



MY VILLAIN. MY WEAKNESS.  
MY STEPBROTHER.

*Lies* LIKE  
LOVE

EVA SIMMONS

*lies* LIKE  
LOVE  
EVA SIMMONS



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## Author's Note

The characters in this series make morally gray decisions that are not always redeemable. Hard topics will be discussed with graphic on and off page content that may be sensitive for some readers. Trigger warnings (which contain spoilers) can be found on my website.



To those walking a tightrope for fear of judgment, sometimes  
you have to just say *fuck it* and grab the scissors.

# Fairytales

*FAIRYTALES ALL START THE same—with innocence.*

*With a girl in a red cloak searching for something she lost.  
Whether it be a home, a family, or love.*

*They start with someone untouched. Someone who has yet to  
face true darkness. Either because she's too naïve or too  
sheltered.*

*All it takes is one step into the forest...*

*Or so, the story is told.*

*They always blame the wolf for the girl's loss of innocence.  
For him leading her deeper and deeper until she's so lost  
there's no escape. Not realizing, no one had to ask her to  
follow him.*

*One look into the wolf's eyes and she did so willingly.*

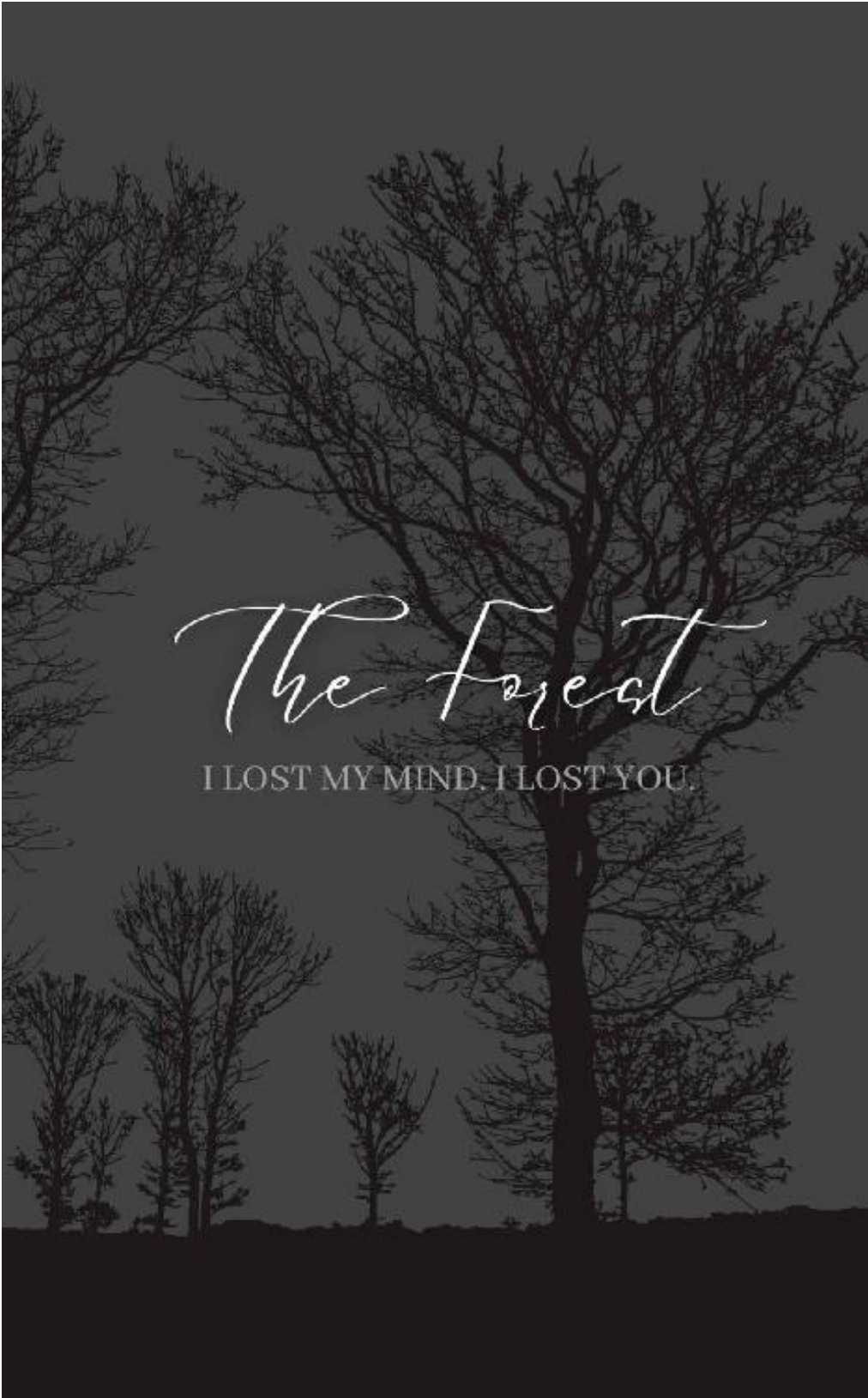
*His gaze became the trees, the vines, the sky. They became  
the path of endless possibility.*

*Fairytales are simple.*

*The hero slays the wolf, saves the girl, falls in love.*

*But that's assuming the wolf is the bad guy. That she wants to be saved. That there are heroes at all.*

*Not just villains and lies.*



# *The Forest*

I LOST MY MIND, I LOST YOU.



## Fel

GLITTER ON CONCRETE IS fitting for downtown Los Angeles. Fake beauty covering up dirt. This city might look pretty from the outside, but it finds a way of making a mess of anyone who dares step foot in it.

Bright lights and movie stars lure the innocent with money, fame, and glamour. All things that can be found up in the hills. But in the filthy chaos of downtown, they're far away and unattainable.

It's something I remind myself of as I scoop up body jewelry from the sidewalk and silently curse my best friend for convincing me to follow her to Twisted Roses Tattoo Parlor in the middle of the night.

"I told you this was a bad idea." My shoulders deflate, as I pick up a gem-encrusted barbell and dig at the grit now embedded in every crevice.

Maren reaches for a belly button ring and holds it up, frowning as she hands it back to me.

“How else do you expect your business to take off?” She pops up to stand and dips her thumbs into her pockets. She’s glancing down at where I’m crouched on the sidewalk, probably looking desperate as I try to salvage anything I can. “Body piercings don’t sell themselves, Fel. And the small shops aren’t cutting it. Your vision’s too narrow. I’m helping you broaden your mindset.”

I tuck the fallen barbells back into the case and scoop up the few beads that aren’t covered in whatever disgusting grime coats this city, before standing up.

“Don’t pretend you forced me out of the apartment tonight for the sake of my business.”

Maren smirks at my narrowed gaze but doesn’t bother arguing. We both know she isn’t dragging me to downtown LA in the middle of the night to provide life support to my semi-successful, suddenly struggling jewelry business, no matter how good a friend she is.

“Exactly.” I shake my head.

“What?” She shrugs, grabbing my hand and pulling me along beside her. “He was hot, okay? I’m not going to apologize for appreciating a god-like man when I see one. Tall, fit, a pierced tongue I’d like to—”

“Stop.” I don’t need the filthy scenario she’s imagining burned into my brain. “No guy is hot enough to wander downtown LA in the middle of the night for. I don’t care what he looks like.”

And I don't.

Tattooed arms and a wicked gaze don't warrant chasing someone who isn't willing to make a move. Call me cynical or old-fashioned, but men aren't worth that kind of effort. Especially the hot ones. All they'll do is use it against you.

"Come on, Fel." Maren rolls her eyes. "Forget the hottie I'm going to let fuck me into next Sunday and think about yourself for a minute. You know I'm right about this. Celebrities get inked and pierced at Twisted Roses. This isn't just any tattoo parlor. If you convince them to sell *your* jewelry to their clients, your business is going to be golden."

If only her enthusiasm was contagious. Because right now, I need her to be right.

I've been making jewelry since high school. Back then I never intended to do anything with it beyond passing out friendship bracelets and decorating my wrists. It was a hobby, nothing more.

In my family feeding *dreams* was a waste of time when it could be better spent climbing social ladders. I was groomed to follow the perfectly curated path Mom and my grandparents laid out for me. A path that entailed many things—none of which involved spending my life doing something for *me*.

But that's what I did, even if sometimes I wonder if I should have just listened to them.

Starting a jewelry business sounded simple growing up in a world where everything was handed to me the second I asked



for it. Money, opulence, all I could ever want at my fingertips.

But that was a different life—a different me. Now each step I take feels bigger and more intimidating.

My family's plan for me would have been a safe route, while my instincts are constantly veering me toward danger.

Like right now, as I walk through downtown LA—well outside the parts of the city I'm comfortable with as I chase possibilities. Betting on the hope that the Twisted Roses piercer takes pity on a girl looking for a chance.

*How did I let Maren talk me into this?*

“Just trust me.” Maren rests her head on my shoulder like she's reading my thoughts.

“Famous last words.”

I love my best friend, but she has a way of finding trouble. On the outside, her life is seemingly polished and put together. She has a comfortable job working for a plastic surgeon's office when she doesn't need to work. Her family comes from old money. Generations of wealth that's rare in a city bleeding with overnight success and viral fame. Dollar signs that hide the fact that she isn't happy in their world any more than I was.

But unlike me, Maren plays their game just enough to use their pristine world as a disguise. The more money her parents hand her the more reckless she becomes. And here I am, following her into the chaos.

I scratch my forearm and try to itch the nerves that just found their way to the surface. My nails rake my skin hard enough to leave red marks, and the sight makes my stomach sink, so I carefully move my collection of bracelets back into place to cover them.

Maren's gaze drops to where I'm rubbing my arm and she frowns, knowing too much as best friends always do. Luckily, she doesn't say anything about it as she continues to pull me along beside her in silence.

Turning a few more corners, we finally stop in front of a shop that looks like every other one on the street—underlit and unimpressive.

“Isn't it incredible?”

It's something all right. But *incredible* isn't the word I'd use to describe it.

Twisted Roses might be known for their celebrity client list, but from the outside, it looks like any other dingy tattoo parlor in downtown LA.

Neon lights, red velvet. Dancing skeletons painted on the window that taunt anyone who walks by.

The *O* on their open sign is flickering like it's about to go out, and nothing about this place feels welcoming. If anything, the skeletons smile in a dare—begging you to step foot inside so they can do what they wish with you.

My throat tightens and my skin itches.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath to settle my nerves, but my nose is flooded with the scent of a wet city filled with trash. Someone nearby is either puking, pissing, or smoking a joint.

Last night's storm soaked the ground and I already feel another one coming.

The shift, the change. *The thunder.*

The sky's ready to release some rage.

My eyes fly open when a group of girls stumbles out of the club next door to the tattoo parlor. They're laughing and singing at the top of their lungs as the three of them hook arms so they don't fall over in their five-inch heels.

They remind me of my Barbies growing up. Sterilized perfection straight out of the package. Dyed hair, painted faces, perfectly trim bodies. Beauty that's been curated to be absolutely flawless, but it's the kind of pretty that's rarely natural.

I can't help but wonder if they had mothers like mine who constantly reminded them nothing is good enough as-is. Teaching them on a daily basis that perfection is difficult but attainable, and the only way to make someone love you.

My mother failed to mention love is also like crystal. Beautiful so long as you don't let it crack. All it takes is one tap for the veins of imperfection to spread until it shatters.

The door to the club swings open again and music filters out to the tune of a heartbeat.

*Thumping.*

*Thumping.*

*A sign of something coming?*

“Let’s go.” Maren tugs my hand. “The girl on the phone said he’s here until eleven.”

She drags me into the parlor and my senses are overwhelmed by the scent of bleach. So strong it burns my nose and stings my eyes. The air is sterile, and it should be comforting given what they do, but for some reason, it’s just another reminder of how dirty it feels to be this far outside of my comfort zone.

One step inside Twisted Roses and the teeth of reality nip at my unmarked skin. The shop’s walls are as decorated as the receptionist’s body, while I’m out of place.

I’ve never even considered getting a tattoo. And besides my ears, I’ve never dared to pierce anything.

Maren releases my hand and walks over to the front desk. The girl sitting behind it has her feet kicked up and she’s reading a magazine. She doesn’t bother to look up as Maren leans against the display case and starts talking, not that Maren seems to care.

I hang back and circle the lobby, trying to pinpoint what about this place feels so familiar.

Every wall is covered in clashing images. And where I’m used to businesses that are set up to make a person feel welcome from the moment you step inside, everything about this place does the opposite.

One wall is covered in a portrait made entirely of eyes. Some open, some closed, some melting, some bleeding. While another wall is decorated with wilting flowers and skeletons. The entire scene is a collection of images saturated with death.

A wooden ribcage with daisies blooming.

A bleeding heart with a knife through it.

Insects pinned in neat little rows.

Scattered throughout the collection of art are framed photos of tattoos. They're intricate and beautiful, and even if the outside of the parlor is unimpressive, I understand why Twisted Roses is so popular once I see what the artists are capable of.

Art on skin—and it's almost enough to convince me to set my own appointment, officially leaving my old world behind.

After college, I did my best to step away. I moved in with Maren and stopped accepting my grandparents' money. I rationed what was left of my parents' inheritance and have managed to float semi-comfortably since.

But chasing dreams is more expensive than I anticipated, and for the first time in years, I'm running on fumes. So it's either I take risks for my jewelry business in hopes they pay off, or I sink.

*Or run back to them*—which is not happening.

Circling the lobby, I can't help but feel the weight of my inexperience—in life, in action. At twenty-six I thought I'd have figured it out, but all that number does is draw out my

anxiety. Time is suddenly an hourglass running out of sand, and instead of building castles, I'm sinking in it.

“He's finishing up with a client. Then he'll be out.” Maren comes up beside me and her nose scrunches as she follows my gaze to the wall.

I've been zoned out, staring at an image of a disfigured skeleton with a bleeding heart spilling out of his chest. It's not pretty, but somehow, I can relate. The emptiness of being only bones, and yet, still finding ways to suffer.

I turn toward Maren and try to shake whatever has gotten into me. Something about being in this place stirs up the dirt covering my demons and I don't like that their fingers are showing.

The sooner I can make my pitch to the piercer and get out of here, the better.

Maren props herself against the wall, picking at a fingernail as we wait. And I try to avoid looking at anything besides the knots in the wooden floors, tracing the pattern in them to distract myself.

My legs get tired the longer we stand, and I can't help but wonder how long it takes to pierce someone. It's been almost twenty minutes and the same song has been playing on repeat through the shop's speakers. Either that, or I'm just not noticing the difference in screams and drumbeats because it all sounds the same.

I'm tempted to sit down on the couch in the corner, but I can't help but think the girl at the front desk would judge me for it.

Every so often her gaze lifts from her magazine, and she skims me over. The smallest smile ticks in the corner of her mouth, and it's clear she senses how out of place I am.

After a while, one of the tattoo artists finishes with a client, and leads him to the front of the shop. They pause in the doorway to finish their conversation, and I don't miss that they're both completely covered in tattoos. Demons and devils paint their skin.

*You shouldn't be here.*

If their demonic ink had mouths, I imagine that's what they'd say to me. Right before they'd eat me alive.

The artist talks to his client for a minute, before saying goodbye and leaving him in the lobby to pay. Only then does the girl at the front desk drop her feet. She swipes his card and showers him in flirty glances before going back to her magazine.

But the client doesn't leave. He pauses when he spots me and Maren standing against the wall, and an unsettling smile crawls his cheeks as he starts to make his way toward us.

Dropping my gaze to the ground, I hope it's enough for him to take the hint and leave, but it isn't. And when I look back up, he's in my space—tall, smelling of leather and day-old

cigarettes. A darkness in his eyes that tells me what he's thinking.

From a young age, I learned the eyes hold everything you need to know about a person. Their energy, their intentions. If you look close enough, you can see the color of their soul through the filter. And something about this guy and his wicked dark stare makes one thing clear—he's up to no good.

I shouldn't stare as he stops in front of me because all he seems to do is appreciate it. But I learned my lesson when it comes to turning your back on monsters. It's safer to face them.

“Ladies.”

Maren rolls her eyes and lets out an unamused chuckle. Which he ignores as he plants a hand on the wall beside me, glancing between us.

“Whatcha up to tonight?”

Maren stops picking at her fingernail to look him straight in the eyes. “Nothing that involves you.”

I love my best friend.

No fear. No apologies.

She has two temperatures—blistering hot or ice cold. And she must be reading the same impression I am from this guy because her stare is arctic.

“Bitch,” the guy mumbles and shakes his head.

“Excuse me?”



But he ignores Maren's glass-cutting glare, turning to me instead. "What about you, sweetie? You want to come out with me and have a little fun. I'll make it worth your while."

He lifts a hand to reach for my hair, but it's stopped halfway to me as a tattooed hand wraps around his wrist, jerking him backward.

"Out. Now." The other guy shoves him toward the door, and the client stumbles as he almost falls.

With a final look of disgust, the client shakes his head and flips off the room. "Assholes."

The door to the shop slaps closed behind him, and I finally breathe a sigh of relief until I turn to find someone new standing directly in front of me.

Someone tall, with wild green eyes that make my insides plummet.

*The eyes are the key to the soul.*

A warning *he* taught me to listen to from there on out.

"Oh good." Maren lifts off the wall and practically bounces with excitement as she clings to my side. "Fel, this is—"

"Jude." His name is almost a whisper from my lips because I can't help that my throat still chokes on it after all these years.

He's nothing like the charming football player with the varsity grin I remember. His green eyes always held an undercurrent of blue, like the opal necklace I used to wear, but

now the familiar shade is colder—meaner—as he looks me over.

He's grown at least half a foot and filled out with solid muscle. His hair is a touch darker, and his skin is littered with ink. A man has replaced the clean-cut teenage boy from my memories, and as he pops his knuckles between us, it draws out every muscle in his forearms.

One moment and every word Maren has said in the past twenty-four hours loops on replay because the green-eyed god who pierced her nose is everything she said and more. Only, she doesn't know him like I do.

While Jude Carlisle might be every girl's fantasy on the outside, I've met the monster beneath.

“Wait.” Maren pulls back, looking from him to me. “You two know each other?”

Jude smirks because that's an understatement.

“Look who's all grown up.” Jude crosses his arms over his chest, and I swear it broadens his shoulders. His gaze moves down so slow I feel the heat of it sweeping over me before his eyes snap back to mine. “Long time no see, Red.”

The nickname I hate still makes my teeth clench. Every boy in school used it because I have red hair, and they were too juvenile to be creative.

But that wasn't Jude's reason. He did it because he knew it pissed me off. He did it to get under my skin. He did it because he couldn't help taunting me to get a reaction.

Something my stepbrother was always so damn good at.

## Jude

FELICITY ALCOTT LOOKS AS proper as ever. A pristine air around her, even when she's standing in the middle of a tattoo parlor in downtown LA. She schools her expression like she's trying to remain calm and collected, while still pinning me with a prissy *fuck you* glare that reveals all her feelings.

Fel doesn't belong here in her designer top and high-waisted acid-wash jeans that probably cost more than every piece of art on the walls surrounding her. Everything about her shines and sparkles. From her endless collection of necklaces and bracelets to her bright blue eyes.

While most people walk through these doors to camouflage themselves and hide their skin, she makes a statement standing in front of me not wanting either. And I'm not sure how, after all these years, she's unchanged in so many ways.

Freckles peek through the makeup on her cheeks and her silky, wild, red hair is tied off her face to contain it. It's scarlet in certain lighting, but under the lamps of the parlor, it's a deep

strawberry. Like she smells. Sweet, ripe, tempting me to shit I'm not allowed.

“Wait, this is your *stepbrother* Jude?” Her dark-haired friend's eyes go wide, darting between Fel and me, as she puts the pieces into place.

*Her stepbrother Jude.*

She's mentioned me. And I can't help but relish in the knowledge that even if Fel is glaring at me ready for battle, her friend is already revealing chinks in her armor.

“Ex-stepbrother,” I correct.

“And why is that?” Fel snaps.

The nervous girl she was as I watched her circle the lobby slips away, and I can't help but feed on her irritation. She's pissed I'm standing in front of her, not that I care. I've been watching her since she walked through the door because *yes*, I fucking noticed.

She's Felicity Alcott—impossible to miss. Red hair in a bun that probably took an hour to secure and perfectly painted on makeup.

Her appearance always was deceiving.

But I know her well enough to read the little ticks that give her away. How she plays with her bracelets when she's nervous, and how she chews the inside of her cheek when she's biting back what's really on her mind. How her pretty package is a distraction when really the girl's got teeth.

I watched her circle the lobby while her friend asked Téa when I'd be done with my appointment. And instead of walking over, I couldn't help hanging back to see what she'd do. Studying her as she examined every piece of art decorating the walls.

Wondering if she was a figment of my imagination or the past finally catching up with me.

It's been eleven years since we've been face to face, and I've kept tabs just enough to make sure of it. So when she walked into my parlor, so far outside her glass castle, it was laughable, I couldn't help but watch her take it all in. She analyzed every inch like she saw straight through it.

I was tempted to disappear out the back door before she saw me because I've stayed out of her life this long, and nothing good comes from her realizing I'm still in LA. But then Crew's client had the nerve to try and touch her, and my restraint snapped.

"You know why." I tick my head to the side, challenging her with my gaze. "You really want to go down that rabbit hole again, Red?"

Fel flinches at the nickname she hates, and I can't help but love the blush it draws up her pretty little neck.

"Seems like you two have some catching up to do." Her friend takes a step back and looks between us once more. The *fuck me* eyes she had when she first spotted me are all but gone. "I'm going to wait outside."

“I’ll be right out,” Fel says to her friend, but she hasn’t broken our unspoken staring contest.

It isn’t until her friend disappears out the door that Fel’s eyes dip once more, taking in the ink on my arms and hands. The last time I saw her, I looked like a different person—I *was* a different person—so I can only imagine what she’s thinking.

In her mind, she’s probably holding my current self up against the image of the football captain she shared two of the worst years of her life with. Except, he’s someone I haven’t been in a long time. Or maybe, never was.

“You’re back.” Her ocean-blue gaze snaps upward.

“Never left.”

Realization hits those doe eyes, and they go wide, before filling with fury. Every emotion I expect, and then some. But I don’t bother acknowledging it because it won’t get us anywhere. She’s spent the past eleven years hating me. What’s a lifetime more?

“You lost or something?” I tip my chin at the door. “This isn’t your part of town.”

She laughs, but it’s dark and unamused. “*My* part of town? How is it yours?”

Fel still thinks of me as the seventeen-year-old boy whose family bled more money than hers did. Money I never had any interest in touching.

“Guess you don’t know me anymore.”

“Guess not.” She shakes her head, and another strand of red hair falls from her bun. “The Jude I knew wouldn’t have let me think he left town when he’s been here all along.”

She might think she wants the answer to all the questions I have no doubt are swirling around in her pretty little head, but she doesn’t. If she’s looking for comfort, she isn’t going to get it from me. So I keep quiet, watching her face slowly fill with irritation.

“Whatever.” She takes a step to the side.

I should let her walk away now. I should cement myself in place and watch her disappear from my life for the second time.

But if the past eleven years have taught me anything, it’s that my soft spot for Felicity Alcott’s irritating optimism and strawberry scent still have power over me. And the fact that I can’t help but slap my hand on the wall beside her head to stop her, is proof I need to make sure she walks away for good this time.

Eleven years ago, it was on her terms. This time, it’ll be on *mine*.

Fel’s fiery gaze falters as she turns to once more face me. Strong as she tries to be with her rigid posture, a hint of fear flashes in her eyes.

Good.

She walked into *my* parlor—my territory—and she needs to understand how dangerous that is, so she stays the fuck away.



“Already running?” I taunt, not able to help myself. “Always did have a weak stomach when it came to the hard shit.”

Her jaw clenches, as she tries to gather her composure. “Fuck you, Jude.”

“From what I remember, that was off-limits.”

Her lips part and she takes in the sweetest inhale. One breath and my blood runs hot enough that I want to make her regret ever finding me. Or worse, do something I stopped myself from doing a hundred times in the two years we spent under the same roof.

This close I realize she has changed. She’s no longer an awkward, scrawny sixteen-year-old girl who bowed down at the first hint of a challenge. She’s fire-burning molten, and I wonder if I ever really knew her at all.

Peeling my hand off the wall, I step back and create some space. To see her is one thing. To smell her is another. But none of it changes a damn thing.

“Why are you here, Felicity?” My fingers form fists thinking about the fact that she’s not only in my part of town but wandering this part of the city in the middle of the night.

Fel tips her chin up, clutching the box she’s holding tighter to her chest. “I *was* here for a business proposal.”

“If you want to work in a place like this, you’re going to need a little more ink.”

Her gaze hardens at my smirk.

“Not that kind of business.” She rolls her shoulders back. “I make jewelry.”

Tilting my head, I once more take in the box she’s holding to her chest, and I can’t help but be a little curious. She was always making bracelets and necklaces when we were teenagers. But that was pretty, fancy shit she passed out to her snobby, perfect friends. So it doesn’t make sense how that would bring her here.

“It doesn’t matter.” She shakes her head. “This was a mistake.”

She moves a step to the left, but I snatch the box from her hands as she does.

“Hey.”

She tries to claw for it, but I turn before she can grab it and open the lid. Inside, are an assortment of barbells, lip rings, and chains. It’s so left-field for a girl who only has her ears pierced, that I can’t help but chuckle.

Fel slips around me, slapping the lid shut and grabbing it out of my hands. “Like I said, a mistake.”

“I’m impressed, Red.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Didn’t think you had any edge.”

She glares at me, but she knows it’s true. Girl’s vanilla. Problem is, I’ve never considered that a bad quality when it comes to her.

“So you want me to sell those to my clients?”

This might be the first time since I met her, she's actually surprised me.

"I didn't know you were the piercer when I walked in here."

"That a problem?"

"I—" her face scrunches. "I just figured it was off the table now."

"I could be convinced to sell your barbells. My clients would buy them." I shrug a shoulder.

"Convinced how?"

I grin at the nerves lacing her question. "You'd have to back it first, of course."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I take a step toward her, and it forces her to tip her chin up further to look at me, elongating her slim neck.

Daring to lift a finger, I graze her ear, trailing it down her smooth skin until my fingers pause on her pulse at the base of her throat. Her little heart races with every hint of fear she's so good at hiding on the outside.

"Let me pierce you with it and you can sell it here all you want."

"You want to pierce me?"

The idea of driving a needle through her perfect flesh and making her flinch, making her exhale at the pain, making her bleed for me—it probably shouldn't entice me as much as it does.

She might not be my stepsister anymore, but it doesn't mean she's not off limits.

“You want me to back your product, seems only fair.” I take a step back because if I don't create some distance this will all go downhill.

“Fine.” She reaches up and grazes the top of her ear with her fingertips like she's already deciding what she'll let me do.

“Nah.” I shake my head. “You want to sell in a shop that caters to celebrities, you're going to have to take a bigger risk than getting your ears pierced like a teenager.”

Her eyes widen. “What then?”

I drag my teeth over my lower lip and drop my gaze to her chest, knowing it's enough to scare her away. She might think I'm actually considering this. But I'm not.

I'm going to make sure she walks out the door to this shop and never comes back for both our sakes.

Her hands fly up to her perfect tits, and she takes a step backward, backing herself against the wall. “You mean?”

I shrug, dropping my gaze further. “Unless you were interested in getting creative a little lower.”

The sound that escapes Fel's chest is barely human. She's revolted. I should probably be as well, but the idea of her legs spread while I drive metal into her is borderline exhilarating.

Fel shakes her head, and I watch disgust paint her face. “You might look different, but you haven't changed one bit.”

*Wrong.*

Not that I correct her.

I've avoided her for a decade for the sole purpose of allowing her to continue to portray me as her villain because she needed him, even if she refuses to acknowledge it.

“Goodbye, Jude.” She shakes her head, her face filling with misplaced disappointment. “See you in another eleven years.”

“If you're lucky.” I wink, and she frowns as she turns and walks away.

I watch her disappear out the front door, leaving a cloud of her strawberry scent in the air like a ghost lingering to haunt my senses.

Her friend wraps an arm around her, and they both look through the window a final time at whatever they're saying. Fel's eyes narrow with the kind of fury that will paint the back of my eyelids for years to come.

Not that I blame her.

Fel hates me because I broke our families—because her mother slit her wrists after what I did, and I walked away, seemingly unscathed.

And I hope the rage she harbors rocks her to sleep at night.

I wasn't her hero for a reason. And she can lie to herself all she wants—it was for the best.

## Fel

*THE FRONT DOOR SWINGS open and I jump off the bottom step, running across the foyer so fast my bare feet almost slip on the tile.*

*“Jude!” I scream as our eyes connect.*

*His gaze slides downward and I feel it trail every inch of me.*

*“What the fuck happened?” He catches me when I reach him, holding me away so he can take me in.*

*When I try to wiggle free, all he does is grip tighter. So I pound my bloodied fists against his chest, leaving splatters with every hit on his white T-shirt.*

*“Like you don’t already know?” A sob rips from my throat.*

*“How could you?”*

*“Fel.” My name is a threat.*

*“She...” But I choke on the words and can’t get them out.*

*She’s gone, and it’s all his fault.*

*Jude's green eyes darken before they widen with realization. He hauls me against his chest, ignoring that I'm thrashing around. Ignoring the blood-stained water that covers my hands and arms. It coats my feet, so they slip against the cool surface of the tile.*

*He holds me so tight it feels like he's also somehow letting go. And I fight him as much as I crave him. Because I'm shattering and it's all his fault.*

*"I'm sorry." Jude buries his nose in my hair and shakes his head. "This wasn't supposed to happen."*

*But he doesn't release me, and I feel my heart clawing with every beat in an attempt to escape my chest. If only it was that easy.*

*Finally, I find the strength to shove him off me.*

*Or he lets me go.*

*It's all the same in this broken, bloody mess. He knew the moment he tipped the first domino this is where we'd end up, and he did it anyway.*

*Stumbling back, I have to steady myself as bloody water drips from my clothes and slicks the tile. My fingers wet with the mess Jude has made.*

*He's just like them—using me as a pawn in whatever game they've all been playing. And I was dumb enough to let him.*

*"I hate you." I take another step backward. Tears wet my cheeks, but I'm numb to anything other than the seam splitting*

*my heart in two. "I hate you, Jude. And I'll never forgive you for this."*

*"Fel, stop." Jude grabs for my wrist, but this time, he can't catch me.*

*I'll never let him catch me again.*

*"She's dead," I choke out, tears making rivers on my face. I clench my hands and try to ignore the bloody water starting to dry. "Are you happy now? You knew they were about to snap, and you made sure it happened."*

*"I did this for you, Fel. Can't you see that?" Jude takes a step closer, and I seal my eyes shut like it can save me from him. Like if I'm not looking, I'll be able to escape.*

*There's no escaping Jude Carlisle.*

*"I had to." He's pleading now. And I want to believe his words as I used to, but he's turned them around too many times. "I told you."*

*"No." I shake my head so violently my hair sticks to my tear-stained cheeks. "You never tell me anything. Not really."*

*"I tell you everything you need to know."*

*"And what about the rest?"*

*"It's not important," he grits out.*

*"Says you." My insides break with each word. "I can't do this anymore, Jude. All you do is hurt everyone around you."*





Maren flicks a lock of my hair off my shoulder. “Earth to Fel.”

“Sorry.” I sit up and reach for my coffee, realizing it’s cold.

I barely slept last night, and it’s catching up with me.

Some people have dreams, others nightmares. I’m not sure what happens when I close my eyes, except that each morning the light isn’t unwelcome because I’m finally awake.

“Someone’s distracted.” Maren drops into the chair across the table from me. “Does this have anything to do with seeing a certain stepbrother last night?”

“He’s not my... I just—” But I don’t know what to say, so I dig my fingers into my scalp and rake them through my long hair. “He’s here. He’s been here all along.”

The last time I saw Jude, I told him I never wanted to see him again, but I didn’t expect him to actually listen to me. In the two years we were a quasi-family, he made a habit of purposely doing the opposite of anything I asked of him.

Except for that.

He burned my life to the ground and left, never looking back.

“Eleven years.”

Maren frowns. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

It’s a lie with so many veins they reach every nerve. But some things I can’t talk about, even with my best friend.

Maren knows my mom was married to Jude's dad for two years when we were teenagers. And that I've hated him since. But that's the extent of it, and it's enough.

No one knows what really happened except for me and him. And even back then, I had a sick feeling I only knew half of it.

I sit up tall and hope Maren doesn't notice the panic sweeping through me. Rolling my shoulders back, I take a deep breath and compose myself.

"Sorry to ruin your fantasy of hooking up with the hot piercer."

"Do not apologize." Maren reaches across the table and plants a hand over one of my own. "If I'd have known who he was, I never would have dragged you down there last night. And to think I wasted a night with my vibrator thinking about him."

"Gross."

She purses her lips but doesn't take it back. After all, I'm sure she's not the only woman who's wasted a fantasy or two on Jude Carlisle.

He was always attractive, even back then. Tall, built, with a possessive presence that made girls desperate for his attention. He was solid muscle, captain of the football team, and a teenage fantasy. All things I shouldn't have paid attention to, considering we were supposed to be family.

Too bad my heart and head never agreed when it came to him.

But while I always thought Jude was attractive as a teenager, nothing could have prepared me for the man I was face-to-face with last night. A hardened, cut version of himself. Carved and defined. Ink lacing his skin. Demons, like the ones I always suspected raged inside him.

The kind of disarming appearance that only brings pain.

“What are you up to today?” Maren asks, ignoring that I’m drifting with thoughts of Jude as she pulls her dark curls into a ponytail.

“I’m going back to the drawing board.” I frown, standing up and walking into the kitchen. “I need to scope out other ways to expand my business.”

*Since last night blew up in my face.*

I stick my coffee mug in the microwave and nuke it because if I’m going to get through today on zero sleep then I’m going to need some caffeine.

“If you need some quick cash, just come with me tonight. They’re always short on girls, and the guys would love you.”

“I don’t need quick cash; I need an actual income stream before I have to scrap everything I’ve been working for.”

After checking my account last night, I was reminded I’m running on fumes. Even if my jewelry is becoming more and more popular, materials are sinking me, and I’ve been running through my cash like a wildfire. A big break is the only thing that’s going to tip the scales, or I’ll be forced to settle for an office job that takes up all my free time.

The easy answer would be to return one of my grandparents' phone calls and take them up on the dollar signs they've been waving at me. But their conditions are more than I'm willing to pay.

"I get that." Maren walks up and plants her hands on my arms. "But it's an easy five hundred bucks for a couple of hours."

"Feels dirty."

She frowns.

"Not that I'm saying what you do for fun is dirty."

"Say it like you believe it." She rolls her eyes, even if she isn't actually offended.

Maren isn't shy about her body like I am. She owns her sexuality and has no problem draining men's wallets in the process.

For her, being a ring girl a couple of times a month is for the thrill. She doesn't need her first income, much less a second. She enjoys the attention, which is something I don't understand.

"All you have to do is walk in a few circles. Then, boom, five hundred bucks." Maren digs her thumbs into her pockets and looks me over. "I get how it seems, but they're all good people. It'll be fun."

I open my mouth to turn her down, but quickly snap it closed again. Five hundred isn't much, but it's enough to cover the hole in my rent this month, while still allowing me to put a

deposit on the gems I need for a custom order. Besides, it's quick cash with no attachments.

Being a ring girl at an amateur fight for a night isn't ideal, but after walking away from my family's money and social connections after college, I quickly learned most things aren't.

"Fine," I grumble. "What time?"

"Fights start at seven but be there by six." Maren smiles. "This is going to be so much fun. Nothing like hot, shirtless men beating the shit out of each other."

"While we walk around in bikinis..."

"And shorts." She shrugs. "Loosen up, Fel. You're not part of their world anymore. It's not a crime to enjoy yourself every once in a while."

I don't bother telling her enjoyment is the least of my concerns. She wouldn't get it. Instead, I just nod, and let her think whatever she wants.

I need the cash, and if this is the price of freedom, I'm willing to pay it.



Maren leaves for her day job, and with her gone, it's just me in her apartment.

*Our* apartment—I've lived here for two years, so it should feel like mine. But nothing about this place does.

Not that my grandparents' house did either.

Or college.

Ever since my mom died and Jude left, the feeling of *home* became an enigma to me. An idea that left me hanging from a noose with just enough rope to make me think it was possible. Tightening every time I try and actually reach it.

Seeing Jude last night stirred up every unwanted memory. Reminding me no matter how much I think I've moved on, a piece of me was always his.

After everything fell apart, I somehow managed to finish high school. I got into college, I made friends, I finished my degree. I had plans of building a business on my own and finally doing something with my jewelry.

But even if I took all the right steps in that direction, there was always a *someday* on the horizon closing in.

Someday I'd prove myself without my family name.

Someday I'd believe I can make it.

Someday I'd forget him.

Saying *someday* like I wasn't scared of what that meant—moving on. From a life I'd rather forget and a stepbrother I wish I hadn't continued to miss.

At least I was free. Or so, I thought. Until last night when I looked into Jude's eyes and realized it was a lie I'd been telling myself for years.

Survival instinct that kept me going.

I might have been the one who told him to leave, but it was the fact that he actually did that broke me. After all he'd done, after all I'd lost, it was him walking away that was the final straw. No matter how much I hated him, somewhere deep in my chest, he was embedded.

Something made crystal clear with one look into his wicked, green eyes.

One moment soaked in blood.

Eleven years drowning in secrets.

It never mattered how good I was at telling people I'd moved on, deep down I never believed it.

Finishing my coffee, I make my way to my bedroom and pull out my jewelry supplies. I spread them out on the bed and tie my hair in a bun as I get to work, determined to distract myself from the sinking feeling spreading through my chest.

Between seeing Jude last night and agreeing to be a ring girl for quick cash today, I barely recognize myself. But I have to do what I need to survive.

At least, that's what I tell myself.

Last night, I finally listened to my best friend—I took a risk.

Yes, it blew up in my face, but I can't regret it. There are people out there who believe in the things I create. People who are willing to buy my jewelry and wear it proudly. I'm not giving up my dreams because of a terrible, accidental run in with my ex-stepbrother.

If the piercer had been anyone other than Jude, I'd have easily convinced them to sell my things. But as always, the universe had other plans.

Last night was a reminder of the girl I'll always be deep down inside. The one who bleeds through the surface no matter how deep I bury her. The girl I've spent years hoping would someday disappear.

*Someday.*

I string a gem and shake my head, trying to get Jude's green eyes out from where they're carved in every thought.

He was always my weakness, regardless of how wrong my feelings for him were. Having him in my life was better than not having him at all.

Or so I thought.

Every step closer to him, he found new ways to push me away. Slowly deteriorating, and I ignored every warning sign until it was too late.

He broke us.

He was free.

While I was in chains.

I string another gem and notice what I'm making without realizing it. A collection of green and blue like him and me coming together in ways we can't.

Tossing the necklace to the ground I lie back and close my eyes. Jude Carlisle is a black hole housing all my regrets. A



man there's no escaping, no matter how many years have passed.

## Fel

*MOM PULLS MY SHOULDERS back and smooths my hair. "Stand up, Felicity. At least pretend I've raised you properly."*

*She circles around me and wipes underneath my eyes before stepping back and looking me over, giving me a final nod of approval. I'm not sure why she seems nervous, because she's perfected the art of hiding her emotions, but her eyes dart around the room as she straightens the straps on my dress for the hundredth time.*

*"There." She presses her own lips together, smoothing her lipstick. "I'm going to make my rounds. Be good and smile please."*

*I force one that feels so fake there's no way she doesn't notice, but she ignores it as she walks away.*

*These events make me dread my life. And ever since Dad died we've been attending them more often. Mom might think I'm blind to the reason behind it, but just because I'm fourteen, doesn't mean I don't see what she's doing.*

*Some people are good at being alone, and she isn't one of them. She needs direction, status, money. I'd like to think she's looking for love in this sea of snakes, but that's not something Mom cares about.*

*Survival.*

*Getting us through losing him without sacrificing our lifestyle—it's all that matters to her.*

*I make my way to the edge of the room and grab a book off a shelf, dropping onto a couch sitting against a far wall. At least this event is being held at a historic library, so I can bury myself between the pages of an old book and pretend everyone around me doesn't exist.*

*Mom won't mind anyway. As long as I'm keeping to myself and not making waves, she doesn't care what I'm doing. If anything, this helps her case of selling me as the perfect potential stepdaughter to whatever man she ends up charming this evening.*

*Flipping open the book, I realize it's much older than I thought. The pages are worn, and the spine is cracked. Some of the corners are turned down and I wonder how many times it's been read. Wrinkles and tears giving something inanimate life. A story heard so many times, that even when it's set aside, it lives on in the minds that carry it.*

*The book is an older version of Red Riding Hood, one I'm not familiar with. The tone is darker, and the girl doesn't fear the wolf in this one. She willingly escaped her life for the forest, and even if it scares her, it makes her feel alive.*

*I can't help but wonder what it's like to be that girl, brave enough to truly experience something when I've never been allowed to.*

*"Thought the sign said hands off."*

*I jump at the voice coming up beside me and slap the book shut.*

*Looking up, a boy around my age is standing beside the couch with his arms crossed over his chest. His gaze drops to the now closed book in my hands, and he smirks.*

*"Joking." He shakes his head with a chuckle, and it tussles his sandy brown hair. "No one gives a shit what you do with the books as long as you don't interrupt their party."*

*He circles until he's dropping into the empty spot on the couch beside me. His eyes scan the room and I'm thankful I'm not the only one here who seems to hate parties like this. It makes me feel less alone.*

*Finally, his gaze returns to the book in my hands. "What are you reading?"*

*"Not quite sure. Some fairytale." I tuck the book to the side, wondering if he thinks I'm childish for reading a kid's story. It's the last thing I want him to think, as his green gaze holds mine and my world turns emerald.*

*"Isn't this the fairytale?" He waves an arm out to the room of pretentious people, who are pretending to care about whatever conversation they're in the middle of.*

*“That’s what they’d like us to think.” I chew my bottom lip, suddenly nervous. “You new to town?”*

*Mom drags me to these types of social gatherings every weekend, so I’ve met anyone she deems worthy of her presence. After a while, all the faces are the same. But I’ve never seen him, I’m sure of it. Not even at school.*

*“Dad’s tech company just transferred here from Seattle.” His eyes scan the room once more, until he finds a man in the crowd I assume is his father. “So yeah, guess I am. I’m Jude.”*

*“Felicity.” I swallow at the lump in my throat. “But my friends just call me Fel.”*

*“Fel, huh?” He smirks.*

*Dangerous. Tempting. A warning sign he’s nothing but trouble.*

*“I’ve heard all the jokes, if that’s what you’re thinking.”*

*“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

*Except something about the darkness in his smile tells me he does.*

*“Fel... like: I fell for you the moment I saw you. Or my favorite: You must be an angel because you look like you fell from heaven. Guys always think they’re so creative.”*

*“They actually say that shit?” Jude chuckles, shaking his head.*

*I nod.*

*He hums, his laugh fading as the electricity in his stare crackles through the air. “Well don’t worry, I don’t think you’re an angel.”*

*“Why not?”*

*He leans closer, and I catch an inhale of his pine scent. Like a forest I’m already lost in. “Because the quiet ones never are.”*



Violence.

Blood.

And they cheer it on. They beg for more from the depths of their souls as some guy’s fist connects with another’s jaw and they slowly paint the ring red. The fighter slams his knuckles into the other’s face again, and I swallow hard, trying not to acknowledge the sinking in the pit of my stomach.

*All I see is blood.*

*All I see is her.*

“You actually came.” Maren pops up in front of me, smiling so brightly it’s out of place in this underground fight club.

“Promised I would.” The fighters finish a round, and the amount of blood splattered on the ring leads me to believe this isn’t the first fight. “Am I late? You said to get here at six?”

Maren follows my gaze to the ring. “Pre-show.”

Her hair is up in a tight ponytail, showing off her strong cheekbones. Her thick eyeliner and fake lashes are dark enough to draw out the gold in her brown eyes so they sparkle. And she's wearing a bikini top so small her full breasts fight to break free from all sides. It's neon pink and stands out brightly against her dark skin.

“Don't worry,” she wraps her arm around my shoulders when she notices whatever look crossed my face at the sight of her outfit. “I made sure to save you a top with a little bit more coverage.”

She winks, and the shimmer from her eyeshadow glimmers as she grabs my hand and drags me toward a dressing room.

When we step inside, it's chaos. Girls are running around wearing next to nothing as they get changed. Some are on their phones and others are laughing, unfazed by the fact that half the room is topless.

“Ladies, this is Fel,” Maren yells out to them.

A few turn their heads long enough to skim me over and smile at me like they think I'll be eaten alive.

I blame my yellow, floral summer dress. It's out of place here.

*I'm out of place here.*

*You need the money.*

Maren leads me to a corner she's claimed with her things. Her makeup is piled on a small section of the counter, and her

bag hangs from the back of a chair. She reaches in and pulls out a scrap of fabric, handing it to me.

“This is what you consider *more* coverage?” I hold up the green bikini top, which apart from two small cups and a thick band that will wrap my ribcage, is mostly a collection of strings.

She shrugs, turning to the mirror to fix her makeup. “More coverage than the others.”

Scanning the room, I guess she’s right. One of the girls has skipped a top all together, in favor of glittery, star-shaped pasties.

Once more holding up the bikini top, I repeat the same speech I’ve been reciting in my head all afternoon. It doesn’t matter if my morals are about to take a hit, there’s a reason I’m doing this. I’m so close to finally making it on my own without my family’s help, and I’m not backing down now.

Freedom is worth spending a few hours in this itty-bitty bikini top.

*It’s worth everything.*

Turning to face the wall, I slip my dress overhead and toss it to the side. I was prepared with a pair of spandex shorts, but without the dress, they don’t feel like they cover as much skin as they did when I examined myself in the mirror at home.

I slip on the bikini top, and it barely covers my cleavage. I’m lucky I’m only trying to hide my conservative B cup and not Maren’s double D’s, or I’d be falling out.



“Happy?” I spin around, adjusting the band once more around my ribs.

Maren pauses with her lipstick hovering, as she glances at me through the mirror. Her eyes sweep me from head to toe, and she grins.

“Girl, you look hot.” She sets down the lipstick and spins around, immediately fluffing my hair around my shoulders when she does.

“I was going to put it up.”

“Don’t. Guys go crazy for your red hair. Leave it wild.”

After tousling my hair a couple more times, she pulls me to the makeup counter and gets to work on a look that’s a lot more dramatic than the minimal makeup I’m used to. She draws thick lines that swoop up in the corner of my eyes, drawing out the blue in them. Shimmering my cheeks until my whole face practically glows.

“Here.” Maren hands me some bright red lipstick that almost matches my hair.

I paint it on and assess my reflection. This might be the first time in my life I’ve felt sexy, and I can’t help the shame that wells up with how much I don’t mind it.

If Mom saw me now, she’d turn over in her grave.

By twenty-six, she expected me to be married and living in a mansion in the hills. Attending mind-numbing brunches with trophy wives while nannies watched my children. She wanted me to be *her*.

Little did she know, her path of security was the beginning of her own end.

“Well, she’s cute.” Some girl in a leopard one-piece swimsuit stops in front of me.

She crosses her arms over her chest, and it pushes her breasts up even further. Her platinum hair is stick-straight and her dark blue gaze is icy as she skims me over. I’m not sure what’s sharper, her glare or her inch-long nails.

Maren barely glances up long enough to roll her eyes. “Fel, this is Brea. Brea, Fel.”

“Nice to—”

“You’re new,” Brea cuts me off, kicking her hip out, and planting a hand on it. “So let me be clear, hands off and we’ll get along.”

“Hands off what?”

She smiles. “Cute, playing the innocent act, huh?”

“I’m not playing anything.”

“Get lost, Brea.” Maren spins around.

Brea doesn’t spare her a glance, but her smirk tells me she’s enjoying getting under our skin. Wetting her over-inflated lips with her tongue, she brushes her white-blonde hair off her shoulder.

“Just issuing a friendly warning.” Brea winks. “Wouldn’t want the new girl getting herself into any trouble.”

“How nice of you.” Sarcasm laces Maren’s tone, and from the wicked grin on Brea’s face, she doesn’t miss it.

“Catch you later, girls.”

Spinning on her heels, Brea turns and walks away. Her hips tick back and forth with each step, drawing attention to her curves. Girls like Brea know exactly what they’re working with and how to use it.

If I thought for a second I could walk in here like I belong and come out unscathed, I was wrong.

“What was that all about?” I turn to Maren.

“Some of the girls are territorial.” Maren shrugs, turning back to the mirror to finish painting on her lipstick.

While I’m in the lion’s den with claws aimed in my direction, Maren is unfazed. Managing to make herself a part of any world she steps into.

“Territorial over what?” I plant my hand on the makeup counter, not letting it go. “I’m not taking their spot. You said there were enough fights to go around and that they needed more girls. What’s she worried about me touching?”

“The guys, Fel.”

“What guys—” But then it hits me. Brea’s worried I’ll get handsy with one of the fighters. “I’m not here for a date.”

“I know that.” Maren laughs, and I’m not sure why it stings that she thinks it’s so ridiculous. “But the other girls don’t.

And some of them get attached, whether the guys like it or not. Just do your thing, stick by me, and you'll be good."

With a pat on my shoulder, she walks past me and drops into a folding chair against the wall. She pulls out her phone and starts flipping through social media, leaving me no choice but to drop the conversation and sit down beside her.

It shouldn't matter anyway. I'm not here looking for a guy to take me home, I'm here for quick cash. Brea's worried about nothing.

On the other side of the dressing room door, screams pulse in waves. Every so often the crowd goes wild, and I suspect it means another round has finished.

One of the girls walks back in with blood smeared across her chest. I'm not sure if this underground fighting ring is legal given the location and the apparent lack of rules.

At the start of each fight, a man with a clipboard walks in and chooses a different girl. And as the night continues, Maren assures me it's a good thing we haven't been picked yet because they save the best for last.

Something that feels like a relief until I'm finally called.

"Redhead, you're up."

I look over my shoulder at the guy pointing at me from the doorway.

"Your turn, girl." Maren stands with me, gripping my shoulders. "Remember, it's just you and the numbers up there. Stay out of your head. You've got this."

If only I had her confidence.

“I’ve got this.” Somehow the words sounded surer from her lips.

“Oops.” Brea knocks past me, her leopard bathing suit spotted in blood from the fight that just ended. Giggles bubble around the room at her not-so-accidental run-in. “Enjoy the kiss, new girl.”

She swipes the smeared lipstick on her bottom lip and shoots me a wicked grin, before disappearing across the room and dropping into a chair to rehash the fight she just witnessed with her friends.

“Wait.” My stomach jumps to my throat. “What kiss?”

“Okay, so please don’t hate me...” Maren grits her teeth.

Screams well up from the other side of the door. Wails knocking around my insides.

“Don’t hate you for what, exactly?”

“It’s customary for the ring girl to give the winning fighter a little prize for his troubles. Not *required* per se, but common enough that they’d be disappointed.”

“What kind of prize?” *Please don’t say it, please don’t say it.*

“Nothing much. Just a kiss.”

Now the comment about girls getting territorial makes more sense.

“Don’t worry about it.” She tries to brush it off, knowing it’s exactly what I’ll do.

Kissing random men—especially for money—crosses the line from a moral blip to dirty.

“What do you mean, don’t worry about it?” I’m shaking my head as she spins me around and pushes me toward the door.

“It’s just a kiss.” Her lips are by my ear. “Remember, five hundred bucks.”

Smacking me on the ass, she nudges me out the door, and it’s closed before I can question what I’ve gotten myself into.

The guy with the clipboard leads me down a long hall. With each step my heart hammers harder against my ribs.

I consider turning and running in the other direction. But no matter how much I want to walk away before this gets any worse, I need the money. Besides, I’m an adult. A kiss is a kiss. It doesn’t have to mean anything if I don’t let it.

I’ve kissed my fair share of frogs over the years. This can’t be any worse than the guys in college who were incapable of properly working their tongues. If this is what it’s going to take to maintain my independence, I’ll do it.

“Here you go, sweetheart.” The guy with the clipboard hands me a sign with the number one on it. “Go look pretty.”

He pushes the door open, and I’m met with a rowdy room of drunk men.

When I walked in here, it seemed less intimidating. But by now—with alcohol flowing and in half my clothing—anxiety creeps through me.

Deep breaths. I can do this.

I've done worse and survived.

A few men holler at me as I pass, and I try my best to ignore them. Focusing on the ring, the circle, the sign—nothing more.

I look good.

I feel good.

I'm free.

This is my decision, and I'm going to own it if it means building an empire that will take me far away from my past and my family.

But as I climb the steps to the ring and the fighters come into view, the room is quieted by my heartbeat pounding between my temples. Because Jude is in one of the corners of the ring staring back at me, and he looks pissed.

## Fel

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE for someone who disappeared from your life for eleven years to suddenly be everywhere?

I escaped him.

It was over.

Jude's eyes narrow as his gaze drags my body, pausing on my chest as he takes in the tiny green bikini top. His jaw clenches as he continues trailing down further, traveling every inch of exposed skin. Smothering me with the rage that radiates out of him.

Like he has the right to be upset or care what I do with myself after all this time.

After *he* walked away. After *he* was an asshole to me at his tattoo parlor last night.

Fuck him.

I climb the final step, and roll my shoulders back, gathering every last ounce of confidence I can muster. Jude's rage fuels



me as we lock gazes, and I test what a decade has done to the two of us.

Eyes locked. Cold, focused, issuing a threat.

He expects me to retreat—to be the girl who always listened to what he said. A girl dumb enough to trust him once.

Never again.

Gripping my fingers on the sign, I flip it up and overhead, daring to smirk before turning my back on him.

While I was nervous to walk out here, I feed on the energy he's emitting from across the ring to slowly make my way around it. Jude might think of me as the scrawny sixteen-year-old girl he left covered in blood in the foyer, but I'm ready to prove him wrong.

I'll walk this stage; I'll make them all want me.

And I'll root for the other guy to win just so Jude has to watch me kiss him.

Slowly, I circle, his inescapable pull drawing my attention with each step. A palpable energy that's nearly intoxicating as he sucks every ounce of oxygen from the room with his presence.

From the corner of my eye, I watch him wrap his knuckles and his wrists with tape, but his gaze doesn't leave me. In a room filled with men watching, all I care about is one.

Another step closer, another corner turned.

I tell myself I'm doing this for the money.

I tell myself I'm doing this for my freedom.

But every inch forward right now is for Jude.

Finally reaching his corner, I try to pick up my pace and hurry past, but he catches my wrist in his grip and tugs me toward the ropes the moment I'm within reach. They dig into my hips as he holds me tight against them. Pressing his body close enough for me to breathe him in.

He smells like midnight in the middle of summer, cool and warm all at once. Nerves tickle like the grass on the back of my neck when we'd lay in the backyard under the stars. He smells like heat and sweat when the fight hasn't even started.

Sweet, spicy, destructive.

His hold on my wrist tightens, his nearness clouding my vision.

He's close enough to feel his lips brush my ear as they curl upward—in rage, in amusement, in promise. It was always the same when it came to him. A game.

“What are you doing here, Fel?”

“None of your business.”

He breathes out an unamused chuckle. “You made it my business by showing up during *my* fight.”

“Didn't know it was *your* fight.”

Why is he fighting anyway? He's a body piercer. This doesn't make sense.

“You shouldn’t be here.” A growl reverberates from his chest to the air. It shakes the room until the ground beneath my feet is unsteady.

Finally, I dare to face him. I look him in his sharp green eyes and narrow my own. If only it was enough to scare him or make him flinch. Challenge only ever draws his wickedness to the surface.

“What are you going to do about it?” I provoke him against my better judgment. “Kick me out?”

The devilish smirk that climbs his cheeks hardens the lump in my throat. Given an ultimatum, Jude will still manage to have his way every time. Worse, he fights dirty. And the way his gaze sweeps down to my lips as I draw them between my teeth, says everything.

“Of course not.” He pulls back the slightest, reaching his thumb to my lower lip and tugging it out from between my teeth, smearing my lipstick across it as he does. “Stay. *Watch*. I’m gonna win just for you, Red. Then maybe I’ll give you what you’ve thought about for years.”

My throat tightens.

Sweat and screams knot my insides.

Jude’s trying to get under my skin, thinking he can throw my teenage hormones at me to prove a point. We were young, I was confused. It didn’t help that we lived together, and he was constantly walking around shirtless.

Or that underneath his football captain façade, I saw hints of another side of him.

Like the time I failed a midterm, and Mom spent the entire evening berating me for it. He climbed into my bed and held me when I cried, reminding me failing one test wasn't enough to limit what I'm capable of. Or how he'd sit and read with me instead of going out with friends when he sensed there was tension brewing between our parents. He said it was because he was tired, but he was my shield in a world that was starting to feel foreign.

He used my sensitivity against me to build trust. Making me believe there was good in him when there wasn't.

“I didn't want anything from you then. And I sure as hell don't now.”

Amusement ghosts his expression. He doesn't believe me. *I* don't believe me.

I'll hold this line anyway.

“Save it for later, Jude.” A referee stops beside us, his gaze dropping to where Jude's fingers grip my arm.

Jude lets me go, but when he steps back, he doesn't acknowledge the referee, trapping me with his gaze instead. Something dark flashes in his eyes as he scans me once more. My goal of pissing him off worked a little too well. Rage has been replaced by determination. Something more terrifying because it means he's focused on his prize and nothing will stand in his way.

“Eyes on me, Red.” Jude wraps his hand a final time. “Watch what you make me do.”

I’m not sure what he means, but the referee shuffles me down a set of stairs before I can ask. I’m led to a seat at the edge, where the other eight numbers await me. And I can’t help but wonder how many I’m going to need.

*How far is Jude going to take this?*

The crowd roars as the start of the fight nears, and Jude stands in the ring with his fingers flexed. Eyes locked and focused on me. While he should be worrying about the man on the other side of the ring, he doesn’t break my gaze.

Issuing Jude a challenge is dangerous. Lines don’t exist for him. I threw meat to the lion anyway.

A buzzer blares through the speakers and it makes me jump, while Jude doesn’t so much as flinch.

He stays in place in his corner of the ring without a care in the world. A god in the flesh out for revenge.

Jude’s always been attractive, but right now as he stands in the ring in fighter shorts, my mind walks a moral tightrope. Shirtless, every tattoo on his chest is on display. Hints to the stepbrother I used to know, but no longer do.

His fingers flex and it draws out the muscles in his forearms. Thick veins that ripple with every pop of his knuckles.

The seventeen-year-old boy I said goodbye to is gone, and in his place stands a man whose gaze wants to ruin me a second time.

His opponent is the first to move. He steps forward with a proud smile on his face at Jude's hesitation. Wiping a finger on a gash above his eyebrow and pushing his short blond hair off his forehead, he grins wide, failing to see what's right in front of him.

The fighter probably thinks the fact that Jude hasn't taken a step means it'll be an easy win. But Jude doesn't hesitate without a reason. While his opponent is fueled with adrenaline, Jude is assessing, and his gaze is lethal.

This fight was over before it began because Jude doesn't play games he won't master.

It doesn't matter how much I want the other fighter to win just so I can prove a point, Jude won't let it happen.

When the other fighter reaches Jude, I'm not sure who swings first, but it happens so fast, both fighters are on the sidelines and then in the middle of the ring. Fists strike skin with raw fury. Jude takes a solid hit to the jaw, but all it does is make him smirk.

He always was a bit of a masochist in school—feeding off punches when he should have been staying out of trouble. Taking whatever pain was necessary to find his opening to strike.

Like he does now, letting his opponent get in one more good hit before he seizes the moment. His opponent shifts to the left, leaving him wide open. An opportunity Jude takes before the other man has a chance to blink. To breathe.

For a split second, the entire room is silent, broken with the sound of Jude's knuckles cracking against his opponent's face.

Again.

And again.

The crowd screams.

Even if there's a referee, he doesn't seem to care how much blood coats the ring. He watches them beat each other in a brutal display of rage.

Something Jude embodies right now. Pure hate surfacing in his eyes. In his actions. His focus might be on his opponent, but his fury makes waves that rock the building. The earth. My soul.

Eleven years and the man can wreck me in ways I forgot he was capable of.

Jude is about to land another punch when a buzzer sounds and two men slide through the ropes to peel the fighters away from each other. Both are still standing, even if I wish one wasn't just so it would be over.

"This your first fight?" A man sitting next to me leans in, and for the first time since the fight started, I'm aware that I'm at the edge of my seat, gripping it for dear life.

I look over at a guy who must have fought already because his eye socket is darkening and his lip's split in the center. Bruises and gashes make a mess of his otherwise strong facial features.

“You look nervous.” His blinding grin’s out of place here.

I shake my head. “It’s just intense. How long will it last?”

“As long as it takes.”

That’s what I’m worried about.

Jude drops onto a stool in the corner of the ring, and someone starts applying Vaseline to a cut on his eyebrow. They’re talking to him about something I can’t make out over the roaring crowd, but he’s not paying attention. His head is tipped back against the ropes and his eyes are focused on me.

“You a friend of Jude’s?” The fighter beside me leans closer, and Jude’s jaw clenches.

“Not exactly.”

“Girlfriend?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Definitely not. I’m Fel, his stepsister... or I was his stepsister. Not anymore.”

“Interesting.” He pulls back slightly, and his gaze darts between me and Jude.

I’m not sure what crosses his mind at my confession, but he seems to be thinking it over quite a bit. He stares across the ring until Jude finally spares him a glance. A silent conversation bordering on a battle as their gazes narrow.

“Well, I’m Sage.” He drops his arm around the back of my chair with a dark grin, not looking away from Jude when he does. “A friend of Jude’s.”



It's clear he wants a reaction, and he must get what he's looking for. Because Jude stands, turning his back on us, while Sage smirks.

“You did that to piss him off.”

Sage shrugs, removing his arm from my chair now that Jude's no longer looking. “Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Curious if it would.”

I open my mouth to ask him to elaborate, but the referee stops in front of me before I get the chance.

“You're up, redhead.”

I grit my teeth and want to tell him I have a name. That I'm not just some piece of meat walking around for their entertainment. But right now, it feels like it would be a lie. Between the men in the room watching me as I walk back up to the ring with the sign for the second round, and the silent war Jude and Sage were waging from across the room, I feel like a toy in a game of tug of war.

Stepping to the edge of the ring once more, I pull my shoulders back and snap the round two sign overhead. But this time, when I pass Jude, he lets me. He doesn't so much as look up as I make my way around. Instead, his eyes are closed and he's rubbing his knuckles.

Focused.

Peaceful.

Deadly.

I make my way back to my seat, but Sage doesn't say anything to me when I sit down, so I stay quiet. They obviously know each other, and Sage called Jude a friend, but right now they don't feel like it.

The buzzer sounds and round two starts.

This time, there's no pause. The fighters immediately collide as knuckles meet bone. I can only imagine the sting from the sheer force of the hits.

Jude's opponent only gets in one good punch this time, giving Jude the clear advantage. But when I expect Jude to finish him, he pulls back. Circling, almost taunting the other fighter and dragging it out.

"What's he doing?" I lean toward Sage, watching Jude retreat when he could end it. "Why isn't he finishing it?"

A dark grin crawls Sage's cheeks as he slowly shakes his head. "He's proving a point."

The bell dings to end the round and Jude looks over at me, smirking, before turning his back and making his way to his stool in the corner.

*"Eyes on me, Red. Watch what you make me do."*

His words from before the fight revolve in my head.

Jude isn't just proving a point. He's making a statement—for me. He's going to drag this out in the most painful way possible while I'm witness to every moment.

Most people want you to see their best side, but Jude was always intent on me seeing his worst. The darkest, most ruthless, bloodiest parts. Testing my limits and viciously pushing me past them.

Tonight isn't a fight—it's a reminder. With every connection of his fist on his opponent's flesh he's delivering a message. He's violent, aggressive, angry. And he wants to make sure I never forget it.

The rounds go on and on. It feels like it's endless as I wait for one of them to give up. By round seven Jude doesn't even take a hit, but he goes easy on the other fighter anyway. Prolonging the battle to the final seconds on the clock.

And each time I circle the ring with the sign, it feels more like a punishment. Like if I dared to show up here, Jude's going to make me suffer as much as possible. He might not like me being on display, but he cares about vengeance more.

Round nine starts and Sage has leaned back in his chair, no longer seeming the least bit worried. Jude is winning—he's already won—he just hasn't landed the final punch.

“Stepsister huh?” Sage says to me, finally, after avoiding talking for the past five rounds.

“Ex.”

Sage hums, not sharing whatever he's thinking.

Just as the ninth round is about to end, Jude finally steps in and rears his arm back, landing one final blow to the side of his opponent's face, which knocks him out cold. The fighter

falls like a dead weight to the ring, into the blood of all the fighters before him.

Jude barely acknowledges it as he flexes his hands at his sides and steps back. And for the first time in seven rounds, his gaze dares to find me. Amusement erased, leaving nothing but rage.

“Better go crown the winner,” Sage says, standing up and walking away at his own comment. But it feels like more of a taunt than an actual compliment.

And none of this feels like a win.

The referee leads me into the ring as he starts to announce Jude’s score. But Jude couldn’t seem to care less as I stand on the other side of him and wait for whatever he’s planning.

*Jude wasn’t supposed to be here.*

*Maren should have told me about what was expected of me before I walked into this.*

All these thoughts race through my mind as the referee’s voice is mumbled by my blood pounding between my temples.

“Jude Carlisle.” The referee announces, and the crowd rears to life.

This is it; I feel it in my bones. My skin tingles and my stomach drops. Because as much as I hate Jude for everything he’s done, and as much as I never wanted to see him again, he’s right. I have thought about this.

Lying in bed at fifteen, I wondered what it would be like to be lost against his lips. I wondered if he was worth the flames of hell it would bring the both of us. I'd lie awake and hate my mother for marrying his father because I'd never see him as the brother I was supposed to.

*He was supposed to be mine.*

But now, the lines are blurred in blood, and I'm not sure what I want.

I turn to face Jude but he's not looking at me. He's standing tall with his hands at his sides and his fingers flexing. His jaw works, and he lets out a deep breath. "Don't come back here, Red."

And he walks away, not looking back.

## Jude

*“WONDERED IF I’D SEE you here.”*

*The familiar voice draws out a grin I can’t contain. A voice I’ve thought about more than I should have these past couple of weeks since running into her at another one of my father’s pretentious networking events.*

*She was so sweet, I swore she might have been a figment of my imagination, but here she is. Ocean-blue eyes dragging me under.*

*“So you go here?” Fel grips her notebook, radiating that same nervous energy I remember from when we met. Like she’s always on edge about how she’s coming across to people when she has nothing to worry about.*

*“Do now.”*

*It should be illegal to wear the school’s maroon uniform like she does. Her long red hair clashes with the color, but somehow, she’s perfect anyway.*

*“And you’re ditching class already?” Fel’s perfect eyebrow ticks upward.*

*“Study period.”*

*It’s a lie, and the smile Fel tries to bury tells me she sees straight through it, but she doesn’t argue. Her ocean-blue gaze moves to my feet resting on the table, and I can’t help but smile at how this girl gives everything away with her eyes.*

*Intrigue. Annoyance. It’s never been so easy to read someone. Either that or I’ve never been so curious.*

*“You’re one to talk?” I point out the fact that I’m not the only one in the library when the bell to class rang five minutes ago.*

*“Unlike you, this actually is my study period.”*

*I have no doubt she’s telling the truth because she doesn’t seem the type to rebel or go off course.*

*Her eyes once more move to where my feet are kicked up on the table, so I drop them to the floor and lean forward on it. “Well then, by all means, join me.”*

*It’s possible she’s smart enough to turn down the offer, but damn if I’m not happy when she drops into the seat across from me at the table instead.*

*She flips open a book that’s so thick it thumps when she cuts straight to the middle.*

*“Whatcha got there?”*

*“Calculus.” Her eyes avoid me as she rummages for a pencil and pretends to ignore that I’m here, even if her blushed cheeks give her away. “It’s study period, remember?”*

*“Don’t need to study.”*

*A look between irritation and interest claims her eyes. “Everyone needs to study.”*

*“My grades do fine without it.”*

*“Define, fine.”*

*“Good enough to keep me on the team.” I shrug.*

*“What team?”*

*“Football.”*

*She bites the corner of her perfect puffy lips, and while nothing has kept my interest like being on the field, I think watching her might dethrone my love of the game.*

*“So you play?” She’s all but forgotten the book in front of her, or the quiet library we shouldn’t be talking in, and I love that I pull her attention the way I do. Something about this girl with her fire-red hair gets my blood pumping.*

*“Since I was little.” I lean back in my chair and pop my knuckles, not missing how she’s examining the muscles in my forearms as I do. “Couldn’t pass up a socially acceptable excuse to hit people.”*

*She rolls her pretty eyes like she thinks I’m joking, and I wish I was. So I smile in return and bask in the glow of her cheeks, absorbing the innocence that leaks from her pores.*



*Wishing it was enough to soak up the darkness that's followed me around since I was born.*

*When we met, I might have told her there was no way she was an angel, but I'm no longer convinced. Because the girl calls out to me.*

*"Do you play any sports?"*

*She doesn't look the type, but I'm not ready to let the conversation go.*

*"No. But my dad played football, so I understand the game."*

*"Sounds like he and I would get along." I've never met a girl's parents, so I'm not sure what compels me to suggest it, but I don't take it back.*

*"He's dead."*

*All the light in the room drains with the color on her face, and her eyes move back to the Calculus book in front of her. But even if her eyes are skimming the pages, her gaze is detached and distant.*

*"My mom's not dead, but she's gone," I admit, not sure why I'm offering her comfort with the shit I don't talk about with anyone. "She was smart enough to get out."*

*"Out of what?" She's looking at me again with those eyes that are fucking dangerous.*

*"A life she didn't want anymore, I guess. Wouldn't know, I never met her. She left when I was born."*

*Already, I feel Fel digging—reading me. Deciding what she thinks of my admission.*

*“I don’t blame her,” I say, wishing I could believe it so Fel will too.*

*Besides, it’s part truth. Dad never elaborated on why Mom left, but I’ve lived with him long enough to understand why she’d want to.*

*“You don’t like your life, do you?” Fel’s staring at me, the slightest sheen to her bright-blue eyes.*

*“Do you?”*

*Her gaze moves around the library taking it in with whatever she’s thinking.*

*“Good schools. Nice houses. Money.” She lists them off like they should mean something. “What’s not to like?”*

*But her tone is flat, and I sense the distance in her eyes as she tries to connect herself with the words coming out of her mouth.*

*“There are more important things than all that shit.” I lean forward on the table, and it puts us so close I get a hit of her strawberry scent.*

*“Like what?”*

*Daring to reach out, I brush a fallen lock of red hair off her perfect heart-shaped face, tucking it behind her ear and loving the blush it brings to her freckled cheeks.*

*“Like freedom. A life without chains. Someday...”*

*“The grass is always greener, Jude.”*

*“Maybe.” I pull back. “But anything’s better than being fake like them.”*



There’s something about driving metal through a person’s flesh and watching how they react. Knowing their heart’s racing in anticipation of the pain you’re about to inflict. But they sit patiently and wait for it.

Begging to be hurt.

We’re all secretly masochists. It’s just a matter of what kind of pain you’re willing to tolerate.

Barbells, gauges.

*Redheads who don’t know better than to stay the fuck away.*

“Coffee?” Sage stops in the doorway to my piercing room at the shop and holds a to-go cup out to me.

I walk over and take it from him. “Don’t think this makes us even.”

“Even for what?”

“You know what.” I walk away and go back to setting things up for the tongue piercing scheduled for noon.

“Oh, right... Fel, I believe her name is.” Sage smirks, being a dick and taking a sip of his coffee.

A seemingly innocent comment, when really, he’s trying to get under my skin so he can get information.

“You can forget her name.” I don’t like hearing it out of his mouth anyway, even if he is my best friend.

There’s a reason I’ve never mentioned Fel to him. She’s the single point in the universe where every regret I have lives. It’s hard enough to survive with that buried inside me, much less having to relive it for his entertainment.

“I don’t know...” Sage tips his head back and closes his eyes. He’s pretending to think hard, but he’s smiling wide like the dick he is. “She was pretty unforgettable. Besides, you fucked my sister. It’s only fair.”

Circling the chair in the center of the room, I stop in front of him and punch my fist into the wall beside his head. But he doesn’t so much as flinch. “She’s not my fucking sister. And she’s off-limits.”

“Understood.” Sage smirks because he got the reaction he was looking for.

*Dick.*

Besides, Sage knows I didn’t actually fuck his sister. It was a kiss during a stupid game of truth or dare and didn’t mean shit. We were all rolling so hard that night I don’t even remember it. But he’s taunting me because he’s the master of uncovering people’s weaknesses. Something Fel is, whether I like it or not.

“Seriously, man.” Sage lifts off the doorframe and walks into the room, taking a seat on a chair in the corner. “Why haven’t you ever mentioned her?”

This is not the conversation I want to have right now—or ever.

Even if I've kept close tabs on Fel for the past eleven years, I've been careful not to let anyone in on that secret. She was a past never meant to actually come full circle.

And now she's everywhere. Showing up at my shop, showing up at my fight.

The second I saw her climb the steps in short shorts and a bikini top, I almost murdered everyone in the room for daring to so much as look at her. No one is allowed to see her like that.

*Especially me.*

*Fuck.*

“I told you my dad was married once.” I shrug, trying to play it off like I haven't purposely hidden Fel away from my best friend like some damn secret that needs protecting.

“It's about what you failed to tell me, Jude. And you fucking know it. What's the deal with you and that girl? Don't think I didn't see that shit you pulled in the ring. You could have won in the first round against that douche.”

“I was in the mood to let out some aggression.” I take a drink of my coffee and it immediately burns my tongue.

“*Aggression* would have been three rounds.” Sage glares. “You did that shit just to make her watch.”

Fucking Sage, always seeing through all my shit.

“You don’t need to worry about what I make her watch.”

Sage takes another sip of his coffee. “Jude, we’ve been friends for a decade, and I’ve let you in on some dark shit. Demons from my past I don’t share with anyone.”

I swallow hard, because he has, and I’m being an asshole for not doing the same, but all my rules go out the window when it comes to Fel, even my brotherhood with Sage.

“I’m here if you need to talk, just remember that.”

“I will.”

He tips his chin up. “Good.”

Taking another sip of my coffee, silence chokes the room.

I want this to be enough. For last night to be a closed door. For her to actually listen to me for once, so we can continue pretending we aren’t embedded in each other’s lives as much now as we were back then. But I sense her like a beacon pulsing. And even if I managed to stay away for years, now that I’ve seen her again, it feels impossible to continue to do.

The need to hit something radiates through me. Anything to release the tension I’ve never been able to set free in the one way I want to.

“You got a full schedule today?” I change the subject before the thoughts that will send me to hell flood my brain.

He nods. “Booked until ten thirty. Why?”

“Crew and I were thinking of going out tonight to blow off some steam.”

“Thought that’s what last night was about.” Sage tips his chin up and his gaze moves to the gash on my eyebrow.

“Different kind of stress relief.”

He shakes his head and chuckles. “You guys have fun; I’ve got shit to do after my shift.”

“Like fucking Téa?” Yes, I’m aware he’s screwing our new front desk girl. He’s not subtle about it, and it’s becoming an annoying pattern.

“Better than chicks looking for a commitment.”

“And you think she isn’t?” I quirk an eyebrow. “When this shit goes bad, it’s going to fall back on the whole shop. *Again.*”

“Don’t know what you’re implying.”

“That you’re always fucking the chicks working the front desk.” Every. Last. One of them. “It’d be nice if we could get one to stick around for more than five seconds without you sticking your dick in them and scaring them off.”

“They know what I’m offering from the beginning.”

They should. He’s clear about it. Problem is, the guy’s also a magnet for clingy chicks. Chicks that don’t seem to realize he really means it when he says he’s not settling down with anyone.

After all, I’m not the only one haunted by ghosts from the past.

“Whatever you say, man.” There’s no use arguing. He’s going to do what he’s going to do, and I’ll be the one cleaning up the mess as usual.

“Well, I better get set up.” Sage stands, tossing his coffee cup in the trash. When he turns, he almost runs into Echo, who’s barreling around the corner.

“Jude.” She snaps her gum, clacking it between her teeth like she always does. Her fingers rake through her half-bleached, half-black hair as she tugs it up into a ponytail that bounces around as much as she does.

Girl is so fucking energetic. I need more coffee just to look at her. But at least she balances out the grumpy assholes who make up the rest of the Twisted Roses group. Between me, Sage, and Crew, I figured we’d have broken her spirit by now. Apparently not.

“What’s up?”

She pops her gum. “Some girl’s here to see you.”

“Where’s Téa with this information?”

Echo shrugs and pops her gum again. And I can’t help but glare at Sage, who just smirks. It’s a matter of time before we’re filling the front desk position for the fifth time this year, and he doesn’t give a shit.

“Send her back.” I nod, and Echo disappears out the doorway.

Thought I’d have more time before my noon appointment, because I’m booked solid for six hours straight after that, but



apparently not. I chug the rest of my coffee, letting it burn my throat before tossing it in the trash.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Sage walks over and claps me on the shoulder, looking like he’s about to say something else, but there’s nothing to be said when I’m not willing to talk about it. So he shakes my shoulder and walks away.

Sage probably thinks he can figure out whatever I don’t tell him on his own, so he’s not pushing the subject. But I’ve buried Fel’s and my secrets. So deep even she doesn’t realize how much I’m hiding.

Sage can dig all he wants. I know how to bury bodies.

It was the only way to survive after everything happened.

Her mom was dead, my dad was in jail, and Fel told me she never wanted to see me again. My only choice was to walk away and hope the damage didn’t swallow her whole.

After all, I gave up everything for her. Football, college, my future. She just couldn’t understand it.

It was then I met Sage. I was crashing on a mutual friend’s couch, so he offered up his spare room. Sage introduced me to Blaze, who owned Twisted Roses at the time, and they taught me how to tattoo and pierce. They made me believe there was a way to survive without my dad’s blood-soaked money. And I finally realized why I never fit into my life until I walked away from it.

While Fel was perfect and made for their world, I was poison laced in ink, spreading through everything.

I turn to the counter and prep for my tongue piercing, unwrapping a sterilized needle and setting it aside. Anything to shake last night from my mind. I focus on bleaching my equipment a final time while Crew's death metal mix plays on repeat in the shop. It's not my taste, but at least the screaming drowns out my thoughts.

When footsteps down the hall get closer, I spray down the black leather chair in preparation.

"Take a seat." I toss the rag into a bin in the corner of the room, before turning to face my next victim.

But as the door to my piercing station closes, ocean-blue eyes stare back at me. The coolness of the deepest parts singing a siren song that makes me want to drown. Her red hair, bright as fire in a messy bun on top of her head.

*She shouldn't be here.*

But fuck if I'm not tempted to remind her why.

## Fel

I HATE THAT JUDE looks amused when he sees me standing here. I hate that he takes away my power in any situation with one look. I hate that I can't just let it go. That I needed to show up at the parlor and prove myself. But I'm tired of him walking away whenever he wants, and this time, I'm not letting him get away with it.

“You always were shit at following directions.” Jude picks up a needle, and it feels a little like a threat.

“You always were arrogant enough to think you're the only one who makes the rules.”

I cross my arms over my chest and stare at him, wishing it was enough to break this tension, but he just smirks in amusement.

“What do you want, Fel?”

“You walked away.”

I should be trying to play it cool, but Jude breaks through all my patience with one sharp gaze.

“Which time?”

“All of them.” I drop my hands to my sides and ball them into fists, hating that it’s so easy for him to draw a reaction from me while he stands there completely unaffected. “But I’m talking about last night.”

“Were you hoping I wouldn’t?” He sets down the needle and slowly walks closer, planting his hand beside my head on the closed door behind me. “Were you hoping I’d take what I earned from your pretty lips instead?”

“No.” I hope he doesn’t notice how much it sounds like a lie.

Jude reaches up and smears his thumb over my lower lip like he did last night and smirks. “Liar.”

Pushing off the wall, he steps back and stares down at me with a smug expression that boils my irritation to the surface.

“Think whatever you want.”

“I will. Besides, you’re the one who’s standing in *my* parlor. Again.”

“I’m here to remind you that you don’t get to tell me what to do.” I tip my chin up. “You don’t get to reappear after eleven years and think that you being my stepbrother for the whole five seconds our parents were married gives you any right to dictate my life. I don’t take directions from you anymore. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“You done?” Jude lifts an eyebrow.

I nod my head. “As long as you hear what I’m saying.”

“Oh, I hear you, Red.” He breathes out a dark chuckle. “But you’re not walking around that ring again. I can fucking guarantee it.”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Fuck you, Jude. You get to do whatever you want with your life, but for some reason you have a problem with me doing the same?”

“You don’t need that shit, Felicity.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Why?” He steps back, gripping the counter behind him. “Already burned through all your grandparents’ money?”

“I never took their money, for your information. You weren’t the only one who walked away.” It comes out louder than I want it to, and it erases any lingering hints of amusement from Jude’s face. “Mom’s inheritance, yes. She left that for me, so I used it to go to college. But she only had so much. I’ve been building a jewelry business. It’s not cheap, and that means I have to make sacrifices. You of anyone should understand that. So if I decide to wear a bikini for thirty minutes to pay my rent, you don’t get to have a say.”

I hate that Jude drags the truth out of me without even really asking. I hate that I want him to know it. I hate that he still makes me feel safe enough to tell him, even when I’m aware of what happens once he has the information.

“Just—” I shake my head, and it loosens a few strands from my bun. “Stay out of my life, and I’ll stay out of yours. Okay?”

He won’t let me leave, but I try anyway. Turning, I reach for the handle, and he’s behind me so fast I’m gulping in his scent. He plants his hand on the door, holding it closed before I can escape him. No time to breathe as his body presses close behind me.

“I’ll sell your jewelry.”

Sighing, I look over my shoulder at him. “That’s not why I came here. I get—”

“Felicity,” he cuts me off with a hard gaze, using my full name, which he only does when he’s frustrated or trying to make me listen. “It’s good stuff, all right? This is a business decision. I’ll sell it.”

“No *conditions*?”

He shakes his head, and finally, I turn around. But he doesn’t step back, and I’m so close to the bubble of gravity that surrounds him I’m caving in on myself.

“You’re only offering now because you don’t want me showing up to another fight.”

He doesn’t respond to that because he doesn’t need to. Jude likes control when it comes to me, and this is another way he’ll take it. It doesn’t matter whether I’m his or not, the thought of me being someone else’s makes him irrational. Looking at me, touching me, it’s all the same.

It's why he's offering to sell my jewelry. To keep me fully clothed and as far away from his fight nights as possible.

"I can't guarantee it will pay all your bills. But it's something."

I nod in understanding because I might not like why he's doing this, but I need it. Selling my jewelry at Twisted Roses gives me access to clients I wouldn't stand a chance with otherwise. This is my opportunity. So even if I have to deal with Jude and his constant need to have power over me, I'll do what needs to be done for my business.

"I should get going. I'm sure you have work to do." I reach for the door handle behind me again, and this time he steps back, not stopping me. "What sells the best? So I can bring the right things by later."

"Lots of studs lately. Monroe piercings, noses. And hip piercings are having a moment."

He almost sounds professional when he slips into shop talk, and once more I'm struck by the fact that Jude is no longer a teenage boy who lacked direction.

"I'm here until ten." Jude shifts his body weight but stays glued in place, watching me carefully as I open the door.

"I'll bring some things by later then."

I turn, but even though I'm no longer looking, I feel his eyes on me as I disappear around the corner. Even the sterilized air isn't enough to bleach my thoughts.

Being around Jude resurrects everything I buried these past eleven years. And here I am affixing myself to his shop like letting him back in my life isn't going to be a huge mistake.

Not that it matters.

I can hate him all I want—regret him all I want—deep inside, the feelings never change. I'll always stupidly want the man who broke my family and my heart, even if I should know better.



## Jude

THERE'S A LOUD BUZZ, followed by metal unlocking, as the door swings open. And I'm met with eyes I promised myself I'd never look into again.

People used to tell me I looked a lot like my father, but whatever happened to him in this place changed that. He's a gaunt version of the man I remember growing up, and the illusion of who I thought he was has been stripped away.

"Ten years." He sits down in front of me, and his handcuffs clatter against the metal table as he rests his hands on it. "Good to see you, son."

I hate that he calls me that.

I hate that it's who I am.

I hate him.

"Why is Felicity refusing to take money from her grandparents?" I'm clenching my hands in tight fists, which digs my fingernails into my palms.

“Cutting straight to the chase?” Dad smirks. “No hello, how are you?”

“I don’t care how you are.”

“But I see you still care about her.” His smile drops and a familiar cold void fills his gaze.

“Just answer the question, and we can both say goodbye for another ten years.”

He doesn’t want to see me any more than I want to see him, but he doesn’t seem surprised I’m here. Amusement brightens his eyes, and I wonder how many years he’s waited for me to show up and ask him this question.

The last time I saw my father, I didn’t think much of the final words he said to me. It wasn’t until Fel showed up at my shop that I heard them whispering from the back of my mind.

*You can’t keep her out of your path, Jude. What’s meant to be always finds a way.*

What did he see back then that I didn’t?

I ran far enough that she never would have found me if she stayed where I left her. But she didn’t, and my father doesn’t seem surprised by it.

Maybe I should have expected it as well—maybe I did. After all, there’s a reason I’ve never taken any relationship past a certain point. A reason I’ve always seen Fel’s face when I close my eyes. A reason I never really got over our two years together.

The years don't matter when it comes to Fel, and even in her absence, I couldn't shake her from my bones.

*What's meant to be always finds a way.*

I figured it was a metaphorical taunt to remind me I deserve to burn in hell for wanting my stepsister the way I did. Only now, I hear it as something more literal. And I need to know why he seemed so certain of his convictions.

“Why did she cut them off?”

“Why don't you just ask her?”

I considered that. Every time she's dropped off jewelry at the shop the past week, I thought about asking why she walked away from her grandparents' money after college. Her mom didn't have much of an inheritance, which was one of the reasons she married my father. So I'm not sure why Fel would rather struggle selling jewelry at tattoo parlors than accept her grandparents' support and pursue something more.

I have so many questions, but any answer she gives is bound to be scripted.

Fel might have a weakness for telling me the truth when she shouldn't, but I'm well aware there are still pieces of every admission she hides. She did it back then, and she'll do it even more now knowing what I'm willing to do with that information.

“What makes you think I know anything?” Dad leans back in his chair, ignoring the fact that I never answered his question. “I don't get out much in case you forgot.”

“They still visit you.”

*I just don't know why.*

If anyone has a reason to hate my father for what he did, it should be Fel's grandparents. Why they've continued to visit him in prison baffles me, and I'm not sure Fel's even aware of it.

She meant what she said when she told me she cut ties with her family, but somehow it feels like my fault. With her mother dead and me gone, I expected her to cling to them for comfort and support, maybe I should have kept closer tabs to confirm it happened.

But even if I had eyes watching just close enough to confirm she was fine, it was easier to stay away. It was *right*.

All it took was seeing her again to remind me that when it comes to her, I'd rather do what's wrong.

Girl is glue.

I don't mind it.

*Damn it.*

Escaping her pull was hard enough the first time around, I'm not sure how to do it again. My need to protect her when I was younger has only grown over the years. And sitting here in front of my father, I'm sure there's a bigger game that's far from over. It makes me want to lock Fel in a cage and keep her to myself so they can't hurt her again.

Only I'm allowed to do that.

“From what her grandparents shared with me, she wanted space,” Dad says, finally answering my question.

“They don’t take it seriously?”

“Of course not.” He breathes out a chuckle. “Spoiled little rich girls don’t actually want freedom. They want attention. The second things get hard she’ll come running back to them. It’s only a matter of time before her mom’s money runs out, and she’ll do what they expect.”

“Which is what?”

“Got me.” But his grin says otherwise.

“Why do you seem so happy about all this?”

More like, why does he care?

I’ve wondered many times why her grandparents never cut him out of their lives after what he did, but I never thought about what he was getting out of it. And something about his joy in seeing me sitting in front of him asking him these questions makes me nervous.

Dad plays people like pawns, striking long before people figure out what game they’re playing. It’s where I learned it.

“Don’t get too attached, Jude. We both know how that ends.” He pushes his chair back and stands.

“This isn’t the same.” I stand to meet him, looking him straight in his cold, dark eyes. “You don’t control me anymore, and I’ll make damn sure they stay far away from her.”

“Don’t pretend you’re the better option.” Dad focuses his gaze. “Felicity may be in the dark about what you did, but you aren’t the only one who knows the truth. It doesn’t matter what was right or wrong. You pushed her mother over the ledge and she’ll never forgive you. You’ll always be her villain, like it or not.”

“Takes one to know one.” I push my chair in and turn away, my stomach clenching.

I’m not sure why I came here thinking I’d get answers. My father was always a master of manipulation. And even if he’s behind bars now, it’s not for the reasons he should be. Embezzlement was the least of the evil this man’s done in his life. He was just careful enough to not get caught red-handed with the rest of it.

I should be relieved. He’s locked in here with no chance of getting out anytime soon. If only I didn’t sense him still pulling strings from his prison cell. Using me or Fel’s grandparents, or anyone who will listen.

*For what?*

Invisible chains are tightening. Hooks that latch Fel to her previous life when she thinks she’s free like me. She isn’t. Dad all but confirmed it. They’re loosening the leash just enough to make it her decision when she returns.

I just don’t know what their plan is for her once she finally does.



*“Why am I here again?”*

*“You’re my son.” Dad adjusts his suit jacket, before ringing the bell.*

*This house is ridiculous—a compound really. Bleeding with overindulgence and money that could be spent on better things. And it’s still a downgrade from mine and Dad’s.*

*“Bringing your son on your dates now?”*

*Dad’s glare cuts my direction. He knows I’m trying to piss him off because I hate when he drags me along to shit like this. I hate that he pretends to care and wants me to do the same. I hate that no one around him sees through it.*

*“Behave, Jude.”*

*He looks away before I can salute him or flip him off. Wouldn’t do any good anyway. Once Dad gets an idea in his head, there’s no stopping him, especially his fifteen-year-old son.*

*My phone vibrates and I look down at the screen, trying to bury my smile at her name filling it with the kind of hope I didn’t think was possible.*

***Fel:*** *It will be fine, promise*

***Jude:*** *It’ll be boring, but I’ll survive... mostly*

***Fel:*** *I’d rather all of you survive*

***Jude:*** *And if I don’t?*

*Fel: Guess I'll have to find someone else to entertain me while I study in the library...*

*Jude: Taunting me now? Cute*

*Fel: Joking...*

*Jude: What are you up to tonight?*

*Fel: Mom has another date... kill me now. And she said this one is it.*

*Jude: It?*

*Fel: A keeper*

*Jude: Maybe you'll get lucky, and it won't stick*

*Fel: It might not be the worst thing if it does stick. At least I wouldn't have to watch her date anymore.*

*Jude: True*

*Fel: I think he's here, I've got to go. Text me later and let me know you survived your dad's business dinner?*

*Jude: You got it*

*The door swings open as I tuck my phone in my pocket and a woman with strawberry blonde hair is beaming. A smile so sugary I want to choke.*

*"Steve." She breathes his name out like he's not the devil incarnate, even if her eyes show the slightest detachment I can't help but focus on.*



*Dad steps forward and paints on the phony smile he's perfected. "Abigail."*

*Reaching for her waist, he pulls her in for a kiss and my stomach sinks. This was supposed to be a business dinner. I was only joking when I called it a date. But one moment and the earth might as well shift.*

*Dad steps back and Abigail steps aside to let us in.*

*Inside, the house is even more gaudy than I thought. A double-winding staircase meets us in the foyer. The walls are covered in art, and statues are prominent in the corners of the room. All things that scream money.*

*Except, Abigail answered the door, there was no staff in sight, and I wonder if I'm the only one who notices.*

*"This must be Jude." Abigail looks me over, the brightness in her expression muted this time.*

*I try to ignore it and just nod.*

*"Lovely." One word, but she doesn't sound like she means it.*

*Movement on the staircase pulls her attention, and she rolls her shoulders back proudly at the figure paused at the top of the stairs.*

*I follow Abigail's gaze until my focus is on a girl who makes my whole world shrink in on itself.*

*Fel's eyes lock on mine and my gut plummets watching her eyes dart between the three of us standing below her. Puzzle*

*pieces click together at the same time as they feel like they're breaking everything apart.*

*I didn't see it before, but the resemblance between Fel and her mother is suddenly clear as day. Her text still open on my phone, tearing my life down the middle.*

*One glance in Fel's eyes carves a hole beneath me.*

*I'm sinking.*

*Fel looks beautiful tonight out of her school uniform. Her red hair is loose around her shoulders, with a single braid holding it off her face like a headband. Her lemon-yellow dress is brighter than everything in the room as she slowly makes her way down the steps toward us.*

*But the closer she gets, the darker her expression. And as my dad slips his hand in her mother's, every beautiful inch of her face falls. An expression that twists the knife as I realize what this night really is.*

*Her mother's date.*

*My father's business dinner.*

*Only Dad would use those words when he really means he's introducing me to his new girlfriend. Everything in his life is a transaction. A calculation. And this one might be what breaks me.*

*I've only spoken to Fel a handful of times at school these past couple of weeks. We mostly talk through text when neither of us can sleep. But something about this girl felt like my*

*lifeline in a cold, fake world. And as Dad's lips move with his words, he takes the scissors to it.*

*One sentence and he changes fate.*

*"Jude, meet your soon-to-be stepsister, Felicity."*

## Fel

TWISTED ROSES ISN'T THE first tattoo parlor to carry my body piercings. But as I spread my jewelry out in the display case, my business feels real in a way it hasn't before. More so than when I started an online Etsy shop or had necklaces displayed in my first storefront. More than when Maren came home one day with my barbell through her belly button.

It feels official.

The Twisted Roses celebrity client list isn't exaggerated. They come and go discreetly on a daily basis, already eyeing my jewelry as they do.

When Madison Maine walked past me two days ago and complimented my necklace like she wasn't one of the biggest names in rock music, it took everything in me not to scream. She might have been here for an ankle tattoo, but for the first time in a long time, my dreams felt within reach.

That feeling is something I hold onto every time I cross paths with Jude in the lobby, and he offers a snide remark or

sideways glance. I remind myself this is worth it every time he avoids me or pretends I don't exist.

This isn't about him.

"I want more stories about Jude as a teenager." Echo hops up onto the counter behind the display case and pops her gum. She crosses one tattooed thigh over the other, as she blows another bubble with her crimson lips.

Of the four artists who work at the parlor, Echo is by far the friendliest. She might come across as intimidating with her Cruella De Ville hair and collection of black and gray tattoos, but underneath, she reminds me a lot of Maren. Bubbly, energetic, bursting at the seams.

Today, she's in a Killers T-shirt, cut around the collar so it falls off one shoulder, revealing a star tattoo. And she's wearing short black shorts that show off the bows on the backs of her thighs every time she bends over.

I wish I had her confidence.

Growing up, I was taught women should be unblemished and unmarked. I was raised to believe being an individual made a person ugly. Perfection was curated and looked a certain way.

But Echo shatters my misconceptions and the more I get to know her and the guys at the shop, I feel like I understand the man Jude has become more and more.

He grew up in the same world I did—worse even. His father had the kind of money a person can take three lifetimes

spending while never reaching the end of it. He had everything people think they want. Jude was the football captain, homecoming king, most-wanted senior.

While it seemed to fit him at the time, witnessing him now talking to Sage, or interacting with a client, I'm starting to see his younger self was a veil.

“What do you want to know about him?” I rearrange a few barbells and try not to react to her casual mention of Jude.

“Everything.” She narrows her cat eyes, and they're devious as she watches me fill the display case with a new collection.

“There's not much to tell.” I shrug. “Where we grew up, things were pretty uneventful.”

At least, on the outside they were. But I'm not going to get into the messy parts with a girl I've just met. Echo might be friendly, but I'm not as trusting as I used to be.

“You're no fun.” Echo hops off the counter and leans her hip against the display case. “Just give me a little bit of dirt I can throw at him when he's being a grumpy asshole.”

I can't help but laugh and shake my head. “He's always being a grumpy asshole it seems. Besides, there's no dirt to share. He was athletic, smart. Teenage Jude only cared about three things: school, sports, and his friends.”

“I get it, gotta protect family.”

“We aren't family.” It comes out snappier than I intend. “I mean, not anymore. It was just a couple of years.”

“Hmm,” she hums, but I don’t know her well enough to read what she’s thinking. All I can do is hope she didn’t sense anything I don’t want her to in my comment.

I place a few more barbells in the case and close it.

“Well I get it.” Echo is looking over my shoulder, focusing on something hanging on the far wall. “Not the stepbrother thing exactly, but the *complicated* part. Blood or not, family can be messy.”

She might avoid my stare, but I don’t miss the darkness coating her expression. A void unlike her upbeat self, making me wonder what Echo hides beneath the surface. Behind her eyes something plays out that sends a shiver through me.

Maybe we’re all running from ghosts in our pasts, hoping the skeletons don’t find a way to catch up with us.

“Anyway.” She shakes her head so hard her ponytail whips around. She breaks her focus on the wall, clicking her gum between her teeth and gnawing on it again. “Has it really been eleven years since you’ve seen him? And you just walked in here randomly?”

“Coincidences, right?”

One I didn’t think possible. And even if I’m able to force a smile for Echo’s sake, I’m not sure how I feel about the universe throwing me once more in Jude’s path. Part of me wishes I’d never seen him again. And the other part doesn’t want to walk away now that I have.

“A random run-in after eleven years is a pretty big coincidence.”

“I guess. I hadn’t seen Jude since my mom’s funeral.”

“I’m sorry.” Echo frowns.

Pressing my lips together, I’m not sure what to say. Sorry doesn’t capture how deep the pain of certain losses travels. Mom wasn’t warm or comforting, and she cared more about our survival in a world of money than my feelings, but she was still my mother. When she died, a part of me was buried with her, and I still feel the suffocation of the dirt thrown over those memories.

At the time, I wasn’t sure who I hated more—Jude for pushing us all over the ledge or her slitting her wrists because she’d had enough. Either way, they both found their own unique way to leave me.

Her funeral was the last time I faced either of them. Mom in her casket and Jude standing at the edge of the graveyard by a large tree.

I didn’t expect him to actually show up. But as the priest started to speak, my gaze lifted to find him at a distance in front of me. He didn’t join the group, like he knew he wasn’t welcome, but he didn’t leave when I spotted him either.

While the priest spoke, I searched Jude’s eyes for remorse or regret. Anything that would make the reality of the moment hurt less. All I found was the cold, painful truth that he was no longer the boy I met in the library.



“Echo, can I—” Jude comes around the corner and stops when he sees me standing in the lobby. His jaw clenches, and that simple reaction is enough to piss me off.

I’m the one who hates him, yet he acts like he has any right to be annoyed by my presence in his tattoo parlor.

Echo looks from me to Jude, not saying anything, but no doubt sensing the tension. It’s radiating between us. So thick there might as well be a current sweeping the air in warning.

“Didn’t know you were here.” He scratches the back of his neck, tipping his chin down just enough that a longer strand of hair falls over his eye.

“I was just leaving.” I wasn’t, but there’s no point staying now.

It’s easier to be here when I avoid Jude. At least then I can catch up with Echo and ignore the fact that all these visits do is bring out years of tension between him and me.

“Already?” Echo frowns. “If you go, I’ll be stuck alone with these assholes all day.”

“I’m standing right here,” Jude reminds her.

She smirks. “I’m aware.”

The two of them hold the standoff, and I’m not sure who I feel sorry for. Echo, for having to put up with the guys in the shop. Or the guys, in pain with every burst of Echo’s energy.

“Don’t you have a client?” Jude faces off with Echo.

“He’s taking ten to smoke.” She blows a bubble and pops it at him. “And you aren’t my boss, so why do you care?”

“I don’t.”

Echo bites her lip and ticks up an eyebrow in amusement like his tone is exactly what she wanted from him. Just because she’s sweet doesn’t mean her sugary personality doesn’t also hide the claws beneath.

I turn toward Echo, trying to ignore Jude. If he’s going to pretend I don’t exist, then I can do the same. I don’t come to the shop to reconnect or make nice with him. This is business. End of story.

“I really do have to go, sorry. I promised Maren I’d go bikini shopping with her this afternoon anyway, so I need to get home.”

“Why?” Jude focuses his attention on me for the first time since turning the corner.

“On that note...” Echo steps back, smiling and looking between us. “I think my client is ready, so I’ll catch you later Fel.”

She disappears down the hall, laughing so sweetly it’s devious.

Rolling my shoulders back, I clutch my jewelry case tighter and dare to face Jude, who’s stopped directly behind me, flooding my nose with his wintery cool cologne.

I hold my breath and try not to smell him. I try not to notice how his dark jeans hug his thighs. Or how the thin, pale gray

fabric of his T-shirt shows off every ripple of his shoulders and chest. I try not to admit to myself how one second in his presence disarms me just as much now as it did back then.

Instead, I grip the hate bubble in my core and hold onto it as tight as I can, embracing the fuel that ignites the wall of fire between us.

“Why are you going bikini shopping?”

As much as he doesn’t deserve my explanations, the only way out is through with him. “Maren wants something new to wear tonight.”

“But you won’t be there.”

It’s not a question, and I can’t help narrowing my gaze at the assumption. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I won’t.”

His posture relaxes, but he doesn’t walk away.

“Is that all?”

He tucks his hands in his pockets and his jaw ticks. “Yes.”

“Wonderful.” I start to turn, but his hand finds my arm, stopping me.

“What’s your problem?”

*My problem?*

I spin to face him so fast, I almost drop my jewelry. But like he’s watching every movement, Jude catches it.

“What’s my problem?” I return his question with a laugh, as I grab my jewelry case from his hands. “I’ll tell you what it is.

You need to decide what you're doing, Jude. Either ignore me and let me go about my business, or act like a decent human being and pretend we can at least make this civil. But don't think you can just pop in and demand things whenever you feel like it."

"That's not how it works between us, and you know it." Jude steps closer.

How is there still a gap to close? His nearness forces my chin up, and I'm met with his green eyes. His pupils drain the brightness from them.

"What do you want from me?"

Jude's question catches me off guard. I'm not sure why he cares or how to answer.

"I don't want anything. You're the one acting like we're at war."

"You're the one who hates me."

I want to hate him. I *do* hate him. But the more time I spend downtown at Jude's shop, the easier it is to forget why.

When he disappeared, it was easy to make him the bad guy. He didn't like our parents being married because it ruined whatever plans he concocted in his head. So he let his need for revenge consume him and he made us all suffer the consequence.

Back then, it was easy to explain it away because I didn't have to face him.

But spending time around him at Twisted Roses is making things murky. The aimless teenager who got into fights at school and rebelled against our parents is now running a business. He's built a life for himself, and even if I never would have pictured it, this place suits him.

Only, where does it leave us?

The Jude standing in front of me now is harder to hate because I'm finally seeing him in a different light.

If only I knew how to still trust him.

"I need you to understand something." I take a step back, if for no other reason than to clear my head. "We aren't picking up where we left off. It's been over a decade, in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten how long it's been." He works his jaw. "Doesn't matter if it's been ten years or twenty. I'm not going to sit back and watch my stepsister make a fool of herself."

I slam my jewelry case on the counter. "Your stepsister?"

A laugh I can't contain rips from my throat. Jude always used that word like the safest threat in his arsenal.

"What?" He shrugs, nonchalantly. "It's what you were."

"Exactly, *were*, as in, past tense," I point out. "As in, something we both know didn't matter anyway. It was a threat then and it still is, but that's all."

He opens his mouth to argue, but I step forward and he clamps it shut again.

“Don’t try to deny it.”

Jude plants one of his hands on the counter beside us and leans closer. Giving me the full force of his squared jaw and fierce eyes. “I wasn’t.”

My heart is racing so fast that I can’t tell if I’m still breathing. “Then why say it?”

“What else do you want me to say, Fel? It’s what you were, and it’s the only word left that makes any sense of this.” His teeth grind. “You weren’t supposed to know I was still in town. You aren’t supposed to be here. But here you are, every fucking day, walking into my shop and reminding me of all the shit I don’t want to fucking think about.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Mine.”

His admission catches me off guard. And for once, I wonder if the hate in his eyes is directed at the wrong person.

“I’m not going to apologize when everything I did was for you.”

“For me?” I laugh.

“Yes.”

There’s no pause. One word followed by silence. The air is thick and my laugh fades into it.

“Like I said back then, I did everything for you, and here you are trying to ruin your life anyway.”

“I’m building a business.”

“With barbells and lip piercings?” He drops his chin and shakes his head. “You’re running from something. What is it?”

“It’s none of your business.” I grab my jewelry case again. “You left. You don’t get to ask questions.”

“Walk away if you don’t like it.”

This was a bad idea. My business might thrive but I’m pretty sure Jude’s going to tear me in two before that happens.

“Fine.” I clench my jaw and give him one final, hard look before turning and walking toward the door.

“And here I thought this was us starting over,” Jude says to my retreating back.

Planting my hand on the door and pushing it open, I pause, half in and half out. There’s so much I want to say, but all it does is cut into wounds that are still dripping with his infection.

Tipping my chin over my shoulder, I let out a sigh. “There is no starting over, Jude. You made sure of it.”

If only he hadn’t.



*“It’s official, sis.” Jude leans against the doorframe.*

*I tug at my bridesmaid dress, feeling it tightening around me.*

*“Don’t call me that.”*

*“It’s what you are.” He lets out an unamused chuckle and brings a beer to his lips.*

*“Where did you get that?” I walk over to him and snatch it out of his hand. “If your dad catches you drinking—”*

*“Let him.” Jude grips my arm, and the beer bottle falls to the floor, shattering on the tile.*

*But he doesn't care or notice as he grabs my wrist and spins me around until my back is pinned against the wall and he's towering over me. “I can think of worse things he can catch me doing.”*

*“Jude—”*

*“Don't pretend you've never thought about it.” He places his palm over my cheek and toys with my bottom lip with his thumb. “We both know where this was heading before my dad went and fucked it all up. You and me to the end, Fel.”*

*“You're drunk.” I push his chest. But instead of backing up, he moves in closer.*

*“Why does it matter if I am? Not the first beer I've had in my life, won't be the last.”*

*“You're sixteen, for one.” I cross my arms over my stomach. “But also—you don't mean this.”*

*Jude drops his chin and shakes his head, chuckling as he lifts his gaze once more to meet my own. “That's where you're wrong, Fel. It's where everyone's always fucking wrong.”*





## Jude

SINCE OUR CONFRONTATION A week ago, Fel has avoided me every time she drops off more jewelry, and I shouldn't be surprised. If being an asshole is what it takes to keep the line drawn between us, I'll do what needs to be done. She never understood my willingness to take it as far as I had to with her.

The last thing I need is Fel getting close again or getting ideas in her head that I'm a good guy who did what I did for the right reasons. Letting her in only ends in blood, and I'm no idiot lying to myself and denying it.

But I can only avoid her so much.

Felicity Alcott with her splash of color and all-seeing blue eyes is impossible to ignore. Sitting in the lobby chatting with Echo every chance she gets. Flipping through a random stack of tarot cards that was left behind by one of our clients. Peeking into corners of the universe she doesn't belong.

Looking beautiful in a way that shouldn't be allowed with her freckled cheeks and heart-shaped face. The kind of beauty wars are fought over. Danger disguised as sweet. Soft but sharp beneath. A wake of destruction.

One look and she's karma—or penance for all the things I've done.

Ghosts knocking on the gates of the cemetery.

*Not that she realizes what happens when you wake them.*

Eleven years and she still never figured out the truth. At some point I expected it to get out—braced for it. Years of fingernails scratching at the surface was bound to uncover something. But her family was careful, and whatever secrets I buried, her grandparents threw more dirt on to save the family name.

They let me rot for their sins, and I did the same.

Fel's family wasn't the only one in shambles. I was seventeen—no mother worth looking for and my father locked away. No chance of seeing Fel again because she'd eventually want answers to why her mom killed herself.

I had no choice but to accept the fact that losing Fel was the only way she could move on with her life in a way I never would. Blood smeared on my slate meant wiping hers clean.

Phantoms tested now that she's back, resurrecting them with every conversation. And the more she haunts me the less I remember why I left her in the first place.

My knuckles crack as I slam my fist into the punching bag. Pain is all I want to feel right now, when it's the only thing strong enough to dull the tight sensation Fel's presence creates in my chest. And since I have an appointment soon, and there isn't enough time to cave someone's face in, a bag is going to have to do.

"You need to get laid," Crew's voice comes up behind me, sounding almost amused. "It's a better way to let out a little tension."

I punch the bag again and my hand is throbbing. "Is that what the blonde you took home last night was? Stress relief?"

Crew drops into the chair in the office and rakes his dark hair off his forehead. "She was something all right. Sucked dick like a pro."

"Wouldn't be surprised if she was. Willing to fuck you and all."

"Funny." Crew's smile drops as he plants his tattooed hands on his thighs. "What's got you in a shit mood this early?"

"Nothing." I grab the punching bag by both sides to stop it from swaying and drop down into the chair across the desk from him. "Just thinking over some shit."

"This have something to do with the hot-as-fuck redhead dropping jewelry off at the parlor every five seconds?"

"Her name's Fel, and don't fucking talk about her like that."

"Oh shit." He leans forward and grins. "You really like her?"

“She was my stepsister.”

“I’m aware.” Crew chuckles. “And I’m surprised you think that little moral dilemma would even faze me.”

“I don’t.” Crew’s moral compass is flat-out broken. “But either way, she’s like family. Not interested.”

“Sure.” Crew narrows his eyes, and it pisses me off. “So I guess you won’t mind if I have a go at her then? Test the little redhead’s limits.”

It takes everything in me not to break his face for his comment. But I know Crew, and he’s only saying it to get under my skin. So if that’s how it’s going to be, I’ll give him a taste of his own medicine.

“Good luck trying.” I smirk. Fel wouldn’t go for him anyway. “If that’s the best you can do to take your mind off the fact that Echo is fucking your brother, have at it.”

All amusement falls from Crew’s face and his jaw clenches. “I don’t give a fuck about Echo.”

“Next time say it like you mean it.”

Crew and Echo might act like they hate each other, but she’s the only person who has ever been able to get under Crew’s skin. Which leads me to believe there’s something more going on. To add to it, she started dating his brother a few months ago, in what I can only guess is an attempt to piss Crew off.

It’s working.

It doesn't matter that his brother is a well-known member of one of LA's most popular, ultra-conservative churches, so he's probably not even fucking Echo. Me planting the seed in Crew's head is enough for his fists to clench like he's holding back a punch.

"Fuck you, man." Crew shakes his head and stands up, landing a hit on the punching bag in the office before walking out.

Maybe I should feel bad about what I said, but I don't. My comment might make me an asshole, but he's the one who started this shit by dangling Fel in front of me. The guys should know better than to use her to try and piss me off.

I tip my head back and clench my fists. They're pulsing to the point of being almost numb.

Taking out my aggression on a punching bag wasn't the smartest thing to do right before I'm scheduled to pierce someone's eyebrow, but I had to do something—anything—to take my mind off the shit going on in my head.

"Whatcha want me to do with Fel's new lip rings?" Echo's voice cuts through my thoughts, and I look up to see her standing in the doorway. "Your room or the display case?"

"Display case."

Echo rolls her eyes. "Someone's grumpy."

It's not even noon, and I'm already over everyone's attitude.

"Do you need something?" I stand up, trying to ignore the throbbing between my temples. "Because I'm not in the mood

for small talk right now, Echo.”

Echo pops her gum again. “Whatever.”

“How’s her shit selling anyway? People buying it?”

I’m not sure why I’m asking or why I care, but I can’t help it.

Echo crosses her arms over her chest, and I already see the wheels in her head reading too much into my question, but I don’t take it back.

“Good. It’s doing better than anything else we’re selling up there.” She shrugs. “Plus, girl’s got the goods to sell it, so that helps.”

“Goods?”

“She’s pretty, Jude. Obviously.” Echo rolls her eyes. “Those bikers definitely don’t seem to mind. They basically walked in and told her to take their money, even though they’re here for tats.”

“What bikers?”

“A couple of prospects from Blaze’s crew. They came in looking for Sage and got distracted with Fel bent over, stocking the display case.” Echo smiles before turning to walk away, knowing exactly what she’s doing as she throws dirt on the landmine and begs me to step on it. “Don’t worry. She’s got it all under control.”

What the fuck?

No one told me Fel was here, and apparently, she's not only up front, but looking too damn pretty as always. The girl's gone from nowhere to everywhere, and I can't decide how I feel about that.

Following Echo toward the front lobby, I tell myself it's because I'm sick of Blaze's bikers showing up and acting like he still owns this place when he doesn't. I tell myself it's because I'm keeping an eye on Fel just enough to scare her away for good. I tell myself it's because I'm checking in.

But walking into the lobby and seeing some prospect leaning over the counter grinning at her, I want to cave someone's head in.

"What do you want?" I stop in the doorway, ready to snap.

"Jude, man." Randy, the one of the two of them I recognize walks up and shakes my hand. "Been a while. We were just saying hello to your new employee."

His eyes move to Fel, all the way up and down her.

She looks so fucking sweet today, it's no wonder they want a taste. Light blue jeans and a pink retro My Little Pony T-shirt. Her collection of necklaces and bracelets makes her glitter in this dingy part of LA.

"She's not an employee, so direct your questions elsewhere."

"Got it." Randy rakes his nails over his shaved head and takes a step back, taking a hint the other biker doesn't.

Instead, the fucker dares to reach a hand out to her. "You should come out with me tonight."



“Touch her, and I’ll make her watch as I cut off your fucking hand.”

Both their eyes snap in my direction. But while the biker looks amused, Fel’s gaze is heated.

Not that I give a shit. It wasn’t a joke. Them looking at her the way they are is enough to make me want to carve their eyes out. But if they touch her, I won’t hesitate to unleash every bit of rage this girl brings to the surface.

“Says who?”

The fact that he has to ask tells me he’s new to Blaze’s crew. And if he’s not careful, he won’t last long.

“Me.” I narrow my eyes.

He pauses for a moment, reading my posture and likely deciding whether I’m serious or not. At least he’s smart enough to see I am because I’m one second away from cutting off his fingers one by one if he doesn’t back the fuck up.

It’s unhinged.

It’s unhealthy.

She hates me for it.

And I don’t give a fuck.

Both guys take a step back. “Understood.”

“Sage is free now, so you can head back and see him.”

Randy nods. “Thanks, man.”

They both avoid looking at Fel as they walk past her, disappearing down the hallway that leads to Sage's room.

"I can handle them." Fel leans forward on the display case and starts re-arranging the barbells. "In case you forgot, I was raised in a world of overconfident men."

"Bikers aren't the same as trust fund douchebags."

"I'm not a damsel, Jude." But she avoids my gaze as she says it, focusing on the jewelry instead and swaying her hips to the music playing in the shop.

Today, she's tied her hair up in a messy ponytail, and it falls everywhere. Red hair in her face, around her neck. I want to suffocate in it.

When I don't bother responding to Fel's comment, her eyes flick in my direction. Blue depths that hold the past and the present. A glance that has the power to resurrect every body I've buried. Flickers of hope that feel a lot like lightning bugs you can catch, but if you hold them too long, they'll lose their spark.

"Why do you know so many bikers anyway?" She pops up, turning to face me.

"Look around you, Red. Tattoos, bikers. You'll be lucky if that's the worst you see coming to this part of town every day."

And I mean it, there are much worse things. Which is why, as tempted as I am to keep her here, it's better for her if I push her away.

*This self-inflicted game of Russian roulette is going to kill me.*

“I don’t get it.” Confusion knits her eyebrows.

“Don’t get what?”

“What happened to you, Jude? You got into Ohio State to play ball. You had the grades and the talent. You had options. And don’t pretend the money was gone, because it didn’t matter if your dad went down for embezzlement, he had money elsewhere. So how did you end up here?”

Every loaded question she’s probably wondered since first running into me at the parlor spills out. She can’t connect who I was with who I am. Good luck trying because neither can I.

“I get you hated your dad after they locked him up.” It’s an understatement, but I don’t correct her because then I’d have to explain why. “But you still had options. You could have gone to school like I did and done something more.”

“We made different choices.” I walk over, not thinking about it until I’m too close and she’s directly in front of me smelling like some kind of magic potion that stirs up my insides.

“And what choices were those?”

I plant my palm on the display case, leaning so close I swear I feel the heat radiating off her body. “Ones I thought were right.”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?” She ticks an eyebrow. “You were wrong?”

I shake my head. “No, the problem is that it didn’t matter in the first place. It was always going to end the same.”

“Fate.” She bites the corner of her lip, and I’m desperate for a taste.

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

It’s as fitting as anything else considering she’s standing in front of me right now.

When I watched her blood-stained hand slip out of mine eleven years ago, I never expected to actually have her in my life again.

I stood at her mother’s funeral and watched Fel’s red hair whip around her face as I memorized every inch. I reminded myself over and over again why it was right to let her mourn and move on from them—from me. But her being here now feels like a sign of something I should have paid better attention to.

Her scream in the back of my head still vibrates at a frequency that shakes up all the shit I’ll never really forget.

And it pisses me off because she stands here acting like she hates that I’m the villain when it’s exactly what she needed.

“Do you ever wish you could have done it differently?” Her tone is softer now, her defenses slipping, so I take a step back.

It’s genuine. Pure. Slipping through the cracks in me.

“No.”

Her face falls because she wants me to tell her I've changed. That I regret what I did. That I shouldn't have hurt her. She wants to think that because I've made something of myself now, it can take back all the evil I've done.

She wants to think I'm still the kid who used to lie next to her in bed while she read stories. Both of us trying to escape a reality we thought we could.

Fel's blue eyes soften, and there's hope I never want to see again.

Hurting her was the most selfless decision I ever made, and it's better for her heart if she never learns that truth.

I take a step back, throwing up the same defenses that make it easier for her to hate me.

"I don't waste time with regrets. So stop looking for the good in me, Red. You're not going to find any."



# Fel

“AVOIDING THE SHOP OR just a certain person in particular.”

I jump at the voice coming from behind me and spin around.

Sage is standing propped against the wall of the shop as he pulls out a cigarette and smirks at me. He lights it, before tucking his lighter back into his pocket, his eyes skimming over me as the cigarette dangles between his lips.

I’m not sure how I didn’t hear him walk up, but there’s no doubt he just caught me staring at Jude through the shop window.

While I’ve avoided the shop for the past few days to create some distance, inventory is running low, giving me no choice but to face this place—and him.

Echo said if I came by around two he’d be with a client, so I thought I’d be safe, slipping in and out, avoiding him. Instead, he’s sitting on the stool at the front counter with a girl propped on top of it, laughing.

And it's not just any girl, because I'd recognize her platinum blonde hair and devious gaze anywhere.

Brea crosses one bare leg over the other, and in her short, white mini dress, every inch of her tanned thighs are on display. She leans closer to Jude and wets her lips with whatever she's thinking, and all that's going through my head is what Maren said about ring girls getting territorial.

*Is Jude her territory?*

I know as much about Jude's dating life as he knows about mine—nothing. Not that I have one myself.

But Brea?

Something about her presence stings deep as she bats her eyelashes at him and tips her head back in a giggle. She's comfortable, looking almost sweet as she talks to him. Even if I've seen her claws.

I'm not allowed to care. I have no right to feel jealous.

*Jude isn't mine.*

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I turn back to Sage, trying to stop myself from imagining whatever Jude might be saying to make his perfect, blonde girlfriend laugh.

It was only a few days ago Jude was scaring off any guy who looked at me, but I should have known better than to let false hope creep in.

Sage draws the cigarette to his lips again, not breaking our stare as he takes in a long drag. His gaze strips me to the bone,



and I fear he sees every emotion rolling through me as he holds the smoke in his lungs.

“Those will kill you.” I tip my chin at his cigarette and try to distract him from whatever he’s reading on my face.

“Something’s bound to.” His words curl out with the smoke.

He looks irritated by my comment. Or maybe he’s amused?

Sage is impossible to read, and even if I’ve spent plenty of time at the shop these past couple of weeks, he usually avoids me. They all do—except for Echo.

Only right now, Sage is hyper-focused on whatever he’s reading from the fact that I’m standing outside the parlor window.

“Jude never mentioned you,” Sage says, taking another drag of his cigarette. “Been friends with that guy for a decade, and I never even knew you existed.”

“I’m not surprised.” Even though it stings a little to hear it.

While Jude never left my mind, I get the impression that when he walked away, he never looked back. He reinvented himself and moved on, clearly never expecting to see me again.

“I’m not sure what happened between you two back then, but it fucked him up good if he’s never said a word about it.”

“Clearly.” I roll my eyes, and they land on Brea once more through the window before I look back to Sage. Jude’s so torn

up that he's working his way through ring girls to get over it. "He gets no sympathy from me."

Sage's eyebrows pinch as if he can't figure out what to say. Or maybe he knows exactly what he wants to say, but he won't because he's Jude's friend. Either way, the silence is pure tension until his gaze once more moves to the window beside us.

Brea's leaning forward now, almost spilling out the top of her dress. Her eyes dart up long enough to see me watching them, and a grin tilts her smile in a challenge. Pursing her lips, she silently gloats when Jude's gaze drops to them. A sickeningly obvious attempt for her to get a rise out of me.

It shouldn't work as well as it does.

Her hands grip the counter, and it pushes her shoulders forward. She giggles, while Jude watches her. And when she finally looks back at me, the reality of the situation knocks me in the stomach.

*There's no winning against girls like Brea.*

I don't belong here.

As Brea lets out another laugh, Jude breaks his stare on her, and his gaze drifts until it lands on me through the window. Through the skeletons painted on the glass, and the flickering neon sign.

I should look away, but he doesn't, and I can't seem to either. I hold his gaze and find something in it I didn't see the other

day. Frustration? Rage? His eyes narrow as his stare moves between me and Sage.

To Jude, I'll always be a possession. His belonging, even if he can't have me. It should make me feel better when my own jealousy claws at my throat. But deep down, it just makes us sick for wanting what we shouldn't.

"Fel," Sage's voice pulls me back to this moment. "You gonna go inside?"

As if Jude hears it too, he breaks our stare and turns back to Brea, who's now glaring at me through the window.

"Actually, would you mind just taking this in?" I hand Sage the baggie with the barbells Echo asked for. "I have somewhere to be, and I'm already running late."

Sage looks between me and Jude. I'm not fooling him, but he doesn't call me out on it.

"Thanks again," I say, stepping around him and walking away.

My feet can't take me far enough, fast enough because even before I hear him—I feel him following me.

*I can run, but he'll always chase.*

"Fel, wait." I'm not sure how he caught up with me when he was inside the shop talking to Brea only moments ago, but I barely make it around the corner before Jude grabs my arm and spins me to face him.

His green eyes trap me like honey I can't escape.

“Why didn’t you come in?” His eyebrows pinch, as he lets me go.

The step of distance he places between us isn’t enough. The city closes in, my bracelets weigh me down, and I’m trapped by his gaze.

“You were busy.”

Jude grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger when I wish he wouldn’t. One brush of his skin on mine, a match to gasoline. I’m ablaze, and he’ll burn me up until nothing is left but ash.

Back when we were younger, Jude used to touch me often. Not in a sexual way, but in a way that made me feel safe and protected. He wasn’t shy about holding my hand in a large crowd so I wouldn’t get lost or wrapping his arm around my shoulders in a half hug. It was innocent.

Standing here now with his thumb below my lip, toying with the line between sweetness and sin, I want everything I shouldn’t.

Jude watches me wet my lips. His tongue piercing clicks against the back of his teeth as he grits his jaw. The city rages on, but I’m close enough to hear it. Close enough for every tick of metal against teeth to vibrate through me.

Electricity buzzes in the air. My nerves, one graze of his thumb away from snapping this tension. Jude must sense it too because he drops his hand.

“Your jewelry’s selling well.” He tucks his hands in his pockets.

“Seems to be.” Not that I know what the standard is at his shop. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

It’s odd how someone who used to be as close as family can also now be a stranger. How someone’s gaze can both break you and put you back together. How things that once felt safe can no longer be trusted.

I want the boy from the library. Something impossible judging from the man standing in front of me.

“Don’t you need to get back to Brea?”

“How do you know B—” he cuts off his own question in realization. “Fight night?”

I nod, not giving much more. None of the girls were particularly nice to me, but Brea made sure I was especially uncomfortable.

“Brea’s just a friend.” Jude’s expression is flat.

“I didn’t ask.”

“You were thinking it.”

“Stop acting like you know everything about me.”

A menacing smirk tilts his lips. “You always were jealous of those cheerleader types, if I remember correctly.”

Something I said pissed him off, so he’s bringing the devil out to play.

Good.

My defenses were faltering. But one smug statement is enough for me to salvage them.

“And you always were such a fan.”

Jude’s jaw tightens at my comment. He shifts in closer, tilting his chin down until his mouth is beside my ear. “I see you’re just as blind as you were back then.”

“Stop trying to get under my skin, Jude.”

“Stop pretending I’m not still there.”

“God—” I spin around and grunt in frustration. Every time I think I’m getting closer to seeing another side of him, he reminds me of exactly who he is. Pushing me away and pulling me close.

Catch and release—when I wish he’d just bash my head in.

But when I try to escape him and walk away this time, all he does is follow me down the sidewalk.

“Running from the truth?” Jude taunts beside me.

“You wish. I haven’t thought about you in years.” *Lie.* “I’ve moved on.” *Another lie.*

“Have you?” He grabs my arm and spins me around, stopping me in place.

People continue to pass us on the street, and no one says anything.

“I have.” If only I sounded surer than I actually am. “So it’s fine. Go back to your *friend.*”

Jude looks me over, his fingers tight on my forearm as he stares me down. His teeth grind and his green eyes burrow into me. Finally, he takes a breath and releases my arm, shaking his head.

“Have it your way.” He turns, leaving me standing alone on the sidewalk with no spine left.



*“You’re seeing Jude tonight?”*

*The bathroom door slams shut, and I’m thankful I’m hidden in a stall because my stomach sinks at the mention of Jude’s name.*

*“How did you even manage that?” A voice I immediately recognize as Samantha’s cuts through. “He doesn’t date anyone.”*

*“Oh, he does. He’s just discreet about it.” Through the crack in the stall, I see Veronica smiling as she fixes her ponytail in the mirror.*

*I don’t like that they’re talking about Jude, or worse, that they seem to know things I don’t. It’s no secret half the cheerleading squad is clawing to get at him, but I thought he turned them all down.*

*Maybe I’m wrong.*

*“I don’t get it, he’s the football captain. Not to mention, God’s gift to women. He has nothing to be ashamed of.”*

*“It’s that little stepsister of his.”*

*“Felicity?” Samantha’s voice goes up an octave at my name, and it sends a chill up my spine.*

*“She’s pathetic.” Veronica spins to face her friend, as she shakes her head. “You heard she’s in love with him, right? It’s gross, they’re related.”*

*Except, we aren’t. Just because our parents are married doesn’t make us actual siblings. And I’m not in love with him. I care about him, that’s all.*

*“Does he know?”*

*Veronica leans in close to Samantha. “Who do you think told me?”*

*Pounding starts between my temples, and I have to brace myself as I feel a bubble of rage well up inside.*

*“Whatever. Book nerds like her don’t matter.” Veronica waves her hand. “He’s mine.”*

*Mine?*

*Why does that word turn my insides to knots?*

*Samantha and Veronica file out of the bathroom laughing, and I finally find the strength to peel myself from the stall.*

*I’m not an idiot. I’ve heard the rumors. Ever since our parents got married, kids at school have been speculating whether there’s something more between me and Jude.*

*It never bothered me because I knew the truth. Or I thought I did.*



*Something about how Veronica downplayed it. How she said he was the one who told her I was obsessed with him, aches deep in my chest.*

*But as much as it hurts, it's a reminder of what we are now. Stepsiblings, nothing more. No matter how much my heart stupidly hurts every time I think it.*



# Fel

I DROP MY PURSE on the table and let out a sigh. “Crap.”

“What’s wrong?” Maren perks up from where she’s sitting on the couch.

“I forgot to get the cash from the parlor when I went by earlier, and I just remembered rent’s due.”

“All good, girl.” Maren takes a bite of her ice cream. “I’ll cover you, and you can get the cash to me next time you have it.”

“No.” Being friends and roommates can already be a slippery slope. I’m not adding borrowed money to the mix. Besides, I have the cash in my account, it’s just reserved for a gem order I’ve been putting together. “I’ll swing by the shop tonight after nine and grab it.”

“Why after nine?” Maren’s eyebrows pinch. “Isn’t it *dangerous* being out that late?”

She throws up air quotes and laughs because she knows it’s what I think, even if she doesn’t agree with me.

“Very funny.” I open the fridge and rummage through the leftovers until I find a container of pasta. “But I’ll deal with whatever lurks in the shadows as long as I can avoid one shadow in particular.”

“Does this particular shadow start with a *J* and end with an *ude*.”

I glance over my shoulder just enough to glare at her.

“Girl, you are so transparent. Fuck him already and get it over with.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and Maren’s grin stretches her face so wide there’s no way she missed it.

“I can’t.”

“You can.” She winks. “And let me point out, you didn’t say, *I don’t want to*. Because girl, *you want to*, and we both need you to. The only way you’re going to get over that man is to get under him first.”

If only it were that simple.

Jude isn’t just a guy to get over. He’s my past, my present. He’s everything. If one look from him is enough to make me question my morals, I have no doubt what crossing that line with him would do.

“You’re considering it.” She points her spoon at me.

“Am not.” I spin around and stick the pasta in the microwave, waiting for it to make my thoughts disappear.

“You are. And Fel...”

I face her once more.

“It’s okay.”

“He’s my stepbrother.”

“Not anymore.”

She’s right, and still, it changes nothing. I let him in once, long enough for him to light my life up in flames.

So why does a sick part of me want him to do it again?

Why does the thought of him touching Brea make me want to replace all thoughts of her with myself? I’m not rational when it comes to that man, and it’s frustrating.

Maren goes back to her movie, and I eat my leftovers standing at the counter in silence. I hate him. I really do. So why am I starting to feel it less and less?

By the time Maren changes and leaves for fight night, I decide I’ve waited long enough and make my way downtown. What used to scare me is starting to feel familiar, and a world I shouldn’t feel comfortable in is all too welcoming.

It’s late. Most of the shops on the street are closed, and I realize I should have just taken Maren up on her offer to float my portion of the rent for a day because nothing good comes from wandering downtown in the middle of the night.

When the shop finally comes into view up ahead, I breathe a sigh of relief that I actually made it. But my stomach plummets just as quickly at the closed sign flashing in the window.

Stopping in front of it, I peek through the skeletons for any signs of life inside. But no luck, it's dark.

Téa is the worst receptionist on the planet. She knew I was coming by late and didn't say they were closing early tonight.

Turning to walk away, a body presses close behind me, setting the hair on the back of my neck on its ends. My skin prickles, and every warning Jude has issued races to the forefront of my thoughts.

“Lost, sweetie?” The unfamiliar voice snaps my shoulders back. “If you need help getting home, I'd be happy to offer my services.”



# Jude

THE STREETS ARE BUSY in this part of downtown. Doesn't matter what time of night it is. It's suffocating.

I need some space—a drink, a joint. I need to get out of my head because all I see every time I blink this past week are Dad's cold eyes staring back at me.

What he said when I visited him in prison a couple of weeks ago has been playing on repeat. Puzzle pieces trying to click together when they don't quite fit. And I can't help but feel like Fel walking back into my life wasn't a coincidence as I originally thought.

It was easy to avoid her for eleven years, and now suddenly she's everywhere. I'm not sure why or how, but each day that passes convinces me more and more that something bigger is at play.

Her grandparents are only giving her space as part of some larger plan. It makes me wonder what that plan is. And what do I have to do with it? If anything.



Seeing her again feels like punishment for what I've done. It was hard enough walking away the first time. But to have to face her almost daily and continue to only let her see the darkness in me that will scare her away is nearly impossible.

It's why I left, why I stayed away, why I need her gone. Either that or maybe she'll fall so far I'll ruin her to the point they won't want her back.

*Then she'll be mine like she was always meant to be.*

It's a dangerous thought.

Rounding the corner, I park my car in a free spot in the lot near the shop. Twisted Roses is dark and it's a relief. If I'm lucky, Sage will be out with Téa so I can fall into bed—or oblivion—without having to explain why I can't stay out of my head lately. I'm not in the mood to deal with anyone else right now.

But as I approach the shop, two figures in the alley between the parlor and the club next door become clearer, and my throat tightens.

One of the two figures closes in on the other and my pulse thunders behind my eyes. Adrenaline racing as I quicken my pace.

“Just let me go.” The desperation in her voice as I approach makes my patience snap.

A guy has Fel cornered against the building, and when she tries to step to the side, he wraps a hand around her throat and

pushes her into a wall. Her eyes widen with the kind of fear that makes me see red.

Tunnel vision.

The buildings around me vaporize until there's only me, him, her, and what I have to do to protect the only thing in this world worth keeping whole.

"Hey." I grab his wrist and land a punch on the side of his face at the same time, which forces him to release his grip on Fel's throat.

She chokes out a cough, and it fuels the rage ripping through me as her breath stutters.

I push the guy up against the brick wall beside her so hard the back of his head slams against it, and his eyes get hazy. But it doesn't stop me from slamming my fist into his face again.

He fucking touched her. Took away her air like he deserved it. Like it was *his*.

Rearing back, I reach into my back pocket and pull out a switchblade. The guy almost topples as I release him and reach for his hand, but I pin it overhead before he can. Flipping the blade around in my hand, I grip the handle and shove the blade through the center of the guy's palm. Digging it in until the tip scratches the brick on the other side.

All the air leaves his chest with his scream, and it feels so good. I want to hear that sound until his throat is raw from making it.

Twisting the blade in his palm, he cries out again, and only then do I pull the blade free and press the bloody knife against his throat. Once more pinning his body against the wall.

“You think you have a right to touch her?”

The sick perversion in his eyes when I walked up is replaced with fear. His pupils blow wide as I hold the blade tighter against his throat. His blood pumps with his breaths, and I want to watch it spill down his neck for what he tried to do. I want to slice him open, so he understands what happens to people who try to take things from me.

“Jude.” Fel’s delicate hand wraps around my wrist, and I snap my attention in her direction so fast it makes her jump. “Please, don’t.”

She’s still out of breath, but desperate as her eyes move from me to the man I’m ready to slice into.

She’s scared when she shouldn’t be.

*This is all for her.*

Fel raises every bad part of me to the surface. She makes me this man who has no limits. While she thinks she’s seen my worst, she’s only had a glimpse. Anything I’ve done up until now is a fraction of what I’m capable of.

I meant what I told her—there’s no good left in me.

My blade tickles his artery and my body itches with the urge to rip it open. To find out if peace only exists when I’m chasing it for her. But for some reason, her eyes beg me not to.

Blue pools asking for mercy. And as much as it goes against every urge, she's the reason I back off.

"Fuck." I shove off the guy and fold the blade back in on itself.

Rearing back once more, I hit him square in the temple, and he falls to the ground. He's knocked out cold but breathing.

If it weren't for Fel begging me not to, I would have ended him. *I should end him.* No one has a right to touch something that's not theirs. Especially when it's her.

I turn to Fel, and she's standing staring at the guy on the ground. So small she almost shrinks in on herself. Every ounce of her fierce defiance fades in this moment.

She stares at the crumpled body for a long moment. Catching her breath and waging a war in her mind. When she finally looks up at me, her eyes are glassy. Against better judgment, I dare to stare directly into them.

I wait for her to run like she did when we were kids. I wait for her to tell me I'm still the same piece of shit with no morals when it comes to her.

She'd be right.

Instead, she surprises me by stepping in. Reaching for my hand and for some reason I let her take it. Blood squishes between our palms and it shouldn't feel so familiar.

It shouldn't feel so comforting.

“Come on.” I tug her hand, trying not to think too much about it as I pull her from the alley and down the street.

A few people look at us as we walk past the parlor. They’re probably wondering why I’ve got blood on my hands and shirt, but in this part of LA, no one says anything. I’ve seen a guy get his fingernails ripped off in the middle of the street and no one so much as stopped or blinked.

“Why were you at the shop this late?”

“I didn’t realize you guys closed early on Wednesdays. I came by to pick up my cash for the week because rent’s due on Friday.” She squeezes my hand at the admission even if I don’t think she realizes she’s doing it.

And fuck if it doesn’t make me feel instantly protective.

I stop us outside the gate beside Twisted Roses and unlock it, waiting for her to climb the staircase first, so I can lock it behind us again.

“Where are we going?” Fel looks at me, and even though it’s dark, her blue eyes cut through the night.

“My place.” I nod to a doorway at the top of the staircase. “Come on.”

I guide her upstairs and breathe a sigh of relief when the apartment is dark and empty. “Sage must still be out.”

Good. The last thing I need is his judgment. With any luck, he won’t come home until morning.

“You guys are roommates?”

I nod, tossing my jacket onto the couch and walking over to the open kitchen. The apartment is fairly big for LA, but unimpressive. The walls are paper thin, and the windows don't seal properly, so it's always too hot or too cold. The floors are shaggy carpet, and the walls hold a moldy smell that never really goes away. On one side of the apartment is a spare bathroom, and on the other is the hallway that leads to the bedrooms.

It's not a dump compared to some places I've crashed at, but it's not as nice as I can afford either. And it's nowhere near as nice as Fel is used to, not that she says anything.

She watches me move around the apartment. Liquid softness in her eyes reminds me I should have sent her home. Tonight is one more reason to add to the long list of why I shouldn't be dragging her further into my world.

If she's smart, tonight will scare her back to her grandparents' mansion in the hills.

*So why does that thought twist a knife?*

I'm the lesser of two evils.

*I think?*

Either that or I'm just selfish.

I grab a bottle of whiskey off the counter and a glass from the cabinet, pouring enough to take the edge off and instantly downing it.

“Want some?”

Fel is standing in the middle of the living room staring at me. Her face is blank, so I'm pretty sure she's in shock, but her shoulders roll back as she tries to hide it. And for the first time tonight, I realize how delicate she looks in her pink sundress that hits her mid-thigh. Her hair is tied up in a high ponytail, and her simple makeup is smudged from crying.

I grip the glass harder as my gaze follows the smears down her perfect cheeks because I shouldn't have let him live.

"Please." Fel walks over, her eyes dropping to the whiskey on the counter.

I pour a much smaller shot for her. She's tiny, and from what I can tell, she doesn't drink often. So I'm surprised when she takes the glass and shoots it in one swig, even if her entire face winces when she does.

"That's strong." She grits her teeth, and the struggle on her face makes my heart constrict.

She hands the glass back to me, and it's smeared with blood from our fingers. A mess we're always making around each other.

Fel's leaning against the counter, but her eyes are detached as she focuses on a far wall.

"What?"

"Nothing." She shakes her head.

I close the gap between us and tip her chin up to face me. "Tell me anyway."

“It’s just...” She wets her lips, and her eyes are brimming with tears. “Tonight could have been—”

“It wouldn’t have.” I cut her off, refusing to think it.

“Jude, I got lucky you showed up when you did, okay?” She grabs my wrist, and the fact that she’s touching me sends my brain into a black hole. “If you hadn’t, and his friend had shown up—”

“Wait.” I drop my hand. “What do you mean, *friend*?”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head. “Maybe there was no friend, it was all really fuzzy.”

“Fel. Try to remember.” I plant my hand on the counter beside her.

She chews the inside of her cheek, her eyebrows scrunching. “I think I remember him saying, *he won’t mind if I have a little fun first*. I guess I just assumed there was someone else.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose and shakes her head.

Spots dot my vision. It takes all my effort to stay cemented in place in front of her instead of storming downstairs and finishing him off like I should have.

“Come on.” I release the counter and step to the side. “We need to get you cleaned up.”

“I can go home.”

“No.”

“Jude—”



“Just *no*, okay, Fel?” I try to keep my voice level but fail. She’s got me unhinged. Riled up. Everything I try not to be, she unleashes.

My stare traps hers and she swallows hard. Whatever she reads on my face stops her from arguing further, and she gives me a single nod instead.

She follows me to the bedroom, her hand brushing the back of mine in the narrow hallway. Static that electrifies my nerves.

I tuck my hands in my pockets. If I touch her again, I’m not sure what I’ll do. Even if I used to have no problem sharing a bed with her when we were younger, it doesn’t feel innocent anymore.

Back then I still thought I could bury whatever perverse feelings I had for my stepsister. Now, I’m not so sure.

I’m well aware of how her sundress swishes over her smooth thighs as she walks down the hall. How it hugs her tight around the chest and makes me want to bury my face between her perfect tits. How the sight of her makes me want to forget we were ever supposed to be family, so I can show her the only thing she’s ever been to me—*mine*.

She pauses in the doorway, and I walk past her to the closet, seeking out a shirt that will cover enough for me to get my thoughts in check.

“There’s a shower through that door if you want to use it.” I motion toward the bathroom and hand her the T-shirt.

She takes a moment to grab it, staring at the shirt hanging between us. And I'm not sure if she's waiting for me to explain myself for what happened, or questioning why she hasn't left. But after a long pause, she finally takes it.

Her blue eyes connect with mine and it kicks up every violent memory I've buried. Even when she turns and disappears into the bathroom they thrash around between my temples. She hates me, but she trusts me.

She shouldn't.



# Fel

*THE FRONT DOOR OPENS and closes, and Steve's jaw clenches as footsteps get closer. Mom and I push the food around on our plates, and I try to ignore what's looming. We sit at the table and pretend to eat until Jude finally walks into the room.*

*He has the nerve to smirk as he circles and sits across from me, not making eye contact.*

*"You're late." Steve sets his fork down and focuses on Jude. "And you've been fighting again?"*

*"You should see the other guy." Jude shrugs, picking up his fork and taking a bite as if the fact that he walked in here with a black eye and torn uniform jacket isn't going to make waves. "Besides, nothing your money can't fix, right, Dad?"*

*The way he says "Dad" always sounds like it hurts on the way out.*

*Steve's fist clenches and mom tenses beside me.*

*“Stop being an idiot, Jude. Save the aggression for the football field.”*

*Jude slams his fork down harder than necessary. “Fuck that.”*

*“Jude.” I reach across the table, and only then does he finally look up at me.*

*My eyes beg him to stop before this escalates, but his dark gaze drinks the hope straight out of me.*

*Jude used to take out his aggression on the field, but ever since our parents got married, he’s been slowly devolving. At first, I thought he was upset for the same reasons I was because us being stepsiblings means there’s a clear line drawn in the sand between us. But that was before he took a trip to visit an aunt, and something drastically changed.*

*“I can’t, Fel.” Jude pushes his chair back, shaking his head and breaking our stare when I wish he wouldn’t. I need to see his eyes—to understand what’s breaking him inside. I need to know why he’s been changing.*

*“I’ll be in my room.” He storms off.*

*Pushing my own chair back, I stand up.*

*“Felicity,” Mom snaps.*

*“I’m just going to check on him.”*

*Her gaze narrows.*

*“Let her,” Steve says, once more going back to his food. The irritation is still there, but he’s burying it now that Jude has*

*left the room.*

*They both like to pretend the tension in our house doesn't exist. Which I'm fine with right now if it lets me escape this nauseatingly fake family dinner.*

*Stopping at Jude's door, I knock once. "Jude."*

*Trying the handle, it isn't locked, so I make my way in.*

*At first, I think maybe he bailed out the back door, but there's water running in his bathroom, so I follow the sound. The air is already muggy from the hot water running in the shower, but Jude is propped on the counter fully dressed, leaning against the foggy mirror.*

*"You can't talk to them like that." I hop up beside him on the counter, and only then does he turn to face me.*

*"Fuck them."*

*I shake my head. "What happened at your aunt's house?"*

*I've asked him a hundred times. He never tells me. A merry-go-round of lies he spins me on.*

*"Nothing," he says, but his teeth clench and he breaks my stare.*

*"Really? Because you've been non-stop fighting with your dad ever since you got back."*

*Jude leans his head against the mirror and closes his eyes. His chest rises and falls with every deep breath, and I wish for once he'd let me in.*

*“Don’t you ever get tired of it?” Jude asks, ignoring my question entirely. “We’re walking on eggshells when it’s all bullshit.”*

*My heart pounds against my ribs, and I grip the counter. But I can’t admit it, even here just to him. Saying out loud that the life my mom provided eats me away, feels like I’m betraying her.*

*“You do.” He answers for me. “None of this is real. They don’t even love each other.”*

*“What makes you think that?”*

*“It’s obvious.”*

*I wouldn’t know. Mom’s never seemed capable of love to me. It’s not Steve’s fault. And on top of that, I’m not sure what love even is.*

*A lie people tell themselves to justify their actions? Something to explain how another person can make them completely irrational?*

*If so, what do I feel for Jude?*

*“What do you know about love?” I ask.*

*Jude tips his head and his green stare finds me once more. So deep and endless the branches of darkness weave through the pits inside me.*

*He lets out a dark half-chuckle of a breath. “Nothing, apparently.”*



I stand inside the hot shower and wait for it to wash me clean. The sixteen-year-old girl and my current self blur as rivers run over my skin. I wait for the water to wash my tears away. I wait for it to wash the blood away.

I wish it could wash *me* away, but it can't.

I've spent years denying what lies beneath the mask that is my life, and it didn't start when Jude's father married my mom. It was long before that. I was born into a world of gold coated lies. Strings my parents pulled, then my grandparents.

I was a puppet, and they used me.

Jude saw it before I did. He handed me the scissors to cut myself free, and promised I'd feel better once I did. Except, instead of standing there to catch me, he disappeared.

Turning off the shower, I soak in the silence. Drips of water splatter from the faucet as it empties. Steam clouds the air, and I breathe so deep I wonder if it can baptize me.

If this moment could take away my sins, would I want it to if it meant losing Jude?

I'd rather drown in their holy water and suffer with him than be pure. A dark realization I've buried for years.

The bathroom is quiet as I step out of the shower, and I wonder if Jude finds it odd how long I've been in here. I don't care. I don't hurry. I take my time drying myself off, running my fingers through my long red hair.



With no makeup, my freckles are prominent on my cheeks and chest. A pattern Jude used to say revealed the secrets of the stars. If only it didn't take wading through darkness to reach them.

I slip into Jude's T-shirt, and I'm swimming in it. I'm not sure if he realizes what he handed me, but I can't help but trace my fingers over the logo, remembering the one and only concert he and I ever went to together.

He snuck me out of the house in the middle of the night. Said it was for my own good to get into some trouble. He swore if I never experienced anything then life wasn't worth living.

Maybe he was right.

I open the cabinet under the sink, looking for a hairbrush, and find a box of condoms instead. I'm not allowed to feel jealous over things I can't have, but it doesn't stop my heart from tightening in my chest at the reminder of all the things he must have done in the years since I've seen him.

Things I once fantasized about no matter how wrong it was.

I shut the cabinet, and run my fingers through my wet hair again, settling on leaving it messy because I can't face whatever this unwanted feeling is that stirs with the idea of Jude sleeping with other women.

*He's not mine. They're allowed to have him.*

Taking a deep breath, I finally open the bathroom door, knowing I'm going to have to face what happened tonight

whether I want to or not. He's probably upset I was wandering downtown in the middle of the night.

It's his fault when he's been less than welcoming at the shop. Almost as if my presence is insignificant, when he's the universe wrapping around me.

But tonight, he was the one at my side as if I'd manifested him. Saving me when something terrible could have happened.

Hating him is easier when he isn't pretending to be a knight in shining armor, and now my emotions are all blended up. When he stabbed that man in the alley for me, I shouldn't have liked it as much as I did.

He protected me. Teetering on the line between my hero and my villain.

*Is it wrong to want both sides of him?*

I step out of the bathroom and met with his empty room. It's the perfect opportunity to slip into my dress and leave. There's a shower running down the hall, and I could be gone before he's finished.

Instead, I find myself climbing into his bed and telling myself it's for comfort. Innocent, like it was back then.

*It's all lies.*

I sink between his sheets, and they smell like laundry detergent and him. Breathing them both in, I'm overwhelmed with the scent that used to rock my mind to sleep at night. Comfort capable of making me lose all good sense.

The shower turns off down the hall and the walls are thin enough for me to hear the shower curtain grate against the metal bar. Cabinets and doors clatter with whatever he's doing, and my heart races.

Something slams shut, and then feet are padding down the hallway.

We've shared a bed many times. But this feels different. It *is* different, and I'm not sure what he's going to make of me lying here.

*I should have left.*

Jude turns the corner and freezes in the doorway when he sees me in his bed. His hair is wet and haphazardly going in all directions. He's shirtless, wearing a pair of dark sweatpants that hang low on his waist. The dim hallway light overhead draws out every cut of muscle in his chest and abs.

I shouldn't look at my stepbrother the way I'm sure I am, but I can't help it. My gaze runs the full length of him, as my tongue swells.

He's the only man to ever really see me. To protect me in the best and worst ways. And after spending years thinking I'd never see him again, here he is.

"You really shouldn't look at me like that." Jude rubs a towel over his hair as he walks into the room.

"I'm not." I tip my chin up.

But he just smirks, shaking his head.

I run my hands over the comforter and his eyes drop to the bed. “Do you mind? You said I can’t go home. But I could sleep on the couch if you prefer your space.”

“It’s fine.”

Jude tosses the towel into a laundry basket and turns to face me, leaning against the dresser. And even if he says it’s fine I’m in his bed, he doesn’t climb in next to me. Instead, he watches me from a distance.

Controlling the situation.

*Or himself?*

But I’m no longer a teenage girl willing to wait patiently for him. I want to break him just to prove I can. No matter how level-headed he thinks he is, I’m not the only one affected by the gravity of us.

“Are you tired?” I ask, stretching my arms out.

He shakes his head while watching my every move.

Under his gaze, I can’t help but stretch out more. Pushing the comforter down with my feet and putting my bare legs on display. Every bad thought that will send me to hell races through my blood. Excitement fueled with adrenaline.

Forbidden or not, I need the man who was willing to draw blood for me. Who would have killed for me if I let him. I need all the things I’ve denied myself and more.

The way Jude swallows hard as his gaze skims my bare legs is intoxicating.

“That’s two fights you’ve won for me now.” I stretch my legs out along the bed. “And you still haven’t claimed your prize.”

Jude’s eyes snap back up to mine, dark and dilated. I don’t usually say things to taunt him because I understand him well enough to know it’s a dangerous game to play with a man who has no limits. But as I push his buttons, I’m fueled by the sight of his expression darkening.

I can’t handle this tension, and I’m going to break him if he doesn’t break me first.

“You can’t handle being my prize, Red. No matter how far you’ve fallen.”

I don’t acknowledge that he’s trying to make me feel inexperienced just to maintain control. Instead, I meet him where he’s at and push back. I’m not the teenage girl he remembers, and I can’t help but feel the need to remind him of that fact.

“I’m not a virgin.” I run a foot up the sheet and his eyes follow its path. “You might have walked away, but it doesn’t mean I never got any experience.”

Jude’s jaw tightens, as I walk a tightrope that’s on the verge of snapping. I’m taunting him for a reaction when I should know better. But I’m still irrationally stewing over the condoms under his sink, and I can’t help but keep going.

“Does that bother you, Jude?” I run my hands down my sides and up onto my thighs, appreciating how it makes his

body tense. “Does it bother you that someone touched your stepsister? Dirtied her? That you were all talk and no action, and someone took that right away from you?”

At that, he lifts off the dresser, walking to the bed with primal rage brewing in his eyes. I knew my comments would draw this reaction, which is why I said them. But as always, I can’t anticipate what he’ll do in response.

Jude reaches onto the bed and grabs my ankle, pulling me down so I’m no longer sitting. He climbs over me and plants one knee between my legs, with the other on the outside of my thigh as he hovers.

“It’s cute you’re trying to piss me off, Fel.” He leans in and runs his nose up my bare neck, breathing me in, before lifting to look at me again. “But you’re no longer my stepsister, so if you think continuing to remind me of that part of our past will stop me, you’re wrong.”

He’s so close I can’t blink or breathe because I worry I’m at risk of him devouring me at the slightest slip of my defenses.

“As far as your little taunt about other men...” He looks down my body, pausing where his T-shirt rides so high up my thighs I’m almost exposed to him. “I don’t care about your virginity. As I told you back then, it’s not something I think a person should cherish. Besides, when I fuck you, I guarantee it will be so hard and deep I’ll hit places no man has come close to reaching.”

“*When?*”

He smirks, bringing his mouth right over mine and brushing his lips barely across them, but not kissing me. “You and I are inevitable, Fel. Always have been. Whatever illusion you’ve held onto as to why I haven’t claimed you yet is wrong.”

“Then why?”

It’s the wrong question, I know it the moment the words leave my lips. But it doesn’t mean I don’t need to hear it.

“Because you’re better than all of this.” I almost think there’s sadness in his eyes as he says it. “Better than anything I’d do to you.”

“What if I’m not anymore?”

Jude stares at me so hard and deep I see through all the green in his eyes, and it’s only his dark soul staring back at me. A soul that sees the parts of mine I don’t show anyone. A soul that calls out to the deepest parts of my own.

“Then you need to be reminded.” He pushes off the bed and sits back on his heels between my legs. “I’m ready to claim my prize now.”





# Fel

I MIGHT HAVE STARTED this little game, but he should have waved a white flag. And I'm not sure if I'm relieved or nervous that he hasn't. Because as he sits over me on the bed, his knees forcing my legs to stay spread for him, I want to cross every line I told myself for years we shouldn't.

“What do you want, Jude?” I tip my legs open the slightest bit more, and he doesn't miss it, planting his hands on my thighs to stop me.

His fingers tighten on the soft flesh of my inner leg, making me flinch. It stings a little, but I need more. I want to feel everything I've never allowed myself. Things that hurt before they feel good.

Like him.

“I want to see how perfect you are. Since you seem to forget it.” His gaze moves down to the apex between my legs. “I want you to touch yourself for me.”

“How is that *your* prize?”

He looks me in the eyes and his grip on my thighs tightens. “Because, Red. You’re going to finger your pussy until you’re screaming my name. You’re going to prove to me that you’ve always wanted this, no matter how much your prissy little mouth denied it. And I’m going to enjoy every second.”

Control.

Everything about Jude is him keeping the upper hand, and this is just another way he’s chosen to do it. It should make me stop and question what I’m doing. But I can’t help that my heartbeat feeds on his words like a shock to the system. I can’t help that he makes me want to submit to him.

Jude releases my thighs and plants his hands on his own legs. He sits back and silently waits like a dare.

Outside, the chaos of LA rages. But in here, all I smell is him. All I feel is him. And it calms me to sit in the center of his storm.

Slowly, I trail my fingers down, gripping the hem of the T-shirt and slowly peeling it up over my hips.

“Farther,” he says when I pause with the bottom hem of the shirt at my waist.

Nervously, I keep going, waiting for him to stop me as I go higher, higher until I’m revealing my breasts.

He takes me in with appreciation that makes me ache between my legs. So I continue and pull the shirt overhead until I’m lying on his bed in front of him in nothing but my thin scrap of underwear.

“Felicity...” Jude slides his tattooed hands from his thighs to my own, slowly dragging upward. Over my hips and up my stomach, stopping with his fingers wrapped around my ribs just beneath my breasts. “You’re my downfall.”

I *should* care that his confession sounds like I’m as toxic for him as he is for me, but I’ve never felt more power over Jude Carlisle than I do in this moment. So instead of responding with words, I trail my fingers down and push my panties to the side, widening my legs.

My body shivers under his touch as I stroke myself up and down, sliding my fingers through my wetness desperate to relieve the ache. But just as I’m about to slip my fingers into where I need them, Jude catches my wrist and pulls my hand up between us.

“Not yet.” He draws my fingers into his mouth and sucks on them, and the sight alone is almost enough to send me over the edge.

His tongue rolls over my fingers—his piercing flicks between them—and I want to beg for him to lick me until I’m screaming. Excitement plays in Jude’s eyes, hinting he knows every dirty thought as he rolls the metal between them again, only releasing me once they’re thoroughly wet.

“Finger your pussy for me, Red.” He presses my palm between my legs. “Just because I can’t touch you doesn’t mean you aren’t mine. Let me hear how pretty you moan wishing it was me inside you.”

Jude's never been appropriate, but I've never heard him talk like this either, and I can barely handle hearing it.

Dragging my hand back down, I slide my wet fingers over myself before driving them in on an exhale. Jude's grip tightens on my legs the moment I do. His eyes focused as I push them in further. Again and again.

I'm drenched with my excitement, and wet from his tongue. And even without his direct touch, he's a part of every wave of pleasure that rocks through me.

Driving my fingers in farther, I roll the heel of my hand over my clit. Fantasizing it's the feel of the man kneeling between my legs and not myself.

Jude's inked chest flexes as he grips my thighs harder, and the sight makes my pussy tighten. I've imagined this exact scenario alone in bed—long before it was acceptable. But being here now with him half naked watching me finger myself, I'm barely breathing.

“That's it.” Jude leans back and watches. “Show me what I want to see.”

If this is as far as he thinks we can take this, then I want him to have all of it.

Grinding my hand harder, pressure starts to build. It's almost too much between the friction of my palm and his dark gaze. But when I tip my head back and close my eyes, Jude moves over me and grabs the hair at the back of my head. He tilts my

face to his, the pressure of his fingers bringing tears to my eyes as my back arches.

“Oh no, Red. No looking away while your pussy cries for me.” He holds my face an inch from his as he lays his body over mine. His hard cock presses against the back of my hand and he grinds it between my legs. The motion forcing my fingers in deeper. “You don’t get to taunt me with threats of other men touching you and then close your eyes when you come. It doesn’t matter who has touched this body before today because it’s *mine* now. I own your pleasure like I own your pain. Every good and bad thing belongs to me.”

He grinds his hips again.

“Isn’t that right? Who do you belong to? Who have you always belonged to?”

“You.” I choke on my breath.

“Exactly.” Jude rolls his hips in waves over my hand, driving my motion and moving me deeper. He presses hard and something drags along the back of my hand.

“You’re pierced.” My eyes widen with the realization. “Down there.”

And it’s not just one, because I feel them running the length of his dick, pressing against me and making my head spin.

Jude pins me with his wicked eyes and devilish grin. “Told you that you weren’t ready for me to claim my prize just yet.”

He might be right, but I don’t have time to think about it. Because he grips my hair and grinds his pelvis until I can’t

help but fall over the edge. My thighs tighten around his hips, and I want him to sink into me so badly it hurts to come without him.

I'm not sure if this is punishment or pleasure because as good as he feels, the resistance between us hurts.

Jude relaxes over me as my body stops pulsing, and he draws a hand to the side of my face. He cups my jaw and runs his thumb over my lower lip, focusing on smearing it side to side with whatever he's thinking.

“Don't threaten me again, Felicity.” He presses his thumb into my mouth and holds my tongue down, deep enough that I almost gag on it. “Or next time I'll put you on your knees and make you choke on the metal running through my dick just to prove how *mine* you are. And *I'll* be the one enjoying your punishment.”

A final threat as he pulls his hand away and climbs off me. He hops off the bed and storms to the door, slamming it behind him.



# Fel

*“READING AGAIN?” JUDE DROPS down onto the window seat at my feet and glances at the book in my hands. “Why are you always reading fairytales anyway?”*

*I shrug. “Maybe I’m just looking for the cracks so there aren’t any surprises.”*

*“What cracks?”*

*I press my lips together and let out a breath through my nose. “It’s always so easy in the stories, right? Good. Evil. What’s right and wrong. What about the in-between? I mean, the prince only wants to save the princess because he thinks she’s perfect.”*

*“And that’s bad?” His eyebrows knit.*

*“What if she’s not?”*

*“Maybe her flaws make her even more beautiful to him.”*

*Jude stares into my eyes, and I can’t help holding his gaze, unblinking. Wondering if he feels the pressure as I do. One*



*wrong step and everything might break.*

*“Maybe.” I shake my head. “Thanks for the new bookmark.”*

*I hold up the peacock feather and spin it between my fingers, before setting it aside. I’m not sure when it started, but he’s been leaving them in the pages of my books more frequently lately. Hints he knows exactly what kind of fairytales I’m reading.*

*“That was a dirty fucking page.” Jude grins. “Good little virgins always trying to think of ways around losing it.”*

*“I guess.” I can’t help but blush because the most I’ve done with a guy is kissed him. Every time I get close, all I can think about is the one person I shouldn’t. “I don’t want to think about what you know about virgins.”*

*The idea that Jude’s even been with another girl makes me want to scream.*

*“Don’t know that much.” He shrugs, leaning his back against the other side of the window seat to face me. “Too much pressure. You take that from a girl and they’re going to expect things.”*

*“How rude of them.” I roll my eyes. “Aren’t you Prince Charming.”*

*“Oh, I’m no prince, Felicity. I just speak the truth.”*

*“Not all girls care that much about their virginity. Just because she gives it to you, doesn’t mean she’s going to fall in love with you.”*

*Jude leans forward and traces a finger up my calf, offering me the most devious smirk. "You would."*

*"Who says I still have mine?"*

*He pauses, biting the inside of his cheek at my comment, before starting to trail his hand back up again, circling to the underside of my knee when he reaches it, and trailing down the back of my bare leg. Pausing at the line of what might be appropriate and teasing me with it.*

*"You do."*

*I glare at him. "Doesn't matter. It's not like I'm saving it for anything special."*

*"Well, you should."*

*"And what do you care? You just said girls expect way too much for it anyway."*

*Jude leans in and wraps his arms around my bent legs, resting his chin on my knees. "You're not 'girls' Felicity. You're special."*

*It's the closest Jude's come to admitting something like that to me. He might do little things like leave feathers in my books, but ever since our parents got married, he always does it under the pretense of caring about me as family. Nothing more.*

*"I just hope you don't give it to a guy like me," he says. "Give it to someone good who deserves it. Who'll treat it right."*

*“That’s surprisingly sweet.” And I’m not sure what to make of it.*

*“Your innocence is important,” he says before a slow grin crawls his face. “And then once that’s gone, you can be who you really are without the guilt of your purity holding you back.”*

*I swallow hard at where this is going. “Meaning?”*

*His eyes drop to the book in my hands. “Meaning... tell me what you’re reading, and I’ll answer your question.”*

*My fingers grip my book, but he doesn’t try to take it away. He holds my legs, the stubble on his jaw scratching my knees as he waits for me to answer.*

*“It’s a fairytale.” It’s nearly a whisper. “Sort of... it’s a retelling.”*

*“And what happens in this retelling, Fel?”*

*“She’s trying to make it to her family, but she gets lost in the woods. And that’s where she meets the wolf who’s hunting her.”*

*“What does he do when he finds her?”*

*I can’t say it out loud. Jude knows I haven’t opened my legs for anyone, and unlike him, there are still things I’m shy about.*

*“Exactly,” Jude says, sitting back and facing me once more in the window seat. “This is why virginities don’t fascinate me. Even yours.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because innocence is only sweet for a second. It’s why good girls always hand theirs over to princes. No surprises. They know he’ll treat it right as he takes it. It’s boring, a right of passage. And ultimately, it’s forgettable. Being someone’s first is a waste of time. After all, Little Red Riding Hood might think she knows what she wants when she steps into the forest, but that’s only until she meets the wolf.”*

*“What does she want then?”*

*His eyes drop to the book in my lap. “Keep reading and find out.”*



“Well hello, Miss Didn’t-Come-Home-Last-Night.” Maren sets her phone down and looks up at me when I walk in the door in nothing more than Jude’s oversized T-shirt. “Good night I take it.”

Incredible. Horrible. Everything.

“It was all right.”

I’m furious with Jude and struggling to hide it. But I refuse to let it show. I’m not going to allow him to get to me after all these years. He doesn’t get to walk in and mess with me for his own amusement.

Sure, I might have brought it on myself by throwing other guys in his face just to see how far I could push him. But a

normal person would have told me to fuck off and left the room.

Jude is far from normal—unhinged when it comes to me. Willing to take it one step too far, and then ten more. I'm sick for pushing him anyway.

But I wanted the rush. The jealousy. The fire.

All things he delivered on—and more.

Reaching into my purse, I drop down onto the couch next to Maren. “Here,” I hand her the stack of cash Crew left for me in an envelope in our mail slot.

Jude might hate me for last night, but he still texted the guys to have them grab me the cash I'm owed, so I can make rent. One more way he's an enigma. Caring for me and treating me like he despises me at the same time.

“Damn, that shop is paying off. Told you Twisted Roses was a good idea.” She flips through the stack of bills.

“Don't get me started on Twisted Roses.” I cringe just thinking about it. “Worst and best idea you've ever had.”

“I'll take the best part and ignore the rest.”

“Of course you will.”

She tosses the cash onto the coffee table. “Guess you're out for tonight's fights then. Jude's going to be there.”

“As if I need more reasons to not attend.”

Hopefully, on the outside, she doesn't see my actual feelings about her comment. Because the idea of Jude getting handsy

with a ring girl after what happened last night, makes me cringe. I have no doubt he might even do worse just for revenge. After all, I taunted him with other men knowing Jude likes the thought of me being his possession.

“Besides, I can’t. I promised my grandparents I’d make an appearance at their gala.”

Maren frowns. “You haven’t seen them in six months. What changed?”

“This isn’t about them. My mom started this charity, so I owe it to her.” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, feeling her blood on my hands at her memory alone. Blood soaked with guilt after last night.

I don’t know what Jude said when he finally pushed her over the ledge, only that he was the last person she spoke to before she disappeared into the bathroom and slit her wrists.

I owe her this, and so much more.

Maren reaches for my hand, squeezing it.

She might not understand the restrictions I grew up with, but senses when I need her.

“I guess that explains the box then.” She scrunches her nose.

“What box?”

“Some guys in dress shirts and slacks had a giant box delivered for you this morning. I thought it was a prank, but let me tell you, those guys have no sense of humor.”

“Where is it?”

“Your room.”

“Wonderful.” I climb off the couch, a weight heavy in my chest at the reminder of how easy it is for my family’s world to find me here.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” Maren stands up and takes my hand, nudging me on the shoulder. “Besides, now is as good a time as ever. You’re awfully relaxed this morning. Sure you don’t want to share who you were with?”

My narrowed gaze is my only response.

“Mmm-hmm.” She winks, not letting go of my hand as I make my way to my bedroom.

Sure enough, sitting against one wall is a giant box, made specifically to hang whatever dress my grandparents deemed appropriate for tonight.

I undo the top and the whole front folds down like an accordion, revealing what’s inside. A pale green top and skirt, so soft in tone it’s barely mint. The top part has long sleeves but is cropped to hit me mid-stomach. And the bottom will ride high on the waist to show off a sliver of skin. The fabric is soft, but puffy, sparkling from the gems that cover it.

They might be diamonds, they might not. It doesn’t really matter. The point is that everything about this dress exudes money and status, like the world I was raised in.

“At least it’s pretty.” Maren rests her chin on my shoulder.

“Yeah.” It’s pretty, sparkly, over-the-top.

Everything they want from me, delivered with a bow and a landfill of expectations.

They're trying to lure me back into their world. And after my night with Jude, I'm tempted to let them.





## Jude

SAGE WALKS INTO THE fighters' locker room and smirks at me. "Want to explain why a certain redhead snuck out of your bedroom this morning in nothing more than one of your T-shirts?"

"She went home wearing just the shirt?"

He nods.

"Fuck." I rake my fingers through my hair.

Fel was gone when I woke up on the couch this morning—not that I blame her. After watching her come last night, I lost my mind. And everything she taunted me with to push me over the ledge finally tipped me over it.

"So, care to elaborate?" Crew pushes the subject as Sage sets his bag down on the bench. Both of them stand in front of me grinning.

Fight night used to be peaceful. It was a way to release pent-up aggression and not think about shit that was pissing me off. Then these two assholes started tagging along.

First, Sage joined me, which made sense, because the dude is always looking for ways to escape whatever demons rage around in his head. Then Crew came along because he's a sadist and can't help but enjoy making people bleed for him.

Now I can't escape them here or at the parlor.

And as I sit under the harsh glare of their amused judgments I wish I'd never told them about this place. Because the last thing I need to think about right now is Fel or her perfect pussy. Or the look on her face while she came from me grinding over her like a horny teenager.

It was the most right-*wrong* thing I've ever witnessed.

"Well?" Sage pushes.

"No," I answer flatly. "You care to explain why we're once again without a front desk girl?"

At least if I'm pissing Sage off about the fact that Téa quit when he told her he's over fucking her, I won't have to deal with him focusing on my shit.

"Fuck you." Sage tosses a towel at me, but at least it shuts him up, and I can prep for my fight in peace.

Crew thumbs through his phone while I wrap my hands, and we do what I prefer we always do in the locker room—sit in silence.

Tipping my head back, I close my eyes and focus on anything to take my mind off Fel. I think about the fight and hope beating the shit out of someone is enough to make me feel better. I flex my fingers, imagining my knuckles slamming

into bone. My hand stings at the thought, while adrenaline heats my blood.

I'm going to break someone's face if it means erasing thoughts of Fel from my brain. Especially after last night.

She pushed my buttons like she's ready to handle what comes when I push back. She isn't, and I was tempted to remind her why.

But looking down at Felicity Alcott offering herself to me sent my brain tumbling off a fucking cliff. It can't happen like that—not with her.

“Jude, you're up next.”

Some guy waves his clipboard through the doorway, but he doesn't bother walking in.

“Fucking finally,” I snort, standing and facing Crew, who's wrapping his tatted hands, which are already bruised. “You gonna take it easy tonight? Keep this up and you're not going to be able to ink.”

“I'll be fine.” He shakes his head and smirks like he finds the suggestion hilarious.

Honestly, I'm not sure how much pain it would take to slow Crew down. As much as I'm willing to throw it all out there in the ring, his tolerance for taking a beating is next level. It's why he's one of the best fighters. You can't win against someone who barely feels pain.

I wipe my face a final time before making my way out of the locker room.

Sage doesn't say any of his regular pre-fight motivational shit like he normally does, which means I pissed him off.

Good. My mood is foul enough without him trying to dig into my shit.

Stepping out of the changing area, I'm met with chaos. These fights aren't technically legal, but no one is going to stop them either. Half the fighters are cops or powerful rich pricks blowing off steam. If they blew the whistle, they'd lose their outlet.

I push through the crowd, and it's rowdy for this early in the night. Booze is flowing and the air is thick with people smoking. Sliding through the mess, I try to clear my head, ignoring the imminent bad feeling creeping up my chest.

Tonight's fight should be easy since I'm up against Axel. He's a big guy, but he expects his size to do all the work for him. He doesn't have any real technique—and he doesn't have any rage.

Fighters who do well here are angry and fucked up. Because when you're in a battle with no rules, there aren't limits to what kind of message you can inflict.

Passing a group of ring girls, I spot Fel's best friend, and my jaw clenches. I swear if she shows up here just to piss me off, I'm going to lose my shit. I'm already hanging on by a thread, so the girl needs to stop trying to break me.

"Maren," I call as she passes me.

She spins to a stop, crossing her arms over her chest. “What do you want?”

Apparently, Fel isn’t the only one with an attitude because her friend’s frowning at me and ready for battle.

“Tell me she isn’t here.”

“She isn’t here,” Maren says flatly.

I breathe a sigh of relief because I need a clear head tonight.

“Not that I agree with her decision,” Maren continues, not reading the fuck-off expression on my face. “I told her she should show up just to rub it in your face because you don’t get to tell her what to do.”

“That so?”

It’s cute this girl thinks she can scare me. At least Fel knows better.

“Yep, *that’s so*.” Maren narrows her gaze. “But she had other plans, so you lucked out.”

“What do you mean, *other plans*?”

It’s already nine-thirty at night, and I don’t like that Fel’s out when her one and only friend is standing in front of me.

“Some gala.” Maren rolls her eyes. “Her grandparents had a dress delivered and everything. Cinderella. The ball. I don’t get it, but you know Fel.”

I do know Fel, and even worse than the thought that she’s out on a date is hearing she’s with her grandparents. Especially after how things went down last night.

I might have said what I did to push her away—or because she pissed me off—but I didn't honestly think it would be that easy for her to disappear back into her previous life. She should have done what she always did when we were younger—bother me until I'm forced to face my shit.

Instead, she ran back to them?

It doesn't make sense, except that it sends the carousel of taunts from my father circling in my head. They've been on the sidelines waiting for her to run out of her mother's money, or get bored, or get scared.

A smart move on their part because it led her to me. The one person with the power to destroy her deep.

Last night she got too close. She made me want to cross a line I promised myself years ago that I wouldn't. She made me face things I stopped myself from acting on one too many times when we were younger.

While I might have told her I wasn't going to touch her because I wanted her to prove she wanted it more, that wasn't the real reason.

I stopped myself because I'm not allowed to keep her, and the second I act on what's been brewing, I'm not sure there's any going back. No matter how brutal the torture watching my fantasy play out in front of me—listening to her moan while her pussy convulsed around her fingers—I couldn't act on my desire.

Her movements, her breaths, her sounds—they made me want to shove my dick so far inside her she'd forget we were ever supposed to be a fake family. They made me want to fuck her until she understood I'll never think of her as anything but the girl I saw first.

And I was close—so fucking close.

So destructive as ever, I pushed her away before she saw the truth. And in the process, I sent her straight back to them.

“Why does it look like I just told you worse news than if I said she was in the changing room?” Maren's cold demeanor falters the slightest, and she's looking at me with too much curiosity.

“Because it is.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, but I'm not sticking around to hear it. I need to get in the ring. I need out of my head. I'm not sure breaking my knuckles on someone's face will be enough right now, but I need to try.

Because I'd rather have Fel taunting me as she circles the ring than have her return to the vultures who have other plans for her. Plans I still haven't figured out but always suspected. Plans I'm positive are no good because my dad seemed amused by them.

I climb the steps to the ring and the crowd's already going wild. Usually, I feed off their screams because it quiets everything I don't want to think about. But right now, it makes me want to crawl out of my skin.



“Hi, Jude.” Brea smiles at me from the edge of the ring as she walks past in a striped, blue bikini top. “Hope you win.”

I will, but not for her.

I’ve never given a fuck about the girls who parade themselves around this place. I get that they draw a crowd, but anything beyond that has never mattered. There’s only one person who did, and I had to accept that I could never have her.

But then she showed up at my tattoo parlor. She walked back into my life with her wild red hair and sent my good intentions up in flames.

She reminded me why I hated her for pushing me to my limits eleven years ago, and why I hate her even more for doing it now.

There’s no going back.

She might have thought it was the heat of the moment, but the second she came under me everything was clear. Fel is mine, always has been.

I flex my hands and stand in the corner of the ring, waiting for the buzzer to go off like it’s the only thing that’s keeping me going. I close my eyes and tip my head back, inhaling the smell of sweat and blood.

My happy place, my home.

I might have pretended to be a clean-cut football player as a teenager, but I was never myself until after I did what I had to.

If I hadn't protected her, no one would have.

The buzzer sounds and my focus snaps to Axel, who's already coming at me at full speed. He's an idiot for a guy as big as he is. If he learned to fight a fraction better than he does now, he'd be able to take out any guy in here with his size and force alone. But he's sloppy, and I can't help but smirk as I watch him already making mistakes.

He reaches me and rears back, but it's too late.

Stepping to the side, I dodge his first punch. Axel should see it in my eyes that this is already over, but he isn't smart. So he's still smiling like there's a chance he'll recover.

Last time I was here, I went all nine rounds. Took a beating and wore myself out trying to prove myself to the girl who never cares enough when I need her to, and too much when I don't.

Not tonight.

Axel steps in, and I seize the opportunity to give him an uppercut to the jaw. His head snaps back and a grunt leaves his chest. But I'm not done. As good as it feels to slam my fist into his face and listen to his teeth chatter, I'm not going to spend my night on him.

He stumbles, but I don't back up. I let loose all the things I shouldn't. The things that got me into this mess in the first place. With a final hit to the side of the temple, Axel drops and paramedics rush in.

I went too far, and it should matter.

I won the fight, and it should matter.

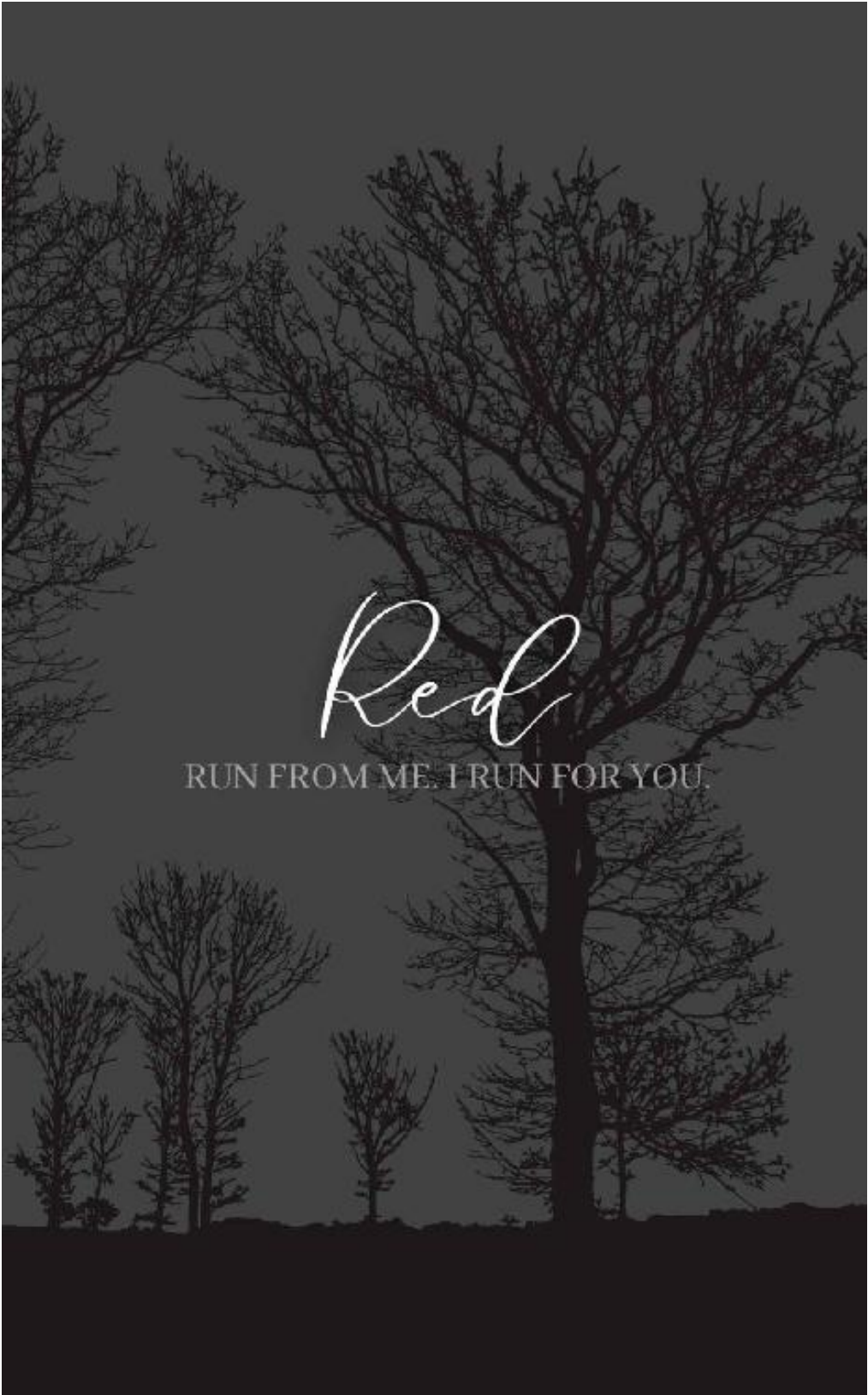
Brea looks ready to get down on her knees for me, and it should matter.

*It doesn't.*

Without waiting for them to even call my name, I climb out of the ring, passing Sage and Crew as I do, and ignoring the looks they share that tell me exactly what they're thinking.

Fel can run, but she can't hide.

And she can hate me all she wants—she's mine now. I'm not giving her back to them.



# Red

RUN FROM ME. I RUN FOR YOU.





# Fel

CHAMPAGNE. DIAMONDS. MEN IN suits more expensive than most people's entire wardrobes.

And they act like it's nothing.

*I thought it was nothing for years as I grew up in my glass castle. Not realizing at the time how easily they shatter. One pebble of reality and the veil drops, the stained glass falls, the illusion rains around you, and all that's left is the price people pay for cutthroat greed.*

"Felicity, you look stunning as always." Grandmother stops in front of me, while Grandfather continues his conversation.

Apart from a polite hello, he'll ignore me for the majority of the night to focus on people more important.

Grandmother skims me head to toe, smiling in appreciation as her gaze falls to how the dress hugs my body perfectly. Sweeping her eyes back up, she pauses at my hair.

"I can schedule an appointment with Venus if you would like. Your red is losing its vibrance with that awful city water."

My throat tightens at her immediate reminder of how she's so good at picking me apart. She'll toss out compliments to appease my ego, but then drop one little remark at the end to ensure I spend weeks questioning if I'm good enough. I could be polished head to toe by the best team at a world class spa and she'd find one thing to remind me there're always imperfections.

It's a trait she passed down to my mother, and all I can do is hope I'll be strong enough to show love without judgment someday.

"Good to see you, Grandmother." I try to ignore her dig, regretting my decision to show up tonight more with each passing second.

I was being impulsive after last night. And almost as if my grandparents sensed it, they called as I made my way home from Jude's apartment. They knew the one thing I couldn't say no to was showing my face at Mom's foundation's annual event, which is why they invited me here.

Her foundation is all that's left of her since she died. Proof that even if she felt cold at times, she cared about people.

Standing here now, I wish I'd felt strong this morning instead of vulnerable. One step back in my old life is a harsh reminder of all the phony smiles and ulterior motives I left behind.

I'm not sure what's worse—suffering through this or knowing at the end, I'll circle right back to where I shouldn't.



It doesn't matter what Jude did or how much it hurt when he walked away after what happened last night. He's gravity, and I'm incapable of resisting. No matter how much I hate my mother for leaving me or resent my grandparents for trying to sell me to the highest bidder after college, no one has wielded the ability to cause damage like Jude Carlisle.

For years I convinced myself to stay away knowing that fact. But the more time I spend around him at his shop, the more he makes me the girl he met in the library. A girl capable of peeking through his hard exterior to the man underneath. A man who made me question my seemingly perfect life for the first time, testing my limits because he knew I could handle it.

Limits we reached the edge of last night. And even if it was for the best that he walked away, I'm stupidly tempted to circle back and finish what we started.

Jude can be as angry as he wants, he played me as much as I played him. While I knew I was baiting him, he was the one who used it against me.

Why did that have to be such a turn-on?

Grandmother narrows her eyes, and I wonder if she sees the havoc the reminder of last night rattles within me. My cheeks are hot, and my arms are prickled with goosebumps. My core throbs at the simple thought of him.

"Miss." A waiter stops beside me and hands me a glass of champagne.

I take an immediate sip and wish the bubbles could pop the thoughts in my head.

“I have some people I’d like to introduce you to.” Grandmother wraps her hands around my arm and tugs me along beside her.

This scene should be comforting because I know what to expect here. Pleasantries, familiarity, everyone putting on a show. But as Grandmother leads me through the crowd, all I want to do is disappear—to run until I’m standing in front of Jude at his fight night, pissing him off.

He might pretend he’s strong, but I want to be the girl with the power to break him. I’m tired of him acting like I can’t.

“Misty.” Grandmother releases me to lean in and give a pretentious hug to a woman wearing an ear full of diamonds and the smuggest expression in the room. “This is the granddaughter I was telling you about.”

Misty pulls back and skims me over. “Ah yes, so nice to meet you, Felicity.” She turns and latches onto someone’s arm beside her, drawing him into this conversation. “This is my grandson, Mark.”

I’ve been here five minutes and they’re already setting me up.

“Nice to meet you.” I nod my head, not enjoying how Mark’s grin bares his teeth.

One tick of his smile and any niceness he wants me to see is clearly only surface level. A guise of the person he’s

pretending to be.

Almost as if Mark senses I'm looking straight through him, his grin falls the slightest bit. His eyebrows pinch, and he scans me over. The veil of charm falters, and he nods once before turning back to his conversation.

"You've been staying with family in the city, right?" Misty asks, not noticing the exchange.

"Yes, with a friend."

"I thought—"

"She's been spending time with her stepbrother." Grandmother nods, cutting her gaze in my direction. "Haven't you?"

"How do you—" but I don't finish the question because of course she knows. No matter how loose they let the leash, they always know.

While I was shocked to run into Jude at Twisted Roses, she doesn't seem the least bit surprised. I can't help but wonder if she's known all along that he never left LA eleven years ago. If so, why would she hide that from me?

"How is Jude, sweetie?" She smiles, but it isn't the least bit friendly.

"Excellent."

His voice coming from behind me sends a shiver the full length of my spine. I must be imagining him because there's no world in which Jude would be here tonight. Except, I feel

him—his closeness sending goosebumps skittering. His scent fogging the air around me.

Tension that only ever pulses when he's close.

Spinning around, I'm met with his wicked amusement, and I'm certain my imagination must be playing tricks on me.

“Pretty as always, Red.” He smirks, and I feel the warmth of it crawl inside me.

Those green eyes beg me to fall for him. Pupils dilated as he takes me in. And I can't help but do the same because I'm caught off guard by the grown-up version of the boy I once met at one of these events. He might no longer accept this life, but he stands before me in a perfectly tailored dark gray suit like a temptation. Or a threat.

“I thought you had—”

“Plans tonight,” he interrupts before I can ask about his fight. “They ended early.”

He's playing the pretense, which is more concerning than if he walked around the room telling them all to fuck off. Jude was always a master at their games, even if he hated them.

He holds my gaze, sucking the air from the room. He might as well be reading a crystal ball that peeks into all my emotions because his eyes see straight through me. Eyes that reveal the truth when all his mouth does is lie. And I wish for a moment we could be different people, who weren't always out to hurt each other.

“Find me before you leave.” Grandmother squeezes my arm, reminding me she’s standing next to me.

I roll my shoulders back and try to compose myself, realizing my jaw is slack, and I’m frozen in shock.

Grandmother doesn’t acknowledge Jude before she walks away, and he doesn’t break my stare. It’s enough to confirm this isn’t the first time she’s seen him in a decade, and my stomach twists at another truth they hid from me.

The music changes and the crowd shifts, but I can’t so much as move or speak as Jude’s green eyes watch me for a reaction. Time stills, even if it’s moving on around us. People pass like there’s nothing to see.

*He’s here.*

*For me? For control?*

I hate him always making things murky.

“Didn’t know you still owned a suit.”

“Still lots you don’t know about me.”

I frown. “Apparently.”

Like how he fits in here as if he never left, while I feel out of place.

“How was the fight?” I pretend we aren’t standing on a fault line waiting for it to crack open.

“Fine.”

“Did you win?”

Jude smirks as if it's a ridiculous question. "Always."

My stomach flutters, and I don't like the thought of some other girl being there to celebrate with him. It doesn't matter if he's here with me now, he always has, and always will, come and go as he pleases.

I'm not sure how much more I can handle.

"How did you know I was here?"

"Maren." He tilts his head. "Done with the small talk?"

"Is that what this is?"

Jude steps closer, and I have to dip my chin because I can't trust myself to face him. His body heat radiates, heightening all my senses. He hovers over me as he brushes my hair off my shoulder.

"Why are you already running, Fel?" It's nearly a whisper.

A secret between us.

"Why do you care?"

His fingers pause on my arm, his entire body tense. There's no room for his energy in a place like this. One vibration and he's going to break everything.

*Isn't that what I want?*

I didn't expect to find Jude when I set myself free from this world, but he's what I need. Good or bad, Jude is always where I've belonged. Of all the people in my life parading around with the charade of pretending to protect me, Jude's the only one who actually did it. Even if it hurt.

It's terrifying and also the one thing that made me feel safe in a world of teeth and greed.

When Jude doesn't answer my question, I dare to look up at him, steadying my breath as I do.

Any show I put on won't get past him because Jude's always seen me for everything I am. A glance is all it takes for him to unbury every messy freckle on my cheeks, and to reveal every ugly spot on my soul. He *sees* me.

"I'm not sixteen anymore. I'm not your toy to play with." I wish it were true.

Jude's green eyes darken like the sun setting over the forest. "You never have been."

"Liar." I step back and take a breath. The room is spinning. Faces morph until there's only one I see clearly. "I can't take this."

I spin around and walk away, trying to catch my breath. Trying to find my bearings. I dart down the hall that leads to the bathrooms and wonder why I didn't just head for the door. I could escape them all.

You can't have one foot in and one foot out of this world. It's all or nothing—Just like it is with him.

He's either owning my soul or destroying it.

I wish he would already.

Jude's strong grip latches onto my arm, and he pulls me into a side room. He spins me around as he pins me against the

closed door, forcing me to face him when it terrifies me. He's breathing like he's been running the same race my heart is.

Out of breath.

Out of fight.

“What do you want from me, Fel?” Jude grips my chin and forces me to look at him. “You want me to take back what I did? I can't. You want me to regret it? I don't. You want me to love you? We both know that's not how our story is written. You're the princess remember? And I'm nothing more than a villain.”

He releases my chin, but I don't break his gaze. If anything, I sear him with the coals burning hot inside me, wishing it was enough to scare him away.

“No,” I breathe out, my chest brushing against him with every breath. “I don't need lies like *you love me* or *you're staying this time*. I wouldn't believe them anyway. I don't need your words any more now than I did back then.”

“Then what?”

“You!” Honesty spills with the floodgates flying open.

My heart is racing, and the longer I stare into his eyes, I'm falling into oblivion, but I can't break his gaze.

“Last night you asked me to fall apart for you, to show you how I've always felt for you, and I did. I hate you for it, but I did. And you did what you always do, push me away and act like it means nothing. Maybe it does because that would make it simple. But you should know it doesn't mean *nothing* to me,



no matter how much I want it to. Because I can hate you for everything you've done and everything you'll probably continue to do, but you're still the only man who can breathe life into those painful, hopeful butterflies I always fall for. Right. Here."

My fingers curl into a fist and I press it against my stomach, trying to contain the fluttering fighting to get out.

"And I hate you for it. I really do."

Jude pulls back slightly at my confession, his eyebrows pinching.

Tears sting my eyes. I'm out of breath and fighting for air. I'm desperate to run, but there's no place to hide when it comes to Jude Carlisle.

"I hate you," I say again, nearly a whisper this time.

Jude brushes a tear from my cheek with his thumb. "I know."

But just as I think he'll do what he's good at and walk away, he grabs my face with both his hands and takes my lips. He kisses me with such force it doesn't matter if it's forbidden. Because the biggest lie we've told ourselves is that we haven't always wanted this.



# Fel

HEARTS AREN'T BORN BROKEN. They're carved in the hands of those who aren't careful with fragile things. And Jude is an expert at ripping holes in mine.

He's ruthless.

Brutal.

He's the stepbrother I wasn't allowed to love in the ways my heart wanted, and over time, it made me sick.

My twisted obsession. To the point where I sometimes wondered if I only wanted him because he was forbidden.

His lips crash to mine. Painfully harsh. The hooks he planted a decade ago grip deeper.

He's wrong for me.

He's bad in the worst ways.

*I want him to be mine.*

Jude's fingers grip my cheeks, and I lose all sense of wrong and right. My darkest desires bloom knowing he's the only one

who can handle them. The only one who can meet me there.

If we're falling, it's together—into what this never should have been.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, and he drops his hands to my hips. His fingers drag over my diamond-covered dress and under my thighs as he picks me up and slams my back against the closed door. Hard enough to force the air from my lungs.

But he doesn't pull back. He takes my breaths like they belong to him, not caring what I'm left with when he's done. And even worse, I want him to drain me for all I'm worth.

In this darkness, doing forbidden things, Jude searches for a part of himself in me. And these walls would judge us if they had eyes.

His hard body presses against mine, and I clench my fingers on his suit jacket to pull our bodies flush. His teeth drag over my bottom lip before he takes my mouth fully again. And when I dare to trace his lip with my tongue, he nips at mine in return.

*Bites it.*

Drags the bubbles of a scream to my throat with the pain he inflicts, and I'm pulsing between my legs.

“Swallow your screams, Red.” He runs his tongue over the spot he bit, his piercing dragging over it, before brushing his lips from my mouth to my jaw, over my throat. Goosebumps follow the path until his breath is by my ear. “As much as I

want to hear them, you aren't ready for them to see just how far their angel has fallen.”

He drives his hips against me with his words, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to swallow the sounds that want to echo a chorus for him. Even if he told me to keep quiet, he rocks his hips like he wants to see if he can break me. Back and forth, putting pressure where I needed him last night. And I'm not sure why the wrong things have to feel so good.

But with every pulse of pressure, my body begs me to submit.

It should be a warning. Nothing good comes from this. Everything Jude gives he makes me regret.

So why can't I stop?

“Why—” I'm cut off by him sinking his teeth into the base of my neck. “Why are you here?”

And I mean everywhere—at this gala, in this room, in my life.

No matter how far either of us runs, or how good either of us hides, there's no escaping.

“I can't stay away from you.”

“You did for a decade.” A growl rumbles in his throat at my comment. “I'm just saying, what is this? A game because you like the chase? Or are you just trying to claim your prize like last night, just so you can walk away?”

The words hurt my throat on the way out. They hurt my heart. I don't want them to be true, but Jude is a fighter—a survivor—and those instincts will always win over what he feels for me.

Jude pauses his movements, and it's a warning to stop before I push us both over the ledge. I can't help but continue because I've already been too honest. And while I've put myself on the line in every way, he's been silently using my body's desire for him as a distraction.

“Or...” I trail off as he pulls back to chastise me with his stare. “Did you already get your prize earlier from one of the girls at your fight? And this is just to prove another point.”

“Taunting me again?” He smirks, dragging a hand up to my throat and wrapping it around the column of my neck, pinning me to the door with it.

Something that with anyone else would terrify me, but with him, I want more. His gaze is frenzied, but amusement plays underneath. And part of me thinks he loves that I push him to the brink, just so he has an excuse to punish me.

*Is that what I want?*

I know better. If only it wasn't so fun to test his limits like he does in return.

“No.” I breathe out as his grip loosens, just enough to allow me a gulp of air that he leans in and tastes from my lips.

Our mouths are brushing, and I've never been more desperate for a kiss. But he holds that fraction of space in a

unique form of torture. His fingers dig into the sides of my neck. The hanging threat that he could take whatever he wanted, and I'd be helpless to stop him. A dark knowledge that would scare me if I didn't stupidly trust him.

“Now who's the liar?” He tilts his head and grins.

Leaning in, he drags his tongue over my lower lip like he's tasting the moan I let out on contact. It vibrates through me, and I wish he would grind harder or fuck me already, but he's keeping me at the brink on purpose.

“Let me be clear, Felicity.” His eyes gleam with darkness as he pulls back. “There's only one prize I'm after—one prize I've *ever* been after. And it's going to break you when I finally take it. But you're going to beg me to keep going because there will be no turning back.”

My heart pounds as I wait for him to close the distance. To finally take me like I've always wanted him to. But instead, he releases his grip on my neck and slowly lowers my feet to the ground.

He rests his hands on my hips, as my entire body deflates. My head is spinning and my skin tingles, like I'm waking up from a dream.

*Or is it a nightmare?*

“You should get back to your party.” He reaches up and brushes my hair off my face. “I'm sure they're missing you.”

“I'd rather stay in here with you.”

His eyes light up like he enjoys hearing that, and I feel a strange sense of pride in pleasing him.

“Same. But if you don’t get this over with, you’ll never get out of here.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. This isn’t the time and place to figure out what’s going on between us, no matter how possible it feels for the first time in years.

I showed up tonight to parade myself around for my grandparents. To show them I’m doing fine without them. I came here to honor my mother and pretend I’m still the pristine, good daughter she wanted me to be.

*Look at me now.*

Jude steps back, and I have to hold my legs steady as he does.

A gap of space has never been as significant as the one he creates between our bodies in this moment. It takes all my composure to school my expression as I walk over to a full-length mirror leaning against one of the walls.

I’m a disaster. My hair is wild, and my lipstick is smeared. Every bit of what we’ve done shows, no matter how much I smooth and rub.

“I’m a mess. They’re going to think something happened.”

“Didn’t it?” Jude looks amused as he watches me from across the room.



I narrow my eyes at him through the mirror and cross my arms over my chest, but he ignores my pouting. A playful smirk ticks up at the corner of his mouth as he crosses the room and stops directly behind me.

He grazes the side of my cheek, smoothing down my neck, pulling loose tendrils of hair over my shoulder.

“Come to think of it...” Jude lights a path of fire along me as he slowly drags his fingers to the front of my throat and up my jaw, resting the pad of his thumb on the center of my lower lip. “I don’t mind you being a mess. Always preferred it actually.”

He presses his thumb to my lip, the tip rolling over my tongue just enough to give me a taste, before dragging it back out. He rubs my red lipstick, pausing just before he reaches the point where it will smear across my cheek, as our gazes connect through the mirror.

Jude’s green eyes are greedy, focused on my eyes before dropping once more to my mouth. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing I am as he bites his lip and drops his hand.

*The things I want to do with my stepbrother are going to send me to hell.*

Burying the warning, I take a measured breath.

“Are you leaving then? Or are you going to stay?”

When we were younger, we both hated these events, finding salvation in at least having each other. We would disappear to a corner and make fun of the ridiculous shows of money.

Which is why, as surprised as I was to see him here tonight—maybe even a little annoyed—his presence calms my nerves.

“Would it piss them off if I stayed?”

“Probably.”

“Then yes.”

“Is that why you showed up here tonight? To piss them off.”

Jude steps closer and plants his hands on my shoulders. His mouth dips low to my ear and his breath makes my entire body shiver. “You know it isn’t.”

I’m not sure how to take his confession, because I don’t know that. He’s either hot or cold, but he’s never clear. His intentions are always veiled in secrets.

Like right now when I’m in his hands and he’s saying things too close to what I’ve always wanted to hear. He’s in a suit for me. He’s at this gala *for me*. Still, I sense him holding back.

I run my fingers through my hair one final time and adjust my top, making sure my dress is perfectly in place. With a final swipe underneath my lip to make a sharp line, I spin and face him.

“Ready,” I say, although I don’t think I’ll ever mean it. This isn’t a world I’ve belonged in since I stepped out of it.

Jude steps back and waves an arm out for me to pass. As if he could ever be considered a gentleman with the way he handled me only moments ago.

He follows me out of the room, and we maintain a safe distance, not so much as glancing at each other as we part ways in the crowd.

It doesn't matter that our parents are no longer married or that it was brief and ended brutally. In some circles, we're still seen as family. This is one of them.

Glancing at Jude through the sea of faces, I wonder if that's what appeals to me about how he lives his life now. The people he surrounds himself with aren't scared of the dark things we were raised to hide. They accept you for your beauty and your blemishes.

They embrace the ugly truth over perfection.

Jude swallows hard. Eyes locked, secrets unspoken. Reality bare for the first time in over a decade. He did everything he could think of to push me away, but it doesn't matter. Every broken piece of me has always been his.



# Jude

FEL MIGHT THINK SHE no longer belongs here, but she's wrong.

Her smile gravitates people toward her. Her beauty stands out in their bland world.

When we were younger, I never understood why she fought her natural place. Because while I was always uncomfortable at events like this, she fit right in. The same way she does now.

I watch her from the edge of the room, not missing that my eyes aren't the only ones on her. She's stunning in her pale green dress. It shows off a tease of her stomach and cuts low between her perfect breasts. She's sparkling from the gems like a sky full of stars.

Her cheeks are still flushed from our kiss, and the sight burns hot inside me. I can still smell her on me—feel her on me. Years of resisting her perfect puffy lips, and one taste was confirmation I'll never get enough. I'm just not sure what to do about it.

Uncertainty flashed in her eyes as I watched her fix her makeup in the mirror. She waited for me to confess my sins the same way she did. To offer more than a physical answer to her unspoken questions. She waited for me to admit everything I've denied for as long as she's been off limits.

My silence wasn't because I was questioning this. And it wasn't punishment like she seemed to think. But she's not prepared for the words I'll say if I let myself, so I bite my tongue.

*For now.*

A man three times her age stares at her cleavage as he walks past, and it takes everything in me to stay in place. If I was smart, I would have dragged her out of here before the men in this room had a chance to place her on their mental scale and weigh her against everything they're looking for in a trophy wife. Better yet, I would have fucked her so loud in the other room they'd know who she belongs to.

But if the sight of her is mine, the sound of her is even more so. And when she screams with my cock inside her, it'll be for my ears alone.

Fel makes me fucking insane.

There's only one person I've ever come unhinged for, and she's tipping her head back in a laugh so loud it sends shock waves through the room.

Or maybe that's my imagination.

“Long time, Jude.” Fel’s grandfather stops beside me, sipping his whiskey. His eyes follow my line of sight to his granddaughter.

He’s been circling for a few minutes, and I didn’t miss when he started closing in, which gave me enough time to escape if I wanted to. But this conversation is inevitable—just like me and *her*.

“Not long enough.” I don’t bother looking at him.

His shoulders shake with a half-hearted chuckle. “How are things at the tattoo parlor?”

“Good.” I hate that he’s faking pleasantries, but that’s all this world is—a load of absolute bullshit. “How long have you known I’ve been there?”

“I’ve kept tabs.” He taps his glass with his index finger, humming as he thinks something over. “Don’t pretend you haven’t.”

I can’t help the laugh that almost bursts out of me, but I swallow it down. I know better than to hand this man my reactions.

“Someone had to.”

Her grandfather hums again. “Are you saying we can’t protect our granddaughter?”

“So you admit she needs protecting?”

Finally, I do dare to look at him—straight in the eyes. He tries to bury his shock at the bluntness of my question, but

cracks show.

Her family let me fall on my sword for what happened. They painted me as a reckless teenager who needed to be committed. But they forget I know their truths, even if Fel doesn't.

Fel's grandfather holds my stare because he isn't the type of man to back down. While most people in this room can't see past his classy façade, with his salt and pepper hair swept neatly back, and his suit perfectly tailored—he's just like our parents, maybe worse.

He let Fel believe *I* was the villain.

“We both know how this ends.” He holds his drink up and out, and my eyes once more move to Fel. “You two were always drawn to each other. But Felicity has a future. She has bigger things to do in life than to let you drag her down. Just because you gave up your potential, doesn't mean you should take hers.”

Almost like Fel feels me watching her, she finds me through the crowd. Her pretty, blue eyes skip from me to her grandfather.

“That's where you're confused. I didn't give up anything I didn't want to. And as for Felicity—at least have the spine to admit what's really bothering you. She might pretend to hate me, but she'll always trust me more.”

“What have you told her?” His posture hardens.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”



It would only hurt her.

“Good.”

I can't help but laugh now. “Not what I would call it.”

Her grandfather huffs, taking another sip of his drink, but not elaborating, so I move on.

“Speaking of the past you like to pretend doesn't exist, why are you still talking to my father?”

Her grandfather smirks like my question's beneath him, and he can't believe I'm asking. “You think you know it all—thought you knew it all back then too.”

“I know more than you think.”

“I'm sure you don't.” He narrows his gaze, sweeping the room. “You were a boy acting on impulse. A teenager. What you think you knew and reality aren't one and the same.”

“He would have—”

“You don't know that, Jude.” His voice drops like a hammer. “There were more important things on the line than your feelings for her.”

“So you forgave him? After what he did—what they both did?” My fingers clench around my glass, and I feel like it's going to shatter.

I want to break every piece of china in this room just to prove how fucking fragile it is in this world they cherish.

“Yes.” He nods once, downing the final splash of whiskey in his glass. “Someday you'll understand. See you around, Jude.”

He turns to walk away, leaving me with more questions than I walked in here with. The way he casually disregarded what happened a decade ago makes it perfectly clear there's something I missed.

And if that's the case, walking away was pointless.

A waiter passes, and I trade one drink for another, wishing they were stronger. It doesn't matter how much money bleeds from these walls, the richest people are cheap in some ways, and the liquor tastes like water.

I shoot it anyway and grit my teeth.

Coming here was a bad idea, but I knew that. Making myself known again in their world puts me back on their radar. They might have assumed I was still keeping an eye on them, but I maintained a safe distance.

Showing up tonight and walking up to Fel changed that. I placed the targets on both of our backs.

The girl makes me fucking reckless.

If I was smart, I'd walk away and hope for the best. I'd assume her grandparents are dicks, but they wouldn't actually do anything to hurt her. I'd believe what her grandfather said about wanting her to have a real future.

Maybe it's that I'm selfish.

Or maybe it's that I know better.

But ever since Fel stepped in my path again, there's no escape.

She finishes her conversation and turns. The diamonds on her dress catch the light from the chandelier and she's a princess in a sea of vipers.

I'd know. I'm one of them. Wanting to get a taste of her goodness.

Her blue eyes lock on mine as she makes her way toward me, and I wonder if I can telepathically force her to run in the other direction because I'm too weak to say it out loud. But as she walks through the room, all I do is will her closer.

I draw her in.

I become her gravity so she can never escape me.

Maybe I am as bad as them.

"What did he want?" Fel stops in front of me, and her dress swishes one final time, showing off her creamy thigh.

*This thing is too damn tempting. She's too damn perfect. I'm going to make an absolute mess of her.*

"Just saying hello."

Fel frowns. "You expect me to believe that?"

She wants answers. She deserves them. But even so, I know better than to open my mouth, because it's easier for her to hate me for keeping secrets than to learn the truth.

So I shrug in response.

She crosses her arms over her chest and her posture tightens. I feel her going rigid on me, and I'm tempted to pick her up and slam her against the wall just to make her soft again.

For a girl who pretends she can't be reached, I studied her long enough to learn all the tricks. And even if I shouldn't enjoy playing her like I do, sometimes I just can't help it.

"I'm going to head home." Fel avoids my gaze in favor of scanning the room.

"I'll take you."

Her blue stare snaps in my direction. "I'm capable of getting there by myself."

"I'm aware." I set my glass down.

I don't care if her grandparents paid a driver to take her to her door. After last night, I'm tempted to never let her walk the streets of LA at night alone again. She never could see the monsters standing in plain sight. Which is why it took her too long to realize I was one of them.

Luckily, she doesn't say goodbye to her grandparents. Or maybe she already did, and I missed it because her grandfather was clouding my thoughts with his bullshit. But we slip out of the party the same way I arrived—quietly.

Fel's silent the entire drive back to her apartment, giving me time to think. The second she opens her mouth, her sass will push me over the ledge, so the silence is welcome.

In the car, I strip off my jacket and tie and roll up my sleeves. Being in a suit for the first time in years is suffocating. Another thing I wouldn't do for anyone—*except her.*

When we get to her place, I walk her all the way up.

*Sick.*

*Obsessed.*

I can't let her out of my sight because if anything happens to her, I won't stop until everyone suffers.

When we finally reach her door, she sticks her key in the lock, and pauses.

I'm not sure if it's her or the wall vibrating. Her teeth rake her bottom lip, and her fingers shake around the key.

“Everything okay?”

If a picture says a thousand words, her eyes are a mural. Heartache and hope. Pain and beauty. A battle raging. Calling out to me.

“Do you want to come in?” She might hate herself for asking me that question, but she can't help it for the same reasons I'm standing in front of her now.

Just like I'd sell my soul for her, she can't deny I'm the drug in her veins. I'm the high she's chased until she couldn't help but feed her addiction.

*Inevitable*—just like I told her. There's no escape.

And as I follow her into her apartment, I'm prepared to prove it.



“*You came.*”

*It's not a question. Fel's grandfather doesn't ask questions. He makes statements with the kind of certainty that turns them into facts.*

*"I had to." Across the lawn, Fel climbs out of a black town car and makes her way across the cemetery. Her red hair is tied back, but strands shake loose with the wind. "I need to talk to her."*

*Her grandpa hums, following my gaze, as Fel stops in front of her mother's casket.*

*There's so much pain in her eyes that she looks almost numb. Puffy lids and swollen cheeks. I've no doubt she's been crying for hours. Days even.*

*"You don't want to do that," her grandfather says after a long moment.*

*I can't help the unamused chuckle that breaks out. "I don't?"*

*He turns to face me, pulling my attention away from Fel.*

*"Your father is in jail. Her mother is dead. Let her grieve, Jude. Let her move on. Absolving yourself of your guilt is only going to cause her more pain. She has a real chance to get past this if you let her."*

*"You mean you want me to hide the truth?"*

*"If that's what it takes to protect her." His gaze moves once more to Fel, standing across the lawn. Her eyes haven't left the casket. "She's not like you—or like any of us. She has a chance to be better. But if you tell her what your father did. Or the real reason her mother killed herself, she'll hang onto that*

*pain until it eats her alive. Her grandmother and I are here now to make sure she lives a good, normal life. You need to let that happen. There's still too much neither of you understand."*

*"She'll hate me."*

*She already does, I feel it in the way she screamed the last time I saw her. The way her bloody hands shook. The way her eyes were oceans freezing over.*

*"She will." The fact that he agrees makes my gut sink. "But it's better than her hating herself."*

*With a final slap on my shoulder, her grandfather walks away. And I'm frozen in place as her mother's plot fills with people. The priest arrives, and even if I can't hear his words, the mood in the cemetery shifts. Only then does Fel look up, her eyes finding me across the distance.*

*She holds my stare so long I feel every bone in her body breaking under the weight of losing her only other parent. I watch as everything we thought this could be shreds around us.*

*The girl in the library and the boy who thought he stood a chance in a world of monsters vaporize.*

*I stare at her long enough to feel her blame crawl like a being across the cemetery toward me. And I accept it. I can't escape what's happened. But she can.*

*And maybe someday, I'll be able to help her understand why her grandfather is right.*

*I can't stay if it means I'll hurt her more.*





# Fel

MAREN RARELY COMES HOME on Friday and Saturday nights, so it's playing with fire to invite Jude in. Knowing, the two of us alone is an explosion waiting to happen. Knowing, his suit is a mask for the wicked beneath.

So why do I widen the door enough for him to follow me? Tempting us both to get lost among the trees.

Jude closes the door behind him, and when I spin, I'm met with a smug expression.

"I'm still mad at you." I strip off my coat and hang it on a hook by the doorway.

Jude watches my every move. His gaze wandering the full length of my body, before pausing on where my bare thigh peeks through a slit in the fabric.

This dress might be over the top, but I don't mind the attention I've been getting in it.

"Could have sent me home." He smirks. "So why didn't you?"

The condescension. Always reading me easily, while he's a closed book.

“Why?” I plant a finger on his chest, and the contact alone makes me feel out of breath. “Because hating you never changes anything, Jude. So why bother?”

“Meaning.” He steps in close enough that it forces my hand flat on his hard chest, and I have to drop it before I lose all composure.

Jude in a suit is temptation enough. But now, stripped of his jacket, sleeves rolled up to show off his thick, tattooed forearms, my head spins.

“You never stop playing games, do you? And I never stop falling for them.”

A truth that hurts more than I'd like to admit.

I could have sent him home; I could end our arrangement at the shop. I could stop putting myself in positions where there's no escaping his magnetic draw. But I don't.

“Is it really that easy for you to see me again after all these years and act like nothing ever happened?” I let out a defeated breath. “One minute you're pinning me to a wall and kissing me, and the next you're plotting in a corner with my grandfather. One minute you've got me naked in your bed and the next you're slamming the door in my face.”

The last part stings because if I'm honest with myself, it hurt more than anything else. He got what he wanted—proof I've

always been a mess for him. Evidence that no matter how angry he makes me, I can't resist. Then he walked away.

I take a step back, but he steps forward to meet me. There's never escaping quicksand.

"You done?" His tone is sharp when he has no right.

I shrug, clamping my mouth shut. If I keep talking all I'll do is throw more sand over my own grave.

"Good." He takes another step, gripping my chin to tilt my face up to him. "You pissed me off last night, that's on you."

"On me? You—" I try to pull away because he's turning this around on me, and the audacity burns as hot in my stomach as it does behind my eyes.

But he forces me a step backward before I can and pins me to the wall beside the front door. The full force of his body presses against mine, every flush inch of him hot as his face hovers an inch from my own.

I'm not sure who's more desperate as we fight for the air between us.

"Shut up, Red. I heard you. Now it's my turn to fucking talk."

I tug my chin to the side, and he releases his grip on it, but he doesn't step back. He doesn't let me go. He holds me against the wall and clouds my judgment with the scent of his cologne.

Body heat that could set my life on fire if I let it.

“Don’t lie to me and say you weren’t trying to piss me off last night. You were, and that’s fine.” His thumb grazes along my neck, up and down the center of my throat like he’s mesmerized by every heavy breath. “You can play coy and pretend you don’t push my buttons on purpose, but we both know you do. You like seeing how far I’m willing to go for you. And trust me when I say this Fel—I will take it *all the way* if you force my hand. Which leads to our truth.”

I dare face him again. “What truth?”

“It pisses you off that I play dirty.” He smirks, digging his hips against me harder with his words and forcing my legs slightly apart. “But you like it. You *want* it. You’re not the good girl they think you are.”

“Then what am I?”

I press my lips together and hope it’s enough to stop me from wishing he’d just lean in. The closeness, the heat. I spent years convincing myself I wanted him because he was off limits, but with his body pressed to mine, I feel safe when I shouldn’t—needy and desperate. And it isn’t because he’s forbidden. It’s because he sees through the perfect girl they raised, straight to the mess he makes me.

“You’re bad.” It’s like he’s reading my mind as he taps his thumb on my lip. “Just. Like. Me.”

There’s no denying it as he trails his finger over my lip, my cheek, down the center of my throat. As he feeds on my body’s reaction, while I ignite at his touch. His hands, the only ones my body wakes for.

Who we were years ago feels so far away and so close as his rough palm grazes over my bare skin. And his eyes—his dark soul. One look, and I'm certain I've never really escaped him.

Moving his fingers from my throat to my chest, to my stomach, he grazes the exposed skin. His eyes don't leave my parted lips as he rakes his fingers back and forth across it, reading every quick breath I can't hold in. His nails skate over my belly button and my entire body shivers.

It doesn't matter that he's never touched me like this before, he plays me like an instrument with perfect precision.

"I still hate you for what you did." I'm not sure why I say it, but I need him to know that even if my body responds to him like this, it doesn't erase our past.

"I know."

No, *I'm sorry*. Because like he said, he wouldn't mean it.

We stare into each other's eyes as he touches me, and he feels so good; I'm the strike of a match away from fully incinerating.

"I'll always protect you, Fel." Jude draws his hand around my side and up my back, lacing it through the hair at the nape of my neck and tipping my face up. "Whether you like the outcome of it or not. I'll always do what needs to be done for you."

"Why?"

Fire builds behind my eyes, and I'm not sure if it's because of emotions breaking free or his grip on my hair. I can't escape

the fact that I'm bursting at every seam as my flesh burns and cracks.

"Because you're worth protecting."

*Because I was his stepsister? Because we once were friends?  
Or more?*

All questions on the tip of my tongue, but I'm not brave enough to ask them.

"You should go," I whisper, hearing myself slipping with each word and hoping he doesn't think I actually mean it. Because yes, *he should go* for so many reasons, but it doesn't erase why he shouldn't.

"Do you want me to?" A challenge. Calling me out for the heart beating for him in my chest.

"No."

"Exactly."

He dips down to steal a kiss, but he takes so much more than my lips. His mouth on mine sends my blood racing through my veins, and my heart jumps straight from my chest and into his hands like it belongs there.

Jude's fingers tangle in my hair, as he pulls me tighter to him.

Rough, unforgivable. *Inescapable.*

He picks me up into his arms, and there's no place more dangerous. *No place I feel safer* as I wrap myself around him.

He carries me to the couch and throws us onto it, not breaking our kiss as he lays over me. And I can't help but explore him through his clothes. The ridges of his muscles beneath his shirt, hard and laced in demonic ink. He draws my tongue into his mouth and sucks on it, before releasing it and sinking his teeth hard into my lower lip.

*Why do I thrive on his pain?*

He wraps his fingers around my throat, breaking the kiss and lifting enough to pin me to the couch. His pupils blow wide at the sight of me losing all breath and good sense for him. Slowly, his other hand skates up my leg, into the slit of my dress, and along my inner thigh.

My eyes flutter at the sensation, and my head tips back on instinct, but Jude slides his hand into the hair at the back of my head and forces me to look at him.

“Don't you dare look away from me when I'm touching you, Felicity.” He leans in to graze his lips over mine in a taunt. “I want you to watch every wicked thing you let me do to you. Deny it all you want; we both know you've always dreamed of being my bad girl.”

He drags his lips down my jaw, my neck, and sinks his teeth into the tender flesh at the base of my throat. I'm sure he feels my heart racing. If he sunk his teeth in just a little farther, he'd taste how my blood runs hot only for him.

“Say it,” he says, his breath on my neck as he rakes his teeth over me.

“What?” My heart is racing.

“You know what.”

I do, and it makes me hate him even more. “I want to be your bad girl.”

He sinks his teeth in again, this time so hard my back arches. I know what he’s doing, he’s leaving his mark on me. He’s claiming what’s his. His teeth bite into my skin so hard there will be marks where anyone can see them, and I’m sure that’s what he wants.

“I want to be yours.” This whisper is different, but I don’t take it back because I mean it whether I want to or not.

He sits back on his heels, releasing me. I didn’t realize my body was chasing him until I slump back and have to catch myself on my elbows.

“You are *mine*.” His fingers work the buttons on his shirt, and he watches me as he pops each one. Slowly stripping it off so I’m faced with his bare chest.

My eyes sweep his tattoos, and unlike in the dim light of his room last night, in here, I see each one clearly. Demons, blood, skeletons, roses. Until my gaze lands on one in particular buried in the mess.

“Wait, what is this?” My hand flies to the peacock feather hidden in the greater design as my eyes find his.

“You know what it is.”



I swallow, feeling the question burning my tongue, but not asking. Still, he answers what's unspoken with his dark green eyes.

*He put this here for me.*

Something he branded himself with. A symbol that used to feel like hope. A secret we shared. And all these years he's carried it around with him.

I want to know why. I want him to explain how he could have walked away from me and still found it necessary to etch me into his skin. But he grips my wrist and moves it lower before I have the chance.

My palm flattens as he presses it against his rippling stomach, dragging it lower until I'm cupping the hard bulge beneath his zipper. The contact makes him twitch.

I love that I do that to him. That he can deny with his words all he wants, and he can lie to me every chance he gets. But his body tells me the truth the same way mine does him.

He wants us to burn in hell side by side.

Jude reaches down and wraps his hands under my thighs, pulling me closer, so my hips are slightly lifted, and I can't help the images that run through my head at the motion.

"Take me out, Fel." He drops his arms to the side, giving me the power to move my hand and deny him. "Show me how much you've always wanted this."

Another test. Another way for him to put me at his mercy. Another game.

And like always, I play.

My fingers graze up and down his zipper, feeling the length of him underneath. We both know I'm not going to resist this. I wanted him back then as much as I do now. He might have denied me last night, but it was a tipping point on a larger scale.

Jude watches me and waits, like a man in control. But beneath the surface, I sense him on the verge of snapping. He's holding back as hard as I'm begging him to let go. And like the dares he issued when we were younger, I still can't resist as I pop the button on his pants and drag the zipper down.

He waits for me to slowly peel down the front of his pants, his jaw ticking when I swallow hard at the sight of him.

He's larger than I expected. And I expected enough when he was pulsing between my legs fully clothed. That fact alone makes me nervous. But it's not his size that has my heart thundering.

Jude wraps his hand around his thick cock and pumps it, baring the underside to me. And I catch sight of what I felt last night through his sweatpants. A row of metal, fitting for a man who pierces people for a living.

“What is that?”

Jude smirks, pumping his cock again, and not taking his eyes off me. “A Jacob's ladder.”

Six barbells run through the underside of his dick, and the piercings fit the name.

“Didn’t it hurt?”

Jude smirks, stroking his dick in his hand again like it’s nothing for me to be watching him pleasure himself at the sight of me. My blood runs hot and my stomach’s fluttering so hard it might burst.

I was sheltered growing up, and becoming an adult didn’t change that. Even though I’m no virgin, my sexual experiences are limited to lights-off, boring sex.

Jude is anything but boring as he kneels in front of me, already leaking onto his hand as he strokes harder.

“Hurt like hell, Red.” He smirks, his eyes skimming me over with a look that strips me to the absolute bone. “But you’re going to thank me for it.”



# Fel

I CAN'T TAKE MY eyes off Jude. I'm staring at each pump of his hand over his hard shaft. He has no reservations as he puts himself on display for me. While I was nervous lying naked in front of him last night, he bares himself without seeming the least bit vulnerable.

“You ready for me to take my prize, Red?”

My eyes snap to his.

I should say no and kick him out before this goes any further. Instead, I find myself nodding. A simple dip of my chin that seals both our fates.

He releases himself and leans in, reaching for something in his back pocket. And when he pulls it out, I realize it's the same knife from last night, still stained in blood.

Jude leans in and pulls my top away from my chest. And before I can ask what he's doing, he rips the blade down the center of the fabric, exposing my breasts.

“Jude—”

“I’m going to fuck you in this dress, Felicity.” He tosses the blade to the side, reaching for the slit of my skirt and ripping it open, before bunching what’s left of the fabric at my waist. “You can wear their dresses. You can play in their world. You can pretend you still belong there. But it means nothing. You’ll always belong with me.”

His fingers wrap around the front of my underwear, and his knuckles graze my clit, forcing a moan from my lips. He tears the lace from my body and throws it to the side with his knife.

“Open your legs.”

I widen my knees and Jude watches with sick satisfaction as I submit to him. He loves it. *I* love it. I’m so fucked up that I can’t deny it even if I wanted to.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” He drags his hands up my inner thighs, all the way to my center, spreading me open for him. “I’ve wanted to play with this perfect pussy for too many fucking years.”

His thumbs graze over me, and my eyes roll back in my head, but I don’t stop watching. His gaze darkening. A tick of a grin I want to swallow and feel all the way to the pit of my stomach.

Jude watches me like a man obsessed, focusing on every reaction he draws out. I’ve never felt more beautiful than I do in his hands, and it’s intoxicating.

With his thumb rubbing slow circles over my clit, he grabs his cock in his other hand and pumps it. It’s a sight I’ve

imagined in the middle of the night as my hands slipped downward, but no imagery could have done the sight of him justice.

He leans in and rubs the head of his dick over me, putting pressure on my center, before pulling back over and over. A sensation that feels as forbidden as it does hypnotic.

Jude doesn't bother removing his slacks, the same way he doesn't bother removing the ripped remains of my dress. He wants to fuck me in it. He wants to remind me of the perfect world he's going to blemish until there's no trace of it left.

He presses the thick head of his cock at my entrance, and I can't help but groan. The size and his piercings are overwhelming to look at, and I have no idea how he'll fit. But as his hips rock forward and my body aches, it doesn't matter.

*Right. Wrong. All of them.*

*He's mine.*

“Are you on something?” Jude's jaw clenches as he rubs himself over me again. “The pill or...”

“The pill.” Not that I've needed it lately. And while I've never let anyone have sex with me bare, I know why he's asking, because we make each other reckless.

“Good.” He smirks, pushing his hips forward enough to bring me to the verge of blacking out from the pressure alone. “I'm not fucking you with anything between us, Red. You're going to feel every inch of this.”

He spits on my pussy, rubbing it around with his cock and making me even more wet. My fingers dig into the couch, and I feel like I'm going to lose my mind if he doesn't bury himself where I need him.

As if Jude reads my thoughts, he grins. So dark, so wicked, so deep—I lose myself. And then he brutally thrusts himself in.

A scream rips from my throat with such force it's silent as he hits me deep. I might as well be a virgin with how my body has to stretch for him. How his hips shift and the barbells create a ripple of pressure that almost sets me off.

I'm not sure how he finds his way deeper, but with a tilt of my hips, he does, blurring my vision.

“Fuck, Fel.” Jude's fingers dig into my thighs as he sits back slightly to draw himself out, before pounding his hips forward again.

He's not a gentleman, and he doesn't wait for me to adjust. He forces me to take him like he's earned it. And with every thrust, he does. He earns my screams, my shaking bones, my pleasure. I might as well sweep whatever pieces I have left and hand them over because as he fucks me, I hand him all I have left.

“You're perfect.” He pounds in harder.

One hand reaches for my breast, and he latches his thumb and forefinger onto my nipple, pulling hard. When I scream,



he leans down, licking a path from my chest to my mouth and grinning as he hovers over me.

“I’m going to pierce these.” He squeezes my nipple again, and my pussy tightens around his dick as he thrusts in hard and does it again. “And you’re going to fucking love it.”

The pain of him gripping my nipple as he fucks me makes me believe him. I’d let him pull out a needle right now and drive it through because he makes me want everything he’ll offer.

Jude plants his mouth over mine and our tongues battle for space. It’s too much and just enough.

It’s where I belong.

Jude being Jude, he tries to fuck me like he hates me as much as I hate him. But in this moment, I can’t help but wrap my arms around him and force him to connect. I fall into his rhythm and both our hard edges soften for each other, allowing the other in.

He pulls me up to him and we melt into the waves we’re making. Candle wax dripping and coating reality.

It stings.

It burns.

He’s finally mine—even if just for tonight.

Jude digs his fingers into my lower back and holds me tighter as he fucks me. He’s still kneeling on the couch, and I’m not sure how his legs haven’t given out, but he’s a man

possessed. Like he's chasing how I clench around him the harder he thrusts. My entire body shakes like I'm going to explode.

His size. His piercings. Reaching the deepest corners and marking them. I can barely breathe between his kisses and my screams.

And I melt into the rhythm. My body in tune with every pump of his hips. My chest finds room for his air. My heart finds pieces I forgot existed.

I'm compelled to pull back just enough to do the most dangerous thing I can do in the arms of a man like him—look him in the eyes. I search the opal pits for the pieces of his soul he tries to hide.

I bring my hands to his face, and he wraps his through my hair, slowing his pace while rotating his hips so he's everywhere. My top hangs open where it's sliced down the front, and my nipples rub against his bare chest. Hearts hammering with every breath.

The cool gems on my dress rake where his hips grind against my bare legs.

“Jude.”

He circles his hips, and I lose my breath on his name.

“I've got you, Fel.” He tightens his grip around me. “Always have. Always will.”

The one promise he's never broken. Even if it hurts. Even if he leaves. He'll always have me. And that's a problem I can't

dwell on right now.

“I hate that you hurt me,” I confess, as he slows even more.

We’re melting like the room around us. My heart begs him to take care, but I don’t know if he’s capable of it.

Jude tips his forehead to mine. “I don’t try to.”

Words I feel walking the line between honesty and a lie. But I let them dance there because it doesn’t matter when there’s already no escape.

“I just can’t help myself.” His eyes pinch like the admission hurts him.

It hurts me too. But for once, he’s not lying. He’s looking deep into my eyes with the burning truth, and I’m putty in his hands.

“I know,” I whisper.

He holds me tighter and hits me so deep I see the flames closing in on us. They burn like a torch against my skin. Jude stretches me to my limits and breaks me with every rough thrust of him.

“I know,” I repeat as I unravel.

I shake, shiver, explode. I take every hard thrust as his jaw clenches, and he comes inside me. As he marks me like no one else can. A high with such a quick drop that blood rushes to my brain.

But he doesn’t let go. He holds me. His hands run slow circles over my back and in my hair. A gentleness he rarely

offers, so I can't help but soak in it.

“There's no coming back from this, Red.” Jude grazes his lips over mine, back and forth, and I wonder if he's enjoying that I'm out of breath and wants to feel it.

“I understand.”

“No, you don't.” He shakes his head, skating his lips over mine, before finding my jaw and peppering kisses on every inch of skin he can reach with me tight in his arms. “You don't understand. Because if you did, you'd have turned around the moment you walked into my shop and never looked back.”



*“What are you doing?” I cross my arms over my chest and smirk as I watch Jude try to sneak out of our parents' bedroom.*

*His face drains of color, as my eyes fall on what he's holding in his hands.*

*“Why do you have that?”*

*“Don't worry about it.” He clenches his jaw and straightens up taller, using his height against me, like I should be intimidated.*

*He shakes his head and tries to barrel past me, but I don't let him.*

*“Jude, stop.”*

*If he thinks that just because I'm a year younger than him, I'm oblivious to whatever's going on in this house, he's delusional. The four of us have been walking a tightrope between a cold war and a nuclear explosion.*

*"Wait." I grab his arm.*

*He spins to face me, but as he does, he drops the handheld camera to the floor, and it shatters.*

*"Fuck, Fel." He reaches down to pick it up as a door behind us swings open.*

*I look over my shoulder to see Mom standing in the doorway with wet hair, wearing nothing but a robe, like she just stepped out of the shower.*

*"Have you seen your stepdad, honey?" she asks, and it makes my skin crawl hearing her call him that.*

*We shouldn't be family at all. I almost scream it at the top of my lungs, but I don't. Ladies don't scream. Alcotts don't express feelings.*

*I shake my head, and she frowns before disappearing back into her room.*

*When I turn back around, Jude's standing in front of me looking pale—or caught. Anything but himself.*

*"Why were you in their room?" I ask him again, the pit in my stomach widening. "With that?" My eyes drop to the camera.*

*Jude shakes his head but doesn't say anything.*

*“Were you recording her?” I’ve never gotten the impression Jude had any interest in my mother, but this doesn’t make sense.*

*“Don’t be ridiculous.” He laughs, but it’s forced, and he doesn’t look the least bit relaxed.*

*“Then explain yourself.”*

*“You wouldn’t understand.”*

*“Try me.”*

*Jude steps in close, looking me straight in the eyes. “Just trust me.”*

*“Jude—”*

*But he turns and walks away without an explanation, and this time I don’t follow him as he disappears into his room and slams the door.*

*Trust.*

*A big word in a house of lies.*

*Trust.*

*A big word for someone breaking it every time I turn around.*



# Jude

THE ROOM IS CLOAKED in a green haze from the sheer curtains hanging over Fel's window. I have to blink the morning into focus as the past haunts me from my memories.

They're the same curtains she had hanging in her room when she was younger. Sheer emerald silk.

Back then, she said the color reminded her of my eyes. And because of that, I assumed she burned them along with every other reminder of me. Apparently, she didn't.

The sunbeams are dulled by the green glow that illuminates her in her bed. She's naked and asleep, letting out the sweetest exhales I've ever heard.

It took three times for me to fuck her out of her dress before we made it to her room and passed out. But even then, I couldn't sleep. She closed her eyes the moment her head hit the pillow, while I watched her dream with the kind of innocence I've never experienced.



I should leave before we go down this path that will inevitably lead to me hurting her all over again.

But I can't tear my gaze off her red hair spilling across the pillows, like the blood of our sins pouring out. I can't help but love how she glows under the green filter of the sun shining through the curtains like it's my eyes coating every inch of her.

Fel was always pretty, but she grew into her features in a way I couldn't have anticipated. Her sharp nose is softened by her heart-shaped face and the full apples of her cheeks. Her eyes flutter with her dreams, reminding me of the purity she exuded when she was younger.

Part of me wants to wake her up, so I can get lost in her eyes again. It's the only place I've ever been somewhat accepted. Even when she's upset, if I look deep enough, there's a home for me within them.

The other part of me wants to let her sleep, so I can roam my gaze over her freely, knowing I'm the only one seeing her like this. Fucked completely into submission. Relaxed. *Trusting.*

Her stomach is flat on the bed, putting her bare back on full display with a sheet hugged loosely around her waist. The universe of freckles on her skin paints the most beautiful picture, and I want to kiss every one and make a wish that I could be a better man for her.

Rolling onto my side, I trace a finger down her spine, barely grazing her skin. And even though she stirs, she exhales with my touch. Her body relaxes when it probably shouldn't.

I'm no good, regardless of what she tries to tell herself. No matter my reasons for doing what I did. She holds onto the boy she met in the library like there's still hope of a good man beneath. I lost him when I lost myself.

I always knew my dad was a bad guy, but learning the truth and then seeing it play out in front of me changed who I was. My protective instincts for Fel changed who I was. *I changed who I was.*

All to save her.

*Look what I've done.*

Lying here should feel like a second chance and not a taunt from the devil.

Her lips part on an inhale, and I want to be her every dream and nightmare. I want to be all she thinks about. All she craves. I want to be the only one to hear the sounds she makes.

*How do I let that go?*

When I offered to let her sell her jewelry at the shop, it was so I could get close enough to confirm she was happy. To make sure the demons from our past weren't still out to get her. And while I have no proof they are, I still haven't let her go.

She wiggles her nose with her dream, and I'm not prepared to ever hand her back to them.

I want to hoard the sight of her, the smell of her, the presence of her. She's been mine since the moment I met her, no matter how much I try to resist.

There's something about the way Fel consumes my vision with her red hair. How I want to cling tighter until we both suffocate. How I want to protect her with every bone in my body.

Fel is mine. End of fucking story.

“How long are you going to lay there staring at me?” The corner of her mouth ticks up, even if she doesn't open her eyes.

She's too trusting, too relaxed—and I love it. While she could have kicked me out last night, she let me through her defenses. My soul drowns in an attempt to absorb the power of that fact.

“As long as I fucking want.” I drag my finger up her spine, before brushing her hair to one side.

Leaning in, I kiss the base of her neck.

I wish I could live in that spot. Where her wild mind sends every thought and sensation to the rest of her body. I could burrow among the nerves in her vertebra and feed on her energy.

“Charming.” She flutters her eyes open and narrows them, even if she can't bury the flattery clear on her rosy cheeks.

“Never claimed to be charming.” I drag my lips to her shoulder, covering her in kisses. Replacing every inch of her skin with my lips until all she feels is me.

Fel drags her arms beneath her chest and props up on her elbows, watching me over her shoulder as I continue to kiss a

path down her shoulder and along her back. She tastes like the juiciest, ripest fruit I could sink my teeth into.

And she feels...

The moment I sank into her I was addicted. A desperate man at every sound she let loose as I hit her so deep her soul vibrated.

I wrap an arm between her legs and pull her naked body toward me, laying over the back of her and pinning her, stomach down on the mattress. There's something about controlling her that makes me fucking insane.

That and the fact that she lets me.

"What are you doing?" She buries her face in the pillow as I tuck her hair behind her ear and bite the lobe.

"Eating you." I nibble down her neck.

I want to swallow her whole.

Sinking my teeth into the soft flesh on her shoulder, I reach my hand between her legs, where she's already soaking wet.

"Oh, god," she moans, as I shove a finger inside, and her pussy tightens.

"Cute." I shove another finger in and appreciate how she loses her breath with my touch. "But I promise no one hears you like I do. So if you want your prayers answered, you better fucking pray to me, Red."

At that, I kneel between her legs and tug her hips in the air. Bending down, I lick the full length of her pussy, before

driving my tongue into her and rubbing my piercing along the spots that make her whole body shake.

She tastes like fucking paradise, and I want to wake up with her quivering on my tongue every fucking day.

“Jude.” She grips the sheet beneath her so hard her knuckles are white.

I can’t help but smirk as I pull back. Her sweetness coats my tongue like the best thing I’ve ever tasted. She knows who she belongs to, even if she tries to fight it.

“That’s right, Felicity.” I lift up, kneeling behind her as I wrap her long, red hair around my fist and rub my aching cock through her wetness. “You pray to me.”

In one hard thrust, I bury myself inside her, and she lets out a scream I’d like to play on repeat.

I don’t think she realizes what the feel of her does to my sanity. Every bit of her sweet pussy tightens and quivers without a condom to dull the sensation of my barbells rubbing against her. She draws me deeper with every thrust because her body is where I belong. I’m stuck in the center of the fucking universe, and I don’t want to escape. Nothing but her wrapped around my bare cock as I mark her from the inside out.

She shifts her hips as I slam in harder, shaking from the brutal force, and moving forward. But instead of letting her escape, I grab one of her arms and twist it behind her back, pinning her down with her ass in the air for me.

My roughness should scare her, but she gets so fucking wet instead.

“You trying to run from me, Red?” I thrust in harder, and she can’t fight me with how I’m limiting her movement. “You know I won’t let you.”

I shift my hips back and slam into her again.

“Jude.” My name on her lips is the only place it’s ever belonged.

I slide out so slow she’ll feel every barbell rub against her. Her body shakes violently. She’s on the brink. Shivering, soaking my dick. Marking me with her scent.

“What do you need?”

Thrusting in again, it kicks the air from her chest.

“I need you to fuck me—hard.”

“Fuck.” I pick up my pace, not able to contain myself. “I love when you talk dirty.”

*I love everything about her.* But that’s my secret. So instead of admitting it, I allow her to hold onto that ounce of hate she thinks she has for me. It’s just enough that if I decide to feed it, we can both escape this.

Releasing her arm, I grab her perfect ass and hit her at an angle that sinks me deeper.

I lied when I said I didn’t care about her virginity—even if at the time I didn’t realize it. The thought of anyone else

touching her makes me want to fuck her so hard she'll never feel anything but me inside her again.

Fel's screams are muffled by the pillow, but they're still music to my ears. Every little sound she makes is *mine*.

I slap her ass, and she screams again. A chorus just for me. Her soft skin turns pink, spreading up her ass cheek like wildfire. She can't hide her reactions to me, even if her freckles try to bury them.

Thrusting in harder, her body starts to clench. She shifts forward again like it's too much.

*It is*. For me too. But I don't care because I need both of us to feel the full force of what's happening between us.

"You can't run from me, Red." I lean down and slip my arm under her stomach, pulling her hips to me. "I won't let you."

I fuck her so hard my thoughts vaporize. Her screams become the only sound worth living for.

I fuck her so hard I can't tell where one of us ends and the other begins.

I fuck her so hard that she can't possibly belong to anyone else.

It was a warning when I said there's no coming back from this. She needed to understand the severity of what we're doing. Because I meant it. It's either Fel and me, or the end. That's the final page. And I'm going to fuck her until I reach it.

“Jude.” She screams for me, and I can’t help but smirk.

She knows who she belongs to. Not her family, not God. She’s fucking *mine*. And I’m going to make sure she never forgets it.

Her whole body liquifies with her climax. Her pussy tightening as she draws mine out of me. I pulse and pulse, as she squeezes out every drop. Not letting up until both our bodies relax and I release her with a groan.

But when I pull out, I keep hold of her hips before she can fall to the bed. I lean back on my heels to get a good look at her perfect pussy spread with her ass in the air. My cum tries to drip out of her, and I shove it back in.

She groans because she’s sore, but I bury my fingers as deep as she’ll allow so nothing drips out.

“I don’t want one drop of my cum to leave this sweet pussy, Red. You’re mine now.”

Withdrawing my fingers, I collapse beside her on the bed, and pull her to face me.

Her cheeks are red, and her eyes are the brightest blue I’ve ever seen.

“That was...” She traces the tattoos on my arm with her thoughts, before burying her forehead into the pillow like she’s embarrassed.

“Hard enough for you?” I can’t help throwing her own request back at her.



She might want to hide from what we've done, but I need her to accept it. I need her to see this for what it is—what it was always meant to be.

“Maybe.” She smirks. “I mean it could have been harder...”

The little temptress thinks she can push my buttons, and I'm not going to make her pay.

“Careful what you taunt me with.” I lean in and nip at her lower lip. “I'll meet your challenge every time, and then I'll go way past it.”

She sighs, her eyes fluttering. “I know you will, Jude.”

Fel curls against me, and I can't help but wrap my arms around her. I hold her knowing it's the only place no one else can get to her.

The only one who can hurt her here is me.

“Where do we go from here?” Fel sounds almost defeated by her question.

I bury my nose in her hair. “I don't know.”

Except, I do. In the organ they call a heart that beats inside me, I know exactly where we go.

*To hell.*

Because she feels too damn good for this to send me anywhere else.



## Jude

“HOW BUSY ARE WE today?” Sage drops into the chair at the other side of the desk and tosses a joint at me.

I kick my feet up and lean back, pulling out my lighter. If I’m going to be piercing all day, I’m going to need something to take the edge off.

“We’re booked solid.”

I light the joint and take a hit, holding the smoke in until it reaches my brain. My vision clouds as I float out into the universe.

“Want some?” I pass it off to Echo, who’s propped up on the corner of the desk fixing her ponytail.

Her eyes have been dilated and red since she walked in, but it doesn’t stop her from snatching the joint out of my hand and taking a long hit. She refuses to talk about whatever is going on with her lately, but she’s high more often than not, which isn’t like her.

Problems for another day.

My focus snaps to Sage. “We need to hire a new front desk chick before we all go fucking insane. This is getting ridiculous.”

He ignores my comment, not lifting his eyes from whatever he’s typing into his phone.

“Why does it have to be a girl?” A thick cloud of smoke curls from Echo’s lips with her words. “I’m not opposed to sticking a hot guy up there to draw in more ladies.”

“The last thing I need is another one of you fucking the person working the front desk.”

Not that I think Echo would, but I’m annoyed enough with Sage to bring it up just in case.

“This coming from a guy who’s allowed to pass judgment on the people *we’re* fucking?” Sage laces his fingers together and wraps them around the back of his head. “Don’t think I haven’t heard what’s going on through our thin walls.”

“Stop fucking listening then.”

I’m tempted to bash that into his skull because the fact that he’s heard Fel’s screams as she comes on my cock gives me tunnel vision. If he weren’t my best friend, I’d consider slicing his ears off. And until I figure out what I’m supposed to do about that irrational thought, I might have to duct tape her mouth while we fuck from now on, so she keeps her screams to herself.

*Not a bad idea actually.*

The thought of Fel bound and completely at my mercy has my dick twitching. She's all sass in public, but when it's just the two of us, she's practically begging to submit to me.

“We talking about the redhead Jude's obsessed with?” Crew walks into the room and snatches the joint out of Echo's hand. He never calls Fel by her name—or any woman by their name for that matter—because then they might think he gives a shit. “You're hitting that, right? Redheads are fucking freaky.”

My hands clench and my whole body tenses because I don't need him thinking about how Fel fucks—freaky or not.

She's the only girl who's ever made me jealous. *Possessive*. Out of my fucking mind.

While I spent my entire life before and after her not giving a shit about anyone other than myself, all it took was her walking back into my life for her to completely absorb me.

“You're all pigs.” Echo frowns, her gaze darting between us. She taps her heels on the desk with each kick of her legs, knocking at my nerves. You'd think getting high would chill Echo out, but if anything, it riles her up.

“What happened to you?” Sage ignores Echo's comment, looking up from his phone long enough to notice the bruising on Crew's face.

Crew drops onto the couch in the office and kicks his feet up on the armrest. “Rough night.”

“Fucking or fighting?”

He tips his head to us and grins. “Both?”

“What kind of chicks are you fucking to leave you beat up like that? No thanks.”

“This was the fighting,” He waves at his black eyes. “The claw marks down my back on the other hand...”

“On that note—” Echo hops off the desk and heads to the door. “I’m going to do some *actual work* while you guys measure your dicks.”

“Whatever you have to think about with your fingers inside you,” Crew yells to her retreating back.

One of these days the two of them are going to kill each other or finally fuck. At least, I hope they do before they drive the rest of us insane.

“Echo needs to get laid.” Crew snorts, throwing an arm over his eyes.

“You offering to be the sacrificial lamb?” Sage laughs.

Crew shakes his head. “Fuck no. Good luck to whoever taps that.”

“Thought she was seeing your brother?”

“The only thing he’s fucking is his hand while he jacks off to Jesus.” Crew laughs. “Saving himself for marriage or whatever shit the church has brainwashed him with this week.”

Crew and his brother, Rhett, are opposites in every way, which made it even more shocking when Echo started dating

Rhett. She and Crew might not get along, but on the outside, they seem to have more in common.

Why she's seeing some guy who's practically married to the congregation is confusing as fuck.

"So when are you bringing the redhead out to party with us?" Crew asks, swinging his legs over the side of the couch and sitting up.

"Never."

"Come on." He leans forward, his eyes glimmering with whatever sadistic thoughts are running through his head. "Scared she can't hang?"

She's not the one I'm worried about. Fel's a magnet for danger, so she's learned how to be resilient. *She* isn't the problem. It's what I'll do if anyone dares to so much as lay a hand on her that is. These guys might be my best friends, but one wrong look in her direction and I can't trust that I won't skin them alive for simply thinking about it.

"Scared one of us will steal your girl, Jude?" Sage joins in on taunting me from his chair, sharing a look with Crew.

"You two are the least of my worries."

"I don't know..." Crew stretches his arms out across the back of the couch. "I could show her a whole new world."

"She's not into your sick shit."

"At least now he's admitting to fucking her, otherwise how would he know?" Sage laughs.

They're pissing me off just for the reaction.

“Fuck off.”

“Whatever man.” Sage leans forward, facing me. “Doesn't matter anyway. We've got Echo's birthday party tonight at Incinerate. Remember?”

*Fuck.* “No.”

“Well, she invited Fel.”

“When?”

Sage shrugs. “Beats me. Echo just said Fel was coming, and I figured you knew. So much for keeping her away.”

I make a mental note to remind Fel not to keep things from me, even if I have to brand it into her skin. There's no way it slipped her mind because Fel plans shit weeks ahead. Which means only one thing—she's not sure how I'll react to her accepting the invitation, and she hid it on purpose.

It would be smart if I wasn't going to figure it out sooner or later. Fel knows the idea of her getting friendly with anyone at the shop makes my temples throb—even Echo.

Maren's a bad enough influence on her, dragging her to fight nights and planting seeds about me in her head. But Echo is worse. She comes from our world. LA streets are deeply ingrained in her. And even if she seems sweet on the outside, there's a much harder core underneath.

“So you're coming then?” Crew asks, smirking.

I'm tempted to punch him, but he'd probably just enjoy it.



Sick fuck.

“Apparently.”

Incinerate isn't half bad, but I'd rather spend the evening between Fel's legs.

“Good.” Crew stands up and stretches his arms. “Can't wait to get some more time with your little *friend* to see what's got you so whipped.”

“Look at her wrong, and I'll slit your throat.” My eyes are fixed on Crew as he stands and heads to the door.

Sage might make a few comments to piss me off, but he wouldn't actually try anything. Crew, on the other hand, is unpredictable, so I wouldn't put it past him.

“Don't doubt it.” Crew smirks, dipping out of the room.

“Fuck, dude.” Sage chuckles. “You're really into that chick.”

*Into her* doesn't really capture it. Obsessed, addicted. I'm tempted to cut us both open so we can climb inside each other.

*It's a good thing no one can read my mind.*

“I'm watching out for her.” It's not a lie, even if it's also not the full truth.

Sage stands up and walks over to the desk, knocking on it once. “Sure you are.”

I shrug, trying to play it off.

“Avoid talking about your shit all you want, you'll tell me eventually.” Sage reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. “Besides, I got you something.”

“This what I was asking about?”

Sage nods. “But you’re probably not going to like it.”

“Didn’t think I would.”

I might not talk to Sage about all the deep, dark details of my past with Fel, but I needed information only his connections could provide. People who aren’t scared to dig into illegal places to obtain information.

After my conversation with Fel’s grandfather at the gala, I was certain there was more I was missing. Dots I needed to connect to understand what he meant when he said I didn’t know the whole truth back then. So I asked Sage for a favor.

Sage might not be a patched member of the Twisted Kings Motorcycle Club, but he’s close enough with a few of them to tap their connections.

Sage drops the folded piece of paper onto the desk.

“Thanks, man.” I pick it up and slip it into my pocket.

I could open it right now and get my answers, but I’ve already overshared by asking him to look into this.

Sage nods, turning to leave, but as he does, he almost runs into Echo popping through the doorway.

“Jude—” She runs square into Sage.

He grabs her shoulders and practically picks her small frame up as he catches her.

“You invited Fel to your party?”

It's official, I'm unhinged because I don't care what she has to say, Fel is all I can think about.

Echo's mouth snaps shut, and her eyebrows pinch at my sudden question. "Well, yeah. She's my friend."

"No, she's not."

Echo crosses her arms over her chest and her eyes narrow. The sweet façade she presents slips away to the darkness underneath. Sage must also sense it because he walks away laughing and shaking his head.

"Yes, she is." Echo faces off with me.

I can't help but smirk. It's cute she thinks she's tough.

"We'll see."

The darkest smirk climbs her cheeks, and I've got to give her credit for the confidence she musters when she aims for it.

"Yes, we will."

Spinning on her heels, she starts to leave but pauses with a hand on the doorframe before disappearing. She turns her head to the side and taps her finger on her bottom lip. "Oh, almost forgot why I came in here. My *friend's* asking for you."

"Fel?"

"That's the one."

I stand up, irritated she's wasted my time. "Where is she?"

"Don't worry." Echo rolls her eyes, but there's a touch of sick amusement in her expression. "Crew's keeping her company."

Echo turns and leaves, knowing exactly what she just did. The little traitor isn't sweet at all. She's the devil.

"Damn it." I make my way to the front of the shop.

Why I consider these people my friends baffles me in moments like this. Especially considering we spend almost all our time together at this shop and still know barely anything about each other's pasts or personal lives.

When I reach the lobby, the sight of Fel kicks me in the chest. Her ripped jeans and black tank top show off her smooth, freckled skin. Her high ponytail swishes and her bracelets rattle as she talks with her hands, and her rings sparkle with the sun beaming through the windows. With barely any makeup, the speckled galaxy on her cheeks is on full display.

Infinite.

A black hole for my soul.

Her sweet smile absorbs me.

It's enough to make any man want a piece of her. Including Crew, who's sitting behind the front desk with his feet kicked up and laughing at whatever she just said.

He spots me walking into the lobby before she does but doesn't drop his feet or pull away. Instead, he leans back further and shoots me a wink just to piss me off.

I'm tempted to kick the chair out from under him, but somehow, I manage to keep my cool. Fel already thinks I'm unhinged without me throwing fuel on that fire right now. So

while I have no problem showing her how far I'm willing to take my possessiveness, that will be later between my sheets.

When she finally catches sight of me walking up, she pops upright and straightens the bottom hem of her tank top. It's irritating that she thinks she needs to be perfectly presentable, even for me. But it's been bred into her for her entire life.

"Wasn't expecting to see you."

"I'm here for my appointment." She shimmies her shoulders with a feisty little smirk.

"Your what?"

Fel presses close. Her perfect tits pushing against my chest, and she has to tip her neck all the way back to look up at me.

"My appointment," she repeats, biting her lip. "I'm your ten-thirty."

My ten-thirty was a name I didn't recognize, which means she used a fake name to surprise me. Devious little tricks she thinks I'll let her get away with. Lucky for her, right now, I'm too curious not to.

"My ten-thirty?" I tip her chin up to me.

Fel lifts onto her toes until her lips are barely brushing mine. "I want you to pierce me, Jude."

One sentence and any frustration from today disappears for a girl who knows exactly what to do and say to make me bend to her will.



# Fel

THE SECOND I CLOSE the door to Jude's room at the shop, he spins me around and slams my back against it.

There's something about being pinned between him and anything. No mercy as his body presses firmly against mine. My legs shake, and his knee between my legs is all that holds me upright.

Jude exudes control without needing to demand it. He wields it in every action. Every glance.

For him, I'm frantic. And fantasies I should be ashamed of are at my grasp.

No matter how many threats Jude issues or how ruthless he fucks me, I trust him to know what I need more than I trust myself. His love is pain. Scalding to the touch. Burning a hole through me.

"Don't tease me, Red." He tips my chin up with his finger and thumb, tugging my bottom lip out from between my teeth.

For years it bothered me when he used that nickname because it walked the line between a tease and a threat. But every time he uses it lately, his eyes shimmer.

I swallow thickly as my tongue swells.

“I’m not teasing.” I reach for his wrist and pull his hand from my chin, dragging it down my throat and chest, until his fingers graze my nipple. “I want you to do it.”

A whisper. A dirty confession.

I’ve never considered getting anything pierced apart from my ears. But something about knowing Jude will be the one to do it—that he *wants* to do it—makes me anxious to let him drive himself into me in every way possible.

He narrows his gaze, playing with his tongue piercing and clicking it against the back of his teeth as he thinks it over. He pauses long enough for me to wonder if he’s waiting for me to back out.

I won’t.

I’ll let him break me before I surrender. There’s only one person with the ability to push me past my survival instincts, and it’s Jude Carlisle.

I’m never coming up for air again.

“Well then, Red.” He steps back, likely realizing I’m not going to back down. “By all means... lose the top and sit on my throne.”



Blunt. Crude. His pupils are wide, but his eyes are narrowed in a dare.

I reach for the hem of my tank top and strip it off, appreciating how his gaze immediately drops to my breasts. His focus honed in as he watches me brush past him, to the chair in the center of the room.

Cool leather sticks to my back. The strong scent of bleach and cleaning products stings my nose.

“You have perfect tits already.” Jude circles me slowly, walking over to a cabinet in the corner and gathering what he needs. “But I’m going to enjoy marking them.”

I have no doubt he’s telling the truth. Jude wants to brand me—hurt me. He wants to do every dirty, wrong thing I’ll allow. The same way I want him to be the one to do it.

“I assume you’ve already picked out your jewelry?” He doesn’t look at me as he grabs something else from a drawer.

I dig a plastic baggie out of my pocket.

Two small, simple barbells, except one has a green gem on one of the ends.

When he reaches for them and I hand them over, the victorious smirk that climbs his cheeks might as well be a reward. I chose them specifically for him. Green is his color.

Green eyes.

Green jealousy that burned hot when it shouldn’t.

Envy for anyone who had him when he couldn’t be mine.

All things eating away at me slowly. So I surrounded myself in green like injecting the poison would make me immune eventually. Green curtains in my room, green opal necklace around my neck, green peacock feathers in the pages of my books. Green, I'd never escape, so I stopped trying.

Jude takes the barbells out of the package and drops them onto the tray.

My heart is racing as he snaps his gloves into place, sterilizing the barbells first, then the needle, as I sit exposed, waiting for him.

“Is this how it always is?” I can't help but ask since I've been sitting in the chair topless. My eyes drop to my bare chest, and his follow.

Once more the green monster inside me makes an appearance at the thought of how many women he's pierced in places I don't want to think about—even if it's his profession.

Jude smirks. “No, I just wanted to stare at your tits. Normally you'd keep the shirt on until right before we got started.”

It takes me a moment to digest his statement. “And... do you like it?”

He pauses with the sterilized needle in hand, glancing over at me. At the blush spreading my neck like wildfire, revealing all my embarrassment. It's impossible to hide when my skin reveals my every emotion.

“I like piercing people if that’s what you’re asking.” His gaze snaps back to mine. “But that’s all it is. When I pierce someone, it’s body decoration. Nothing more.”

He sets down the needle and grabs a bottle of sterilizing fluid and a swab, walking over to me. He’s moving in slow motion—or maybe it’s my imagination.

“But if you’re asking if I *like* piercing people the same way I’m going to enjoy doing this to you—then no way in fucking hell.” He leans in and places the swab beneath my nipple to catch the sterilizing fluid as he starts to pour it over me.

The sudden chill pebbles my nipples.

He wipes it clean and moves to the other. “Want to know how much I’m going to enjoy making you hurt for me, Red?”

I bite my lip, fighting back a smile as I nod.

He sets down the bottle and leans in close. “Then feel for yourself.”

He presses his hips closer as his mouth drags over the shell of my ear. His tongue runs a small circle on my lobe before he plants a kiss right beneath it.

Lifting my hand, I skate my fingers up his thigh until I’m grazing the bulge beneath his jeans.

“That’s it.” Jude grabs my wrist with his gloved hand and flattens my palm over him, forcing me to rub up and down his length. He’s hard as steel and my cheeks are on fire. “Be a good girl for me now, and tonight I’ll show you just how much I enjoyed this.”

He steps back and my hand falls, as he denies me what I'm desperate for.

I'd let him bend me over in this chair and fuck me while he drives metal through my skin, but he's irritatingly professional.

*How is that even hotter?*

His gaze moves to the rosy blush I feel coating my cheeks, but he doesn't act on it. He walks back over to the counter and snaps his gloves off to replace them with a sterile set.

My nerves skitter to the surface as the latex rolls down his hands, and I remember what he's about to do.

Am I really doing this?

I'm sure there are easier—less painful ways to test my limits. Metal through flesh is extreme and semi-permanent.

As if Jude reads my hesitation, he pauses.

“It's going to sting.” He looks down at my nipples, and I realize I've crossed my arms over my stomach. “You still sure you want to do this?”

“I'm sure.”

If he can survive a ladder of barbells on the underside of his dick, then I can manage two nipples.

*I think.*

Jude pulls out a marker and places dots on the spots he's going to drive the needle through. Anxiety and anticipation battle inside me as goosebumps prickle my arms. Each graze

of his gloved hands on my skin is a terrifying reminder of what's about to happen, while also sending shivers straight between my legs.

Once Jude is satisfied with the marks, he grabs the needle and holds it up between us. His finger and thumb clamp over one nipple and he tugs it into place. It would feel good if I didn't know what was coming.

He lines the needle up. "Breathe for me, Felicity."

I dig my nails into the leather armrests, and on my exhale, he pushes the needle through. It burns like something hot biting straight through my flesh, but I manage not to flinch or cry. Even as it starts to sting behind my eyes.

"Good girl." His praise is strangely calming as he places the barbell on the needle and pulls it back through.

There's barely a pause before he moves to the next one.

Knowing how it felt the first time should make the second one more bearable. But if anything, it hurts more. Or maybe it's that the first nipple's still throbbing as he drives the other in.

"All done." Jude sets everything aside and walks the tray back to the counter, slipping off his gloves. When he turns to face me, a feral look sweeps his face as he looks me over. "A true work of art."

I didn't do this for him. He might have given me the idea, and I might have been aware he was already considering it, but this was my own way of pushing my personal limits. Even so,

the appreciation in Jude's eyes as he stares at my chest wells in the deepest pit of my belly, and I'd love to read every dirty thought that just crossed his mind.

But before I can ask, Jude's professional mask slips back into place. He places two strips over my nipples to protect them. It doesn't dull the throbbing, but it dulls the sensation of my tank top rubbing against them as I slip back into it.

"Keep those on until I come over later to help you clean them."

I nod, sliding to the edge of the leather chair. "So I'll see you later then?"

*Did that sound desperate?*

*Do I care?*

"Mm-hmm," he hums, standing up. "Speaking of, what's this I hear about you going to Echo's party tonight?"

"It's her birthday." I shrug. "She invited me."

I try to play coy even if he sees straight through it.

I didn't keep the fact that I'm going from Jude on purpose. Eventually, he was bound to find out. But when Echo asked me, she said he was already going. And I couldn't help the green monster that reared its ugly head when I realized he hadn't asked me to join him himself.

We've spent most of the past week together. Yet, he didn't care to invite me to Echo's party. I wasn't sure if it slipped his mind or if he did it on purpose, but it hurt.

I'm irrational.

He twists my thoughts until they're spun around.

So I kept quiet.

Although, the coolness in his tone has me questioning if that was a good idea.

"Why don't you want me hanging out with Echo?" I veer the subject from the fact that I didn't say anything.

"She's not the kind of person you need to be hanging out with."

"You mean people like you?"

"Exactly."

Like he's the one who gets to decide that.

"You don't make all the rules, Jude. What if I want to have a little fun. I mean... nipple piercings. LA clubs. Maybe I need a few experiences."

Jude glances up from wiping down the counter at my comment. I'm being a brat. I'm pushing him just to piss him off. And I love that I can.

"Anyone else sees those barbells, and they'll pay in blood." He stalks over to me and tips my chin up. "I fucking promise."

His possessiveness should be a red flag. Or, at least, a warning sign. Instead, it's a huge turn-on.

"So you get to tell me what to do now?" I don't back down, enjoying his little show of claiming me.

“Exactly.”

“Fuck you, Jude.”

I try to move past him, but he grips my arm and holds me in place, tangling his fingers through the hair at the back of my head.

“Is that an offer or a threat?” He grips tighter. “Because I have no problem making you scream for everyone in the shop to hear if you force my hand. So tell me, Fel, do you want to say that again?”

I grit my teeth because I really do, but my nipples are sore, and I’m not sure I could handle whatever punishment he’d throw at me right now. So instead, I shake my head.

“Good.” He grazes a hand over my cheek, his tough exterior faltering as he stares into my eyes.

They burn, and with each blink they’re getting glossy. Because as tough as I try to be around him, I can’t help that I fall apart.

“Talk to me, Fel.” His tone is softer with the change in my demeanor. His fingers graze my cheek, and I hate how perceptive he is. “What’s the real issue?”

“You touch me like you own me.” The words shake on their way out. “And maybe you do, and always have. But where does that leave me with you?”

His eyebrows pinch. “What about me?”



“You know I’m yours. You point it out every chance you get. But how is that fair when you still get to be everyone else’s?” I should shut up now, but the words spill from my lips, and I can’t stop them. “You’ve still got condoms under your sink. I’m not an idiot. I know you only ever tell me half of anything. So how many other women are you with while we’re fucking?”

Jude smirks, dropping his chin and shaking his head, which makes my stomach curl.

“I’m not *fucking* you.” There’s an icy, hard undertone to his voice. Almost like the thought of it sickens him.

“Okay, well you *were*. Past tense then. At least now I know where you stand.” I try to pull away, but he doesn’t let me.

“Nothing is ever past tense with you.” His hands ball into fists and he presses them to the wall on either side of me, locking me in. “What I’m saying, *Felicity*, is that we aren’t *just fucking*. The moment you let me sink into your pussy, you became mine. Your orgasms, your mouth, your fucking soul. You handed yourself over to me whether you like it or not. So whatever makes you think I’d give a fuck about anyone else when I have you...”

He grabs my cheeks in his hands and forces my stare to focus only on him—the center of the universe.

“You have been, are, and always will be the only person on this entire planet to ever matter to me. Something I apparently need to prove more than I already have. Toss the condoms in

the trash for all I care because I can guarantee using them was not worth it compared to having you.”

I blink, and a tear rolls down my cheek.

Jude brushes it away with his thumb. It’s gentle, sweet. All things he rarely is. Like the sides of him he only shows to me, and even then, it’s fleeting.

Even so, I can’t help that I soak it in for every last drop.

“What if this can’t last?” My fears bubble to the surface as his thumb grazes back and forth. I know better than to trust this can actually be something, when I’ve seen the outcome play out in front of me once before. “What if this is only temporary?”

“Then to the end we go.” Jude rakes his fingers into my hair, pulling it away from my face as he kisses my tear-stained cheek. “For you, I’m always prepared to go to the end.”

I fall against his chest, into his arms. Needing him unlike I’ve ever needed anything.

“Promise?” I bury my face and breathe him in.

I’m asking him for something he’ll likely break, but I can’t help myself.

“I’d follow you to my own damnation.” He kisses the top of my head. “If this were a fairytale, like the ones you’re always reading, I’d follow you to the end.”

“Does that make you the huntsman or the wolf?”

He breathes out a chuckle that rustles my hair, before kissing the top of my head. “Neither. I’m the forest, and you’re never escaping me, Red.”



*The door to my room swings open, and Jude steps inside. His hair is a mess, and I’m not sure if it’s from football or some girl he’s been rolling around with.*

*A familiar knot tightens in my gut, even if it’s pathetic.*

*“Where have you been?” I watch him circle my room from the corner of my eye, but don’t dare look up from my book to face him.*

*Jude walks over and drops down onto my bed next to me. “Out.”*

*“Your dad’s looking for you.”*

*“He knew where I was.”*

*Finally, I do meet Jude’s emerald gaze. “Then why was he waiting in my room to ask me where you were?”*

*“No clue.” His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t let me in on whatever he’s thinking. “What are you reading?”*

*“None of your business.” I clap the book shut as he tries to peek over my shoulder at the page.*

*“That won’t stop me, Fel.” If anything, my immediate defense lit a challenge.*

*I'm about to pull the book away, but Jude hops up and pins me down, straddling my waist with his strong legs, sitting on top of me. He snatches it straight out of my hands, while I try to claw at him to get it back.*

*His legs are too strong and his arms too long for me to stand a chance. Not that it's ever stopped me from at least putting up a fight.*

*"Nice try, sis."*

*"Don't call me that." I cross my arms over my chest.*

*Our parents have been married for only a few months, and already I'm counting down the days until I can disappear to college. Until I'm no longer a room away from a boy I'm not supposed to be thinking about as anything more than family.*

*"What should I call you?" he asks, flipping the book open to the page I was on. "Red?"*

*"You know I hate that." I roll my eyes. "You would think guys could be a little more creative."*

*"They could. I've thought of a hundred creative nicknames for you. But you might not like them any more than that one."*

*"Like what?"*

*Jude tears his gaze from the book and his opal-green eyes nearly suffocate me. He presses closer, so he's hovering his mouth beside my ear.*

*"Nothing good... sis."*

*A bubble of rage pops, and I push at his chest, trying once more to grab the book, but he laughs and keeps it away.*

*“What is this anyway?” He skims the page with his finger, hovering as he starts to read it. “Damian drags his hand up her stomach, over her chest. Drawing a path of fire he cools with his tongue—”*

*“Jude, don’t.”*

*“You’re the one reading it.”*

*“Not out loud.”*

*Jude ignores my irritation, returning to the page. “His finger and thumb trace her nipple, sending heat waves through her. Pressure building and begging for release. And when he clamps his mouth over—”*

*Snatching the book from his hands, I toss it across the room before he can stop me.*

*“I was reading that.” Jude leans forward, still sitting on top of me, so his fists are on either side of my head.*

*I swat at his chest. “You’re just making fun of me.”*

*“I don’t know, it was pretty entertaining.” He leans in closer. “Is that what you sit in here and think about, Red?”*

*“I told you I don’t like that nickname.”*

*“Too bad, I do.”*

*“You’re such an ass.”*

*“You like that about me.” He reaches up and brushes my hair off my face, trailing his hand slowly down my throat, until*

*a single finger trails down the center of my chest, pausing between my breasts. Feather-light, and still managing to send shockwaves through me.*

*His touch shouldn't feel this good when he's my stepbrother.*

*"Answer my question." He locks gazes. "Are you a freaky girl under this polished exterior?"*

*My heart races, and I swear he looks like he wants to lean in, even if he shouldn't. And I want him to. I want to go back to the beginning and take him up on whatever we could have been before our parents met.*

*I'd ruin myself if it was for him.*

*Instead of waiting for my answer, Jude pulls back, lifting off me and hopping off the bed. And I try to ignore that I can't breathe as he creates more distance. Because the look in his eyes says I'm not the only one who was thinking things I shouldn't.*

*Too bad control is something Jude's a master of.*

*I watch him walk to the door, but as he reaches it, he pauses, planting a hand on the frame to look back at me.*

*"Hey, Fel?"*

*"Yeah?" I hope it doesn't come out as choked as it feels.*

*"Stay away from Dad when I'm not around, all right?"*

*My eyebrows pinch. "Why?"*

*"Just—" He rakes his fingers through his short hair. The sandy brown is streaked with golden strands from the summer*

*sun. "Please."*

*I nod, not sure what I'm agreeing to, but seeing in his eyes he needs it.*

*Jude turns the handle, but just as he's about to leave, screaming comes from down the hall. His face pinches and my stomach sinks.*

*Our parents are fighting again, not that either of us knows why.*

*I wait for Jude to leave me alone to listen to the chorus of screams through the walls, but he closes the door instead, walking back over to the bed and dropping onto it beside me.*

*He pulls a book off my nightstand and hands it to me.*

*"Read to me, Fel." He crosses his arms over his chest and closes his eyes.*

*I'm not sure if it's for me or him, and it doesn't matter. Jude is safety, while our world is chaos. So I open the book and start at the beginning.*





## Jude

TAPPING MY GLASS ON the countertop once, I draw it to my lips and drain the whiskey down my throat. Anything to take the edge off the fact that Fel's joining my friends at Incinerate tonight. She might think it sounds exciting, but it's nothing like the posh clubs she's probably used to. Turn down the wrong hall and you'll catch someone fucking or sticking a needle in their arm.

Down the rabbit hole we continue to go.

It's my fault. I should have seen it coming.

From the moment she stepped foot in Twisted Roses, there was no going back. I might have scared her away at first by being a dick and pissing her off after fight night. But she was back in my life. *Back in my fucking veins*. All roads led to me dragging her into my world of ink and blood.

Fel has a vague idea of the person I've become, but she's still only seen the surface. After I left my old life behind and met Sage and the guys, I discovered a world where embracing

your darkness is encouraged instead of suppressed. And even if I didn't get in deep with Sage's buddies in the Twisted Kings MC, it doesn't mean I haven't done shit that would make Fel think I'm more unhinged than she already does.

My attempts to drown out the memory of her led me down dark paths. Blood, rage. Anything to escape the fact that I'd left all the good in my life behind.

I should have kept it that way.

It would have been for her own good.

At least, that's what I thought.

The piece of paper Sage handed me in the office earlier burns a hole in my pocket. Information confirming Fel's been swimming in a sea of piranhas.

What does it say if I'm the safest option for her right now? Because I'm not much better for her than they are.

Not that she sees it.

Today at the shop, her eyes spoke volumes. While she likes to act tough around me, her cool exterior melted from the adrenaline rush of being pierced. She let out every hint of insecurity I'm sure she's been burying.

It doesn't matter how hard I fuck her or how tight I hold her, there's a space between us she can't trust bridging because I've left her once, and she thinks I'll do it again. So she cloaks that fear in concerns about me fucking other women—and maybe it is something on her mind—but if she could only read the thoughts in my head she'd have known better.

I've lived my life trying to get over her, just as she's done with me. We were young and confused, and I was stupid enough to allow us to be apart for a decade.

Not anymore.

Felicity Alcott is my destiny, and the moment I accepted that, the truth consumed me.

*To the end we go.*

I don't know if she's ready to live up to what that actually means, *but I am.*

Crew pours another round of shots for him, Sage, and me. I'm not sure why he's here. All he's going to do is piss Echo off. But maybe that's his plan. I wouldn't put it past him to ruin her birthday just for the fun of it. If anything, getting under her skin is his favorite hobby.

A few knocks come at the door before it swings open. This apartment might be mine and Sage's place, but the whole shop treats it like their home away from home. Crew and Echo both have keys and crash on the couch when they need to.

Echo walks in first. Her half-black, half-white hair is stick-straight around her shoulders tonight, and she's wearing a black leather jumpsuit that would be more fitting for a BDSM club than Incinerate. Her red heels bring her tiny self to almost average height, and she's smiling until her gaze lands on Crew.

Rhett is noticeably missing from her side. Partying at a club is probably something he sees as beneath him, even if it's his girlfriend's birthday.

Doesn't matter. Because any other thought leaves me when I see the flash of red hair behind Echo. A sight that drowns out whatever jokes Crew and Sage are making about Echo's over-the-top outfit.

All I see is *her*.

Fel has her arm linked through Maren's, and she's smiling as her gaze locks on mine. Blue pools that used to make me believe if I swam in them long enough, I'd find the other side. No such luck.

She's sparkling in a short dress that's covered in rainbow-colored gems. It's tight around her chest and dips low between her pierced tits. I love that the stones hide the barbells, making them a secret just between the two of us.

The dress hugs her waist before it flows out, swishing where it hits her mid-thigh. And her hair's in big waves with a braided piece holding it off her face.

She looks too damn sweet for where we're going. Too polished for this part of the city. Too bright to be allowed in my shadows.

But I'll take her there anyway because I'm sick and can't let her go.

She and Maren walk over, and I'm sure her friend's tight white dress should be appealing, but nothing compares to Felicity Alcott making a statement.

Maren whispers something in Fel's ear, before breaking off and following Echo to join in on the next round of shots.

“You want me to murder someone tonight, Red?”

She stops in front of me with a smile she tries to play off as coy, but she knows what she’s doing. She’s purposely made herself a glittering beacon for attention, and fuck if I’m not drawn in.

Her wrists are covered in bangles and bracelets, and as usual, her fingers are decorated in a variety of rings. She’s sparkling—bright—all good things I should have either taken when I belonged in that world or left behind.

“Do you like the dress?” She avoids my question entirely and does a little spin that kicks up the fabric around her thighs.

I grab onto her waist and pull her back to my chest. “Fel...” her name comes out as a warning as my hand trails down her stomach.

“Yes, Jude?” There’s playfulness in her tone.

“Don’t tease me unless you want to be walking around all night with my cum dripping out of your pretty little pussy.” My body blocks her from the view of the chaos unfolding behind us, so I drag my hand down and pull up her dress in the front. Just enough to rub my fingers along her.

The lace is already soaked, and I love that my girl gets wet at the thought of me filling her up.

*My girl?*

Fuck. Where did that come from?

“There are people in the room.” She swallows a moan as I run my fingers over her again.

“Exactly.” I smooth her dress back down and wrap my arms around her waist once more, dipping my mouth close to her ear. “And I’ll fuck you in front of them just to prove you’re mine if I need to.”

It’s a lie, there’s no way I’d let them see her like that. She’s *mine*. But I’ll let her think I’ll make good on my threat because the lengths I’d actually go to in order to claim her are much darker.

Fel tips her head back against my chest and relaxes in my arms. Trusting me like she shouldn’t.

“Maybe we should have stayed in.” She closes her eyes on a sigh, as she rests her arms over where mine are wrapped around her waist.

“We should have.” Hence why I suggested it. “But you wanted to party, Red. And even if I have to carve the eyes out of every man who dares look at you tonight, we’re going to do just that. You’re mine, and it’s time they know it.”

She opens her eyes and blinks up at me. The softness in her gaze is disarming.

There’s a reason I’m usually rough and unwavering with her. Because it’s easier to keep my guard up when I always hold her just a fraction away. If I fuck her like I’m breaking her, I don’t have to accept the fact that she’s actually the one destroying me.

In my arms, looking into my eyes, it's what she does. She's the bulldozer that slammed into my life the moment I first laid eyes on her. She's the only home my dark heart has ever known. She's the only one who has truly seen me.

She knows my sickest, bloodiest secrets. Still, she lets me hold her in my arms like her trust in me isn't shattering my life to pieces.

She's controlled my mind and body since the moment I met her. One flick of her deep blue eyes over the rim of her book in that library, and I would have given her anything.

*I did.*

I was her knight in shining armor in all the ways she loves and hates.

"You two lovebirds going to take a shot with us before we leave?" Sage taunts from behind me.

Fel tenses at his words, so I let her go.

Always so close and so far. A forest of knots twists inside me.

*Destiny just out of reach.*

If I've learned one thing about fate, it's that good things don't last.

"One more." I lace my fingers through Fel's and lead her over to the counter.

Echo and Maren are deep in conversation as Crew slides fresh shots in my direction.

Part of me wants to get fucked-up to take the edge off. But I can't let my guard down tonight. Not with Fel standing next to me looking so perfect and breakable.

She holds her glass out, and I tap mine against it, slamming it to the counter once before draining it down my throat. A ritual I wish meant more than this night is going to turn to shit. But that's all Incinerate promises. Good times. Bad people. Worse decisions.

Fel winces at the burn of the alcohol as she swallows it down, and it's so fucking sweet. She's so fucking innocent. I want to devour her.

She sets her glass beside mine on the counter, pursing her lips at the taste lingering on her tongue. But when she catches me staring, the smile that crosses her face is so genuine, it lances my chest.

The alcohol's already moving through her system, and she's feeling good about tonight—carefree.

Because she doesn't know what I do.

Eleven years ago was only the beginning. The worst is yet to come.





# Fel

WALKING INTO INCINERATE IS a little like walking through the gates of hell. A flood of heat and smoke hit us the moment we step inside. A mass of gyrating bodies filling every inch of the dance floor. Recklessness and depravity bleeding from the walls.

Incinerate might sit right next door to Twisted Roses, but it's an alternate universe of energy, throbbing to the heartbeat of the bass. One step through the doors and it's clear why Jude sounded like he wanted to murder Echo for inviting me.

My disco ball dress puts me on display while my inexperience draws out my nerves. Somehow, even the grit and danger of downtown LA are further away in here. Stepping directly through the teeth of the beast instead, begging him to swallow me whole.

Women in pasties dance in cages. A couple fucks in a nearby booth.

Pill popping. Cash. Drugs.

*What was I thinking?*

I'm prepared to be dragged straight to the center of the madness, but a bouncer guides us to a staircase at the side of the club. It's dark and narrow, smelling of sweat and weed. Jude tightens his grip on my hand with each step, zipping me tight to his side as we make our way up.

At the top, I'm met with what must be the VIP section because it's less crowded with large booths scattered throughout. The glamor of escaping downstairs is a relief, even if my shoes stick to the floor with each step.

We're led to a booth in the corner, where a waitress wearing a fishnet bodysuit and black lace underwear walks past me, smirking at my dress.

"Here you are." The bouncer waves an arm out to the booth. "Happy birthday, Echo."

He turns to her and reaches for her hand, kissing the back of it. Crew knocks past them, which pulls them apart, sliding into the booth first, and grabbing a bottle of something purple that he starts drinking like water. Echo has mentioned to me she's dating his brother, but I can't read whether it's protectiveness or irritation darkening Crew's gaze as he watches the bouncer stare at Echo's ass as he disappears.

Echo slides down next to Crew, and she mouths something that looks like, "Slow down," but he doesn't listen.

Jude slides in next, pulling me onto his lap and wrapping his arms around my waist as I sink against him.

“You’re being awfully sweet tonight. It’s not like you.”

“I’m sweet.” He smirks.

Except, he’s not. Jude’s love language is being rough, controlling, demanding, sometimes even a little mean. He’s protective over things he values, which makes him anything but sweet when it comes to me.

But I let it go because even if I don’t understand it, his hard demeanor is one of the many things that draws me to him.

The rest of the group starts pouring more shots, while Jude is unusually quiet. Something is clearly on his mind tonight, but when I asked him about it on our walk over here, he refused to talk.

Steel walls covered in vines there’s no cutting through.

He plants a tattooed hand on my thigh and rubs it up and down, teasing the hem of my dress, but not pushing for more. Threats he’d do anything inappropriate to me in front of others to simply claim what’s his are just that. He forgets I know him. He likes me all to himself.

The club throbs. There’s a blue haze that slowly melts from purple to green to red. Lights strobe and the bass rattles my ribs.

“The guys really killed it with this one,” Sage shouts over the music.

Jude nods. “Sure fucking did.”

“What guys?” I face Jude.

“Enemy Muse. This is from their latest album.”

Sometimes I forget how popular Twisted Roses is, and that it’s not unusual for celebrities and rock stars to walk in and get work done. But the mention of the biggest rock band in the country catches me off guard.

“What?” Jude pulls me closer.

“I just can’t believe you know Sebastian Kane.”

“He’s a friend.” Jude squeezes me tighter. “So please tell me you don’t have a crush on him because I’d hate to have to do something about it.”

“Very funny.” I wrap my arms around Jude’s shoulders and seal our bodies together.

My nipples are still sore from earlier, and for some reason, I love the reminder—the sharp sting of pain from what I let him do. A sensation only Jude can give.

“He’s not you,” I whisper in his ear.

And I mean it. Celebrities, other men. No one is, or could be, Jude Carlisle.

Jude runs his fingers through my hair and brushes it off my shoulder, holding me and looking me in the eyes. I try not to sink too far into this moment, but I can’t help myself.

This man in my grasp was always off limits. *Forbidden*. Torturing me at the sight of him because not being able to have him didn’t prevent me from craving it. Never thinking it could actually be possible.

One kiss pushed me under and now I refuse to come up for air.

A waitress drops off a round of shots, and I don't miss that her eyes linger on Jude a moment too long. He's playing with his tongue piercing like he does when he's lost in thought, and her cheeks flush pink at the sight of him clenching it between his teeth.

She's beautiful—like Brea and every other girl who can't tear their gaze off him. And I wonder if he meant what he said to me at the shop earlier when he told me he didn't need anyone more than me.

I'm nothing more than a girl with little direction blindly chasing my dreams. Haunted by a dead mother and a closet full of skeletons. Hoping Jude can live among them when years ago it was impossible for him to stay.

The waitress disappears—not that he seemed to notice. Jude hugs me tighter, and I can't help but wince at the pressure it puts on my nipples.

“Sore?”

The dark gleam in his eyes says he's satisfied with himself for inflicting a little pain.

“Yes.”

He squeezes me again, and even though pulsing heat radiates through me, I want more.

“Do you like it when I hurt you?” He must notice how every bit of pressure makes my eyes flutter and my thighs clench

around his tattooed fingers.

“Sometimes.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Jude shakes his head and dips his mouth by my ear, planting a kiss behind it, and sending shivers over my skin with his breath. He grins against my neck as he grazes his lips back and forth over the sensitive skin. “You like it when I hurt you *always*. It’s your downfall, Felicity. You should know better by now.”

He nips at my earlobe, before pulling back and staring into my eyes.

He knows he’s right. *I* know he’s right.

I hate him for every bit of pain he puts me through. But more than that, I hate how it doesn’t stop me from still going full circle. No one can hurt me like Jude Carlisle. And no one can make me ravenous for more.

But I don’t admit the real power he has over me because I don’t know how he’d use that information. Even I have my limits on the pain I’ll allow him to inflict.

So I stay quiet and relax against him, enjoying the fact that we’re in a place I can do this openly. If we were at another one of my grandparents’ galas, people would whisper. They’d judge.

Among his friends, in a club bleeding sin, right and wrong already don’t exist. People chase what makes them feel good. For me, that’s Jude, and the high being in his presence gives me.

He said, *to the end.*

A terrifying thought.

Does it mean he doesn't see us coming out of this whole?

I'm not sure how we will. Jude might think I don't sense what's looming, but he's wrong. Monsters have a way of giving away their presence long before you see them. They're the shiver running the length of my spine every time Jude kisses me with the intensity of another goodbye.

He senses danger. It's in his eyes.

Threats from our past waiting to collide with what we're doing. It should be enough to stop us from making these same mistakes all over again.

*To the end.*

If that's true, then throw dirt and roses over my grave. This time, I'm not letting him go.





## Jude

WISHING FOR THINGS YOU can't have—you can't keep—only leads to disappointment. Selfishly, I want her anyway. I'll *keep* her anyway.

Claw her from my cold, bloody fingers, and even then, my soul won't let her go. Disappointment be damned. If Fel is destined to belong to a monster, it'll be me.

She stands at the balcony railing, looking out at the dancefloor as she laughs with Echo and Maren. Her hips sway to the beat of the music. Her dress sparkling more than all the lights in the club combined. More than the stars through a pitch-black night. A chandelier in a place that doesn't deserve her shine.

When she tips her head back, I'm mesmerized at how she laughs so wildly it might as well crawl the room in my direction. It rushes my bones and draws me toward her. Magnetic energy pulling me in until I'm wrapping my hands over where hers rest on the railing.

Her back melts to my chest. I'm her home, and she's my damnation.

“Having fun, Red?” I whisper in her ear.

Echo and Maren take the hint, rolling their eyes as they get lost. I don't give a shit if I'm interrupting their girl time. They've held her hostage long enough.

“Yes,” Fel dips her chin and smiles. “Any reason you scared my friends away?”

“Because you're mine, and I want you to myself right now.”

She shakes her head and opens her mouth to say something, but a hand slaps over my shoulder, interrupting us.

“Jude, man. I thought that was you.”

Pulling back, it takes me a second to place the guy's face. It's been a decade since I've seen him, and he's aged twenty years in the past ten. It isn't until he shoots me a lopsided grin that I remember him from the football team back in high school.

“Parker?” I step back, and Fel turns beside me.

“Yeah, man. Good to see you.” His eyes drift to Fel. “Holy shit, Felicity? Wait...”

His eyes skip between the two of us.

“Weren't you two like family or some shit?”

“Not anymore.” I want to break his nose for bringing it up.

Hesitation flares in her eyes like it did when I closed the distance at her grandparents' gala. While I'll burn for my sins,

she's still testing her skin's resilience against the flames.

“Okay, kinky. Whatever, dude.”

I grit my teeth.

Parker and I were never close. The most we had in common was that we enjoyed playing the same sport. He was always a selfish dick, more worried about fucking anyone who opened their legs than anything else. And standing here now, I get the impression some things never change.

My glare should be enough for him to realize he needs to fuck off, but like the idiot he's always been, he doesn't budge. Instead, he dares to open his mouth and continue digging his grave.

“Can't say I'm surprised that shit with your parents didn't work.” Parker grins, skimming Fel's dress, pausing a second too long where it dips between her breasts. “I mean we all remember your dad being kind of a creep. That shit with your mom and all.”

Fel's grip on my arm is all that holds me to the earth. Gravity might as well be sucked from the room as my vision goes black.

“Parker...”

“Your mom?” Fel's voice squeaks with her question.

Two years we lived under the same roof and there is one person we never talked about—*her*.

Parker opens his mouth to say more but I step between them before he can answer her seemingly simple question. “Nice seeing you, Parker.”

He lifts his eyebrows, finally taking the hint at my callous tone. He’s lucky I’m not beating him to a pulp to let out some of my rage.

Whatever he was about to say is bullshit Fel doesn’t need to hear. Parker wasn’t one of the guys on the team I actually confided in. He’s repeating rumors, passed on and diluted so many times, it won’t do Fel any good to hear them.

Not that it matters. The dirt’s been moved, and as much as I’d like to bury this, Fel will continue to dig until she uncovers every body.

“Yeah...” he shakes his head, stepping back. “Good seeing you too.”

If only his walking away was enough for Fel to let his comment go. She won’t. Her eyes work my gaze over. Questions she probably let dance in her head for years, while knowing better than to ask them.

Pain in her eyes because my mom is a weakness. A soft spot. She senses it.

Fel’s gaze liquifies as she holds onto the good guy in me like she did back then. The little crease between her eyebrows gives everything away.

It’s too much. I turn away, but she grips my arm tighter in response.

“What was he saying about your mom?”

“Come on, Fel.” I shake my head. “Parker’s full of shit. Always has been. Let it go.”

“Why would he bring her up then? You never—” she stops her sentence mid-thought and swallows hard. “Why are you always hiding things from me, Jude? You never talked about what was going on with our parents. And you never mentioned her. What really happened back then?”

“Don’t try to make me a good guy here.”

She scoffs, too smart for her own good. “Unless you are, and you just want me to think you’re not.”

“Parker doesn’t know shit.”

“You always said you were protecting me. What were you protecting me from?”

I try to walk past her, but she follows me. She’s on my heels, and I’m tempted to get us both out of the club before one of us explodes. Firecrackers in the palm, a spark away from going off. But like the walls closing in on all sides, the farthest I make it is the hallway to the bathroom before she’s grabbing my arm and trying to stop me.

“You just let me think you were the villain back then, didn’t you?” Her pace quickens to stay on my heels. “What did your mom have to do with any of this when you never talked about her?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What if it does?” She tries to reach for my arm again.

I shake her off because this isn't the time or place. “You can't handle it.”

“What makes you think I can't handle it?” She follows me into the bathroom and the door slaps shut behind her. “Don't think I didn't see things falling apart. Was your mom the reason our parents were always fighting?”

“If only.” I can't help the sick laugh that bursts from my chest. Darkness bleeding out. “Just drop it.”

“No.” She grabs my arm and steps in front of me.

I push her against the counter until her ass digs into the edge of the sink. Gripping her face, I force her to look me in the eyes. “Some things should remain history, Felicity.”

“Like us?” She's pushing me into dangerous territory. Not that she'll stop.

“You know I'm not talking about us.”

“Do I?” The bathroom walls might as well crack with the pain pinching her face. “What happened back then was never about you acting out like a stupid teenager, was it? Even if my grandparents told me you were sick and just wanted attention. They said you had some strange fixation with me and didn't want us to be family. They said that's why you did what you did—to split them up.”

I really hate her grandparents right now for telling her all this bullshit.

“I tried to tell myself you didn’t mean it.” Fel keeps going, out of breath. “That you were just trying to make them get a divorce because your dad was an asshole and the fact that they were married pissed you off. That, and the fact that my mom was never very nice to you. I tried to tell myself it all just went too far.”

Her version of the story is so much prettier than the truth. Wrong, but still pretty.

“When you never came back, it was easier to hate you. To believe what they told me was true. Because it didn’t matter. Either way, you left me alone.”

“It was for the best.” I step back, but she steps forward. My body, her magnet, refusing to let her go. “It got you away from them.”

“And I’m supposed to thank you for that?”

“Thank me. Hate me. Do whatever you want with that information. I got us both out of there before something happened no one could take back.”

“Because then I was safe right? You saved me?” She laughs—wild, loud, angry—before her eyes lock on mine. “You think you left, and all my problems were solved? Just because you walked away doesn’t mean nothing bad happened.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Felicity.” I grab her arm and pin her against the counter again. “What are you talking about? What happened after I



left?”

What I did should have solved all her problems. I don't like her insinuating it didn't.

“My family was already sinking before our parents got married. But after my mom...” She cuts off on a choked breath, always unable to say it. “My grandparents had to be strategic.”

“Strategic how?”

“Connections. Acquaintances. It doesn't matter.” She shakes her head. “You might think I'm naïve or blind, but I lived that life too, Jude. I know how they all work. They knew how to parade me around just enough for me to seem like an option. It was only a matter of time—”

“An option?” Blood crashes between my temples.

“I never gave any more than I was okay with.” She chews her lower lip, and I'm not sure what scares her more, my reaction or her own memories. “Why do you think I walked away after college and moved in with Maren? They were going to turn me into her.”

*Don't say it. Don't say it.*

She swallows hard. “I think they had someone picked out already, or at least, they were working on it. If it were up to them, I'd already be married, and I wasn't going to let that happen.”

The thought of Fel married to anyone else makes my fingernails itch for blood. My knuckles desperate for pain. My

throat tight. But to think of her being married off as a trophy to satisfy some rich fuck, so they can use him for his money evaporates all remaining traces of my sanity.

Still, for her, I try to collect myself. Because I'm so fucking proud she was strong enough to walk away.

"I didn't expect it to lead me back to you." It's almost a whisper. "I hated you."

"What was I supposed to do, Fel?"

"Stay."

"Even if you told me to go?"

"Yes."

"Even if I'm the one who pushed your mother over the ledge?"

Fel presses her lips together and takes a sharp inhale through her nose, before letting out the breath. "You had your reasons."

"Did I?"

"Didn't you?" She pushes against my chest. "Or are you really that evil? Because yes, living between those walls was a nightmare, but at least it was tolerable."

"Is that what you think?" I grip her chin hard and pull her face inches from mine. "That you didn't deserve better because you would have simply *survived*? Yes, I'm selfish when it comes to you. I overreact and do shit that should have gotten me locked up by now. And honestly, anything I've done

is tame compared to the shit that's gone through my head. But I don't fucking care because all that has ever mattered to me is that you walk out of this whole. Not in pieces. *Whole*. Even if it meant leaving you behind when you asked me to."

"You weren't supposed to listen." Tears pool in her lashes. "You say it was all for me, but you always refused to give me the one thing I needed."

"What did you need, Fel? The truth?"

"No." She shakes her head as I loosen my grip. "Not even that."

"Then what?"

"Your heart," she yells. A plea and a sob slicing me down the center. "I needed you to let me in."

She's so far lost in this mess that she still stupidly wants it. So blind that she doesn't see she already has it.

"You want my heart?" I let her go and reach in my back pocket, pulling out my knife. Flipping it around, I press the point of the blade against my chest with one hand and use the other to force hers to the handle. "Then carve it from my fucking chest and get a real good look. Slice your name into it like it doesn't already exist there. Hold it, break it. Do whatever your little soul desires."

Her chest is heaving as I wrap both my hands around hers now, forcing her to grip the knife handle tighter. The blade digs through my shirt and draws a drop of blood.

“It means nothing.” I squeeze her hands. “Hearts are blind and worthless. My heart beat for you because you were forbidden and it’s a stupid organ. My heart isn’t where you are. You’re in my fucking marrow, my nerves, my bloodstream. You’re the constant pressure between my temples and every ache in my bones. You’re embedded so deep, you hurt unlike any drop of ink or piercing. So if you want my heart, take it, along with everything else. Consume me. End me. Every part of me has only ever lived for you.”

I release her hands and drop them to my sides. Her fingers still gripped tight to the knife on my chest, and I’m at peace with whatever she decides.

*To the end.*

“I won’t lie and tell you I’m the good guy, Fel. I’m not. I’m the reason your mother is dead. I’m the reason my father is in prison. I’m the reason your life is broken. And I’d do it all again for you. Because they deserved what they got, but you didn’t.” I shift and the blade stings as it bites deeper into my skin. “I never left you, not really. I was always there waiting—knowing at some point you’d find me when the time was right. And do you know why?”

Fel swallows hard, tears swimming in her eyes as she gives me the faintest, most heartbreaking nod.

“Why?”

“Because we’re inevitable,” she whispers the confession I told her when we saw each other again. Only now, I think she finally believes it.

“Exactly.” I brush a tear from her cheek, rubbing the salty moisture between the pad of my thumb and finger. “You’re right, I did have my reasons. And someday I’ll tell you what they were. But right now, I need you to either trust me or shove the blade straight through because that’s all I can give you.”

Fel’s fingers grip the handle so tight they’re white, holding it there for a breath longer, before dropping it to the ground.

“Who am I to you, Jude. Honestly?” Her arms fall to her sides, a balance of strength and defeat. “Your stepsister you weren’t supposed to touch? The damsel you wanted to save? A prize for you to win?”

“All of it.” I tip her face up and drown in those ocean eyes of hers. “You’re mine. Every good and bad thing I’ve ever done or wanted. You’re the sweetest fucking thing I’ve ever tasted. The only peace I’ve known. And you’re way too fucking good for me, but for some reason, you never see it.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh, but you are.” I lean in and brush my lips over hers to savor the taste. “Don’t worry, it won’t stop me.”

“Then take me, Jude,” she whispers against my mouth. “I’ve never been anyone’s but yours.”

Her confession should push me away. If I were a good man, it would.

But I’m not.



# Fel

*I'M MET WITH SCREAMING the moment I step into the house.*

*"You don't know what you're talking about!"*

*I follow the voices into the living room to find Jude facing off with his father. My mom sitting on the couch with her cheeks buried in her hands.*

*"What's going on?"*

*Mom jumps at the sound of my voice, while Jude and Steve's gazes snap in my direction.*

*"Nothing." Mom stands and brushes her fingers over the front of her dress.*

*"Nothing? Really?" Jude's gaze darkens with the laugh rolling like thunder from his chest.*

*Tension in the air so thick, one more step and I might snap it. A line Jude tests with an unhinged chuckle that is so dark and*

*unlike him, the boy pacing side to side might as well be a stranger.*

*“Nothing—”*

*“Don’t,” Steve cuts him off.*

*This family has been on a collision course, and as Jude pauses in front of his father with his hand in a fist, I sense the jagged edges. Rocks under the surface of what was once a peaceful ocean. A lighthouse too late with its warning.*

*“You really think I’ll keep this quiet?”*

*“You’re drunk.” Steve snatches the beer bottle I didn’t realize Jude was holding.*

*He doesn’t usually drink, even when he’s partying at a friend’s house. But lately, when his dad does something to really piss him off, he’s been drowning his rage with booze.*

*“What do you care?” The faintest slur of his words, and I’m not sure even I can get him out of this.*

*“You’re seventeen.”*

*Jude’s narrowed gaze is bone-chilling. “So age does matter?”*

*A heartbeat.*

*A pulse in the room.*

*Silence, but I’m sure we all hear it. Gazes flicking from one person to the next as they subtly avoid me.*

*“Go sleep it off.” Steve steps back and sets the beer bottle on a side table.*



*But Jude doesn't move. He holds the line with his father and tucks his hands in his pockets. His gaze moves from his dad to my mom. Back and forth before it finally lands on her.*

*"Do something or I will." His teeth clench. "Either way, I hope you both burn in hell."*

*"Jude!" I reach for his arm as he walks past me, but he shakes me off.*

*My center of the universe is tilting.*

*The boy I met is fading.*

*Secrets eat him from the inside out.*

*Turning back to my mother, I search her stare for answers when all her gaze offers me is distance. Her eyes lose focus. They might as well grow legs and walk away from this moment—from me.*

*I'm losing them both, and I can't seem to make them stay.*



Eleven years ago, when I told Jude I never wanted to see him again, I was sure of three things:

One—Jude was selfish with his feelings. Possessiveness grew roots that bloomed resentment within him. Something I watered without realizing it.

Two—Our parents didn't love each other. My mom was in it for the money and status, while his father had reasons, I don't think even Jude understood.

Three—My family wasn't the only one with secrets. But unlike mine, his tangled deep.

And up until tonight, I repeated those three mantras so often they became facts. Scripture. Indisputable truth.

In my mind, Jude reached a breaking point, dragged us all down with him, and still managed to walk away unscathed.

Except, the cracks are showing. Parker's comment had him visibly shaken. A knotted expression that drags me back a decade to when we sat in his foggy bathroom, and he refused to tell me what happened in his one and only visit to his aunt's house.

He learned something—something he shared with someone on the football team apparently—and it broke him.

Jude squeezes my hand when he glances over his shoulder. "You okay?"

*No.*

But I nod, hoping he'll believe it.

None of this is okay. And what's worse, it doesn't make me need him any less. I was never under any illusions when it came to Jude. He was bad then and he's bad now. But my desire for him is inescapable.

"Where are we going?" I tug his hand as he leads me up the dark staircase that leads to his apartment. But instead of stopping at his door, he continues higher.

"You'll see."

Blind trust compels me to let him drag me to hell if that's what he wants.

When the knife fell to the floor in the club's bathroom, the wall I've spackled for years, crumbled. The cold war melted, acceptance taking its place.

Jude didn't offer answers, but he gave me a choice. Accept his reasons for keeping quiet and trust him or walk away.

Either held hurt—living with his lies or losing him.

Metal clattered to the floor, and in my bones, I knew there was no going back. It doesn't matter what he did or why. This is our second chance.

Jude is my villain. My weakness. My stepbrother. I'll let him rip my heart from my chest and drain it for all its worth because loving him means I don't want him any other way.

We reach the top of the staircase, and he pushes the door open, guiding me onto a large, open rooftop. LA smog hides the stars, but I feel them on the other side of the haze.

The rooftop terrace has a decent view for being in the middle of downtown, surrounded by buildings. There's a bench, chairs, a fire pit. A nice open space to escape in a city where it's so often impossible to do so.

"I didn't know this was up here." I follow Jude as he makes his way to the other side of the roof.

His fingers grip the brick ledge as I stop beside him.

“Sage and I come up here when we need to get a little space.”

“It’s beautiful.”

You can almost forget we’re in one of the worst parts of the city this late. You can almost hear beyond the pulsing of the nightclub next door. You can almost see past the smog, to the stars.

With my stomach pressed to the ledge, I search this city for the answers Jude can’t give me. I search my lungs for air and my heart for healing. Here with him, it feels reachable when it shouldn’t.

Jude moves behind me and places a hand on either side, lacing his fingers through mine on the ledge like he did when we were at the club. He wraps me in a warmth that shouldn’t feel safe.

My shield.

My protector.

*My home.*

“Remember the fairytales you’d read in your room?” he whispers in my ear, raking his fingers back and forth through mine until my skin tingles.

“Yes.”

“I used to think about them a lot when I came up here. I’d stare out and imagine you on the other side of all this, almost like you were some princess locked away in her tower.”

On the other side of the city is a different neighborhood—one we can't see from here. A place he once lived in with me, until we both became different people. And from here, standing on the roof looking out, there's no remnants of that world in sight. No sparkling hillside of comfort, just darkness coating our escape.

“Even after you went to college, I thought about you still being there. Like you were trapped in some place I couldn't break you out of. But if I could, I'd finally get the chance to feel your skin, to smell you in my arms, to taste you—I'd be free of all this.”

“You have me now.”

Jude breathes out a laugh. “What does the prince do in your stories, Red?”

“He saves the princess.”

“No, he *takes* her.” Jude plants his lips on my neck and kisses a path up to my jaw. “He slays the monsters to make her *his*.”

“I want to be yours.”

“You are.” A low growl in my ear gives me shivers. “Tell me, what does he do in your fairytales once he has her?”

Knots clog my throat. We're no longer talking about childhood books. After all, that's not our story. Our fairytale is stained in blood.

“He does whatever he wants.”

“So is that my prize, Red?” Jude drags his hands along my arms, and over my chest, until they rest over my stomach and he’s pressing me to him. “Do I get to do whatever I want now?”

“Always.”

I want to be Jude’s everything, and I want him to be mine. If he saved me, then maybe I’m also saving him. From whatever darkness he was lost in as he sat up here alone and stared out at the distance.

“Do you want to know what I thought the first time I saw you?” he whispers in my ear, slowly dragging his hands down and bunching the bottom of my sparkly dress.

“I can guess.” His hands move inward and my breath races. “I was reading at a gala, so you probably thought I was lame.”

“That wasn’t the first time I saw you.” Fingertips graze my skin as he moves up my thighs and hooks his thumbs in the band of my thong, slowly dragging it down my hips. “It was the week before at the cemetery. I was visiting a friend’s grave and you were a few plots over, standing there in a blue dress with peacock feather earrings. It’s why I always left those in your books. They made me think of you.”

He’s never told me this. Pages he ripped from our story to distort my version.

Jude drags my thong all the way off, and I step out of it. His hands grazing the length of my bare legs as he slowly stands

back up. When he's once more towering over me, he spins me around to face him.

“You were crying, and I couldn't help but wonder what could make a girl that pretty look so sad.”

“I was visiting my dad's grave.” I choke out.

“I figured that out later.”

My mother would never go with me. After he passed away, she refused to acknowledge he ever existed. Almost as if another man wouldn't want to be with her if she held onto any feelings for him. It didn't matter to her that I was his daughter. If he wasn't allowed to exist in her mind, he shouldn't reside in mine either.

I'm not sure what hurt worse, losing him or trying to pretend for her sake he was never part of my life.

“I saw *you* then.” Jude lifts me up and sets me on the ledge of the building. “Not the girl on the outside you show everyone else, but the girl underneath. Tear-stained cheeks and rawness that can't be replicated. I knew you before you ever spoke a word to me.”

“What did you see?”

“The most beautifully broken thing.” He brushes my hair off my face and drags his hand down my face, my throat, between my breasts. “When I walked up to you at the library that night, our parents weren't supposed to meet each other because of it. You were mine, but he had to go and make her his.”

I wrap my arms around Jude's shoulders, zipping our bodies together with the heat of a warm summer night.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to know it's all for you, Fel." He tips his forehead to mine. "I didn't do anything to break us. I did it *for* us. I need you."

Tightening my arms around him, I pull him closer. "I need you too."

I have since the moment I met him at the library. Since he walked up to me and joked about the fact that I was reading a book at a fancy party. I loved his cocky attitude and his fuck-off demeanor. I loved his pretty-boy grin and his green opal eyes.

Jude reaches up and drags his fingers along the fabric of my dress, where it dips low in the front, peeling it aside. A breeze chills the air between our bodies, pebbling my nipples.

"Fuck, those look so good on you." His gaze fixes on the barbells with a dark intensity that makes my legs clench his hips. "When they heal, I'm going to hook you up to chains."

"Chains?"

His eyes flick to mine. "I'm going to do things you've never even imagined, Red."

Why does that sound so appealing when it should scare me?

He leans in and blows a breath over them. He can't play with them yet, but he finds ways to tease me anyway.



I rake my fingers through his hair as he undoes his jeans and pulls them down in the front. His hands grip my thighs, and he pulls me far enough off the ledge that it's digging into my ass, as my body tips back.

I'm at his mercy just like he wants me. Hanging from the edge of this building, at the tipping point of my sanity.

Jude rubs his cock in circles over me, dropping his face to mine when I moan on contact. "Swallow your screams, Red. I'm the only one allowed to hear them. And I'd really hate to have to burn this whole city to the ground for listening, but I will."

He drags my ass down the brick and impales me on him in a single, brutal thrust. It stings, and hurts, and sends me to the brink all at once. His fingernails dig into my thighs as he spreads me wider for him. And mine dig at the brick of the ledge, holding on so he doesn't fuck me off the side of the building.

My lungs choke on city air as his row of barbells rolls against all the right spots. My lips part and his tongue slips in, silencing the scream that burns hot on my tongue. He draws my tongue into his mouth like he wants to eat me alive.

"My screams, Red." He pulls back and smirks. "Be a good girl and hold them in."

It takes everything in me. I grip the brick as it grinds against my flesh with every hard thrust. Jude fucks me with intensity I can't look away from. His green eyes the shade of a forest in the darkness. Trees I'm already lost in.

Releasing the ledge, I become a vine around him as he fucks me against the brick. He could throw me over, and I might not notice because I'm already falling. With every kiss, every breath, every thrust. I'm fading into whatever this is.

My pierced nipples rub against his chest and it's the final thing to set me off because I need his pain as much as I need his comfort.

Jude's fingers dig into my ass cheeks as he jerks and comes, and I feel the blush run my chest and cheeks.

It feels like surrender. It feels like peace.



## Jude

FEL STRETCHES HER LEGS out and I pull her calf over me, rubbing the arch in her foot and appreciating how it makes her eyes roll back in her head.

“You’re distracting me again.”

“Well, if we weren’t doing this in your bed, I might be less distracting.”

She looks up from the beads she’s stringing and narrows her eyes. “You think so?”

“No.”

She laughs, knowing me too well.

I should probably leave, but there’s no blade sharp enough to cut me from her.

Fel is propped against the headboard, while I’m stretched out upside down on the bed, so I can rub her bare legs. With every movement, the thin fabric of her tank top tightens over her tits and shows off her pierced nipples.

It's fucking hot.

Everything about Fel is perfect, polished. Except for the metal I marked her with.

“How many more of those do you have to make?”

She sets aside one bracelet, reaching for another. This one has a thick gold band with rivets for the pink gemstones she's gathering.

“Too many.” She frowns. “The shop might be covering my bills, but it's not enough to grow yet. These are for online orders.”

I'm tempted to throw money at her problems to make them go away.

Just because I live above a tattoo shop with my buddy doesn't mean I'm actually broke. I've pierced and tatted some of the biggest names in the business, and with my twenty-five percent ownership in the shop, money isn't something I've thought about in a few years.

But I don't push the subject because Fel stepped away from her grandparents' wallets for a reason. She wants to prove herself and make it on her own. So even if I'd never actually let her sink, I'll sit back unless it becomes absolutely necessary.

“What's that one?”

She scoops up a collection of beads that look like eyes, fixing them to a large bangle.

“Creepy right?” Her smile brightens the room. The city. The fucking planet.

“I kind of like ‘em.”

She shakes her head. “Well you would. They remind me of that wall in the shop with all the eyes on it.”

“That was Crew’s idea. He said people should walk in feeling eyes on them. That no one should ever feel too comfortable.”

“Interesting business plan.” Fel bites her lip as she focuses on stringing an especially tiny bead.

“Crew doesn’t care about business plans. Or comfort. Or people for that matter.”

He’s fun to get shitty with and entertaining to watch in the ring. But every quality that makes him a blast at a party is also what gets him into trouble.

“What about you?” she asks. “I know you try to play it cool when it comes to the shop. But you put in a lot of work there. And yes, before you tease me about it, *I’ve noticed.*”

The cutest blush stains her chest.

“Is me being nonchalant about the shop *playing it cool?*”

“Something like that.”

I dig my thumb into the arch of her foot and her eyes flutter. The way this girl reacts to everything I do sends me into overdrive.

“It wasn’t something I planned on.” Her body rocks with every roll of my thumbs over her skin, and she has to set down her jewelry, so she doesn’t drop it. “When Dad was locked up, the feds seized his assets, and anything left was hidden offshore, so there weren’t a lot of options.”

“So there is money left?”

“Plenty.”

While legally speaking, the court took it all, they’re wrong. Dad’s wealth was never maintained in his United States bank accounts. So even if he’s in prison, he’s as rich now as he ever was.

“Didn’t matter though. I didn’t want it. I’d rather be broke than touch his money.”

A symphony of heartbreak melts her gaze, as she nods in understanding.

“Luckily, it never came to that. After I left, I met Sage and the guys, and they got me into all this shit. Turns out, I was halfway decent at it.”

“So you can tattoo as well?”

“If need be, yeah. But I prefer piercing.” I grin. “Something about making people bleed.”

“Twisted.” She tries to bury a smile. Even if she shouldn’t, she gets off on the side of me willing to hurt people. “So if I want a tattoo...”

She runs her fingers down her smooth, bare thighs.

“No one’s touching your body but me, Red.” The idea of another person inking her, piercing her, touching her—no fucking way.

“Noted.” The pretty little grin stretching her cheeks tells me she’s pleased with my reaction.

It’s sick as fuck, and I love it.

If I had to guess, she probably doesn’t even want a tattoo, she just likes to see if she can push my buttons. Call me possessive all she wants, she thrives on it.

“I took over as the shop’s piercer when Rachel left. Blaze, the previous owner, dipped soon after. The four of us didn’t want a random artist swooping in and feeding off the notoriety we established, so we all went in on a four-way split.”

“Wait.” Fel curls her legs up and crosses them, leaning toward me. “You guys own Twisted Roses?”

“Me, Sage, Echo, and Crew. Although some of us definitely work harder than others.” I roll onto my side and prop myself up on my elbow.

“That must make for entertaining business meetings.”

“It’s all right. As long as we all smoke a little something first.”

Fel shakes her head, smiling. “Productive.”

I grab her ankle and drag her down the bed until she’s laying over me. The sweetest little yelp making me feral.

“Oh, I can be very productive.”



“If this is your idea of helping me—”

“Depends what I’m helping you with.” I reach between her legs, pushing her panties to the side, sinking in two fingers before she can so much as stutter out a breath.

She’s already soaked. This girl is going to be the death of me. Probably in more ways than one.

“I’m supposed to be working.” She moans as I hit the bundle of nerves that makes her shiver.

“If you’d like me to stop...”

Fel buries her face against my chest as I rub the heel of my hand against her clit and sink my fingers in deeper.

“Don’t stop.” She shakes her head.

She feels like heaven—something I never really dared to imagine. But as her pussy pulses around me and I lose myself in the strawberry scent of her body wash, I’m pretty sure I’m getting a glimpse of it.

Fel’s hand skims down and she tries to slide it into my sweatpants, but I grab her wrist and stop her, pinning it behind her back and holding her tight to my chest.

“Why won’t you let me reciprocate?” Her bottom lip is puffy with her pout, and I can’t help but bite it.

“Because...” I shove another finger in. “I’d rather do some things just for you.”

Her hips start to ride my hand and she stops arguing. Her nails dig into my chest, and she clings to me like I’m what she

needs to survive.

“You like that?”

Her hips rock against my hand, and she's riding the waves that will send her straight over the edge.

“Yes.” The word is nearly silent as it escapes on a breath.

Her cheeks flush and her lashes flutter. Little moans chase every exhale. She grinds against my hand until she comes all over it, soaking my fingers so beautifully I almost black out.

Her small frame shivers on top of me, and I'm a man obsessed with every flinch, every sound. The scent of her desire in the air and her screams splintering my soul. Her hope digging my grave.

If I thought I knew everything there was to know about her eleven years ago, I was wrong. She's endlessly and perfectly made for me.

When Fel finally stops shaking, she relaxes against me. Comfort that feels so good it makes my rock-hard dick twitch. Something she definitely notices as she looks up and grins.

Her hands run down my sides and toy with the band of my sweats once more.

“You've had your fun, Jude, now I'd like to have mine.”

“Oh really?” I pin her arms to her sides and grind my dick against her stomach until she moans. “Why give you what you want now, when I'd much rather hear you beg for it?”



## Fel

JUDE STEPS OUT OF the bathroom. Hair still wet and messy how it sticks to his forehead, and a towel wrapped around his waist. His eyes move to where I'm propped on the edge of the bed. Heat blooming in my belly as his gaze trails from my toes up to my eyes.

After fingering me until I screamed earlier, he refused to let me reciprocate. All I wanted was to drop to my knees for him, and he enjoyed spending the afternoon holding me on the brink.

Resistance I'm intent on snapping, even if it means I have to break him.

Jude's gaze rakes me once more, it burns almost hot enough to dry my wet hair, already curling at the ends. The hair on the back of my neck stands tall in anticipation.

One glance and it doesn't matter how much he's resisted me today. He can't resist this.

“Take off the robe, Felicity.”

The way he rotates the names he uses for me turns my core molten. Depending on the moment, my name can be playful or a threat. And at times like this, when my full name falls from his tongue, he's at his most devious. Thinking of all the ways he'll tear my perfect, pristine life in half.

He waits for my hands to find the tie at my waist before approaching. Slow, predatory steps toward me as the thin white robe slides open in the front and falls from my shoulders.

Jude's throat bobs with a hard swallow as he takes me in.

After my shower, I slipped into a lingerie set I picked out while shopping with Echo and Maren. White lace thin enough to reveal hints of everything it should be hiding. Soft silk ribbons that wrap my stomach and garters around my thighs.

Little is left to the imagination, and Jude doesn't seem to mind as wicked thoughts play in his eyes. He always did enjoy receiving presents, while I like pretty packaging.

His gaze pauses on my thighs as he takes in the scrap of fabric between them.

“Spread your legs.”

He watches as I slowly open my thighs for him, revealing my exposed pussy in this crotchless outfit. He doesn't take his eyes off me as I widen my knees far enough to give him a full view. And all I can do is sit in anticipation of what he's going to do about it.

One step and his body wash clouds my senses.

He peels down the lace cups covering my breasts and grins.  
“Much better.”

A single finger trails between them, toying with one barbell, then the other, igniting the path beneath it.

“Is this new?” His finger hooks into the band of my bra and he pulls me closer.

“Why?” I bite my lip. “Worried someone else has seen me in it? Or are you worried someone else has fuc—”

Jude cuts me off by grabbing my chin with such volatile force it sends my heart racing. I’m playing with fire by teasing him with the threat other men, but I can’t help it. I want the beast. Jude makes me animalistic.

“Taunting me, Red?” His grip tightens. Leaning close, he hovers, dragging his nose down my jaw and breathing me in. “Act like a bad girl, and I’ll treat you like one. Now answer my fucking question. Is. This. New?”

But he doesn’t wait for my answer before biting my throat in punishment.

“Yes.” The word barely audible through my scream. “No one’s seen me in this. It’s new.”

“Good.” Jude releases his grip and takes a step back. “My girl knows better.”

*My girl.*

How can two words blend my insides to mush?

“But...” Our stares lock and his voice vibrates with the rush of adrenaline. “Can’t have you thinking you can get away with saying that kind of shit to me, Red.”

We can’t. It’s why I said it.

I need him to make me pay, so I can prove there’s no limit with me when it comes to him.

“My girl needs a reminder of who owns this body, doesn’t she?” He runs the pad of his thumb over my lower lip, before shoving it in and forcing me to choke on it.

“Yes.” But it’s mumbled around him.

Jude smirks, releasing me. His hands drop to my legs, and he lifts me up, spinning me around on the bed until I’m lying with my head hanging off the bottom. He stands over me, smiling at how I’m exposed in front of him with my neck straining. Once more, he drags his thumb over my mouth, rougher this time, smearing my Chapstick across my cheek.

“Who does this sassy mouth belong to?”

“You.”

He shoves his thumb in again and the word comes out choked.

“Correct.” He smears his wet thumb over my mouth as he drops his towel, his dick already rock hard, metal glistening, and hanging like temptation over my head. “This whole body belongs to me. And I’m going to tame this bratty mouth of yours until you learn that lesson.”

Why does that make my heart race? Heat pools in my belly and I'm slick between the legs.

Jude grabs his dick and taps it on my wet lips. "Open."

One word. Blunt. Harsh. Blurring my vision.

Parting my lips, he shoves himself in so hard and fast that he hits the back of my throat, and I have to fight my reflexes. The salty taste of his precum coats my tongue and tears blur my vision.

"Breathe, Fel."

Jude grabs my neck with both his hands, rubbing his thumbs along the center column like he's willing it to relax. Slowing, he pulls back, before thrusting in again. With the angle of my head tipped, hanging off the bed, my throat is open to him. He thrusts deeper, making a home for himself in my body—my soul.

"That's it." He rubs my throat with his thumbs. "I want to feel my dick in your throat as you swallow me down. I'm going to fuck this mouth until you learn not to tease me with it."

With each thrust, my throat relaxes. Tears and spit stream down my face, but all I want is to take him—to please him. To be all the bad things for him I never allowed myself.

"Spread your knees." His grip tightens on my throat as I obey his command. I'm wet enough I'm sure the mess glistens between my legs. "Beautiful. Now, touch yourself, Felicity. Show me how good it feels when I'm fucking your throat."



Stick your fingers in your pretty little cunt and wish it was my cock filling you up instead.”

Spit gurgles with his hard thrusts, and I’m on the verge of coming or blacking out. Gliding my fingers between my legs, dots cloud my vision, and when I drive them in at the same time as he shoves himself deeper, I leave my body for a moment. Foggy pleasure holds me in suspension as my throat opens for him.

Jude continues to rub the column of my neck as I run circles over myself. And I get lost in the feel of his dick moving in and out of my mouth, deeper and deeper each time. Metal clashing against my lips. Tears streaming from my eyes. My hand soaking. My mind floating.

“That’s it. Worship your pussy just like it deserves. Such a good girl,” he praises, and all it does is push me closer to the edge.

My body relaxes as pressure builds between my legs. His thrusts quicken. He’s as close as I am. And as if he times it, the moment I start to shake, the first warm hit of his cum coats my tongue and leaks down my throat.

I’m fighting to swallow it down as he pulls his cock out and paints my face and chest with the rest. A mess of him staining my cheeks, my lips, my neck. Until every drop coats me from the inside out.

When he finishes, he kneels down at the end of the bed, giving me a hit of his infinite eyes as he takes in the mess. He

smears his thumb from my cheek to my lips, drawing a path over my mouth and forcing his cum between my lips.

“Mine.”

I close my mouth around his thumb and suck the taste of him off it. “*Yours.*”

“To the fucking end.”



## Jude

“I THOUGHT I SAID to dress warm.” I swear this girl’s trying to test my patience.

Fel looks down at her black leather jacket and pulls it closed to hide her midriff. “I did.”

My gaze skims to her bare legs, where her shorts are cut so high, they’re barely considered that. She’s decorated her ankles with chains and charms that swish above her sneakers. It’s sinful how delicious she looks in the simplest of things.

“I’ll be fine.” She rolls her eyes, circling around me, and climbing into the passenger side of my convertible. “Clear sky with no clouds in sight. Stop being paranoid.”

The weather isn’t what I’m worried about. It’s the fact that this girl looks too damn good in anything. Strawberry dessert served on a pristine platter. And I’m the jealous asshole determined to never let another man get a taste.

“Where are we headed?” She’s bursting with excitement. All I said was I needed to run an errand, and she’s acting like I’ve

promised to take her to a music festival.

I start the engine and the Mercedes purrs to life. The rumble of the engine vibrating through Los Angeles. I might have left my formerly posh life behind, but my appreciation for classic cars stuck with me. Which is why, this beauty was my first big purchase with my own money.

“I need to go see a friend about something.”

Fel nods, turning to look out her side of the car as I pull away from the curb. I’m sure she’s wondering what it is I need to see a friend about, but she doesn’t ask.

Ever since the night at the club last week, she avoids questioning anything I don’t bring up explicitly. And I can’t decide if she’s really that trusting or if I’ve finally taken the fight out of her.

Either way, it’s getting under my skin more than when she was calling me a liar and trying to figure out the truth every five seconds.

Fel grew up in a world where acceptance was expected. Or worse, a defense mechanism. Fall in line or face judgment—something she was always more equipped to handle than I was. But just because she’s perfected how to maintain appearances, doesn’t mean that’s what I want from her when it comes to us.

Her submissiveness in the bedroom is sexy, but when she’s challenging me outside of it, is when my blood runs especially hot. Testing me at every turn and keeping me on my toes. I

like her sassy tongue that makes me want to shove my dick in her mouth just to shut her up. The fact that it's quiet grates on my nerves.

Hence our little trip. I'm ready to come clean once I do one final thing first.

Fel's hand slips over my thigh, right where it belongs. I'm not sure what she reads on my face, but she looks almost sad as her wild red ponytail whips around with the wind.

I plant my hand over hers and lace our fingers together. She fits perfectly in every spot I put her. In my life, in my blood. The girl was meant to be mine, even if I was never good enough to be hers.

Fel's quiet for the majority of the drive, tipping her head back and closing her eyes at one point. I'm not sure if she's sleeping or relaxing, but her delicate breaths relax me.

Driving my Mercedes is how I clear my head, and with her beside me, I could drive forever.

After a couple of hours on the road, we're finally in an open stretch, loose from the chains of LA and breathing in clean air again.

For all the credit LA gets for being glamorous—it's not as spectacular as books and movies want people to think. You might cross paths with a star on the street, but it doesn't mean you'll see them overhead.

It's a city filled with smoke, broken dreams, and a sky you can't wish on.

After driving for a few hours, we finally make it to the Twisted Kings compound—the last place on earth I should be taking Fel, if only I wasn't so fucking addicted, I can't go five seconds without a taste of her.

Even if I'm not patched in, I'm close with their VP, Blaze, from the days when he owned Twisted Roses. So the guys at the gate let us in without questions.

When shit went down with my father, I was a mess. Blaze gave me direction. He took me under his wing the same way he did Sage, treating me like his younger brother. He had my back, and I had his. And when someone tried to kidnap his girlfriend, I was by his side handling nasty shit, even though I wasn't patched in.

I'm not a King, but I've earned the respect of the only people who matter on this compound.

Turning to the left, I pull up to Blaze's bar and put the car in park. Music shakes the ground, even if it's early in the day. Doesn't matter if it's five in the morning, someone inside will be tipsy, drunk, or puking.

I walk around and open Fel's door, helping her out by taking her hand. Delicate fingers slip into mine. Soft and perfectly polished.

*Too damn good for me.*

“Remember what I warned you.” I lace my fingers through hers as we walk to the door.

She chuckles. “What? To stay close?”

“Exactly.” I squeeze her hand because she has no idea what we’re walking into.

She might think she’s met bikers before, but she’s never been directly around the Twisted Kings. They’re worse guys than me with no problem spilling blood for no real reason.

First time I came here someone got their tongue cut out for something no one cared to elaborate on. I thought I’d seen my fair share of blood, but these guys make a mess simply to play in it.

They operate far outside LA’s city limits to maintain the illusion of distance. An attempt to keep their hands clean from what they drive into the city for. But bodies are buried, and blood is spilled by these guys on a daily basis.

It’s why I only come here on occasion. Keeping close to Blaze, while maintaining distance from club business.

I should have left Fel back at my place or hers. Even Crew is a better influence than whoever we run into at Blaze’s bar. But like an addicted man, I can’t resist.

“Just stay close,” I say as the door swings open. And I wish they didn’t sound like famous last words.





# Fel

THE MOMENT WE WALK into the bar, I'm met with a neon sign that reads: *I LIKE FUCKING*.

Underneath it, someone scribbled in Sharpie: *don't we all*.

Jude squeezes my hand tighter, and I follow him around a corner. He looks so good today with his hair freshly washed, but naturally dried so it's messy. He's wearing a black T-shirt that hugs his biceps and shows off the tattoos on his arms. The simplest things on him make it impossible to tear my gaze away.

If I thought the music was loud from outside, inside the bar my ears ache. Music thunders through the speakers, but no one is dancing. A few guys wearing leather sit at one end of the bar, and a few other groups are scattered throughout.

Jude didn't explicitly say this is a biker bar, but I'm not an idiot. The barbed rose emblem on the walls matches the patch on a few of their jackets, and I remember seeing the same thing on the bikers who stopped at the shop to visit Sage.

A couple of them tip their heads up and acknowledge Jude when he walks in, but he barely reciprocates. His grip tightening when a couple of guys look me up and down.

*Dress warm* makes more sense standing exposed in this room. He didn't trust where he was taking me. But he's the one who dragged me out here, and I'm more than capable of handling myself.

Jude leads us to the bar, where a girl with a jet-black bob and neon pink eyeliner is leaning over it scanning the room. When her eyes land on Jude a smile crawls her face, and it's so big and filled with energy, it makes my stomach hurt.

I'm not sure why I care which girls Jude's been with since I didn't save my virginity when he walked away either. But the same way he's possessive when it comes to me, I can't help the jealousy that breezes to the surface when a beautiful woman looks at him.

"Jude." She pulls the towel off her shoulder and slaps it on the bar, running around it to him to give him a hug.

She practically jumps into his arms, even if he only gives her a one-armed pat and doesn't release my hand.

"Hey, Candy."

She steps back and holds his shoulders for a minute, sizing him up, before releasing him. Her eyes move to me and her eyebrows pinch.

"This is Fel." He holds up my hand.

"Interesting. Jude with a girlfriend."

I'm not sure what to make of her comment. Or the fact that he doesn't argue with her when she calls me his girlfriend. Instead, he tugs me along to follow her to the bar.

"You're here for Blaze, right?" Candy reaches for a bottle off the shelf behind her and pours a drink, sliding it in his direction. "I think he mentioned you coming by."

Jude nods, sliding the shot to me. "I'm driving."

A wild, high-pitched laugh bursts out of her like she can't believe what he just said. "Alrighty then."

"I need you to do me a favor." He guides me onto one of the stools, before leaning across the bar and pinning Candy with his stare. "Keep an eye on Fel real quick while I chat with Blaze."

"Wait, what?" I spin on the stool to face him.

I didn't come all this way for him to put me in the corner and make me wait. Especially not with some girl who looks at Jude like she's waiting to sit on his dick again.

"Felicity," he warns.

"Don't *Felicity* me." I grab his arm and force his body to turn toward mine. "Why did you even bring me with you?"

Candy steps back and pretends to be drying glasses, but I can tell from the gleam in her eyes she's listening.

"Because I wanted to spend time with you."

"By leaving me at the bar?"

“By bringing you with me to the bar.” He sighs, standing up tall and holding my arms at my sides as he towers over me. “I’ll be quick. Just trust me.”

“Trust.” I can’t help but let out an unamused chuckle. “You sure use that word a lot.”

He frowns but doesn’t bother acknowledging the fact that I’m right. Leaning down, he kisses me on the top of the head and then walks away, meeting up with some blonde chick with giant breasts, who leads him out the back.

*Wonderful.*

I turn on my stool and grab the whiskey Jude abandoned, taking a large drink of it, even if it burns.

“So, you and Jude.” Candy props her elbows on the bar in front of me, not taking the hint that I’m pissed off, and she’s the last person I want to talk to.

I tip my glass up at her, not really confirming or denying because I still don’t know exactly what *me and Jude* are.

Bringing the glass to my lips again, I drain the rest of the liquid and set it back on the counter.

My head is swimming, but at least it takes the edge off my irritation.

“What about us?” I ask, the whiskey already making my defenses slippery.

“It’s just, I’ve never seen Jude with a chick.” She leans against the counter, focusing past me like she’s trying to

picture it. “I mean not like this.”

She means *more than him just fucking them*, which is not something I want to think about.

“We’ve known each other for a long time.”

I’m not sure why I’m entertaining this conversation considering my mood, but the more the whiskey settles, I’m loosening up.

“All right.” Candy scans the room once more and frowns when she sees guys getting rowdy in the corner. Rolling her shoulders back, she snaps upright. “Calm the fuck down or take it outside.”

Her sharp pitch makes me jump, and I realize this tiny girl with bright pink eyeliner is actually kind of scary. The guys must agree because they instantly settle. And even if I don’t like her friendliness with Jude, I admire her confidence.

“So how do you know Jude?” I finally ask, not able to help myself.

A smile ticks in the corner of her mouth that makes my stomach flutter. “You’re worried he fucked me, right? Because you like him?”

Like him. Love him. *Belong to him.*

I shake my head, but she sees right through it, so there’s no use. “Maybe.”

It must be the whiskey because I shouldn’t have admitted that.

Candy's neon green fingernails tap on the bar top, one by one as she watches me squirm. A final tap and her smile slowly shifts from devious to sweet. "Don't worry, there's never been anything between me and Jude, if that's what you're wondering. Unless you count him piercing my labia."

My eyes go wide, dropping down her body in realization as my cheeks blanch.

"Wait, seriously?"

She shrugs. "Blaze likes it."

The way her eyes twinkle when she mentions Blaze makes it clear I'm worrying over nothing. Jude left me with Candy because she's Blaze's girlfriend. And I'm the dumb girl so obsessed with him I didn't see it.

"I like your bracelets." Candy reaches across the bar and spins a sun and moon charm between her fingers.

"Thanks, I made them."

"Damn girl." She fans her face. "That's really good. You should start a business or some shit."

"It's what I'm trying to do." If only it didn't feel like an uphill battle most days.

"Hey, where're our drinks, Candy Kane." Some guy shouts from the other end of the bar.

Her eyes narrow before she turns to face him. Volatile, terrifying. I'm not sure how he doesn't see it.

"Not serving you a fucking thing if you ask me like that."

“I’m a paying customer.”

“I don’t care if you’re Jesus Christ himself.” She taps her forehead, chest, then each shoulder in the form of a cross, and I can’t figure out if she’s actually religious or messing with him. “You talk to me like that, and I kick you out of my bar.”

“It’s Blaze’s bar.”

His comment makes her stand up taller, venom leaking from her eyes, while the most wicked smile stretches her face. “And I’m Blaze’s girl, in case you forgot. I don’t think your VP would appreciate how you’re talking to me, do you?”

Finally, that shuts the guy up. Whoever Blaze is, the simple mention of his name and status, has the guy shrinking in on himself.

“Give me one sec, babe. I gotta go serve these assholes now that they’re going to behave.” She pats the bar top in front of me. “I might not like ‘em, but I’m not passing up their money.”

Candy winks, before disappearing to the other side of the bar. By the time she gets there, they’re all laughing like old friends who weren’t just shouting profanities at each other.

I’m used to people having to act a certain way around others. Polite, pretend. This place is all rude and raw, but I can’t say I mind it.

“Haven’t seen you in here before.”

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of someone leaning a little too close to me at the bar. His blond hair is short and



messy. And when I turn to him, he smiles like he thinks highly of himself.

Only—his eyes.

Something violent brews beneath the surface.

*And the soul always knows.*

“Mark,” some other guy shouts at him from across the bar. But Mark doesn’t bother looking, flipping the guy off instead.

“Fine, your death wish.” Another guy at their table laughs.

Mark ignores the threat and looks at the glass sitting in front of me. “Can I get you another drink?”

“No.”

While I didn’t mind that my head was swimming while talking to Candy, I don’t like that I’m foggy left alone at the bar.

Mark leans closer. Vodka heavy on his breath as he licks his lips. “What if I got you a little something more then.”

“I’m here with someone.” I shift my body as far away from him as I can, elbows on the bar, pretending like it’s enough to ignore him.

“I don’t see him around.” Mark makes a show of pretending to look.

“He’s talking to someone real quick.”

“Talking.” Mark chuckles. “Yeah, I saw him disappear with Daisy into the back.”

My stomach sours.

“Mark,” Candy yells from across the bar. It seems everyone in here knows this is a bad idea except for him.

“Oh, come on,” he says to Candy. “The girl and I are just talking.”

“I have a name.” I pin him with a glare.

He smiles at me finally acknowledging him. “And I’d love to hear it.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Feisty, I like it. Redheads are always so much fucking fun for that reason.”

He reaches out for my hair, and the energy in the room shifts. Static electricity forming a current. A pulse sweeping my spine.

Because I sense him.

I smell Jude before I see him. Or maybe, his rage is just that palpable. But one moment it’s just me and Mark at the bar and the next, Jude has Mark’s arm twisted behind his back and he’s slamming Mark’s face into the bar top.

“Warned you.” Some guy across the bar laughs at what’s happening.

Jude slams Mark’s face into the bar top again and blood splatters all over it. He shoves Mark from his stool and tosses him to the ground. An animalistic wail releases as Mark slumps to his knees.

But Jude doesn't acknowledge Mark's pain. Instead, he turns to me. His pupils blown wide with rage as he scans me. Almost like he's confirming I'm untouched. Finally, a hint of a dark smile stretches his face, and he moves in to brush my hair off my face.

“Just can't stay out of fucking trouble, can you, Red?”



# Fel

MY ATTENTION SPLITS BETWEEN Jude standing in front of me and Mark, climbing to his feet as he holds his bloody face in his hands.

“Was that really necessary?”

“Did you say he could touch you?”

“No.”

Jude shrugs, as if that's enough of an explanation. He's not the least bit guilty about hurting someone for trying to brush my hair off my shoulder. I shouldn't be surprised after I witnessed him stab a knife through someone's hand, and nearly slit his throat, but the rage that lives in him finds ways to catch me off guard.

“Sorry about that.” Someone stops beside Jude.

Demonic images cover every inch of exposed skin that isn't his face. Dark hair buzzed, lips ticked up in a smirk as he scans the scene with amusement.

“Blaze, this is Fel.” Jude wraps an arm around my shoulders.

Blaze?

This is his bar, and the blood splattered all around is presumably from one of his guys. Still, here he is apologizing to Jude. When he said Blaze was like an older brother, he wasn't lying, because Jude can't seem to do wrong here, even if he isn't a member of their crew.

Blaze works his jaw, scanning me over but not saying hello. Protectiveness bleeds from his rigid stance as he seems to be trying to put the two of us together in his head.

Finally, his gaze cuts back to Jude. “You guys should stay for a bit. Chill. The party's about to get started.”

Jude shakes his head, unlatching from me long enough to reach out his hand. “Thanks for the offer, man. But we're taking off.”

Blaze slaps his palm against Jude's and pulls him in for a half hug, saying something low enough that I can't hear it, before pulling away.

“Nice to meet you, Fel.” Blaze finally acknowledges me, holding out his hand.

When I take it, he holds mine tight. Weighing my fate in his grip. The faintest hint of a smile finally breaking through, and I hope it means he finds me worthy of a man I'm drowning for.

“Come back some time,” Candy yells over my shoulder.

She bounces with her wave and her hair swishes at her shoulders. She reminds me of Echo—sweet and salty. Sugary and bitter. Never clear on what side you're going to get.

Blaze lets me go, walking over to Candy, and they're practically making out over the bar as Jude pulls me away. Mark's in the corner with ice on his face, and he doesn't so much as look in our direction as we pass.

I get the impression the people that come here are used to trouble, and I'm not sure what to think about the fact that Jude isn't the least bit intimidated by it. If anything, he fits in.

Jude is quiet as he leads me to the car, holding the door open for me while I climb in. It's getting chilly as the sun starts to dip below the horizon, and Jude must notice my shivering because he hits the button to close the roof before starting the engine.

As much as I loved the feel of the air on my skin driving here, the warmth of the heater is comforting.

We head back down the road in silence. He plants his hand on my thigh, stroking my fingers to the tune of the music. Every brush teases the inside of my leg, and each time, I have to clench my thighs.

Blood splatter paints Jude's shirt, and he wears it like a trophy of all the sick things he'll do in my name.

We're almost to the highway that heads straight back to LA when Jude takes a left and goes in the opposite direction.

“Where are you going?”

“For a drive.” He squeezes my leg.

It’s getting dark, so it’s harder to read his face when he refuses to look at me. But he’s grinding his jaw and every muscle is tense.

“Did something happen back there?”

“You mean besides some douche thinking he can put his hands on you?” Jude’s glare cuts in my direction.

Even if I know he’s not happy about drunk Mark, I also know Jude’s using him as an excuse for whatever’s actually bothering him.

“I’m talking about whatever you and Blaze met about.”

His grip on my thigh tightens, but he stays quiet. His jaw works so slowly that I almost miss it. And unlike the times when Jude is tight-lipped because he’s keeping things from me, I think whatever he’s holding back right now tears him up inside.

We reach the coast and Jude pulls off the road. He stops us where the car faces the sunset and puts it in park. Tipping his head back, he closes his eyes. The weight of whatever he’s carrying fills every inch of the car.

His fingers graze the skin of my inner thigh. A pendulum ticking back and forth in the silence. Wrong. Right.

The beginning. The end.

“Jude, you’re worrying me.” I turn in my seat to face him, grabbing onto his hand with both of mine. “What’s wrong?”



He tips his head to the side to look at me, and I'm not sure I've ever seen him this defeated. "I need to tell you something you aren't going to like."

"Okay..." It feels so drawn out my stomach's in knots.

My heart pounds as if one more confession is all it will take to break it free from my ribs.

Jude sits up taller, grazing his thumb back and forth over the back of my hand. Pausing for a moment before he pulls his fingers from mine and reaches for his phone in his pocket. He flips through it for a few minutes quietly.

"Here." He hands it to me.

I've known Jude for years. I've seen sides of him no one else has, and this man sitting beside me with barely any fight left, isn't him.

Taking the phone from his hand, I hope he doesn't spot the goosebumps prickling my arms, but one look at the screen, and I'm sure there's no hiding it.

The screen illuminates with a picture of me at fifteen. I'm sitting in the middle of my bed at our parents' house, reading a book. My hair is in a long braid, swept off to one side like I used to always wear it.

"Keep swiping." Jude wraps his arm around the back of my seat and waits for me to do just that.

I move to the next picture.

It's me again, but this time, I'm standing in front of the mirror brushing my hair.

And the next I'm singing into my hairbrush.

The next I'm in nothing but a T-shirt and underwear because I've stripped off my pajama bottoms to get in the shower.

Then I'm walking into the bathroom.

I was alone in these moments, so there's no reason anyone should have these pictures.

The next few photos follow me gathering things in my room before I head into the bathroom. But when I swipe again, the photos end.

"What are those?" I set the phone down, numb, but still shaking. "Did you take them? Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"No," Jude answers me flatly.

"Is that—" I stumble over my words. "Is that all of them or do they..."

Air—breath—life catches in my throat.

"I deleted the others." He reaches for me, but I pull back.

The sides of the car are closing in, and I'm losing my grip. There's no space in this universe for what's about to burst out of me, much less this car. How can Jude have pictures on his phone from when I was alone at fifteen?

Pictures of moments no one should have been there for.

I open the car door to climb out, almost tripping as my foot meets sand. It tries to drag me backward, but I manage to fight

it. I vaguely hear Jude getting out of the car as well, but my head is crashing like the waves at dusk. A current with no light and no escape.

“Fel.” Jude grabs my arms from behind, spinning me around so fast I almost fall again.

“I don’t understand.” I’m still trying to catch my bearings.

Jude rubs my arms up and down, and part of me feels like he’s the only thing grounding me right now. Proof of my stupidity, as he’s clearly been keeping bigger secrets than I imagined. And like the dumb girl he makes me, I trusted him not to.

“I need you to tell me everything, Jude.” Tears well in my eyes, a salty sting like I’m already drowning in the ocean. “No more lies.”

Jude nods, swallowing hard. The collected, controlled man I’m used to slipping away. Vulnerability sheens his eyes and it’s more terrifying than his stone-cold, lethal stare.

“Back when my dad met your mom, I didn’t think anything of it.” He brushes a hair off my face. “At least not past the point of being pissed that he was making it harder for me to flirt with you.”

Jude closes his eyes and takes a deep breath like he’s preparing himself for whatever he’s about to admit.

“I started to notice him watching you after we moved in. It’s why I didn’t stay after school unless I had practice, and I

didn't like to go out with friends. Something wasn't right, and I had this bad feeling."

Jude squeezes my hands.

"When you told me he was waiting in your room once, I knew something was off. He was the one who sent me to the store to pick up a few things. It didn't make sense."

"What did he do?" I swallow hard, already feeling the answer hanging between us.

"He hid cameras. I found them when you were at the library late one night."

Deep in my chest, a black hole opens to consume me. Sounds are fuzzy, and I can't process what Jude's saying. I never felt comfortable around his dad, and I always thought he looked at me a little too closely, but he was my stepfather, and I thought he cared about my mom enough that I was imagining it.

"I got rid of them." Jude's teeth clench.

"Wait." I shake my head. "When I saw you coming out of their room that day. You were holding something."

*A camera.*

I accused him of filming my mother, even if it didn't really make sense. But now, I see it clearly—the vacant stare in his eyes, his drained face.

"After I found the cameras, I confronted him. But he pretended like he didn't know anything about it. So I had to

find proof.”

“And you found those in his things?”

Jude’s face hardens, and he shakes his head so slowly, time stills. “No.”

He squeezes my hands. The earth is too heavy. The salt too thick as I take in a deep breath.

“I found them in your mom’s dresser.”

Time stops.

I blink, I think. I’m no longer part of existence.

I shake my head because Jude can’t be right. My mom was cold, but she’d never do that.

“No.” It comes out a choked whisper.

Jude reaches up and grazes his fingers over my cheek, which is when I realize I’m crying because his hands feel wet on my skin.

“She needed money, my dad had it. He promised not to touch you if she let him...”

“Film me?” I finish his sentence, and he nods. “How could she? And how could you know that?”

“I went to her, thinking she could help stop him because I didn’t know her involvement at the time.”

My head’s shaking involuntarily as my mind rejects his confession.

“I tried to stop it. I threatened to expose them. But your mom took matters into her own hands. Instead of going to the police as I asked, she turned my dad in to the cops for embezzlement, and she slit her wrists to hide their secrets.”

My eyes burn with tears. I can barely see as Jude hauls me against him. He cocoons his arms around me, absorbing every shake of my bones as I choke on my sobs.

For years he let me hate him. Either because he thought I wouldn't believe him without proof, or because he thought it was better for my sanity if I was kept in the dark. But there's one thing he never lied about. He was protecting me. From things I couldn't imagine.

I grieved my mother like she deserved my love when she used me.

I'm fighting my choked breath with every inhale. “You should have told me.”

So I could hate him or forgive him, or at least decide on my own how to process this. Instead, he kept me in the dark, and like some twisted butterfly effect, he changed the course of everything.

“I know that now,” Jude admits, breathing me in, and I can't help but let him. “But Fel, there's a reason I'm telling you this...”

An icy chill cools me to the bone as I tip my head back and meet his gaze. Green eyes dark as the forest at night, and I know this gets worse.

“Why?”

“Because...” Jude lets out a sigh that might as well fill the ocean I’m drowning in. “They destroyed the photos and videos back then, so I wouldn’t have any proof against them. There was nothing for the cops to find.”

“But the pictures?”

Jude’s grip on my hips tightens. “Exactly. This afternoon while we were at the bar, someone sent those to me. It’s not over.”





# Fel

*MOM RUNS HER FINGERS through my hair, before splitting it into three to braid it.*

*“What’s wrong?”*

*She might think I’ve been blind to the tension that exists in the house lately, but it’s bleeding from the walls.*

*Mom frowns, and it draws out the wrinkles around her mouth. “You’re too trusting, Felicity.”*

*“Dad always said—”*

*“Your father’s dead,” she snaps. “And may he rest in peace.”*

*Whenever I bring him up, she says that, like it makes up for the fact that she refuses to acknowledge he was ever a part of our lives. She says he died when I was too young to see the full picture, so I still had my illusions intact. That if I knew who he really was I’d have understood it was for the best.*

*I can't understand how losing a parent is ever a good thing —no matter what they've done or what kind of bad runs in their blood. I'm half each person, and whether he and I are dissimilar or not, there's half of myself I'll never fully understand because he's gone.*

*"This was a bad idea." She unravels the braid and starts over.*

*"I can just wear it down if that's easier." I don't care what I look like at these events anyway. It's always her making me up when I'd rather sit in bed and read.*

*She shakes her head. "Steve wants it braided."*

*I have to bite my tongue because I'm not sure why that matters, or why her husband cares so much about how I wear my hair; but I know better than to comment.*

*"Where's Jude?" If I were smart, I'd swallow that question as well, but he disappeared after another blowout last night, and it's killing me not knowing where he is.*

*Usually, he'll at least respond to my texts, but all I'm getting is radio silence.*

*"He's probably blowing off steam or getting into trouble. He's a delinquent." She grits her teeth. Her anger an undercurrent in her tone.*

*I'm not sure why she's always calling him a delinquent. He's the football captain, he's on the honor roll, girls flock to him. He might be a bit of an asshole with a major ego, but he doesn't get into actual trouble.*

*“Will he be at the party?”*

*Mom tugs my hair as she braids it, her grip more forceful as she pulls two pieces over each other. “Hopefully not.”*

*“Won’t Steve be upset?”*

*Mom breathes out a chuckle. “There’s too much you don’t understand, Felicity.”*

*“Then explain it to me.”*

*“You’ve got your head in the clouds half the time.” She shakes her head. “Or between the pages of your books. There’s a real world with hard decisions that are going to break you if you aren’t careful. Life isn’t pretty, and happily ever afters don’t actually exist. Sometimes, you have to do things whether you like them or not. Survival—that’s all that matters.”*

*Sitting in my mansion on LA’s hillside, I’m not sure what Mom knows about survival, but when her dark blue eyes meet mine in the mirror, I sense a part of her she’s hidden away.*

*“If I’m ever gone, you need to understand something.” She presses her lips together, drawing the color back to them.*

*“Why would you be gone?”*

*“Hypothetically.” But it doesn’t feel hypothetical at all.*

*I swallow at the lump in my throat. “Okay.”*

*“Life is hard, painful, and rarely worth it.” She ties off the end of my braid, running her fingers through the swoop of a*

*curl at the end. “But even if it’s ugly, you do what has to be done for you and yours, so you can survive.”*

*Her gaze meets mine in the mirror again. Mom’s soul is bare with her words. Fear sending her adrift.*

*I nod in answer, not sure if that’s what she’s looking for when my words fail me.*

*Mom stands, patting me on the shoulder and squeezing it gently. “And don’t trust Jude, Felicity. You’ve got a soft spot for him, and soft spots are how you get hurt. Find someone you don’t care about. Never hand a man the power to break you. Promise me.”*

*I nod. “Promise.”*



Hurt is like sand in the ocean.

My feet sink into it, and when I think I’m as far as I’ll go, one wave is all it takes to sneak water between skin and grain and bury me deeper.

Hurt is endless and hides a world beneath what the eyes can see. Ripples on the surface that work with the wind and the earth to drag you further down. While you focus on the waves, they’re nothing compared to the current.

“You’re awake.” Jude stops beside me in the water.

The tide started at my ankles, but now I’m knee-deep. And I can’t remember if I came to it or it came to me. All I know is it sounds peaceful to let it wash me away.

It sounds quiet.

I nod and take in the slowly brightening sky. It's strange how time passes regardless of what we've done or said. The universe doesn't care about our good or bad days. It exists before and after us. While we're sandcastles waiting to be washed away with the waves.

A circle we'll never really escape.

Last night, I fell asleep in the sand, crying in Jude's arms. And I dreamt about my mother. Memories and figments of my imagination clashing against secrets spilling out. I dreamt about promises young girls make when they're too naive to know better.

*But she did.*

She sold me for her own survival to a man who could give her the life she wanted. And even if she absolved herself of her guilt under the guise of not allowing him to touch me, it doesn't make her any less sick.

Fifteen.

Sixteen.

My stomach turns at the thought.

And Jude knew all this time. He knew when I was under the same roof as them and he said nothing. He thought he could save me the pain if he was the only one who carried the burden. It's selfish.

I want to hate him more.

I want to run and never look back.

I want to drown in this ocean of lies around me.

But breathing in the salty air, cool waves tickling my goosebump-ridden skin, I'm cloaked in peace.

Calmness that shouldn't be allowed in moments like this—after lies like his. With people like us.

As much as I should hate Jude for keeping the truth from me, a sick realization woke me in the middle of the night. I'm thankful for every lie that burned his tongue. For every evil thing he did for me.

It was *always* all for me.

I reach out and take his hand. Wind binds us together as our fingers lace, and the earth sighs in relief with a gust that promises my soul to wherever his is going.

We're sick.

Twisted.

The truth is flayed open, and I'd still rather have him than lose him.

"You saved me."

"I did what had to be done."

Turning to face him, I might as well be seeing a different man in the light of the rising sun. Wind whips his hair over his forehead and his tired eyes let me in.

*The eyes are the doorway to the soul.*

And he'd sell his to protect mine.

"You saved me," I repeat again. "And you let me hate you for it."

"It was better than you being hurt by what they did. At least if your hate was focused, you could move on without carrying the weight of what really happened."

I step to him like a magnet because I can't help or deny it. My judgment, my fate—means nothing. If there was good inside me at risk of corruption, our parents already ruined it.

"I don't think I ever really hated you." I wrap my arms up around his shoulders and pull us chest to chest.

Seal us together.

"Maybe you should."

"Well I don't."

"He was so fucked up, Fel. The things he could have done... the things he did. Even before you." Jude rakes his fingers through his hair, maintaining the gap between us even if I don't let him go.

"What do you mean, before me?"

Jude blinks me into focus, cupping my cheeks in his palms and handing me the full force of his breaking heart in his gaze. "Remember when I took that trip to my aunt's house when we were younger? I found papers in some old boxes."

"What did they say?"

His fingers glide into my hair as he pulls it back. “They had information about my mother.”

I figured as much after what Parker said at the club, but it doesn’t stop the knots forming in my gut.

“I found out—” he chokes on the words, blinking as his grip on my hair tightens. “She was fifteen when she had me.”

“Fifteen?” My eyebrows pinch.

A weight drops inside me with the single nod Jude offers.

*Fifteen.* Which can only mean...

“He...”

She was underage.

His father’s obsession with me wasn’t where his sickness started. Veins of his perversion traced even further back. Jude’s existence is proof of it.

“I should have seen it.” He tips his head back and seals his eyes.

Daylight reveals every emotion he tries to hide.

“How could you have?”

Jude shakes his head. “If I had, I could have stopped anything from happening to you before it ever did.”

“Jude.” I grip the sides of his face in my hands and stop him from shaking. To hold him in place. While he’s physically whole, somewhere deep he’s breaking.



“You didn’t know.” My tone is firmer this time, and I will him to believe it.

He pulls me into a hug, melting his body into mine and burying his face in my hair. He kisses the side of my head. My temple. My neck. He holds me like we’ll both fall apart if he doesn’t.

“I was the proof he was sick.” Jude’s body shakes with every word. “It’s why he took me from her. I was the proof, and I brought him to you. He could have done so much worse. I’m sorry, Fel. I failed you. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I brush my fingers over his back. “It’s no one’s fault but theirs.”

“I promise I’ll never let anything bad happen to you again. I promise.”

“I know.” I hug him tighter.

For the first time, I believe him.



# Jude

I HOLD FEL AND wait for reality to hit. For her to push me away and tell me she can't ever forgive me for the secrets I kept.

Instead, she buries herself in my arms. Melts to me like she's never trusted me more.

*Have I fucked her up that bad?*

*Or am I worth her forgiveness?*

For years I believed if I came clean with her, she'd never speak to me again. Her forgiveness didn't balance on the scale of all the wrongs I did. And the fact that she lets me hold her now cracks me wide open.

That, and the knowledge that this is far from finished.

I should have known it wasn't over eleven years ago. Her mother was dead, and my father was locked up. Every loose end tied in a seemingly perfect bow when villains never fall that easy.

There's always a bigger bad pulling the strings.

I suspected her grandparents when Sage handed me proof they've been accepting money from my father's offshore accounts. But something about what her grandfather said at the gala made me question my convictions.

They want Fel back in their world so they can marry her off and cut ties with my sick family for good. They want a better life for her as means of obtaining one for themselves. Only, someone else won't let that happen.

The same person who sent those pictures to my phone yesterday.

They knew I was looking for answers, so they showed their hand just enough to make me aware they're still playing this game. They want me to know the trap is set—I've stepped in it. They're not letting her go.

Neither will I.

Fel's sigh shrinks her against my body. Gentle innocence she lets out with each breath.

I walk us both out of the water and tug her to my lap in the sand. Her back is to my chest, and I hope my evil isn't strong enough to spread.

*Forgiveness is a door to all the bad I've hidden from her.*

She's relaxed now. Coming down from the adrenaline of last night. If I were smart, I'd take her home. But with my arms wrapped around her, it's impossible to move.

Salty air fills my lungs, and ocean waves rock my mind in a chaotic world. I'm not ready to let this moment go.

Fel accepts the fact that I kept things from her, and I want to believe we'll walk away with her understanding intact. Because my admission should have pushed her away when all it did was draw her closer.

I carried the burden for both of us. I protected her and let her hate me for it.

*For her own good.*

She's too good for me and always has been. Proven once more in this moment.

Trusting me.

Forgiving me.

Understanding me.

I don't deserve it.

Fel stirs in my arms, blinking up at me. There's a lightness in her gaze I haven't seen since we were younger. Peace that puts the demons to sleep, and I wish it were that easy.

I tighten my arms on her waist to stop time from corroding her with the dark realization this nightmare is far from over.

"Tired?" I ask, dipping my nose to her neck and breathing her in.

"Just thinking."

I kiss the top of her head, her usual strawberry scent replaced with salty ocean air and sand.

She's as endless as water, and just as impossible to contain.

"We can go if you need to." She shifts against my back, sitting up taller and resting her head against my shoulder. "We were out here all night and I'm sure you've got appointments today."

"Echo took care of it." I texted her while Fel was sleeping last night, knowing we wouldn't be back anytime soon.

Part of me keeps waiting for reality to crash down on her. For Fel to blame me for my part in not helping her sooner. I wait for her to realize I'm just as bad as them for keeping my mouth shut.

Her expression doesn't so much as shift. Eyes wide open like the ocean before me, revealing all her secrets. Silence that stretches as long as this beach as we read the only truth that ever really mattered.

*Mine or not, I've always protected her.*

Fel tips her face up. "So, when you saw me again all these years later, you didn't know there was still footage out there?"

"No."

"But you suspected?"

"Not that there was footage." I was an idiot, and I should have, but I was seventeen and wanted to burn the bridge and be done with it. "But I always suspected there was unfinished business."

"Why?"

I shrug. “I just had a feeling after a while. Your grandparents wanted me out of your life the second everything went down. They had their reasons, but I don’t think it was as simple as what they said.”

“Like them trying to marry me off to a rich stranger?”

“I wasn’t aware of that at the time.” My jaw clenches with the thought someone else could have had her. “But if it was really over, why would your grandparents still talk to my father? Something wasn’t right.”

“Wait.” Her spine stiffens. “What do you mean, my grandparents still talk to your father?”

In the spiral of confessions last night, I must have skipped over that one.

“They still visit him on occasion.”

Her expression sours with the realization.

“I asked Sage to do some digging, and it turns out he’s still financially supporting them.”

“Hence them trying to marry me off to someone with plenty of money.”

I brush her hair from her face and wish I could make this all hurt less. “Exactly. Except, that would cut ties for good, and instead, you ended up walking into my tattoo parlor. So either it’s a massive coincidence, or someone had other plans. How did you hear about us anyway?”

Her eyebrows pinch. “Maren told me about it. Why? You think there’s really more to it?”

“I don’t know what I think anymore.” There’s never been a truer statement.

“And you don’t know who sent you the pictures?”

“No, fucker blocked his number. I’ve got some people looking into it.”

Fel spins in my lap until she’s straddling me. A tiny thing in my arms compared to the endless ocean behind her. So fucking small and temporary in a world of big teeth.

“Is that why you went to see Blaze?” Her arms tighten around my shoulders. “Because of his *connections*.”

She’s too smart for her own good, as always. One step inside the Twisted Kings bar and I’m sure she saw through all the shit that goes down there.

“Blaze has a guy in the city helping me figure out where the pictures came from, but that’s not why I was there. They came in while we were at the bar.”

“Hmm.” A devious little smile climbs her cheeks.

“What?”

“Just, if we weren’t at the bar because of the pictures, then why did we go there? And why did you suddenly go from telling me nothing to spilling your guts? Something else is up, and you promised no more secrets.”

Damn ocean eyes seeing through everything.



“Why does it matter?” I bite at my cheek.

“Oh my god, Jude.” Her eyes widen. “You just hid a smile. You never smile.”

“I smile.”

“No. You smirk. Or grimace. Sometimes you laugh. But a genuine *happy about something* smile—never. I can’t even believe it. Do it again.”

She bounces in my lap, and under any other circumstances I’d bury us in the sand and fuck her, but it’s so sweet and innocent. I’m lost in her smile, bright as the California sun.

“I’m not smiling.” I stick to my original statement because even if I might have felt it, there’s no way I’ll admit it to her.

She shakes her head before tipping her face back with a groan. “Always so big and tough. Can’t even admit it.”

“You like me tough.” I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close, grinding her over my lap. “And big.”

“Jude.” She moans, but she rolls her hips again, like the dirty girl she is just for me. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Me trying to fuck you is never to distract you.” I circle her hips again and her eyes roll back. “It’s because your pussy is the paradise I belong in. I’ll fuck it when and where I want without needing any other reason.”

“Come on,” she pleads, forcing a pout from her perfect strawberry lips. “You promised no more secrets. Why were we at the bar?”

“Now who’s playing dirty?” I smack her on the ass, and she lets out a sweet little yelp.

“I learned from the best.”

Narrowing my eyes, I squeeze her ass in my hands and secretly love her comment. Me rubbing off on her might be my new favorite thing.

“So tell me.” Her voice is so quiet this time, the wind tries to carry it away.

And as we sit with her lips brushing mine, the only girl in the world who matters in my arms, I’m not sure why I’m still keeping secrets.

After yesterday, one thing became frighteningly clear, there are still forces bigger than us out there trying to tear us apart. But the difference between the seventeen-year-old idiot I was back then, and the man holding her now, is two things: I’m no longer afraid of what waits on the other side of this, and I won’t lose her to them again.

Reaching in my pocket, I fish out what I’m looking for. “Blaze has *connections*, as you so eloquently pointed out.”

She smiles at my comment.

“And I needed something specific, so he agreed to help me find it.”

Fel pulls back as I lift up the ring between us.

“You’d think green diamonds would be easier to find in LA. But on short notice, not so much.”

“Jude...” Her fingers skate over the emerald stone, seated on a simple platinum infinity band.

“You used to say your color for me was green. But I like to think it’s actually my color for you because no one sees you like I do Fel—through my eyes. And even on days where you think you’re a mess, or a product of what they made us, you need to know that’s not who you are to me. In my eyes, you’re the rarest, most beautiful green diamond. Shaped by their pressure. And instead of it destroying you, you grew more beautiful through the pain.”

Her fingers shake as they hover over the ring. Chest heaving. Her lashes blink and a tear drops between us.

I grab her hand and slip the ring onto her finger. “I don’t care if being with you is wrong, nothing feels more right. I meant what I said. We’re inevitable. I’m in love with you, and I’m done fighting this.”

Fel blinks up at me with tears pooling in her eyes so bright, and she’s never looked more beautiful. Freckles sprinkling her cheeks like every wish I’ve made she held in her heart, so they’d have a home.

“I love you too.”

“You better.”

She laughs at that. Free. Wild. Untethered.

“Fuck the rest of the world. You’re mine, Felicity Alcott. Please say I can be yours.” I hold her cheeks in my hands as tears start to pour. “Marry me.”

“Of course.” She stumbles on the words in a half laugh, and a half cry. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, I’m not joking. *You* better not be.” She playfully shoves at my chest.

“Fuck no, I’m not.”

I pull her face to mine and kiss her lips. Taste her tears, her love, our sin. I let us bleed out together.

She wraps her body around me and kisses me with every bit of her soul.

And when we pull back, she’s smiling so big it breaks my heart in ways I didn’t think possible. Because if anything happens to her, it will be the end of me.

“I can’t believe you did this.” Her eyes drop to the diamond.

“Just for you.”

Closing her eyes, she nuzzles into the side of my neck. “It’s almost perfect.”

“Almost?”

She pulls back and nods, and I don’t like the tone of her voice. Her gaze hardens with a cloud of darkness hovering over this moment.

“There’s only one way to fix this.” Her expression tightens. “I have to go see them. They’re the key.”

Her eyes dart once more to the ring on her finger.

“No.” She’s got to be fucking kidding me right now. I protected her back then. This is my battle to finish. “I’m still not convinced your grandparents didn’t send me the pictures. Or at the very least, aren’t in on it.”

A breeze wipes her smile from her face. “I need the truth, Jude. All of it.”

*Truth*, when all I’ve ever told her is lies.

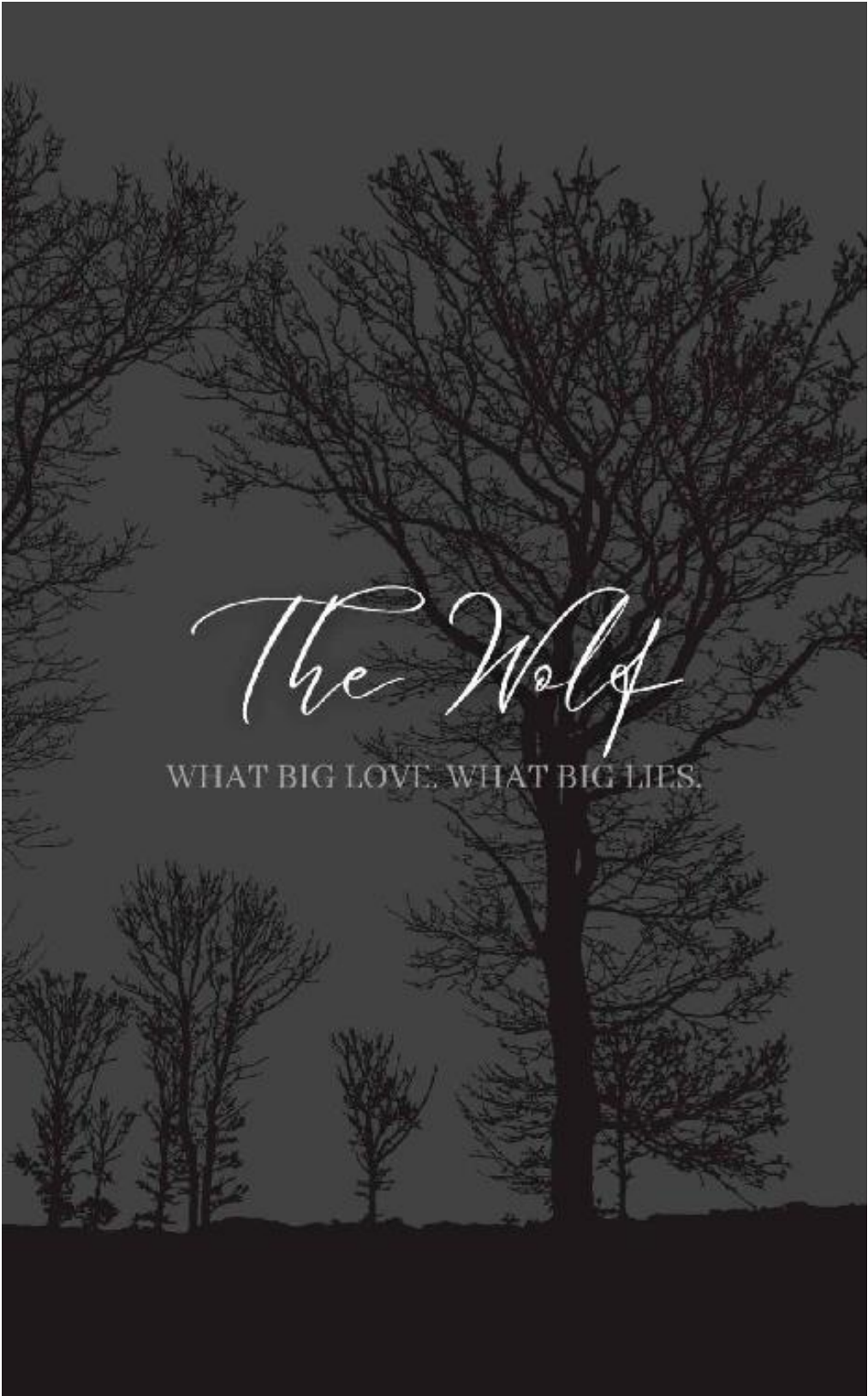
She can only trust me so much when I’ve proven over and over again, she shouldn’t. She’s right. Even if it makes me sick to my stomach. There’s only one way to make up for the years I spent hiding things from her.

Holding her chin up, I lose myself in her eyes. “If you do this, I refuse to lose you to them again.”

“You won’t,” she whispers, and like the air senses turmoil brewing, the wind kicks up. “I need you to trust me to finish this for good. To the end, remember?”

“To the end.”

Only this time, we might actually reach it.



# *The Wolf*

WHAT BIG LOVE, WHAT BIG LIES.







# Jude

FEL STANDS IN FRONT of the full-length mirror in my bathroom with her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. Her fingers fidget in her hair, and she's radiating nervous energy.

She'd probably rather be in jeans and a crop top, wearing a collection of bracelets, but she's stepping into their world today. And it was ingrained in her at a young age to keep up appearances.

"How do I look?" She runs her fingers down her teal sundress.

*Beautiful. Gorgeous.*

*The death of me.*

I walk up behind her and plant my hands on either side of her hips. Her silky dress butter as I run my palms around her stomach and tease the tops of her thighs. "You never look anything but perfect."

The smile that climbs her cheeks splinters my soul because it's a reminder that I'm an idiot for agreeing to her plan.

I'm tempted to chain her to my bed and forfeit this promise, but I know better.

"Perfect," I repeat, kissing her bare shoulder and inhaling her sweet, strawberry scent. Her blush follows the path my lips draw on her skin. "But I still think you'd look better naked, riding my dick."

Fel spins around and plants both hands on the center of my chest, pushing me back a step. She tries to force a frown, but the red spots dotting her neck and cheeks give her away. My crude comments turn her on, so I don't bother taking them back.

Besides, something has to distract me from the fact that she's going to see her grandparents today. It's my fault it's even necessary when I should have finished this shit years ago. This mess isn't hers to clean up.

My father's sick perversion started it. Her mother's spineless promises fed it. Protecting her is my responsibility.

The only reason I don't say that out loud is because, whether I like it or not, she needs this.

She's been sheltered from the truth her whole life, and this is her way of reclaiming her power. A way for her to hear the truth straight from their lying mouths. She needs to understand I'm not the only one who hurt her. Closure is within her grasp, and the worst thing I could do is take that away.

Besides, I still haven't found anything to suggest her grandparents had anything to do with the photos that were sent

to my phone. It's possible they're pawns as much as she is—even if they're far from innocent.

Reaching for her hand, I draw the green diamond to my lips and kiss the spot it lives.

*None of this matters because she's mine.*

While the barbells mark her body, this ring marks her soul. 'Till death do us part, and even then, I refuse to let her go.

"We don't have time for that." I swear the girl reads my mind.

But as she tries to step back, I grip the flimsy fabric of her sundress and tug her tiny body against me. "We always have time for that."

"Not today." She frowns.

I hate that she's right.

I hate that she's going to brunch while I'll be at the shop pretending like I'm not going out of my mind.

Time needs to make a decision—speed up or slow down. Anything to skip the hours in between this moment and seeing her later.

Tugging her hand, I lead her out of the bathroom. She might have spent years thinking I'm a master manipulator, but it's nothing compared to what her family is capable of. They know her almost as well as I do, and they know exactly what to say to get her on their side. Ring on her finger or not, they'll weave doubt.

Walking Fel out of my apartment is a death sentence for my sanity.

“Damn, Felicity. You look pretty.” Echo winks, when we reach the bottom of the steps. She’s perched against the brick smoking a joint.

Their friendship still bothers me, but at least I know what to expect with Echo. She’s only a bad influence to a certain extent because she doesn’t actually let shit happen to the people she cares about. Besides, the more eyes looking out for Fel right now, the better.

Fel swishes her dress with a twist of her hips before doing a little curtsy. “Thank you.”

“This is for you, I’m guessing.” Echo points to a car idling at the curb before taking another hit of her joint. “Square’s been staring at me for the past five minutes.”

I have no doubt about it. Not many people know what to make of Echo with her dual toned hair and tattoos. Especially people from Fel’s world.

*Fel’s world.*

It used to be mine once. My family had more money than hers. More prestige. More status.

More everything. And it was stained in blood.

“Oh, and Jude, your ten-thirty is here.” Echo lifts off the brick and puts out her joint, popping a piece of gum into her mouth.

Girl is the definition of having an oral fixation. Whether she's smoking, chewing, or talking, her mouth is never not doing something.

"Be right in."

Echo nods before disappearing into the shop, and I turn to Fel, who's biting her lip once more. The sun is veiled in LA smog, giving her cheeks a warm glow that doesn't bury her nerves.

"You'll be here tonight." It's not a question because I refuse to entertain my fiancée sleeping anywhere else.

She nods, her eyes darting to the car, before looking back at me.

"I can go with you." Doesn't matter how many times I offer, she won't say agree to it.

"I need to do this."

Lifting up on her toes, she plants her lips on mine, and like every time since the first time I tasted her, her kiss seals my fate.

She pulls back and walks away, glancing a final time over her shoulder before climbing into the car. Red hair whipping around her with the wind. An expression too similar to the one she wore at her mother's funeral.

A reminder of the first time I saw her crying over her father's grave. And I can't help but wonder if it's a bad omen that our beginning and end are marked with death.

Back then we were two kids covered in the blood of our families. Not yet old enough to understand the depth of what we were wading in. But now, as the car drives away and rips my heart down the center, I send half of it with her.

It takes everything in me to walk into the shop instead of hopping in my car to follow her. I'd love nothing more than to be at her side, but I promised her this. A final farewell until I seal her to my soul for eternity.

Luckily, piercings keep me busy for the next hour, but before I know it, I'm hiding in the office, staring at my phone every other minute wondering when I'm going to hear from her.

Crew finally makes his way into the shop around noon, walking in with bloodshot eyes and his knuckles split open.

“What’s wrong with you?”

He drops onto the couch in the office, shaking his head. Those cushions might as well have his body imprinted on them because he sleeps here more than he does at home.

“Nothing.”

“You look like shit.”

He tosses his arm over his eyes. “Rude.”

“What do you want me to say? Good morning?”

Crew shrugs but doesn't uncover his face because he doesn't actually care. He's spiraling lately, and I'm not sure what's causing it. It's rare Crew talks about anything more than

tattoos, women, fighting, or drinking. Defense mechanisms he uses to bury shit he hides so well.

Not even Sage, with his all-seeing eyes, has been able to figure him out.

Much less me, who hasn't been paying attention to anyone since Fel walked back in my life.

"Where's your chick?" Crew asks, his face still covered.

Of all the days, he has to give a shit today when I'd rather be distracted.

"Busy."

"Away from here? Finally got smart and left your ass, huh?"

Sage stops in the doorway. "Dude, you're fucking asking for it. Idiot put a ring on her finger."

That gets Crew's attention. He throws his legs over the couch to sit up with his eyes wide in shock.

"Tell me you fucking didn't?"

I don't bother responding because he won't understand. Proven by the laugh that explodes out of him.

"He's lost it, right?" Sage crosses his arms over his chest.

Both eye me like I ate a bullet, but I don't give a shit. They can think what they want.

I light a joint and inhale a long drag, waiting for it to settle the panic running a race in my bloodstream. It's rare for me to feel out of control, and that's all Fel does. Chaos, fixation. The urge to overanalyze, so I don't miss anything.

“It’s been a couple of weeks since you’ve been to a fight man, you gonna go tonight?” Sage tips his chin up at me, and I realize I’ve been zoning out.

“Maybe.”

“He means no.” Crew leans back and chuckles.

“Look in the fucking mirror.”

Crew’s face is black and blue around one eye from a nasty beating at his last fight. But the severity of the bruising isn’t what’s concerning, it’s that it’s there at all. Crew doesn’t lose to anyone. He’s quick, brutal, deliberate. There’s only one way people get the chance to beat the shit out of him, and that’s when it’s his choice. The bruises mean he wanted the pain, but I don’t know why.

“You should see the other guy.” Crew smirks.

“He was basically a puddle by the end of that shit.” Sage braces his hands on the doorframe overhead, looking at Crew. “That was fucked. If there were rules, there’s no way in hell they’d let you back in there.”

“Good thing there aren’t then.”

He’s such a sadistic fucker.

“Besides, you’ve been MIA as well. What gives?”

Sage flexes his fingers. “Saving my hands for the shit that actually makes us money.”

“Pussy.”

“I’ll be back.”



Crew shakes his head, looking annoyed all of a sudden. I'm not sure what goes on in his head that he's constantly trying to escape, but half the time the dude looks one second away from crawling out of his skin.

Or maybe it's the weed getting to my head.

This is some good shit.

Echo pops into the doorway and glances from one of us to the other, frowning. "Am I the only one who works around here?"

"Apparently," Crew answers, being a dick.

She doesn't bother acknowledging him, looking at me instead. "Fel's friend is here."

"Maren?" What the fuck would she be doing here? She knows where Fel's at. The two of them are constantly texting.

"Obviously."

Even Echo's annoyed and unbearable to be around today. Not a good sign.

Hopping up, I pass the joint off to Sage before making my way to the front of the shop. And sure enough, Maren is standing in the lobby wearing a hot pink tank top, black pants, and leopard heels, looking like she's headed to a club in the middle of the day.

Except, that's how she normally dresses.

"What's up?" I stop in front of her.

“Oh, *hello* to you too, Jude.” She turns to face me, narrowing her gaze. “How are you? *I’m fine*. How are you? *Lovely*.”

“Are you done?”

I don’t care how she’s doing; I just care why she’s here.

Maren shakes her head, looking annoyed.

Join the club.

“Fel mentioned something to me the other day after she stupidly agreed to marry you.” She rolls her eyes like it annoys her to even think about it.

At least all of our friends are in agreement over the fact that they think we’re making the worst decision of our lives.

“What did she mention?”

“She wanted to know how I heard about Twisted Roses.”

I wasn’t aware Fel asked Maren about it. The beach is the last time I mentioned it.

“Here.” Maren hands me a business card with an address scribbled on the back. “I got it from this guy at a bar. I was admiring the work on his arm, and our conversation went from tattoos to piercings. He said if I wanted to get my nose pierced, he knew just the place. Not sure why it matters though.”

So it really was random that Fel walked in here when she did?

I should be relieved, but I’m not.

“Anyway, I’m on my way out, so if you want to give that to her when she gets back, that’s all I know.”

“Thanks.” I nod.

I might not like Maren, but at least she’s been helpful.

Maren skims me over but doesn’t make a move to leave right away. “Be good to my girl, Jude.”

*Like I wouldn’t?*

But I don’t bother responding because there’s only one girl I’ll explain myself to.

Maren doesn’t seem to mind my silence. She searches my gaze for some honesty, and her expression softens the longer she stares. She knows I’ll protect Fel, even if she doesn’t understand our relationship.

Hate me all she wants; Fel is my world.

Finally, Maren nods once. The smallest tick of acceptance for something she can’t stop if she tried, before she walks out the door and leaves me with the card in my hand.

I flip it over. Back and forth. Nothing to see—except my stomach sinks as I register what’s on the front. Flipping it once more, I stare at the symbol in the corner. The company name might not be familiar, but I’d recognize that mark anywhere.

And it’s crystal clear. Fel walking back in my life wasn’t random at all.



# Fel

THIS MANSION USED TO feel like my home, and not just haunted walls with ghosts around every corner. Some I've been acquainted with for years, while others are only now revealing themselves to me.

I pause in the large foyer, the cold stone tiles stretching before me. Empty space that used to feel like it housed a family. Or at least, some version of that.

After Mom died and Jude's dad went to prison, it was nothing more than a memory of what once was.

My grandparents sold their house in New York and moved to California, so I could finish high school with my friends. Looking back, they probably should have dragged me far away. It would have been easier to heal had I not been soaking in constant reminders of everything that broke me.

Rooms that housed memories I'd replay each time I stepped in them.

My final year of high school I finally understood why my mom refused to acknowledge my father's death. Sometimes it's easier to play pretend.

It's what I did. Lived between these walls like they didn't reek of blood and the secrets seeping from them. I lived among those ghosts, pretending certain doors were walls, and the demons behind them didn't exist.

Lies potent enough to survive until I disappeared to college.

Walking in here now knowing the truth, all I feel are the haunted creatures I was too scared to face back then. Secrets Jude locked away so I wouldn't have to deal with their presence. And I'm not sure how I never saw them for what they were while they stared me in the face.

"Felicity." Carmen steps into the room. Her dark hair is pulled in a tight bun, and not a strand is out of place.

She's worked for my grandparents for the last few years, never wavering from her stone-cold expression. She never smiles, and barely acknowledges people more than the simple act of handing them something. An even temperament is something my grandparents appreciate, and Carmen embodies that quality.

Cool indifference.

It's a quality easier to come by when you value money over love. And in my family, it's all that mattered.

My mother spent her life fighting to live up to my grandfather's expectations. Either make money or marry it.

Which I assume is why my mother went from her father's money, to mine, to Jude's dad's.

Thinking about it now, I'm not sure if it was my mother's fault, my grandparents, or lineage long before our generations.

Bloodlines of Alcotts were groomed with the same intent.

Carmen leads me to the family room like I'm a guest who doesn't know my way around. She waves to the couch before disappearing, but I walk over to the mantle instead.

There's not a speck of dust on the frames, even if they haven't moved or changed in years. Some pictures are of my mom and dad, some are of my mom and Jude's father. Only one has me and Jude together, and we're standing with our parents between us.

We're both younger than I felt at the time we took it. A reminder we were just kids living in their world. Fighting uphill battles we didn't understand.

In the picture, Jude's hair has more blond than it does now. His features are softer and there's not a speck of ink on his skin. I'm not sure how I never noticed back then how much his appearance was an illusion. While this picture is exactly how I remember him, it doesn't *feel* like him at all.

Turning my attention to myself, I'm not sure I've changed at all, inside or out. My long red hair is in perfect waves and my freckles refuse to hide in the light of the sun. I'm dressed in something expensive and uncomfortable, and I remember

Mom adjusting me over and over until the picture was her version of presentable.

Perfection, nothing less. Except when I look closely, my smile doesn't reach my eyes.

The photo takes me back in time like a memory I can walk around in. Jude and his dad were in an ever-lasting stalemate over something he refused to talk about. They fought so often; I stopped thinking too much about it. But that day was different. The lingering tension was on the verge of snapping.

Everything was about to change. Not that I knew it at the time.

You never see the truth of a moment until long after it happens. And even then, the mind plays tricks on you.

“What a lovely surprise.” Grandmother's voice comes up from behind me, and I spin to face her.

It's not a surprise at all. We planned this brunch two days ago, but *appearances* and all.

Her gray hair is pinned off her face and she's wearing one of her church dresses. Fancy enough to make me feel underdressed in an outfit that cost more than what I make in a week at Twisted Roses.

I walk over, and she gives me a polite single armed hug, but when she pulls back, her expression is tense.

Grandfather comes into the room with his usual confidence. Not faltering as he walks over and gives me a forced hug. We've never been close, and he's not affectionate out of love.



It's all pretense, which is fine. At least I know what to expect with him.

He cares about me to the extent of me being his granddaughter with the ability to further his legacy. But that's the limit.

"Felicity." He nods, walking over to the in-room bar and pulling out his nicest scotch.

He pours his usual inch and corks the bottle, walking to his leather chair at the head of the room and taking a seat.

When I lived here, my relationship with them felt less formal. Now, I can't help but feel like this might as well be a business meeting.

Grandfather waves his arm out to the couch, and Grandmother rushes to take a seat. Always eager to please him in any way she can.

I take the seat across from her as Carmen comes through the door and sets three glasses of water on the coffee table in front of us, before leaving again. I'd like to drown my thoughts in martinis right now, but no one offers me one.

Grandfather downs scotch like he'll dry up without it, but women are supposed to be *ladies*. So god forbid.

"How have things been at Maren's?" Grandfather raises his glass to his lips and takes a sip.

He doesn't call it *my* place because he refuses to acknowledge I'll stay there.

“Fine.” I reach for my water to cool my throat.

I know why I’m here; I just need the courage to come out and say it. But the words are stuck, and my mouth is dry. Part of me wishes I’d taken Jude up on his offer to come with me. He calms my nerves in every situation.

“But that’s not why I’m here.” I set my glass back down. “I need to know if what I’ve heard is true.”

Grandmother grips her skirt, wrinkling the fabric. Her nails twist the silk with whatever she’s thinking. But while she looks anxious, Grandfather doesn’t so much as blink. He taps his index finger on his glass once, maintaining his cool expression.

“You’ll have to elaborate.” He takes another sip.

I smooth my fingers over my thighs, trying to find my spine. My grandparents have never been the warmest people, but I don’t think they would try to hurt me.

“Was Mom aware of why Jude’s father wanted to marry her?” I cut straight to the point like it can take the sting away.

Grandfather doesn’t even pause. “Yes.”

His expression is stoic. There’s not so much as a flicker of emotion behind his response.

“And she was okay with it?”

“You have to understand—”

“Tabitha,” Grandfather cuts her off, and she frowns at him, but she doesn’t argue as she sits back and crosses one ankle

over the other.

He taps his whiskey glass with his pinky finger once more, before taking a long drink, watching me the entire time. The air feels thicker than ocean sand saturated with all things trying to pull me under.

He sets the empty glass on the table in front of him. “Your mother knew what she was getting into. The market was struggling, and she found a solution to help the family.”

“So you knew?” My throat closes in on the words.

“I assumed Jude told you as much.” He narrows his gaze. “*He’s* where these questions are coming from, correct?”

I nod, swallowing any illusions they were in the dark about what was happening. They weren’t. My whole life I’ve been a puppet for profit.

“But why?”

It’s a pointless question. If they were aware of what Mom had gotten us into—of what Jude’s father was using her for—and they still let it happen, is there really an explanation I’d accept?

“She knew what had to be done for the good of the family.” Grandfather says. “Everyone has to make sacrifices.”

“She used me.” I can’t breathe. “They had photos, videos. I wasn’t even legal.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not saying I condone his sick preferences. He’ll pay for those sins eventually. But he never

touched you, she assured me of it.”

His tone is cold, uncaring. Like the fact that I wasn't physically touched makes it acceptable. How many times does a person have to tell themselves something in order to believe it? Because as I look between the two of them sitting in front of me, I swear they do. They justify what they did for the lifestyle.

They might not have approved of Mom's choice in a husband, but he bled more money than Wall Street.

“He violated me,” I say, even if my argument is lost in the black hole of this room. “They both did.”

“That's a stretch.” Grandfather sits up straighter, looking like he actually believes his statement. “You're young, Felicity. Live long enough, and you'll understand we all have to pay debts to stay afloat. They aren't always pleasant. Besides, everyone has their vices. Of all people you should know that. After all, you always did have eyes for *your stepbrother*.”

“That's not the same.” Jude and I are no more family now than we were back then.

We were pawns in a bigger game they were playing. There was no love between them, it's clear now. And what did exist is long gone.

“Some would disagree.”

I have to grip the couch not to scream. “You're making excuses for her.”

“She's our daughter, we loved her. Just as she loved you.”

A laugh bursts out of me. “Clearly, she didn’t.”

“She did.”

“Then how could she have done it?” I stand, out of breath and feeling like I’m going to faint. “How?”

“Because I asked her to.” The voice coming from behind me makes my stomach float before it plummets.

He’s gone.

He can’t be here.

I spin so fast I almost fall, and everything inside me breaks as reality shatters like glass around me.

Standing in the doorway is my dead father—except, he isn’t dead at all.



# Fel

MY HEAD SWIMS, AND I'm sure I must be hallucinating. Someone must have slipped something into my drink because reality cracks like old paint on walls so quickly every illusion of my childhood ages ugly in front of me.

Dad is standing in the doorway in a crisp button-down shirt and khakis. A casual expression that is borderline smug, yet devious because he acts as if he hasn't changed my entire view of him in the span of one sentence.

“Dad.” It's foreign on my tongue.

It's been years since I've said it out loud, years since I've seen his face. A face that was frozen in photographs, while this man in front of me has aged.

I wait for him to respond or walk toward me. I wait for him to wrap me in a hug and comfort me like I remember. But just as reality shatters, so do my memories of him.

Mom used to chastise me for glorifying my father, saying I only remembered the good in him because he was dead. And

now, I see it. The hugs he never reciprocated with more than a pat on the back. The long work trips. His empty seat at the dining room table.

She warned me not to idolize him, but it's all I did.

And like him crawling from the grave in front of me, every truth of my childhood slowly reanimates as I stare into his eyes. Visions of a future I could have had if I'd never lost him blur, while what he said cuts through.

“You asked her to?”

The room snaps back into focus, and he becomes clear as day. He's not the calm, comforting man I remember, he's the wolf hiding under the guise of family.

He's just like she was, and for the first time the curtain is pulled back.

“I asked a favor of my wife, and she understood my reasons.”

I shake my head. “She wasn't even your wife at that point.”

“She was always my wife.” Dad's tone has a rough edge for the first time since walking into the room. “A piece of paper doesn't change that. He wasn't interested in her anyway.”

Because he was interested in *me*.

My stomach twists, the words lodging in my throat. It's sick, and what's sicker is that they knew and allowed it. *Accepted* it even.

“I don't understand.”



“I kept an eye; nothing would have happened that I didn’t approve of.”

The way he says it makes me believe him. If one person has held control these past eleven years, it’s him. Something I’m certain Jude didn’t know either.

While we were both too busy focusing on the obvious threats, there was someone else out there all along. Someone who should have loved me as his family and blood but didn’t.

“Why?” I choke out the word and it dies in a room where truth doesn’t exist. “How could you do that to your daughter?”

“Because he’s not a good man, Fel.” Jude turns the corner and pauses in the doorway.

Two burly men rush toward him, pausing only when my father holds up a hand stopping them. They take a step back, but don’t retreat. And just like I remember from when I was younger, my father is flanked by men like the world’s out to get him.

Except, he’s not the victim here. He’s the villain.

Jude’s shoulders are tense as he assesses the situation. He’s wearing the same dark jeans and white T-shirt he was wearing when I left him this morning. Only his eyes are a dark void I’m sinking into. A pit of tar that coats every inch of skin. Burning hot as his gaze skims me, like always, verifying there’s no damage.

“Ah, Jude.” Dad doesn’t bother looking him in the eyes as a vicious smirk ghosts his cheeks. “Good of you to join us.”

Jude walks around Dad, his stare focused on me. And I see everything I need to know in his eyes. Shock. Anger. He didn't know my father was alive any more than I did. But the moment he figured it out, he came for me.

Like he always does.

Like he always promised.

*Like he always will.*

He walks toward me prepared to be my protector in this moment. If only he could grip the universe to stop it from tearing apart. It's a losing battle as the past and present paint a collision of chaos in my head. Something he must sense as pain stains his expression. He let me hate him for years to prevent this very moment. Whether he knew the full truth or not, he tried to save me from an ugly reality time didn't prepare me to face.

"How did you find out?" I ask when Jude stops in front of me.

"Maren stopped by the parlor to give you this." Jude holds out a business card with the address for Twisted Roses written on the back. He flips it over, showing off the emblem on the other side. "It's how she heard about the parlor."

A logo I'm familiar with sits in the corner. A spear with the initials D.A. on either side of it.

*David Alcott.*

It was on my father's company letterhead growing up. And even if the card has no other clear indicator, one thing is

certain. He sent Maren to Jude—and me to him in the process.

Jude folds the card and places it in his back pocket, turning to face my father, standing a fraction of a step in front of me.

“At least you bought her a decent ring.” My father’s gaze drops to where I’m spinning the green diamond infinity band around my finger. “Expensive for a piercer’s salary.”

“I’m more than that.”

“Ah, yes. Moving up.” Dad ticks a finger in the air, and it feels almost mocking. “But we both know you could be so much more. So much you’d never want again.”

“Why do you care what I want?” Jude narrows his gaze.

“I don’t.” Dad shrugs. “But if you want my permission to marry my daughter, there will be expectations.”

“I don’t remember asking.”

“Funny.” Dad smirks, his gaze darkening. “Me either.”

Both of them hold the standoff in silence for a moment. Jude with his arms crossed over his chest like my own personal bodyguard, and Dad like the devil without a care in the world.

Finally, Jude breaks the tension.

“Why don’t you cut to the chase, so you can crawl back into whatever grave you clawed your way out of.”

“Is that any way to welcome me back into the family?”

“You aren’t welcome, and we aren’t family.”

“We will be.” Dad looks at me again. “As intended.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I’m not sure what’s more unsettling, the fact that Dad is here, or that his statement almost sounds like this was his plan all along.

“You think it was an accident you found your way back to him?” Dad tips his head toward Jude but doesn’t break my stare. “It might not have been my plan initially, but after your mother stopped playing her part, I had to get creative.”

Dad circles the room, to the bar in the corner, helping himself to Grandfather’s scotch. And I remember for the first time since Dad showed up behind me, that they’re still in the room. But while Grandmother looks nervous, Grandfather is unaffected.

They knew he was alive all along.

“After a few of my business ventures dried up, your mother and I had to think long term. My bridges were burned, so the only option was to go underground for the time being.”

“You mean play dead,” Jude corrects him.

Amusement warms Dad’s dark gaze. He allowed his own daughter to believe he was dead to settle his bad debts, and there’s not a hint of regret in his eyes.

“It was the cleanest break.” Dad takes a drink, before setting his glass down and refilling it. “Besides, it allowed your mother to look for other business opportunities.”

“My family’s money.” Jude’s jaw clenches, and I’m not sure if it’s a result of the harsh way my father talks about our

parents' marriage like a business transaction, or the reminder of his father's blood-stained money.

“Your father understood the terms.” Dad perches himself on a barstool, too relaxed for the intensity of this conversation, and it makes me want to scream. “Steve and I met in college. We go back years.”

He tips his glass at me, and my spine stiffens in the realization. Jude must sense it because he leans close enough to take my hand.

“He was into tech while I was good with people. He built things, and I sold them. The two of us had the potential to corner the market had it not been for his vices.” Dad's eyes skip to Jude. “Like your mother.”

Jude's grip on my hand tightens, and I flatten my palm over his, holding him in place as best I can.

“What about my mother?”

“Don't worry, we made sure she had what she needed, so long as she stayed away and kept her mouth shut.” His eyebrows lift as he takes another sip of his drink. “We took the burden off her hands. Let her live her life. After all, she wasn't ready to be a mother.”

“Because she was *fifteen*.” The words almost choke in Jude's throat. “It was rape.”

My hands are barely enough to hold Jude back, not that he's moving physically. It's his rage, barely contained. The sick truth he shared with me on the beach. He's a product of the

crime his father committed, and it lives inside him as a broken shard years can't heal.

“Unfortunately.” Dad’s lack of sympathy is piercing. An absence of understanding. He’s as hollow and evil as they come.

“After that *incident...*” Dad takes another drink, standing and slowly circling the room, “Steve needed to create some distance. He moved to Washington, while I came to LA, and that’s where I met Abigail.”

The tension that ripples the air is palpable.

“When my investments tanked, Abigail and I set our plan into motion for the insurance money. But it ran out faster than anticipated, so I had to call in a favor.”

*Favor.*

The word is hanging in the air when realization strikes me. Jude moving to LA, me meeting him in the library—we aren’t the reason our parents met. They’re what brought us together.

“Abigail and Steve both understood the terms. I’d supply him with my LA connections, and he’d ensure my family was provided for. To be fair, I thought his sickness was specific to your mother.” He points at Jude. “Fel was never meant to be involved.”

“When you found out you could have stopped it.” It’s a stupid thing to say to a man with no morals, but I do because I’m haunted by the memories of a man he never really was. And I can’t help wishing he was the one in front of me now.

“So says you and your mother.” He shakes his head.

I take a step forward, but Jude’s shoulder blocks me. He doesn’t trust my father, and I don’t blame him. So I cling to Jude’s arm and hope it’s enough to keep me level.

“But she went along with it.”

“She did.” Dad nods, clucking his tongue once. “For the most part.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

My father ignores my tone, taking another sip of his drink. “The three of us had an understanding. While the original arrangement didn’t involve you, sacrifices had to be made on all sides. Your mother understood enough to play her part, until Jude caught on.”

Dad stops circling the room, pausing directly across from Jude.

“Your guilt did her in, congratulations.”

“That wasn’t the goal.”

“Wasn’t it?” Dad’s head ticks to the side. “One wrench in the wheel, and it didn’t matter how much I reassured her. She was impulsive as ever and prepared to burn it all down. She took the videos and was ready to turn the three of us in.”

That doesn’t make sense. In Jude’s version of the story, she buried their secrets. She slit her wrists to protect herself.

“Then why didn’t she?”

I thought Jude was the one who tipped the dominos, but as Dad's eyes glimmer in violent excitement, and the corner of his lip ticks, my heart starts to race.

"Give me a little credit, Felicity," Dad gleams. "I'll always protect my family. Even when the threats come from within."

"You—"

I choke on the words as he nods in sick amusement.

"Her revealing the truth would have only hurt you. You're welcome."

"So you killed her?" This time the words do get out through the tears. Jude's hand barely tethers me to this plane of existence.

"I protected you."

Jude's grip tightens. "You protected yourself."

"Would you have rather the videos be entered into evidence?" Dad takes a step toward us. "Your sweet, underage stepsister exposed for a courtroom? A jury?"

The fact that he justifies his actions makes it clear Steve isn't the only one of our fathers who is sick.

"I couldn't let that happen. Even if it meant losing Abigail or sending Steve to prison."

"That was you."

"It was all me." It's nearly a yell as he waves his arms out, enjoying the attention. "They trusted me with everything, handing me all I needed to take them down. Even now, in



prison, Steve knows there is worse dirt on him than embezzlement. Why do you think he still sends me money? I could get him locked away for three lifetimes if I wanted. Don't you understand? I've had this under control all along. All you two had to do was play your part and not get involved."

Dad walks back over to the bar, pouring a drink and shooting it down in one gulp. "Bygones be bygones. I'm willing to forgive. You let your hormones get in the way of adult decisions, and now I'm going to give you both the opportunity to fix it."

"How?"

Dad smirks, like my question is exactly what he wanted.

"One thing was always obvious back then. His fascination with you." Dad's eyes move from me to Jude, then back again. "It was stronger than anything I could have planned for, hence the predicament I found myself in. And with Steve getting difficult to work with this last year, I've considered alternate solutions."

Something about the calmness of his tone is unsettling.

"Jude never left the city, Felicity. He might have let you hate him, but it was only for your own good. And it never stopped him from keeping an eye out for you. It's why I sent you to find him again, even if at the time you didn't realize it."

Jude tenses, like he senses a shoe about to drop that I'm not seeing.

“You have my blessing. Your marriage fixes everything between our families, and on the upside, you get what you want—each other.”

“But...” Jude says, drawing the word out in the question I’m sure we’re both thinking. Invisible strings wrapping tighter the longer we stand here.

“Accept control of your father’s accounts as his beneficiary. He’s locked up, your name is listed. There’s enough for you to seize control of his offshore assets. You’ll have more money than you’ve ever dreamed of.”

“I don’t care about money.”

“Of course not.” Dad agrees, tipping his head my way. “But you care about her. And these are my conditions.”

“Who said I give a fuck about your conditions?” Jude relaxes his arms to his sides like he does when he’s standing in the ring, mentally preparing for a fight. Dad might not recognize it, but he’s ready for battle.

“Because I have the power, Jude. You got my present, I take it?”

“You sent the pictures?” My stomach twists. “Why do you even have them?”

“In the event I ever needed to remind you who is really in charge. Regardless of who you live with, where you are, or how much freedom I’m allowing at the moment, you are my daughter, and I will have a say in your life.”

“I’m twenty-six. You aren’t my keeper.”

“The fact that you think your age matters in this family shows how naïve you are,” Dad says. “It didn’t back then, and it doesn’t now. You will do for your family what I ask of you. Just like she did.”

He’s threatening me with the man I love. Somehow turning our engagement into another puzzle piece in his sick game.

“Are you willing to lose him?” Dad threatens. “I can arrange that. Then you’ll be free to marry someone of my choosing, and I promise they’ll be much more agreeable.”

Jude steps forward, but Dad holds up his hand.

“You’ll take the reins of your father’s empire, like you were meant to years ago. All you have to do is sign the papers, Jude. It’s that simple.”

“No,” Jude says.

Dad laughs. “No? Was I not clear?”

“Crystal.” Jude stands in front of me almost completely now. “But you don’t make the rules. I’ll tell you like I told them years ago, I’m not playing these games, and Fel isn’t either. I protected her from them, and I’ll protect her from you if it’s the last thing I fucking do.”

“Have it your way.” Dad reaches behind him so fast my brain is still processing when he draws the gun.

He’s smiling as he points it at Jude, and I know in my bones, regardless of what he said, he wanted this all along. There’s no good in him like I remember. No comfort, no peace.

Only violence.

One second that happens so fast I don't have time to process as he pulls the trigger, Jude drops, and life shatters around me.



# Jude

MY SIDE STINGS.

Venom spreads.

Or is that my nerves tensing for self-preservation?

It's hot and cold and it knocks me backward. Sounds mute except for her scream echoing in my ears.

Fel reaches for me, but hands wrap her arms before she's close enough. The men who followed me inside when I got here reach her like the souls of purgatory dragging her out to sea with their torment. Faces with wide mouths and melting eyes.

But I can't break my stare on Fel. All screams and red hair as she flails around and kicks at the two men pulling her away. She elbows one and manages to twist.

She runs and runs.

*The princess running away.*

And for a moment, time snaps as it all plays out around me like something I'm watching outside my body. Her scream echoes as it fades into silence so deep I'm not sure if I'm really hearing it.

The room comes back into focus, and I see Fel's father ordering his men to go find her as they all file through the doorway and disappear.

The fucking asshole shot me.

He shot me for my unwillingness to play his game. He shot me because he thinks Fel is his. All these years in the shadows, and he reveals himself just to claim her after all he's done. Killing her mother, destroying her life, and letting me take the blame.

He might have said it was an offering, but he was handing us a noose to join him. And walking in here, I knew how this would end. Not that it would keep me away.

Fel's grandmother runs over to me, and presses her hands over my bleeding wound, while her grandfather sits, frozen. They didn't speak so much as a word during her father's unhinged rant, confirming they're pawns as much as we are. One man has held control this entire time. A man who should have been dead.

Looking toward the doorway, my imagination places her in it, even when I know she's running from her father and his men.

Her ghost, a figment with eyes screaming louder than her mouth. Cheeks wet with tears. Hair spilling like the blood I want to pour from their throats for touching her.

“Get off me.”

I pull away from Fel’s grandmother and stumble to stand. It’ll kill me to fight through and find her, but it’ll kill me if I don’t, so there’s no decision to be made.

“You need to sit down,” she says like I’ll listen. “We need a doctor.”

Her comment almost makes me laugh because I’m a dead man walking. I feel it as numbness spreads. Not pain, but the absence of all things I should be feeling.

Doesn’t matter. I’ll fight until the grim reaper’s at my doorstep. It’s Fel and me to the fucking end, and her father needs to learn that lesson.

I stumble forward as I fight to catch my bearings.

Blood sticks my shirt to my side, but I barely feel it. Nothing matters but a scream ripping down the hallway, like it’s growing legs and guiding my path. Her fear is fuel in my veins when I’m losing the fight.

Grabbing my side with one hand, I pull out my switchblade with the other.

It’s not ideal when he has a gun, but it’s all I have. I’ll move quick and quiet, knowing he’ll finish me if I don’t get close enough to finish him first. He won’t hesitate a second time.



I stumble out of the room, and the hallway stretches as my vision tunnels. Spots of light blur my vision, and it takes all my focus to blink it clear.

“Where did she go?” Someone is close, hunting her. And I can’t help the grin at how Fel slipped from their grasp.

*Good girl.*

*A game of cat and mouse I’ll willingly play if it means she’s mine at the end of it.*

I press my back to one of the walls as footsteps close in. My heartbeat hammers between my temples in the deadly silent foyer.

One step, another. Closer and closer as I steady my breath. Each step they take more frantic as they search for her. They’re panicking, and I can’t help but smile at my luck. While they’re running on adrenaline, my loss of blood calms me.

A clear head wins every time. No matter the size. No matter the strength. No matter the weapon.

In this moment, my mind is clear for her. All I see is Fel and what I need to do to end this for us both.

A man comes around the corner so quick he doesn’t see me stick my leg out and trip him. He falls face first to the tile, and I land with a knee on the center of his back as I sink my blade into his artery.

Blood has a way of making art when it’s spilled.

It spreads like oil in water.

It pours like sap from a tree.

It spouts like water in a fountain.

All dependent on the tool you use. And I paint the most beautiful picture for her.

I'm not sure if this is how it's supposed to feel when you take a life. I've hurt people before, but never been the one to actually kill them.

But this—my knife—my hand forcing this man's soul from his body as blood spills out onto the tile, my fate is written. There's no denying what I've done.

And all I can think is *good*.

These sick fucks want worse than death for Fel. To sell her, to use her, to violate her. And I'll never let that happen again.

Pushing off the man on ground, I make my way farther down the hall, following the sounds that echo and hoping they're leading me in the right direction. Like ghosts rattling, they guide me through the maze. I follow Fel's screams as I make my way up the winding staircase.

*This was always meant to end where it started.*

It might have been her subconscious that led her up here, but we both know why.

I reach the top of the stairs as another set of footsteps starts to slap the tile behind me. The second man her father hired is

closing in. But I manage to slip around a pillar before he spots me, and I hold my breath.

This time, I don't trip him or hesitate. All reservations are gone. I spin the moment he's close and rip the blade across his throat, shock widening his eyes before his breath has a chance to escape his chest.

He falls to the ground, knees first at my feet, and I press my foot against his chest to kick his body back down the staircase.

Two down.

One to go.

The only one who matters because I'm going to cut the head off the snake and make sure there isn't a piece strong enough to survive.

"You can't hide from me, Felicity." Her father's voice echoes down the hall. "Your mother understood. Give me a chance to help you understand too."

Manipulation, mind games.

I never knew the man before today, only that Fel thought he was a good person, when I had a feeling, he wasn't.

Her mother being after my father's money wasn't a secret. Or the fact that she played along with her new husband's sick obsession. But the roots had to have started somewhere. And the way she didn't show a hint of grief at any mention of Fel's father made me suspect he was the reason.

Turning the corner, I see the door to my old bedroom is slung wide open. Of course she went here, of all places. The one place in these haunted walls she always felt safe, whether she'd admit it or not.

I was her safe space in a world filled with thorns.

She might not have known about the cameras in her room or the lies of her family, but deep down she sensed it. It's why she'd slip into my room on bad days, even if it was innocent back then. Comfort. Familiarity.

Fel's been mine longer than she's been willing to admit it.

Stepping through the doorway to my old room, my mind travels back eleven years. To the last time I was standing at the foot of the bed, packing my things. Fel screamed she never wanted to see me again.

She didn't realize then we were inevitable.

I did.

Muffled voices come from the bathroom, so I walk over quietly. I'd like to think it's on purpose and not because my blood loss is slowing me down, but who knows. He has a gun, and I can't take the chance he'll shoot me again because I'm fairly certain that would be it.

From the doorway, I hear water running, and it makes my stomach sink because his voice is clear, but Fel is silent.

"You will listen to your family, or I will train you to do so. Just like her."

There's a splash and flailing that strips me of my hesitation. I push the door open to see Fel in the bathtub. Her arms claw for the air her father isn't allowing her as he holds her head under. Her nails dig into his cheeks and throat, but almost as if he sees it as a challenge, he forces her deeper.

*Tunnel vision.*

There's a chance I'll be Swiss cheese at the end of this, but there's no stopping my legs at the sight of his hands holding her under. All that matters is reaching Fel.

Her dad turns at the slapping of my feet on the tile, and he smirks, releasing her to face me.

Water splashes from the tub as Fel pops to the surface, and her hands rake at her chest as if she can open it with her fingers to let more air in. Her hair is slick crimson over her shoulders, and it matches my vision as she clutches her heart and searches for her breath.

It might be rage. It might be luck. But I make it to her father before he has a chance to grab his gun. I wind back before cracking my knuckles against the side of his face, and the force sends his gun flying.

Her dad falls to the floor, and I straddle him, hitting him again and again as he laughs like the sick man he is. Feeding off every hit like the most sadistic fighters in the ring.

"Jude." He spits blood when I finally pull back, but I don't climb off him. "We could have built an empire. Still can."

“Fuck you.” I pull my knife out and bring the bloodied blade to his throat.

“So this is what you’ll do, make my daughter watch you murder her father.” He grinds his teeth as I press the blade harder against his skin. “She might have looked past it once, but killing both her parents is unforgivable, don’t you think?”

He still blames me when he’s the one who killed her mother. Like if I hadn’t outed them, this would have ended differently. He’s still bargaining, like he has a chance.

He doesn’t. There’s no threat that will stop me from doing what needs to be done. Not even Fel can reign in what must happen.

She’s fighting for breath next to me as water splashes around. But I don’t look at her, even when I feel her eyes begging me to.

“Jude.” My name from her lips is lost in the tunnel of darkness that exists around me in this moment.

I’ve always given her what she needs, whether she likes it or not, and right here, right now, that’s what I intend to do.

Fel is heart. She’s love. She’s purity that shouldn’t exist after all the things they’ve done to her.

She’s perseverance.

And I’ll be her evil every time if it means she’ll come out of this with the goodness only her heart holds. I’ll be the bad guy when it hurts her. I’ll break her heart and spill their blood. It’s my gift.

I'm her villain.

“Jude.” This time my name spits from her father's lips. A final threat driving me to the edge.

“You can't kill a man who's already dead.” I look him in the eyes and peace sweeps through me. “But you can send his soul back to hell.”

I drag the blade across his neck, knowing I should feel guilty as blood pours out onto my hands. Knowing I should care about the fact that Fel is filling the bathtub with her tears. Knowing the calm that makes my heart float in my chest is sick.

I don't.

I ended this for her, once and for all.





# Fel

JUDE TURNS OFF THE faucet and reaches out a bloody hand.

Crimson ink that laces every page of our story. Red veins that run through our history like a map that always leads us back to the same place.

*Jude and me.*

I look into his eyes, and I know this is wrong. But like a truth I can't deny buried under every lie we've told each other; it will never change my love for him.

Reaching up, I take his hand, and he holds me steady as I climb out of the bathtub.

My father chased me in here, and when I tried to hide from him in the tub, he turned on the water and held me under until my lungs burned, and my eyes were filled with so much pressure I thought they might burst.

In that moment I wasn't afraid—I understood my life and my mother.

How people become a product of what they're exposed to. The power of money and status was rooted deep in generations on both sides. She was a victim the same way I was. Hardened with the knowledge there was no escape. A tool in her family's game, and then my father's. Conditioned and groomed to accept it.

Maybe at one point, she loved my father enough to believe it could be different. Only he didn't save her, he threw her to his wolves. Something she held against Jude when she shouldn't have.

Mom resented Jude for trying to save me when she couldn't break her chains. The men in her life used her to the point where she believed it's all she deserved. Hopelessness strong enough to eat a person from the inside out.

While they pulled her strings, she became a shell. Fighting back too late, and her soul paying the price.

When I was on the brink of drowning—nails raking my father's face and water baptizing me from the inside out—I understood them all.

Which is why, as I step past my father's lifeless body, I don't so much as flinch or look down. The man I thought he was died when I was young, and I refuse to mourn the person he became.

Jude leads me out of the bathroom, and I pause as we pass his bed.

His room looks exactly the same as it did when we were younger. Royal blue wallpaper and silver finishes. The one place that always felt like him, even when he didn't.

“Fel.” Jude turns, capturing my cheeks with his hands. Blood smears my jaw, and it's what we are—death, sacrifice, an inevitable end.

I should mind the sticky way his fingers drag my skin. But unlike when we stood here eleven years ago, there's no pain in the lives we've lost, only freedom. Jude has no limits when it comes to me, and I finally accept it.

It might make me sick like him—or like them. But the blood on both of us had to be spilled.

Jude grazes his thumb over the apple of my cheek, and I'm lost in his green eyes as they search mine for answers.

“Are you okay?”

“To the end.” It's almost a whisper, but I've never understood the words more than this moment.

Jude leans down and brushes my lips with his. “To the end.”

He presses his mouth to mine and my heart beats again. Life only his kiss can shock through my system. I grip the front of his T-shirt with my wet hands and pull him closer, parting my lips to hand him all I have left.

Butterflies and tongues fluttering as we find each other in this madness.

I've loved Jude as long as I've hated him. And I needed him through all of it.

Jude pulls back, and I seal my lips with the taste of his kiss.

"Is this it then? Is it finally over?"

"No." He reaches for my hand and grazes his thumb over the back of it, pausing on the ring on my finger. "Just the beginning."

I've never needed a beginning as much as I do right now. To start over, and to leave this all behind me.

Jude's face winces and his shoulders slump ever so slightly as my hand grazes his side. And like I've forgotten, realization floods back. *My dad shot him.*

"We need to get you to the hospital." I place my hand over the bullet wound and he winces.

"Forgot about that."

"How do you forget about a bullet wound?" It's seeping blood, and I'm not sure how he's even standing.

Jude tips my chin up to face him. "I forget myself for you."

I shake my head because I don't want him to do that. But there's no stopping it either. Because I forget myself with him as well. His green opal eyes with their drop of blue that feels like the piece of me he took for himself and has kept safe ever since.

Jude drops his hand and sits on the bed, color draining from his face. "Maybe I do need that doctor."

He lays back, and I reach into his pocket for his phone. My fingers shaking as I dial. I'm not sure how to explain the bodies or what happened here, but I can't let him die worrying about it.

I give them the address before hanging up, and Jude tugs my hand, pulling me onto the bed next to him.

"Lay with me," he says quietly.

This might be the weakest I've seen him. It's a stark contrast to the man who fought his way to me with a bullet in his side.

I curl against Jude and hold my hand over his wound, trying to keep in what's leaking out. It feels like no use as his blood soaks the fabric and squishes between my fingers. Warm, wet. A familiar texture I wish wasn't.

I'm not ready for him to leave.

"I missed this." Jude closes his eyes as his breath steadies, while I silently beg his chest to rise with every beat of my heart.

"Me too."

"Remember those nights you'd climb into this bed when we were younger?"

I bury my forehead against his chest. "Yeah. But you only know about half of them."

He shakes his head. "I know about all of them."

"You snuck out all the time, Jude." I look up. "Half the time I came in here needing you, you were gone."

Jude turns his face to me, brushing a rogue hair from my cheek. “I was always here for you. Sometimes I didn’t tell you because it was hard pretending being around you wasn’t ripping me up inside, but it doesn’t mean I wasn’t there.”

His finger trails down until he’s wiping a tear from under my lashes.

“Sometimes I’d hear you coming, and I’d slip onto the balcony to hide. Thinking, if you didn’t find me here, you’d leave.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know.” His hand pauses, where he’s cupping my face. “You’d climb into my bed whether I was in it or not.”

“It smelled like you.” Like peace—while everything else was chaos. “Why did you hide?”

“It hurt too much to hold you when I couldn’t have you.”

“You have me now.”

A hint of a smile ghosts his cheeks. The sight so rare it feels like the most beautiful secret he’s ever told me. But almost as quickly as it appears, his body winces and his eyebrows pinch.

Pressing my palm to his side, it’s not enough to keep him in. But I’m not ready to let go.

“What do you think happens when you die, Red?” Jude looks up at the ceiling.

“I don’t want to think about that right now.”

“I don’t think anything happens.” He ignores me trying to brush off his question.

I’m not ready to face a life without him, but the way his jaw clenches, I think maybe he needs my comfort when I want to be selfish.

I sigh. “What do you mean nothing? Like you just disappear?”

“Something like that.” Jude continues running slow circles on my shoulder. “There can’t be anything as good as this out there. Or as bad.”

Maybe he’s right. If heaven and hell are a state of mind, then I’ve already experienced both.

“I don’t know what I believe,” I admit. “But I’d like to think there’s more than nothing after this.”

I curl up against Jude and get lost in the feel of his thumb grazing the back of my shoulder—back and forth. I lose myself in the rise and fall of his chest, and how each exhale breaks a piece of him off like he’s leaving.

Inhaling deep, I fight to hold him here for both of us.

Somewhere in the distance, sirens start to echo. They wail through the neighborhood as they get closer, and it reminds me of the night I found my mother in the bathtub after she slit her wrists.

*After he killed her.*

Sirens and tires paint the silence of the night with chaos. They wail like the demons that wander these halls. Distant, even when they're close. Ripping through the windows, yet still, somehow drowned out by the beating of Jude's heart.

Slow, but steady.

At some point before the sirens arrive, another set of car doors opens and closes, and I wonder if my grandparents are even still downstairs. They did nothing to prevent what happened. Not so much as flinching when my father's men tried to drag me away. Even if they are still here, they're gone in every sense that matters.

More doors slam, followed by yelling and banging downstairs. Dusk claims the sky, and it's splashed in red, white, and blue lights.

Gripping Jude's side, I seal my eyes shut and beg the universe to let me keep him after all we've done. Footsteps near and I yell for them.

Cops flood the room, and it's no longer the peaceful scene it was when it was just me and Jude lying in a mess of blood.

Paramedics walk in, and only then do I let Jude go.

"Who are you?"

"Do you live here?"

"What happened?"

"How many bodies?"

"Where's the gun?"



Questions skitter in circles so fast I can't answer them. I'm not even sure if they're all directed at me, as I sit on the bed, numb watching the paramedics cut open Jude's shirt and try to stop the bleeding.

The peacock feather inked on his chest is stained in blood. Nothing more fitting for our love.

"It's my grandparent's house," I finally choke out.

A cop narrows his eyes. "Where are they?"

"I don't know."

Nothing is left here, not even them. And for the first time since my mother died, I'm sure once I walk out these doors, I'll never step through them again.

"We were meeting them for brunch." I smooth my hands over my blood splattered dress. "And then—" I trail off, looking toward the bathroom. "They came for us."

The cop continues to ask questions, but I can't answer them. Every thought is stuck in my head or my throat. I can't focus on anything but Jude, who hasn't opened his eyes in a few minutes.

I'm frozen until the paramedics strap him to a gurney and start to wheel him out.

"I need to go with him."

A cop skims me up and down. His hard features made sharper by the intensity of his frown. He's likely still deciding

if I'm the villain or the victim, and I wish I could make him understand it doesn't matter because we all lost this battle.

Finally, he waves an arm out in agreement, letting me leave.

I follow Jude down the hall as they wheel him to the staircase, leaving the ghosts behind with every step. We make our way through the cold dark foyer and out into a crisp evening that offers my lungs a fresh breath.

Climbing into the back of the ambulance, I sit beside Jude and lace my fingers through his. And only then, does he finally blink his eyes open.

He squeezes my hand, and I realize I know the answer to his question.

After you die, you're reborn again.



# Fel

FOG SETS LOW OVER the headstones.

It's a cool night, and this far from the city, stars manage to break through the pollution and reveal themselves. I can't help but wonder how many of them are up there, and if one person could count them all.

Are they as endless as they feel?

If stars are eyes of those we've lost, I wonder what they witness. No doubt it's all the things we're incapable of seeing.

Things we're too scared to face until there's no other option.

Like that night.

After that day at my grandparents' house, they disappeared. They used their money to fabricate a story about someone breaking in and trying to rob them. They buried the truth, and even if I should mind, their cowardice absolved Jude of what he did.

They bolted back to New York without so much as calling me. Disappearing with their secrets.

Lies—only this time, I accept them.

No one needs to know that my father was never really dead, or that he tried to come back to life by taking my own. His memory will be buried with a past I'll no longer let haunt me.

“You shouldn't be so easy to catch, Red.”

Jude stops behind me, brushing my hair off my shoulder. He leans in to bury his nose in the crook of my neck. Inhaling deep to breath me in.

“Didn't know I was supposed to be running.” I smile, knowing that's exactly what he wants because he loves the chase.

“Liar,” he whispers in my ear, and it sends a shiver the full length of my spine. “It's why you chose this costume isn't it. To tempt the big bad wolf. Remember what I said he'd do if he caught you.”

“Eat me?” I bite my lip, hoping for exactly that. “But you aren't the wolf remember? You're my hero.”

Jude chuckles against my neck. “This is a new story.”

His fingers start at the peak of my shoulder and trail downward, over the bare skin of my arm and around my body, until he's pressing his palm against my stomach and pulling me against him.

I'm vaguely aware we aren't alone, and it shouldn't turn me on like it does.

Nearby, people holler, and it's followed by a chorus of laughs.

Jude wasn't joking when he said Blaze's annual Halloween event was wild. The bar has been transformed into a haunted house. And outside, the field is unrecognizable. There's a fake graveyard, a drive-up theater playing horror films, and a haystack maze.

Most people are dressed up. Except for Jude, who opted for a simple nametag on his black T-shirt that reads *wolf*.

It's fitting for how he's been stalking me all night. His eyes following wherever I go. So when I slipped out the back door, I knew he'd come and find me.

"So you're the bad guy now?" I sink into Jude's hold.

He trails his nose up and down my neck as he breathes me in. "Bad for you."

"If that's the case, then who will save me?" I smirk, feeling his grip on my stomach tighten. "Should I call for one of the guys over there to help the damsel?"

"What did I say about taunting me with threats of other men, Red?" His teeth grind beside my ear, fueling me with adrenaline.

"I don't remember." It's a lie to get a rise. I want his fury, his possessiveness. I want his rage.

Jude chuckles so darkly in my ear I have to clench my thighs.

“You don’t remember,” he repeats, his voice dropping an octave with his whisper. “Then I think I’ll have to remind you.”

“Mmm.” I rub against him once more. “You’ll have to catch me first.”

I bolt out of his grasp before he has a chance to process what I said, weaving through the fake graveyard as fast as I can and making my way to the entrance of the maze.

Behind me, I hear Jude’s footsteps, but they’re even, measured. He doesn’t even bother running as I disappear through the walls of hay. Walls there’s no climbing. It’s either find my way through or be caught and suffer my punishment.

My heart is hammering as I slow down and try to catch my bearings. But every corner I turn just leads me deeper inside. My breath races, and even if he hasn’t found me yet, I feel him getting closer.

Hunting me.

Stalking me.

“You can’t hide from me, Red.” Jude’s voice is closer than I expect, and it makes me jump. “Want to know why?”

I don’t answer as I weave through the haystacks. Twigs snap beneath my feet, giving me away with every step.

Turning another corner, I'm met with another dead end, and when I spin around, his arms wrap around me. I'm caught, my heart is racing, my blood swims with anticipation.

Pulling me close, he dips his lips to where my pulse meets my throat.

"Want to know why you can't hide from me?" he asks again.

"Why?"

"Because I always find what's mine." He licks up my neck, along the shell of my ear, and I can't fight the moan that escapes my lips. "And I have no problem reminding you that's exactly what you are."

He grips the top of my shoulders and shoves me to my knees in front of him. Dirt and hay dig into my skin at the force of it.

But as I look up at Jude towering over me, I want his roughness. I want him to mark me as his in every way. My body, my heart, my soul.

His fingers slip under my red hood, and he peels it from my face, freeing my long waves as he brushes them back.

"Take me out, Felicity." He drags his thumb over my bottom lip. "I'm going to fuck this mouth until there's no denying who you belong to. And when you choke, I want you to remember that no one can save you from *me*."

I can't help clenching my thighs together. This possessive, hard side of Jude should scare me when I'm in this position, but it only makes me desperate for his punishment.



Reaching up, I undo the button on his pants, and he continues to toy with my lip while I do, pushing his thumb over my tongue and then wiping my mouth with it, wetting my lips.

I undo his zipper and pull down just enough that his cock juts out. He's already rock hard and thick.

Wrapping my hand around him, I toy with the barbells running the underside, loving how they feel on my fingers. On my tongue. Inside me.

Jude tilts my chin up and steps closer, so the head of his dick is right in my face. He drags his hand along my jaw, before shoving two fingers in my mouth and pushing them so deep I gag around them.

"Don't fight me already." He pulls his fingers out for only a moment, before shoving them in again. "This is the easy stuff, Red."

He plays with my tongue as he pushes his fingers deeper, forcing me to adjust. I breathe through my nose and fight to resist my gag reflex. Slowly, he drags them out. Shoving them in further with each stroke before holding my tongue with his fingers deep against the back of my throat.

"That's my girl, taking me how I want her to."

Pure darkness coats his expression and it's so hot, I want to please him more than I've wanted anything.

"Much better," he praises as I take his fingers deeper this time and don't gag.

Finally withdrawing, he coats my lips and his dick with my saliva. He grabs my hand where I'm holding him and tightens both our grips, pressing the head of his cock to my lips.

I open for a taste. Circling the head and getting high on the salty precum coating my lips as he slowly paints them. He groans, and I flatten my tongue, licking up the underside of his dick, along the line of barbells.

“That’s enough playing.” Jude grips my hair, wrapping it around his fist until it stings and brings tears to my eyes. He grabs my chin and forces my mouth wide. “Now for your punishment.”

He drives himself in, using his leverage on my hair to prevent me from pulling back when he hits the back of my throat. He tastes like metal, and I have to breathe through my nose as I fight my gag reflex as he holds still in my mouth.

“So pretty, choking on my cock in the dirt like a bad girl.” Jude pulls his hips back and then thrusts in again.

Tears stream down my face at the pressure, but he doesn't relinquish control. He holds my head in place with both his hands as he fucks my mouth harder. And maybe this is punishment because it makes me need him between my legs more than I ever have. But he's not giving it to me.

I reach between my legs and peel my skirt up, aching to relieve the pressure. But when he sees what I'm doing, he thrusts to the back of my throat until I'm choking on his dick and pauses there.

“Hands on your thighs while you take your punishment.” He holds his dick deep in my throat until I do as I’m told, only then backing out. “Maybe next time you’ll know better than to threaten me with this sassy mouth when all it makes me want to do is fuck it.”

He pumps his hips at a steady rhythm. In and out, and I feel my lips and tongue getting sore from the barbells and force of his thrusts. His fingers grip my hair as he gets closer. His whole body tensing.

Jude grabs the side of my face and looks down at me with a tight expression. “Swallow every drop, Red.”

At that, the first warm hit of his release coats my tongue. He comes so hard and much that I’m fighting to breathe while I swallow him down. And he holds my face, making sure nothing gets out.

“Fuck.” He pulls out of my mouth and lets go of my hair, cupping both my cheeks in his hands and wiping my lips clean. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

My cheeks heat with his words. I’ve spent my life trying to live up to everyone’s expectations, never reaching them. But Jude loves me exactly how I am. When I’m perfect, when I’m messy, when I’m broken, when I’m whole.

He loves me.

“You can touch yourself now.” His gaze dropping to where my fingers clench the hem of my dress. “You earned it.”

His eyes darken as he watches me widen my knees in the dirt and slide my dress up, slipping a hand between my legs.

I drive my fingers in and can't help the moan that comes out as he stands over me, watching me do it. I'm already so close, and the pleasure in his eyes drives me to the brink. My mouth is still numb from the hard way he fucked my face, and it sparks my core to life. I ride my hand for him, appreciating how every wet sound of my fingers sliding in and out intensifies his stare. His dick once more hardens in front of my face.

"Jude—" His name is a moan that cuts off with the air leaving my chest.

"I know." He grabs my shoulders and pulls me up, like he's in tune with my body enough to sense what I need from him. He spins me around so fast I have to catch myself on the hay wall of the maze. "You want to come on my cock, Felicity?"

"Yes."

"Good." He pulls my dress up and puts pressure right where I need it. He's rock hard as he shoves himself in. "Because if my girl is going to come for me, I'm going to feel it."

"Jude."

"That's right." He fucks me harder, and I'm not sure how he does it when he just barreled into my throat as long as he did. "My name's the only one I want on your tongue, or I'll fuck your mouth until it's branded there."

He grabs my hips and controls every thrust, pounding in and hitting me so deep I can barely think, much less breathe.

“You’re so tight for me.” He thrusts in harder. “Did sucking my cock in the dirt do this to you?”

I nod my head, feeling myself building. “Yes.”

“Good girl.”

My pussy clenches at his praise, and my legs start to shake.

Jude pounds into me hard and unrelenting. He chases my climax like he chased me through the maze, with a frenzy of anticipation. My body clenches, and I evaporate with the pleasure that explodes from my core. And he fucks me through it. Harder, until he’s pounding his hips against my ass so intensely, I feel him everywhere.

It isn’t until his own climax hits that he finally slows down, folding his body over me. I’m caged against the hay wall, breathing hard as he leans in and kisses the side of my neck.

He snakes a hand up and grazes my breasts with his fingertips, toying with my piercings until my nipples pebble for him.

“Feel better?” I tease him because I can’t help myself.

“Almost.” He pulls out and slides my top and panties back into place.

He spins me around, adjusting my dress before pulling my hood over my head once more to hide my now messy hair.

Stepping into me, he wipes the underside of my eyes with his fingers and grins.

“I want you to go back to the party with my cum dripping out of you the rest of the night, making a mess. I want them to smell me on you, from the inside out, so there’s no confusion who you belong to. And when we get home, I’m going to shove those cum soaked panties in your mouth and you’re going to scream for me until I think you’ve learned your lesson. Then I’ll feel better.”

At that, he grabs my hand and leads me out of the maze, even if only the one in this field. Because in his heart, I’m lost forever.

# Epilogue

Jude

## Two Months Later

“THIS ISN’T YOU HOLDING me hostage, is it?” Fel giggles as I lead her through the doorway, kicking the door closed behind me.

“You are my hostage.”

“I’m your girlfriend.”

“Fiancée,” I remind her.

“Oh right.” She laughs. “I’m still getting used to that.”

“Don’t get too used to it. It’ll be *wife* soon enough. And then ‘till death do us part.”

She lets out a sweet laugh, but I’m not kidding. The only thing that will tear me away from this girl after all we’ve been through will be my soul leaving my body. Even then, I’m not so sure I’d leave her.

“But no, this isn’t a hostage situation. Even if you’re giving me some ideas for what to do with you and my belt later.”

I love that she shivers at my statement. That the idea of me fucking her rough and under my control makes her literally melt in my hands.

“Not yet, Red,” I whisper in her ear as she bites her bottom lip thinking about it.

Stopping her in the middle of the room, I finally peel my hands from her eyes and step back.



It takes her a moment to blink in her surroundings. I watch as her eyebrows pinch and she looks around, trying to figure out what she's seeing. It's an open space with tall ceilings and large windows. Brick walls on three sides, and then a fourth that's all windows that look out over the city. The room we're standing in is wide open, with a small hallway that leads to a bedroom and bathroom.

“What is this?” Fel finally spins to face me.

The sun streaks through the windows, making her face glow, and she's so damn pretty I'm tempted to lay her on the floor and sink into her.

Stepping forward, I tuck her red hair behind her ear. “Our new place.”

Her eyes go wide as she looks around again. “No, Jude.”

“No?” I tilt my head.

“This place must have been a fortune. Square footage in LA —”

“It was nothing.” I brush her cheek.

“Please tell me you didn't.”

My fingers pause on her jaw. “Didn't what?”

“I remember what my dad said that day, about you taking over your father's assets. Please tell me—”

“Felicity.” Her name comes out harsher than I intend, but I don't like that there's still a part of her that can't let go of that day, even if she pretends she has. “I didn't. The shop is inking

celebrities like the members of Enemy Muse for fuck's sake. We're rolling in cash, regardless of what our location says about us. I've never taken a dime from my family. Don't plan to. This is all me. For us."

She presses her lips together and tears brim in her eyes. "Really?"

I nod, and love the smile that stretches her cheeks as she soaks it in. She's my fiancée now, there's no way I'll accept her living across the city with Maren. She hasn't left my apartment since the night at her grandparents' house anyway, so there's no point still pretending.

"Can we really afford it?" She looks around again. "My jewelry is doing well, but probably not this well yet."

"*We* can."

At least, *I* can for now. I'm more than willing to pay for her to live in a nicer area if it means she'll be safer. Plus, with the sudden boom in her business and the fact that she's currently laying out plans to open her own jewelry shop, it won't be long before she's probably bringing in more money than I am.

Financial independence is important to Fel. Even more so after everything that happened. So even if I'm more than capable of supporting both of us, I'm well aware of the significance of her carving out her own path.

"So you like it?"

"I do." She saunters up to me and wraps her arms around my shoulders. "Want to know how much?"

Her hands make a trail down my chest, heading for my pants, and as much as it kills me, I have to take a step back.

“What’s wrong?” Her face pinches, first revealing confusion, before the slightest hint of fear flashes.

“Nothing’s wrong.” No matter how much time passes, there’s still a flash of worry she carries around. “It’s just, I’m not done with the surprises. Come here.”

I lead her across the room. The sun is starting to set, and it casts a warm haze through the windows. The glow illuminating the apples of Fel’s cheeks.

“I have one more surprise for you.” I lead her to the bedroom and pause, turning to catch the look in her wide blue eyes. “I’m done waiting to marry you. It’s already been too long, and I’m not waiting another fucking minute.”

Reaching for the handle, I swing the door open and breathe a sigh of relief. Maren held up her end of our deal, proven by the bag hanging on the closet door. I might not understand Fel’s relationship with someone as flighty as Maren, but at least she’s loyal.

“What is that?”

“Maren said it’s the dress you picked out.” I guide her over to it. “Don’t worry, she dealt with the logistics, I didn’t look at it.”

“Since when are you traditional?” Her eyebrows pinch with her small smile.

“I’m not. But if we’re doing this, we’re walking into this without superstitions or bad energy.”

We’ve carried around enough of that already from our past.

“So what do you think? I’m done waiting.” I grab her hands and don’t care if I sound like a totally whipped punk because this girl is it for me.

“Wait, when?” Her eyes dart between me and the dress bag. “Why is it here right now?”

“I guess I lied, there is one more surprise.” I lean down and kiss her forehead, breathing in her sweet strawberry scent. “Meet me on the roof in an hour.”

“Jude.” Her gasp teeters the line of surprise and shock. “You want to get married right now? Like today? Are you sure?”

“Never been surer about anything.”

“But it’s so fast. You don’t need time to think about it?”

I lift the hand that’s home to the emerald ring I gave her and hold it between us. “I thought about it when I met you as a teenager. I thought about it when you walked into my shop eleven years later. I thought about it when I put this ring on your finger. I’m all in. When I take my last breath, it better be filled with your scent. And if I’m going to feel heaven, it’ll be between your legs. I’m ready for you to be my wife *now*. No more waiting.”

Fel presses her pink lips together, and when they pop open, they’re brighter from the blood rushing to them.

“There’s no going back. Don’t even consider it.” I wrap my hand around her jaw and pull her face to mine.

“I wouldn’t.” She relaxes in my grasp. “I want this too.”

The best words to ever leave her mouth besides my name and the day she said *yes*.

Leaning in, I take her lips. Holding her face in my hands and knowing I’m never going to let her go. Kissing her with my entire heart.

“There’s time for that later.” I smirk, backing up before I fuck her against the wall when she needs to be getting ready. “One hour.”

Fel nods, trying to bury her smile but failing as a knock comes at the front door.

I leave Fel to get ready and walk over to it. Swinging it open, I’m met with Maren’s annoyed expression skimming me head to toe, unimpressed as ever. Echo is standing at her side, popping her gum. And they’re both wearing matching pale green dresses.

“She’s in our room.” I tell them as I brush past.

“So she’s onboard?” Maren asks, unable to help herself.

*As if there was a chance she wouldn’t have been?*

Fel and I were meant to be together since the moment we met. Something I’ve known in the marrow of my bones from the first moment I saw her. There’s no reality in which she would have turned me down.

*Fate.*

It's how our story was always written.

“Of course.” I shake my head and ignore Maren's prying eyes as she closes the door behind me.

I make my way across the hall to Crew's apartment. For how frequently he crashes on the couch at the shop, or at my place with Sage, I had no idea he actually had such a nice home. His gritty demeanor makes it easy to forget he actually comes from money like me.

Hence the expensive apartment he's been hiding from everyone in one of the nicer neighborhoods. It was dumb luck I even found out about it when I was searching for a place to buy for me and Fel.

No hiding it now that we're neighbors.

It only takes one knock for Sage to open the door. And when he does, my gaze drops to the blood on his dress shirt.

“What the fuck happened?”

Sage shakes his head. “Echo punched Crew.”

“Wait, what.”

I just saw her a second ago, and she seemed perfectly collected, popping her gum and looking cheery as always.

Following Sage into the apartment, I'm sure I heard him wrong. But as we turn the corner into the kitchen, Crew's standing in the center, shirtless, with ice on his nose.

And the sick fucker is smiling.

“What did you do to piss off Echo?” The last thing I need is these dicks ruining my wedding.

“Nothing.” Crew smirks, releasing a dark chuckle.

Sage tosses a blood covered rag in the trash can. “Don’t bother. He’s not saying shit, and neither is she. All I know is she and Maren showed up, and I left them alone for one fucking minute. Next thing you know, she broke his nose.”

“That’s not actually what happened.” Crew tosses the ice into the sink, and his eye sockets are already darkening.

“Then what did?”

But Crew doesn’t say another word. He just stands there with his fingers gripping the counter on either side of him, replaying something in his head like I’ve seen him do in the locker room before a fight.

“Crew?” Sage pushes, not taking the hint because he can’t help but act like the big brother to all of us.

“It’s between me and her,” Crew says finally, walking into the bathroom and slamming the door.

“He’s such a fucking mess, just ignore him.” Sage strips off his shirt and trades it for a freshly pressed black one, before handing me the bag with my suit. “So this shit’s really happening, huh?”

“Yep.” If the guys were shocked I proposed, they were even more surprised when I said I was surprising her with a wedding.

But I don't expect them to get it. When you meet your soulmate and watch her get ripped from your hands, you don't hesitate when you finally have her back again. I fought our demons and won. She's my prize and I have no apologies claiming her.

"I'm happy for you, man." Sage says, but he looks like he's holding back a laugh.

"Sure you are."

He smiles, shaking his head, switching places with Crew to change in the bathroom once the door finally opens. Crew's face looks like shit, but I guess it wouldn't be a Twisted Roses wedding if someone didn't have a few bruises.

When Sage finishes changing, I dip into the bathroom to get dressed. I stand in the mirror and try to decide who stares back at me. The kid who met Felicity Alcott eleven years ago and the man I am now bleed together so much one doesn't exist without the other.

Just like I don't exist without her.

*Inevitable.*

Fel and I were meant to walk this road, and we're finally doing it. I'm going to make her my wife, but it's nothing more than a title with how she's branded on my soul.

*Mine.*

Now. Always. Forever.



# Epilogue

## Fel

IT'S COOL OUTSIDE FOR an LA winter, but as I step out onto the roof, I'm too excited to care about the chill of breeze tickling my skin.

“You sure you're ready for this?” Maren brushes her fingers over my shoulders and adjusts my straps.

“You know I am.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I know. But I wouldn't be a proper friend if I didn't give you an out if you needed one. So I'm just saying... say the word, and I've got the getaway car on standby. I'll get you to an airport and on a plane to anywhere.”

“I appreciate it.” I hold her arms. “But I'm not going anywhere, and you know it. This is what I want.”

Maren's face softens, and even if she doesn't get it, a genuine smile crosses her cheeks. “Just checking.”

I take a deep breath and pull her in for a hug. It doesn't matter if she understands my decisions, Maren has always been there for me. She supported me when I decided to pave

my own way after college and has held my hand through all the events of the past couple of months.

She's the only person besides Jude who knows what really happened at my grandparents' house. And she's been there for me even when I didn't have the words to formulate my feelings.

Music kicks up across the rooftop, and Maren pulls back, holding onto my hands and smiling. Whether she and Jude get along doesn't matter, she knows he's good for me. He brings out my strong side, empowering me to face the world instead of fearing it.

"This place isn't bad. Look at the view."

I follow Maren's gaze out at the city, which somehow seems both big and small from up here.

Close and far away. Like my past and my future.

"I can get used to it, that's for sure." I still can't believe Jude surprised me with this beautiful apartment—or this wedding. "But I'm going to miss living with you."

"Same, girl. Same." Maren frowns, but I know she's secretly happy for me. "But I get it. From the moment we stepped into that shop, I should have seen this coming."

"You mean when you were trying to seduce him yourself?"

Maren rolls her eyes, and I laugh. It sounds ridiculous now, but it doesn't mean I don't plan on giving her crap about it for the foreseeable future.

“The man only had eyes for you.”

“I know.” And I only had eyes for him.

No one was ever going to live up to Jude in my mind or in my heart. The memory of him was a breathing force inside me, hibernating until I saw him again. He was the hope in a dark world when I was younger, and he’s the heart of my future.

“This is it.” Maren squeezes my hands, and I almost think there’s a burst of excitement. “Let’s go make you a bride.”

This *is* it. The pinnacle of so many things. Unlike any moment between him and me before. It takes everything in me not to rush around the corner and run to him. But I steady my breathing and nod.

“I’m ready.”

Maren smiles and waves a hand out. “Then let’s do this.”

Following her around the corner, I’m not sure what to expect. But the moment my eyes meet Jude’s, I lose myself in the stretch of space between us.

A path of peacock feathers guides my way, and it’s something that only Jude would do. The holder of my secrets in our past life and this one. The man who sees the girl beneath the red hair and bloody past. Stories only him and I share.

Pages we ripped out so no one else can read them, living on only in our hearts.

I take a deep breath as Maren walks the aisle first, stopping beside the small group gathered with the city lit up behind them. The only people here are from the shop and Maren, which is perfect.

Jude knows this is all I need because as long as I have him it doesn't matter who else shows up.

I run my fingers over my dress and start walking forward, feeling his eyes on me every step of the way.

Maren was paying attention when I was online searching for a dress because I remember flagging this one and making a comment that it was perfect, even if it was double what I was willing to spend.

Still, he made it happen. And I feel like a goddess as his eyes scan me from head to toe.

The white lace is delicate and simple, hugging every inch of my body before flowing out past my hips. It allows me enough room to walk, while still managing to melt over my curves. It cuts low in the front, just enough to tease but not enough to actually show anything. And the thin straps secure it over my shoulders.

When Jude's green eyes once more meet mine, I think he might take a knife to the fabric later.

Not that I'd mind.

I walk across the rooftop toward him, and I should probably be hearing the loud city raging around us. Car horns and chaos

that make white noise. But my heart is thundering, and the music drowns out anything else as I make my way forward.

Every moment of the last eleven years closes between us, and I wish we'd have never let them pass us by. We wasted so much time we could have spent together.

When I finally reach Jude, he catches me in his arms and pulls me to him, dipping his mouth by my ear. And I can't help but laugh at the fact that he can't control himself when it comes to me, even in this situation.

“You look stunning, Red,” he whispers.

Pulling back, he looks me over, and even though there's lust in his gaze, that's not what I focus on. It's the pain melting away with every second.

I want him to look at me like this forever, so I can get lost in those eyes. In his green gaze seeing all the things I couldn't.

Jude steps back and nods to the man officiating, who starts reciting vows. It's clear, yet somehow foggy as the words come out. Because we've ended up here of all places. Together, when it shouldn't have been possible.

Jude rubs the backs of my hands with his thumbs, tingling my skin the way only his touch does. My body igniting for the only man with the power to draw life to my bones.

I'm safe with him, and I don't want to be anywhere else.

“Do you, Felicity Alcott, take Jude Carlisle to be your husband, now and forever?”

I nod, swallowing down the lump in my throat. "I do."

Tears burn behind my eyelids, but I try to hold back, and he grips my hands tighter, sensing me at the edge of falling apart.

Jude is my home. In a world where I have no family or safe space to belong, he made himself that for me.

"And do you, Jude Carlisle, take Felicity Alcott to be your wife, now and forever?"

Jude steps closer and draws his palm up to cup my cheeks in his grasp. "I do."

The man keeps talking, but all I hear is Jude breathing so close to me he's drawing life to my body. All I see is the smile faintly crossing his lips like a secret. All I feel is his skin on my skin, keeping me safe. Making me his.

Planting my hand over where his rests on my cheek, I graze my fingers over his wedding band.

"Does it feel weird?"

He shakes his head, his hair brushing my forehead he's so close. "Feels like the most right thing there is."

I can't help but smile at his confession.

"Think I'll get it inked on me. Then it's never coming off."

"Isn't that bad luck?"

Jude reaches for my chin and tilts my face to his. "Not when it's you."

His gaze travels so deeply into mine, I feel the veins of his love meeting my bloodstream. Promises only he can make

without needing to say a word. Faith in us that carves deep in my ribs.

“To the end,” I whisper.

“No.” Jude shakes his head, dipping his mouth over mine. “Even after that.”

I can’t help but smile because I can’t imagine a life without him.

“I love you, Red.”

“I love you too.”

He smirks. “Still hate that nickname?”

“Not with you,” I admit, covering his hand with my own and kissing his fingertips. “I don’t hate anything with you.”

“Good, because I’m going to shred this dress later and fuck you on top of it.”

My cheeks blush. “You better.”

His lips press to mine, and everything melts away. Heaven or hell can come and take us. Souls know no bounds, and forbidden or not, mine has always belonged to him.



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THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading *LIES LIKE LOVE*! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review. Your support means the world to me.

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# Acknowledgements

Walking into this series, I didn't plan on writing a stepsibling romance—I didn't plan on writing anything taboo at all—But sometimes, the characters speak with such conviction, it breaks all your rules.

That was Jude and Fel's story for me. The infinite bond they shared was overwhelming, and all I could do was go along for the ride. This is my darkest book to date, but I enjoyed writing it so much. These two are passionate, possessive, and a little violent. The love they shared was raw, and not always pretty. But their bond was endless.



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For my readers, here we are at the end of another book, starting a new series. Thank you for sticking through this with me. For taking a chance on a new group of damaged bad boys. Thank you for holding my characters in your heart and enjoying their stories. You are the reason I do this.



## About the Author

Eva Simmons writes hot, heartbreaking romance with complex heroines, and broken, dirty-talking bad boys who fall hard for them.

When Eva isn't dreaming up new worlds or devouring every book she can get her hands on, she can be found spending time with her family, painting a fresh canvas, or playing an elf in World of Warcraft.

Eva is currently living out her own happily ever after in Nevada with her family.