



THEIR
HALLOWEENED
QUIZEN

CARLY CLAIRE

Their Hallowed Queen: Part Two

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Dedication



THIS ONE'S FOR ALL the ones who read Part One and thought... wow, that was dark and spicy.

You haven't seen anything yet.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Babe. The blurb said it all, didn't it? This is part two of a Halloween-themed novel about a woman and her sexcapades with three dark, gorgeous men. It may make you laugh, or cry, or maybe even cringe. But it should never fuck with your mental health. If you haven't shaped your trauma into dark humor and kink, this may not be the book for you. And that's cool! Marley and her

men may not be everyone's cup of tea, but I guarantee they're someone's shot of whiskey!

This is part two of two and it must be read after part one, because much like Colton's cock, this bitch is thicccck with all the C's.

Much like Tripp's cock, it's studded and wicked.

And much like Rev's cock, the story is dark.

There is a happily ever after awaiting our main characters... after they are done suffering.

If you don't want to have the twist ruined for you, stop reading. Play with fire, dance with the devil, and jump in the deep end.

If you feel that you're not in the headspace to tackle the unknown, read on and see if any of these things are a hard limit for your reading pleasure.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Themes which may not be suitable for all readers include but are not limited to: Abuse of Power, Anxiety, Attempted Rape, Body Shaming, Breath Play, Death, Depression, Drug and Alcohol Abuse, Dubcon, Exchange of Bodily Fluids (Snowballing), Explicit Sex Scenes (Sometimes with multiple partners), Kidnapping, Knife Play, MFMM Scenes, Manipulation by a Doctor, Mentions of Human Trafficking, Mentions of Self Harm, Mentions

of the Occult, Murder, Mutilation, Police Corruption, Primal Play, Religious References, Satanic Rituals, Slut Shaming, Trauma and subsequent PTSD, Unconsensual Bondage, Water (temperature) Play, Witch Prosecution, and probably some stuff I'm forgetting.

3 years ago

ONE SECOND, JAKE IS there—hazy and out of focus. The next, it's just darkness. And then the darkness is gone, and so is Jake, and I'm looking up at the sky.

At least, I think it's the sky. But the clouds are gone, and the bright cerulean has turned to a velvety navy color. When did it get so dark? "You okay, Angel?"

My chest hurts, my head, everything. It takes a moment for everything to come back, but when it snaps into place, I realize I must have passed out. Did Jake get a hold of himself when he realized what he was doing?

But it's not Jake who leans over me. It's not Jake's voice in my ear. And it's not Jake's hand brushing hair out of my face.

"Take it easy," Rev says as I try to sit up.

Colton offers me a hand, and I'm able to get my feet under me to let him help me to them. Tripp pulls Rev to standing as well, just as I sway into Colton's chest. The world hasn't stabilized yet, but I look around for Jake

anyway and don't find a single trace of him. I do notice a spot of blood on Colton's collar, though, the shiner already forming around his swelling eye.

"Oh my god," I gasp, reaching out to touch him but thinking better of it. My fingers come to a halt in the air, taking in the knot loosened at his tie. The most absurd thought strikes me that he looks good. "Are you okay?"

"I'm more worried about you." He dismisses me with his words just as he brushes my hand aside and tilts my chin up and to the side, looking at my throat. "He's out of his fucking mind."

"I'm going to kill him," Tripp announces, crossing his arms heavily across his chest. "Fucking asshole."

"We'll deal with him together," Rev agrees, also sounding like he'd very much like to commit murder.

"I think he killed her."

I don't realize I've said that out loud until I notice they're all looking at me like I'm crazy. I shake my head, but it's too late to put the words back in my mouth. "Forget it."

I bite my lip like I'm punishing it for letting my thoughts slip by. These guys might be my friends, but they're Jake's *best* friends. There isn't a single person who would probably believe me any less than these guys. And yet, something about the looks they exchange makes me think they're considering it.

"Forget I said anything. I've got to get back in there."

I'm turning to go when a hand closes on my wrist, and Colton spins me back to face them. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I don't know," I shrug, "It's fine, whatever."

"You wouldn't have said that if you didn't have a reason." Rev points out.

"And him choking you like that out of nowhere?" Tripp adds, letting the

thought speak for itself.

I shouldn't bother them with this, but they're looking at me in earnest, and they look so genuinely concerned. "He's just been weird lately." I shake my head, but it doesn't dislodge the idea I've got rattling around in my brain. "I think he's on drugs... I think he's *been* on drugs. And over the summer..."

I hesitate, not sure if I should just bite my tongue and keep her secret. But when Audrey begged me not to tell anyone, I don't think she thought that the man who she told me had tried to hurt her may end up killing her. Keeping her secret now feels like a bigger betrayal than sharing it.

"You can tell us anything," Tripp says, dropping his weight on the backs of his legs and getting down to my level so that he can look into the eyes I've cast toward the ground.

"What happened over the summer?" Rev prompts.

The words congeal in my throat, and I look around to be sure Jake isn't anywhere in earshot. "I went to pick Audrey up for one of the bonfires," I swallow, glancing at Colton. It's his reaction I'm most terrified of. Audrey was his girlfriend... the fact she didn't confide in him must feel like a betrayal in itself. "Jake was there, and he had her against a wall. He stopped when he saw me, and he chased us out of her house and..."

My chest feels like it's constricting. The sky overhead is growing darker, illuminated only by the threads of sunlight peeking through the darkened clouds. If I don't get it off my chest, this secret may suffocate me. "Audrey said that Jake tried to rape her." I clamp my mouth shut the minute the last word passes my lips, pressing my fingertips to it like that will help the words get back in. It doesn't even prevent me from saying anything more because I find Colton's eyes, which are wild with anger. "I'm so sorry, Colt. She begged me not to tell you. She was worried about ruining your friendship, but

if he did that, is it really a stretch to think maybe he's the one who put her in that coffin?"

Tripp and Rev lock eyes as they consider my suggestion, but Colton is smoldering. I can practically feel the heat rolling off of him, the rage. "She said what?"

I know he heard me, so I don't repeat myself. "If he killed her and I kept that secret..."

I'll never be able to live with myself.

I'll never forgive myself.

I would understand if none of you ever want to see me again.

"Hey," Rev shakes his head, somehow sensing my spiral. "None of that, okay."

"This isn't your fault," Tripp agrees, grabbing my hands and squeezing gently. It's not one of the hugs he used to give me, but it's comforting all the same.

"Get her home." Colton says. His voice is hard, and there's no room for argument as he turns to go.

"Colton—"

"I'll talk to you in a bit, Marley." He assures me. "Just go home."

"I can't leave..."

But I'm arguing with myself because he's already gone by the time the last word is off my tongue. "The service isn't over. Hadley's in there, and she'll wonder where I went—"

"You can't go back in there like this," Tripp says, standing. One of his hands slips from mine as he does, but he holds firm to the other one, using it to pull me toward the parking lot.

He's walking so fast I think we're almost running from something before I

realize the storm clouds are knitting together just overhead, ready to open a torrent above us. He unlocks the door of a Mustang—I don't know when he bought it, but the shiny green paint job suggests what the leather interior confirms. New car smell permeates the air as I slip into the passenger seat, and Tripp leans across me. His hands find the seat belt and pull it into place. I think the air that's in the car may have been sucked out in that moment because I don't even move to breathe when his eyes slide to mine.

He's so close that I can see the faint sunburst pattern in the iris of his eyes, smell the mint on his breath, see the spot where he nicked himself shaving a few days ago. I think he's going to say something, maybe kiss me... he almost looks like he wants to do one of the two. But he does neither, settling for a smile just before the heavy silence is broken by the click of my belt popping into place.

He shuts my door for me a second before Rev shuts his in the back seat and leans into the space between the driver's side and me. I try to squash the disappointment in me at the missed opportunity. It's not like I'm looking to start anything right now, but Tripp makes me feel good, and having him so close, I'd thought he was going to go for it. I crave his comfort more than I crave air, but it's ridiculous to be thinking about this right now.

"Colton won't do anything stupid, right?" I ask, looking between the two of them.

"Colton always does stupid things." Rev shrugs. "He'll be fine."

"But he's going after Jake, right? I don't want him to get hurt."

"Jake's the one who will end up hurt," Tripp says quietly. "And he deserves it."

"He's lucky we were more worried about you than going after him earlier." Rev sighs, but it sounds angry.

“Mmm.” Tripp agrees, turning the key in the ignition. I glance back at the church to see the doors have been pushed open and people are spilling out onto the steps. “He’s also lucky we’re not all together right now because he’d be next in the morgue.”

The rain breaks through the sky seconds before we pull onto the highway. Tripp drives like we’ll live forever. It’s an interesting dichotomy, whipping around the winding roads, probably going too fast after having just learned first-hand that we’re not invincible. But the AC is on blast, the music is on low, and I feel inexplicably at peace as raindrops splash across the windshield. All of my exhaustion from the last week seems to be working its way into the moment, easing the tension and stress of the funeral. I don’t want to go to sleep and lose this little bliss.

“Don’t take me home.”

It’s quiet while my words hang in the air and they both turn to look at me. “What?”

“Don’t take me home.” I sigh. “I don’t want to go back yet.”

I can’t offer them much more of an explanation without potentially breaking down in tears, so I don’t. And that seems to be okay with them because Tripp catches Rev’s eyes in the rear-view mirror and in that weird way they have of always understanding each other, they come to an agreement. “Okay,” Tripp agrees, switching lanes suddenly and punching the gas pedal. The engine roars as we pick up speed, the sound of the pattering rain only growing more furious.

“Hold on.”

It takes a moment to realize what he means, but I grab hold of the handle above my head as he whips the wheel way too late, exiting off of the desolate highway. The storm ahead of us is darker than the clouds in our mirrors, but

my stomach isn't knotting in fear right now. It's anticipation, excitement, nostalgia.

Being with them feels so right.

For just a little while, the reality of our world is falling away, and I know it's wrong, that I should let myself feel the grief. But I can't drown in it anymore. Being with them gives me hope for the future I've lost. They were my past, and while I don't know what tomorrow looks like, maybe they can be a part of it too.

I know where we're going. I could drive this route in my sleep.

The closer we get to the Vineyard, the more my anxiety melts away. But Tripp doesn't take the turn for the vacation house, driving us instead toward the south beach. By the time we park, the rain is pelting the roof hard enough to fill the silence with a cadenced rhythm. Rev wastes no time, throwing his door open and rushing out into the twilight. Evening is descending fast, and with the darkness brought on by the storm, it's hard to see much of him beyond what the headlights illuminate as he runs past.

"Wait." My fingers are on the handle when Tripp reaches out, covering my other hand with his and stealing my attention.

His touch is gentle, warm... like his eyes on me. "I just wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?"

"I know it's been weird between us for the last couple of years, and that's largely my fault." I'm starting to argue that point, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head. "I was jealous, and I got weird. We were best friends for our whole lives, and then Audrey came along." He sighs. "I felt like you didn't need me anymore, so I stepped back. And then you started dating Jake, and I just..." He taps his palm against the steering wheel as he searches his

thoughts for the right words. “I didn’t understand why you chose him. And it hurt too much, so I put distance between us.”

The space between us now seems to have warmed up, but chills cover my arms, and I want to wrap them around myself. I feel too vulnerable, and yet it’s not a bad thing. It feels exactly the way it should.

“You didn’t understand why I... chose him?”

Tripp laughs, raking his bottom lip between his teeth. When he turns to face me fully, he’s every bit the person I always knew and also someone new... someone I need to get to know. “Don’t pretend you never knew how much I wanted you. I’ve loved you since I knew what love was.”

I want to cry, to laugh, to grin like a mad woman, to tell him to take it back. Tripp Archer just told me he loved me. He just told me he’s *always* loved me. I don’t even have time to sort out the conflicting emotions his words bring because I just want to commit this moment to my memory and live in it forever. But Tripp shakes his head. “I don’t need to hear you say anything. I just wanted you to know how I feel... how I’ve always felt.”

I still try, opening my mouth just before he throws the door open, grinning as he ducks into the rain. I sit with my thoughts for a few seconds, watching the two of them in the headlights as Rev tries to put him in a headlock, both of them laughing, carefree.

And then I join them because if there’s one thing we all deserve, it’s this moment.

Present Day

IF SOMEONE TOLD ME on the street that I had to repent for my sins, I'd think of the night I took drugs and fucked around with a guy I barely knew while my best friend was being murdered. I'd think of the times I sank to my knees to worship Logan with my tongue, the times I let him defile me, the fucked up things we did together that surely aren't looked upon favorably by any church. But when these men tell me I'll spend the rest of my life paying for my sins, I don't know what they're referring to.

“Colton,” I turn to try and get a look at him, but he presses on my shoulder with enough force that I sink to the ground without fighting him. Terror claws at the back of my throat, my heart stutters in my chest, and a peal of nausea ripples in my stomach.

The last day I lived in Serenity Hollow, I felt the eyes on me everywhere I went. They were like magnets, heavy and static, weighing me down. Of course, it was also the day of the funeral. Emotions were running high. Shock seemed to permeate the misty morning air, accusation and confusion lingering along with it. It didn't make sense that two girls could walk into the

haunted house and only one would emerge alive, and nobody could ever figure out the truth about what happened in there.

But it also didn't make sense to them that I would have done anything to her—there was no motive, no method of doing so, no evidence that I had anything to do with her brutal murder. I heard the woman behind me talking about the security camera that showed Audrey and I walk in together and how it showed me hanging back as Audrey advanced. *Suspicious*, she said. *Almost like she was waiting for her friend to be murdered so she'd have an alibi.*

Colton doesn't think that, does he?

“Colton,” I try again, snapping my head up in the direction he went behind me.

“What is it baby?” He purrs, stroking a cheek reverently. His eyes are warm yet hard, full of affection and anger. I don't know where I stand with him, if this whole night has been in good fun or if they're going to pull this belt tighter until I have to truly fight for my last breath. They keep saying this is a punishment, but what for?

“What do you mean?” I pant, my chest heaving as I look between them, willing one of them to just explain what the hell is going on. “Paying for my sins?”

“Don't worry your pretty little head over what's around the corner, angel.” Rev presses a kiss to the top of my forehead. His words don't do a damn thing to ease the knot of anxiety that's coiled like a nest of snakes in the pit of my stomach.

“Just focus on tonight,” Tripp suggests. “Focus on us.”

I've *been* focusing on them, so much so that I can't think about anything beyond them. A glance out the window shows that the sky is lightening up a

bit, the darkness easing back, and I've done nothing but think about them for the entire night, ignoring my responsibilities.

"You know grief, Marley," Colton says. "You lost so many people you loved. Describe it to me."

His words come like a slap in the face, my shock mingling with rage. "I... what?"

"When your parents died and your sister was away at college, you had to identify them, right? What did that feel like?"

"Colt—" Tripp's voice holds a warning as he shakes his head slowly. The ache in my chest now has nothing to do with the restricted airflow I've been suffering through.

"When you were covered in your best friend's blood and too late to help her," Colton continues, undeterred. "How did that feel?"

It's a shock to me that I can get any sound past the lump in my throat, but I choke on his name again, desperate for any sort of clarification on why he's doing this. "Colton..."

"When you walked into your therapist's office and saw your lover dead on the ground, all that blood..." He gives me a minute for my brain to conjure the image I can't will away—Logan with his bare chest covered in stab wounds, not yet cold by the time I leaned over him to check for a pulse. If I'd been there ten minutes earlier, I may have been able to spare him his life. Or I may have been the one left looking like a human pin cushion on the floor of his office. "How did that feel?"

"Give her a minute," Rev says, glancing at Colton before turning his attention to me, patting me on the shoulder.

I feel like I've been sucker-punched—disoriented, and shocked, hurt, and angry. Tears burn my eyes, the ache burns inside my chest, and my anger

burns through my veins. I'm not sure what kind of answer he wants from me and I can't give him those answers without ripping my heart out, so I grind my teeth together.

"Fuck you!"

"Not good, huh?" He sneers, crossing his arms and leaning against the dresser. "Which hurt the worst? Was it your parents because that ruined your innocence? Was it Audrey because it ruined your life as you knew it? Or was it your little puppet master Logan because that ruined your idea of the future?"

"Colt!" Tripp is yelling now, but I can barely hear him because the world has just tunneled around me. My chest is too tight to take in air, though I'm not sure if that's the problem or if my brain is just shutting down to avoid the shards of glass that are cutting through my veins.

"I can't—"

"Marley." I feel hands on my face, trying to guide me to look at them. I don't know whom they belong to or what they're trying to tell me. I'm too busy spiraling.

"How did you know?" I gasp, finally managing to breathe through my nose enough to steady my vision so that when I look up at Colton, he only laughs.

"What?"

"Logan. How did you know about him?"

"I'm a cop, Marley. You're a person of interest in the murder of someone you were fucking. You don't think they would have reached out to law enforcement in the town you grew up in?"

His admission feels like getting kicked in the stomach. I didn't run from a murder investigation because I was guilty. I ran because I needed to see someone I trusted, because I wanted to feel safe. Logan was basically my

only friend, as pathetic as it is. I just needed to be near someone who knows me, someone who doesn't doubt that I have never killed anyone.

Now I realize how guilty it probably makes me look, skipping town the morning after spending the night in the police station being interrogated. "I didn't do it, Colton." I shake my head, trying to stave off the foggy feeling in my brain that comes around whenever I think too hard about the details of all the death that surrounds me. Logan had told me it was my brain's way of trying to protect me from trauma—cutting out key moments without removing the entire memory, like punching holes in the fabric of the past and eliminating the information that makes it hard to function on the daily.

I imagine him standing over my shoulder as I tell him I've unlocked memories I forgot I even had—people I forgot even existed. I could never remember exactly what happened in that haunted house in between what I did with Mark and Colton showing up after the security guard stumbled upon me.

Logan never pushed me to relive that night, as much as he wanted answers, too. When I suggested hypnotism, he said it wasn't advisable in cases of trauma. When I suggested coming home, just that one time, he said that if I did that before I was ready, it would be like taking a hammer to my progress. I hate the feeling of not knowing parts of my own past, but I hate being broken even more. Logan's approach was the first one that didn't make me feel like I was giving up a part of myself, the only one that didn't rely upon a diagnosis of mental incompetence.

"Are you a murderer, Marley?" Colton leans in front of me, his beautiful face pulled into the slightest smirk like he's taunting me.

"No. I—I've never killed anyone. I didn't hurt any of them. I would never —"

"Answer the question, baby." He pats my cheek with a little more force

than necessary.

“I fucking told you I never hurt anybody!”

“Wrong!” He roars it so suddenly that I jump, my heart leaping into my throat in case it needs to vacate this useless shell of my body and make a break for it.

“You hurt *us*, Mars.” Tripp’s voice is sad, and when I turn to blink at him, his bright eyes reflect that quiet disappointment.

“Maybe you didn’t mean to,” Rev agrees, smoothing the hair back from my face. “But you hurt every single one of us.”

“The question I want an answer to, Marley, is what hurt *you* the most? Which loss hurt so bad that it made your chest feel hollow and your lungs burn? Which loss made your bones ache and your spirit scream and your blood go cold? Which death made you want to scream at the stars?”

I know the answer I should give. And I know the answer he wants. They’re not the same.

As a daughter, the answer should be obvious. The death of my parents should be the single most painful moment I will ever have to endure—it was the shattering of my worldview, the end of my childhood, the hallmark of my realization that the world is a dark and cruel place. The death of my parents is the scar that cuts the deepest, the wound that will never heal. But Audrey’s death hit different and settled into my bones deeper.

Losing the people you love most in the world ought to be the most devastating thing a person shouldn’t have to endure. It nearly broke me—I was so fragile it wouldn’t have taken much to snap me during that time. But I had my sister, and when she was too much, I had Audrey. It’s natural to lose your parents eventually—it’s expected. But I was able to gather enough of the pieces of myself to reassemble something like who I was. And then

Audrey helped me navigate the world without letting it blow me apart again. Without her to hold me together when I fell apart in the face of her death, I had no one to put me back together. Not when I couldn't tell my sister the truth about that night, and not when the entire town looked at me like they suspected I was hiding something.

“Audrey’s.” I whisper around the crack in my voice. It feels like a betrayal to my parents, to say that what happened to them wasn't the single worst pain I've ever felt.

Colton looks like he doesn't believe me, lifting an eyebrow to appraise me without a word. He doesn't ask why, he doesn't judge me for not saying my parents, and he doesn't yell for me to answer anything more. His voice is quiet when he says, “And Logan?”

“I didn't love Logan.”

It feels wrong to speak coldly about the dead, but it's the truth. Logan and I had shared something—something inside him that also existed inside of me, something that made us a fucked up little pair, that allowed him to tolerate my company. We talked about the future, about life, about everything superficial. But I never loved him.

“Audrey was my best friend. I loved her in a different way than you did, but I loved her, Colton. I didn't fucking kill her or any of them.”

“I was your best friend, too,” Tripp says so quietly I almost don't hear him. When I do, I turn to face him. “I loved you, Marley, and you pushed me away. When she moved here, it was like I quit being good enough for you.”

“Tripp...”

His words are so vulnerable I want to hug him, to tell him that of course, he was good enough. It wasn't that Audrey was a better friend or that she was cooler—she was simply more relatable to me. She was my first girl best

friend, after growing up the only daughter in a group of neighborhood sons, the only girl traipsing alongside the boys, the last one chosen when we played soccer in the cul-de-sac with the older kids, because I was a girl and nobody wanted *that* on their team.

When Audrey moved to town, she filled a space that Hadley had recently vacated, as she became too cool to be caught dead with her little shadow constantly tailing her. Audrey showed up when I needed her most, and we just clicked. It never occurred to me that Tripp would think I pushed him away. To me, it felt like the natural evolution of childhood friendships.

“That’s how it felt when you left,” Rev explains, glancing from Tripp to me. “It was like none of us were enough to make you stay. Like none of us were good enough for you anymore.”

“No.” I shake my head, trying not to let the tears gather in my eyes as the guilt washes over me. It feels ridiculous to be having such a vulnerable conversation like this, tied up and naked between them. I guess they’re taking the idea of the naked truth literally. “It was never about any of you.”

“Not even me?” Colton challenges, drawing my attention back to him.

“God, no. Of course not, Colton.” I’m not sure where the laugh comes from, but it bubbles out of my chest like a hiccup. “If there’s anyone I would have stayed for, it would have been you.”

Maybe that’s too much to admit in a room full of men I’ve been hooking up with tonight, but it’s the truth, and Colton deserves to know it. There’s a glimmer of hope in his eyes, just a faint bit of something like vindication, and then it disappears like it was never there. “But you didn’t.”

“Because I couldn’t!”

Yelling may not be the greatest idea, given that I’m trying to de-escalate them, but it’s coming at the cost of escalating myself. “I couldn’t fucking

stay, Colton.”

“Why?” He snaps, getting in my face now. He looks dangerous, his eyes wild, his jaw tense. “Why couldn’t you stay, Marley?”

“Because!” I scream, wishing my hands were free so I could clap a hand over my mouth and keep from saying something I’m about to regret. “Because they threatened all of you if I didn’t leave!”

Silence follows in the wake of my outburst, and I see them all exchanging a look of disbelief. “Who would be stupid enough to threaten us, angel?” Rev asks, drawing my attention to his clear eyes. “Give me names.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head honestly, struggling to hold onto my anger in the face of Rev’s sudden calm. The way they’re teetering back and forth between rage and tenderness is making my head hurt and my body ache. I don’t know if they’re going to kiss me or kill me, and it’s as exhausting as it is exhilarating.

“Who threatened you, baby?” Colton tries, rubbing his thumb over my lips like that will coax names that I don’t know to spring from my tongue.

“They were wearing masks,” I tell him, turning to find Tripp watching me thoughtfully. “I don’t know who it was, I swear.”

I know Colton is dangerous. The way he beat the fuck out of the pirate who tried to blindfold me earlier, the way he fucked my throat without a hint of mercy, the way he wrecked Kenny Miller’s pickup when he grabbed Audrey’s ass our junior year. He’s never tried to hide the fact that he is the sort of person you *don’t* mess with, but right now, with his jaw tense and his body rigid, his face just inches from mine, I’m reminded of how fucking ruthless he can be.

“Tell us what happened, Princess,” Tripp suggests, his voice veiled with a forced calm.

“Every detail.”

3 Years Ago

IN THE COVER OF the rain, I let myself feel everything I've repressed the last few days... the last few years. I dance in the rain, spin in circles like a child, let it pelt my skin and soak my clothes. In a few hours, the temperature will drop further and the ground will be covered in sleet, but for now it's solid. The waves crash hard against the shore and rocks, the wind screams, and the air is cold, but I've never felt so renewed as I do dancing in the rain in the headlights with them. I let myself cry, the hot tears washing away with the rain as quickly as they fall, let myself laugh, let myself love this moment. I'm alive, for better or worse, and it hurts sometimes, but it's fucking beautiful here too. These moments are few and far between, but they're worth the wait.

By the time the rain slows, we're all soaked, and Tripp is looking mournfully at his car, knowing we're about to drag in sand and water. My already tight dress is clinging to my skin, making me shiver harder now that I've stopped moving around, and it's not leaving much to the imagination anyway. I peel it off quickly before they can say anything to make me think

twice about it and rush to the car, diving into the backseat. I don't dare search the darkness for their faces, though as I'm leaning forward to turn the heat on, the driver's side door opens, and Tripp slides in. Pretty sure he gets a good look at my cleavage, held aloft by my bra before I get the heat up and retreat. Only when I do, I realize I'm not alone. Rev climbed in behind me, and just like Tripp and I, he's shed his wet clothes so that when he pulls me back onto his lap, I can feel the outline of his burgeoning cock through his wet boxers.

I feel like the water drops between us are about to start sizzling because the heat emanating from our bodies is intense. But Tripp literally just confessed his love for me, and despite the feelings that are being stirred up inside of me by Rev's warm skin on mine, I can't do this to him when he's right there... watching us. Except, he's grinning when he catches my eye in the rearview mirror, his eyes molten, with no trace of jealousy or anger.

Rev's hands rub circles on my arms, warming my skin with the friction as Tripp backs out of the parking space.

If I thought I was at peace on the way here, it's nothing compared to how blissfully content I am when I ease my head against Rev's chest. Tripp keeps the music on low, and the rain starts again once we reach the highway. I'm sort of sad that we don't go to the vacation house, but Hadley is probably going to kill me when I get home anyway, so better to get it over with. And what a wonderful way to spend my final hours.

I don't realize I've drifted to sleep until I'm waking and peeling my damp hair off of Rev's skin, blinking at the shape of my house in front of me. My disappointment is renewed at the fact that this night is over, and I don't know what the morning will bring, but there's no way it can compare to this.

The sky is clear here, though rain drips slowly from the eaves of the house.

Tripp opens the door, and when I see him standing there in his boxers, I remember I'm half-naked. "Your dress." He explains, offering me the wet bundle he pulled from the trunk. Still disoriented, I groan at the realization I have to meet my sister at the doorstep in my bra and panties. I'm an adult, and it's not like I'm afraid of Hadley seeing me in my skivvies, but the thought of explaining to her what happened after I split from her makes me nauseous.

"You want us to stay?" Rev offers, his voice carrying the slightest undertone of hope.

I do want them to stay. Or to take me away again. I could sleep in the guest house, and Hadley would be none the wiser, but it's not fair to ask them to keep the demons away. I don't know how long I slept on Rev's chest, but I feel refreshed and rested, and I don't believe I'll be sleeping tonight, so I won't keep them up with me. "Hadley and I were supposed to have a movie night."

It's true, though I kind of forgot until I used that as an excuse. It's not like I wanted to watch a movie anyway. "We'll see you tomorrow," Tripp assures me, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. It's so sweet I think I may melt, but I manage to keep it together long enough to smile at them both, wave, and then scurry up the steps.

Tripp doesn't get back in his car until I'm shutting the door behind me and turning the lock in its place.

I take advantage of the darkness to try and get control of the smile on my face. I feel like a fool, like Cupid suddenly shot me in the ass and now I'm head-over-heels. I didn't realize how much I'd been repressing my disappointment at how things ended with Tripp, and now, knowing that he

not only still cares about me but cares about me a lot more than I thought he did, I feel giddy. And that's to say nothing of Rev.

I can't think about it right now because if I start overthinking, I'll kill the good vibes I'm high on, and I'm not ready for them to be gone. So, I put them out of my head as best I can and climb the stairs two at a time. The space under Hadley's door shows her room to be dark, but I hold my breath all the way to my room just in case she's waiting for me on my bed.

But my room is empty, so I strip off the rest of my wet clothes and throw on the coziest pajamas I have. I should shower, but the thought of washing their touch off my skin makes that idea unappealing, so I climb still-wet under the covers and lay there with the day's events looping in my head.

I fall asleep to the memory of being cocooned against Rev's warm body and Tripp's soft lips on my forehead.



I wake with a knife to my throat.

“Wakey, wakey, Marley!”

The words stir me out of sleep, though at first, I think it’s just the start of a dream as I blink through darkness and find no focal point.

And then he leans over me, the Scream mask nearly glowing in the dark. My first instinct is to curl up, to make myself smaller, or at least to jump out of bed and run. But the blade at my neck digs into my skin just enough for me to realize it’s there, right where Jake tried to choke the life out of me

earlier. I open my mouth to scream, but he laughs, shaking his head. “No, no.”

The faint glow of a cell phone bobs closer to my face, the light obscuring my view of whoever is behind that phone. But it doesn't matter because the screen catches my attention... or rather, the person on the screen catches my attention.

Hadley.

She's lying on her side, the blanket drawn to her ears but tucked under her chin, her dark hair pulled back on top of her head. She didn't remove any of her makeup, and for one horrifying moment, I think that she may not be alive. And then she moves, adjusting the blanket, her eyes still hooded with sleep, before falling still again. She's alive... because she's their leverage.

The camera pans to someone in the bed behind her, the Freddy mask. He waves, showing me a flash of the knife.

“They can't hear you,” Ghostface assures me. His voice is the distorted kind of electronic sound from the movies, lilting up and down. It's more terrifying than if he were simply yelling at me, oscillating between calm and controlled and then unhinged as it gets when he speaks his next words. “But if you scream, I guarantee you'll hear your sister getting ripped apart. And you don't want that, do you, Lavigne?”

I shake my head the slightest bit, aware of the knife that could end my life in a matter of seconds. “You didn't keep our secret, naughty girl.”

“I didn't—”

“I told you, we are everywhere. You're our little pawn, Lavigne. But you don't want to play by our rules. You're cheating?”

“No.” I say, staring up into the mesh where the eyes are, trying to appeal to them, trying to see if it's Mark's dark eyes behind the fabric.

“We know what you told the police, so don’t bother lying. I just want to know why you did it?”

“I...” Is that a trick question? “Because you killed her!”

“Yeah, yeah,” He waves a gloved hand like I just accused him of cheating in a game of Tic-Tac-Toe. “I told you, we did that for you. But you’re not grateful.”

“She was my best friend!” I cry, my voice rising with the ridiculousness of this conversation. He’s straddling me, his weight trapping me against my own mattress. I realize my mistake when he grabs my hair, pulling me into him.

“Quiet, little mouse, or we’ll slit the bird’s neck.”

I don’t need to look at the camera to know they’re still talking about Hadley. “Please,” I try, the single word quaking with the tears I’m keeping back. “Don’t hurt her.”

“If you don’t want her to hurt, you need to shut up and listen for once. Can you do that?” I nod the tiniest bit, and he drops my hair, letting my head fall back against my pillow. “Good. If you can’t keep quiet, I can stuff your throat with my cock, but then I don’t think you’d be listening to me. So keep those pretty lips closed unless you’re going to put them to work, hmm?”

When I say nothing, he takes it as a sign of my compliance and sighs. “You know, I really wanted you to keep your mouth shut. But I also really wanted to show that little sex tape you made to the whole town, too.” He shakes his head slowly, the motion exaggerated. “Decisions, decisions.”

With his knife to my throat and a stranger in Hadley’s bed, the video of me coming in the haunted house doesn’t sound like the worst of my problems. He’s quiet for a minute, then tilts his head to the side to appraise me. “You know what I’ve decided, Lavigne?”

He doesn’t expect an answer, which is just as well since I don’t think words

would come even if I tried to summon them. “I’ve decided I want to keep your little porn star debut for me and my friends to enjoy. But you *do* still need to be punished.”

“No,” I shake my head, panic rising in me stronger now. “Please, I’m sorry!”

I have no idea what his idea of punishment is, but I am certain I don’t want it.

“I’m sorry.” He mimics. “I’m sorry. Girls like you are always sorry, aren’t you?”

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, but he rushes on in the way he does, happy to carry on a conversation alone. “Audrey said she was sorry, too.”

I’m crying now, and that pisses me off. They don’t deserve any more of my fucking tears. I don’t deserve to be pulled along on a string like a toy. “Fuck you!”

I know my voice is too loud—it trembles with my rage. I couldn’t control it even if I tried—which I do, when the phone screen tilts toward me, offering a view of Freddy slipping the knife against Hadley’s neck. I damn near scream, but a gloved hand covers my mouth. As I watch, I realize he must not have used any force because she’s not bleeding, not cut... she’s still asleep.

They must have drugged her. My sister has always been a heavy sleeper, but you don’t sleep through someone crawling into your bed, shoving a phone in your face, and putting a blade against your flesh. “You will.” Ghostface laughs. “But not tonight. Tonight, you get punished.”

“I’ll do whatever you want,” I say, closing my eyes as my mind fills with a thousand awful things he could ask of me. “Just don’t hurt my sister.”

“I won’t hurt her.” He heaves his shoulders like he’s annoyed by my

pleading. “In fact, I’ll make sure someone keeps her safe when you’re gone.”

When I’m gone.

I clamp my mouth shut, refusing to let the scream out of my throat, where it’s bubbling up to cause an ache in my entire chest. I thought earlier that if this was my last night, it would be the perfect one. But now I’m pissed that he’s trying to get my fear to chase away the peace of the memory. I clench my jaw so tight I think my teeth will shatter and everything aches, but he doesn’t get the satisfaction of me pleading for my life. “Do it, then.” I say, reaching around to cover his hands with my own. It takes all of the courage I have to touch him, let alone to face my impending death, but I won’t go out the way I’ve been living. I won’t scream and cry, and I can’t kick and fight, so I’ll take control of the moment. “You want to kill me, so fucking kill me!”

To my surprise, he didn’t take the chance I gave him, pushing my hands off of him and moving the knife away from my neck. It takes a minute for me to register the sound coming from him, but then I realize he’s laughing.

And he’s not the only one. It’s that creepy clown who’s holding the phone, and he drops it when he, too, begins laughing. His isn’t modulated, but it’s a deep sound, rich and terrifying and slightly unhinged. “You stupid little whore. I’m not going to *kill* you!”

I nearly choke on my relief, but I tamp it down in case this is part of the joke. When they finally get control of themselves, Ghostface shakes his head. “I want you alive, Lavigne. Just not here.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to process those words before he seizes me by the throat and wraps his hand around it. His weight shifts as he climbs over me, and then he uses his grip on me to throw me to the floor. “You’ve broken our trust. You can’t stay.”

I’m scrambling to my feet, but not fast enough. He towers above me,

looking down like I'm some strange creature he's never seen. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," he chuckles. "Let's see. Think of it like this... I'm your king, and I banish you." He turns to the figure wearing the comedy and tragedy mask, his arms in a little shrug as he seeks his friend's approval. At the nod, Ghost drops the gesture and leans back against my mattress, crossing one boot over the other, waiting.

Banished?

We're not in medieval times, and he's not royalty. We live in a free country in the twenty-first century. He can't banish me.

But he can threaten me with the safety of everyone I love... everyone I still have left. The list has dwindled, but it still exists.

I choke out the only thing that comes to mind. "I have nowhere to go."

"That's not our problem." He shrugs. "You're the one who betrayed us, Lavigne. Shoo, shoo."

He flips his hand at me as if I'm a dog that's begging for a bite of food and not a whole ass human he's sending away from her home, her family, her friends. "I—"

"No more fucking excuses, Lavigne. Start running, or I'll chase you out of here."

I know it has to be a part of whatever sadistic game this is, but I have no choice but to play. I keep my eyes on him as I move past him, keeping as much space between our bodies as possible while still being within his reach.

When I make it to the door, I step through without turning my back on him, and he fakes toward me all at once.

That's all it takes.

I start running.

Because what choice do I have?

I don't want to leave Hadley alone with them, but I can take the chance they'll hold themselves to their promise, or I can stay and guarantee that they'll kill her. It's not a choice at all. I'd do anything to protect the ones I love. I couldn't save Audrey, but I can save Hadley, so I will.

I run, barefoot and in my pajamas, down the stairs and out of the house. I'm sure that if he catches me, he'll kill me and my sister, and then my entire family will have been wiped out in the space of a year. I pause when I make it to the middle of the driveway and look back up at my window.

The lights are still off, but there's enough of a glow from the moon for me to see the shape of Ghostface. He leans out the window, bracing his hands against it. "Run fast and far, Lavigne."

Something about the way his voice carries in the night is even more unsettling than when he'd stood in front of me. I take a few steps back without looking away in case he decides to leap from the window and slash me to bits in my driveway. But when my feet hit the edge of the curb, the storm drain below me drops off, and I trip.

By the time I get to my feet again, he's no longer in my window, but his voice carries to me on the still night.

"I'll see you soon, Marley."

Present Day

IT'S EASIEST TO START from the very beginning, so that's what I do. I start with us running into Mark and his friends at the park—which Colton already knows—and fill in the blanks I am able to. I'm hazy on some parts. I remember going to the funeral with Colton and Rev, I remember seeing Audrey in the casket. But I don't remember leaving or the wake that was supposed to follow. I'm assuming we didn't go.

When I'm finally done recounting waking up to a knife against my throat and a stranger in Hadley's bed, my throat hurts from trying not to cry and from straining my vocal cords. After talking for so long, the silence feels heavy and strange as it presses around me. I can tell they have questions, but I'm pretty sure they don't know where to start. They all share a look that seems like some sort of silent understanding, and then Colton nods.

Rev walks around behind me, and my spine tenses, every inch of my arms erupting in goosebumps. But I don't take my eyes off Colton. I've given them the truth. That's all I can do. If they've taken up vigilante justice and intend

to kill me themselves, I'm hardly in a position to fight them. And my soul is too tired to beg anymore.

I don't know what I expected, but it isn't the clank of metal as Rev frees the belt at my wrists. I lost feeling there forever ago, and now, as suddenly as the strap falls free, sensation returns in the form of pins and needles, an almost painful itch. The other buckles follow until I'm suddenly free of everything and I finally feel like I can breathe.

I almost fall forward in my relief, but Rev scoops me up with one arm under my knees and the other supporting my back. I'm all too aware of his hands on my naked flesh, how close he is to my ass, how exposed I am pressed against him.

Tripp comes around the front of us, heading toward the bathroom. I don't even get a chance to ask what he's doing because I hear the rushing water in the next instant. When we round the corner to join him, I see it pouring from the tap into the massive sunken bathtub.

This was always my favorite part of the guest house. Mom used to dress Hadley and I in our swimsuits and bring us out here sometimes when we were being a bit too much. She'd fill the entire tub with cool water and blue food dye, little sea creatures, and random toys. Yes, we had the pool, which we loved, but as kids, we could pretend the bathtub was the ocean. Our mother was nothing if not creative, and us playing mermaids in our swimsuits for hours gave her an opportunity to cool off and read a little in peace.

I guess the bathtub wasn't just large because I was a kid. Tripp's already standing in it, the water up to his ankles and filling the space with bubbles and... something else. I squint at the water, unsure if I'm really seeing what I think I am.

Where the fuck did he find rose petals? And not just any rose petals—black

ones. I suppose it must have been one of Hadley's less-dramatic Halloween touches, and almost feel bad for a minute that Tripp must have ruined them. The guilt disappears pretty quickly, though, because when I look back up at him, he's devastating. He's lithe but muscular in all the right spots, his flat stomach dusted with a little trail of hair leading straight down to his cock, which is already hard again.

The air smells sweet and delicate, clearing up the scent of sex and sweat that's clung to all of us tonight. "A bath?" I say, turning my head to get a look at Rev, who only nods. Not fifteen minutes ago, they were telling me I needed to be punished. Now Tripp eases against the edge of the tiled backsplash, the water not yet high enough to cover the erection between his thighs. His silver piercings glint in the water, and then he reaches out his arms, and Rev passes me off to him like I'm nothing more than a bundle of towels. But his body is warm, and the water is even warmer. As Tripp shifts me against his chest, I sink into the water further and let my head fall back, suddenly more relaxed than I've been in ages.

I'm not entirely sure where we stand, but they're not going to kill me or turn me over to Boston P.D. yet, so I can let my guard down a little.

"Don't fall asleep yet," Rev smirks as he steps in with us. For a moment, I worry the tub won't hold us all comfortably, but then he sits with his back against the opposite end of it, his knees canted apart and his legs pressing against Tripp's so that I fit easily in the space between the two of them, facing Rev, who looks sexy as sin with that smirk still in place.

Before I can say anything, he gets a grip on my ankles and tugs on them. My ass slides out from under me, and Tripp anchors me with an arm around my waist, keeping me at a gentle incline so that my head is above the rising water. I expect his hands to move south, but he actually moves them to my

shoulders and begins kneading at them. At the same time, Rev massages my calves.

Their fingers work in tandem to liquify me quickly, chasing away the lingering anger inside of me. It's the most heavenly feeling I've ever known. I didn't realize how much tension my body was holding onto. Now that it's slipping away from me, it's almost as though another invisible belt has finally been freed, letting me relax the rest of the way. I'm not sure how long that one was there... since they switched it up on me earlier and made me fear them? Since Logan died? Since Audrey?

As nice as it is, I can't help myself. The logical part of my brain is skeptical, suspicious. It's not weird to follow kinky playtime with a little bit of nurturing, but it is weird to be sitting here with them like this after everything that's transpired tonight. They haven't even said a word to acknowledge any of what I said.

"I don't understand." I sit up a little, glancing between the two of them. "Is my punishment over?"

"Only for tonight," Colton says, drawing our attention to him from where he stands in the doorway, his arms crossed and his back pressed against the frame. One foot is crossed over the other. He could be watching someone pick a paint color for as casual as his stance is. The only betrayal that he isn't uninterested is the fire in his eyes—they're molten, hungry. He said my punishment is over, but I can feel Tripp's erection nestled against my back, Rev's thick cock brushing against my ankle, and Colton is clearly not ready to be done with me tonight.

They'll be the death of me.

Colton joins us at the edge of the tub and perches himself on the side. It's a funny sight, but I don't laugh. "You haven't made it up to us just yet, baby."

He strokes the side of my cheek slowly, holding my gaze. “But you will.”

He reaches into the water and seizes my wrist, resting the back of my hand against his thigh and proceeding to rub circles in the spot where I was tied.

It’s an oddly erotic feeling, given how far it is from any erogenous zone. Then again, I’m in a tub of warm, bubbly water, getting massaged by three gorgeous men. That in itself is pretty fucking erotic. It’s the kind of thing that simply doesn’t happen—one man is rarely ever so romantically inclined that they draw up a rose-petal bubble bath and massage you in it, let alone three.

But I’m done questioning it. I lay my head back against Tripp’s chest again and let my eyes close, focusing on how good it feels to have all of the anxiety, pain, and achiness drawn out of me.

When I open my eyes again, and my vision clears, Colton is gone. I’m momentarily filled with the panic of falling asleep when I shouldn’t have. “You’re fine, Angel,” Rev assures me, patting my leg gently. “We’d never let anything happen to you.”

Tripp makes a sound of agreement behind me, and I’m suddenly aware of him. My skin sticks to his when I peel myself away from him, and when I turn to get a look at him, his chest is red where I slept on him. It couldn’t have been for long, despite the pruning of my skin. The water is still comfortably warm.

I don’t allow myself to appreciate that, though, because I’m suddenly wrapped in a cold fog. It happens all at once before I can grab ahold of either of them. It’s like slipping under the water’s surface—one minute, I’m in the tub between them, and the next, I’m gone.

And I’m sitting in a car, surrounded by the smell of leather and cologne. Rain patters against the windshield, and my heartbeat is racing, sending the blood rushing through my veins. When I glance down, I notice the dress I’m

wearing, and when I look to the left, I see Tripp. He's looking at me, but not directly at me, and his hand is on mine, but I can't feel his warmth. It's like looking at a ghost until he starts talking, and my addled brain only grows more confused.

"I just wanted to apologize."

Apologize?

My confusion only intensifies when I hear myself speak the very word I just thought—but I know my lips didn't move.

When I turn, the feeling of looking at a ghost only intensifies. I see myself—not like I'm out of my own body, but like I'm looking at a past version of me... slightly younger, less worn-through, more traumatized. My brain loses track of the conversation as I try to work through whatever this is, and then he tells me he loves me—loved me.

I realize I'm in the midst of my own memory just as it peels away and is replaced with another one—the same night, my half-naked body pressed against Rev's in the backseat, dipping my toe into something I didn't quite understand, the peace of being so safe, so protected, so loved.

That feeling is ripped away from me when I surface from the past, just the way it was ripped from me that night. "It's okay," Tripp assures me this time, brushing his knuckles against my cheek.

"I..."

The spaces between those two memories stitch themselves quickly together, completing the picture of everything that happened between us leaving Audrey's funeral and showing up at my house that night.

I'm not sure what just happened. I've never had a memory so violently restored, so physically real. I've also never felt such a sense of longing, a desperation to return to the girl I was that night and live every moment over,

right up until I sent them away, and then try to do something—anything—that will keep *this* version of me from being born.

“I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know why I said it, but it’s true. I am sorry. That night, I had such a sense of peace, and hope for the future. I thought that everything would work out. When I’d had that moment with Tripp, I’d briefly let myself indulge in the idea of a future with him in it. When I’d danced in the rain with them, I’d let go of some of the sadness inside of me. And when I’d curled up against Rev and seen his best friend nod his acceptance from the front seat, I’d allowed myself to feel treasured. I felt all of those things that night, right up until I was ripped from sleep into a waking nightmare. In a matter of hours, I’d fallen in love with a future that would never exist. And now I’m pissed that it never will.

“Losing you after all that hurt so bad,” Tripp confesses as if he also saw the memories. He flicks his eyes up to mine to see if I’m giving him my undivided attention. I am. Even with Rev behind me, it may as well just be the two of us right now.

Of course, it hurt. Audrey was murdered, and then I left. Our friend group was shattered, but it may have been capable of being patched up if I hadn’t gone and pushed the knife in deeper. Colton lost his girlfriend, and then his one other link to her disappeared. The grief was bad enough in and of itself, but maybe together, it would have been blunted. Instead, I left him to deal with it alone. And I let Tripp confess his love for me, tell me how much it hurt him to see me move on, and then disappeared from his life. And Rev...

“I wish you’d come to us,” Rev says, drawing my attention back to him. “We could have helped.”

“I couldn’t have taken that chance, Rev,” I shake my head, trying to ward

off the visceral, sick feeling of being back there that night. Though the memory doesn't pull me into it the way the last one did, its sharp pieces are cutting through my brain right now. I want to cry, but I'm sick of crying. I'm sick of backing down, of running, of pleading. "I couldn't take the chance that they'd hurt Hadley. She's all I have left."

"You had us." Tripp's words feel like a smack across the face. They're the truth, but that doesn't dull the pain of them.

I can't tell them that they weren't enough because they were. If things had been different, I'd never have left, and who knows what would have become of us. Maybe Tripp and I would have dated, maybe Rev and I would have gotten closer, maybe Colton and I would have had each other to lean on. But none of that happened because they meant too much to me to stay and risk their lives, their futures, their families.

"I know. And I loved having you, but I saw what they did to Audrey. I couldn't take the chance of that happening to my sister... to any of you."

There's a chill creeping up my spine in spite of the warm water. It's fear, sorrow, anger.

They took so much from me. And I have no chance of getting revenge because even if I figured out who they were, how can I go toe-to-toe with a bunch of murderers?

"You said there were three of them?" Rev says, glancing from Tripp to me. "You're sure?"

"At least three, possibly four." I shake my head. "It was dark. Maybe there was someone holding the camera in Hadley's room. The night that... the night Audrey died, there were like seven of them there, maybe more. There can't have been that many in my house... I'd have heard them."

"So, four, most likely." Tripp nods, working through something in his head.

“One holding a knife to your throat,” His voice is terse over that proclamation, lightening up when he continues, “one holding a knife to Hadley’s throat. And two holding the phones.”

“I guess.”

My head is starting to hurt, so I close my eyes and press my fingers to my temples, seeing if that helps ease the pressure.

It does—but it’s replaced by a slightly dizzying sensation as I feel myself slipping from reality again.

I’m looking at men—monsters. They stand in their Halloween masks like they’re waiting for the director to yell action... six of them... seven. I lose track of how many.

The killer doll, the opera mask, the melted face of nightmares, the neon-lighted mask, the screaming ghost, the hockey mask, and that goddamned clown.

This trip into my memory is quick and yet too long at the same time. I snap into the past long enough to see them in all their macabre terror, and then I’m back in their arms—both of them. They’ve wrapped me against them, effectively making a sandwich out of me. “You’re shaking,” Tripp says, rubbing my arm like that will help warm me up. But I’m not shaking because I’m cold... it’s an automatic reaction to the terror that sank to my bones at the memory of seeing them like that.

There were seven of them, for sure.

Mark was among them—or at least, I thought he was at one time. When I talked it through with Logan once, he’d had an obvious explanation, as always. I’d confessed what happened in there after months of his suggesting we get around to it, and while he listened through the whole story that nobody had ever believed, he was quick to offer me an explanation.

Particularly when I told him that Colton had worked with Mark that night, he said that my brain was trying to fill in the blanks. He claimed I'd blocked off the truth of what happened that night into little pieces that would make the trauma bearable, and when some of those pieces went missing, my brain searched through my memories for a scapegoat. It landed on Mark sort of at random because of the week before when I'd sat at the diner with Audrey and a few of our friends.

If Mark wasn't under one of those masks, then were his friends under them either? I'd initially thought Mark and his two cronies had to be involved, given how Mark disappeared right when I needed him most that night. In hindsight, I wish I'd confronted him before I let them run me out of town.

"I didn't realize how much I'd forgotten." I sigh, suddenly aware of how my skin is pressed against Tripp's, my breasts on him. My nipples harden as if I was summoning them to join the fray.

I clear my throat at the last second, just before a little whisper of desire can slip out of it. I'm trying to think of a way to put a little distance between us, as if he didn't already notice, when he catches my chin lightly in his fingers, tilting me to face him. No sooner do I do so than he captures my mouth in a kiss—soft, slow, warm. His kiss is sensual, his lips whispering over mine before he parts them to grant himself access to my mouth.

I don't know where I stand with any of them, but Tripp kisses me like a man who has nothing but time, who wants to enjoy every second of this moment. And when Rev reaches around me, rubbing my shoulders and letting his touch dip lower and lower, his touch is similarly languid. There's no urgency, no hate, no anger, no reservation in the love they give. This is pure, and it's beautiful, erasing the pain of the memories I let go of and replacing them with an indescribable warmth.

When Tripp pulls away from me, it's just long enough for him to spin me against him again so that I'm facing the tap this time. "I promised you two more orgasms, angel." Rev's words are hot in my ear, his lips brushing against the shell of it so that I shiver in anticipation as much as what his touch does to me. At least they've chased away my anxiety, and now I'm riding on the jittery sensation that's always left in the wake of it.

"Rev..." I don't know why I'm going through the motions of trying to deny him. My body craves these men and all the delicious and wicked things they're capable of. I want to take whatever he's willing to give me because I don't know when I'll ever get this opportunity again. Morning is rapidly approaching, and I think we've all come to an unspoken agreement that this is a one-night kind of thing. It's the devil's night, we're reasonably young, we were at a party. This kind of thing is the sort of opportunity that doesn't come around often, a perfect storm of reasons to live on the edge.

"I'm willing to share if you want."

We've already been sharing, but I don't have to point that out because I realize he's talking to Tripp. "I want."

There's no hesitation in that response, and apparently, it's the one Rev wanted anyway, because he breaks into a beautiful grin. "Remember when I said we won't let anything happen to you?"

I nod, my nerves too addled to make speaking possible. "And you trust us?"

Maybe I shouldn't. After all, how well do I know them? Just because we used to be friends? Because we're bound by our past? Because I had a crush on both of them once, does it really mean I know them well enough to trust them? It's been three years since I last saw them—they could be totally different people. But I do trust them, so I nod again.

"Good. Remember that, too, because I'm going to make you come without

touching you.” He says so plainly that I think at first I must have misheard him. “It will be Tripp’s hands on you, his kiss, his name on your lips when you come. Got it?”

I don’t even know what the expected response to that is—but my body does. I feel myself clench at nothing, desperately searching for the friction to back up his words. But it’s not friction that I get.

“Take a deep breath.”

It happens so fast I barely get a second to process that I’m in motion before I’m going under. Thankfully, my survival instincts are functional at least part of the time, and I manage to do exactly as he commanded before Tripp pushes on my shoulders, sinking me between his spread thighs so that I’m submerged entirely in the water—well, *almost* entirely. I can feel hands on my thighs, pulling just enough to lift my hips above the waterline. The water is still impossibly warm, the air on my exposed bottom half cold without being uncomfortably so. The bubbles have dissipated so that when I look up from where Tripp is holding me down, I can see his face clearly.

From down here, he looks like a god—not your typical Zeus or Thor, but a Loki—a god of mischief, slightly edgy, wearing his darkness like a hat he can slip on and off, looking so incredibly innocent in one minute and so brutally breathtaking in the next. His mouth curves in dangerous amusement, but his eyes are still soft, reassuring. I don’t decide to trust him so much as my body simply does it because it’s what feels right. They own a part of me—they always will.

It takes a second to get the last of the panic to subside from my veins, which is a fraction of a second longer than it takes for the jet of water to find my clit in the perfect spot. Rev’s holding my ankles aloft, keeping me in just

the right place so that it flows from the tap straight onto the spot that is begging for attention.

I'm no stranger to showerhead love, but this? The stream is thicker, more powerful. I tense as soon as it makes contact, sending the first powerful stirrings through me.

I think he's just going to hold me open until I begin thrashing, but suddenly the water grows colder. It's not a terrible change, but it's noticeable, and it increases the pleasure as I arch against the bottom of the tub. I know better than to breathe in, but my brain is screaming for me to take a breath. My lungs don't ache the way they did when my chest was constricted—they must have been overridden by the pleasure coursing through me.

When the pleasure is this intense, and I'm on the edge of orgasm, I hold my breath, much like I'm doing now. But now the difference is that it doesn't stave off the orgasm at all. I can feel it building inside me, ripples of pleasure coursing through me like the rippling water.

And then the water gets hot, and my hips are bucking, my ass squeezed together as I search for more of what I need, lost in this most unusual bliss. *Fuck*, it feels good. I don't know exactly when I grabbed hold of Tripp's arms, but I'm holding him as he holds me down, and now my nails are biting into his skin as they push me to the edge. I close my eyes—the corners of my vision have gone dark, blind with the need to finish what we've started, even if it takes everything in me to do so. I've never needed to come as badly as I do in this moment, captive under the consistent pressure of the running water, barely cognizant of the fact that they're watching me from above the water.

The water goes frigid, and I go to pieces, my hips reaching up to meet the stream. I'm so fucking close.

Rev must turn the tap some more because the water pressure increases, and

I'm a goner.

The orgasm hurts as much as it feels fucking divine, and I've never loved a pain more than this. It's a white-hot pleasure, the kind that makes it feel for a moment as if my every nerve has been lit beneath a match, beginning low in my stomach before ripping through me like an explosion. It flattens me, stealing the breath from my lungs, sending a blast of heat up my spine as I can't fight it off anymore. I gasp, needing to cry out with the mind-bending pleasure of whatever the hell that was. The sound is swallowed in the bubbling water I'm thrashing around in, and I'm drowning in both the bathtub and the ecstasy of what I just experienced.

I don't even realize I'm screaming profanities that I haven't even considered before until all sound comes back to me as Tripp heaves me above the surface, whipping my hair over my shoulder so that I am free to take a gigantic breath once I manage to stop coughing and spluttering. It only takes a minute to get myself under control, and by that point, I've not even stopped feeling the waves of pleasure tearing through me, reaching all the way down to my toes and then reverberating back to the base of my spine. "Holy fuck!" I gasp, searching for their "I-told-you-so" grins.

But Tripp captures my mouth again, swallowing the rest of whatever nonsense I intended to spew. This time, there's no more tenderness in his kiss. It's raw, needy, hungry. It knocks me off balance, pushing me back against Rev this time. His arms circle me the moment I'm within reach, and I haven't even gotten my breath back from being held underwater before he's stealing all of my oxygen again. And I'll let him gladly steal the oxygen from my very veins because I feel so inexplicably tethered to him. It's as though putting my life in his hands and watching him cherish it has branded me to

him, and now I'm simply their property, their toy, their whatever-the-fuck-they-need-me-to-be.

This time, Rev doesn't pull me below the surface. He holds me against him, a willing captive as Tripp suddenly wraps my thighs around his arms and uses the leverage to bring his mouth level with my pussy. I have no doubt I'd be soaked if the water weren't a factor washing away the evidence of my release, but I can feel how slick I still am as he drags his tongue along my slit, sending the deepest shudder through me. "T—Tripp," I stutter as he nears the spot that's still pulsing with the force of my last orgasm. I mean his name as a warning, a plea for mercy. But he takes it as encouragement, lapping at my cunt without the slightest hint of letting me off easy.

"Fuck!" I cry, my voice whiny and needy and strangled with desperation for more and less of what he's doing. I feel my every muscle tense as I try to arch away from him, but they've got me locked in tight. I don't succeed in moving an inch, so I'm stuck at the mercy of Tripp's skilled tongue... of which he's only been using the tip to lap at my wet folds. But now, he darts his tongue over my clit, the sensation stirring an ache inside of me.

"It's—too sensitive." I moan, both wanting him to keep going and to give me a moment to come down.

If he hears me, he doesn't offer me any indication of it, flattening his tongue against me. The pleasure is violent over my already-abused clit. It's heaven and hell, and I circle my hips to the best of my ability, intermittently trying to escape him and let myself be ravaged by the bliss.

"Too much!" I gasp, squeezing his shoulders to try and capture his attention.

When I feel the smooth metal ball glide against me, I nearly cry, my chest tightening as I scream, my voice breaking on a dry sob as the overstimulation

tips me toward the edge of my sanity. “F—fuck! Fuck!”

I’m distantly aware of the chuckle from behind me, Rev’s hot skin against mine, and his rock-hard body beneath me. “Please!” I beg, though I’m not sure if I’m begging for an orgasm to end my torture or for him to stop before he can get me that far.

“Too bad you never wanted a safe word.” Rev chuckles, his teeth grazing against my earlobe.

The pain tempers the sensation a little, allowing me to gulp in air, to breathe through it. And then Tripp pulls my entire clit between his lips and I clench, immediately right back to the point of too much. He finds a rhythm, sliding that piercing over the top of my clit, sucking me into his mouth like he’s been deprived of this his entire life.

I can feel the hysteria looming, the laughter building in my stomach. I’m too overstimulated, stuck in a no-win position now. If he continues, I have to endure this blissful agony for as long as he wishes. If he stops, I’ll have to endure the brutal misery of depriving my body of what it wants more than my next breath. I’m just starting to laugh when Rev pinches my nipples—hard.

“Tripp!”

It’s a welcome dose of pain that tempers what Tripp’s doing. I don’t know when I grabbed his head to try and push him away, but my fingers tangle in his dark hair instead as I throw my head back and let the orgasm blow me apart.

It launches me to the moon, sends me to the fucking stars, and then lets me float in space a moment as I lay, heaving, against Rev’s chest. I don’t even realize Tripp hasn’t released me until I come down from the high. I have no idea how long that takes. I just know that when it starts to release its grip,

another orgasm starts to creep in, and I go feral, thrashing around until he releases me just as tears spring to my eyes.

I see him for one moment, lips glistening and red, eyes dark and full of lust, before I collapse against Rev's chest and let my eyes close. I can feel my chest heaving, but other than that, not a single muscle in me twitches. I'm so thoroughly exhausted that I think my muscles may have turned to lead.

"You sure you've had enough?" Rev taunts.

"We could go all night." Tripp assures me.

I have no doubt that they could, which is both terrifying and exhilarating.

"No more," I beg, not even bothering to open my eyes to relay the message.

I hear their laughter, but that's the last thing I'm aware of before the darkness floods in.

Present Day

I WAKE IN THE morning with a dry mouth, a crick in my neck, and a foggy idea of what happened after they were done trying to snatch my soul. I barely remember being pulled out of the tub and swaying on my feet, my legs like jelly after all that exertion, and Rev wrapping a towel around me before carrying me to the bed.

If anything happened after that, I may never know. I slept like the dead, unaware of the exact moment I crashed. And yet, despite all that, I feel good.

I feel *really* good.

My body is sore—no matter how weird I thought Logan and I got, it has nothing on the experience of being shared with multiple partners. Parts of me that I didn't know could possibly hurt are achy, but only in the best way possible—the kind that is a visceral reminder of the night before.

The only problem is that I wake up alone. They're all gone, as if last night never happened. The only reminder is the feeling that still lingers, a phantom pain or pleasure that assures me I'm not *totally* crazy yet.

My heart feels like a brick in my chest as I survey the empty room. I feel inexplicably stupid, embarrassed. I knew what we were getting ourselves into, so why does their absence make me feel like I've just been abandoned? It puts a lump in my throat to realize they've fucked me thoroughly, and fucked with my head, and then just disappeared like this. But what did I expect, breakfast in bed? To wake up pressed between them?

There's a robe neatly folded on the dresser, so I step into that and go to survey the damage of our night. But there's nothing—no empty pizza box, no water bottles, no trace of my shredded clothing. They... cleaned. And brought me a robe, left hanging on the back of the door.

When I've checked that the entire guest house is, indeed, empty, I decide to lock up and go shower. It's as I'm turning the light off that I remember the pirate and the blood that splashed across the wall, the floor.

There's not a drop to be found.

I get the sudden, strange sensation that I slept too long and the world shifted somehow, but I push it off and hurry back to the house, praying to whatever God will still have me that Hadley didn't lock me out. The neighbors would surely love to see me beating on my front door on this cold, foggy morning in an over-sized bathrobe.

There must be a god somewhere who hasn't turned away from me yet because the back door is unlocked. But as I push my way into the house and quietly close the door behind me, intuition tells me I'm not alone.

Hadley stands at the island, her hair pulled atop her head in a messy bun, wearing a similar robe to mine. She looks exhausted and slightly ill, but she grins at me as her eyes take me in. "Good night?"

I have no clue what she knows, but I hope it's precisely nothing. I can tell that's not the case when her grin turns to a smirk. "Your friends brought

breakfast,” she gestures to the spread laid out on the counter—bread, bagels with cream cheese, muffins, jam, biscuits. All the carbs are garnished by an assortment of fruits and cheeses—apple slices drizzled with honey, grapes, and pear halves. It’s more food than two people can reasonably eat at this hour, all packaged with a little flourish as if it came from a little café’ bakery or something. “I think they cleaned too?”

“My... friends?”

“Mmhm.” She nods. “You know who I mean. The same boys who have doted on you and followed you around like little ducklings since you were kids.”

I look up from the assortment of pastries before me to see her smiling from behind a coffee cup. “They never doted on me,” I argue, feeling oddly called out by her. She may as well just say, “I know you fucked around with all of them last night, you dirty bird”. But she only laughs and then promptly winces and sets her cup down to press her fingers to her temples.

“I’m not going to argue with you, Mars. I’m too hungover. But don’t insult my intelligence by pretending they aren’t obsessed with you. Word got out that Marley Lavigne came home for the first time in three years, and suddenly, everyone’s beating down our doorstep.” She chuckles more gently this time. “And for the record, I’m not judging. All love is valid.”

“Gross,” I say because her sisterly and motherly tendencies have just overlapped in the weirdest way, making me feel a bit too mushy. I’ve missed her more than I allowed myself to realize. I filled the void of my old life with nothing but Logan for years, and while the end of that hadn’t exactly been a choice, I feel like it was the best thing that could have happened. Not him dying, but the removal of him from my life. I didn’t feel like he was toxic when we were together, but in the quiet, I always knew that what we were

doing was wrong. Avoiding drama, avoiding trauma, fucking without establishing any sort of guidelines, and using each other like a vice to avoid *everything*. It's unfortunate that he had to die for me to realize that, but I'm liberated in the best way.

And I'm going to find Mark and let him know exactly that. He chased me out of town, and I know that he's the same one who pulled me back in—he's the one who murdered Logan. He reeled me back in like a fish on a hook, and I'm going to go thank him for it when I get up the nerve—but that won't be today. Today is Halloween—exactly three years since I watched my best friend's brutalized body fall from the rafters.

“What are your plans for today?” I ask, ready to get out of this awkward conversation about the guys and cast away thoughts of Audrey's death.

Hadley's eyes go wide, and she shakes her head. “I'm not doing a damn thing today. And neither are you.”

“But...” I squint at her, wondering if she's serious. “It's Halloween.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “And it's the first time you've been here in forever. We're going to do all the fall things we normally do—pumpkin carving, roasting the seeds, binge-watching horror fil—” Her voice breaks on the last word, her eyes floating up to mine. She shakes her head vigorously, only wincing a little this time. “Nope, no horror movies.”

“Yes, horror movies.” I correct her. “I still watch scary movies!”

Tentative, she seems to think on it for a minute. “Really?”

“We'll just avoid the slashers,” I shrug, acting more casual than I feel on the inside. The slashers were always my favorites, and I've desensitized myself in many ways, but that's not one of them. I can't bear the thought of watching a young, beautiful girl get hacked to death on screen. “That still leaves *Poltergeist*, *Children of the Corn*, *Pet Sematary*, *The Sixth Sense*...”

“The Exorcist?” Her eyes light up in excitement, so I muster a smile and nod. “Deal!” She says, popping a grape in her mouth. “But first, I need ibuprofen before I blow my head off.”

“Hadley,” I scold, surprised by the flippant violence. I know what she means... we’re both hungover, though in two very different ways. Her words remind me of the safe that I came across in her room, the gun. “Actually, I have a confession.” Her eyebrows raise—both of them—as she waits for me to carry on. “When I was picking a costume last night, I noticed the safe...”

She shrugs a little, waiting for me to hit her with a question. When I don’t, she shakes her head. “You know dad had guns. He kept it locked up so we wouldn’t end up getting hurt when we were young.”

“Of course, I know he had guns,” I shrug. He was the police chief—he had a work-issued firearm that went missing the night he was murdered, plus however many personal ones he kept in the house. “But I didn’t know you did.”

“Does it really surprise you?” She shakes her head the slightest bit before turning her back to me to reach into the cabinet above the stove, where we’ve always kept the medications. “After what happened to you and Audrey, I wanted to have something if I needed it.”

“Yeah.” I agree. She’s right. She’s a young woman living alone. Our town is historically low in crime, but then the Halloween incident happened within a year of our parents being murdered. I don’t blame her, honestly.

She pops the pills in her mouth, swallows them with a swig of coffee, and then looks at me dead-on. “Why don’t you go shower the stench of sex off of you, Mars? You smell like a whorehouse.”

My mouth falls open in shock before she dissolves into laughter. “I’m kidding. But also, I’m not. You smell like them.”

Them.

I don't have to ask who she means.

Them.

My guys.

Rev, Tripp... Colton?

I manage to suppress the smile until I turn away from her. I'm halfway up the stairs before I realize I'm grinning like a damn fool.

Present Day

WE'RE IN OUR HALLOWEEN pajamas, which are arguably too skimpy for New England in the autumn, but we're sacrificing coziness for the aesthetic of tank tops that say 'boo-bies' and have skeleton hands poised perfectly over the goods. Besides, under the cover of thick knit blankets with the candles going inside our freshly carved jack-o-lanterns, we're cozy. I'm not sure I've felt this at ease since before my parents died, before she left for college, back when everything was simple.

I'm trying not to fall asleep despite the pitter-patter of rain falling overhead and the smell of pumpkin cake baking when the doorbell chimes. I jump, making Hadley jump too. And then we both laugh as she stands, making her way to the front door. I can't see anything beyond fragmented shapes through the glass window, but Hadley peers through the peephole. Her whole presence seems to shift. I can't describe what exactly it is—maybe the subtle straightening of her spine, the way her shoulders tense, the way she glances at me from the corner of her eye.

When she swings the door open and steps aside, at first, I'm confused. The uniformed officers greet Hadley with a cursory smile, and then I feel the ground fall out from beneath me when their eyes sweep to me.

My mouth goes dry, the world blurs, and I catch myself against the wall, forcing myself to breathe through my nose. I haven't gotten around yet to telling Hadley about Logan. I mean, she knows about his existence. She even met him on one of her visits and was less than impressed. But since being back, I haven't found a good opportunity to tell her that my therapist with questionable methods was murdered—and I'm a suspect.

"Marley Lavigne?" The younger of the two nods at me in greeting. He says my name like a question despite the fact he knows. There's no question in the way he looks at me—and he's oddly familiar. I wonder if we went to school together?

Hadley's body language is a very firm 'fuck you' with her crossed arms and set jaw, but her voice is reasonably pleasant when she asks, "What can we do for you, officers?"

"Mind if we come inside?" The other officer asks, matching her iciness. But I don't miss the way his eyes light on her, exposing the truth that he's very much interested in her. And, of course, he is. The whole town always had a thing for my sister until Audrey came along and became the center of everyone's attention.

This one is slightly older than his counterpart—mid-thirties if I had to guess.

"Actually, we're kind of busy," Hadley says, just as I start telling them that of course, they can come in. She glares at me when the officers take my invitation, and I make it a point to ask her about the tension later.

They don't wait for us, walking straight to the kitchen and making

themselves at home at the little breakfast nook. When the elder officer—whose name on his chest says ‘Maggiani’—finds Hadley’s gaze, I realize he’s definitely been here before. “Have a seat.” He says, indicating the space next to him.

Hadley scoffs immediately, planting her hands on the island counter and making it clear that she will not be going near him. “What can we do for you, officers?”

“You had a party last night?” The younger of the two, with a name on his chest I can’t read from this angle, glances around like he’s looking for any signs of a fugitive we’re harboring. I see his eyes narrow on the space above the fridge and turn to see if I can find whatever he sees. But there’s nothing there, which gives me the uncomfortable feeling that I’m being watched.

“My annual Halloween party.” She shrugs, glancing at Maggiani. “You know, the one I have every year.”

“Mmm.” Maggiani nods. “I figured that’s why Luke Condon was dressed in costume last night.”

“Lots of people were here,” Hadley says, proudly. “It was a big hit.”

“Yeah?” He prompts. “A killer party, huh?”

“Yep. Best night I’ve had in a long time.”

I feel like I’ve been somehow pulled into the middle of something personal as they volley back and forth, each comment rife with undertones that have nothing to do with what we’re talking about. Did they come here just to check on Hadley’s social life? The other officer turns enough to let me read his name—Logan.

My chest tightens uncomfortably just in time for him to meet my gaze. “Everything okay, Lavigne?”

“Fine.” I muster a smile and turn to get myself a glass of water, mostly to

have something to do. What are the chances that this officer who just showed up on our doorstep has the last name Logan? It's a really uncomfortable coincidence... especially given the subtle familiarities I recognized. Now I know *where* I recognized them from—the square jaw, the almond-shaped eyes.

Fuck.

It's horribly eerie, but I turn back to face them with my freshly filled water glass pressed to my mouth and intentionally avoid looking at Officer Logan. “Well, we're not here for a social call.” Maggiani says, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees like he's about to tell us a secret. “Just to ask what you know about Luke Condon's night?”

“I'm nobody's keeper,” Hadley says, defensive. “I had everybody put their keys up, so if he is drying out in a ditch, that's not on me.”

“Not drying.” Maggiani shakes his head. “Dying.”

“Well, *died*.” Officer Logan shrugs. “That ship has sailed. He's already in the coroner's office, probably having his skull cut open for the autopsy.”

Hadley glares at him before turning her eyes to Maggiani, where they soften the slightest bit on him. “He's dead?”

“Is he ever.” Maggiani sighs. “I know it's no great loss. He was a thorn in my side, but no one deserves to be murdered.”

“How do you know?” I ask before I can think better about opening my mouth. It would probably be smart of me to keep my mouth shut and pretend I'm not here, but as the officer said, that ship has sailed. “I just mean, how do you know it was murder and not an accident or... suicide?”

The officers exchange a look, and then Maggiani nods. Officer Logan opens his phone, scrolls a second, and then turns the screen to me.

Hadley comes in close to see what he's showing, so when I turn away in

horror, I practically bury my face in her shirt. “Does that look like an accident to you?”

It’s a rhetorical question, I’m sure. No one could possibly argue that the mangled body in the crime scene photo he just showed me was an accident. And I don’t think anyone really commits suicide by slitting their own throat.

But that’s not the most disturbing part of the photo. That’s not what has me cold, horrified, in the beginning stages of feeling numb. The man in the photo—the victim—is Luke Condon. And Luke Condon is dressed as a pirate, complete with a little stuffed parrot sewn on his shoulder.

Even if there was any room for doubt, the crooked nose that was clearly recently broken and the swollen eye with an early bruise under the socket dispel any chance that it’s not the same guy I took to the guest house—the same guy Colton had to save me from.

Now would be a good time to admit that I have a stalker. Now would be a good time to admit that the pirate and I started to hook up. Now would be a good time to tell the truth about what happened back in the city. But the words all stick in my throat, one big, congealed mess that barely allows any air to pass through my windpipe.

“God.” Hadley says, sounding like she’ll be ill. She can handle all the fake gore, blood, and guts, but when it comes to real-life carnage, she is notoriously queasy. She wanted to be a nurse, too, at one point until my mom reminded her just how squeamish she really is.

I turn back to the officers with the most neutral face I can manage. “Who is he?”

“Luke?” Maggiani doesn’t look too impressed. “He’s the local drunk, moved here a year ago, and has caused nothing but trouble since. We’ve booked him more than once a month since, but the bastard seemed to have a

wishbone up his ass... always got off scot-free. Guess his luck finally ran out.”

“Or he messed with the wrong person.” Officer Logan looks at me pointedly, and I can feel my breathing go shallow. I wonder if he notices. “Witnesses claim they saw you out back with Luke, making out? Care to comment on that, Lavigne.”

“I—”

I can feel Hadley’s eyes on me, her surprise. Thankfully she reigns it in and laughs them off. “You aren’t seriously suggesting she had anything to do with this?”

“We’re not suggesting anything.” Maggiani says, at the same time Logan says, “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

There’s an awkward beat of silence as we process their words, and then all eyes sweep to Officer Logan, who looks unbothered by the attention. “Bit strange, how she runs out of town after the last murder we had around here, and we went three years without even a manslaughter. Now she comes back, and someone dies on the first night she’s here? It’s a bit suspicious.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Hadley snaps. “Marley was a victim, not an accomplice!”

“An accomplice? I’m not implying she was an accomplice. I’m implying maybe she orchestrated the whole thing. Think about it a minute—the best friend, who used to be the town darling, suddenly gets cast aside when Audrey moves to town. At first, you befriend her, but then, little by little, the jealousy eats away at you until one day you can’t take it. So, you plan her murder, make yourself look like a victim, and then ditch town so you don’t have to keep up the victim act the rest of your life. I think someone helped you murder her, and then you ran away together.”

I'm opening my mouth to start trying to refute him. I didn't kill Audrey, I didn't help anyone kill Audrey, and I didn't run because I was guilty. I was chased out of town, and I left alone without anyone. But I never get the chance to disprove his outlandish claims because he hits me with, "Where were you last night?"

"She was with me."

The voice that speaks those words is new to the conversation, and I don't see him, but I would know that voice anywhere.

Colton.

"Chief," Logan snaps to attention like a kid who's been caught talking bad about their teacher in the hallway. He clears his throat and jumps to his feet, nailing his knee on our table in the process.

Colton's arm slips around me, offering a comforting weight. He smells like the outdoors, like he's spent a good amount of time in the elements. When I turn to face him, I see his hair is damp from the rain. I suppose none of us heard him come in because we were so caught up in the wild accusations Officer Logan was throwing at me. He manages a smile for me, presses his soft lips against my temple, and then turns his attention back to the officers. "You're not supposed to be here."

"No." Officer Logan agrees.

"Is this a personal visit?" He shifts his attention to Maggiani, who is looking at him with distaste, the polar opposite of Logan's regard for him.

"No." He looks to Officer Logan, who glares at him. "The kid wanted to check out your girl based on witness testimony. You saying you're her alibi?"

"Not just me." Colton shrugs. "We were with Tripp Archer and Rene Robicheaux. They also can account for her whereabouts since we didn't part ways until well after the call was received about Condon's body."

My cheeks redden at the revelation he just shared, admitting to the fact that we were all *together* in more ways than one. Properly chastised, Officer Logan hangs his head. But Maggiani doesn't seem too bothered as he stands, letting his eyes slide to Hadley. "I know you didn't have anything to do with this, but he was at your party last night, so if you think of anything, call me."

"I lost your number," She shrugs. "Sorry."

"I've known the Lavignes since I was a child." Colton says. "Neither of them have anything to do with any murders. In fact, their parents were the first people murdered in this town in over three hundred years, so let's not go pointing fingers, hmm?"

He's calm, but I can sense the anger underneath what he's willing to show. It's like he took the accusation personally, which, to be fair, I can understand. I would be similarly offended if someone accused him of murder—we have known each other since childhood, and we've been through more than some people ever have to deal with, both separately and together. And now we're... together?

The entire night before feels like some kind of weird fever dream, wickedly sinful and delicious and too fucking amazing to be real. But the possessiveness with which he's got his arm around me, the way he vouched for me, is a reminder that there's something between us... *whatever* that something is.

"Of course." Officer Logan says, shooting a look at his partner and then jerking his head toward the door. Maggiani rolls his eyes but follows anyway. He stops just in front of Hadley, grinning. Her arms are crossed, and her anger only seems to solidify when he reaches out to tip her chin up, offering himself a clear view into her eyes. "Looking forward to seeing you,

sweetheart.” When he releases her chin, he notices her cleavage in the tank top, the skeleton hands poised perfectly. “Nice shirt.”

None of us speak until we hear the front door shut, and then Hadley turns to Colton. “I hate him.”

“Yeah,” Colton laughs, “I kinda do too.”

“What was that about?” I demand. I’m asking whoever will answer since it seems they both have things to tell me about their relationship with these people. It’s Hadley who answers first.

“We dated for a few weeks, and he’s been pining over me since.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s a real blow to his ego that a woman just may not be interested in him.”

“It’s also a real blow to his ego that the rookie is now his boss,” Colton adds. “The truth is, I advanced fast because I exposed the truth about what the former mayor and his little police chief were up to. The new mayor is the one who appointed me, and a lot of people just assumed we colluded to take them down, which is ridiculous.”

“Mayor North?” I ask, looking between the two of them.

“*Former* mayor North.” Colton corrects. “Turns out, he appointed his nephew as chief of police following your parents’ deaths because they were taking bribes from criminals to keep the books clean. ‘Safest town in New England’.” Colton laughs. “Yeah, because the mayor and his buddies in law enforcement bullied victims into staying quiet.”

I don’t even know what to say. He gave me a lot of information to process, particularly given that my father was part of the law enforcement team he’s speaking about. He was also good friends with Mayor North. Is he implying that my father also covered up criminal activity? “It’s not for you to worry about, Mars.” He assures me. “Maggiani is just a bitter old man, and I’m

pretty sure Lester is trying to solve all our cold cases so he can take my job if I get promoted.”

Lester.

The name rings a bell somewhere in the recesses of my mind, but I don't get a chance to think much about it because the door opens again. I think maybe they're coming back with an arrest warrant or something, but after a moment, the person who pokes his head around the corner isn't an officer. It's Tripp.

He grins when he takes us all in, and the man next to him drops his keys on the counter before coming to sweep Hadley into his arms. It all happens so quickly I don't even register who the man is until he pulls away and I recognize him. He's got a few similarities to Tripp, and he hasn't changed a ton from when he was a teenager who Hadley dumped to go off to college. “Axel?”

“Little Lavigne.” He grins as he pulls away from my sister, though he doesn't release her when he winks at me. “Or maybe not so little Lavigne. It's been a while.”

There's nothing weird or uncomfortable in the way he says that. In fact, it's almost a brotherly regard he faces me with. I don't know the last time I saw him, but it was probably pre-Audrey when Tripp and I were always together. Seeing them together again feels like the weirdest, greatest *déjà vu*. In spite of the officers' visit, I feel suddenly hopeful, having all of them together like this. But something Colton said just before they walked in has my mind reeling. “You're the *mayor*?”

“Guilty as charged.” He grins.

“And you appointed *him* as your chief of police?” I fix Colton with a side-eye and see him laugh.

“I sure did. Colton here uncovered some quite unsavory dealings that were going on in the town’s politics. It was hard to believe that Mayor North was that corrupt, at first. I worked my way up from his assistant, which I’m sure you remember, to his right hand. We offered him an honorable retirement, but the truth always comes out eventually, right?”

“He didn’t have to work with that inheritance,” Hadley says proudly. “But the town has always been important to him.”

She doesn’t have to tell me as much. I remember the day she came home in tears because their relationship was going nowhere—she wanted him to go to college with her, but he didn’t want to leave our hometown. I guess life forced Hadley’s hand to bring her home. Now I wonder if he’s the reason she stayed even after I left?

“Yeah, yeah,” Tripp rolls his eyes. “He’s a damn humanitarian.”

“Speaking of,” Axel turns to Hadley. “I love this outfit, but if you don’t change soon, I think we’ll be late.”

Hadley opens her mouth and then closes it, wincing as she looks between him and me. “I was going to spend the day with Marley.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I assure her, though I don’t know exactly where she’s supposed to be going.

“Actually, you are.” Colton grins. “I need a plus one for the gala.”

“A gala?” I’m already shaking my head when Hadley gasps in excitement.

“Oh my gosh, yes! Mars, you have to come!”

“We have a charity event tonight in Salem.” Colton explains. “The Massachusetts Historical Society decided the best way to commemorate three hundred thirty years since the witch trials in Salem was to sell ridiculously expensive tickets to a charity gala and donate profits from the auction of historical artifacts to The Arcane Society. It was supposed to be months ago.

But you know, February weather is terrible, and we had that crazy blizzard come through, so it got postponed ‘til now.”

I remember the blizzard. I was snowed into my apartment in Boston with Logan for a week. It’s a wonder we didn’t kill each other.

“And we have to go because *politics*,” Tripp rolls his eyes, hooking an arm around me so that now I’m situated between him and Colton. It’s a comfortable place to be, even with Hadley and the freaking mayor looking expectantly at me.

“And because the Massachusetts Historical Society hired Black Dahlia events to plan the entire thing.” Axel’s voice is similarly proud as he grins at Hadley.

I blink at my sister, remembering her telling me that she had a huge client coming up in her business. I teased her when she first told me about her business venture that event planning in our small town couldn’t be very lucrative, but I had once said the same thing about real estate in our sleepy town. I guess it’s more a labor of love than anything, and she seems to be doing well for herself. To have caught the attention of something like a historical society sounds really impressive.

“Oh yeah,” Tripp laughs. “That too.”

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I argue because it’s probably the last argument I can make. And it’s true. What the hell does one wear to a gala on Halloween? Definitely not any of the stuff I packed when I left the city to come home for a few days.

“Well, lucky for you, I couldn’t decide on which dress to get, so I got four. Come upstairs with me!”

I’m searching for my last-ditch argument, but there’s no hope. Hadley’s latched onto the idea of me going with her, and I’m outnumbered anyway.

Besides, at least I'll have Tripp and Colton tonight to keep me company. There are certainly worse places to be—like in a jail cell accused of the pirate's murder.

Present Day

COLTON INSISTS ON DRIVING separate from Hadley and Axel, which is fine by me since the thought of squeezing into the backseat between Colton and Tripp's large bodies is just as terrifying as it is exhilarating. It's also *not* happening in this dress because I may as well be sewn into it. Hadley settled on a large black dress with silver beading that's formed almost like spider webs. It is one thousand percent 'her'. That left me to choose between a red Jessica Rabbit dress that made my nipples feel like they were playing 'will I or won't I pop out and embarrass her tonight', a purple ensemble that was a bit too flashy for my taste or a satin dress in burnt orange, with beautiful drape sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. It's gorgeous and elegant, and I look undeniably phenomenal when she parades me in front of the mirror, but I can't help feel like a fraud.

It feels wrong to get dressed up and go to a fancy party when I haven't come clean about why I came home. Am I responsible for the pirate's death? I have no doubt that Logan was murdered to make a point to me, and

something tells me that this Luke guy's death was meant to be much the same.

It's as I'm standing in the mirror that I notice I don't have any bruises on my neck, no red marks left over from the night before, no signs of anything we did together. I was sure that when the pirate—Luke—bit me last night, he drew blood. But nothing so much as dental impressions mar my skin.

It's weird, but it's a good thing, given that I'm already going to get the side-eye for being with Tripp and Colton even if they manage to keep their hands to themselves, which I don't expect to happen.

And it doesn't. I know what I'm in for when I come down the steps, trying not to trip over the satin and catch Colton's eyes on me, full of lust like I've never seen. It's a wonder he doesn't grab me by the throat and fuck me against the wall, but I guess he has some restraint because he bites his lip and groans. "Fuck, Marley."

"Is that a *good* fuck?" I laugh, glancing at Tripp to find him grinning in approval.

"Fuck yes, Princess."

They look good, too. Better than good, honestly. Colton's broad shoulders stretch the suit jacket he wears so tight that the buttons strain just the slightest bit against his white shirt. It's a simple suit, plain black and clean cut, open at the neck because I think he'd die rather than wear a tie. But it fits him with his little bit of stubble and his pretty-boy haircut.

Tripp, however, took some creative liberties getting his outfit together. He's forgone his signature ballcap, but the ends of his hair still flip up and drag against the collar of his suit. It's nowhere near as tight as Colton's, but what he lacks in brawn, he makes up for in whimsy. I've never seen anyone wear a printed suit, but Tripp manages to pull off the garment, covered in a jacquard

fleur-de-lis pattern. And he does it without looking like he's staging a coup at Arkham Asylum.

His vest is a deep orange color that somehow perfectly matches the dress I'm wearing, and his dark tie bears the same pattern as his suit. I wonder idly if Hadley made Axel buy different vests so that when she decided on one, he'd have the matching ensemble.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I tease, despite the fact that words don't do justice to how good they look.

"Love the color." Axel grins. And then his jaw goes slack when his eyes shift behind me to where Hadley is now joining us.

"You are a vision." He tells her, taking her black-gloved hand and pulling her into him for a kiss that makes me blush and turn away. They're every bit as gushy as they used to be. Honestly, they look like they've been ripped out of some sort of gothic Jane Austen novel.

I always liked Axel. Part of it was probably that he felt like a brother to me since Tripp and I were so close. And he really loves our town with all its eccentricities. It's why he stayed when Hadley tried to spread her wings, why they broke up despite being so in love. Now, watching how he indulges her, I can't imagine them ever not being together... though I also can't picture Axel as the mayor or my sister as the First Lady of Serenity Hollow.

Twenty minutes after he laments how stunning she looks—and she does look stunning—we're following Axel's Tesla down a winding road as the fog seems to part around us. I expected that being in the car together would be at least a little awkward, but it's like we fell right back into the roles we abandoned years ago. It's comfortable, easy. Natural.

Leaning back in the passenger seat, I think about the last time I was in the car with them. Well, with Tripp, at least.

The memory feels casually mine this time. I'm not sure why I'd blocked that bit of good along with some of the bad, but I guess the brain just does what it can to protect you. That's what Logan always said when I would get frustrated over the things that I didn't remember. It's too bad you can't just pick and choose what things your mind blockades. Maybe if I'd found him sooner and begun to work on the trauma when it was a gaping wound rather than a badly set break, I could have had more influence over which things got locked away.

I close my eyes and remember how safe I felt with them just before I was chased out of town, how content I was in spite of everything. It was the first glimpse of true happiness I'd had in months. And now, after months in the dark, my therapy failing like everything else in my life, and the torrent of bad luck that's been abundant in my life... now I have this.

Maybe I shouldn't feel so safe with them, given how last night went. Maybe it's foolish to be lulled back into a sense of safety so soon after returning home, let alone when you add in the fact that they had me bound up and begging them for mercy hours ago. Trusting my heart to them feels like playing with fire—but isn't that what love always feels like?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Tripp asks, leaning into the space next to my ear so that his words can brush against it. It's not just his words that brush them—his fingers dip behind my ear and then produces a coin between his thumb and index finger.

I laugh so loudly it comes out like a snort. Tripp always had a thing for magic—we'd play as Magician and assistant. Obviously, I was his assistant, entrusted with catching our pet rabbit Sugar Paws and shoving her in the top hat before passing it off to Tripp while our parents watched us with

amusement. I forgot about his penchant for theatrics, for magic. I forgot about Sugar Paws, too. Whatever happened to her? I'll have to ask Hadley.

I see Colton glance at us, curious to hear my reply. I've been quiet, but I don't think they feel awkward, either. I sincerely doubt Colton has ever felt awkward about anything, ever. "You can't afford them all." I tell Tripp playfully, pushing his hand away because there's no way I'm telling him that I was just thinking *I love them*.

Nope. No fucking way.

What the fuck is wrong with me to even think that? You don't just wake up one morning and suddenly realize you love someone, let alone three men. Clearly, I'm hungover... or drunk... or clinically insane. Most likely, the latter given that I have been a shitty patient.

I needed a little bit of clarity for a while, so I left all of my meds in my apartment when I came here. I've been completely unmedicated since Logan died, which seems to be helping. The sleeping pills got me into a deep enough sleep to avoid dreaming since it felt more like courting death, but they always left me feeling foggy. And then there's the Frankenstein's cocktail of antidepressants and beta blockers and whatever the hell else Logan threw at me these last few months.

Or maybe it's just being here, being with them, that is giving me these little moments of clarity. Maybe it's feeling so safe that's letting my brain unlock things that I had previously squirreled away. Maybe it's them.

"I am fabulously wealthy, remember?" Tripp's voice pulls me through the fog of my thoughts. I see Colton shake his head, grunting a laugh, and then my eyes find Tripp's.

"And how did you get so wealthy, Triptych?" I tease, relishing the way his grin only widens at the nickname. He always hated it when I called him that,

and I always hated it when he called me Princess. Tripp Eugene Archer is his full name, but Triptych was always fun to say. Besides, it's fitting. He is a work of art. I feel myself basking in the glow of that grin, way prouder of myself than I should be at procuring that reaction from him.

"You know he always had family money," Colton shrugs like whatever Tripp can say isn't that impressive.

"Obviously. Only rich people name their kids stuff like Tripp."

He chuckles at that. "Would you believe me if I told you that Rev is an excellent financial advisor?"

I pause to contemplate that, but I don't really need to. "No surprise there."

"Well, when you have money, it's not hard to make more. My parents died not long after you left..." He's quiet, letting himself feel grief for just a moment.

"I'm sorry," I tell him sincerely. I know the words are useless. I know I hated hearing them. But I *am* sorry. I should have been here for him when that happened. His parents were genuinely great people, and as vastly different as they were from my parents, they were incredible. I took them for granted, forgetting how Mrs. Archer had come to do my laundry, make me meals that I didn't even eat right there in my mom's kitchen, and hold me so I could cry to a mother figure, even if it wasn't my mother. I probably would have died too in those days after my parents if not for her care.

"They left everything to Axel and I." Tripp continues. "They had more money than they knew what to do with."

"But you did?"

"I had some ideas." He grins, the snake bite piercing on his lip, glinting mischievously. "But mostly, I'm just having fun being the mayor's playboy brother."

The mention of him as a playboy makes me shift uncomfortably, swallowing past the lump that puts in my throat. He doesn't belong to me, despite the fact that we formed a blood pact and talked about getting married if we never found anyone else. He could have been... if I hadn't left. If I hadn't been forced to leave.

I hate Mark more than ever right now. I'm going to have to sweet-talk them into telling me where to find him later. We're well past due for another visit.

"So," I clear my throat. "You became a bit of an investor, Axel chose to be the freaking mayor." That will never *not* be weird, even if it makes sense. He used to walk around my house in his boxers, for fucks sake. But it's not as weird as Colton's choice in profession. "Rev plays with other people's money. What about you, Colt?" I turn to get a look at him, his knuckles tight around it. "Why law enforcement? And why *chief*?"

I realize I'm being nosy. I'm probably overstepping, even. They haven't asked me anything about my life other than why I ditched them, and yet I've asked a million questions about their dynamic, their finances, their lives.

"It was a means to an end." His voice is clipped, uninterested. "I blame the other Archer for that."

"Let me set the scene," Tripp smirks, glancing over to see Colton's eye roll before looking back at me. "Colt was working at The Dive, which, as you know, had a *reputation*." When I lift an eyebrow in question, he mimics me. "Oh, maybe you *don't* know? Well, let's just say it's not an establishment for upstanding, law-abiding citizens."

"What?" I laugh. "We went there all the time."

"Yeah," he agrees, "and we weren't law-abiding citizens. We were little hedonists."

I start to refute that claim, but I don't think he's wrong. A lot of kids used

to hook up in the parking lot out back. I know for a fact that Audrey gave Colton more than a few blowjobs in the bathroom. I decide to keep my mouth shut, not wanting to mention her when I was the one on my knees for him last night. Especially because, as frightening as it had been in the moment, I get a wicked rush at the thought of doing it all over again.

“Okay, so I looked at the world through rose-colored glasses back then.” I laugh. My glasses were stomped into a million pieces, just like my heart. I see the gritty reality now, the darkness. But now I find beauty in it instead of being frightened by it.

“Mm.” Tripp agrees. “So, our boy here is hearing all these sordid things—drug deals, murders, whispers of a prostitution ring.”

“Bullshit.” I say. “My parents were the first murders in this town in over three hundred years.”

“Wrong.” He shakes his head.

“Tripp,” Colton catches his eye in the mirror, his voice edged in warning. “There was a girl. Real grisly murder. And your dad was on the case.”

“What?” I laugh. “You’re telling me there was a murder here that just went completely under the radar? You know when I hit Mrs. Prescott’s mailbox the week I got my license it was front page news the next morning. That time you got locked out of your house in just your boxers, the entire town knew before you found the spare key.”

“Your dad always tried to protect you, you know? He did a good job of it... maybe too good of a job.” He bites his lip, contemplating whether he should have kept that thought in. “Your parents sheltered you because they loved you so much, but you said it yourself. Rose-colored glasses.” He shrugs. “I think they just didn’t want you to worry about stuff like that, so your dad kept the investigation really quiet.”

I glance at Colton, wondering if he also thinks I've been too sheltered. It's true my parents loved me abundantly. And I was considerably less edgy than Hadley, but it's not like I was a complete square. I mean, I went into a haunted house rolling on ecstasy, and look how that turned out. Clearly, sheltered rose-glasses Marley was better off than 'throw caution to the wind' Marley.

"Okay," I concede. "So, they tried a little too hard to keep me from seeing the ugly in the world."

Tripp looks like he's going to argue that point, but he just nods. "So, then your parents die and Douchebag North takes over for your dad. All of a sudden, Colton starts seeing people come from out of town, meeting with the chief of police of our little old town, passing briefcases in the shadows where teenagers go to fuck. Weird, right?"

It does sound weird, so I nod. "Well, then it gets weirder. Mayor fuckface starts showing up in the back of The Dive, too."

"The plot thickens." I intone because I'm not sure what else to say about it. He nods fervently.

"So, you'd think they're up to some shit, right?" Thankfully, he doesn't wait for an answer. "It's already pretty damn weird to see the mayor and the chief of police lurking in the back alley like they're going to get their rocks off, but then it gets fucking *weirder*."

I'm on the verge of laughing. I can't tell how serious he is right now. "Tell me they weren't fucking each other?" I mock a gasp. "I always knew there was something wrong with Jake. You're telling me he's inbred?"

"Guess who else starts showing up for these little meetings?" It's another rhetorical question; he's too excited not to answer for me. "Fucking Pastor Jean."

Okay, that one does come as a shock. “Rev’s dad?”

“Yep, seedy son of a bitch. One day Colt sees them all together, sees two strangers pull up and pass this girl off to good old, church-going Pastor Jean. You think he took her there to repent for her sins?”

I’m suddenly uncomfortable, shifting in the front seat at the thought of what could have been going on. Jake’s dad was always really creepy—he’s the reason Jake always crept into my house and why I never slept there. Hearing that he was involved in something sinister isn’t exactly a shock. And the cousin who took my dad’s spot on the force was always an ass, so it’s not hard to imagine that he got up to nefarious deeds too. But Rev’s dad? I just can’t imagine he’d be into anything so *dark*.

“So, what? You’re saying they run a prostitution ring in the church attic? Because I’ve been up there for bake sales, and it’s not exactly a brothel. There aren’t even beds.”

“You don’t need beds in a brothel,” Colton quips, shooting a glance at me that makes me tingle all over.

“You also don’t need beds if you’re not keeping the girls.” Tripp shrugs, leaning back as if that’s it. He told me that whole story, and now he’s lacing his fingers behind his head and tilting his chin up like it’s time for a nap.

“So you think that Rev’s dad is a serial killer and the mayor and chief of police covered it up?”

“Not a serial killer,” Colton says tersely. He flicks his gaze back to Tripp, who seems to take the hint. He sighs.

“Not a serial killer.” He agrees. “More like a... cult leader.”

I nearly choke on my laugh. “A—A cult leader?”

“And he performed virgin sacrifices right there in the church basement, paying men to bring girls from out of town so that he could go on doing it

without getting caught. Obviously, the North's were in on it. So, Colton has this suspicion, he takes it to Axel, because who else do you go to with info like that? The FBI would have laughed his ass into the next century."

"And... you collaborated to take down the North family and the Methodist Church's satanic worshippers?" It's a question for Colton, but I turn to Tripp, facing him dead-on so he can see how ridiculous I think it sounds.

"Yep. But the story isn't over yet."

I feel exhausted already, my brain grappling with the impossibility that something so horrific was happening right under our noses. It sounds like the kind of story you find in the bowels of the internet when you've been playing Google roulette for far too long.

"The night of Audrey's funeral, Colton paid Jake a little visit. I mean, he nearly fucking killed you, and you said yourself you thought he killed Audrey. He gets to the North house, and as he's visiting your horrible ex, guess what he finds?"

"A fucking psychopath's lair," Colton grumbles, cutting a glance at me. "I mean, pictures of you, Audrey, and Jenny Clark... you remember her, right? The girl from the swim team who disappeared early in senior year? Yeah." He nods when recognition lights in my eyes.

Jenny Clark. She was relatively new since she moved here at the tail end of junior year, quiet and unassuming. She was on the swim team, and she always smiled back at me in the halls. I even invited her to sit with Audrey and me at lunch once when she was new, but she never showed.

"It probably wouldn't have been weird given that you and he were together so long, but the weird thing is, you didn't know any of the pictures were being taken. I'm talking about open-curtain photos, swimming in the pool. Just... creepy shit."

I don't even get a chance to feel unsettled about the idea that my ex-boyfriend was spying on me because Tripp takes control of the story again.

“So, you may be thinking... what if he had a passion for solving crimes and just wanted to get justice for Audrey and Jenny? Well, I'll tell you why that's not the case. Because he had Jenny's locket in his bedside table.”

“He had her... locket?” I blink. “How do you know it was hers?”

“Because it had her initials on it? Because she wore it every day? Because it's around her neck in the missing posters that were plastered all around town?”

“Okay,” I nod, waiting for him to drive it home. I had considered that Jake may have killed Audrey, given his sudden escalation of violence. But imagining him killing a girl he had no relationship with is a bit of a stretch. It's hard to imagine.

“So I took the info to Axel, who has a friend at the Bridgewater DA's office. Apparently, he knew your father, since the jurisdiction overlaps. He was able to get the case files that hadn't yet gone missing. He built a case against the sheriff's department, then against North, then against Mayor North. This stuff takes time, so I joined the academy to watch them from the inside.”

“And guess what happened?”

“You guys took over,” I say, watching Colton focus on the winding road ahead of us. There are more cars on the road now, so I'm guessing we're close to our destination.

“Damn straight,” Tripp says proudly. “I bought all of the businesses that were laundering their money for the North family and became a woefully unprepared businessman. Axel stepped in as interim during all the initial buzz and then was sworn in when the Governor stripped North of his duty. The

P.D. had to put their chief on unpaid leave, and then they had to let him go, so Axel put Colton on the fast-track there, and we've been doing it since.”

I have more questions than I started with, but we're clearly out of time. And my shock subdues them for the time being, anyway.

Present Day

A SPRAWLING BLACK ESTATE seems to stretch and unfurl before us, expanding as we draw up to it. The manicured lawn is adorned with a three-tier stone fountain, complete with angels holding the first two tiers aloft.

When I don't see a single car, I realize it must all be valet. Colton confirms as much when he follows Axel under the colonnade at the forefront of the building and hands his keys over to a middle-aged man in a simple uniform. Tripp offers his hand to help pull me from the truck, which I manage to do without stepping on my dress. I'm impressed, but not as impressed as I am when I straighten and get a look at the building before us.

Through huge glass doors, I can see the inside is bright, all adorned with candles that seem to be floating high overhead. There are probably hundreds of them hanging there, setting a cozy, almost romantic vibe. I can't imagine how long it took to string up all those things on fishing wire to make them appear as if they're held up there with some sort of magic. But that's not even the most incredible part. The pumpkin stacks on either side of the doors are huge, arching high overhead. Instead of being carved with little faces or

designs, they're an aesthetic combo of white and orange, interspersed with pampas grass to make it look more elegant than the typical Halloween décor. It's the kind of design that can transition easily to a basic autumn look come morning when Halloween night has passed, and the world is focused on getting shit they don't need for cheap.

"You designed this?" I ask, turning to where Hadley is waiting on Axel's arm.

But instead of seeing my sister's proud smile, I'm taken aback by her silver mask. It's small and delicate and leaves much of her face exposed, so there's no doubt about who she is. But it makes my heart skip a beat—until I look around and see that *everyone* is wearing masks.

When she sees my reaction, her painted lips pull into a frown. "You okay?" Nobody told me we were headed to a damn masquerade.

It seems silly, in hindsight, to not have thought any better. I know Hadley well enough. If she planned this party, I should have known it would be a masquerade. She may be edgier than me, but she loves to let her princess side and her witchy side fuse in the coolest ways.

"Fine," I manage, taking the mask she offers me and putting all of my energy into making sure my hands don't shake as I tie it around the back of my head, where my hair falls around my shoulder in luxurious curls.

Tripp takes the ribbons for me and ties them together, smoothing his hand over my hair before slipping his own mask on—a velvet-trimmed black that covers everything from the middle of his cheeks up to his hairline. Colton's is a simple black design that doesn't conceal much of his face. It looks like something the Hamburgler would throw on before raiding the burger joint.

"You're with us." He assures me as Hadley and Axel turn to go inside, pulling me against his side. "You're safe."

I know he's right. Something tells me Colton would kill before letting any harm come to me. He damn near did last night. But it doesn't exactly ease the anxiety I feel as we progress into the vast space and watch people mill about around us in large dresses and expensive suits.

"Let's get you a drink," Tripp suggests. "Calm the nerves."

That actually sounds like a great idea. I gladly follow him to the bar that wraps the length of the far wall. Colton walks on my other side, nodding randomly at people when they make eye contact. I wonder if he recognizes them all or if they just recognize him since it's fairly obvious who he is. I'm actually kind of grateful for the mask, as the eyes that fall on me only linger a moment before they pass quickly over me to the next person. They've given me the luxury of being the woman who showed up on Colton and Tripp's arms rather than *that girl* whose best friend was murdered in a haunted house.

My anonymity is a great cloak as people pull my entourage to the side intermittently to have conversations with them. Hadley, in particular, keeps getting tapped on the shoulder by admirers who are blown away by the décor, which is admittedly phenomenal. Elegant and spooky touches abound, and the crackling fireplace in the center of the room, set in the nook of a curving staircase, glitters as it burns. It's not even until we gather for dinner that I see the full extent of it.

I'm two drinks deep by the time cocktail hour segues into dinner, and a couple of uniformed workers pull open all the doors to reveal dozens of round tables set around a stage. The tables are laden with silver, covered platters, and gorgeous crystalline china. But the most impressive thing in the space has to be the centerpieces, which are black candelabras dripping with deep purple crystals and ivory candles, the flames of which all seem to flicker constantly.

Hadley shepherds us to a table near the stage, where Tripp pulls out a chair for me before sinking into the one next to it. Colton takes the empty one on my other side while Axel sits next to him with my sister on his side. “Everything looks wonderful, Sweetheart.” He tells her adoringly.

I notice my name on the little silver place card that’s edged in scalloped black lace and ignore the lump in my throat. I wonder if she always leaves a place setting for me, just in case. No doubt she called on the way here to ensure someone set it out for her.

“Wait ‘til you see the food.”

I’m much more relaxed with the alcohol from my drinks working through my bloodstream, which is burning with desire at the proximity of them. “I have something to tell you,” I say, leaning into Colton until I’m sure no one will overhear what I’m telling him.

Apparently, the drinks are stronger than I thought because that came out of nowhere.

I’m not going to admit to having a stalker who may be responsible for the deaths surrounding me lately, but at least if I tell him I need to confess something to him, he’ll know to ask me later. It feels like a good first step in confessing the dark details of my fucked up life.

Colton nods, but when he turns to whisper back to me, his voice is hoarse, and I think he’s choking on his lust. The way his eyes dip to my cleavage assures me that I assumed correctly. “Unless it’s how bad you want me to rip that dress off of you and fuck you until you can’t walk, it can wait.”

Tripp chuckles in spite of the fact that he couldn’t possibly have heard... could he?

I actually *do* want Colton to rip this dress off of me and fuck me into the morning, but obviously not here or now. However, there’s no harm in having

a little fun and working him up a little more.

I gulp down the last of my drink, gathering every ounce of liquid courage I need, and slide my hand across his lap until I feel him under my hand. God, he's huge. I still haven't gotten over it. He also apparently has mastered his poker face because he doesn't even twitch as I skate my palm back and forth over the crotch of his pants, feeling him grow harder by the minute.

"Where's Rev?" I ask innocently, looking anywhere but at Colton as I tease him.

"Don't worry," Tripp leans in, chuckling. "You'll be seeing him tonight."

I can feel Hadley smirking at me, but she can't possibly know I'm stroking Colton under the table. Rose-colored glasses Marley would *never*.

There seems to be no judgment coming from my sister despite the way she's looking at me. Just... acceptance, gratitude, joy. As crummy as it feels to be sitting here like a fraud in the presence of highly powerful and rich people, it's also a blessing. After our parents, Hadley had to take on a maternal role. Or rather, she chose to since I was practically old enough to deal with that myself. It caused a shift in our relationship, a rift that only grew deeper following what happened with Audrey. And then I ran from her, pretty much sacrificing any chance of us being what we used to be. But today, from her gentle mockery about my activities the night before to this moment here, it feels like we're the same people we used to be before the ugly world decided to ruin us. And I'm selfish enough to let that feeling override the guilt, so I push it out of my mind and decide to focus on this... every beautiful detail.

I'm moving my hand off of Colton when he seizes my wrist under the cover of the table and drags it back to his lap. Only now, he's unzipped his pants, so my hand lands on hot flesh.

A wicked thrill floods through me, like electricity, straight to my core as I slip my hand into the waistband of his pants and let my fingers close around his hard cock to the best of their ability. I can't fit him entirely in my grip, but he doesn't seem to mind. He shifts the slightest bit, granting me access to slide my palm down the length of him, squeezing just a little when I reach the tip. He looks almost angry as he turns his eyes down to the table, focusing on something in front of him. "Look, Colt," Tripp says, just loudly enough to catch the attention of our table mates, who follow Tripp's gaze to see what he's pointing out. "It's your ex."

My heart falters at the term *ex*, my mind conjuring up the image of Audrey, but I follow the direction Tripp's indicating to see a willowy brunette with enough neck to make a giraffe jealous. Her long earrings dust against her bony shoulders, and she's noticed we're talking about her. There's not much to her mask—it's a lacy slip of fabric that does nothing to hide her identity. She smiles and then closes the distance between us.

I feel Colton shift again, but if he's trying to dislodge me, good fucking luck. I'm suddenly jealous, and I acknowledge I have zero right to be. I'm also petty enough to try to make him orgasm right in front of this girl. If she's any kind of ex, she'll recognize it when I make him cum, no matter how good his poker face is.

I manage a smile as I stroke him back to the base slowly, firmly. "Colton," she says, looking like she wants to reach out and hug him but then thinks better of it.

"Lily," he nods, barely managing to smile for her benefit.

"You look good."

"Thanks." He grunts just as my fingers dip lower, pulling his balls into my hand instead of his cock. I take note of his squeezed fist and tug on him,

feeling his hips lift toward my hand.

“Lily,” Tripp grins. “Care to join us?”

Colton shoots daggers at his friend next to me, but everyone else seems oblivious to Colton’s distress. “That is so sweet, Tripp.” She smiles softly at him, and the irrational jealousy inside of me spikes. Did she date Tripp, too? Do they often share women?

So, what if they do?

I was gone for three years. I gave up my right to care about who they chose to spend their nights with. Or at least, that’s what I try to tell myself as I move back to Colton’s cock, jerking him fast and hard. I think his eyes cross a second just before he snaps them shut, taking a moment to compose himself. “But I’m here with my fiancé and his friends.”

“Fiancé?” Tripp muses.

Luckily for Colton’s thick cock, there’s no jealousy in Tripp’s voice, so I keep my temper under control and my strokes even as Lily explains that the man she’s been dating for the last year proposed to her in Italy under the stars. I’ve decided the moon must shine out of Lily’s ass by the time she turns to gesture toward her fiancé, who watches her adoringly.

“Sounds really magical,” I say, my voice breathy to my own ears. I know Colton is close to coming by the way he is straining in his seat. I didn't expect to go this far, but now I'm not letting up until I reduce him to half the mess they made of me last night.

“It was.” Lily agrees. “It was good seeing you guys.”

“You too,” Tripp grins as Colton manages to lift his hand in parting, looking physically pained. Any onlooker probably thinks he’s pining over the ex who got away, but I know he’s struggling to hang onto his composure, and I’m making it *very* hard for him.

Hadley and Axel have already gone back to whatever conversation they were having before the brunette's arrival, though it's swallowed in the din of excitement as the doors open and smoke pours into the room.

I nearly jump out of my seat until Tripp's hand lands on my thigh, stealing my nerves. "It's all part of the show your sister's designed." He assures me, his fingers working small circles through the fabric of my dress.

Hadley is turned in her chair, watching excitedly as the black-suited figures stalk into the room and surround each of the tables. An uncomfortable feeling settles at the base of my spine as one of them takes the place behind me and deepens when I get a look at all of them with their hair slicked back and wearing the exact same masks. It's like they've been cloned from one another, and it's mildly disturbing. The smoke is gentle, probably from dry ice, but it eliminates much of the visibility in the room as the people get into position. I've kept my motions consistent, but the cover of darkness gives me the perfect timing, and Tripp's reassuring touch gives me the encouragement I need to finish what I started.

Colton leans into me, his mouth capturing my ear so that he can whisper for only me to hear. "You're going to pay for this, you little tease."

I'm not sure a tease would be milking his cock to completion, which is precisely what I do, but I appreciate the threat. I hadn't planned to go all the way, intending to torture him a little, but then Lily sauntered over, and I couldn't help myself. I had to remind him whose throat his cock was in last night.

He groans into my ear as he comes, and it's probably the sexiest sound I've ever heard as his ragged, forced-quiet breaths fill my ear, and his hot seed fills my palm.

"You dirty, wonderful girl," Tripp whispers, pressing a kiss over my ear

before pulling away.

Satisfied with myself, I pull my hand from Colton's pants and take the napkin Tripp surreptitiously passed into my other hand. I carefully wipe the mess on the linen and then fold it in half, feeling bad for whoever comes across this during laundry. I'll just have to sneak it into the trash if I can, to spare anyone the trauma of wondering how exactly that came to be there.

I'm suddenly aware of the music, which has been a sort of background noise, coming to a crescendo as the figures all step forward at once, reaching between the guests to let their hands fall on the lids of the silver platters. The song comes to an end, the lids are peeled back, and the fog dissipates just as quickly as it began, revealing our food. The staff files into a line and walks back through the doors, which shut again in their wake, allowing me to glance back at my plate.

On my plate is some sort of chicken smothered in cheese that smells divine. It's garnished with asparagus, cherry tomatoes, and a small serving of mashed potatoes with some kind of sauce covering them. When I turn to see if everyone was served the same thing, I see that Colton has steak with roasted potatoes, and when I turn to Tripp, he's got... a burger and fries.

It's an odd combination of foods, made even more bizarre when I look across the table to see a massive Maine lobster set before Hadley. It's even more peculiar when I think about how every one of the staff looks like a carbon copy, but our food is so niche.

I appear to be the only one surprised by the array of food, so I decide not to say anything about it, waiting for Hadley to start eating before taking up the knife to cut my chicken.

It practically melts in my mouth. I fail to suppress a moan at the flavor. "Keep doing that, and there will be something more than chicken in your

mouth tonight.” Colton’s voice is low enough that no one else seems to hear it, but I glance around to be sure.

I shiver a little at the memory of how mercilessly he fucked my throat, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t also feel myself grow wetter at the idea. I do, however, refrain from making any more sounds as I finish my meal. There’s enough ambient noise around the room, as well as chatter from Hadley and Axel and Tripp, though I can’t focus on any of what they’re saying because I’m too focused on trying not to lose my mind to the need, which only grows every time one of the guys brushes a hand over my dress or leans in to whisper something to me.

By the time I feel the edge of my dress being lifted, I’m too full of need to sit still any longer. I jump to my feet so quickly that Hadley and Axel look at me in surprise and concern. “I need to take a walk.” I announce, smoothing the front of my dress as I push my chair out from behind me. “Think I ate too much.”

My sister nods sympathetically, but her eyes betray a bit of her skepticism as she watches me hurry for the doors. When I throw one open, I realize I have no concept of where the restroom is, and the rain I see falling outside is a good enough reason not to want to go back out there. The entire area seems abandoned, and the door snapping shut echoes through the quiet of the room. It’s a little odd but not eerie, so I decide to take my chances finding the restroom instead of going back to my seat.

My search leads me up that massive set of stairs that are lit by stacks of candles on every other step. I’m not sure anyone is supposed to come this far, as it seems to get darker the further up the stairs I go, but the two drinks from before dinner are weighing on my bladder now.

The top of the stairs splits off into two directions, both equally dark, so I

take a chance and go left. The hallway is long and full of doors, each of which looks identical to one another from here, so I wrap my hand around the first doorknob and pull it open to find a small, well-lit room with little individual stalls.

I don't allow myself to acknowledge what luck I've had by finding the bathroom on the first try, rushing into the bathroom, and locking myself in a stall. I hike my dress up around my hips to make it easier on myself, and then as I'm finishing up, I realize my panties are soaked.

I knew that their filthy words and lingering touches were doing something to me, but I didn't realize just how wet I was. I'm not going to walk around with the wet fabric chafing me all night, so I let them slip down to my ankles and step out of them entirely, stuffing them into the trash receptacle in the stall. Nobody looks in those unless they want to be disgusted, so I don't really feel bad about it as I step out of the stall and cross to the sink.

Hadley did a hell of a job dressing me up tonight. I'm not sure if it's the fact that I just made Colton come in my hand or the mask, but I feel like a different person than I was when we walked in here. I'll have to deal with the truth later, but for tonight, the denial is doing wonders for me.

I'm feeling better by the time I open the bathroom door and step into the hall, letting the door close softly behind me.

And then there are hands grabbing me from behind as someone rushes at me, driving us into another room. It happens so quickly that I think I'm going to fall, but the strong arms behind me keep me upright as we stumble into the room, and a hand over my mouth keeps me from screaming. I hear the sound of the lock scraping shut, and then I'm on the ground—or on the body of the man below me, whose hard cock nudges at my ass through the silk dress. It's all happened so fast I didn't have a chance to process anything about what

just happened, but I see the fleur-de-lis on the fabric under my legs and feel relief rush through me.

“Shh!” Colton warns, pressing a finger to my lips as he drags me to my feet.

I’m not sure why we have to be quiet, but the room is dark, so it feels right to whisper. “What are you doing here?”

“I told you you’d pay for that little stunt you pulled at dinner.” His voice is dark and hoarse, but what little I can see of his grin is terribly sexy.

“You’re the one who whipped your cock out,” I argue, crossing my arms and turning to see Tripp getting to his feet.

“And you’re the one who started it!” He challenges, looking over my shoulder.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting your girlfriend to come say hi.” I snap, trying to find Tripp in the darkness. He was just right there.

“*Ex.*” Colton laughs. “You jealous, Lavigne?”

“No.”

There’s no denying the defensiveness in my tone, and I know it as well as them. It doesn’t matter because Colton presses me further into the room, walking me backward in the dark. I’m not afraid of him, but the closer he steps, the more I try to get away from him, intrigued and aroused and the slightest bit nervous about whatever he plans to do.

Even with his mask on, his beauty is devastating. He’s all dark, sharp edges, masculine and hard.

I feel the floor drop a little, and the darkness gets a little bit lighter as he pushes me straight back until I feel something press against my back, trapping me between whatever it is and his hard body. And then his hands seize my middle, spinning me around in one fluid motion and pressing me

over the railing. My stomach flips a little as I look straight down into the scene below—it's a big drop, but the worst part is that it's *open*.

Terror leeches into my bloodstream as I look down, the view down below blurring together as the fear climbs up from the pit of my stomach and lodges itself in my throat. A hard body comes to a stop behind me, grinding me against the railing before I have a chance to step away. I'm dizzy with the fear of being this close to the edge, of knowing that if he just grabbed my legs and tipped me over the rail, I'd fall to a certain death. I have no idea how high up we are, but I'm sure that if this were in the lobby, I'd be looking straight into the floating candles.

We're in an old-school theater box, poised for the perfect view of whatever performance is meant to happen. I don't doubt that if whoever was on the stage—and there *is* someone there, though I can't make out who—were to look up, they'd see us. It's mostly dark up here, but the lights stop just outside of our reach, meaning anyone could spot us if they happened to look up.

“Colton!” I gasp, as quietly as I can manage, despite feeling his hands bunching my dress up around my hips and baring my whole ass to him. The cool air on my skin reminds me what a bold decision I made ditching my panties in the bathroom, though Colton probably assumes I came out this way, which is just as well. No need to let the truth go to his head.

Despite telling me to keep it down, the sound that comes from Colton isn't exactly a whisper as his fingertips dig into my thighs, clearly appreciating his view. “You'll have to be quiet,” Tripp says, his mouth floating over my ear. I can feel their hot bodies behind me, and it's every bit as thrilling as it is frightening. What would happen if we got caught up here? The mayor's

brother, the police chief, and the final girl. The gossip mongers wouldn't know where to begin.

But my guys do. I hear the sound of belts coming undone—a sound I am well-acquainted with after last night.

“We can't do this in here.” I hiss, scanning the tables below. “What if we get caught?”

I don't dare tell them that I'm more afraid of the height than I am of being spotted up here. I know they won't let me fall, but that doesn't stop the thundering of my heartbeat.

“We're wearing masks,” Tripp reasons, “No one would even know it's you.”

Hadley would.

“Grab hold of the railing, beautiful, or your ribs will be as bruised as this pretty little cunt is about to be.”

Colton's words send a rush straight to my clit, which aches at the promise, but I do not have any delusions about being fucked over the side of this railing, so I do as he commands, gripping the iron tight under my palms and bracing myself for what's to come. The steel is slick beneath my sweaty palms. I readjust my grip once before squeezing harder this time.

The adrenaline makes everything both incredibly sharp and oddly dull. The people below us cease to exist, cease to matter. I know they're there, but they're paper people—their lives are inconsequential at this moment.

As nervous as I am, as wrong as this is, I don't want to stop him—I want whatever he wants to do to me, no matter how twisted and wrong it may be. And I feel like getting fucked in public during a charity event is pretty damn twisted.

The belt whipping across my ass sounds thunderous in my ears,

momentarily drowning out the storm of my wild heart. I tense in fear and surprise even as I bite my lip to hold in the moan that bubbles in my throat, terrified that someone is going to look around to see what that noise is and spot me bent over the balcony. The smell of metal only intensifies as I taste a trace of copper from my own lip.

The man on the stage is speaking into a microphone, and his voice carries around the theater, but I can't process a word of what is being said as another slap lands on the opposite cheek. It's a lighter touch, but I jolt against the balcony anyway, my knuckles turning white. I know that one was Tripp.

"This ass is just begging to be filled." He groans, earning a laugh from Colton.

"You promised Rev you'd wait," Colton says calmly, stroking his hands up my thigh until he lands between my legs. "Besides, this pussy is so wet she may die if we don't take care of it."

Oh, god.

I whimper and then bury my face against the backs of my hands, trying to stifle my feral noises. I feel Tripp join Colton, his touch on my wet and needy slit, testing the validity of his friend's claim. "Please," I whisper.

I feel like an animal in a zoo with them just looking at me. I don't want to be looked at. I want to be touched, tasted, fucked.

A hand runs up my spine, flattening me further, and then fists in the hair at the base of my skull. I think of telling them not to ruin my hair because that will be a very obvious tell of what I've been up to, but then I'm sure Hadley's noticed their absence by now. So, when the other hand tangles in my hair too, I only moan, arching deeper. I know it's Colton's tattooed hand that wraps around my throat, pinning me in the exact spot he wants me. He doesn't squeeze this time, just lets me wear his hand like a necklace, a reminder that

he owns me right now. My body is hard-wired to be his little whore right now. I love it more than I think I should.

I don't know at first whose cock is at my entrance until Colton pushes in so swiftly that he forces me to relax around him. He's so big that from this angle, it feels like he just might come straight out my throat, and I can already feel my stomach knotting at the sensation of being this wildly full. He eases back, gliding slowly out of me, and then thrusts in, drawing stifled gasps from inside of me. Tears spring to my eyes at the intensity of trying to hold in my gasps. Colton repeats his process a few times, making sure he's thoroughly coated himself in my juices, letting me adjust to the feel of him. And then he pulls out, and I mewl at the loss of him, suddenly so empty it aches.

It doesn't last long, because I feel the cool caress of metal as Tripp lines his cock up in the space Colton just vacated. I freeze for just a moment at the memory of how hard it was to take his cock against my tongue with the piercings teasing my throat. I've never had a piercing inside of me, and the idea is terrifying. What if he catches something inside me? What if he gets too into it and knocks his piercing loose? What if—

I give up on whatever hypothetical I was thinking when he pushes inside me agonizingly slowly, exhibiting a level of control that I've never seen anyone possess. He slides in little by little, seemingly savoring the experience. Tripp covers my entire back, his hands braced on mine over the railing. "You're taking me so well, Princess." He assures me, the lust causing his voice to go breathy over the last word as he continues to move slowly inside me.

I know he's not as big as Colton, but he is long, and I recall the piercings, and how far apart they were spaced. Four of them, though they don't start

until further up the shaft. When the first piercing slides in, I feel it drag against my inner walls before being pulled deeper into me as I clench around him. My eyes roll back at the sensation, the cool metal skating against my heat. “Fuck.” I whimper as his second piercing hits the skin at my entrance, sliding in slowly. I whimper as each one enters me, forcing myself to stay still despite how badly I want to feel him rock inside of me, and how badly I want to feel those piercings shift and roll against my insides.

“All in.” He says into my ear as he thrusts the last little bit inside of me and circles his hips, making sure that I’m taking *all* of him.

I know I’m not far from the edge—literally and metaphorically speaking. The pressure low in my stomach has doubled since they first bent me over this railing, and Tripp’s little accessories have made it impossible to fight. I’m glad I emptied my bladder just before this because I feel like it’s going to explode from the pressure down there.

Tripp withdraws too soon, his wet cock brushing against my ass as he moves away. I’m about to turn around to beg him to come back, when Colton swivels my hips and slams into me again. I squeeze the banister so hard I think my knuckles may lock up. And then he slides out, letting Tripp take his place, filling me faster this time.

They work out a strange and wonderful rhythm between the two of them, and I’m left quivering and soaking and desperate for their tandem motions to increase. It’s the weirdest sensation—the frenzied glide, the slow retreat, the slamming into me, the brief pause where my body clenches for one of them to fill the void the other just vacated.

It’s Tripp who reaches around to slide his fingers beneath the neckline of my dress, twisting my nipple as he pumps in and then out, and then again as Colton pumps in and out.

“Oh god.” I moan, grazing the back of my hand with my teeth because they’re slowly driving me crazy, and if I don’t come soon, I’m going to scream. And right now, the thought of being caught only heightens my arousal, pushing me higher.

They know exactly what they’re doing because they finally pick up their pace, one and then the other until they’re switching places so fast I lose track of who is who despite their differences. All I can hear is the sound of skin slapping against mine. All I can feel is the arcing pleasure filling me from my womb to my lungs, trying to edge out a scream. Fire rages in the pit of my stomach, an explosion impending.

And then I hear the faint thud as someone falls to their knees, laving a hot tongue across my clit as the other’s cock thrusts into me without mercy. I don’t open my eyes to see who is who—I don’t fucking care. But then I feel the little roll of the metal against my clit, and I think I’m going to come apart into a million pieces.

The bliss pushes me to cloud nine, and then when I feel teeth graze against my sensitive clit, it blows me past that. I bite my hand so hard it brings tears to my eyes, but it doesn’t silence my sounds entirely. I try to keep the muffled series of noises inside me, but there’s no room for them with the violent pleasure and the cock that feels like it nearly just thrust against my cervix, the breathless ache of having something reach so deep inside of me.

Colton pulls out of me so fast that I feel dizzy, clutching the bar and breathing in the metallic scent of the railing.

It’s Tripp’s tongue that laps at me after Colton pulls out, taking everything I give. Just like last night, he licks me until I don’t think I can take anymore. The pleasure is turning slowly to agony, need turning to necessity. Euphoria edges in, bringing with it the sweet decay of my composure.

My cry rings out in the theater, echoing in my ears, but I'm squeezing my eyes so tightly together I can see stars.

I'm about to snap my thighs shut around Tripp's head when he ducks out from under me and chuckles.

I'm too exhausted to move when Colton yanks me away from the edge, dragging me into the comfort of darkness. His hands grab my ass to enjoy a handful before he lets my skirt fall around my feet, prim and proper and betraying nothing of the sordid thing we just did. Well, nothing *other* than the wet spots on the floor.

I slump against the wall and let my eyes close as I come down from the high, trying to compose myself. When I open my eyes, Colton is fastening his buckle in place, and Tripp is reaching into his wallet. For a moment, I am filled with awful horror as he takes out a hundred-dollar bill, but it's not for me or Colton. He places it on the seat right next to where there are two small pools of cum—a tip for the inconvenience of having to clean their mess off the floor.

I'm distantly grateful that they chose to pull out, given that the stain on satin would most certainly look obvious once it dripped out of me since I chose to forego panties. I don't regret it for a second, given how it only made them delirious with need for me once they saw what was under the dress.

"If that's what happens when I rile you up, I may just have to act up a little more often," I say, once I can finally string together words beyond the ramblings of *Fuck* and *God* and *Yes*.

"Please do." Tripp groans, sweeping his gaze over me like he's ready to strip me down and go again. "I love helping punish you like this."

Something dark flashes quickly across Colton's face, but it's gone as quickly as it came.

I don't know what to say to them, and they don't seem to think words are necessary. Tripp simply presses his lips to my temple as Colton unlocks the door.

And then they lead me back to the party as if we didn't just do the most depraved thing I've ever done. And I smile sweetly because I loved every wicked second of it.

Present Day

I WANT TO SPLIT up before walking back into the theater to look just a little less obvious, but Colton wraps an arm around me and yanks me close. I mean, I wasn't exactly quiet at the end. I am sure everyone is going to know exactly what we were doing. But it feels so right being pressed into his side that I decide to embrace it. *Yep, I just had these two gorgeous guys make me beg for salvation. Wouldn't you kill to be me?*

To that end, I don't know if I'm relieved or surprised when no one turns to watch us as we enter. Maybe I wasn't as loud as I thought I was.

When I slip into my seat, Hadley is so consumed with whatever is on the stage that she doesn't even spare me a glance, which I'm errantly thankful for. I adjust my chair, hyper aware of my swollen clit as the satin dress drags over it. I'm wonderfully sore and feeling gloriously filthy.

Once I'm seated and have successfully avoided anyone's gaze, I turn to see the object of my sister's desire. There's a pedestal on the stage, with some sort of totem encased in glass. It looks fancy, and apparently it is, because she stands to make a bid, holding a paddle with the number sixteen emblazoned

on it. There's a paddle at each place setting and a fresh glass of champagne, which I take a sip of and nearly choke on when Hadley voices her bid.

“Three thousand.”

I don't know what the bid started at, or if this is the first one, but she's laser-focused, as if three thousand dollars isn't anything to bat an eyelash over. I don't realize my mouth has fallen open until Tripp leans into me and catches my jaw in his fingers, guiding it closed. I think I'm in shock for a moment because I also don't realize he's smirking at me until he laughs. “If you do that again, I'm going to have to give you something to put in your mouth.”

Heat rises to my cheeks as I glance around to see if anyone heard that, but Hadley and Axel are both consumed with whatever she thinks is worth three months of my rent. Money was never exactly tight for us, but we weren't exactly rolling in it. I mean, a police officer's salary is pretty paltry. But I guess she's been hustling—I'm sure she was paid a pretty penny to host this event tonight. I re-focus my attention on whatever is in the case in time to hear Hadley raise her bid. “Five thousand.”

My eyes are so wide that I think I feel a migraine coming on as I turn to look at her, unsure whether she is serious. “What are you doing?” I hiss.

“I hear six thousand, do I hear eight?”

Hadley's jaw twitches a moment and then Axel rises, raising his paddle in the air. “Ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand!” The announcer bellows, his excitement obvious. “Sold to Number Seventeen.”

Colton chuckles when I slap my hand over my mouth. Hadley meets my eyes as she lifts her glass of champagne, pressing it against her lips. It doesn't conceal the smirk there as she shrugs. “It's for a good cause.”

“You want something too, Princess?” Tripp teases, his fingers rubbing a circle over the back of my hand.

“You don’t have to try to impress her.” Colton laughs. “She already belongs to us.”

“Mm, does she ever.” Tripp croons. “But I’d like to see her in a crown. Wouldn’t you?”

Colton doesn’t answer, but the subtle lick of his lips is all the answer I need. I don’t think he wants to see me in anything, and I’m pretty sure the only crown he’s interested in me having is the crown of his cock painting my lips.

Hadley’s purchase is squirreled away, and another object in a glass case is set up in its place. This time, I can tell exactly what’s in the case, and my curiosity is immediately piqued.

It’s a book.

“A real treat for the witch or warlock in us all.” The announcer—a middle-aged man with his white-blond hair swept back with enough gel to make me feel sticky just looking at it—glances over the audience, waggling the fingers on the hand that’s not wrapped around the microphone. There’s tentative laughter as a few people grace him with pity laughs, and then he waves his hands through the air like Vanna White, revealing the winning phrase on Wheel of Fortune. “The Book of the Divine... also known as the Grimoire!” He looks gleeful in his mockery as he lowers his voice. “Bidding starts at one thousand.”

Colton leans back in his chair, slipping his hands behind his head. With his fingers locked together, he looks bored, and as his eyes flicker to the table where his ex-girlfriend sits like a fairy princess in her powdery blue dress, I feel a pit open inside of my stomach. It’s just a glance, but I’m irrationally

jealous. So, when the man seated next to her, in a black, full-face mask, jumps up with his paddle in hand so quickly he nearly knocks her from her chair, I nearly laugh. Colton snickers when he sees my face, knowing he's got me right where he wants me. I guess he likes me jealous. "Twelve thousand!"

There's an awkward silence around the hall as everyone processes that bid, surely wondering whether it's some kind of joke. The auctioneer opens his mouth, closes it, and clears his throat even as Lily claws at the hand of whom I presume to be her fiancée, trying to get him to sit. He only raises his paddle higher and ups his bid as if he's competing with an invisible man. "Fourteen thousand!"

The auctioneer seems to get hold of himself, shaking his head quickly. "That's the spirit! Sold for fourteen thousand to Number Forty-Six!"

I don't pay attention to whatever comes after that—I'm too busy staring at Lily, whose entire energy has gone from demure and delicate flower to furious dragon. Her arms are crossed, and she leans away from her fiancée, who seems to be pleading with her over something. I wish I could hear that conversation, but I'm sure the gist of it is that he just bid an exorbitant amount of money on a book that was probably bought at Barnes and Noble and stained with coffee to make it look weathered.

Tripp leans forward in his seat, drawing my attention away from Lily in time to hear the auctioneer shift his tone. "Our last item for auction tonight is a real treasure... and I mean that literally."

The glass case that a woman wearing white gloves sets down atop the podium this time is filled with a velvet cushion. And on the cushion is a crown of metal thorns and glittering stones that is easily the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It sucks the air out of my lungs, and I'm filled with the

strangest longing. I rarely look at something other than a gorgeous man and think that I have to have it, but if this is how Hadley felt when she bid on whatever the hell she bought, I get it.

“This crown was said to be a gift for Queen Isabella of England, given to her at her wedding in the thirteenth century. It’s alleged that this crown was a gift from Marco Polo, who traveled the whole world and never encountered a woman more beautiful than Queen Isabella.”

There’s a chorus of ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ as the gemstones catch the light, and every woman seems to be equally bewitched by the splendor. “These orange sapphires are quite rare, and the craftsmanship is next to none. They don’t make ’em like this anymore, folks.”

Tripp’s hand on my shoulder makes me jump, drawing me out of my reverie. It’s stupid to form such a visceral attachment to something like that, so I put it out of my mind. I lean back in my chair and glance down at my nails, wishing I’d had a little warning about tonight so I could have done something about the peeling black polish. At least my heels are closed-toe, so you can’t see the faded pink specks I painted on them at Easter.

I miss the opening bid and whatever follows, desperate to ignore the jittery feeling in my veins of wanting something I can never have. Instead, I think of how to get them to tie me up again, of where Rev is, of all the things I want them to do to me tonight. I’m in my head right up until Tripp leans over me to grab my paddle and stands. “Forty thousand.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he just said, but in the silence that follows his bid, I realize he just offered that price for the crown on the stage. It’s beautiful and has a whimsical history, but I truly doubt that it has any practical value. If it were so important, it surely would have been locked up

in some overseas museum rather than in the middle of nowhere, Massachusetts.

An artifact like that, if it were real, would be priceless.

“Forty-thousand.” The auctioneer says, gathering his wits quickly. “Do I hear forty-one?” You could probably hear a pin drop in the room, but definitely not another bid. “Forty-thousand dollars.” He confirms, nodding. “Sold to number thirteen.”

When he sinks into his chair, he’s grinning, looking quite proud of himself. “Show off,” Axel mutters, taking a swig of his champagne and failing to suppress a laugh.

“Did you just—“ I turn to Colton, seeking confirmation... or an explanation.

“I bought it.” Tripp shrugs. “I want to see you in it.”

“I want to see you in *only* that crown,” Colton adds, his eyes darkening as he glances over me, his hungry gaze lingering on the tops of my breasts before sweeping back up to meet mine.

My face feels hot, and I’m hyper-aware of how many people are looking at us right now—looking at me. “Tripp.” I shake my head. “You have to undo that.”

“No takesy-backsies.” He plants a kiss on my temple and then traces the spot with the tips of his fingers. “A princess needs a crown.”

Colton rolls his eyes, and I almost don’t blame him. I remember listening to conversations between lovers throwing out pet names like confetti, and it’s always made me want to crawl out of my skin. Princess is an embarrassing nickname, the kind you give to children—which, I guess, is fair since that’s when Tripp bestowed this nickname upon me. As the only girl in our group, he’d gotten under my skin with that endearment. But when he whispers it in

conjunction with praise about how good I take his studded cock, it's hard to hate it.

"You're ridiculous." I shake my head. "And crazy."

"We're all a bit crazy, baby." Colton's voice is just a whisper in my ear as his thumb strokes a lock of my hair between his fingers almost absently. Now I truly feel like everyone is looking at me—how could you not when these two men are looking at me like they want to undress me here and now?

"Thank you again to our benefactor, the Arcane Society of America, for donating the objects for tonight's auction. We have a short message they've put together for our purposes."

The auctioneer steps off the side of the stage as a rolling screen comes down and takes the place he just vacated. The lights dim, casting us in relative darkness as a woman in a sweater vest appears on the screen. I glance idly up, following the path of the projection, and see the booth set right next to the one we made good use of not even an hour ago. Though I know someone's there, I can't make out the figure who's setting the projection, which gives me at least a little peace that if anyone saw me getting railed over the rails, at least they couldn't make out any details like the color of my dress.

But that concern becomes a distant memory when the sound cuts out with a crackle and the lighting on the screen shifts. I turn to see what just happened as a din of confused chatter blankets the room.

The video is pixelated, probably because it hasn't been adapted for a screen of that size, but looking at it, I know *exactly* where it is.

My nails dig into the fabric covering my thighs. I suddenly feel like I'm falling.

My chest feels heavy, crushed under the weight of everyone's eyes on me,

the horrible realization that this is security footage of a place I see in my nightmares.

It's a graveyard—though not a very convincing one. A hand sticks up from the ground in front of a tombstone, and strobing lights obscure the walls and strings, the imperfections of the fake set. I watch in horror while everyone else watches, intrigued, as a couple walks into the frame, leaning close together, almost like one of them is intoxicated and using the other as a crutch.

Using *him* as a crutch.

Mark.

I think I'm going to be sick as I watch him lift me onto the fake coffin and lean in to kiss me. It's a slow kiss at first, but it builds quickly, and then he's stripping off my clothes, and all the scandalous bits are hidden while it's obvious what's going on. You never see the face of either of the people on screen, but I remember that white shirt—the one that got covered in blood, ripped down the middle. I remember how Mark always styled his hair like that, swept back like he was auditioning to be a T bird in the next rendition of Grease. It was part of his appeal back then—now he looks like he'd have to bathe in Dawn to cut through some of it.

“Marley?”

I can feel tears burning my eyes; I need to blink them away, but I can't take my eyes away from the screen, away from Mark as he distracted me with an orgasm while my best friend was dying just a few feet away. My vision tunnels, the blackness creeping in as a strobing light. The music assaults my ears, and just like that, I'm pulled out of this magical night and cast into a memory, watching myself scream in ecstasy as Mark plays me like a fiddle.

I want to scream—to warn Audrey to run, to tell Mark I know what he's

doing, to knock some sense into myself. But I can't open my mouth, can't move, can't do anything. It's like all of my senses exist besides the tangible. I wonder if this is how ghosts feel—both present and immaterial, in a constant state of horror. I'm watching a train wreck, and I'm powerless to stop it.

The memory shreds away like wet tissue paper, and then it's replaced by the memory of standing in that auditorium, getting a look at Audrey being strung from the rafters, the thick and constant drip of blood. But the memory is cut with something else, jagged pieces of things I never saw. Audrey pleading, screaming, being held down, a man in the ghost mask slashing her throat with a curved blade, frantic slashing.

“Marley!”

The hand that crosses my face breaks the trance, pulling me back to the gala, to Tripp and Colton and Hadley, who is pressing the tips of her fingers against her lips. I blink a few times as the realization settles around me that I'm on the floor, cocooned against Colton's chest, and my sister is leaning down in front of me.

And my cheek stings.

“Did you—“ I raise my hand to the spot, feeling the heat that's risen to the surface of my skin.

“I couldn't snap you out of it. I thought you were having a seizure, but Axel said that's not what it was, so I slapped you.” She looks at least a little embarrassed about that, but it's got nothing on my mortification. I look up at the screen, expecting to see the security footage from the haunted house stuck on a freeze frame of my O face, but it's on a much more professional still of a woman in a sweater vest, wearing an absurdly happy smile. The words *The Arcane Society of America* light up the bottom right of the screen.

“What happened?” I ask because I can't make sense of it. Did I black out?

Did everybody see the worst moments of my life play out on a screen in front of me? I glance around and realize the room has cleared out, and other than Lily, who is glancing at me curiously, no one else is paying attention to me.

“The gala got cut short,” Colton says as if that’s not obvious.

“It was almost over anyway,” Tripp adds.

“Some freak cut into the footage from the Arcane Society and started playing some weird Halloween porno.” Hadley tries to look angry or affronted, but she can’t help laughing a little. “I’m pissed that they ruined the rest of the night, but it’s kind of funny to watch stuffy politician’s wives literally clutch their pearls at amateur hour.”

I feel weightless in the worst way—like the ghost I was just a moment earlier. “You must not have had enough water tonight.” Axel surmises. “You got really red and then fainted just like that. Stole the show.” He laughs halfheartedly. “You feeling okay, Mars?”

No.

My head hurts, my heart aches, my cheek stings, my stomach is in knots, and my skin feels stretched too tight. I generally feel like I’ve been turned inside out. “Yeah.” I swallow, taking the hand Tripp offers me and letting him pull me to standing. I only wobble on my heels for a second as he pulls me into him, and then Hadley pushes a glass of water into my hand. I take a sip automatically, and then Tripp takes it from me to set it on the table so he can run his hands over my arms.

“You’re shaking.” His voice is full of concern, but he’s looking at me funny as he strips off his fancy jacket and drapes it over my shoulders. I can’t bear the way he’s looking at me, so I turn my eyes back to the screen again, but it’s now entirely blank.

“You take her to the car, and I’ll pick up your purchase,” Colton says,

already turning to go.

I start to protest—I don't need to be coddled—when Hadley forms herself to my other side. “Axel will join you.”

I'm not sure whether that was a suggestion or an order, but Axel takes it either way. I watch him and Colton head backstage while we make our way out the doors and into the lobby. It's stunning, even full of people whispering about what just happened, their horror not at all hidden as the women tug at their furs and exclaim loudly how disgusted they are, and the husbands fidget uncomfortably. The few glances that come my way aren't full of disgust, though—they're sympathetic, curious, concerned.

Nobody knows it was me.

Nobody knows it was real.

It's raining when we step outside, though it's a fairly light and constant stream that's turned the parking lot beyond the covered space into a slurry of dirty water. I watch a couple of maple leaves swirl around the storm drain, cold despite Tripp's jacket and his warm arm around my shoulder. The chill is in my bones because I know what no one else in that building does.

Well, maybe not 'no one else'.

Someone had to have spliced the Arcane announcement with the security camera footage. And they may have even done it live rather than cutting it in advance. Whoever the culprit is—whoever has been stalking me and killing people I hook up with—is likely still here, trying to blend in.

I turn to scan the faces around me, looking for anyone who looks suspicious... looking for Mark. All I see are immaculately dressed men and women, though every one of them is wearing a mask. For all I know, he is under one of those, staring directly at me, hiding in plain sight.

The space between my shoulder blades tingles with the feeling of being

watched, and suddenly my skin is crawling, and my muscles are tense. I feel violated. And I feel stupid.

I've put everyone I love in danger by coming home. I thought that maybe seeing Hadley would give me peace and that being back here would offer me some kind of clarity. All I did was invite the monster from my past to destroy my present.

I jump when the car whips under the promenade and stops just in front of us. Tripp guides me to the passenger side, opens the door, and once I've sunk against the leather, he leans in and grabs my seat belt, clicking it in place. On the retreat, he stops just in front of me, his face inches from mine.

I'm reminded of the last night before I ran from town, that almost-kiss in the car. I think he's about to kiss me now. His mouth is right there in front of mine; his eyes are soft and warm. "You okay?"

No.

I have to tell them the truth, but I should wait until they're all together. And where the hell is Rev?

"Yeah." I manage something that must pass as a smile, and he ducks out of the car, letting me see Hadley standing on the curb with her arms crossed over her chest. The silver cobwebs on her dress glitter in the light from behind her, and though I can't see all of her face through the mask, what I can see of it is concerned. I think of how light-hearted she was yesterday when I intruded on her Halloween party. It feels like a lifetime ago in some ways, and yet it was invariably only a day ago that she was unburdened. Now I've got her worrying about me. Guilt crawls up my throat and nestles in a lump there.

"Do you want me to have Axel bring us home together?" She asks after a minute, her eyes flitting to Tripp as he palms the keys from the valet and slips

into the driver's seat.

I think I'm still managing a smile when I tell her I'm going to spend the night with Tripp. She's smart enough to gather that Tripp isn't the only one I'll be spending the night with, but that seems to ease her worry a little. "Okay." She nods, taking a step back so that I can pull the door closed. "I'm staying with Axel, but I'll have my phone on. Call me if you need anything."

I roll my eyes at her, procuring a laugh, and then shut the door between us just as Axel slips his arms around her and presses something in her hands. Whatever he bought her, I realize. It looks like some sort of statue no bigger than a baby doll, and her whole face lights up as she pulls it against her chest. I'll have to ask her about it later, over the phone. This will be the last time I see Hadley until I confront my demons... or slay them. I'm glad it's a happy snapshot that will live in my brain.

I hear the trunk slam shut and then Colton slides into the back seat shortly after. He doesn't fight Tripp about driving, just leans back, peels his mask off his face, and immediately undoes the buttons at the top of his shirt, letting his tattoos breathe. "Our princess is staying the night with us." Tripp announces, grinning as he shifts into drive.

"You say that like she thought she had a choice." Colton's hand lands on my shoulder. I'm not sure if it's meant to be comforting or possessive, but it does steel my nerves a little.

"There's something I have to tell you guys." I say, catching his gaze in the rearview mirror. "You said Rev will be joining us tonight?" Colton nods.

"So, is it a surprise then?" Tripp asks, grinning when he glances my way.

"Yes," I suppose it is going to be a surprise when I tell them I'm leaving again, that I can't stand the thought of any of them being hurt because of me. "When Rev joins us, I'll let you know."

“We have a surprise for you too, baby.” Colton says. Leaning forward to press a kiss against the side of my neck, he slips the mask off my face. I’d almost forgotten I was wearing it.

The scruff of his beard scratches at my delicate skin, sending a shiver through my body and making me press my thighs together as the desire starts to pool in my stomach.

If their surprise doesn’t involve all of us getting naked and fucking ’til morning again, I’m not sure I want it. Fortunately, we’re on the same wavelength because Colton’s hands slip down the neckline of my dress and drag my breasts out of the top. The cool air and my arousal have combined to turn my nipples into hard points, which he’s more than happy to try and coax into tighter peaks. His hands palm the underside of my breasts, holding them up for Tripp to turn and get a look at them. “Fuck. Your tits are perfect.” He groans, one hand on the wheel as he uses the other to adjust himself. “I’d kill to pierce those nipples.”

Colton seems to agree with him because he takes the chance to lean over and pull one between his teeth. He’s not gentle, but that only adds to the euphoria as I toss my head back against the headrest and squeeze my eyes shut, surrendering to the feeling. I’ve considered it a few times but always got scared and backed out because the thought of putting my tits in a stranger’s face while I get shot through the nipple with a needle just sounds awful. But Tripp makes it sound so enticing—I’d let him do it for me.

“Colt—“ I pant when he releases me, only to repeat the move on the other side, sucking me between his teeth and using his tongue to roll my nipple tighter. The rain is falling harder now on the rooftop, and his scent is practically drowning me. It’s bliss... until he pulls away.

When I open my eyes, all I see are the headlights as we come skidding to a

stop. They're bright lights—the kind that obscure your vision when you drive past them and pray that no raccoon darts in front of your car before your eyes can adjust. The only thing I can tell is that we're not on the highway anymore.

“What's going on?” I ask, tugging my dress over my chest and turning to look at Tripp. But he's looking at me instead of out at the car we nearly crashed right into head-first. His mask is gone, too. Colton opens his door without a word. I'm disoriented and confused, but I can just make out another figure standing near the driver's side of the other car.

Alarm bells start tolling deep in my skull as the chill creeps up my spine, knowing that something is wrong. My eyes are starting to adjust to the light, so when I look past it, I can tell that the other driver is a man. “Tripp...” I warn, clutching my seat belt like that will accomplish anything.

They told me earlier that our town was darker than I had realized. Now, I feel like we're about to be car jacked.

“It's going to be okay, Mars.” He says calmly, leaning forward to press his lips against mine. I don't respond right away—my brain is struggling to understand what's going on. This is hardly the time for him to kiss me, but also, part of me seems hard-wired to respond to him. When I do, he deepens the kiss, pulling me into him, his fingers in my hair, his tongue sliding against mine. When he pulls away, I'm breathless and even more disoriented than before, unable to register the faint clicking noise for what it is.

When my door is opened, I don't even get a chance to turn around. Instead, I only see Tripp rest his head against the back of his seat, sighing as thick arms wrap around my torso. The click, I now realize, was Tripp unbuckling my seat belt.

“Tripp!” I yell, the panic in me rising quickly as I'm hauled from the car.

“Colton!” I try to twist myself out of the grip, but there’s nowhere to go, and my assailant simply drags me out into the dead of night, where the headlights blind me again as I try to kick, fight, claw. But I can’t find any purchase with my arms trapped against my sides and the hard body pressed behind me. The rain falls heavy around us, making my skin slick as I fight for my freedom, my hair sticking to my skin, and fat drops falling in my eyes.

I know it’s him, though he doesn’t say a word as I scream his name, struggling against him. He’s hard against my ass even as I can sense that the energy has changed. This isn’t a part of whatever games they like to play. I know it instinctively. And it’s confirmed when the figure steps out of the shadows enough for me to see his face.

There’s just one peel of thunder in the sky, closely followed by a fork of lightning that illuminates the newest addition to our gathering.

It’s only a glimpse before the blindfold slips over my face, and the world feels like it’s collapsing in on me. I think I’m screaming, but I can’t hear it over the blood rushing in my ears and the voice in my head.

Stupid, stupid bitch.

“Long time no see, Lavigne.” Mark laughs. I can feel his breath on my neck. Every part of me feels raw and exposed in his presence. After all this time, even after starting to come to terms with the idea of confronting him, the reality of being next to him is jarring.

The terror is still present, but it takes a backseat to the anger when he presses his lips against mine, his tongue sliding into my mouth greedily. It’s a wet kiss, sloppy and violent and gross. I nearly retch when he pulls away, but I force it back as Colton tugs my hands behind my back and binds them together. I don’t know what he uses, and I don’t care.

I hate him. I fucking hate him, and I’m pissed. I should have known better.

I should have known from the very first night when he told me that Mark had been with him all night. I should have known that Colton didn't have any feelings for me, then or now.

It's not Colton who swings me over his shoulder, causing the whole world to tilt on its axis.

It's not Colton's hand that grabs my ass and squeezes.

And it's not Colton who throws me down against something hard, knocking my head without care.

“God, I've missed you... and that tight little cunt.”

Present Day

I WANT TO CRY, but I won't give him the satisfaction of peeling off a tear-soaked blindfold later. If they want to kill me, they wouldn't blindfold me to do it. That doesn't mean my death isn't the end game or that it won't be a side effect of whatever the fuck they're up to, but when I hear the trunk close, I realize they're taking me somewhere.

I work hard to calm the frantic beating of my heart, keep the tears at bay and my breathing shallow. Thanks to Logan, this isn't my first time in a trunk, so I'm at least a little prepared as he turns the music on. I can't make out any words, but the bass rattles my bones and makes it hard to think.

I don't know what they want from me. They killed Audrey but let me go, then chased me out of town and stalked me until I came back, punished me for leaving, and now they're taking me... somewhere. Confused isn't the word for what I am. Betrayed doesn't even begin to encompass the mutiny they just committed. It feels like my brain has been shoved into a shitty blender and chopped into awkward fragments. Nothing makes sense, but I do understand one thing crystal clear.

They must have been in on it the whole time.

These guys were my best friends. They were everything to me. Colton was Audrey's boyfriend. Tripp was like my soul mate. They held me after she died. Colton watched my house for me to make me feel safe... right up until the night the masked fiends crept in and threatened me. Convenient that it was the one night Colton wasn't standing sentry in the driveway.

But why? What's the point of all of it, the push and pull?

And they were barely friends with Mark. Why would he insert himself and his friends into our lives just to kill Audrey and start this whole years-long game of cat and mouse?

I remember Tripp's earlier story about the mayor and the chief of police, Rev's dad, and satanic sacrifices. Is that what Audrey was? Was Tripp literally setting the stage for me? I think of the way Colton had been tense, reluctant to indulge him.

It also doesn't escape me that there were at least seven people there the night Audrey was murdered. Tripp and Colton's betrayal is as good as a confession, so that's three that I know for sure. I can assume Rev was also in on it, Mark's two friends. That leaves one more, and it's an answer I've known all along. I've never wanted my suspicions of Jake to be true, but at least I'm not blindsided by his betrayal. It hurts in a different way, though the sting of his duplicity is not quite as harsh as it is for the others. I expected it from him.

My ride in the trunk is thankfully not a long one, though it is certainly uncomfortable as my body is bounced around like a ping-pong ball. I can't imagine where we're going, but it's clearly off the beaten path, which makes me rethink my assessment over whether they plan to kill me sooner than later.

I don't bother wasting my energy screaming since I wouldn't be heard over the music, which is why they likely didn't bother with taping my mouth or gagging me. I'm going to use that to my advantage—it's the only one I have. When Mark throws the trunk open, I'm going to pretend to be unconscious. If I'm fast enough, I can bite him and—what? Piss him off? I won't get very far with my hands tied behind my back, especially blindfolded. And what's the point of that anyway? He knows I saw him. It's clearly less about hiding their identities and more about torturing me, reminding me of that night.

The difference is, this time I don't let the fear reduce me to a sniveling puddle of tears. This time, I focus on the rage, letting it curl inside of me, focusing all of my energy on that. I've already built a wall of fire around my broken heart. Now I just have to keep them from putting that fire out.

I'm still trying to decide my game plan when the engine cuts off. The silence that follows is deathly, the kind of absence of sound you only expect to hear in a crypt. After the rattling of the license plate, the thrum of the engine, the blaring of the music—it's disconcerting.

And then I hear voices. "You got her?"

There's more chatter, though I can't make out the individual words.

The car door closes, and there's collective laughter, followed by the sound of another car door opening. "She played right into their hands. Like a pawn on the chessboard, she's so easy to manipulate." I hear Mark's laugh get closer, and then the trunk pops open. If I wasn't bound and blind, I'd have sprung out at them like a rabid animal, but seeing as the odds are stacked against me, I still myself and wait.

"Is she alive?"

My heart jumps at the voice. Though it's no surprise now, the betrayal still hurts, even with the nervous edge in his voice. Rev.

“She’s fine.” Colton says, his voice carrying on the night as he draws closer to the edge of the trunk. “Although her pride may be wounded. She thinks we really just were in love with her or something.”

I’m sure the red on my cheeks gives me away as he adds insult to injury. “Playing possum, Princess?”

Tripp.

I feel like a blade has just swung through the center of my chest, slicing my already shattered heart into ribbons. Of all of it, Tripp is the one who hurts the most. I can’t keep the sob in my throat as hands close around my arms, dragging me into a sitting position. The blindfold is yanked off, and when my eyes adjust, I see them. All of them, exactly as I pieced it together.

Well, all of them minus one. Jake is nowhere to be seen, but Colton and Tripp watch me from where they’re standing nearby. It’s Rev whose hands are on me. I avoid his eyes and look past him to see Nick and Carson standing together, grinning. And on the other side of me, with his hand on the trunk as if he may just slam it shut and walk away, is Mark Holland.

I spit at Mark first, though it’s not nearly as satisfying as I’d hoped. It doesn’t hit him in the face, but I gather it landed on his shoe because he looks down and kicks the dirt before moving so fast it nearly gives me whiplash, literally, as he seizes a fistful of my hair and uses it to yank my head back. I’m not sure, honestly, whether he’s going to slap me or kiss me, but he does neither, running a finger over my lips and forcing them apart when they don’t automatically open to his touch, two fingers sinking behind my teeth and pressing my jaw toward my chest.

I’m trying to figure out the logistics of biting him when he leans forward and spits directly into my mouth, snapping my jaw shut so forcefully I’m surprised my teeth don’t break.

I'm vaguely aware of the chorus of laughter from behind him.

Disgust curls through me, churning inside of me along with anger and humiliation and hurt. My cheeks are blazing, my blood boiling.

The thought of swallowing his spit is awful, but the thought of holding it in my mouth until he lets go of me is even worse, so I squeeze my eyes shut and feel the muscles in my throat work hard to swallow it down. Spit from a kiss wouldn't bother me—spit mixed with Tripp's cum didn't bother me, but it's the intent behind it that makes this especially hard to stomach. He wants me to feel exactly as I do—hurt, worthless, scared. He confirms as much when he pulls back to appraise the rage on my face.

"I hate you!" I tell him just in case he has any illusions that we're playing at being enemies. I want to dig my nails into his throat and rip it out. I want him to die.

"You're going to hate me a whole lot more real soon, Lavigne."

That's not possible, but I don't tell him that as he makes a grab for me, catching me around the waist and tossing me over his shoulder. I've been jostled all around in the trunk and now flung about like a sack of potatoes, and I can feel the tops of my breasts are close to spilling out of the silky fabric of this dress, and with my arms pinned behind my back, I'm helpless to do anything about it. I think it's Nick who whistles.

"What a *fucking dress*, Lavigne. I mean, you always had great tits, but you really grew up these last few years."

"In more ways than one." I growl, trying to catch Mark's dick with the edge of my heel. I'd like to impale him on it, honestly. "I'm not fucking scared of you."

"You should be." I know that voice belongs to Colton, though I can't see him.

“And you *will* be.” Carson adds, laughing as he brandishes a drooping clown mask, holding it right in my face like a sinister little gift. He’s such a caricature of himself that it’s hard to be afraid of him. The running back who peaked in high school now gets his kicks by acting like he’s fearsome. The truth is, I’m less afraid of him than I am of the people I trusted with my heart, only to watch them betray me. At least with someone like Carson, I know exactly what I’m getting. I clocked him as a sociopath a long time ago.

I have no idea what to expect from the men I *thought* I knew. Colton seems to sense as much because he slows to walk in line with Mark and seizes my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. They’re cold, hard... empty. “We’re going to fuck you raw and bleed you dry tonight, baby.” He punctuates that horrible promise by patting my cheek distantly.

Mark chuckles in appreciation. “And if you’re a good little whore, maybe we’ll make your death quick.”

I clench my jaw so hard I think my teeth really will shatter this time, and the muscles in my jaw ache, but I refuse to give him a reaction. He’s a big fucking bully, and I don’t doubt that he’s getting off on my fear. They all are.

My breath is coming in jagged gasps, my ribs aching from Mark’s arm digging into them, my shame practically drowning me. I’ve never felt so stupid, never felt so betrayed. A sense of self-preservation keeps me from curling into a ball and inviting death to come take me, but the searing ache in my veins, my disappointment, makes it hard to want to fight them.

In the space of twenty minutes, not only has my heart been broken by multiple people, but it’s also been stomped on, shattered to pieces, and set ablaze. Add to that the humiliation, the fear, the adrenaline pumping so strong inside of me that every cell in my body feels like it’s been doused in

kerosene, and I don't even try to stop the tears silently streaming down my face despite my earlier conviction that I wouldn't give them this.

Mark leads the way with me, and the five men follow, punching one another playfully, laughing, acting like they're about to watch a grudge match rather than whatever they're going to do. They all ignore me, letting me spiral alone as I watch them act like I don't exist.

The rain has slowed again. Fat drops land intermittently on my skin. It's dark out here wherever we are—no lights from passing vehicles, no neon signs, no hint of any life beyond us. I'm going to die tonight, and who knows how long it will take them to find my body... if they even *leave* a body. They could leave me in pieces like they left Audrey, scattering me to the countryside. My stomach twists at the thought of Hadley forever waiting for me to come home without realizing that I'm gone.

And then an even more terrifying thought occurs to me. Hadley knows I left with Tripp and Colton tonight. If I go missing, she will know exactly who to go to. And if I die, she'll know exactly who's to blame.

Except, Colton is the be-all end-all of the police department, and he was put there by Hadley's boyfriend. There's no way that they get away with this without my sister raining down the fires of hell to bring justice to my name, and they know how protective she is. They aren't bothered by that knowledge, which means Hadley is likely in danger, too. Is Axel tied up in all of this, too? Is my sister literally sleeping with the enemy?

"I'll do whatever you want," I say, forcing myself to sound calm and measured. "But don't hurt my sister."

"Hadley doesn't have what we want," Mark assures me, squeezing my ass as if to illustrate his point that this is very much personal. I don't know what I

did to them, but somehow every man here tonight hates me so desperately that they want to hurt me, degrade me, destroy me.

“She’s only of use to us when she’s helping us get to you.” Nick confirms. His dark blue irises are almost black in the night. When he flashes me a smile, it’s nothing short of predatory.

Tripp picks up his pace to walk ahead of us, his head down as he passes, refusing to meet my gaze. I don’t know what would happen if he did. I think looking at him would only hurt me more than him, anyway.

I hear the jostling of keys and then the creak of metal against rustling leaves. A gate?

My guess is correct, it turns out. Though Mark continues walking, I see Tripp has lingered there until Rev walks through, the last of us to pass. They mutter something to one another, cast a glance in my direction, and then Tripp threads the lock through the chain. Rev gives it a hard pull, ensuring it doesn’t come loose, and just like that, I’m trapped. In a fucking nightmare.

The darkness that was so stark just a few moments ago is lightening as we approach whatever it is they’re taking me to. The air is colder now, maybe because of my wet dress clinging to my skin or because there are no trees around anymore to break the wind. Either way, silvery plumes of smoke curl through the air on every exhale, and my teeth are chattering.

This time it’s Colton who breaks off from the rest of us, walking just ahead. I hear rustling around, a cranking noise, and then whirring as lights bloom on all around me, so bright and sudden that I have to squint to see past them. When I do, I wish they’d just left me blindfolded. My stomach does a freefall as the realization slams into me from all angles.

No.

No, no, no.

“Call me sentimental, but I thought it would be nice to go back to where it all began.” Colton catches my eye for just a moment, but I can’t focus on him. I can’t focus on anything. The whole world seems to be spinning around me, and the bile rising in the back of my throat is warring with a sob to be first to break out of me.

Jaunty, whimsical music winds up from an almost whining crawl, the speakers protesting and crackling as they issue the music around the abandoned park, slowly coming back to life after years of apparent disuse. The sound that used to be carefree and casual now chills me to my core, particularly paired with the slow fading as it struggles to catch up.

If there’s one place on Earth I never wanted to go again, it’s here. But this isn’t Earth. This is a hellscape, the playground of demons and monsters. I’ve been here a thousand times, more in my dreams than ever in reality. As different as it looks empty and barely clinging to life, it’s the same place from my nightmares. But I’m not sleeping. I won’t wake up with a tear-soaked pillow and chase away the bad vibes with a pumpkin spice latte.

There’s no escaping this time.

“How many girls can say their lover owns an amusement park, huh?” Nick elbows me in the ribs, then turns to Tripp. “Actually, I guess you can’t either. He’s not your lover, Marley. He’s your jailer—we all are.”

“Welcome to your prison.” Mark laughs, tossing me without ceremony on a slab of cement with weeds poking through the cracks. He doesn’t throw me, though, with my hands behind my back, it’s hard to control the landing. The impact jars my shoulder and knocks me breathless for half a second. I hiss when my arm scrapes against a jagged chunk of concrete but waste no time struggling to my feet.

Everything looks exactly as it did when I last saw it... older, decaying,

rusted, maybe. But the Halloween décor from three years earlier is still up—the skull arch over the park entrance, most of which have been bleached by the sun, giving them a ghostly white appearance. The orange and black banners that hung from the promenade are in tatters, blowing in all directions with the breeze. The ticket booths to my right still proudly display their posters for Halloween Terror Nights, albeit through broken and dirty glass.

The roller coaster in the distance is lit up in multi-color, a rail car poised at the top of the drop. In the distance, I can see the reflection of all the lights on the lake and shudder to think of what kind of creatures have taken up residence there since the property has been abandoned. For that matter, all kinds of creatures could exist in these gates. I'm fairly certain now that humans are the scariest of all animals, capable of playing mind games, lulling their victims into complacency, and killing for no reason. Because there *is* no reason for any of this. I don't have anything worth killing over. I've never done anything to make any of them carry a grudge against me. I'm just Marley.

And I'm going to die tonight because I got tangled up with these guys. Because I let myself believe that I was capable of being loved by them. The pain is visceral, eclipsing the physical ache of being thrown about like a bag of trash. I'm worse than that, though. I let myself think that I could really be loved—not just a toy to be pulled out and put away on a whim, not just a fuckdoll, not just a pretty thing on someone's arm at a gala. I want to sink back to my knees and sob, but that won't change anything, so I cover my hurt with anger.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, glaring out at them as I take a step back... right into an old food stand. Three years ago, Audrey and I stood here while

she vied for the attention of her own killers. Mark bought me a candy apple from a woman dressed as a zombie.

There are no zombies here now, though the place certainly looks like it was ripped from a post-apocalyptic zombie film.

The canopy drips water onto my face, but I drag my tethered hands across the counter, looking for a jagged edge that I can use to cut whatever is tying my wrists together. At the very least, I want to free my hands to get in a few good hits—at the most, maybe I can gouge Mark's pretty eyes out.

I'm not delusional. I know I'm outnumbered, locked in with them on a huge parcel of land. I don't even know how big it is, honestly, given that there are so many backstage areas for the workers to pull the strings behind the scenes. There are a thousand places to hide my body here and no one to hear me scream... or at least, no one who won't get off on the sound.

The lazy grin on Colton's mouth tells me he knows exactly what I'm trying to do, but he's not the least bit threatened by my futile attempts to plan an escape.

"Why not?" Carson laughs, his golden curls bouncing as he tosses his head back, lifting his arms like a ringmaster in the circus. I'm guessing his dad never loved him, and his mom loved him too much because his entire being screams *I hurt puppies to get my dick hard*. I suppose it always did, but in high school, that's just considered 'charisma'.

"What?" Mark tips his head, trying to see me in a different light. "You don't like the theatrics? I know Audrey was into the whole show—she loved being the star of it, too."

"She liked being murdered?" I laugh, my frustration peaking when I don't find anything to help me break the binding on my wrists.

"Maybe not that part," Mark admits. "But she sure loved every moment

leading up to it. See, she was under the impression that *she* was calling the shots that night. Thought she had us eating out of the palm of her hand like we were her lap dogs or something.”

“But she’s the one who screamed like a bitch in heat when I slit her throat.” Carson shrugs as if he’s just telling me the rain is wet. It’s such a simple statement, devoid of almost all emotion. Only the little smirk in the corner of his mouth gives away the pleasure he finds in the memory.

I can still feel her cold blood on my skin, the horror of the past mingling with the horror of my current reality. “You’re psychotic!” I cry, though the words stick in my throat toward the end. How did I never know that I was friends with monsters? Colton, Tripp, and Rev were there for me in ways that no one else was after Audrey died. They held my hand, dried my tears, made me feel safe.

How did they put on such a good show of being normal people that I missed that they were capable of *this*? And what does it say about me that I did?

“You know what Whit said,” Nick grins, shrugging as he pulls a blade out of his pocket and points the tip of it toward me accusingly. “We’re all sick inside. Even you.”

He’s far enough away that the knife isn’t much of a threat, but he certainly doesn’t look shy about using it. My knees give a little under the weight of the impossible odds stacked against me. The boys are starting to blur together in front of me, the adrenaline leeching into my bloodstream as I look around for an exit strategy. I have seen firsthand what they’re capable of. If I don’t get out of here, I’ll no longer be the final girl. I’ll just be another dumb girl who let a man—okay, *multiple men*—fool her into walking into her own demise.

“There’s nowhere to run, angel,” Rev says, crossing his arms. He’s

smirking, though the menace doesn't quite make it to his eyes. It's like he doesn't even care enough to try and addle me, as if I really mean so little to him that he can't be bothered to try.

And even like this, he's so fucking gorgeous it hurts. His beautiful skin is awash in the glow of the pale moon, dancing on his sharp features... the cheekbones that could cut glass, the straight nose he's currently looking down at me from. It makes him look vicious, lit in shadow by the flickering light of a lantern strung on the entrance of the haunted hayride.

The metal letters have been shaken loose, the R missing and the D transposed so that now it says "Haunted Hay Die".

Or maybe I'm just panicking, and my eyes are playing tricks on me. It's a touch on the nose, honestly.

"There's nowhere to hide," Tripp says quietly. He still won't look at me, and I want him to as much as I don't. I want him to see what he's doing to me, to feel the cracks in my heart deepening every second he disregards me as if I'm a stranger.

"You're a rat in a maze," Nick smirks.

"Colton!" I yell, drawing his attention to me from where he's leaning against the abandoned tractor-trailer with his arms crossed casually over his chest. "You're a cop. You're supposed to protect and serve."

He laughs, moving so swiftly that I practically climb back onto the kiosk counter in my haste to put some space between us, my wrists pressing against the rough edge. His hands circle around mine while he holds my gaze, and I hold my breath. I couldn't move even if I wanted to—being this close to him paralyzes me. And my stupid, treacherous body somehow hasn't gotten the message yet that he's not a good guy, and I shouldn't be going all wilty for him no matter how good it felt to have him bend me over that balcony.

I fall deathly still when I feel the metal of a blade being pressed against my skin and realize just how real this is. “I *am* protecting. And serving.” A quick glance behind him eggs him on, but I don’t dare take my eyes off of him. “I’m protecting my brothers. And I’m serving a force greater than you can comprehend yet, baby.” He presses a kiss to the top of my forehead, and I simultaneously tense as a small part of me softens, melting at the adoration he’s fixing me with. My body, even being pushed into desperate circumstances, reacts to him in ways I can’t control. That makes me hate myself almost as much as I hate him... maybe even a little bit more.

I don’t think they’re going to hack me into bits like Audrey. I’ll be lucky if I don’t end up taxidermized on one of their bedroom walls.

He’s pressed so close to me that he could probably kill me with a single stab in the right spot. I slam my eyes shut, refusing to let them watch the light leave my eyes.

There’s a small ripping sound in the night. For one second, panic strikes as I try to assess the damage, try to figure out where he cut me. Then he draws back with the blade in hand and wiggles it in front of me, showing me that it’s not slick with blood.

He only cut the cord, freeing my hands. The tension in my shoulders and stiff neck eases just a little, but I’m not sure what his angle is. Does he expect me to thank him for cutting the cord he bound me with in the first place? I open my eyes to see if he’s still there, even though I can feel him.

“You really don’t stand a chance, but I want a show, Marley.” Colton’s voice is deceptively soft, pulling at my defenses. “You may not be into the theatrics, but you can’t deny that you make a beautiful star.”

“*Porn* star, that is.” Mark laughs, following it up with a high-pitched chorus of moans. “*Oh Mark, fuck! Fuck, Mark!*”

More laughter joins his and my skin burns, the embarrassment fueling my rage. I was so young and vulnerable when I went into that haunted house with them. I was so stupid, so desperate to feel something good again, desperate for my best friend's approval. Mark preyed on that vulnerability, just like the monster he is. And now they have the nerve to laugh about it.

"I think your sister enjoyed your highlight reel," Colton whispers. His lips are so close they brush against my cheek, making me shiver. I want so badly to melt against him and wake up to realize this was a dream, the side-effects of a really wild night and one too many mind-melting orgasms. But his words only drive the invisible blade in my chest deeper.

"*You* did that?" I gasp, trying not to let my voice break even though my stomach feels like it's about to fall to the ground in front of me. Now that my hands are free, I move one between me and Colton, holding myself together around the middle like I can keep myself from falling apart. The ache has bled downward. It's not just my chest that feels hollow now. Everything feels empty.

I will not cry.

I will not beg.

I will not give them the last bit of dignity I have—If that's what they're after tonight, they can pry it from my cold, dead hands.

"Well, technically, Mark and Rev were the ones to switch the tape while we kept you... occupied."

My voice is thick with unshed tears when I ask, "Why?"

For just a moment, it's like the world falls out from around us. It's just me and him. The man who came running when I called, who stood guard in my driveway, who went on double dates with me and Jake and Audrey. He

watches me for a long moment so that I wonder if he is thinking the same thing I am.

“Because we gave you rules, Marley!” He snaps, his fingers closing around my throat, tilting my face up to him. He’s so tall I have to look up at him just to see him looking down at me like I disgust him. I was already entirely at his mercy, but now I can’t even escape his gaze or the way it makes me feel like I did something wrong, like *I’m* the one who betrayed him. “We gave you rules, and you refused to follow them. The first thing you did was tell me what happened, and then I had to convince you that *you* were the crazy one.” He uses his free hand to point the tip of the knife at me. “And you fell for it. But before that, you told the police. The damage was already done. We had to make good on our promise.”

“Now?” I scoff. “Three years later, you had to make good on your promise to show my sex tape?”

“It took a little longer than we wanted,” Mark admits, drawing up to my other side. “You can thank Whit for that. We were supposed to share you, to bring you into the fold. But he ran off with you and tried to claim you for himself. So, I figured I’d share our little recording to remind you who had you first.”

The two of them effectively block my view of the others, isolating me, cutting me off from any hope of appealing to Tripp or Rev’s sense of rationality. I can tell there’s no chance of getting through to either of them—they’re too far gone, enjoying watching me squirm too much. “But now we’ve got you right where we want you.” Colton teases his fingers along my arm, illustrating his words.

“And now we get what we’ve been waiting three years for.” Carson grins, managing to look like the jack-o-lantern luminaries lining the concrete path

ahead of me. It's the main path, leading the way through the whole park, connecting each of the haunted houses. Though the park was always open year-round, they seemed to know when they built this place that the fall season would be their money-maker, so the emphasis is heavy on the twelve haunted houses. They curve in a giant circle around the lake in the center of the park so that if you continue following the trail, you'll start in the same place you began.

I won't be able to outrun these guys, but if I can catch them off guard enough, maybe I can break away and find a place to hide. I just have to wait for the right moment to try and escape.

There's a small part of me—a very small part—that wants to just stand here and make them end it now. I don't have any desire to be tortured if this is all a game that I can't possibly win. I may be a little masochistic; I may like the pain when it's feeding my soul and blunting the chaos, but this is beyond. It's fucked in a million ways, not the least of which is that I just let Tripp and Colton take turns on me in the theater.

“Remember when we were kids, and we used to play hide and seek in the new construction neighborhood?” Colton turns to Tripp, who chuckles at the memory. He may be older with more piercings and a bit of scruff, but he's still so much like the boy who used to find me the best hiding spot and then take a place across from it so he could break out and draw the seeker away before they ever found me. He knew I hated being the seeker because I could never run fast enough to catch any of them. He was such a good friend, so compassionate and kind. I don't know what happened to that boy, but I know that it's at least partly my fault he's gone now. I loved him, and I abandoned him for the world to swallow him, let the darkness take root.

And now they're darkness personified. They're going to swallow me. I bite

my lip in a vain attempt to stop the trembling, my jaw tense with the sob I'm holding in.

“Those were good times, right Marley?” Rev sighs, letting his eyes flick to mine. He looks like he'd like to go back to the past and finish whatever business he never did. Except, I think that's what this whole thing is about. Unfinished business.

“I'm feeling sentimental, too,” Colton says, turning to Mark. “What do you say to a good, old-fashioned game of hide and seek? Marley hides...” He catches my eyes widening before he says the obvious, “We seek.”

My heart hammers so hard against my ribcage that I can hardly hear Mark's laugh. It sounds far away, drowned out by the crashing of the blood pumping in my ears. It was stupid of me to back myself against this food cart—they're ringing me in, blockading all chance of escape.

I can tell Mark likes the idea by the wicked gleam in his eyes, but he refrains from letting it show, his gaze darting to me before turning back to Colton. “Six against one? Not great odds for her.”

“Zero odds for her.” Nick corrects him, his eyes flashing with excitement as he contemplates those odds, running a tongue over his bottom lip before it quirks into a wicked grin. “But really good odds for us.”

“And what does the winner get?” Carson asks, drawing the attention of the other guys to him where he stands with one ankle crossed over the other, the toe of his work boot digging into the wet ground. He looks like he came prepared to bury a body—my body, which he looks at with unveiled interest before turning back to Colton. “If we're all going to seek her out, what do we get if we find her?”

Colton pauses for just the slightest moment as if he hadn't thought of that, and then his lips turn into a half-hearted smirk. “How about whoever catches

her first gets to fuck her first?”

Terror like a rod of lightning spears me, striking my heart and traveling down to my toes until I feel every last muscle lock in terror. They’ve just pushed me into fight or flight mode, and I’m freezing. They can’t really mean that. No matter how wicked they are, no matter how much they want to torture me, they can’t seriously mean to hunt me for *that*. It’s inhuman—possibly the worst thing you can do to someone. Death would be merciful compared to that.

The tears I’m trying so hard to deny slide down the back of my throat. A few of them escape down my cheek, hot and salty as they mix with the cool night. The fear sticks in my lungs like tar, but that’s not why I’m crying.

The betrayal hurts worse than anything they can do to me. And even more agonizing than that is how stupid I feel for letting myself believe in happy endings. I read the fairytales, and I was still foolish enough to think that there was such a thing.

I turn to Colton, looking for anything left of the man I thought he was. Even if he’s different, even if he is a dirty cop, he wouldn’t really let them all hurt me, would he? Would he really stand by and watch them take turns using my body as their plaything?

The way he ignores my cries tells me that he absolutely would. “Please,” I try again, hoping that I can appeal to just one of them, to get one of them to see through their own madness, “You can’t!”

They seem to have forgotten that I exist beyond any means for their pleasure—my cries go unheard as I plead with any of them to look at me as if I could talk some sense into them. But now they’ve latched onto this idea, and every cell in my body knows there’s no going back. I am going to be hunted in the night for my body, for the right to do whatever they want to me.

The worst part of it is that my brain seems to have gone on strike from my body, which is full of a buzzy, awful cocktail of horror and adrenaline. Butterflies and pterodactyls are swooping through my stomach in a tangled mass, clawing at my insides, and I can't deny the slickness between my thighs. The thought of being touched by any of them right now makes me want to set myself on fire. I've never felt so raw, like my skin has been peeled back and every nerve is exposed for them to bring me to an agonizing end.

"Stop!" I beg, turning to Tripp now.

But I know the truth. Even if he wanted to stop this, even if he wanted to help me, it's too late. They've caught onto the idea like bloodhounds on a trail. I'm shaking, numb, too horrified to do anything other than let the tears stream silently down my face.

"And the rest?" Nick asks, eyeing me with interest. His eyes linger on my chest, my breasts barely hidden under the wet fabric of my dress.

"We'll draw straws." Colton shrugs.

Present Day

THERE'S A CHORUS OF laughter, and then Mark turns to look at me, almost as if he's surprised to see me standing there. "What are you still doing here?" He laughs, smacking my ass like a horse he wants to send off to the races. The contact makes me jump, but I can't make myself move yet, looking between them all, waiting for someone to laugh, to say that this is all a really fucked up Halloween prank. "Go on!"

I falter for a moment longer, unsure whether turning my back on them is really in my best interest. Maybe this is a part of the game... maybe they want me to think I have a chance only to take it away.

"Run!" Colton growls, a sound so primal and urgent that it sinks into my spine, ratcheting up the sense of urgency already making my breath come in shallow pants, my stomach too tight to accommodate the space my lungs need.

Then he turns his back on me, leaning over the counter and grabbing for something. There's a clink of glass, and then he produces a few beer bottles.

Beer bottles.

Like this is a fucking party. Like they're not about to do horrible things to me. Like they're not about to kill me or make me wish they would. "Thanks for bringing refreshments." He says, passing one to Mark, who winks at me before spinning around to take it.

I know they're still watching me, but I don't know how long I have. Are they counting to ten? Are they going to finish their beers? Are they going to leave me to run and hide all night, terror leeching into my bones, and then come find me in the daylight?

All at once, enough of the blood that's coursing through my head rushes to my toes, and I feel like I can move again. I do just that, turning and running straight down the obvious path. Now isn't the time to try and be creative—not when they can see me. I'm not going to back myself into a corner in the haunted hayride and let them cut me off like a pack of hyenas so I can be brutalized on the ground surrounded by corn and rattlesnakes. No, my best choice is just to run far and fast, let the cover of darkness work to my advantage when I get a little space between us, and then find a place to hole up.

Fuck these stupid heels and whoever thought of such a stupid contraption and this goddamn dress. The satin feels heavy as it clings to my legs, weighing me down as I run, teetering on the heels. It's a wonder I don't trip before I even make it to the concrete path, which has cracked in places and is littered with a thick layer of dead leaves. I'm bound to break an ankle, but it's better than potentially stepping on broken glass or a bear trap. I don't know if they're psychotic enough to have gone full 'The Greatest Game' on me, but if they've gotten as far as buying an abandoned theme park and locking me in here with them, there's really no telling what lengths they'll go to.

No more tears fall as I run. Now isn't the time to cry or feel sorry for

myself. Now is the time to clear my head and focus on making it through the night alive, preferably unscathed, particularly not by Mark, Nick, or Carson. The raw truth is that the other three know they don't have to fight as hard to take what I've given them willingly. But the thought of letting them fuck me again just to pass me along to the others makes everything inside of me want to die. Colton did tell me he wanted to share me with his friends, but I never imagined that he meant it like this.

I keep my head on a swivel as I run, never looking back. The sound of my heels against the pavement is a dead giveaway to my location—I can't outrun them, and they won't give me a big enough lead to render my footfalls a moot point. I have to get off the concrete, get indoors somewhere where I can slip out of these shoes, and silence my movements. And if the heels don't give me away, the sharp gasping sounds of me trying to get a decent breath surely will. I have to calm myself, or I may as well strip down and hand myself to them on a silver platter.

As I run, more of the park comes to life in front of me. It's only a half-life, though. Everything looks haunting now, the lights touching the air inches above the dark ground but sinking feet in darkness so that I can't see what's ahead of me. Or, potentially who. There were more than six of them all those years ago, and Jake isn't with them right now. Is he waiting for me in the darkness? Are they just giving him a chance to reunite with me before they come to join us?

The roller coaster in the distance is space-themed throughout the procession, dark and cramped. Even with the lights on, it would be a great place to hide. But it's all the way at the back of the park, and Colton confirms my fear that I'm running out of time when the music in the air cuts out with a crackle and his voice issues through the speakers. I don't dare turn to see how

much space I've put between them and me, but it feels like they have me surrounded as his voice follows me everywhere, drowning out my own terrified sounds.

"Tick-tock, Lavigne. We're going to give you to the count of six... that's how many of us there are against one of you."

My heart launches itself in my throat as I look around for the nearest place to take cover. It will surely be futile—I don't think I can regain the breath I've spent enough to keep my heaving from giving me away. "One..."

I've run farther than I thought I would be capable of, but unfortunately, I've also backed myself into a dead end. I don't have time to get across the footbridge that closes the distance to the other side of the park, and it's the only space that's not touched by some kind of light.

"Two..." That's Tripp. The warning in his voice makes my chest constrict. His voice lilts at the end, playful and inconsequential. But there are consequences to losing this game, really awful consequences, so I have to win.

The darkness is what I've been looking for, but that bridge was weathered even in its heyday. I remember it creaking underfoot as Audrey and I crossed it three years ago on our way about the park, completely oblivious that in a matter of hours, she'd be dead, and I'd be ruined.

"Three!" Carson, or maybe Nick. I've never been able to tell them apart well enough by voice alone. They may as well be the same damn person, given how flat they both are. It's as if they exist strictly for the purpose of fluffing Mark's ego.

The bridge is probably rotted, possibly even missing entire planks. There's no way of knowing how deep the lake is, and without the fountain at its center lit up the way it used to be, it's impossible to see the edges of it.

“Four, and we’re coming for our little whore!” Definitely Mark. I don’t know what I did to make him hate me so much, but I can sense how much he wants to ruin me again... how much he always has.

The giant plaster clown at the entrance to the house of mirrors leers at me on my left, only a single bulb in the marquee-style sign still intact. To the right is a haunted house with the name scrawled on a wooden board in flaking red paint—zombie chase.

I’m already being chased. Not a fucking chance I’m going to dip into a place where I won’t be able to tell real people from fake. Besides, haunted houses mean automation. I can hear the screaming and growling coming from inside the dark entrance already just from the power being turned on. I haven’t been here in three years—I don’t know where the sensors are, but they might. I don’t know how often they drag people out here to their own private hunting grounds. Any of the haunted houses will give my position away, so I have to cling to the darkness.

“Five!”

I’ve never been scared of clowns, Stephen King be damned. But the statue feels like it’s mocking me, leering at me as I run past him into his domain.

Rev’s voice over the intercom is hard and flat and final when he says “six”, but I don’t stand around to contemplate it.

I dash under the cover of the big-top canopy and keep my eyes on the floor. I realize too late that I can’t ditch my shoes yet without them realizing I’m in here, so I’ll have to make it to the exit before I can attempt to soothe my aching feet. Fortunately, that’s on the other side of the bridge, so as long as I make it through without incident, I can head to the Laser Rocket Rollercoaster.

I’m no stranger to the mirror maze and the funhouse on the second story,

though it feels distinctly more terrifying now than it ever did. It was my favorite attraction as a kid for a reason. While my parents walked around stumbling into walls and Hadley hid around corners waiting to jump out at them, I kept my gaze focused on the ground, looking for the seams where the mirrors either connected or gapped. To that end, I make it through the first segment of the mirror maze in record time, just before my vision clouds and plumes of fog drift up from the floor, obscuring my feet. It happens so quickly that I feel it's going to suck me into the abyss, but it stops near the hem of my dress that I've gathered in one hand to be able to move better. It's just enough to take away my view of the floor completely so that I feel like I'm moving through clouds, drifts of fog rising in columns intermittently.

I clench my jaw and try to squint through it. I should have known they'd play dirty. I'm guessing it's Tripp who remembered my affinity for the house of mirrors and thought to put foggers in here. They definitely didn't exist last time I was here—I made Audrey walk through it with me, her fingers fisting the back of my shirt as I led her through the maze for old time's sake. She wasn't scared of much, but not being in control was definitely one of those things. Knowing that she was at my mercy to get us out—and that there were scare actors in clown masks stationed around every corner—had definitely freaked her out.

The jaunty circus music turns sharply to hard metal that issues so loudly from the speakers set high up in the recesses of the ceiling that the walls shake, making my image distort as I stand there at a crossroads, having to choose between left or right without the benefit of my maze hack. I can't be sure if it's a trick of the fog and light or if someone else has joined me in the maze, but either way, I see motion reflected over my shoulder and realize I can't stay still anymore.

I go right because that *should* lead me toward the bridge and the side of the park I want to get to. The traditional exit spits you out on a staircase that leads to the fun house, and then you jump onto the inflatable canopy set below the exit to catch you and roll down to the ground. But even if they've turned the inflation to the canopy on, it's been left to rot for three years. I don't trust it to catch me. And for that matter, I don't trust them to not be waiting at the bottom of it to snatch me up.

I'm just pulling myself between two walls when I see the shadow move—definitely not a trick of the light. I slap a hand over my mouth, forcing myself to remain silent as I back into the hall, afraid to take my eyes off the space I just came from in case I lose them in the fray and give them the element of surprise.

If I thought walking through the maze in heels and a wet dress in the fog with music blaring in the background was bad, doing it backward is an entirely different beast. I rely on touch, running one hand over the tarnished glass and the extra fabric of my dress gathered in the other while I search for the exit.

Just as my fingers hit the edge of a glass pane, I see the shadow materialize in front of me, as if it came from the smoke itself. Except, it's a real person, and he's standing within arm's reach, dressed in that awful clown mask. I didn't expect them to get all dressed up for me, but I guess it's only fair since I'm all dolled up for them.

“Carson.” I say, recognizing the mask from when he tried to taunt me with it on the way in. My voice shakes in spite of myself, my throat thick with unshed tears. He's the last person I wanted to find me, the one who seems to have the most wicked intent. The only benefit to being found by him first is

that there may not be enough of me left to suffer through whatever the others plan to do.

All of me is shaking as he moves toward me, the world tunneling around us.

I think I may faint at first, and then the ground seems to fall out from under my feet as the past washes over me. I'm watching him get dressed in that awful clown costume as Audrey shimmies out of her clothes right in front of me, standing in her bra and panties like she's not in any kind of rush to get dressed in whatever costume Carson is holding out for her.

She looks so real, so alive, so... dangerous. I watch her pick up a curved blade from a table of props, running a finger over the dull edge. They don't see me—and of course they don't. I'm not really here. I'm a ghost from the future, unable to warn her to run.

They're talking, but I can't hear the conversation, and then she's wrapping her arms around him, sliding her tongue into his mouth. Their movements play like a scene on fast forward, him grabbing her hair, pushing her up against the stage, taking the weapon from her hands, drawing that same curved blade across her throat, her blood pooling on the ground.

Even as I watch it unfold, it feels like something is missing. The memory is muddled, weighed down by something. I know it's not my memory, but it seems as though it's someone's highlight reel.

“I'm so fucking glad it was you this time, Marley. You always did think you were better than everyone, didn't you?”

His voice draws me back to reality, where I see Carson has drawn closer, a knife in hand, much like the one I just saw him wielding in the memory. It takes me a moment to process his words as I search the mirrors around us,

looking for any hint of the exit. “What?” I gasp, hoping that it will be enough to keep him talking.

“You were a stuck-up bitch from the first day I met you. I asked Jake if there was a stick lodged up your ass once, the day he told us you taste like sin. He said that was the best part about fucking the good girl... that you look like an angel but let him fuck you like a whore. Guess I’m about to find out if he told the truth.”

Carson lunges for me just as I make a move out of his path. He catches me around the waist, smacking us right into a mirror. The back of my head knocks into the glass mercilessly, my tired ankles finally giving out from under me as I fall to the ground.

He’s upon me in an instant, pinning me under his weight as he swings one knee over my stomach and then the other. His erection presses against my stomach and only seems to grow harder as I struggle against him. I’m rattled enough by what I just saw happen in the past, let alone by the knife that’s very much being pressed against my neck now. “Don’t worry, Lavigne. I’m not allowed to kill you yet... you get to stay alive while I have my way with you... and I am going to have *my* way.”

He’s too busy pressing the knife to my throat to bother covering my mouth, and my lungs are aching to scream, but that would actually be counterproductive. If I scream, all I’ll accomplish is telling the rest of them exactly where I am so they can wait for their turn. I have a better chance of fighting him off if I stay quiet in spite of the sob in my throat and the blinding terror and my churning stomach.

“That outfit suits you, Carson.” I say, my voice unintentionally husky. Maybe it’s the strain of holding back my scream, or maybe it’s the effort to conceal my hatred, but it comes out smoky and seductive.

The tears are burning my eyes, but I blink them away. I can't call for help because it would just draw the rest of them, and I can't fight because I'm pinned down, but I'm not going to stay quiet and give him the benefit of my compliance. I'm not going to let him think I'm giving in.

"You like this, bitch?" He laughs, fumbling with his zipper with one hand, the other pressing the knife just barely into my throat so that I don't get any ideas about trying to dislodge him. "Wait 'til you see what's under it."

I'm opening my mouth to tell him it fits him because I've never taken him seriously, because he is a fucking joke. But then I see the movement in the mirror and clamp my mouth shut, trying to conceal our presence.

"They said winner gets to fuck you first. They didn't say how many times I got to fuck you...or where. So, I'll let you choose how you want our first time to go. Not an offer you'd get from the others..."

He's still fumbling with his zipper with one hand that's shaking in excitement, so he squeezes me between his thighs, tightening his grip on me and freeing up his other hand to slide it up my dress. I see the moment he realizes he's touching my bare ass, and he realizes how much easier I've just made this for him.

Thankfully, he lets go of me so that he can use both hands to pull himself out of his pants, though his touch still makes my skin crawl like it's covered in spiders. "You are fucking pathetic!" I snarl, trying to wound him the only way I know how to at this point. "Your dick is fucking pathetic, too!"

That's all it takes. Just a moment of distraction, and as he's pulling his cock out and I'm trying to reach for the strap on my shoe to have at least some sort of weapon, the tip of a blade plunges straight through his chest.

The sound sends a jolt of horror through me—wet and squelching and so fast that Carson doesn't even have a chance to scream. I do, though. The tip

of the blade is just inches from my face, but I can already feel he's gone limp, the fight rapidly leaving his body as he collapses over top of me, showering me in his blood. I seize my opportunity, catching a glimpse of the Ghostface mask in the mirror ahead of me as I take full advantage of the moment, struggling out from under Carson's body. I'm able to throw him off of me with some effort, though my palms are slick with sweat and his blood. I don't know who's under that mask or why they'd kill him, but I don't dare stick around to contemplate it. I simply run, spotting the opening in the mirrors, and making a break for it.

The music cuts out for a brief second, the crackling of the PA system practically popping in my ears. My nerves feel raw, like someone's watching me, and the ear-piercing sound of interference from the speakers all around me mixes in with the blood rushing through my head, the pounding in my temples.

After a moment, the sound of static rises above everything else before giving way to the warbled and lilting tone of the voice modulator. The voice modulator that they used the night they killed Audrey. The one that I still hear in the back of my head when I close my eyes sometimes.

"You squeal like a stuck pig when you come. I bet you'll bleed like one, too, the first time a real man fucks you."

Maybe this was the plan from the start.

"We've got a clown down in the mirror maze!" Ghostface croons into the PA system, just before the crackling cuts out, and the music takes over again. It doesn't drown out the sound of maniacal laughter that follows the announcement from somewhere behind me.

It also gives away my location. It's got to be the only reason they would announce that. Carson was one of their own, and he was just thrown aside

like he was nothing. It doesn't bode well for me, but I can't focus on that right now.

Carson's hot blood is already going cold on my face, the temperature dropping. I'm near the exit, so I just have to make it there without attracting any noise, and then I can make a break for it. The fog clears as I get closer, allowing me to see the single line of the E still lit on the exit sign. I throw the door open, unconcerned with making noise now. I have the hope that they'll stop and check on Carson, though something tells me that would be a wasted effort.

Pallets and crates are piled up on either side of the door, some still stacked neatly, and others scattered across the ground. I consider barricading the door, but it doesn't make sense to waste the time it would take to do that. There are still five of them compared to one of me, and they could be anywhere.

Fortunately, the mirror maze exit was well hidden when the park was designed, so I have the cover of a tall vinyl fence on either side of me, though there are pieces missing, and the once-white boards are green and slimy, covered in climbing vines and weeds. The air feels damp; I'm pretty sure the lake in the park's center overflowed at some point and caused parts of the park to effectively turn into a swamp. I'm no wildlife expert, but the croaking and chirping create a thunderous cacophony that's as ominous as it is obnoxious. It does, however, help muffle the noise as I rush through the dark alley, dodging cobwebs and dripping water from the trees that bend over the top of the fence.

Back here, it's dark, and other than the choir of insects, it's quiet. It's such a jarring difference from the lit-up park that it somehow unnerves me more. Or maybe that stems from the fact that I just watched them kill one of their

own brutally—there was no hesitation, no faltering. If they are capable of doing that to one another, my mind can't even conceive of what torture they may reserve for me. And did they kill him just for the sake of getting to me first? Was it just a convenient opportunity to dispose of someone who was already grating on one of their nerves?

It's a relief when I turn the corner, and the horizon is lit with the attractions. The roller coaster is close enough that I have to tilt my head back to look up at it, which is how I manage to miss the figure standing at the base of it, shrouded in fog that makes him look like he just stepped out of the fires of hell.

I freeze when I see him, arms crossed over the navy jumpsuit that stretches across his chest. I feel like I've been thrown into the middle of the horror movie he's from, catching a glimpse of him from across the street and wondering if it's me he's coming for. With the mask on his face, I can't tell if he's spotted me yet, and I don't want to turn and run if that's just going to draw his attention and give me away. So, I simply stand there, staring at him like the girls I used to yell at in scary movies. Despite the alarm bells crashing in my head, I can't bring myself to move if there's a chance he hasn't spotted me.

But he just stares back. The prickling awareness on the back of my neck spreads through my limbs, down to my toes, jumpstarting my body's need to run.

He definitely sees me.

Present Day

THERE'S A DECENT AMOUNT of space between us, but my idea of hiding in the roller coaster procession is thwarted. Even if I was able to run past him without getting captured, I'd only be backing myself into a corner. When he takes the first step toward me, I dart in the opposite direction but quickly stop when I hear commotion on the bridge.

Two of them are coming across the rickety overpass, one of whom starts sprinting when he spots me. I can't make out from here who they are, or rather what their costumes are. But it doesn't matter. Tonight, they're *all* my enemies, every one of them out for my blood, my terror, my pain.

My heart squeezes in my chest as my indecision lasts a beat too long, and then I make a break for it, darting across the distance to where most of the haunted houses ring the lake. The darkness gives me the chance to choose a place to hide, though I don't have time to consider my options.

The old water ride has been shut down since well before the rest of the park, and while I'm not sure what the reasoning was, I'd rather take my chances with whatever creepy swamp creatures have taken over the defunct

flume ride than stick around to see how they plan to take what they want. And that's exactly what I do, ducking into the gaping mouth of the crazed clown that conceals the entrance to the ride. It's open in a laugh or a scream, the razor-sharp teeth overhead now even more terrifying than before.

The eyes used to light up red, but I'm grateful they don't as I run straight into his mouth, letting the darkness swallow me. I could be running into the mouth of hell for all I know, though I think maybe I'm already there. It feels terribly ironic now, given that I just watched Carson be murdered with that clown mask still over his head, but I don't have time to appreciate the irony. I swallow the fear that's trying to choke me and plunge forward into the darkness. There's echoing from the mouth of the tunnel behind me—I can't pick apart the voices that carry to me through the stagnant air, but I hear them debating which way to go. And then I hear someone suggest they split up.

That's the last sound I hear before the splashing of my heels in water echoes around me, making my heart pump harder until I think that's echoing around me too.

It's been so long since I last got to ride this that I don't remember much about it, though I do recall boats that led you up a steep climb and then dropped you on the other side of the attraction so that it looked like you were about to plunge right into the lake. One wrong move, and I probably would go plunging into the lake. I've heard drowning is one of the most horrific deaths one can experience, but something tells me what Mark is capable of dreaming up is considerably more horrific, so I forge on in spite of the water rising higher around my ankles, my calves. The deeper I get into the tunnel, the more my anxiety ratchets up, each little sound magnifying itself both in the cavernous ride space and in my head. The deeper I go, the more desperate I feel as the realization sinks in that I chose an awful place to hide.

The haunted houses at least would offer me an exit—without the ride working, there's no light to find the path, nowhere to go but back the way I came. I'm about to sink to my knees and sob when I see the shimmer of water ahead, a shaft of moonlight that's slipped in from overhead turning the surface silvery. But as I take a step toward the boats, my foot doesn't catch hold of land. Instead, I'm swallowed by the darkness as I step right over the side of the loading zone and drop into icy water.

I think, at first, that this is how I die.

But the water doesn't close over my head, and my motion seems to trigger emergency lights, which blink to life along the length of the ride path. They're red, casting a bloody haze around the tunnel. Thankfully, they're dim enough that they won't give me away unless someone's already in here with me, but bright enough for me to see that I'm only in the water up to my neck, and there's a boat just in front of me. I make to push myself toward it, but something holds me in place even as I struggle to move forward, like an invisible hand around my ankle.

“You in here, pussy cat?”

I still, refusing to let myself breathe. The cold water ripples furiously as the walls echo around me, teasing.

Cat-cat-cat.

I'm directly in the path of an emergency light, a sitting duck, and the voice is only growing closer. “I heard the kitty has claws,” Nick calls, his footfalls making heavy splashes as he eases into the darkness straight toward me. “You really shouldn't have killed Carson, Kitten. Because now you've made me angry.”

I try in vain to free myself from whatever's got a hold of me, but I don't so much as budge—I think my heel is stuck in the metal track, the boats starting

to rock a little as my desperate attempts to free myself disturb the surface of the water.

Nick's voice has taken on a more sinister quality when he speaks again, less taunting, and more menacing. I can tell he knows I'm here, and his teasing has turned to threats he intends to make good on. "I'm going to make you *hurt*, kitty."

I know Nick is close, but the tunnel is still obscured in darkness. The drop-off of the platform conceals my location for now, but I know he's moments away from finding me, and then I will be completely at his mercy.

I look around me, desperate, but it's just the unsettling glow on the water and the boats in the distance and Nick behind me.

There's nothing to grab hold of, nothing close that I can use as leverage to try and pull myself out of here.

"And I'm going to make you scream until your throat is so raw you beg me to swallow my cum just to soothe it. And when you—"

I don't hear anything else after that because I take a deep, quiet breath and duck below the water's surface, letting it close overhead.

There's no visibility under the water—maybe because it was always dyed a murky shade of green to hide the tracks from view of passengers, maybe because the stagnant conditions of the last three years have caused it to cloud. It burns my eyes, though I think that has more to do with the stinging cold than anything else. Thankfully, I don't need to see to know where the problem is. I use my own shoe as leverage to pull myself deeper under the water, holding hope hostage in my chest that the motion doesn't give me away above the water.

Best case scenario I free my shoe and break the surface to find that Nick has moved on. Worst case scenario...

There are too many of those to consider.

Without being able to see the track, I can't tell whether I just need to angle my heel a certain way to free it, so I fumble with the strap instead. Getting these heels on was a struggle enough— getting them off in the dark, cold water when I can already barely breathe from the panic seems like a wasted effort. My num fingers are clumsy on the clasp, and the desperation is clawing at my throat. The burning in my chest is a dire reminder that I need air...

The cold feels like knives being pressed into me over and over again, making my spine ache and my muscles tense, my jaw locking as I try to avoid losing the last of my composure. A sob is building in my chest, smothering my need for air, and I can feel my heart beating harder than it ever has, desperately trying to send blood to places other than my head.

I don't even realize I've got the metal clasp in my hand until I feel it give, the leather strap immediately loosening. I jerk my foot out of it, kicking until I pop above the water's surface, trying to inhale a breath at the same time the sob breaks out of my chest. The splashing echoes around me, eclipsed by the sound of my coughing, spluttering, and completely giving myself away.

I don't dare look behind me to see how close Nick is or if he's spotted me—I throw myself into the water and swim the distance to the boat. Thankfully they're low, meant for riders to step into them, so climbing over the side isn't nearly as hard as it would be otherwise.

I'm just about to crest the side of it when a fist closes around my hair, yanking my head back and ripping me into the water. My nails drag across the slimy wood boat as I'm dragged off of it and then back through the water. There's no purchase to be had as I thrash about, looking for anything to grab hold of, anything to help me resist him. But the effort is futile—Nick is

strong, and I'm exhausted, my body numb and aching, and there's nothing around that I can use to my defense.

He pulls himself over the edge without ever letting go of his grip on my hair and then stoops down to yank me out of the water with his free arm around my neck, crushing my still-spasming windpipe. His mask—the comedy and tragedy split-face—is close to my face, but there's no humanity behind it.

The air is brutal now, the chill amplified by the soaked dress clinging to my skin, my wet hair dripping down my back. When he gets the arm around me, I take the only chance I have, trying to make him lose his balance by yanking him into the water with me and then climbing over his body to escape. But all my effort does is make him lose his footing as he drags me over the ledge. We both fall into the tunnel, his body landing over top of mine and crushing my chest into the ground. I have to turn my head to keep from sucking in the water, but Nick's fist against my scalp keeps my face out of the mud as he drags my head up, baring my throat.

His breath is hot on my ear when he whispers into it. "I always fucking hated you." The words don't hurt half as much as the screaming in my head, the agony of my rib, which feels almost certainly bruised, my lungs which still haven't had a chance to recover from their deprivation. "Now smile for the camera, kitty cat."

He doesn't give me a chance to even process those words before a blinding flash of light sparks in my face, a sudden intrusion in the darkness that makes me squint to see past it. I realize what it is when I hear the shutter sound.

He's taking a fucking selfie.

I shouldn't be surprised. They recorded Mark and I in the haunted house. Why wouldn't he document this? Sick fucks.

Disoriented, I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to fight the swarming in my head. I feel faint just from his crushing weight, from the buzzing and screaming between my ears. “Nick—” I don’t know what words were going to come out of my mouth, my tongue moving on its own accord. And I never do, because in the next instant, he slams my head into the puddle. I scream, bubbles rising to the surface of the puddle as I try to avoid breathing in dirty water, drowning myself for him.

I feel his weight shift just a little, not giving me the leverage to get out of the mud, and then I feel the wet fabric of my dress moving higher, his hand moving against my skin, his nails dragging across my ass, his fingers digging into my hips as he puts more pressure on the back of my neck, pushing me in deeper. He’s grinding me into the ground, not caring if he kills me before he gets what he wants. I don’t doubt for a second that he’ll take it from my corpse if he has to.

But I won’t make it easy on him. I’ll fight him until my last breath because I’ve always hated him too.

When he drags me through the water again, I take advantage of the opportunity, lifting my head to suck in as much air as my lungs can take.

“You always thought you were so powerful. Thought men should fall to their knees for you.” Nick’s laugh is derisive, full of contempt. I don’t have a single doubt about his aforementioned hate for me as he starts to push my head back into the mud and I fight him, twisting from side to side. I once watched a documentary on alligators, and the most absurd thought strikes me that I must look like one now, thrashing around, trying to roll him off of me.

I know better than to scream for help, but I can’t stay quiet anymore.

“Fuck—” I spit in between a coughing fit, “you!”

This time when he slams my face into the water, the surface tension feels

like a slap on the face. It's more effective at evaporating the air from my lungs than the water is. Gasping in pain, I choke on the brackish water, feeling it flood deep into my chest.

And then all at once, his weight shifts again—the resistance is gone. I lift my head, spluttering and heave in a breath that makes me cough so violently I begin to retch. Through it all, I try to get my arms under me to crawl out from beneath him, where he is still pinning my legs to the ground, though his touch is gone.

Something sharp slices against my knee as I drag it to my chest, but I don't let it stop me, managing to throw him off of me and struggle to standing. With one heel on, I'm unbalanced, so I catch myself on the wall and take a minute to try and clear the last of the water from my lungs, though I keep my eyes on him the whole time.

Nick doesn't so much as move a muscle—he can't.

The porcelain mask he wore just moments ago is shattered into a dozen pieces, littering the water and floating on the surface so that the little bit of light glints off the white chunks. A jagged black piece of the mask is lodged in his eye socket, blood obscuring his entire face. That's not the only thing the light glints off of—I see one eye open wide even as he doesn't move, the white of which reflects someone just behind me.

My skin crawls and my head pounds and I'm not sure I have it in me to fight anymore, but I spin to face whoever it is, prepared to claw or bite or do whatever I have to.

Except there's no one in the tunnel besides me and Nick's dead body. The hole in the center of his forehead is proof that he's gone... in case the glass in his eye wasn't convincing enough. I'm no crime scene investigator, but I can gather enough that someone shot him right between the eyes, shattering the

porcelain mask and causing it to burst into pieces around me. It's probably what cut me, but that's the least of my problems.

Someone was here. Even if they're gone, they were here, and they shot Nick.

Will they do the same to me? Will they wait until I get close and attack?

My head was underwater, and I never heard a gunshot, but I have no doubt that's what it was. Which means surely the others heard it and will come running to investigate. I don't have time to contemplate whether I have a guardian angel hiding in the shadows waiting to take down the rest of my assailants or if they're simply picking each other off for the right to first dibs. I run, straight through the tunnel, hobbling on one foot as my uneven steps make me struggle to gain some sense of balance.

My ragged breaths surely give me away, so I don't bother trying to hide from them anymore. My only chance is to try and outrun them. The odds are impossible, but there's something deep inside of me that's pushing me on, pushing me through survival mode, forcing me to carry on even when I feel like letting go.

I don't see anyone when the mouth of the clown opens into the dark night, the cheery lights of the coaster bathing everything in a glow that looks deceptively peaceful. Soaking wet, bleeding, covered in mud and barely able to breathe, I spin around, looking for anything that I can use to help me fight back.

I'm done hiding, done being pushed around, done being their prey. The world feels like it's closing in around me and the lights all seem to blur together, but I'm not giving up. I need a weapon—and I know just where to find one.

Present Day

THERE'S NO ONE AROUND, but I feel eyes on me everywhere. I think of the security cameras they manipulated last time, catching me in the graveyard with Mark. Are they recording me now? Can they see me no matter where I go? Did they watch me run into the mirror maze and know to find me there? Did they all watch as Carson dragged my dress over my hips, as Nick tried to drown me in filthy water?

The deck is stacked against me, but maybe there's only one winner tonight. There were seven of them the night they killed Audrey—maybe one of them has switched sides? Maybe there is someone in here who *wants* to see the others die?

I try not to think about the ache that rises in my chest when I think of Tripp or Rev or even Colton dying. Even with their betrayal cutting so deep, it doesn't eclipse the memories I have of who they used to be. It doesn't make me want them dead. I'll fight whoever I have to, and if it comes down to it, I hope Mark is the one who puts me out of my misery so I can die holding onto a memory of the good times with the boys I loved.

The static crackling pulls at my nerves as the song blares from the speakers. I know the beat even before the lyrics begin, even before the voice that eclipses the band, the words screamed into the PA system with an edge of hysteria.

“Another one bites the dust.”

The park is eerie when the music cuts out, leaving the silent night to close around me as I lean against a retaining wall and slip my other shoe off, adjusting it in my palm that’s slick with sweat, mud, and blood that belongs to God only knows who. It’s not a great weapon, but it’s all I’ve got.

Barefoot, I set my jaw and take a breath, getting control of my nerves before setting off on my way. The path is littered with hard candy in faded wrappers and stuffed animals from an overturned game kiosk with the stuffing pulled out of them. My eyes scan every inch of what the light covers, waiting for one of them to jump out at me, but no one ever does.

I keep my eyes on the haunted houses as I ring the lake. The park spans dozens of acres, but they’ve only bothered to light the parts of it that they want to treat as their playground. If I’d run into the darkness, maybe I could evade them for longer. Or maybe I’d run into the fence I keep catching glimpses of in the distance, closing off the center of their hunting ground, ringing me in their cage like the prey I am.

They said they appreciated the symmetry. I wonder if they will still appreciate the symmetry when I rewrite the night and change the ending.

The last haunted house is close to the park’s entrance—I could see it from where they threw me on the ground when they first brought me in here. On my way to it, I pass a dozen places I could hide, but I keep my eyes focused ahead of me, my mind made up.

When I pass the block bathrooms, I’m reminded of when Colton showed

me to the locker room, of when I washed Audrey's blood down the drain. The memory is both horrible and enticing in the fact that it was one of the worst days of my life. But in the aftermath, I felt safe— if only for a few moments, when Colton stood guard on the other side of the shower. I can feel the edges of it trying to pull at me, and I'm beginning to sink into it when I feel fingers close on my arm.

I don't get a chance to look at my assailant as he drags me into the dark, one hand pressed firmly over my mouth. But I fight him all the same, struggling to get out of his grip as the creaking of a door slams open. A light flicks on, and as I claw at the arms that have closed around my waist, I catch a glimpse of our reflection in the mirror.

Jason.

I whip out of his grip just enough to send us both careening into the tarnished mirrors that run the length of the wall, glass shattering as we make impact together. Shards of it rain down around us, glancing off the leather jacket and biting into my flesh as they fall. When he gets me by the waist, I think he's going to push me down on top of it, claiming his prize with every bit of savagery the others have shown me tonight. Instead, he pulls me out of the way of it, lifting me around the waist before setting me down on the other side of the room, keeping me hostage against his chest. Thick arms cage my body to him, an electric pulse seeming to emanate from the space our bodies make contact.

For a moment, we're both fixed on our reflection. I stop fighting him as his hand comes out from over my mouth, my panting breaths making my entire body heave against him. And he just... stands there, testing me, watching me. I inhale the scent of him, so strong in this small room. It encompasses me, seduces me, hits me like a wrecking ball.

Tripp.

He pushes the hockey mask up his head, letting me see the dark locks that fall in those soft eyes, full of things I can't name. He pulls his lip ring between his teeth, thinking, and then sucks in a breath before spinning me around so fast it makes me dizzy. But not as dizzy as I get when he crushes his mouth against mine, fisting his hand in my hair and using the leverage to hold me against him like he's afraid if he lets go, he'll never get this chance again.

He's seductive, getting me drunk on his kiss even as he poisons me.

I know the rules. He caught me. I just don't know why I melt into him as much as I hate him, losing my ability to think, kissing him back even as tears burn my eyes.

Tripp's the one who pulls away, wiping his thumbs over my cheeks and brushing away the single teardrop that fell. "It's okay," he says so gently that I want to believe him. He's still got me against his chest, and it feels so right even as my brain screams at me that this is wrong on so many levels. "You know I'd never hurt you, Princess."

Princess.

It's just one word, but it renews my fight. I struggle to break free of his grip, but his hands move to my wrists and he pins me against the sink, his hard body driving me backward. When the hard edge of the counter digs into my ass, Tripp transfers both of my wrists into one hand, lifts me on the counter with his other, and pins my wrist against the cool glass of the mirror. "Listen to me, Mars."

I don't want to hear anything he has to say. I don't want to look at him, either, but he brushes my dress over my knees and wedges himself between my thighs, using his hand to grip my chin and force my gaze to his own.

Before our gazes can collide, I slam my eyes shut, setting my jaw.

I changed my mind. I don't want him to see the hurt he caused me anymore. I don't want to give him that satisfaction, to let him know how much power he had over me... how much power I *gave him* over me.

"Look at me, Princess."

My heart skips a beat or two, slamming painfully as it catches its own rhythm again. He tries again, his voice even softer, his words whispering over my lips.

When I turn my eyes on him, I wish I could set him on fire with my mind and show him how much I hate him. I'm not sure how I'll convince him when I can't even convince myself.

I don't even get a chance because he goes in for another kiss, losing all reservation as he leans into me. He kisses me like he loves me, and I kiss him back like I hate him, letting him disarm me just enough to surrender this little bit of myself.

When his grip on my wrists loosens, I yank my hands free, tangling them in his hair and pulling him into me. I knock the hockey mask to the ground in the process, where it clatters on the floor and lies forgotten as he loses himself in me.

I think he's going to take me like this. Part of me wants him to, and I hate that part of me, too. That treacherous bitch agonizes over the need for him as he devours me heart and soul.

I whimper when his hard body brushes against my aching core, a potent mix of euphoria and terror twining so deep in me I'm not sure I'll ever be able to separate it from myself.

Tripp responds in kind, a low growl working its way out of him as we share fire in our kiss, his hunger and my hatred twining into something glorious

and dangerous and vicious. When he pulls away suddenly, the betrayal from earlier feels sharper than before, doubling in intensity.

He only stares at me a moment, chest heaving, his lips wet and red from the fury of my kiss. “What?” I snap, glaring at him as I drag the back of my hand over my mouth, wiping away all traces of him and only feeling colder for it.

“I don’t have long. I just had to make sure that you were okay. Are you hurt?”

The silence between us lasts a beat too long before my laughter punctures it. “Am I *hurt*?” I laugh again, louder this time so that he lets go of his grip on me to brush a finger over my lips.

“Shh,” he warns, “I’m not sure where Mark is.”

I appraise him a minute, wondering whether he’s afraid of Mark or Colton or Rev... or me. “I know where he is.”

“Are you hurt?” He asks again, his tone more urgent this time.

“Do you care?” I snap.

There’s enough venom in my voice to take down a racehorse... or a six-foot-four man with more piercings than violent tendencies. I may as well have just stabbed him in the chest for all the pain in his eyes. I take advantage of his surprise, pushing him off of me and jumping down from the counter. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Tripp Archer, but I don’t want to be part of it. If you want me, come get me. If not, stay out of my way.”

He’s quiet as I stalk past him and skirt close to the broken glass. It’s stupid to go near it barefoot, but it’s my only hail mary, so I wrap my hand around a thick sliver of glass, ignoring the tiny shards of the mirror that bite at my skin. I don’t spare Tripp a backward glance, but before the door shuts between us, I see him secure the mask back over his face as he watches me go.

It's chillier outside after the heat between us, but it matches how I feel inside.

Cold.

Dead.

I'm not sure what all of that was about, but I don't have time to worry about it. It's not my job to make him feel better about betraying me, breaking my heart, and ruining my life. Maybe he couldn't go through with it for the same reason I can't make myself hate him. Maybe the ghosts of our past selves are holding too tightly to one another, keeping us tethered despite our circumstances.

When I stand before the Haunted House of Wax, I feel the overwhelming sensation of being tugged into a memory, and then I'm watching myself with Audrey and Mark, hearing her goad me, hearing Mark promise to catch me, telling me to let go. I hate the version of me that gives in to their antics, the one that takes the pills and tosses them back, desperately wanting to feel something good.

I also feel bad for her.

Stupid girl.

I think they've been leading me here all night. Colton himself admitted he was into theatrics—I should have known as much, given how they made a show of Audrey's death. What better place to put on a show than a theater?

A washed-out yellow tape flutters in the breeze, hanging from a nearby tree. That night, they pulled the ambulance and cop cars right where I'm standing while they loaded up what was left of my best friend's body and took her away. And I sat on the tailgate of an ambulance, swathed in a blanket and the security guard's coat, until Colton came running and wrapped me in his arms.

I felt so safe there.

I always felt safe with them.

I was so fucking stupid.

“I’m done running!” I scream, cupping my hands around my mouth to try and amplify the sound. I wonder if they’re sitting in silence, waiting for me, or if they’ve cracked open more beers and cranked the music while they wait for me to walk into their web. “You want me? Here I am!”

I don’t expect them to come out from wherever they’re hiding, and they don’t. I duck under the bit of tape that is still hanging intact around the attraction queue, crossing my arms against the chill that’s sinking into my bones. Going in there feels like the worst decision I will ever make—every single cell in my body tries to resist, my nerves screaming and my stomach twisting, but I ignore all the warning signs and pry the door open.

My motion must trigger the house to come alive—everything roars to life just the way it did all those years ago. The blasting music, the strobing lights, the fog and echoes of chainsaws and metal clanking. My heartbeat is hostage in my chest, trying to refuse to keep going. But I’m stubborn, pushing forward in spite of the tension washing over me, the anxiety spilling into my bloodstream.

The camp scene carnage is still scattered all around, the fake body parts dripping with blood. And standing there, just as he was three years ago, in the middle of the fog and strobing lights with his machete in hand, is Jason. I look for the eyes in his hockey mask, finding only darkness as Mark’s words replay in my head.

“They wouldn’t put an actor at the beginning”.

I know it’s not real because I just left Tripp in the bathroom. There’s no way he got ahead of me to position himself here. Unless there are two of them...

He doesn't move as I get close to him. I don't breathe as I walk before him, keeping my back pressed to the wall and my eyes on him, just in case...

"They want to give you a false sense of security."

I feel the bite of the glass as I squeeze it, ready to use it if I have to.

No, not *if*.

When.

Reality blurs with the past as I remember Audrey's scream, the sight of her hair drifting around a corner, her laughter following. I remember Freddy with his fingers like knives, watching me, sneaking up behind me, his erection nestling against my back before Mark pulled me around the corner, where Freddy followed me, and Michael came at me with that prop knife.

Who was who? Nick and Carson were with Audrey in front of me, so who was it that got off on my fear? Who was it that tried to stab me with that prop knife?

There's no one here now—once I clear the camp scene and turn the corner, it's just me in the empty scene, devoid of any figures, real or not. The music plays and the lights flash and I scan the fog looking for any sign of them. And then I see the blinking red light as I move into the graveyard scene.

They're recording.

Good.

"Let's finish what we started!" I yell, facing the camera directly, my weapon tucked carefully behind my back. "Come on, Mark! I'm right here! Come fuck me like you wanted to all those years ago!"

I don't think they can hear me over the sounds of the animatronics and the fog machines and music, but I know they can see me. I drop the glass pick carefully on the tombstone where he made a fool of me all those years and

then make a show of turning my back to the camera, reaching for the zipper that's keeping me inside this dress.

They used me as prey in this twisted game. Now, I'm going to bait them into coming out from their hiding spots.

My fingers close around the little bit of metal for the zipper, and I tug on it slowly, letting it open around me. The cool air sends violent goosebumps over my skin, my nipples tightening as the wet dress peels slowly away from me.

I've got it open down to my waist, my lower back out and exposed, when I feel the presence behind me and stiffen. "There you are." I say, keeping my voice steady as I spin around to face him.

I know I'm a mess. I've been fucked over the railing of a three-story balcony, chased through the decaying remains of the park, drowned, and choked, and cried more than I care for them to know. I doubt there's anything sexy about me at this moment, but he doesn't seem to mind as he tugs my dress down the rest of the way, letting the heavy fabric fall to the floor with a wet thud. And then he's upon me, bending me over the prop crypt and reaching immediately between my legs. There's no preamble as he shoves a single finger inside of me, pushing deep and hard as he arches my head back.

I'm numb enough to not feel his intrusion, focused on waiting for just the right moment, for the perfect opportunity to hurt him back. "Funny, you're soaking wet on the outside, but on the inside?" He pulls out and wipes his hand on my thigh like that proves his point. "What's the matter? You're not turned on by me anymore? You were like a bitch in heat for me last time, soaking those little panties."

Last time, I was on ecstasy.

I turn around as best I can, taking in the neon mask lit with a demonic

smile, the halogen-threaded X's over his eyes. It washes his skin out, makes it impossible to see his eyes, impossible to see anything beyond those bright, glowing lights. "Maybe I would be if I could see your face," I say, hoping he's dumb enough to fall for the seduction act, palming my makeshift weapon.

I've never thought I had the fortitude to kill someone. After being accused of Logan's murder and having suspicions thrown at me in the wake of Audrey's, I've spent a lot of time contemplating whether I could actually be capable of it. Any other time, I'd have said no. But looking at Mark, knowing he *used* me so that they could murder my best friend, I think I can.

Apparently, he *is* stupid enough to believe that I would have any interest in him because he drops the fistful of my hair, holding me down with only one hand on the small of my back as he reaches up to yank the mask off his face. While he's distracted, I take advantage of the leverage he just gave me, adjusting my grip on the glass and spinning back to face him just as the mask clatters to the ground.

The glass is poised in my hand, but by the time I turn to face him, he's stepped away and is merely smirking at me. I expect him to make a grab for me, to be angry that I've tricked him, to come close enough that I can act without making the first move. But Mark only throws his head back and lets out a rumbling laugh, looking at my makeshift weapon.

"What are you going to do with that, hmm? You think you can hurt me?"

I *know* I can if he'll come close enough. I saw the bit of porcelain embedded in Nick's face—doubt the wedge of broken glass would feel any better. "You want to hurt me." I accuse. "But you don't want to be hurt?"

"I like pain." Mark argues, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a knife. He flips it open so that the blade pops out with a telltale slicing sound.

“I just like giving more than receiving.”

“I like to hurt, too,” I tell him, glancing around to see if we’re still the only ones in sight. No secret guardian angel is swooping out of the shadows this time, and I’m aware of how ridiculous I must look standing here like this, completely naked, my hair plastered to my pale skin, playing at the seductress. If nothing else, this will make a hell of a snuff film. “So come hurt me.”

His lip curls into a dangerous smirk, and I swear I see his cock twitch in his pants. “Gladly.”

Standing my ground, I wait for his approach, knowing I need to swing at the exact right moment. If I mess this up, I don’t doubt that he’s going to kill me whether with his bare hands or the knife glinting ominously in his hand.

My eyes are so focused on him, judging the distance from my hand to his face, that I miss him slashing out at me. My hand burns as the blade slices across it, warm blood pouring out down my wrist immediately, making my grip on the glass go slick. But he doesn’t stop me entirely—I lunge at him, the jagged edge just in front of his eye when he catches my wrist in his hand, his strength stopping me in my tracks.

“At least you’re a fighter. I like that about you. Audrey made it too easy on us.”

I don’t want to know what he means, but as he twists my arm, practically crushing my bones under his grip, I get the feeling he’s going to tell me anyway. He pries the shiv out of my fingers with one hand, backing me against the prop coffin and pinning my other wrist above my head before transferring them into the grip of one hand.

He doesn’t fumble with his zipper the way Carson did—he drops his pants in a single fluid motion, and then I feel his cock against me, hot and hard. I

realize too late that I fucked up, that this was probably the single stupidest decision I've ever made, taunting him like this. It's not like the thin veil of my dress would have stopped him from doing this anyway, but now I feel embarrassed on top of my anger. I may as well have just granted him permission to fuck me, as far as he's concerned. Not that my refusal would likely mean anything to him. "You see, Audrey wanted to be you. But she never understood that if you just give it away for free, nobody's going to want to *pay* for it."

I don't know what he's talking about, but he's lowering himself over me. My skin crawls with the proximity of him, terror knotting my stomach, my breath jagged as if I just crawled out of that puddle again. I won't give him the satisfaction of screaming, but I won't make it easy on him either. I wait until he's right on top of me, and then I thrash against him. My attempt to slam my head into his jaw fails when he ducks, so I try to match his brute force. I'm still trying to get out of his grip when he stabs the knife into the wood right next to my face—not even an inch away. At first, I'm not sure whether he missed because of my resistance or as part of his show of ramping up my fear, but then I catch the wicked glint in his eyes, the menacing grin as he hovers over me so he can bathe in my hatred of him, my rage, my terror. "I've wanted this forever. Fantasized about all the different ways this would go, dreaming of that little cunt choking my cock. I was a little worried, honestly, that Whit would have broken you in too much by now, but I don't even care. You're blowing all those fantasies out of the water tonight."

With his grip on my wrists, he grinds me against the coffin, and my gaze hitches on the knife embedded right next to my face. I'm immobilized, unable to reach out for it, as Mark digs his fingers into my hips, trying to

align himself with me. But the silver is polished, reflective. That's how I see the figure that appears behind Mark's back.

I don't have a chance to back away, no opportunity to fight out from under him as thick gloved hands seize Mark around the neck, pulling him off of me. There's just a flash of silver, Mark's confused grunting as he tries to fend off his assailant, and then a blade plunges into his eye—the same eye I aimed for with my glass.

Mark's scream eclipses the rest of the noise—the squelch of his eyeball puncturing, a guttural sound from the back of his throat that quickly turns into him sobbing in agony. It takes a minute for his wailing to turn into anything audible, and I think it may be the worst sound I've ever heard. "What the fuck?" He cries, his voice rising to an unnaturally high pitch as his hands flit to the spot where the knife is still protruding from his eye, not letting his blood-soaked eyelids close around the hilt.

He's trembling and bone white, the dark red rivulets of blood dripping from his face onto my back. I use his pain as my distraction, spinning around and flinging him off of me. The move sends both of us stumbling.

I'm shaking too, horrified by the sight of him, his eye completely eviscerated. I'm grateful for the dark lighting and the strobing lights that keep me from having to see him in all the horrible colors. Mark's panicking, unsure whether he should try to dislodge the knife, unsure who just betrayed him, his screams perforated by a stream of expletives.

Ghostface grabs him by the back of the neck and brings him to his chest, finding my eyes as he grabs the knife still in Mark's eye and twists. I squeeze mine closed a second too late, Mark's screaming turning frenzied and then stopping all at once. I was wrong. That is the worst sound I've ever heard—the squelching, the screaming, the whoosh of the blade as Mark's wet blood

flung around the space. I'm relieved when it stops, and silence lies thick around the room. When I open my eyes, Mark's gone slack, held up beneath the armpits.

I think Ghost is going to throw Mark to the side and come claim his prize, but the masked man only lifts his free arm and points one finger toward the theater, toward the exit... toward the place where I watched Audrey fall.

I'm almost more scared of him than I am of the others. Everyone else has tried to hurt me, and while this one hasn't tonight, watching him kill the others without a hint of hesitation is somehow more terrifying. They told me I was the prey, but the rest of them have been hunted right alongside me.

The way he's so ruthlessly and quietly dispatched of everyone up to this point is nothing short of brutal. He's practiced, controlled. It makes him a far more fearsome enemy.

I glance down at the dress on the ground, trapped beneath his boot. Sensing whatever I'm thinking, he takes a step back, allowing me to bend down and pick up the tattered remains of my gown, pressing it to my front and covering my chest as much as I can. It's stupid, I know—a vain comfort. He watches me silently as I slowly pick it up, keeping an eye on him just in case he strikes when my guard is down.

And when I turn, he sees my full ass as he leads me like a lamb to the slaughter, dragging Mark with him by one wrist as he follows me through the rest of the haunt.

I know it's Colton by the shape of him, and I know he's seen a whole lot more of me than this, but I can't help the rage that seeps into my bones at the thought of him parading me naked to the last room. The shame curls through me, paving the way for a more profound anger.

When I open the door at the end, the lights are off. I step slowly into

darkness, trying to fight the swirling sensation that's trying to drag me into the past to show me the things I didn't see that night.

The lights come up all at once, warm and blinding, and pointed directly at me so that I have to squint to see past them.

It's different this time—there's only two of them standing in the auditorium, plus Mark, who gets flung unceremoniously to the ground.

Michael and Jason—Rev and Tripp.

And at my back, Colton in the ghost costume.

They surround me, leaving just enough space between each of them that I could try to dart between them and make an escape, but I know they'd catch me. All it takes is reaching out an arm to catch me in their web, and I'm stuck like a moth waiting to be entombed by the spiders.

The jig is up. We're in the final climax, and I'm outnumbered.

This is where it ends for me.

“What are you waiting for?” I tease, trying not to sound as terrified as I feel. I'm not much of an actress, but I've put on a hell of a show tonight and I won't stop now. “Come on. Someone come claim your prize. I know who you all are—the game's over.”

I feel inexplicably like I ended up in an episode of Scooby Doo, waiting to see the monsters reveal themselves to be men in masks. Except, they are monsters beneath those masks, too. I've watched them spill blood all around these grounds tonight, watched them kill, and seen the pleasure they get in my fear.

It's Rev who takes his mask off first, reaching up and grabbing a tuft of the stringy-looking orange hair to use it as leverage. His real face is set in resignation, his eyes glittering despite his hard stance.

I knew they were under masks somewhere—I've known they were

complicit in my worst nightmare ever since they kidnapped me after the gala. I've had all night to come to terms with the fact that the men I loved—the men I loved before I even realized it—are complicit in my torture. But seeing him take that mask off and look at me so sadly hurts worse than anything else tonight. The glass I crawled through, drowning in the mud, getting thrown on the ground and pushed around like a rag doll—it all pales in comparison to the acute agony of seeing my worst fears confirmed. The people I've loved the most in my lifetime are the ones who have hurt me the most.

“I'm sorry it had to be this way,” he says, glancing at the figure on his right.

Tripp pushes the hockey mask up his face and pulls his lip between his teeth, his lip ring glinting in the light. When he pulled me aside earlier, it was easier to focus on my anger instead of the hurt. Now that they're both looking at me like a puppy that got kicked in the stomach, now that their pity is so visceral, I can't help feeling like I'll drown in it.

He takes a step toward me, stopping when I tense away from him and back directly into the only other person here.

Colton.

His betrayal is different than the others. Though it's not as sharp as Tripp's, it hurts the way a blunt knife does, causing more damage even as it does the same thing as a pointed one.

I know that my history with Tripp was real, that our friendship was real. But everything with Colton must have been fake from the very first day—I let him trick me into thinking he was a friend just to let him bring us to this point. As separate as that hurt is, it combines to collapse my throat and cave in my chest. I don't even realize the tears are falling until Tripp steps closer, his own eyes watering. “Don't cry, Princess.”

“Why?” It's all I can manage without collapsing into sobs. And I won't

give them that. They can take everything else from me, but I won't cry like a teenager who had her heart broken by the very men who are going to crush it in their fists.

I don't have anything left to fight for. My dignity is gone, my hope. My sister is the only thing left in the world that I love, and she's safer without me here. There's no reason compelling enough to keep fighting. Nothing is worth the agony of pushing on right now, but still, I cling to a stubborn sliver of my pride, tensing my jaw so that it doesn't shake.

"Why what?" Rev sounds genuinely confused as if he can't possibly conceive of what I need to know. He sweeps me against him, tilting my chin to face him, as desperate for answers as I am. But I can't speak, can't breathe, so I turn away from him and bury my face in his chest instead. I hope they'll do me a small favor and stab me while I'm like this so that I can at least *pretend* I'm going to die in the arms of someone who loved me.

It was easy to hold onto the fight when I felt like we were in a war, but now that they've faltered, my strength has slipped.

I'm a hopeless mess, crying in the arms of a man who means to murder me, and I can't bring myself to care. So, when Colton drags me against his chest, I don't fight him either; I don't even swipe away the tears that spilled over.

I still don't fight them when I feel something thick and warm being draped around my shoulders—a blanket— or when Colton pushes me into Tripp's arms and unmask himself, letting the hood fall to the ground. Through my tears, I look up to see him, his jaw tense, fingers furling into fists just before he rakes them through his messy hair. "You weren't supposed to get hurt." He says it almost like an apology. If it weren't for the fact that he still looks like he's about to rip me apart, I'd think he feels bad... as if this entire thing

wasn't part of his plan, as if he's not the one who suggested this fucked up game and put it into their heads.

"I told you this wasn't a good idea." Rev sounds anxious. It's bizarre coming from someone who's always so self-assured and lighthearted. "Look at me, angel."

I don't want to see him. I don't want to see any of them.

"It's not like we had any other choice!" Colton argues. I think he kicks something because there's a sound of something falling, and then he lets out a heavy breath. "We had to end things once and for all."

"This isn't helping," Tripp says gently, rubbing his hands over my arms like he can massage some warmth into them.

I don't know what's going on, but he's warm and unbothered by my tears falling on his skin, and he feels deceptively comforting. My brain and body are still at a disconnect between what I remember to be true and what I now know to be true.

They killed Audrey. They terrorized me. They're not my source of comfort—they're the source of my horror.

"Everything's okay now," Tripp whispers into my ear.

Though they're spoken with something like sincerity, they sound like the last words you tell an old dog before you put a bullet through their brain. "Rev—" Colton's voice is tempered when he speaks again. "Take care of her."

Present Day

I ALMOST EXPECT TRIPP to close his arms around me, to protect me, to choose me. But he doesn't fight Rev as he spins me to face his friend. It shouldn't come as a surprise that he supports Rev—the one who has been by his side for the last three years. I *forgot* them. But they didn't forget me. They took every ounce of sorrow, regret, and malice that I ever caused them and tripled it before giving it back to me.

I'm dizzy being spun around between them, taking shallow breaths, trying to reconcile the fact that my entire life has been a lie.

Rev's eyes aren't full of malice as he takes me in, swathed in the blanket they gave me. He presses forward, his touch gentle as his hands slip under the cover, skating along my thighs and coming to a rest on my hips. There's nothing overtly sexual in the touch, but it laces my skin with goosebumps that erupt into icy hot chills when he speaks. I'm not sure what he says, or if the words are for me or them. His touch is almost painful at first.

But as that sensation fades and the warmth seeps into my skin, a thick and syrupy sort of feeling spreads through my limbs, down to my fingers and my

toes. I don't know what his touch was laced with, but I expect the world to pull away from me and the edges of my vision to go dark.

They don't.

When he lets go of me, I see the smile on his soft lips and the pride in his eyes. It's too gentle compared to everything else. "Better?"

I don't answer. They don't seem to expect me to. Rev presses a kiss to my forehead, and I only want to cry harder. But the pain is gone—the physical kind, anyway. My bleeding knee, the cold that settled into my bones, my aching ribs and searing lungs, the agonizing tightness in my spine from trembling so hard for so long...

It all stops at once, leaving me confused, warm, dry... but still hollow.

"You let them touch her." Tripp accuses, turning on Colton with a ferocity I've never seen from him. "You let Mark kiss her, let him inside of her." His voice is full of rage I've never heard from him before.

"You *knew* we were using her as bait," Colton says coolly. I can feel his eyes on me, but I keep mine focused on the ground, afraid that if I look at any of them, I'll break down again. I'm at their mercy now, just waiting for them to finish what they started all those years ago. "You knew that was the only way to put an end to this."

"I knew," Tripp says. "And I told you we'd find another way. But you told me that no one would touch her."

I look up now, slowly, to see Colton's head in his hands, his fingers curling against his scalp, pulling tufts of his sandy hair between his fingers. His voice is a growl, but the anger is broken by a strangely sad sound. "I know."

"She's okay," Rev says. I'm unsure who he's trying to convince—me, them, or himself.

The tears have stopped flowing, and I have to sniff to keep the last sob from

escaping. “They’re gone now.” Tripp assures me, reaching out to wrap me in his arms.

When I flinch away, he looks like I’ve stabbed him right in the gut. I see the spark of a tear in his eye, but he grinds his jaw closed and blinks it away.

“You don’t have to be scared anymore.” Rev chimes in, glancing from Tripp to me like he’s not sure who he should be trying to console. “It’s over.”

I don’t know what’s over. The game ended two minutes ago when they trapped me in here and closed me in.

“Not yet.” Colton’s voice is hard as stone when he speaks, drawing the attention of the other two as they turn to gape at him. I see him tip his head toward Mark, who still lies on the ground with the knife protruding from his eye, two of his fingers twitching. He was caught with his pants down, and his small cock is deflated, resting against his balls. He looks so pathetic I almost for a single second feel bad for him—to die with zero sense of dignity. And then I remember how they strung Audrey up naked, ripped out her nipple piercings, and tied me up topless to wait for the security guard to find me, and my sense of pity for him evaporates. “He’s still alive.”

“Kill him!” Tripp yells. He seems to be feeling a fraction of the betrayal I’ve been feeling all night—it’s hard not to feel the slightest bit smug at that as I watch his tortured face with my own tear-streaked face in my hands.

“He has to suffer.” Colton says. “I couldn’t make it easy on him. Not after all this—not after they violated her.”

If it’s possible, my confusion has only intensified. The past and the present seem to be at war with one another. My brain feels like someone’s been alternating pressing the rewind and fast forward button at random intervals.

Are they talking about me or Audrey?

I jump when Tripp’s arms slip around my shoulders, tilting my head back

toward his ear. “You’re safe now, Princess. You’ve always been safe with us. We told you last night, and I’ll tell you again every night until the air leaves my lungs because I would give my last breath if it would give you one more.”

“You will *always* be safe with us.” Rev adds, coming to slip an arm behind my back, holding my waist through the blanket. It’s such a possessive touch without a hint of sexual charge, but it feels strange.

“Now watch what we do to men who dare hurt you,” Colton demands my gaze as he bends down toward Mark, who moans in pain as he fights to stay unconscious. The pain is manageable that way, I know. It’s how I’ve lived the last three years, stifling everything that hurts—even the good things, because the loss of something good is just as jagged as the bad.

“We’ve loved you for longer than you’ve known,” Tripp says softly.

“And in more lifetimes than you can ever imagine.” Rev agrees.

“But this was the only way we could keep you safe and break the curse.”

There’s no world where their words make sense, but I wouldn’t try to pick them apart even if I wanted to. I can’t because I’m too transfixed on watching Colton. He twirls his fingers in the air, just as if he were wrapping them around the handle of the knife in Mark’s skull. There’s a split second where he does nothing, and then he flips his wrist over his shoulder.

It all happens so fast I don’t even know if it’s real at first. Without anyone touching it, the knife comes free of where it’s embedded. In one single motion that flings blood through the air, it follows the arc of Colton’s hand before clattering to the ground.

I blink, trying to make my tired eyes adjust to what I just saw as my brain works overtime to reconcile what it knows to be possible with what it thinks it just witnessed. I’m pretty sure I’m about to pass out even before Mark jumps up as if he’s been electrocuted, the pain jolting him awake with one

long, wailing scream. I go weak against them, but Tripp and Rev hold me up under the arms, lending me their strength.

“Fuck!” Mark cries, though the tears only stream from one eye. The other one just streams blood from what looks like an empty socket, though his ruptured eye may still be there, hidden under all the gore. I’m horrified, nauseous at the sight, and yet I can’t look away. I also can’t help the dry laugh when he sobs, “Why are you doing this?”

“You *know* why,” Colton says coldly.

“You turned on us for *her*?” The disgust is evident in Mark’s voice, the disbelief that they’ve turned on him now, too. “All of this—” His voice breaks on a sob as he turns his accusatory glare on me, “for some bitch who will never give you what you want?”

“No.” Colton says simply. “All of this for our queen.”

Panic floods me for one fleeting second as Tripp’s hand covers my eyes, but then I realize he’s protecting me, censoring the carnage that’s about to unfold. I turn into his chest, still not trusting him but certain of the fact that I don’t want to see whatever brutality is about to occur.

Whatever Colton does with that knife makes Mark squeal like a pig for slaughter.

You squeal like a stuck pig when you come. I bet you’ll scream like one, too, the first time a real man fucks you.

Was that Colton who told me that back then? Or was it Mark who slipped that mask on after he left my side? Are they playing musical masks, or has Colton been the ringleader all along?

“God damn.” Rev says faintly. His voice sounds far away under the agony and horror of Mark’s screaming, but I choose to focus on it instead as I bury my head against Tripp’s chest, stealing the comfort he’s offering.

Mark's sobs are unlike anything I've ever heard. I can't imagine what Colton's doing to him, and I'm not sure I want to as the screams grow closer together, the sound of flesh ripping as Colton tears him apart. His wails reach a crescendo and then die as he gags and chokes on his own blood.

And then it all stops. For a single second, it's too quiet.

"Let her see," Colton says, his voice drawing closer to me.

When Tripp's hand comes away from my eyes, the world is blurry from how tightly I've squeezed my eyes shut. I blink a few times before Colton's face steadies. "Come on, baby." He presses his lips against my cheekbone and then grabs my hand as Tripp and Rev fall away, letting Colton lead me to his work.

"Go on," he says softly, "Look at what happens to people who cross you."

My eyes flit to his, quickly darting past the ground so that I can avoid the crime scene there. I spent years working with Logan to try and make peace with the last grisly murder that took place in here, and while I'm not entirely sure they truly plan to let me leave here alive, I don't think I can bear the sight even this once. But Colton's fingers slide up the back of my neck, tilting my head down, and my eyes open on their own.

My knees go weak, my stomach threatening to turn itself out as the revolting sight comes into view. I wouldn't know it was Mark if I hadn't seen the first blow myself—he's been entirely emasculated, blood pouring from between his legs. I don't look close enough to see the gaping wound, but the head of his pale white cock poking out of his open mouth is confirmation enough of what happened.

I feel weak, unsure if I can trust what I'm really seeing.

"I'd have done that to every one of his fingers, but every second I kept him alive, I felt like he was stealing your air."

Colton's own fingers, still at the base of my neck, guide my head toward him. I'm grateful, unable to pry my eyes away from the horrible scene in front of me.

He looks human—devastatingly gorgeous, with sharp angles and dark shadows and beautiful amber eyes, but human all the same. Nothing about his exterior betrays the beast that just came alive to completely destroy the man on the ground before him. In fact, Colton's anger seems to have been soothed. His tongue flicks over his lips, and then he's pulling me to him, his kiss tender, slow... loving.

It's so much gentler than everything from yesterday, from earlier today. It's lingering and vulnerable, closer to what he showed me when he first kissed me yesterday. And it only serves to deepen my confusion, unable to reconcile this version of him with the one who told me they were going to hunt me like an animal and fuck me raw.

When he pulls away, he presses his forehead against mine and I fight the confusion swirling like a sandstorm inside of me. For a moment, it feels like we're alone here, like we're in a bubble where none of the bad stuff happened earlier. His eyes stay on mine, his blood-coated fingers resting against my cheek.

"I'm sorry that you had to suffer tonight but rest assured that you'll never suffer another minute in this life. You're safe now."

"We've got you," Rev adds. "And we're never letting go again."

I feel like I've fallen and slammed my head against a rock—nothing makes much sense. Everything seems backward. And then a terrible thought strikes me.

What if I got it wrong all those years ago? What if the others chased me out of town to protect me from Colton? He is clearly unhinged. This behavior—I

don't know if it's what he truly thinks, but even if it's all an elaborate act, there's no way a mentally stable person shifts from cold and calculating to *this*. The intensity burning in his eyes isn't love—it's obsession.

I'm vaguely aware of Tripp and Rev standing behind me and Colton's other hand at his side, still covered in blood.

I press myself against him again, closing the distance between our bodies as I seal my mouth over his and pull him into a kiss that takes him no time to reciprocate. The tension seems to melt inside of him as I kiss him deeper, lulling him into a sense of peace. One hand wraps around the nape of my neck, and he uses the leverage to consume me with his kiss.

Kissing him feels as wrong as it feels right, doing nothing to abate the confusion, the distrust, the terror, the disgust. And none of those things lessens the attraction I feel for him, the comfort he gives me, the hate I feel for myself as part of me melts against him. They've ruined me, warped my mind, twisted my soul. The longer I spend in their presence, the more I feel my humanity being drawn into question.

When I pull away from him all at once, throwing myself on the ground and grabbing the knife that somehow went sailing through the air, it takes a moment before he realizes what I've done. I'm already rising on my feet again, the blade wet, ruby red, and sharp between us, when he laughs.

His deep voice gives me chills when he speaks again. "You want to hurt me, baby?"

"It's okay, Princess," Tripp says, taking a slow step toward me. I spin the knife in his direction, raising the tip to be level with his throat, an effective warning. He hangs back with his hands raised, either afraid I may actually use it against him or worried about spooking me.

"I'm sure you're confused." Rev's voice sounds so rational compared to the

other two. “Let’s get you cleaned up and talk about it.”

“Don’t come near me,” I warn him, turning the blade toward him now. The haunted house is behind me—I could dart back through it and find another place to hide. But what I really need are Tripp’s keys. “I want the key to the gate and the car.”

“You can’t go yet.” Colton shakes his head. “We have one more surprise for you, baby. And I know you’re *really* going to love this one.”

“I don’t *want* any more of your surprises!” I yell, looking between the three of them, assessing their weaknesses. If I throw myself against Tripp, maybe I can snatch the keys from his pocket with the knife to his throat. Of the three of them, he’s most likely to not fight back.

“Don’t turn against us, Marley.” Tripp’s voice is pleading, desperate. I almost wonder if he knows what I’m thinking.

Rev takes another step toward me, so I throw myself at his back, clinging to him as I press the knife to his throat. He could shake me off easily, but the knife buys me his compliance.

“Give me the keys.”

“You can’t hurt us.” Rev says calmly. “We’ve died for you, Marley. We’ll die for you a thousand times if that’s what it takes.”

I’m not sure what’s going on, but the way they’re looking at me—not at Rev, whose neck is vulnerable under the blade, at *me*—gives me the last idea I have. I’m not a murderer, but I’m not going to let them get away with this.

I drop from the hold and run, putting as much distance between Rev and myself as I can, my back pressing against the door before I turn back to face them. If threatening them won’t do the trick, I know what will.

I lift the blade, biting my lip as I try to gather the courage I need to follow through on this. “Give me the keys, or I’ll kill myself before you can. I’ll

make this whole night meaningless.”

Tripp’s eyes widen, and I see him reach for his pocket without hesitation. But Colton steps in front of him, his hands raised just a little as he draws closer to me. “Stay away from me, or I’ll do it.” I threaten, my voice shaking as much as my hand.

“I’ll just heal you if you do,” Rev warns. I don’t know what he means by that, but they don’t make me contemplate it.

“Can’t let you do that, baby.” Colton shakes his head. “We’ve suffered without you for long enough.”

I’m lifting the blade higher, prepared to bring it down into my own stomach, when it slips through my fingers and flies across the room—literally *flies*. It looks like it’s been launched out of a slingshot as it’s hurled through the air until it hits the wall and clatters to the floor on the other side of the room.

I’ve barely had a chance to register what just happened, barely had a chance to realize that my hand never moved, because I’m crumbling to the ground in the next minute. The world goes black around the edges as unconsciousness rushes in.

The last thing I feel before everything disappears is the arms that catch me before I hit the ground.

Present Day

SLEEP FALLS AWAY FROM me like smoke, drifting away in tufts, bits of it falling away to expose the reality. I blink into the lights, my eyes aching with their intensity as I turn my head away, only to be met with the old blood stain on the shiny wooden floor.

“You’re awake.”

Tripp. He moves into view, his eyes focused on something behind me. I try to sit up, but I’m weighed down like there’s an invisible anchor on my chest, keeping me pinned to the table. My brain hasn’t caught up yet to what’s going on, stuck on the last memory I have of stripping down in front of the camera and trying to goad Mark into coming for me.

It’s foggy at first, heavy with my past encounter with him, but then I recall his hands tugging my dress down the rest of the way, gladly taking what I was foolish enough to offer. Everything after that slams into me all at once, so fast and relentless it makes my head feel like it’s splitting open, and I cry out from the pain, trying to raise my hand to my head to counter the sudden pressure. But my arms are locked down too, too heavy to move. Now I

appraise myself, the slinky black dress that I most definitely wasn't wearing before I passed out.

"It's okay, Mars." Tripp assures me, brushing the back of his knuckles over my cheek. I think he means to try and ease my anxiety, but no part of me can relax now that I have the missing puzzle pieces. I haven't yet arranged them into something that makes sense, but I at least know that they're within reach. Though I'm not sure knowing makes any of it better.

"It was you." My tongue feels thick and fat, almost like I may choke on it. My words sound clumsy to my own ears. They won't let me go, couldn't risk me hurting myself because they've worked so hard to get me here. "You guys stalked me?"

"Stalked you?" Rev laughs from behind my shoulder. "Is that what you're calling it?"

"You hid under my bed—"

"That was me." Colton grins a little, stepping into my line of sight. "And you have no idea how hard it was not to slip into your bed and crawl inside of you."

His words feel like a sucker punch, vacuuming all of the air out of the room. "Why?" I gasp, cold with the realization that he played me every step of the way. It wasn't just the night Audrey died, or the days after her death, or since I came home. He found me in the city and chased me home... why?

"Why...?" He glances at Tripp like he hopes he'll clear things up for him. "Why didn't I fuck you then? Why was it hard to resist the temptation to climb over you and cover your mouth with tape so that no one would hear you scream when I fucked you the way I've wanted to forever?"

I shiver at that, a small dose of longing mixed in with the horror of what he's suggesting. It's fucked of me to be aroused by that sentiment, but I don't

think it's a line he would have crossed... not back then. Now, anything is possible. "Why did you do it? Why not just call me up like a normal person, and take me on a date?"

"Normal." Rev laughs, coming next to Colton now. "Angel, I've already told you. We aren't normal. Even by our standards."

I don't get a chance to ask for elaboration on that matter because Colton sinks to his knees next to me, his brilliant eyes shining as he smooths his hand over my hair like he means to comfort me. "You really should have paid attention in history, Marley. You were too busy passing notes with Audrey to pay attention to the most important lesson you'll ever learn."

I don't know what he's talking about or why we're acting like high school was the peak of life experience. I haven't used algebra even once since I left school. Besides, I wouldn't call Colton a star student despite being a star athlete. "What are you talking ab—"

Rev cuts me off with his fingers on my lips. "You always said you loved this town, Marley. So why did you leave?"

He's switched directions so fast that I feel like I just got hit out of nowhere, but he's right. I hated everything about my life after I left home, though I'm sure that was colored by the trauma of my last few days here. I had planned to stay in town—running was Hadley's shtick, but I was content to be a small-town girl, a small-town wife, to help my mom run her bookshop, to just... be.

I guess that may not be what most people dream of doing with their lives, but other than my brief delusions of practicing law, I never really wanted anything big. To live freely, to be loved... those had seemed like such simple things to come by when I was young. "You already know why I left." I shake my head, only managing to roll it against the ground that I'm tied down

to. Although, when I look down at myself, I don't see any ropes. Maybe they drugged me to keep me from moving because it's still not possible. "And I'm guessing you all had something to do with it."

"Wrong." Colton shakes his head, too. "We'd never do something to drive you away from us, baby. You should know that by now. Everything we've ever done has been to bring you closer, to keep you safe."

I can't help laughing at that. It's too absurd to be spoken in anything other than irony, and yet they all look at me straight-faced, calm in the face of my disbelief. "And tonight? Are you telling me that was some kind of fucked up bonding exercise? Is that the new generation of team building?"

"No." Tripp places his hand over mine, lacing our fingers together. It feels so casual, and yet there's a disconnect somewhere between my brain and body, between logic and comfort, between right and wrong. "Tonight wasn't for fun. None of this was an easy decision for us."

"Well, you deserve a fucking Oscar because you sure made it look easy." Tears are clouding my vision, but I blink them away, refusing to let them fall. I feel betrayed all over again, shame burning me from the inside out.

"Tonight was necessary." Colton sighs. "It's the only way we could get everyone together and pick them off one by one without putting you in danger."

It takes a moment for the bulk of his argument to wash over me. The words don't make sense. For a moment, I think he slipped into Latin. I think that maybe the matrix just glitched or the world froze around me, but nope. When I blink, they're still next to me, looking as if they didn't just say the absolute most absurd thing I've ever heard. "You're saying you planned this entire night—the whole 'whoever finds her first gets to fuck her first' thing because you thought it would keep me *out* of danger?"

“You were never in jeopardy,” Colton argues. “We had eyes on you all night.”

“You had eyes on—?” I shut my mouth, deciding it’s not worth the air it would take. “You’re telling me that you’ve been letting them hunt me all night while you guys hunted them?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Colton’s nod is brusque. “And now they’re gone. You’re fine.”

Fine?

“You... used me...” My words are slow while I try to make sure I’m really following him here. “As bait?”

I’d known as much earlier, but that was when I thought I was just the shiny trophy for their little game. I’m not sure which betrayal is worse.

“Now you’re getting it.” Colton grins. “I used you just like Audrey used you... just like Logan used you for years. You *love* to let people use you, Marley. Always have.”

“Colt...” Tripp’s voice carries a warning, disapproval in his tone.

“Come on, Tripp. You know it’s true. You had great parents in this life, Mars, so how the hell did you end up with *so many* daddy issues?”

When my jaw falls open, he knows he hit his mark. He dissolves into a laugh a moment later, his fingers pushing back a bit of hair that’s fallen into my face.

“Fuck you!” I spit it with as much venom as I can muster.

“You will, baby. As I recall, I caught you first. And I am a man of my word.”

As chilling as his words are meant to be, the real chill comes when his words sink in... a moment too late. “You know about Logan?”

“Logan.” Colton rolls his eyes, while next to him, Tripp rolls his shoulders.

He looks like he's trying to keep from fighting someone. "Yeah, we know about him."

"The puppet master," Rev says coldly. "Killing him is the most satisfying thing I've ever felt... next to your sweet cunt squeezing my fingers."

His words ignite heat low inside of me, but I squeeze my thighs together and try to ignore it. "You killed him to make me come home? You just hoped I'd come running and put everyone I love in danger?"

I did exactly that, but I won't concede that right now. "No." It's Tripp this time who speaks, bending down to be level with me too. He must want me to see the earnestness in his eyes when they lock on mine. "We killed him for taking you away from us. He betrayed every one of us by chasing you out of town... and he orchestrated the entire thing because he knew he could find you and keep you all to himself, which is exactly what he did."

I'm opening my mouth to refute that as delusional when Rev chuckles. "You really don't remember him?"

"Whit Lindsay?" Colton adds as if that means anything to me. When I only stare at him blankly, he laughs and scrubs his hands over his face. "You really never looked outside of your backyard, did you, baby?"

"She was a little busy with her head up Audrey's ass." Tripp says, his eyes softening almost apologetically when they move from Colton to me. "Whit Lindsay was Mark's cousin. Remember? He moved here our senior year cause his parents kicked him out after he decided to major in Occult History? He was at a couple of the parties we went to that summer. He was a real piece of shit, but he was good for one thing..."

"Killing Audrey?" Rev suggests. They both laugh so casually I feel like I'm missing something, but it's Colton who answers.

"Whit helped show us what we really were."

“Monsters?” I snap, taking advantage of the confusion that’s clouded my fear, making it too irresistible to not fight back in the only way I can. They aren’t bothered by words, though.

“Whit’s the one who revealed the real town history—the one who helped us make sense of all the things we couldn’t explain. He helped us realize we weren’t crazy.”

“No, you’re definitely crazy!” I object. They’re certifiable—the kind of people who should be locked up and have the key thrown into the pits of hell. Though they’re demons, so I suppose that may not be the best place for concealing their imprisonment.

“Whit brought us closer together,” Rev admits as if I didn’t say anything at all. “But he also tore us apart when he got the rest of his clowns to chase you out of town.”

“I came to watch you that night,” Colton says, as if that’s not a creepy thing to announce. Of course, I remember looking out of my window in the nights following Audrey’s death, seeing his truck in my driveway. I’d felt so safe knowing he was watching me, knowing he was at least a line of defense between me and Audrey’s killers, who were still out there. Now I know he’s one of them. “And you were gone. By the time we talked to Hadley and realized you just disappeared without a trace, Whit was gone too. And he kept you hidden from us for years.”

“That makes no sense.” I turn my head away from them, looking around for anybody else. There has to be someone else, someone who isn’t crazy, someone who I could appeal to with reason and rationale. When Audrey died, there were seven of them, at least. Is it too much to hope that there’s one other person out there who came to their senses in the last three years?

“I knew telling you wouldn’t be enough.” Colton sighs. “But I also knew

you weren't going to like the alternative.”

I'm about to turn back to face him to ask what he means when the world falls away from me all at once. I'm a ghost again, no longer flat on the ground but standing in the corner, watching as Audrey shimmies out of the clothes she wore to the theme park that night.

Carson laughs as he gets dressed in his clown costume, and from the stage, Nick watches with jealousy burning in his eyes. I don't know what Audrey's saying as she throws herself at Carson—even if I could hear, I'm not sure I would be able to focus when they all step out from the shadows, dressed in costume but masks missing so that all their faces are uncovered.

Tripp and Rev, Colton.

Whit...

He looks different than when I knew him as Logan, but it's undeniably him. His hair is long and slicked back, with bits of it framing his pale face—he was always clean and polished when we were together, embracing the doctor persona. But his prominent features are all the same... those piercing eyes, the straight nose, the lips that spent so much time on me, whispering wicked words that strung me along between the highs.

Audrey pushes Carson away from her when she spots her boyfriend watching, but there's no denying what she was up to. She's not the least bit concerned about being pretty much naked in front of all of them—in fact, she almost seems to feed off of their energy, the eyes on her.

She's trying to bat her eyelashes, pulling on Colton's hand, making a grab for his cock where it's concealed in his pants. But he never reacts to her, not giving her the attention she wants. I can see her mood souring as she realizes she won't get away with it, and then Carson pulls her back to him just in time to lift a blade to her neck and pull it straight across.

Her shock is palpable. I can feel it as surely as if it were me standing there, blood rushing out over my fingers, wondering why they betrayed me. She reaches for Colton with the hand that's not trying to stop her bleeding. It's a futile effort, and I'm grateful to not be able to hear anything as I'm sure she wheezes, gasping for air that will never make it past her severed throat. Colton doesn't even blink as he steps away from her. He doesn't move a muscle as Logan—Whit—raises his hands and pushes them through the air.

No one panics when Audrey starts levitating, her body thrashing like she's trying to dislodge a demonic entity from inside of her. The little cuts appear more and more as she's raised higher, deep gouges across her limbs, so that when she finally comes to rest against the underside of the roof, looking limply down upon them with vacant eyes, she looks like a marionette doll just waiting for someone to pull her strings.

It's even more awful than what I experienced firsthand, even more horrific than the actual fall. And they're not done yet because as she comes to a rest, seemingly clinging to the last bit of life she's got, Whitt reaches a fist into the air like he is going to pull her back to him. But instead of pulling her down to the ground, her small breasts stretch, her nipples elongating, pointing down toward the ground, stretching until...

I look away before I can see the jewelry ripped from her body—a tiny little sound as it clanks on the ground, and then Whit bends to pick something up, still holding her overhead with just his hand and whatever force is coming from it.

Whatever he took from her, he stuffs into his pocket just before they all straighten.

I feel sick as the lights go out, and the room goes dark just a moment before the door opens, and I step in. Mark is there at my side one moment—me still

glowing, high on the orgasm and the drugs—and then in the next instant, he’s gone, and the lights go up, and they’re all stepping from the shadows, each of them with their face covered.

I can’t bear to look at Audrey, and I can’t bear to see myself so innocent and stupid. Apparently, I haven’t learned anything since then. I turn instead to look at all of them—Carson in his clown costume with Audrey’s blood splashed across his chest, Nick standing on the stage in the same theater mask that impaled him tonight. I can sense Tripp’s gaze on me, so poignant under the Michael Meyers mask, and if I’d been able to see through my terror that night, I’d have noticed Mark didn’t have time to change his whole outfit—he simply slipped on the lighted neon mask, knowing I’d never see past the blinding lights to notice I was looking right at him.

But the others seem to have shifted, changing masks from the night Audrey was killed until now.

It’s clear now that Logan was the ringleader in the Ghostface mask that night, the one who told me I’d squeal like a pig the first time a real man fucked me. I burn at the knowledge that I did exactly that, and I did it many times over the course of what we had. He drew so much out of me, made me cry and beg, sweat, and bleed.

It was Colton who had watched me from beneath the hockey mask and Rev who wore the Freddy Krueger one. I don’t dare question why they’ve switched costumes, but that’s not all there is. I thought I’d counted seven before, but there’s more.

There are two more people behind Logan... Whit.

Chucky, the seemingly bored worker who let us into the haunted house, and Jigsaw with his horrible rosy cheeked mask. And behind them is a host of men in the same black ensemble, simple black masks covering their features

and making them nearly impossible to distinguish from the shadows. They blur together when I try to count them, and I almost wonder whether they're really there or a figment of my imagination.

Everyone is silent—even if I could hear them speak, I don't think any of them attempt it. They all watch him taunt me, content to let Logan run the show. It doesn't escape me that the same boys who held me in the aftermath of this hell are standing here, complicit.

When the memory peels away from me, it leaves me colder than before. These guys that I gave my heart and my body to... They didn't kill Audrey, but they let it happen. They *wanted* it to. They watched stoically as Logan twisted her into a human pretzel, and they watched coldly as he taunted me and told me to keep my mouth shut.

"You're sick." It's all I can manage before clamping my hand over my mouth. Honestly, I feel like I'm the one who's about to be sick. Watching all of that again stirs up the feeling of being back in that moment—the helplessness, the confusion, the terror. And I'm just as defenseless against them now as I was back then. History has a horrible way of repeating itself.

"You're right," Tripp shrugs, completely unbothered with my insult. "We are afflicted. Cursed. And so are you."

So am I.

I've known it for years—since the day I met Logan and stayed rooted to the spot, spellbound, watching his assistant take him into her mouth, watching him grip her hair like reins as he drove into her over and over. The truth is, instead of being properly horrified like a normal human, I could feel the arousal way down deep, fighting to be heard over the part of me that knows it should feel disgusted. I didn't know I was into voyeurism before that, and while Logan and I had kept things between us and I'd never gotten the

chance to explore it, I realized in that moment that I *liked* watching. And when Logan had sensed my presence, opening his eyes to make contact with me, the smirk on his face only made me feel the dampness gathering between my legs. He seemed to like being watched just as much as I liked watching—and that’s when I realized I needed him, needed therapy, more than I had even thought.

Through all our exploration, I’d eventually come to the conclusion that there was something in me that craved pain, punishment, pleasure, embarrassment, chaos, fear. I don’t know when that part of me was born or if it was there all along, but once I came to terms with it, I realized that my sickness didn’t make me a danger to anyone else. I don’t want to hurt others. I don’t want to *cause* chaos. I just want to take it, letting those fucked up things soothe some part of my soul that I’m still not ready to come face-to-face with.

And as wrong as I knew it was to feel the things I did and to explore them with my therapist, in reality, it had only added to the thrill.

But seeing him in that memory—looking so different yet being undeniably the same person—is making me question everything I know about myself. My eyes are burning with the tears I’m holding back, buried behind my rage, a dark anger that has me trembling. “We were cursed,” Rev says, dropping his weight on the balls of his feet so that he’s level with me, his eyes searching mine. “To live our lives in search of you, cursed to feel hollow, incomplete, empty without you.”

They’re obsessed—terrifyingly obsessed. I’ve seen enough true crime to know that it’s not a wholesome thing, nothing like my obsession with pumpkin spice cold brew. It’s the kind of obsession that’s going to have them

carve me up like a turkey and store bits of me in their walls. It's the kind of obsession that will obliterate me if I let it.

"Which is why we had to kill the rest of them," Colton confirms. "To save you... and ourselves."

To save me.

Their delusions are grand, but I think so are my own. As angry as I am, as confused, as hurt... I can feel the knot in my stomach loosening as Colton runs a hand over the silky fabric of my new dress, pushing it out of the way for his fingers to skate along my thigh.

I feel like I've been held underwater and pulled up at the last minute to take in air. Except it's not air that my brain is trying to take in—it's information. For the last three years, my life has been one big question mark, and I've had no access to answers. Fragmented bits of it would rise to the surface, bringing sleepless nights and paranoia, and Logan would help me stifle them, burying the pain. He would give me pleasure to soothe the pain, a balm to my tormented mind.

Now, all at once, they're letting me breathe, giving me so many answers it makes my head throb with their impossible implications and the unspoken things between them. The worst part is none of what they've given me is enough to make me understand. And it's so hard to focus with those fingers wrapping around my thigh, dangerously close to seeing that I'm wet in places that have nothing to do with my earlier foray in the water ride.

"But... Logan?"

"Whit." Tripp corrects me curtly, and when I turn my focus on him, he's watching me darkly.

"Whit." I amend, the name awkward on my tongue. It doesn't make sense—I can't reconcile these two people as one. "Why did he...?"

“Betray us?” Colton supplies when I fail to come up with the words to articulate my confusion. At the same time, his thumb crests the top of my thigh, making me shiver, and my words come out around a gasp.

“Why kill Audrey?” He’s smirking, but I can’t tell if it’s because I’m reacting to his touch despite how much I don’t want to or if it’s the mention of his ex-girlfriend’s death. “And was it just coincidence that it’s his office I walked into?”

“There are no coincidences, *belle sorcière*.” Rev’s voice slips so naturally into an accent that I have to do a double-take to see whether it’s still him. And it is, though his eyes are glittering now, wide with excitement as they flit from Colton’s hand on me to my gaze.

“Let us show you something, *notre reine*.” It’s Tripp this time, whose fingertips dance over my skin, eliciting ripples of desire in their wake as he dusts over my collarbone, up my neck, coming to a rest on my temple and making me still suddenly. It’s vulnerable in a different way, not knowing his intention.

And then I feel it—the telltale pulling I’ve come to be familiar with tonight.

Long, Long Ago

THIS VISION ISN'T LIKE the other ones I've had. This time, I feel the memory pulling at me, I know what it is, but I don't watch it like a third party. I'm not a ghost spying from the corner, I'm not watching someone else's reality unfold. This time, I'm myself. Except... not.

The reflection in the mirror looks like she could be an ancestor of mine—fair skin and my same high cheekbones, her dark hair down in loose curls that frame the tops of her breasts on display in a black corset. There's a beautiful necklace resting in the hollow of her throat, a glittering stone in the deepest, most faceted shade of orange. Something of it reminds me of the crown from the auction, but the memory of that is foggy. It feels like that moment exists both impossibly far in the future and also forever ago. As I move, reaching to examine it, she moves. Or maybe as she moves, I move.

The woman in the mirror isn't the only familiar stranger. Over my shoulder, his reflection devastating even in the mirror, is Tripp. He's wearing a billowy white shirt that looks oddly formal, and yet it's untucked in a way that's anything but. His dark hair is tied back to showcase the beautiful planes of

his face. He looks as though he's just rolled out of bed. And perhaps he has because Rev still lounges on the four poster with ornate carvings in the wood, popping a strawberry in his mouth, the covers pulled up to just above his waist. His bare chest is dusted with a trail of dark hair that disappears somewhere under the sheet, and he's slighter than I've ever seen him. He's every bit as beautiful as I know him to be in my reality.

Everything feels distinctly dream-like and yet eerily familiar. When I turn to smile at them, I feel the oddest sense of *déjà vu*. "Come morning, all our problems will be gone." Tripp says, his hands landing on my shoulders and prompting me to look up at him. He's even more like the Tripp I know when looking at him face-on. I see the warmth in his eyes, the soft curve of his lips, the thick fringe of his eyelashes. The only betrayal that he's not the same man I know, other than his bizarre garments, is the lack of piercings anywhere to be seen. "Calm, notre reine."

They both look calm—Rev's rolling a grape between his fingers, holding it up to the light. He looks the slightest bit bored or tired. But I sense in my gut that something is wrong—a sense of foreboding is writhing like a pit of snakes in my stomach. I can feel it in the air that congeals in my lungs, in the nightmarish quality of what is meant to be a beautiful moment.

Something bad is going to happen. I don't know what's going on or where I am, but I know well enough that something is wrong. I open my mouth to say as much when the door flies open on its hinges.

It's Colton who rushes inside, though there's a clamor behind him that I don't see before he slams the door shut. Tripp and Rev look at him, bewildered, as he mutters something to himself in a language I've never heard and slides his hands through the air. It creates a perfect arc for the bureau in the corner to slide itself in front of the door, barricading it as if he

just pushed it across ice. But I know he never laid a finger on it, and I know he didn't slide it across the wood floor on sheer strength. Just like Logan held Audrey's body aloft with some invisible force, Colton made that chest of drawers move without touching it.

Colton watches a moment as the door creaks under the weight of whoever is on the other side before rushing across the distance to sweep me into a kiss without any kind of preamble. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me deep into his abyss, his tongue sliding into my mouth like we've done this a thousand times before. I can feel myself igniting, warming under his attention, the bits of me that have been locked away for my own preservation coming alive under the safety of his companionship. But I can also feel the dread in my stomach, the resolution.

I've known since I came here that this can't last forever. Nothing ever does.

I don't have a chance to ask what's going on, to appreciate his beauty, to consider how the sight of him steals my breath. His arms pull me against him, crushing my body to his as his kiss steals what breath he hasn't already, holding me like he's afraid to let go.

I'm gasping by the time he pulls away, his dark eyes alight with worry. "Out the window!" He commands. "Now!"

Rev seems to sense the urgency now, standing and stepping into a pair of leather pants, hurrying to get the laces strung as he eyes the door warily. "Whit?"

Meanwhile, Tripp reacts immediately, sprinting to the single window in the stone room and throwing it open. The fire in the hearth fades, and then all at once disappears as the cold drifts into the room with flurries of snow. "I killed him for his betrayal," Colton says, trying to tug me toward the window,

where Tripp stands with his eyes wild, desperation written over every facet of his gorgeous features.

“The others?” My voice nearly sticks in my throat, my chest heaving with the thing I know but don’t dare say aloud.

“Slaughtered.” Colton grinds his jaw. “They killed them all and set fire to the chapel.”

I let my eyes flutter closed in an attempt to keep the tears in.

“Come, Margeaux.” Tripp pleads, beckoning me toward him with an outstretched hand.

I don’t move with the urgency he demands as I step back to take in Colton’s dark features even as I want to go to Tripp, to let him fold me against him. “They’re coming.”

I don’t know who *they* are, and yet I’m not surprised. It’s like I’ve been anticipating this.

“I won’t run again,” I tell him before sinking back onto the bench and facing my mirror. I pick up the lipstick and roll it over my mouth, pressing my lips together to spread the red evenly over them. The storm inside of me is the most confusing thing I’ve ever felt—feelings that belong to me, sensations that most certainly don’t, memories that absolutely aren’t my own. I am Margeaux, and I am Marley, and I think I may be a million people in between.

Under all of it, I understand one thing with painful clarity. I’ve been betrayed by a man.

“Margeaux!” Tripp chides, stalking back toward me. “Come! We can be to the Caves by sunrise!”

“No.” My voice is gentle. Rev joins them, the three of them ringing me in as I focus on my reflection, dusting my cheeks with powder. It’s a ruse,

pretending to care about how I look to quell the fear that's got blood rushing to every part of me.

I can feel Margeaux's exhaustion. I sense that it's as much a part of her as she is a part of me. She's tired of running. She did that when she fled her home, when she had everything stolen from her. She ran and she lived, but only at the cost of dying inside.

The love of a few good men may have kindled some of her old self enough to allow her to love them, too. But she can't run this time, can't bring them into the fray of her curse. Our curse.

"No?" I'm not sure who said that; Margeaux is avoiding catching any of their eyes.

"It's too late to run." My voice is calm despite the cocktail of nerves inside of me... us.

"There's still time!" Colton's hand closes around the upper part of my arm, which has been left bare by the corseted dress. His touch is electric and it's all I can do not to cry out at the jolt that runs straight through me.

"Vous ne pouvez pas dépasser la mort."

I spoke the words, but they don't settle into me until Rev repeats them in English, his voice subdued. "You can't outrun death."

For a moment, it's like I'm not there as they look at one another, trying to decide what to do or say. "No." Tripp says softly. "But you can outsmart it."

When I don't say anything, he spins so fast I think he'll fall, grabbing a book from the little table set next to the bed. Colton hurries to his side, looking over his shoulder as he thumbs quickly through the pages, casting a glance at the door where the commotion from the hallway is growing louder. I hear pounding, yelling, heavy thuds. The walls seem to shake around the door, but it holds.

Rev draws closer to me, spinning me to face him. “Look at me, belle sorcière.”

I’m not sure I have a choice, but I do it either way, taking in his almost ethereal beauty. He looks like I’d imagine elves—slender, delicate features, dark hair falling loose of its tie and showcasing his sharp cheekbones. He looks to be carved from the most exquisite bronze and then had life breathed into his chest by an old god who wanted a pretty toy to make the others jealous. “We won’t leave you.”

It’s a promise that puts a twist in my gut. I knew it to be true from the first moment Colton planted that kiss on me, but it doesn’t mean I like the admission. I know what the consequences are, and I’ve long ago come to terms with them. But I’ve not come to terms with the idea of losing them, no matter how harshly I’ve forced myself to imagine it.

I’m opening my mouth to say something when he drops to his knees in front of me, taking my hands in his and pressing a kiss to my lips. It’s not as furious as Colton’s—Rev’s kiss is slow and thick like he’s taking advantage of every second we have left together, looking to turn them into a small eternity. He spreads warmth through my veins, soothing the fear inside of me.

“I’ve got it!” Tripp’s triumphant declaration causes Rev to part from me slowly, leaving my lips wet as he goes to meet the others. They mutter amongst themselves for a moment before they turn to me as a single unit.

Colton brandishes the dagger at his waist, letting it glint in the passing light of the moon through the open window. It’s red with blood, but there’s no time to be afraid or horrified because he stabs it quickly through his hand, jaw tensing around a growl he’s holding in as he pulls it back out and passes it to Rev.

Rev’s hesitation only lasts for a second as he adjusts his grip on the hilt,

and then he does the same thing, hissing through the pain as blood blooms around the space where the blade is buried in his hand. I can see the tip of it poking out from the underside, and my horror is shared with the woman whose body I'm possessing. I'm rushing toward them, determined to stop this, when Tripp takes the blade from Rev. His eyes never leave mine as he stabs himself through the hand.

I'm so focused on him I don't see the others letting their blood drip into a small, earthen bowl. When Tripp adds his, squeezing his hand into a fist and letting it drip down into the waiting basin, they look at me. "Come, Margeaux."

My heartbeat is like thunder in my ears, my mouth dry. I know what they mean to do, what they are doing, and it's not right. Death doesn't like to be cheated. There will be consequences for this action; there always are, eventually. I watched those consequences befall my parents, watched them destroy my sister, and now I'm about to enter into a bargain with open-ended terms. It's not just a bad idea—it's an awful one. But as I look at them, feel their desperation heightening my own, I know I'm going to do it regardless.

I close the distance between us as the clamoring in the hallway reaches a peak, the frenzy only growing by the minute. It all disappears when Tripp drags me against him, crushing my chest to his and his mouth to mine. He tastes like a sweet wine, delicate and bright. The storm parts for him as he breathes life, hope, love, and promise into me with the motion of his lips, the rhythm of his tongue against mine. When he drives the blade through my hand, the pain is dulled by the rush of his kiss, so that when he pulls away and Colton grabs my hand to squeeze my blood into the mix, my head is dizzy, and I relish the burn. The pain is so minuscule, so easily twisted into

this beautiful pleasure, and so insignificant compared to the thought of losing them forever, an idea that only allows my horror to grow by the minute.

I lose track of whatever Colton is doing as Tripp whispers to me, though my brain doesn't process any of what he says. The words, whether important or meant to soothe my frayed nerves, are lost in the chaos of the wind howling outside, the heavy raps on the door, the tangle of voices screaming obscenities from the other side. When Colton presses the bowl to my mouth, it's Rev who tilts my head back, guiding it with his fingers as he silently urges me to drink.

And I do, swallowing the essence of our life forces, consuming the combination of the four of us until at last, he pulls the bowl away, takes a sip of his own, and passes it off to Tripp. I assume he drinks it as well, but I don't see it because Rev takes one last kiss, licking the blood from my lip and stepping quickly back to let Colton do the same as my head swarms with the magic starting to take hold. His kiss is hard and quick but passionate and hot—I can feel his rage, his darkness slipping out from where he's struggled to keep it so long under lock and key.

Tripp kisses me last, pulling me against him so that I can feel our heartbeats syncing, trying to match one another. I don't hear the door open—I'm lost in the languid feel of Tripp's lips on mine, slow and wet. When the arms close around me, violent and angry, far more brutal than necessary, I'm wrenched away from him to see that his lips aren't wet with our kiss. Tears stream quietly down his face without shame as I feel myself being shuffled around, my head knocking into hands as a dozen people tear at me like they mean to rip me to shreds.

I force my eyes closed, blocking the view I have of Colton fighting to break free of the men surrounding them. I force my head clear of the chaos and

picture them as I loved them most, a gorgeous little coterie of men who doted upon me, whispering proclamations of love, feeding me treats, and taking thorough care of my body. I never lose focus on the memory of them that way, not wanting to think long about their anguish tonight. That is far more painful to consider than anything they could have planned for me tonight. Even as we cross into the brutal cold of the night air and the clamor of the crowd grows, even as I'm thrown to the ground and held with my face in the snow, even as hands tear my clothing from me indelicately, letting buttons fly and lace rip, I don't open my eyes.

When the clasp of my necklace makes an audible pop before being wrenched away, I feel more naked than ever before as the villagers continue their assessment of my body.

When they find nothing on my backside, they flip me, exposing me to the brutal chill of the night air, drifts of snow falling over me. My tears freeze on my face, and I clench my jaw tight, trying to abate the shivering as hands traipse over every inch of my body, looking for any imperfections... a witch's mark.

And they find it—the scar on my hip that I'm sure Whit told them was there, the only thing I brought with me from Paris.

“Witch!” It's a single hiss, at first, that turns quickly to a chant. And then there's a raucous clamoring as I'm hauled out of the snow, and a rope is looped over my head with another knotting my wrist behind my back. The coarse fibers scratch at my icy skin, which has quickly surpassed the first phase of numbness and turned to searing pain. “Open your eyes, witch, and face your accusers!”

There's no accusation in their voices or what they're doing—only condemnation. This isn't a trial. It's a sentencing.

If I turn my eyes to the horizon, I can see tufts of thick smoke and raucous flames in the place where I'd forged a safe place for my disciples. It's worse to see that dream turned to ash, so I focus on the villagers with their condemnation, opening my eyes to see the torches blazing against the night, the men and women wrapped in thick cloaks, the pitchforks and axes held like weapons they'd readily use to defend themselves against me. A terrible, wicked witch in their eyes. I can't bear to see the mob, to see how they have all abandoned rationale and humanity, so I focus my hatred and anger on the man in front of me.

His blue eyes are like glaciers in the night, colder even than the air smacking against my naked body. "As a witch who's entered into a devil's bargain, Margeaux Quentin, you will be punished to the full extent of our law! As mayor of Serenity Hollow, I, Johnathan Nathaniel North, sentence you to death by hanging."

There's an uproar of cheering, jeering, name calling.

I think my toes have fallen off by the time they're being lifted, just barely grazing against the snow-covered wood as I flail, trying to get ground beneath me again. It's a futile effort, and the blood taints the pristine beauty of the snow there. I didn't even realize I'd been cut—I'm numb, on the outside, on the inside.

I turn my gaze elsewhere and find them.

My lovers. My protectors. My most devout disciples.

They're all bound with their hands behind their backs, but they won't die tonight, and that gives me the greatest peace I could find in this moment. Tripp's family is wealthy, renowned, and respected. Even the unscrupulous Mayor North wouldn't go toe-to-toe with them by accusing their son of consorting with a witch, regardless of the fact that the entire town knows he

was. The others have been spared by their relation to him. That's the funny thing about accusation and condemnation. A single person on your side can tip the scale. There's a reason that these three are all that remain of the coven I gave them.

I can hear their voices, and see their mouths moving, but the wind whipping my hair around my face and the chanting of the crowd swallow whatever they're saying, so all I can do is reach into the deepest recess of my heart and focus on the love they've given me.

And that gives me the strength to muster the tiniest smile for them as I make eye contact with each of them... just before the trap door beneath me opens and the rope jerks tighter around my neck.

Present Day

THE SENSATION OF BEING pulled into and out of memories feels an awful lot like the sensation of having that door opened beneath me and that rope dragging me into the air. My throat even feels like it's closing as I come gasping back to the present, my chest hammering and every part of my body aching with so many things I can't give name to—so many feelings that are my own, and not my own, and maybe my own.

“We've loved you longer than you know, Marley.” Tripp says, two fingers finding the space under my jaw and tilting my chin up so that he can capture my lips in a kiss. It's every bit as wonderful as it always is—maybe even more so, now that it lingers with the forgotten memory of his devotion. The realization that I've lived another life. And in that one, this man was my first love.

“We've died for you.” Colton says when Tripp releases me, though he doesn't pull away. His eyes stay on mine, like he's trying to tell me something his tongue won't let him.

“We've killed for you.” Rev adds, his gentle touch falling on my shoulder.

I hadn't realized that I was no longer tied. Or maybe the drugs wore off. But now that I turn to look at him, I can feel that my range of motion has been restored, so I take advantage, sitting up slowly. Tripp slips an arm around me, just in case. Or maybe he can't stand to not be touching me, because he doesn't step away when I'm sitting there, marinating in my thoughts, looking around the room. In some ways, I'm more confused than ever. In other ways, things make sense that I didn't even realize I never understood. The scar on my hip that my mother always insisted was a birthmark despite being more raised and pinker than the other ones—the one on my ankle, my ass, my neck, my wrist. My mother always told me how they were kisses from the stars, and since they were mostly small, they never bothered me. But now? Are those all... witch's marks?

My eyes slide to the silver scar on the back of my hand, an identical one in the exact same spot on my palm... like something went right through it. Tripp lifts my hand, but his eyes don't leave mine as he presses a kiss right over that old wound—the wound he made. He seems to understand the direction of my thoughts, because he grins a little as he flips our wrists, so that his hand rests on top. The light overhead catches the pale pink scar, a jagged line right through his palm.

None of this is possible. And yet, it is.

“I'm a...”

“You came by boat to the colonies centuries ago and took a job working for the Archers. And we fell in love with you immediately.” Colton looks softer than I've ever known him to be. His lips are quirked in a gentle smile. “We all pursued you, treated it like a competition, until we realized it was real for all of us. Even you.”

“You...” I look between them, “You're magic?”

Rev smiles now, pressing his lips to the side of my head. It's such an innocent show of affection it makes something inside of me squeeze in excitement. "We figured it out when we watched you heal a cat that got its paw caught in a mouse trap. Such a silly thing to take the chance at discovery on."

"But it only drew us deeper into you... all four of us."

"Four?" I swallow, feeling the bob of my throat as I work to digest all of this information.

Colton nods slowly. "Tripp, Rev, myself... and Whit."

His voice darkens over the last name.

Whit.

Logan.

I think of the memory, of Colton saying that Whit had betrayed us, saying he'd killed him. I suppose part of me had been too busy reeling to grasp onto the meaning, and part of me had thought I was simply hearing echoes of the present.

"He was always close to us, and when we fell for you, so did he. Or at least, we thought he did. He turned you in and, in the end, betrayed the secrets you trusted us with. We knew the heat was on, that there were whisperings about the town regarding you. He convinced you to divest your powers amongst us, so that if they subjected you to a trial, you'd be safe." Rev's words are bitter. His fingers tense on my shoulder. "And you trusted him because we all did, and you knew you could take your magic back. But as soon as he got that power for himself, he turned. I think he meant to kill us all, take our shares..."

"But Colt got him first," Tripp says, with the ghost of a grin playing on his lips.

“Of course, he did.” Rev grins similarly as they glance at Colton, whose arms are crossed over his chest, over that ridiculous black slip of the costume as he leans against the table like this is all sort of dry to him. But he can’t hide the laugh that slips out of his chest when Rev adds, “Because he’s a badass.”

“He’s also a genius.” Tripp winks at him, making me feel suddenly like I’m interrupting something. “He planned this whole night.”

He planned this whole night. So, Mark isn’t the big bad wolf he pretended to be. He’s just the sheep trying to dress like one. My eyes turn to Colton, and I consider turning my rage on him. Instead, I smirk. “Should I leave you the room?”

I’m not sure where my sarcastic remark comes from unless it’s shock, edged in humor. I don’t think through the words before I say them, but they don’t seem offended by the insinuation.

“We already told you,” Colton grins now, letting his arms drop so that he can turn to get close to me, his eyes level on mine as he draws up to my side. “You’re never leaving us again.”

This time, the words don’t feel like a threat. They feel like a promise—like the most beautiful promise I’ve ever heard. It somehow soothes the last of my addled nerves, unknotting the anxiety in my stomach. Despite everything I have seen tonight, despite every one of Colton’s cold, harsh words, and their standing back to watch me fall apart, I feel oddly at peace now. There’s still so much left to discover, but I can feel the truth in their words, the promise that they’ll keep me safe.

“Cheating death isn’t all that difficult,” Rev’s voice is velvety, thick with desire as he eyes the column of my neck. “It took some time to get it right—”

“And I fucked it up by tethering Whit to the rest of us, too.” Colton’s jaw

ticks at that admission, so I reach out to brush the pad of my thumb along his jawline.

“The first time you died, that night you just saw—we got our revenge, killing every man who touched you that night, every man who let them hurt you.” Rev sighs. “And then we killed ourselves because the pain was unbearable. You spend enough time together, you lose yourselves in one another. You forget where you end, where someone else begins. Your death took parts of all of us, all the good we had.”

“Unfortunately, Whit cursed us with his last breath to never be together. And that same night, we bound ourselves to one another so that every incarnation would spur our revival.” Tripp speaks slowly like he’s trying to see if I’m following him. “So, every time you died, we died, no matter who you were born as, no matter who we were born as.” He tries and fails to manage a smile, but I’m too stunned to focus on whatever is bothering him right now. “The sixth time is the charm.”

“None of us knew what we were.” Colton says. “We never knew that we weren’t just kids who happened to grow up together. Whit was working on his thesis when he stumbled across all of this, which led him to Serenity Hollow. His parents didn’t support all the occult stuff he was into, so they sent him here. It ended up being the equivalent of sending a demon to hell, giving him new ideas, new toys.”

“He joined the Church of my dear old dad,” Rev says coldly. “And the fucked-up ideas he already had only got darker.”

“See, when he first figured out what he was, what we are, he tried to recall the magic with a sacrifice.” Tripp looks disgusted just having to think about this. “He was no doubt disappointed when the first murder he committed didn’t go as planned, and he didn’t get any magic out of it. He came here to

find you so that you could recall the magic for him. But he's the dumbest fucker known to man because he thought Audrey was the witch he was bound to." His tone is sour, showing that after all this time, he still hasn't gotten over his dislike for the girl they allowed to be murdered. "He got her all convinced that she was the reincarnation of a beautiful and wonderful witch who had rich and powerful men eating out of the palm of her hand. Can you imagine?"

"Audrey was so obsessed that by the time we realized it wasn't her—"

"It couldn't be her." Colton interjects, glaring at Rev for a moment. "Because none of us loved her, not even me. There was just one person that all of us were drawn to. Only one person it could be."

I don't need them to state the obvious—they're talking about me. "By that point, Audrey was consumed with it. She'd latched onto the idea of all that power, and she wasn't going to give it up without a fight. When she made her first kill, Whit had convinced her she was making a sacrifice in exchange for magic, that if she just did this one thing, she could become the high priestess of Serenity Hollow... that she could be you."

"But Audrey had no magic, not for a single moment of her existence. She didn't get anything from it... other than a certain police chief closing in on her. It would have been so easy if your dad had just thrown her in jail, let the jury deem her insane, and then locked her up in the cuckoo bin like she never existed."

The mention of my father puts me back on edge, a jarring dose of reality in what's all started to feel like a fever dream. "My dad?"

"He underestimated that little bitch." Colton's words are as cold as his tone, which is closed off. I can tell he doesn't want to talk about this part, but he

powers through it for me. “She swindled Jake into helping her, manipulated him with her run-through cunt.”

I suddenly feel like I can't breathe. Rev strokes the nape of my neck while Tripp's fingers curl around my own, and I stare at Colton, waiting for the shoe to drop. “What did they do?”

“They cornered your parents before your dad could corner her. They made it look like a crime of opportunity and surely got his cousin to suppress the evidence. She thought she was getting away with murder, and she was getting dangerous. And she had her hooks in you *so deep.*”

I don't think he intends sexual connotations, which is great because my brain isn't even processing the information he's handed me already. And he's not done yet. “When she decided to kill you, we had to get involved.”

“She... what?”

Audrey was difficult and stubborn, and now that I'm older, I can see that she was probably toxic, too. But to suggest that she killed my parents or that she wanted to kill me is ridiculous. I don't have those same doubts about Jake... not given how he acted after everything.

“Whit was our ringleader.” Rev says ruefully. “He introduced us to our dark history and helped us see who we really were. And he was charismatic. He sold a lot of people on our history, on the promise of having a place among us in the ‘new world’. I'm sure it's how he got Mark and his little cronies in on it, but he'd worked here at this amusement park that was oh-so-conveniently owned by the Norths, so he orchestrated the whole thing and sold it to Audrey as the way to orchestrate your death. Whit told us we were going to sacrifice her because she was out of control, because she was drawing too much attention, because you were the one we needed to recall

that power. He put the idea of all that magic into her head, and when he realized she was nothing, he turned his back on her.”

“The manipulator got outplayed by the puppet master.” Colton laughs ruefully. “He told her if you were gone, she could take your spot. But it was all a ruse to dispose of her before she could become a liability. And his plan worked. He got that magic, just like he wanted. She wasn’t even dead before the power rushed back to him because you were there, feeding his magic. He used it to finish her off, to manipulate the security cameras, to establish our alibi.”

“The three of us never wanted the magic, princess.” Tripp shakes his head. “He used us to help him get what he wanted, but we just wanted you.”

“And that was our mistake.” Rev sighs. “While the three of us were trying to pick up the pieces for you, he rallied Mark, Nick, and Carson and got them to run you out of town. By the time we noticed you were gone, so was he. He hunted you down, watched you, waited until you sought him out, and then took hold of you, erasing us from your memories.”

I must look dubious. To be fair, the thought of one guy organizing all of that with real people, moving them around like life-size pieces of a chessboard, is pretty ridiculous. “That’s why we called him the puppet master,” Rev says, like he’s just heard the thought I didn’t vocalize. “He knew just what strings to pull to get people to do his bidding. In one of those lives, I guarantee he was a cult leader.”

I start to say that it sounds like he was one in this life, too, but I stop when Colton speaks. “Audrey knew exactly what the rest of them wanted to do to you—exactly what they ended up doing to her. And she still convinced you to come with her, to meet up with Mark and company, to walk into what she thought was going to be *your* death. That’s why they went ahead, why Mark

held you back. They drugged you and Audrey, though you were both stupid enough to take it voluntarily.” Colton sounds like he’s disappointed in me about that, but he doesn’t stop there. “While you were busy letting him use you like a toy, we were getting into costume... Audrey was getting into character. She’d get to play two parts that night—the psycho killer who delighted in her best friend’s death and the grieving, victimized best friend. That two-faced mask that’s embedded in Nick’s skull was what she thought was going to be hers. It was really the perfect representation of Audrey. When we turned the tables on her, all she got to play was the part of the victim.”

“The role she played best,” Rev mutters.

Tripp laughs, but there’s no humor in the sound or in his eyes as I turn to look at him. “Sorry, but you’ve always been so blind when it came to her. The only time I’ve ever wanted to shake you, to make you open your damn eyes, is when she was twisting you around her finger.”

It’s a shockingly brutal proclamation; It makes my mouth fall open in surprise. “I wasn’t just being an ass when I said you love to let people manipulate you, Mars.” Colton sighs heavily. “She fucked with your head, preyed on how much you missed your sister.”

“She didn’t—”

“She fucked your boyfriend,” Rev says harshly. He looks apologetic when I find his eyes, as if realizing how ruthless he came across.

“She used you, abused you. She called you names behind your back *and* to your face, she stole your clothes—”

I’m opening my mouth to say that none of that is true, but Colton stops me with a gruff laugh. “She was *buried* in your dress.”

I stare at him, trying to remember if I said anything to them about that. My

mind is a tangle of thoughts, a tree with roots wrapping in a million directions, some of them twining together. “How did you—”

“You think I don’t remember you wearing that to your parents’ funeral?” He eliminates the rest of the space between us, his mouth hovering just in front of mine so that I can feel the air moving away from his lips when he speaks. “I remember, baby. I remember how bad my cock hurt when you bent down to put something in the coffin, and the hem of your dress rode up to expose just a little too much of your thigh. I remember how bad my chest hurt, ached to give you some kind of comfort, but damn if my cock didn’t hurt harder.”

I don’t know when he grabbed a knife, but Colton skates it up my thigh, illustrating his point nicely as he guides the dark material of my dress off my skin, exposing me little by little. “That was the day that I knew I was sick, just as you said. How could I sit there, holding the hand of the bitch who killed your parents—people who were better to me than my own family—my heart breaking for you, and still think about bending you over the coffin and fucking you until the sadness was gone?”

“I…” I don’t have an answer for that, just like I don’t have an answer for the fact that I’m tense under that blade, desperate for him to do something with it, with *me*. It’s like I’ve heard his words, but they haven’t registered—like my brain refuses to compute them.

“We were supposed to keep you safe, help you put the pieces back together, and figure out who you truly are. But then I guess Whit got it into his head to keep you all for himself again. That was likely his plan all along—greedy fucker.” Rev looks like he would love to have a moment alone with Whit to show how he really feels, but I’m guessing he got that chance, seeing as he’s lying in a morgue somewhere.

“We thought you abandoned us, that you didn’t trust us to help you through it. Your disappearance was the harshest rejection. You broke all of us that day.” Tripp, always wearing his heart on his sleeve, makes my heart feel like it’s breaking, too. I didn’t want to leave them. The last thing I ever wanted was for them to be hurt, which is exactly why I did what the others demanded. I ran.

“And the others wanted the magic that Whit promised them, the power. They got bent on revenge. Three years of being denied what they were told was theirs—the power, the magic, *you*...”

“Which is why we were so pissed when you came back. You left with no explanation, and you showed up without a call. It’s why we had to punish you that first night. We thought you chose Whit. We didn’t know at first that he chased you out of town so he could follow you, watch you, stalk you. You never knew he was there the whole time, long before you realized the rest of us were watching you.”

“He kept you dependent on him, needing him so that he could use you. He fucked with your head while he fucked your body, trying to erase us. He didn’t want you to remember us, to come back to us.” Rev licks his lips. “It’s why we’re going to spend the rest of forever erasing your memories of him, of his touch.”

“After years of torture, we all wanted to make him suffer. And when his cloaking enchantments started to fail, we found you and started to get our revenge, toying with him until it was time to bring you home.”

“Killing him was even more satisfying the second time around.” Colton sighs wistfully, taking the moment to reminisce on an apparently fond memory.

“And taking all that power he stole

“So, you stalked me to... torture him?”

“You have a lot of questions, baby.” Colton says, his fingers massaging the top of my thigh, inching closer to my aching core. “And we’ll answer them all. But first, we have a surprise for you.”

Their last surprise wasn’t a great one as far as I’m concerned, so no part of me wants it, but I can’t deny the ripple of lust, liquid heat that pulses through my stomach as he drags the blade higher, using even less pressure as he turns it flat and skates it over the silky fabric of my dress, up my shoulder, and down into my hand—right where Tripp stabbed me with it in the memory.

“Together or apart, we’ve slain all your demons, baby.” His fingers brushing my hair behind my ear sends a shiver down my spine moments before his words in my ear chase another behind it. The breathiness in his voice barely conceals his hunger, but I don’t know if it’s for me or for whatever vengeance we’re about to seek. “All except one.”

Demons I never knew I had and ones I did. I hadn’t known who was behind all those masks or that we were all inexplicably tethered to one another by some strange magic that apparently transcends death. I hadn’t known that Logan was Whit, that I was little more than a pawn in their game. But I’ve known for a while that Jake was somehow involved in everything, even if he wasn’t there the night Audrey died. Apparently, he’s responsible for the death of my parents—at least partially so. And he’s the only demon we haven’t slain, so when Colton offers me a hand and helps me off the table, I can already see the writing on the wall.

There’s a clamor behind me, and I turn just in time to see the bottom of the thick red curtains pulling away from the floor. Rev’s leaning casually against the side of the stage, slowly lifting his palm through the air, guiding the curtains without touching them.

I don't know where Tripp got to, but he isn't anywhere to be seen, and I can't look for him when the curtain reveals more of what's behind it. A pair of scuffed up tennis shoes, thick chords of rope binding legs to a chair, more of the same binding someone's chest, the thick silver tape over a mouth, and then his distinctive nose with the bump in the side, the result of a hit he took on the field during senior year. It's barely visible under all the blood, but it's there.

My heart catches in my chest, faltering as I try to figure out how I should feel about all of this—seeing him in danger, hearing that he cheated on me with Audrey, being told that he had a hand in killing my parents. I don't know what I should believe. He was so important to me at one time, but Tripp and Rev and Colton? They were too.

My memories are addled, like they were given back to me in a jar and then it was shaken up. There are more than I know what to do with, more than I can bare to contemplate right now. But for all of Logan's mind games, I recognize a few things that I know to be true. Tripp was my childhood, Rev was my mock therapist before I truly needed one, always willing to listen, and Colton was there for me when no one else was. It's still so hard to believe that they pulled this entire stunt, going from doting almost-boyfriends to vicious predators to... whatever they are now. I don't know.

And I can't breathe.

“Calm, notre reine.” It's Tripp's luscious voice in my ear, the comforting weight of his hand on my shoulder even as Colton squeezes my hand quickly. I heard him say those exact words in that vision I had—the memory. But now they feel distinctly familiar, not just like I've heard them spoken. This is more like *déjà vu*—I feel it in my body, as surely as if I stood there two weeks ago, two years ago, two hundred years ago...

Jake's eyes are wide as he takes me in, not even bothering to look at any of the men with me. His face is also terribly pale underneath all that blood. He's trying to make noise, but it's little more than an unintelligible hum as he strains against the gag in his mouth.

These were his friends. They grew up together—we grew up together. We chased each other around the neighborhood, played soccer in the cul-de-sac, and spent weekends staying up late watching scary movies or trying not to fall asleep at the diner after loading up on burgers and fries.

I know the shift happened when Audrey showed up. She eased the pain of my sister's growing up and moving on, but it came at the cost of everyone else I loved, our entire dynamic as a group. We went from a small army of friends to something of a foursome for a while when Audrey set her sights on Colton, and Jake finally made a move on me. Tripp and Rev fell away from us, choosing not to be the fifth and sixth wheel. And then, at some point, our dynamic changed again. Instead of it being the four of us against the world, it was me and Audrey. Jake pulled away, Colton was always busy, and Audrey was always ducking him. Slowly, every one of them put distance between us. It's weird to be standing here in front of them now, the four of us banded against Jake, a united front.

“Jake here has something he wants you to see,” Colton says, gesturing toward his former best friend as if he can't be bothered to get any closer to him.

“The truth is sometimes harder to stomach than secrets and lies,” Rev turns to fix me with a level look, assessing. “Once you see this, there's no going back.”

There's no going back.

I almost laugh.

Not sure what they think there is to go back to; I have no clue about the ramifications of this night. I'm already a suspect, or at least a person of interest in Logan's murder. Now, there are three more bodies, soon to be four. I've been tied up, thrown in a trunk, nearly assaulted, almost drowned, and told that my entire life is a lie, magic exists, and my men have been my lovers across time and space. If they think I'm capable of going back to being *just Marley*, they're sorely mistaken. I think we crossed the point of no return when Colton let me think they were really going to stand by for whoever caught me first to have their sordid way with me.

"It's going to hurt, Princess." Tripp's voice in my ear almost makes that sound seductive—the twisted little bitch inside of me takes those words as a promise. If there's one thing I'm learning about myself, it's that I *like* to hurt. Colton wasn't wrong when he said I love to let people manipulate me, and I can't deny that even under everything tonight has thrown at me, I'm still buzzing for them like we're magnets being held just out of reach of one another, just close enough to create that static pull.

"I can take it."

"Yeah, you can." Colton doesn't miss the chance at innuendo, his voice strained with the desire to prove me right.

Present Day

JAKE'S COVERED IN A cold sweat, clammy under my hand as I lay it over his forehead, willing a memory to unfold around me. Touching him is repulsive, and not just because he's sweaty and bloody and looks distinctly haunted. He made it easy to sever the ties I had to him by being flaky, anxious, and controlling. The night Audrey confessed that he'd tried to force himself on her, he was forever tainted to me. But Jake has the answers to the questions I still have... or rather, the proof.

Tripp insisted that we all had to hold hands, much to Colton's irritation, so he's on Jake's other side, his hand on his shoulder since they didn't want to bother with untying him. Rev is next to him, linking hands with Colton, who is glowering as he stands facing Jake with hatred so tangible it clouds the whole room... the whole theater where Audrey died, right where he's tied up.

"I don't think this is going to work." I sigh my frustration, glaring at Rev because he has the audacity to laugh at the look of disgust on my face as I pull my hand away from Jake's head, wiping it on the skirt of my dress. "I don't have magic."

“No.” Tripp says slowly, like I’m a five-year-old he’s telling something to for the tenth time. “You don’t have powers anymore. You divested them, and when you died, that became permanent. But we have your magic, and it’s stronger with you.”

“Then maybe *you* should all be trying to pull the memory out of his head.” I snap. “Or maybe you need to touch him on the head that he *actually* thinks with.”

“Just because I play with both teams, it doesn’t mean I’m willing to do *that*.” Tripp rolls his eyes at the same time Colton grunts, wrenching his hands free of both my grip and Rev’s. He strides across the distance right up to Jake, snatching up a fistful of hair and using it to yank his head back so roughly I actually let out a startled cry, thinking he’s about to snap his neck right then and there. But then Colton slams his hand against Jake’s forehead like they’re about to spar in a UFC match, and the dimly lit room explodes with light so bright I have to squint against it.

When the brightness eases enough for me to lower my hand from where I’ve been attempting to block the intrusion, I see that we’re in the locker room at the high school. Judging by the fact that there are jerseys and soccer balls strewn about, I’m guessing it’s the boys’ locker room.

It’s not just me this time—Rev, Colton, Tripp, and even Jake are beside me, on the edge of the light where it meets with the shadows of reality. And in front of us are a younger, arguably more good-looking Jake and a very much alive Audrey. She’s in her cheerleading uniform, straddling him on the wooden bench, her lips hovering just in front of his.

“Stop overthinking everything, Jakey.” She simpers, rubbing a flat palm over his chest. Her words are amplified and echoey, like she’s speaking into a microphone, but I’m guessing that has more to do with whatever magic this is

than how she really spoke to him. I can hear the seduction in her tone, the innocent, doe-eyed act. She got away with a lot of shit because of that look, those eyes, the way she would speak so softly. I always knew that much, even if I still haven't reconciled her with the version of her that the guys witnessed. Though, watching her practically grind on his lap like she's auditioning for the Brass Flamingo has me second guessing her loyalty to me. "Just do what *feels* good for once."

Jake's lips part, looking for words to turn her down, but he doesn't. I can tell by the crease between his brows that he's conflicted—a bead of sweat runs down his forehead, and I'm not sure if that's the result of whatever exertion he did before coming into the locker room or the mental strain of trying to decide whether to do the right thing or the thing that feels right.

Audrey rolls her shoulder, pressing her chest more into his face, her cleavage grabbing his focus as she tosses her hair in a sheet down her back. And that's when I realize it's blonde.

When she first showed up in Serenity Hollow, it was with bleached blonde hair that she quickly abandoned in favor of a shade closer to her copper roots. I remember the process because it took three months of me accompanying her to the salon four times to get it to *just* the right color. All that work, just for the mortician at the funeral home to dye her hair dark brown.

"This was..."

"Junior year," Colton says quietly, confirming the thread of thought I just realized. Jake and I had just started dating the July before that year. Audrey died her hair by that Christmas, and I'd never forget the timeline because she claimed she did it for her part in that year's rendition of *The Nutcracker*. Jake and I had been dating for months before this.

Heat spills over my cheeks, rage twisting my gut.

They betrayed me... and I'm sure this wasn't the first time.

I think of the night Jake had her pushed against the wall, and I walked in. She'd told me he was trying to force her, but I know better. Nobody ever forced Audrey into anything. Nobody ever even tried.

"I—want to..." Jake's tongue flicks out over his lips like he can taste her without touching her, get his fill without actually doing something wrong... something like cheating on me with his best friend's girlfriend.

"I'm giving you permission." She says, guiding his hand to the thighs spread around him. His fingers are skating under that fabric, and we don't need to see what happens next to know.

The memory fades just as another comes to life. Seeing myself—my past self—is eerily uncomfortable, but it's the first thing I notice when we arrive in this new memory, the four of us standing under a streetlight. Or rather, five of us, since Jake is there too, all tied up in his chair. It's kind of comical, actually, seeing him from the corner of my eye, but I can't really pay any mind to him when I watch myself lean through the window of the driver's side and kiss past-Jake goodbye. I can see us through the windshield clear as day, or clear as the starless night around us, his hands still on the steering wheel, his chin tilted up to mine, my hands braced against the open window. I can also see Audrey in the passenger seat, her feet on the dash, her arms crossed over her chest, looking bored.

It wasn't uncommon for her to beat me to the passenger seat or call shotgun before it ever crossed my mind, and honestly, I liked sitting in the middle, being rooted in between them. I was always the center point of conversation and could carry it on more easily with both of them in front of me, and their relationship had always begun and ended wherever I was concerned, so young and innocent Marley never batted an eyelash at that. But as I watch

myself wave goodbye to Audrey and traipse up to my front door, I realize how stupid I was. The door has just shut behind me when Jake lunges across the space to the passenger seat, dragging Audrey against him. I see him tangle his hands in her red hair and know that this is, without a doubt, well into our relationship.

I don't even want to watch, and I almost don't care, because, from my peripherals, I catch my porch light flicker back on.

The door swings open. And then I feel like I'm free-falling, though it's not at the dissolution of the memory this time. This time, it's at the sight of my dad.

The sight of him puts a lump in my throat, tears in my eyes. He looks exactly how I remember him—invincible, strong, capable of shouldering the weight of the world. He looks like he could put me back together with a single hug, erase years of hurt, make all of this pain worthwhile.

My heart clenches, and I'm already moving for him when Tripp's hand catches mine. "He can't see you."

But I swear he's looking right at me—or right at us. "Dad!" I cry, because it's been years since I talked to him, years since he looked around for the sound of my voice. I don't feel any shame in admitting that I was a daddy's girl. While I loved both of my parents, the bond I had with my father was deeper than anything else. He was the one person I'd consistently trust my heart to, and he was the one person who never gave me bad advice, let me think I was overreacting, or told me to suck it up. As much as Hadley was my best friend before Audrey, she often hit me with what she considered to be tough love, and my mother just never understood why I was worried about things she considered to be frivolous. But my dad? He was my hero in every sense of the word. And watching him now, silhouetted in the light from the

porch, so close and yet so far away, is wrecking me in a way I hadn't considered to be possible.

I've just broken free of Tripp's hold and started running to the door when the memory pulls away, the black fog tripping me and spitting me out into the dark night. Someone grabs my arm and helps me to stand, but I don't turn to see who. I'm more focused on the memory—a clearing in the middle of the woods. I can hear rain falling from around us, but something seems to keep it from falling in the clearing, where Audrey and Jake and Whit are standing with something on the ground between them.

No, not something.

Someone.

My head is spinning, and there's a lump in my throat that may be permanent, my disappointment at losing the memory of my father manifesting in a visceral form. But my own needs are quickly called into question when I realize what they're doing. Though tape covers her mouth and much of her face is obscured by thick curtains of black hair, I know who is on the ground between them, her arms and legs tied together.

Jenny Clark.

I recognize her bright green eyes, glowing in the light of the fire before her. My father worked her case when she was a missing person, and while I'd had a terribly morbid curiosity, he obviously never filled me in on any of the details. But her eyes had been burned into my soul from the first time I saw her missing poster tacked on the school message board, right in between an announcement for theater auditions and cheerleading sign-ups. I'm not sure when my father began to suspect my best friend of this murder, not sure how long she was missing before she eventually was found. My dad never

revealed that last bit of information that I only found out from Tripp earlier tonight.

We have to help her.

I *want* to say those words. They're thick and heavy on my tongue. But I know by now that we can't change things here—we're ghosts visiting the past, watching moments stolen from time. "This was gruesome," Rev says calmly, echoing Tripp's earlier words. I didn't realize then who he was talking about, but now it makes sense.

I consider asking him how he knows, but as I watch Audrey's mouth moving and Jake lifting a giant, curved blade and catch Whit's wicked grin, I realize the claim is true regardless. The blood rushing in my head keeps me from hearing what's being said, but I'm actually grateful for that when the blade comes down and slices across her naked abdomen.

We're far enough away not to have to see the gore, but Jake's turning his head away from his former self, so Colton grips him and forces him to look at what he did... what he's still doing. Because they don't stop at one hit. They keep going, their stabs growing frenzied until Jake passes the bloody weapon to Audrey, and she continues. I've been watching in horror, but I close my eyes when Audrey takes the blade. This is the *definition* of overkill... I'm pretty sure Jenny died somewhere between the fourth stab and the fifth. I haven't been keeping track of how many times they've plunged that blade in her, but it's well past that.

And what's worse is that I don't see what their motive is. They said Whit convinced her she was making a sacrifice, but nothing about this seems ritualistic. It feels unhinged.

I feel Tripp's arm wrap around me, and just as I'm deciding I've seen enough, the memory collapses.

But it's not over. The next stop in our tour-de-fuckers is a parking lot. There are cars all around us, and we're crowded together between two parking spaces. And so are Jake and Audrey.

This is the closest we've been to them since we started memory hopping—they're right there, hunched down in front of us, dressed in dark clothes with hoods pulled high over their heads to conceal most of their faces in shadow. The evening sky is light against their dark forms, still more day than dusk. The flash of the silver gun in Audrey's hand assures me that I know exactly what memory I've wandered into. I know that before I even hear them speak.

Even though it's not mine, something about this memory feels faintly familiar. It's something I can't put my finger on, and something I don't have time to consider.

"Fuck!" Jake whispers, his throat bobbing as he hunkers lower and glares at Audrey. "I thought you said he'd be alone!"

It's not lost on me that he's looking at her with abject hatred, and she meets it in her gaze.

"I thought he would be." Audrey hisses back. "She was supposed to be with Marley tonight!"

I want to throw up. The reminder of the guilt I've carried for the last four years is threatening to drown me, and the guys must sense it. I'm still pressed against Tripp from before we left the last memory, but now Rev wraps his arm around my other side. I think they're preparing to hold me up in case my knees give out on me—which I think they may do, when I turn to see my parents walking out of the theater. Despite the parking lot crowded with cars, they're the only people in sight. My mother is laughing at something my dad said, that tinkling sound carrying on the wind.

"You really thought he was taking himself to dinner and a movie?" Jake

snaps, rubbing his hands on his pants. They've crept forward, right through us. I didn't even feel anything, not a rippling of wind or the sensation of being breathed upon. Nothing. Because I'm not really here.

"Shut up!" Audrey hisses, pressing a hand over his mouth.

He overpowers her easily when he wants to. Prying her hand away from his face, he says, "We'll have to find another way."

"We can't wait!" She snaps as though she didn't just warn him to keep his voice down ten seconds ago. "Do you want to go to jail for murder? You know we don't have a death penalty here, right? That means you'll rot in prison for the rest of your life. You'd better learn to take it in the ass, because you won't be giving it anymore... at least not for a while as they break you in!"

Her words make me feel even more sick on so many levels, and all the while, my parents are drawing closer. They're still laughing at some private joke, my mother flourishing her arms as she speaks, and all the while my dad looks at her like she hung the moon. I want to run to them and shield them with my body, or wrap them in a hug, or tell them I love them one last time. But even if any of it would matter, I'm too late because Audrey yells 'now' and before I can move, they've run out from between the cars.

The first shot hits my father square in the chest—I'm not sure if Audrey has good aim or if the world just worked in her favor like everyone else did. I close my eyes before the impact that knocks him to the ground, but I see her arm raised and hear the shot, the scream, my mother's sobs, Jake's yelling. There's a moment where it all stops. It's as quick as a heartbeat. And then I hear my mother's voice, small and confused, as she says, "Audrey?"

The second shot rings in my ears just as the memory melts from around us until we're back in the theater.

The four of us stand in front of Jake, who has tears and snot running down his face and is desperately trying to say something. I can feel my own streaming down my cheeks, my heart shattering for a second time tonight... maybe a third. My broken pieces are all loosely arranged in the semblance of something like they used to be, held together by band-aids that let the pain bleed through the cracks.

Watching my parents die, I am certain that a part of me died. I don't think it's an important part, not an identifiable part, but I can feel its absence. It's like the space I'd been holding for Audrey, for Jake, for Logan and the others, has been walled off.

I looked at Audrey as the victim. Young and beautiful and so beloved. I'd thought she was innocent, just another casualty of men who thought they could take what they wanted and do as they please. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Audrey was a victim of her own greed, her desperation, her lust for power in whatever form she could get it.

I'm done grieving them, done mourning people who wouldn't have done the same for me.

"Well, there's the whore's greatest hits." Colton says darkly. "She already paid for her lying and cheating, but now it's her little accomplice's turn."

Throughout the memories, Colton didn't try to offer me any comfort. He simply stood and watched as Tripp and Rev tried to soften the impact of what I was seeing. Now that I look at him, I know why.

He's still not over it. Audrey was his girlfriend, and she cheated on him—with Jake and Carson and who knows how many other people. He says he didn't love her, but he's definitely still angry, and that anger eclipses everything right now. That anger also fuels my own.

Watching my boyfriend betray me was bad enough. Watching it be at the hands of someone I thought was like a sister to me is even worse. But watching them kill someone like they were just trying to see how it felt and then going after my parents? That was downright impossible to conceive. And this darkness that's swirling inside of me, the culmination of this intense night, needs an outlet.

Jake doesn't get to cry over his own actions.

I stride across the distance and rip the tape from his mouth without an ounce of hesitation, catching him in the middle of blubbering incessantly. "I never would have—" His words fall short abruptly as my palm crosses his face, slamming against his cheek and lower jaw so hard that it makes my palm sting. As dumb as he is, he seems to have enough sense to grit his teeth and take it instead of trying to convince me that was undeserved.

Behind me, one of the guys sucks in a breath while another chokes on a laugh. I don't even know what to say. Words aren't sufficient, but I need Jake to make them matter. I need him to give me the slightest bit of doubt that he was really complicit in all of this, even though I saw it with my own eyes. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

No, wolves are better than that. They attack when provoked— when they have to defend themselves or their property. Rev, Colton, Tripp... they're wolves. They attacked tonight to secure what they care about—me. Snakes, on the other hand, bite because it is in their nature. I remember hearing that old fable when I was a kid, and I became irrationally terrified of snakes. What a shame I never realized the two people closest to me were snakes all along.

Jake the fucking snake.

"Go ahead," I tell him, bending down to get level with his face. My own tears have stopped, the hurt replaced by rage. The dark circles under his eyes

that I noticed last night have only deepened. When Colton left me in the care of the other two, did he bring Jake here, all in preparation for this? Has he been tied up all night? “Try to explain yourself. I really want to be entertained.”

“Marley, I—”

“No.” I turn to Colton just as he steps forward, waving a hand at Jake, who immediately clamps his mouth shut, his jaw tense. He watches me as he comes to my side. “Nothing he says is going to change what he did. Do you really want to let him have this? You want to let him poison you with pretty lies and claim that he never meant to hurt you?”

“Nothing he says is going to make me believe he wasn’t responsible. I just saw firsthand that he was. But I deserve to know why.”

“You saw why!” Colton growls, stepping up to me so that I’d be afraid of him if I didn’t trust him. Maybe it’s wrong to still believe in him after everything tonight, but I’m not sure it’s a choice for me. He’s so tall that he makes me feel small in the best way. He can tuck me into his side and keep me safe... when he’s not busy terrorizing me himself.

“Colt.” Tripp warns, at the same time Rev steps forward to brace a hand against his chest, warning him not to push it.

“Then why do you care?” Colton demands, searching my eyes as if he’ll find the answer there before I can open my mouth.

“Why do *you*?” I snap, smacking him in the chest myself, on the opposite side of where Rev’s hand sits. Hitting him feels good. It wasn’t much of a blow, and my palm is still searing from the impact with Jake’s face, but it feels too damn good to stop. I lift my other hand as Rev moves away, letting me hit him on the opposite side.

Colton just takes it in stride, even as the power of my strikes increases, and

the frenzy grows, and I've turned him into my punching bag. I can hear the sound of my name behind me, and I feel someone trying to grab me. But Colton shakes his head, and they back off until, finally, he seizes my wrists in his hands and pushes my arms down.

"I care because I loved you, Marley. I thought you understood that by now."

His words give me pause enough to stop trying to beat the hell out of him (which wasn't going well anyway) and stare at him instead. His dark eyes are full of so many things I can't even begin to understand—rage, despair, pain, desperation, and... love. It's hidden under everything else, but it's there, just as I know it always has been.

We all loved one another in our own ways, and while I never let myself agonize over my dynamic with each of them, I at least knew it was there. I suppose that all shifted when the feelings became sexual. I'd be lying if I said I didn't know they all wanted to see my boobs at some point, but we were teenagers with crazy hormones trying to get a grip on life. Who doesn't want to see a girl's boobs at that age? It's not like it was intense or uncomfortable... it was just a gentle chemistry, each bond unique in its own way.

"Loved?"

"Don't be a brat." He warns, his voice seductively low. "I'll bend you over Jake's lap right now and fuck you so he can see what he missed out on all that time he was running around with the court jester when he could have had the queen."

I clench my fingers, trying not to let myself like that idea. The truth is, Jake *did* miss out on a lot... not just now, not just in the years since Audrey died, not just in the time he was cheating on me with Audrey. And all that time,

Colton wanted me, but he never made a move. “Why?” I manage to ask around the breath that’s still caught in my throat. “Why did you never tell me how you felt?”

“Because I didn’t think I was good enough for you. I didn’t think any of us were, really.”

“Except maybe Tripp,” Rev says quietly.

“And then Jake made his move, and Audrey just kind of... fell into my lap.”

“She fell into a lot of laps, apparently.”

I think of the night we were here, when she was alive, allegedly herding me to my own death. I’d watched her take that pill, watched Carson take it off her chest, and felt something I didn’t really understand then, though I knew it was sexual desire. At the time, I’d wanted to be like her, having men look at me the way they looked at her. Now I realize it wasn’t just that I wanted to be like her. I was, at least a little, turned on by her. Maybe she was part succubus or something. If magic is real, it’s probably not impossible. She had a charm about her—one that people either fell into or saw right through. “So, you dated her?”

“It got me closer to you.” His eyes darken as he gathers my hair into his fingers and pulls me closer to him, so that it may as well just be the two of us alone here. “When we all hung out together, I got to steal glances at you without it being weird. When they went behind our backs and sneaked off thinking they were making fools of us, I had you all to myself. And when I fucked her, I imagined she was you.”

I nearly choke on the breath that’s been trapped in my throat since he told me he wanted to bend me over Jake’s lap. “And when you found out they were cheating together? Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Would you have believed me, baby?” He counters, tipping his head to the side a little like he’s trying to see into my soul to guess the answer before I can voice it. “Or would you have let her weasel you into believing I was crazy, desperate, a liar?”

I don’t have to answer that. We both know the truth. So do Tripp and Rev, and even Jake. I don’t understand it, but it’s like Audrey and I were in a toxic relationship. She shaped my thoughts, influenced my choices, and cut me off from friends and family. We became codependent, or at least I became dependent on her, and she used me enough that I thought she was dependent on me in the same way.

I wouldn’t have believed him then, and Audrey would have turned me away from him entirely. But now things are different. Now, I see her for who she truly was. And my guys saw me then and now for who I truly am.

A little bit twisted, a little bit crazy, a little bit fucked up, a little bit broken. And they love me for all of it.

“Don’t cry, Jakey.” I say, turning to face him suddenly. My handprint still blooms scarlet across his pale face, his similarly red eyes swollen. He stops sobbing for just long enough to look at me with so much hope I almost feel bad.

Almost.

“You’ll see Audrey real soon.”

Colton’s smile is slow to spread, but when he catches my eye, it’s eager. He’s been waiting for this moment for a long time.

“MMM!” Jake struggles against the chair so much that he rattles the heavy legs against the wood stage. The scream that’s trapped in his chest sounds painful, but I can’t bring myself to care about that. I step back, slowly

descending the steps backwards, until I reach the foot of the stairs, and they're all perfectly in my view.

They're all watching me, waiting for what comes next. It's Jake who I lock eyes with when I give the order, crossing my arms over my chest and managing a smile I don't really feel.

“Give me a show.”

Present Day

I WOULDN'T SAY THAT I *enjoy* the show, but I intend to watch it with a certain level of determination.

I watch Jake piss himself, the front of his pants flooding and dripping down the chair as he whimpers, all before they've even made impact. I watch Tripp's eyes flick to mine, assessing my determination to see this through. I watch Colton twirl the blade between his fingers, though we all know now he doesn't need it to hurt Jake when a simple twitch of those fingers could do the same thing. And I watch Rev eyeing me with a hunger I've never seen from him, his desire spurred on by my sense of resolve. He likes me ruthless.

When Colton stabs the knife between Jake's spread thighs, the scream that escapes their hostage makes me think he's just been stabbed right through the dick. I jump, cringing for him before I see that the blade is embedded in the padded seat of the chair, stuffing spilling out from around the puncture. Relief passes quickly over Jake's face, but the tears streaming down his cheeks flow faster as his fear turns to embarrassment. Colton missed, and the

way he's looking at me tells me it was one hundred percent intentional. It also tells me that the danger for me hasn't passed yet. His look is predatory.

"You want a show?" He teases, his lips tilting in a smile before his tongue flicks over them, smoothing it away. "Baby, you *are* the show."

I narrow my eyes at him, not sure where he's going with this. He made it clear just how much he despises my ex—the fact Jake is still breathing at all is a surprise to me, and I don't really know how to feel about it. I want him to be punished, to pay for what he did, to hurt. But does wanting those things make me a monster? And does it make me any more of a monster than him?

"What?"

"Colt," Rev tsks his tongue, but his tone is not nearly as disapproving as he seems to mean it to be. It's silky smooth and deep, and when he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip, I can tell he's conflicted, amused.

"I think we've tortured her enough..." Tripp says, glancing at me slowly. His words lack conviction, like he would very much like to participate in torturing me further.

"I'm not really sure she understands just how much we've missed her for the last three years, boys," Rev says, sensing the direction that Colton is heading.

"I'm not sure she's suffered as much as we have."

"So what?" I laugh, unable to help myself. Suggesting that I haven't suffered as much as them when I literally just watched my parents die and found out that my best friend was responsible for it, is downright ridiculous. But I can't deny the part of me, deep down, that trembles in anticipation, thinking of their last punishment—and the subsequent apology. They'd been glorious in equal measure, and I crave them both. "You're going to let him

live? You're just going to ignore the fact that he fucked your girlfriend behind your back?"

Colton chuckles as his eyes roll over me. "No, baby, I'm not going to let him live." As if to illustrate his point, he flicks his hand behind him without breaking his stride as he crosses to me. Jake's muffled scream sounds like it's bordering on a sob. I tear my eyes off Colton just quick enough to see the red gash appear across Jake's stomach, blood welling up and spreading out over the flannel button-up. "Believe it or not, I'm not the one who has the biggest axe to grind with your former lover. Our guys want their own brand of justice for themselves, Mars."

He's so close now that I'm sure he sees the way my breath hitches when he says 'our guys'. I wonder if he can possibly know how that simple phrase just made my nipples tighten and everything inside of me heat up with liquid desire. I know that they're all close, but I don't know the extent of their relationships with one another. But the possessiveness in his voice makes me constrict, my breaths coming out ragged. "I am a man of my word, Marley Lavigne. I said first to catch you would be the first to fuck you. And I caught you."

My mouth falls open, giving him the perfect opportunity to pull me into him and crush his mouth over my own.

Colton is a dark tornado, picking me up and spinning me through a starless sky before dropping me on the ground, breathless and aching for more. That's what his kiss is like as he goes from zero to sixty, turning me into a hungry, needy mess just in time to drop back to zero when he pulls away. He stole the breath from my lungs and the oxygen from my brain, which is why I lack the good sense to keep my mouth shut when he frees my lips. "You didn't catch me. I gave myself up to you."

Rev's laugh is sharp and abrupt, but it doesn't cut into me the way Colton's gaze does. "What?"

Even Tripp laughs, though I'm not sure if it's for my benefit or Colton's. When I flick my eyes up at him, he's shaking his head, though it does nothing to clear the ghost of a grin on his lips. "You heard me," I say, lifting my chin so that I can see him dead-on. "You didn't catch me, so you don't get to fuck me."

Yeah, I'm a monster. And a brat. There's no world in which I should be egging him on right now, no world in which I'm suggesting that he doesn't deserve to have his way with me. Because that's exactly what I want—what I've always wanted. I'm sick, just like them. But at least we can share the burden of our sickness. They say misery loves company, but that's not the only thing that loves to share. My guys love to share, too—their sickness, their loss, their desires... me.

"You are wicked and wonderful, Marley." Tripp's still shaking his head as he circles Jake, who's trying desperately to get my attention like he thinks he can appeal to me to stop what he set into motion years ago.

"And brave and beautiful," Rev adds appreciatively, fixing me with a languid once-over.

"And incredibly foolish." Colton chuckles. "You want me to catch you, baby? I'll catch you. And when I do, I'm never letting you go again."

There are too many other factors to consider to allow myself to believe that, but I like the way it sounds. I don't want him to let me go. I don't want to run from him again... or maybe I do. I can feel the slickness between my thighs growing as his dangerous gaze assesses me like he's trying to figure me out.

"Colton..." I say, like maybe I can talk him down. This is a dangerous game, even if the rewards are glorious.

“Run, baby,” He whispers, taking a step toward me.

“I’m not scared of you.” I lie even as I step back.

The truth is I *am* scared of him—terrified, actually. I’m terrified of what sort of darkness is in him, of how it calls to mine, of what he can do to me, of what *loving* him can do to me. But underlying all of it, overpowering all of it, is the magnetic pull I feel for him, the same strong attraction I’ve always felt. It transcends how he draws me in, how he makes me feel, how he looks at me. It’s like we’re two halves of something chaotic and intense, and we’ve fought through time and space to be together. And now we finally have the chance.

“You should be scared, baby. Our love will consume you until your heart beats only to set a pace for ours.”

I cross my arms, trying to look unfazed by that. “Oh yeah?”

“Run for your life, Marley.” He says again, stepping closer to me still. I tense my muscles, standing my ground. “Because that’s what’s at stake. Your life.”

“You sound strangely obsessed.” I manage, trying not to let my breath hitch. “You going to lop my head off and mount it on your wall?”

“I like your head attached.” He quips, grinning. “Having my cock down your throat was the greatest pleasure I’ve known yet. But something tells me that’s going to change in just a minute.”

“A minute?” I snap, laughing. The adrenaline and the need are twisting me in knots. “That’s all it’s going to take?”

“No, baby. I’m going to make you squirm. A minute is just how long I’m giving you until I catch you and turn you inside out.”

That sounds deliciously depraved, but I don’t dare let him see that. “I’m not running from you.”

“This will be the last chance you get to do it.”

“Or maybe this will be your last chance to chase me,” I say, fighting the trembling in my legs that’s telling me to go.

“I will never stop chasing you. We will never stop hunting you. Your soul already belongs to us, Marley. It has for three hundred years, for all of your lifetimes.”

“What a fucked-up love story,” I whisper. It’s all I can manage around the need, constricting my entire body like an anaconda, crushing the air from every cell of my body.

“You have no idea.” Colton laughs.

He’s right. I don’t have any clue about my past lives, about what kind of twisted web we’re all entangled in. I don’t know if they know either, but I’d like to figure it out.

“Run, Princess,”

It’s Tripp’s voice that punctures the cloud of my desire. It doesn’t make it disappear, not entirely, but when Rev adds on to his command, he makes it clear they don’t want me to stick around for this. “You don’t need to see what we do to the last person to ever hurt you.”

My chest is vibrating with something I can’t place, and nervous energy swirls like a cyclone inside of me, from the tips of my fingers to my toes. Despite the brave face I put on, despite how much I hate Jake for what he did to me, and to Hadley, I don’t want to watch what they have in store for him.

I do want to know what Colton’s got up his sleeve for me, though I won’t ever let him know as much.

“One last game, baby,” Colton calls out to me as I turn, already starting to run. “Good luck!”

Present Day

I DART PAST MARK'S body, seeing just enough to know that he is, in fact, dead and not about to lunge at me like the horror movie villain he believed himself to be. I don't stop to assess the damage, to appreciate that he's gone. I just sprint past him, back through the maze of eerily empty movie scenes, working my way back to the beginning. I only glance quickly at the camera as I pass, wondering if they're still watching me, if the deck is stacked against me or in my favor.

When I burst through the entrance into the quiet of the night, it's far more beautiful than I noticed it to be before. The adrenaline in me earlier was tempered by fear, by hatred, by contempt and betrayal. But running now, knowing that the men who opposed me, the ones who really wanted to hurt me, are dead? That feels like freedom despite being still trapped in the park with my men. Running now feels liberating, the black silk dress swishing around my ankles, the wind raking its fingers through my hair.

The night is invigorating. I feel more alive than I have since parts of me started dying, more alive than I did even when I chased the high of Logan's

therapy, more alive than I did when I came to this park with Audrey as a teenager, hoping for a cheap thrill to chase away the ache of everything I'd lost. I feel more alive than I have since I was young and careless, hiding from the neighborhood boys, my best friends... back before I ever met Audrey, before Jake ever kissed me, before I knew that my life wasn't only my own.

The cold air stabs my lungs with every inhale, but I focus on breathing through my nose, focus on the splendor of the carousel lights in the distance, the Ferris Wheel lit up like a beacon just near the park's exit, offering a bird's eye view of the rest of the place. I don't love heights, but something about the Ferris Wheel always felt like a safe thrill. And that's exactly how I feel with Colton. Despite the wicked things he's said to me, despite the fact that he's been brutal and beautiful and ruthless, I know in my bones that he's a safe thrill. He may bend me, twist me into knots, steal my breath and make me bleed, but he'd never hurt me... not the way his opposition would have. Not the way Jake did. Definitely not the way Audrey did.

I don't dare turn to see if he's chasing me, don't dare turn back to see if I'm alone in the night. I simply dart toward the beacon in the distance, intending to duck behind the operator's podium and wait him out, maybe even catch him off guard. I can see the padlocked gate from my vantage point in the empty ride queue—they'll be perfectly in my sight when they emerge from whatever they're doing to Jake.

I know I should be more rattled, more upset that I've watched men be murdered tonight. I should be running for my life the way I did an hour ago before everything unfolded. I should be as terrified now as I was then.

And yet, it's like I'm numb to it. It's gross, and it sucks, but either my heart or my head has been hardened by the culmination of my entire life—my past lives, even. The fear that's inside of me now is drowned out by the physical

reactions of my excitement. Heart thumping, breath coming in gasps, stomach twisting and turning with anticipation of what comes next. Not just what comes when Colton catches me, not what comes when we leave, not what comes when the sun rises... all of it. I lived the last four years in fight-or-flight mode, letting the puppet master distract me into thinking I was healing. I don't know if real healing is even possible at this point or if I want it. I've lived with my traumas long enough to know them like demons in my head. If I let them go, would I be letting go of who I've become? And would that be a bad thing, considering I'm not sure yet if I even *like* who I've become?

But I do like who I am when I'm with them. I love the way Colton looks at me like I'm the reason for air in his lungs. I love the way he says 'baby' in that deep voice, even though it makes me cringe when other people say it out loud. I love the way he gives me everything he's feeling, the way he doesn't hold back, and the way that I rise to him. I'm stronger in his presence, stronger because of what we've been through together.

And I like how Rev grins for me when we're not alone, the way his eyes find mine no matter how many people are in a room, and how he makes me feel like I'm the only one who matters. I love the way he whispers the name angel, even as we're doing things that are so sinful his father would probably drown us in holy water. I love how we fit so effortlessly, how I don't have to think or agonize over everything that I say to him. We just get to be ourselves—messy, freaky weirdos.

And Tripp. I think I've loved Tripp since before I knew what love really was. He was my first friend outside of Hadley—the first to treat me like one of them, even when Colton didn't want to play with girls and Rev said I could never keep up. Tripp was the first to love me in this life, and this life is

all that I have right now. Even if he mocked me and called me Princess when I didn't run as fast as them before tripping everyone so that I could catch them, even if he laughed at me when I skinned my knee before pressing his lips to it. There was a time when we didn't have to worry about what we were saying to one another, and didn't have to filter our thoughts in front of one another. Tripp gave me his heart time and time again, and I've constantly failed him.

I won't fail him again.

It's weird that someone I feel so strongly for was just erased from my mind in those dark years when I was away from them. I trusted Logan to help me work through the things I was suppressing, to help me face my monsters so that I could overcome them. Instead, he kept me weak, desperate, needing him. He turned me into a junkie and him as my dealer, leaving me dependent and tethering us together so he could...

So he could what? Use the powers that my presence gave him in secret? I'm not even sure what the point of magic is. Did he get a thrill out of having this wealth of power that nobody knew about? Did he ever do anything with it?

I'm so deep in my thoughts that I don't hear a thing until my scream pierces the night as thick arms wrap around my middle, dragging me up into the air. My feet kick fruitlessly against the little bit of air hovering over the cracked pavement as warm breath dances against my neck. "If I didn't know any better, baby, I'd think you wanted me to catch you."

Colton's chest is warm against my back, his arms secure as he drags me with him from behind the podium. I fight for my freedom, trying to squirm out of his grip, to get on my feet and at least try to outrun him. I'm not just going to fold so easily for him, not going to let him win. But I don't have to 'let' him do anything. Colton takes what he wants and moves with precision.

He knows what he's doing, though I'm too focused on keeping up the fight to realize he's dragged us into the open ride car waiting at the base of the Ferris Wheel—until I feel his arms come out from around me, only to be replaced with the bar swinging shut, blocking us into the little carriage. I don't even have a chance to reconcile that before I feel the lurch, a pull behind my navel that has me squealing and trying to rock back into the seat as we're lifted into the air.

“Nowhere to go, baby,” Colton chuckles, his breath hot on my ear as I feel the distinct outline of his erection pressing against my ass.

I glance at the operator's box, expecting to see Tripp or Rev smirking back at me. But we're alone in the night, the wheel rising on its own. I don't dare look away from the ground, even as the multi-colored lights on it get further and further away. “Colt...” My voice is strangled, my words choked by fear as I adjust my grip on the metal bar—the only thing that stands between me and a freefall into the pits of hell, which is surely where I'm going after tonight.

I feel the same horrible desire I felt at the gala, both afraid of the height and aroused by the danger.

“Mmm?” He's busy sliding his hands up my legs, lifting my dress higher, and baring me to the cool night. I feel the wetness that's gathered between my thighs meet with the chilly air and suck in a breath of anticipation,

If it's possible, my heart crashes in my chest harder as he strokes along the curves of my ass, delicate and teasing as he explores me. Unlike any of the other times we've been in this position, he takes his time exploring me, parting my thighs, massaging them, dipping a finger inside of me.

I toss my head back against his chest, reveling in the way he warms me from the inside out. His body heat does wonders to abate the violent chill of

the early morning, and if we had a blanket, I may actually be content to sit like this all night, letting him love me slowly until we watch the sunrise.

But his patience doesn't last, because he finds a spot that makes me moan and writhe against him, and his cock goes so stiff beneath me I think it may actually break if I sit down on him too hard. Then, those same hands that have caressed me so sensually tighten on my hips. He lifts me off him, his body pressing me over the safety bar. "Enjoy the view, baby." He tells me, threading his hand through my hair and gripping enough of it to lift my chin.

At last, I tear my eyes from the ground, which has blurred below me from the tears in my eyes, hot against the cold wind that's whipping against us harder up here. His lips are on my neck, brushing over my pulse point, making me suck in a breath.

If I don't look down, if I forget that I'm on a Ferris Wheel that's been abandoned for three years, if I ignore that a little bit of metal is the only thing keeping me from plummeting to my death, it's kind of beautiful. The moon is full and bright and looks so close that I could touch it if only I reached out a hand to try. The few clouds in the otherwise clear night are lined with silver, backlit by the moon's glow. The trees in the distance ring us in, the tops of them looking like a blanket of dark snow.

I inhale a gasp as his fingers slip between my thighs, and I let my feet inch further apart despite myself. The wheel moves slowly, but Colton seems to move slower, taking his time touching, feeling, and teasing me. His fingers run over my clit and then sink quickly inside of me, making my eyes roll. "So wet for me, Marley." His words send a shiver down my spine, making everything inside of me draw tighter. He moans just a little when I clench around his fingers, a hungry sound that fuels my own. "You're loving this as

much as I am, my beautiful vixen.” He whispers, the thread of control in his voice sounding stretched too thin.

All too soon, he pulls out of me, leaving the dress bunched over my back, my entire ass out on display for him. The sound of a zipper coming undone rises over my heartbeat, but I barely have a chance to register it because that lurching sensation makes me squeal as the wheel comes to an abrupt stop in the air. My palms are slick on the bar, and I can smell the metal—I can practically taste it as I look down to see all the cars below us swinging erratically. Fear punches my stomach, a reminder that this is insanity, but it doesn’t win out over the arousal.

I feel the warmth of him press against me and take an icy breath, fighting the urge to rock back onto him.

“Colt!” I cry his name as he thrusts into me, spearing me with his cock.

He pushes into me so deep that I cry out again immediately as he reaches a place inside me that is so deep it may as well be a damn reset button. I feel like he’ll come out my throat, but it’s not uncomfortable so much as it is shocking. “I—I can’t—” I rise on my toes, holding the bar tighter until my knuckles glow white under the shaft of moonlight overhead, trying to make some more space for him inside of me. I feel like I’m about to break into convulsions, the shuddering pleasure making me tremble.

“You can take it.” He assures me, his lips pressing a kiss along my jaw as he reaches around to cover my hands with his own. He retreats just a little, offering me a brief chance to breathe before he slams into me again so hard that I feel his balls slap against my skin, stealing my air again.

My moan curls through the night in a silvery plume.

“Fuck,” A sound something between a growl and a whimper rolls through him as he sets a pace. “I love having you to myself almost as much as I love

sharing you with my boys.” He groans.

Despite the filthiness of his words, or maybe *because* of them, I feel myself growing wetter, more slippery around him. I’ve never been so full, and I’ve never been so gloriously terrified as I am every time he slams into me, rocking every car on the wheel right along with our own. “Colt—” I try again, gaining my breath on another retreat. This time, he slips a hand around my waist and finds my clit, making me draw tight against him, rising on my toes.

“Relax, baby,” His voice is strained and hoarse as he finds a rhythm there too, dragging the pad of his thumb over me in small circles that get me to do the work for him. It feels too good to stay still, and his cock is frustratingly still as he stretches me wide. I circle my hips, trying to adjust to him, to match his pace, to get him to move.

But he doesn’t. He only works harder, circles me faster, brings me to the edge in record time... and then pushes me further over the bar so that my entire top half hangs out of the car, the fabric of my dress gaping to expose my breasts to the cool night. It’s the least of my concerns, though, because tears are obscuring my vision, and I don’t know if they’re from fear or need or both. “I’ll never let you fall.” He assures me, letting the safety bar dig into the spot just below my stomach as he pushes into me from the other side.

Pretty words, but it’s hard to believe he is in control enough to make sure that he stays true to them, especially given how he sounds to be on the verge of losing control himself. His sounds make me squeeze him harder, the last bit of control I can cling to as I cede the power to him again. “What if I do fall?” I gasp, but the question is swallowed by my moan as he hits that spot deep inside me again. “Fuck!” I scream, letting the tears fall as I try to blink them away. The wind is colder in their wake, but I don’t care. I don’t think

I'd care if I fell at this moment either because he takes my reaction as a sign of encouragement and doubles his pace, driving in and out of me so fast that I barely have a chance to breathe before he's forcing the breath out of my lungs.

When he pinches my clit, I rocket into the sky, my chest tightening as my release explodes through me. Bits of who I was, who I am, who I have been—they all burst into the night as I scream. I don't know *what* I scream, or if it's even supposed to be a word. Maybe it's just a raw reaction or it's supposed to be a catharsis, or maybe it's the fact that I feel us rocking back and forth through the air like a pendulum as he fucks me harder, faster, never letting me come down while he rushes to join me in the bliss.

I'm trying to form words, trying to dislodge his fingers from my swollen clit, which is pulsing with its own heartbeat, trying to get away from him because he's forcing me into another orgasm before I've even had the chance to come down from the first. "Colt—"

"If you fell," he gasps, slamming into me before his teeth nip my ear. The pain twines with the pleasure that's teetering on agony below my waist, and his words remind me of our circumstances, making me look down.

Whereas before, the ground below us was blurred with my fear, now everything is startlingly clear, in perfect, vivid, excruciating detail. I can see the mirror maze where Carson held me down, the water ride where Nick tried to drown me, the haunted house where Mark thought he was going to claim his prize. All of me is tired and tense, a sheen of sweat glazing my skin despite the cool air. I'm trapped, unable to escape the second orgasm as he hits a spot inside me that makes me scream in tandem with his moan. He doesn't slow until he's done painting me with his release, until I feel him push every last drop of his seed into me.

He's still buried in me, though, when his mouth hovers next to my ear. "If you fall, I'll jump after you."

I still, stunned by the intensity of that proclamation. I'm turning to move, to get a look at him, but he stops me with a gentle kiss on the nape of my neck. It's the most delicate I've seen him be since I came back here, and it's oddly thrilling, like I'm witnessing the amalgamation of the boy I loved and the man I'm drawn to like a moth to flame. "Remember, if you die, I die too. Because this life isn't worth living without you."

Present Day

WHEN THE WHEEL BRINGS us back to the ground, I notice Tripp and Rev, both grinning and looking amused with themselves. I don't know how much they saw, and I don't know if I should be embarrassed if they saw any of it. I'm guessing not, considering Rev begins a slow clap and looks to Tripp conspiratorially. Tripp just laughs, unbothered, so I decide not to be either as Tripp wraps an arm around me and pulls me into his side.

“That was the hottest thing I've ever seen,” Rev groans. “And I barely even saw it all cause you were too far away.”

My cheeks warm enough to fight off the cold air. Now I know what Colton meant when he said I was the show. I wonder if Tripp and Rev took their time killing Jake or if they expedited his death so they could come see the show. “You've got to be hungry after all that.” Tripp grins.

He doesn't specify what *'all that'* is, and I don't ask how much they saw. I don't know what time it is or how much has passed since we left the banquet hall. I feel like it's been ages, like I've lived an entire life in the span of a

single night. In a way, I guess I have. I think when I bled bits of my lives into the night, they collided in the stars and came back to me in a different shape.

My body is tired, cold, hungry... but I feel more fulfilled, and more at ease than I have in years. It's ridiculous, honestly, but I don't contemplate it when Rev sidles up to my other side, slipping his fingers between mine and winking at me when I smile at him.

Colton leads the way to the gate; I'm not sure when he got the keys, but he's already unlocking it by the time the kiosk catches my eye.

I duck out from under Tripp's arm and run to it. They really did leave everything just as it was. The door is unlocked, but as I step into the darkness, there's a little clicking sound, and then the light whirs on overhead. The music still plays, just as it does outside, though I'd kind of tuned it out outdoors. In the shop, it's louder, less easy to ignore as I look around at the rows of merch hanging on the walls, shelves with cups and mugs and little souvenirs.

There's a display stand turned over, like someone left in a hurry and never came back to clean it up. Candy litters the floor, brightly colored wrappers covered in dust, likely the result of some scavengers looking for anything edible. It's weird to remember that I was here with Audrey, that I stood next to her as she picked out a headband and earrings and snapped a selfie in them. It was such an insignificant thing, nothing worth remembering. But now I know that she stood next to me while she had planned my murder—after she had already carried out my parents' murder. I had no clue then just how dark the world really was. I had no clue then just how dark I would become.

For years, I mourned the best friend I thought I had. For years I grappled with 'survivor's guilt', tried to contend with the fact that I'd made it out alive,

and tried to embrace my final girl status. For years, I dealt with the hole-filled memories, tried to wrap my mind around what I thought to be true and what may not have been, wondered what was wrong with me that I remembered something different than what the police said had happened, why I was so sure I'd been with Mark when Colton was so sure I hadn't. For years, I tried various medications prescribed by various therapists, and experimented with methods that were designed to take more from me than they could give.

Audrey may have been the victim that night, but she was the villain every other night. I only wish I knew back then what I know now. I wish that I could have seen her for who she truly was—not the smart, self-assured, independent girl that I thought she was, but as the sniveling, whimpering little pawn of a dangerous man, willing to hurt anyone she had to in order to get what she wanted.

The door chimes open behind me as I grab the shirt off the wall and fold it over my arm. When I look up, it's to face Rev, who has his arms crossed over his broad chest as he watches me. "You gonna pay for that?"

"I think I've earned it." My voice is wry, but I can't deny the ghost of a smile lingering on my lips as I walk out into the night. Colton's walked through the gate already, and his back is to the rest of us as he strides toward the car.

"You've earned the whole damn place, I think," Tripp says appreciatively, dragging me close enough to plant a kiss on the top of my head. "So, what did ya get?"

I slip the shirt over my head, just the way I did with the first one Colton got me. It falls awkwardly around the waist of my dress, but I don't care. When he'd grabbed me this shirt before, I'd assumed it was out of necessity. Now, I realize he has a twisted sense of humor. Audrey had planned to kill me that

night, but I survived her. And I survived the men who took her out of the world. The last one may still be somewhere in my old room, for all I know, but I'm fine with having two.

"I survived Halloween Terror Nights?" Tripp asks, his lips forming a rueful smile as he waits for an explanation. But I think it's obvious.

I don't answer him, following Colton back through the entrance to the park. As soon as I cross the threshold, it's like I can breathe for the first time since... forever. After my screams faded into the night three years ago and my gasping sobs ceased, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Being with Logan had felt like being waterboarded, allowed brief opportunities to breathe before being shoved under the surface again. When they tied me up with belts, and I thought that any good feelings for me were gone, I had thought I might asphyxiate. But walking back past those gates feels like finally having those belts removed, like floating on the surface without fear of being dragged under. It feels like resolution, business that has finally been finished. If I was a ghost, I could move onto the light or whatever. But I'm no ghost... not anymore.

I don't stop until we get to the car, and I turn to take it in one last time, all the bright lights and sounds and the terror. "Why here?"

Colton had said he wanted a show, and I can appreciate the symmetry of finishing where it all began, but why choose such a public place to begin with? Why choose a park with guests still in it to plan my murder? Why choose a place I'd gone with them, with my parents, with Audrey? Why risk getting caught or leave me for the security guard when they could have just as easily dragged me out to the woods to make me watch them kill her?

Colton chuckles a little as if there's something honestly amusing about the question. Rev stops just in front of me, though he doesn't look at me. His

eyes seem fixed on something that no one else can see—something from another time.

“Hallowed ground,” Tripp says quietly.

“This is where you died.” Colton nods back at the park, shining bright and cheery in the dark behind that padlocked gate. From this side of the gate, it doesn’t look abandoned or forgotten. It lacks the eerie quality you have when you’re in the thick of it... or else, I’m just not afraid of it anymore.

As quickly as I let my eyes sweep over the landscape, everything dies in one last hum. And then the darkness swallows it all.

Rather than being unnerved by the darkness, I find peace in it.

I’m not sure, at first, whose hand closes around mine, but when Tripp’s voice sounds next to my ear, I realize how close he is. “You were our priestess... our queen. But fragile men don’t like people worshipping things that aren’t them.”

“We tried to stay out of the public eye, but people had their suspicions about you, about what happened here. When Whit betrayed us, it gave them the ammunition they needed to get rid of you.” Rev’s voice is as dark as the night hiding him from my view, but I can feel that he’s close. “But killing you did no good because you’d already divested your powers, binding us all together. When they killed you, they didn’t expect us to retaliate.”

“They didn’t expect us to burn the town to the ground,” Colton says, expanding on Rev’s little euphemism. “But we did.”

“Every one of them who stood by,” Tripp adds, shaking his head.

“Everyone who listened to you scream without trying to lift a finger in your defense...” Rev’s closer now. I can feel his breath on my lips, and when a cloud shifts, letting a beam of moonlight fall between us, I can see him before me in all of his breathtaking beauty.

“Everyone who watched your blood spill upon the snow,” Colton confirms. “We trapped them all here, burnt them to a town of ash just as they did to what was left of you. And when they were gone, we tried to join you, too.”

“But there’s no rest for the wicked,” Tripp says quietly. “We didn’t get to be reunited in some sort of afterlife. We just got thrown into the same roles, the same bodies over and over again.”

“Cursed to live this life over and over until we could be together, the way we wanted to be.”

“Sometimes it was a matter of the time being wrong. Sometimes, it was the circumstances that were wrong. And as much as I despise him for what he did, betraying you and then us, we never would have made it here in this lifetime either if Whit hadn’t done everything he did. But we severed his connection to us, right before we killed him.”

“He showed us who we are.” Tripp nods. “And now we know that the cycle has been broken.”

I want to ask how they know, but I already know the answer to that. It’s in the air in my lungs and the hope in my chest. It’s on the shirt I’m wearing. I glance down at my chest, looking at the faint green glow of the vinyl letters.

‘I survived Halloween Terror Nights’.

It’s absurd, but I can’t hold back the laugh that bubbles out of my chest. Letting it go feels too good, and I don’t think it’s a choice anyway because I can’t stop. I laugh so hard that tears line my eyes, one of them escaping to roll down my cheek as Rev brushes it away.

When I finally manage to compose myself, I sigh.

“It’s over?”

“The struggle is over.” Rev agrees, his fingers tilting my chin up to his mouth, which presses a languid kiss over mine. It’s soft and slow and so

perfect as he takes his time parting my lips and teasing his tongue against mine. It's a promise, and it's the most beautiful of any I've ever heard.

“But our story isn't.” Tripp says, stealing me away. My lips are still wet with Rev's kiss; I barely even register the loss of his warmth before it's replaced. He crushes me against him with one arm, a grip that promises he'll never let go, while he kisses me exactly like his best friend just did. They've passed me so quickly between them that I'm dizzy, melting into Tripp's chest as he tucks his chin on my head.

But Colton leans over him, guiding my mouth to his with a thumb under my chin. I catch a glimpse of his tattooed knuckles as he brings me right to the spot where he wants me.

His voice is subdued but genuine as he makes his promise. “Our story together is just beginning.”

And then he seals it with a kiss.

Present Day

I LOSE MY BATTLE with my exhaustion, letting the rumble of the car and Tripp's warm body lull me into comfortable unconsciousness. It doesn't feel like a deep sleep, though when I wake up, I feel like I've slept for hours. It doesn't take me long to get my bearings, either. Sitting up, I blink away the last of my fog and look at the large gate we've pulled up to. I turn to see Tripp smirking at me.

“What are we doing here?”

“Did you think we were going to fuck you in your guest house again?” Colton laughs, catching my eye in the rear-view mirror. His lips are quirked into an infuriatingly sexy smirk that I want to wipe from his face. “That bed isn't big enough for all of us.”

All of us.

I don't even have to try to speak around the lump that just put in my throat; The heat rushing to my cheeks surely speaks volumes on its own. Even in the dark, I know he sees it.

There's no pretense, no strings, no hesitation.

“Welcome home,” Tripp presses a kiss to the top of my head, but I can still feel the curve of his lips lifted in a grin. He’s amused with himself, with Colton.

“Home?” I repeat, watching the large gate swing open before us. “You live here?”

I’ve never seen the house that I know to be situated at the end of this drive, but I don’t have to see it to know it’s big and old. People say it’s haunted—or at least, they *did*. And it’s no surprise they did. As Colton pushes the car up the slow incline of the driveway and the headlights catch on something other than asphalt, it’s easy to see why someone would say that. The house—no, the *mansion*—looks like it was drawn from the dreams of Edgar Allan Poe, with gothic architecture and stained glass and turrets like it’s a castle.

“We all live here,” Colton says, tipping his head at Rev, who pulls up beside us in his car and takes the lead. A garage opens on the side of the house, and I watch as Rev eases into it before Colton follows.

The garage is massive. It may actually account for the entire right side of the home, given how many cars are lined up in neat rows in the garage. When I climb out of the backseat, I stand there a moment, taking it all in. Old cars, new ones, shiny and glossy or matte without a topcoat, trucks, and sports cars situated in between SUVs and motorcycles. I don’t even know what I’m looking at, honestly, and it only gets more absurd when I spot the police cruiser with the bar lights on top—the very same one my father used to drive. I nearly choke on my laugh when I remember that Colton is a police officer, that he’s the *chief*, that he murdered multiple men tonight.

“You all live here?” I ask, despite the fact that he already told me they do. For some reason, my brain isn’t comprehending what I already understand.

Colton nods slowly like he thinks I'm too stupid to understand if he does it fast. "Together?"

That gets a laugh out of Tripp, who leaves me there with my jaw open as he heads for a door at the opposite end of the garage. More lights flick on overhead as he walks, illuminating just how huge the garage is. I jump when the door starts to rumble closed behind me, and then realize how far ahead of me they've gotten and scurry after them.

"Wait!" I call, just as Tripp opens the door that leads into the house. He stops, though the other two only brush past him as he turns to wait for me. He says nothing, though that looks to take a bit of effort on his part as he presses his lips together and lets me pass him.

The garage lets out into a large room, which I don't realize is the laundry until I see the units tucked in the corner. It's the size of my entire apartment in the city, but I don't stop to marvel at it, scurrying behind the other guys into a massive kitchen. And I do mean *massive*. It looks like it belongs in the back of a five-star restaurant, but it also has elegant touches—marble countertops, dark cabinets, and gleaming stainless steel. The only thing that looks out of place in the kitchen is its occupants, still dressed in costume.

Rev grabs a jar from the corner and proceeds to shove two cookies into his mouth. At the same time, Colton opens the double refrigerator in front of him and stands there to appraise the contents, the bell sleeves of his costume gaping to expose his thick, inked forearms. I force myself to swallow the breath that got trapped in me at the sight of him looking that damn perfect and flick my eyes to Tripp.

"What are you in the mood for?" He asks, kicking his boots off at the laundry door before crossing to the stove and pulling out a pan. He's shed the bomber jacket he had on, but underneath it, he's still dressed in his suit with

the fleur-de-lis pattern, though he's lost his tie somewhere, and the buttons at his neck are undone. His messy hair is falling loose from where it was brushed back away from his face, little bits of it falling into his warm eyes without his hat to keep it out of them. He looks so at home in this kitchen, like what he's doing is so natural that I feel the awkward knot in my stomach begin to loosen.

"Don't say me," Rev says between mouthfuls. When he catches my eye, he winks before licking another cookie, flattening his tongue salaciously along the edge. Colton snorts his dissent before stepping back from the fridge with a Chinese food box tipped against his mouth. I see him slurp a noodle between his lips with a wet smacking sound that makes my stomach tighten.

If slasher films hadn't already been ruined for me, these guys would have ruined them right now. Because how can I ever look at those masks and not think of a moment like this? It's absurd, and yet, I'm not the least bit put off by it. In fact, I think I'll be having them don those masks once more if this is what comes after.

"Lasagna sounds good, doesn't it?" Rev winks, making me think I'm missing another joke. He rubs his hand over the stomach of his navy jumpsuit, miming his hunger.

"You *always* want lasagna." Tripp rolls his eyes before fixing them on me again. "I'm asking Marley."

My name on his tongue gives me a wicked thrill. I feel it down to my toes, so intense I forget how to speak.

"We're out of lo mein," Colton announces, tossing the empty container into a cabinet that I assume conceals a trash can.

And all the while, Tripp just watches me, waiting for an answer, as if I should be able to think of what sounds good right now and just hope he has

the ingredients to whip it up. My brain is struggling to contend with the absurd normalcy of this moment, but I manage to get enough of a grip on it to ask, “What can you make?”

Rev nearly chokes on his cookie when he laughs. Tripp, on the other hand, is obviously offended, his brows slanting together in irritation. “I can make anything your heart desires. You want a lobster dinner? You got it. You want a croissant from Paris? We’ll be on the next flight, because I know you like it with the view from Les Deux Magots. You want pumpkin pie from Dot’s Diner? I can do that. All you need to do is *decide*.” He cages me against the counter with his arms on either side of me, my back pressing into the countertop. There’s a hint of innuendo in his tone, but it’s just a hint. He wants to feed me before whatever they intend to do with me, and it’s probably a good idea. I woke from my nap famished, the adrenaline of such a long night having burnt through my energy stores.

Tripp looks so confident, so certain he can rise to any challenge I give him. As sexy as it is, the brat in me wants to humble him just a little. “There was this diner around the corner from my apartment...” I hesitate, wondering if I should go with something simple like an omelet or a turkey sandwich.

“The Last Stop?” Colton guesses.

I whip around to face him, shocked, only to find him smirking at me. I’m opening my mouth to ask how he could possibly know that when I realize I already know how he knows that. “Exactly how much did you guys see when you were stalking me?” My tone is defensive, but it’s a sad cover for the embarrassment and arousal warring inside of me.

Rev’s shoulders shake as he holds back a laugh, but nobody answers me. “Their food was overpriced and undercooked.” Tripp rolls his eyes. “But if that’s what you want...”

“Their Cargo Burger is the best thing I’ve ever eaten.” I can feel my mouth watering just thinking about it. As if to illustrate my point, my stomach rumbles in agreement.

“But not the best thing you’ve ever had in your mouth.” Colton waggles his eyebrows, making the heat rising to my cheeks increase a couple of degrees.

“Fine.” Tripp sighs. “Go get a shower. By the time you come back down, your Cargo Burger will be ready.”

I’m starting to tell him I don’t know where the bathroom is, let alone the fact that I have nothing to change into, but Rev dusts his hands over the back of his jeans to rid himself of the cookie crumbs and links his arm through mine with a flourish. “Right this way, ma’am.”

I consider hitting him over the head with the frying pan for calling me ‘ma’am’, but he’s already whisking me out of the kitchen toward a set of steps in the dark hall. “Watch your step. The stairs are steep.” He warns, nodding at the wood that creaks under our feet.

“Why do you live here?” I ask, taking in the portraits lining the stairs—each one of them is an oil painting, all in gilded frames portraying pictures of the same people over and over—Colton, Rev, Tripp. And me. Though there are only four subjects in the paintings, they’re all different. It’s as if whoever crafted these had never seen another face besides ours. In addition to the clothes changing every time, they all have little deviations from their previous portrait. A scar on the brow of Colton in one, his hair long and loose in another, making him look like the beast who turned back to a prince. Me as I looked in my memory earlier tonight, and then me with my hair lighter and set in curls. It’s disconcerting, and I feel like their eyes are following me as we climb the staircase.

“The Winthorpe Estate is where we used to meet when Whit first told us

about everything. His Uncle owned the place or something. It's where he introduced us to our past, to our destiny. When he skipped town, we took the place over for ourselves."

"And you kept it because...?"

"It has sentimental value, Mars. Don't you recognize it?"

I blink, wondering what I'm supposed to be recognizing. And just like that, I do. I recognize these very steps from being dragged down them hundreds of years ago. The memory doesn't come the same way it did earlier. Whereas before I watched it unfold, now I remember it as distinctly as if it happened yesterday. This time is more *déjà vu*, less 'stranger in my own memory'.

Rev seems to know the minute I've latched onto the memory because he holds me tighter to his side, though I don't know if that's for my benefit or his. "This is insane." I tell myself.

You don't grow up in a town like this and not believe in at least *some* kind of magic—maybe not rabbits that get pulled out of a hat or an entire world that operates in the shadows of this one, but you have to have the belief that there are things out there that defy all the laws of what we know. My mother had her crystals and her fortunes, and though I largely dismissed that as nonsense, it was fun to lean into. But being told that my mother's fortunes were divine prophecy would be more easily digestible than being told that I'm a reincarnated witch, bound to these men because we collectively decided one lifetime wasn't enough.

"And yet you know it's true, don't you?" We've just crested the top of the stairs, and Rev takes advantage of the lull in our pace to step in front of me, driving me back toward the wall. He's so gorgeous I can hardly think. When he speaks, I have to focus on his mouth to try and take in whatever he's

saying. A sconce just over my head holds a flickering candle, and in the light from it, he looks just like the man from two centuries ago.

“I—”

“One day, maybe you can unlock all of the realities of your past... of *our* pasts.”

I’m suddenly grateful for the wall behind my back. At least it keeps me standing straight when my knees go weak at the brush of his thumb over my bottom lip. “Tripp may have been your best friend in this life, but our history is rich, *belle sorciere*.”

His tongue is magical—I learned that even before I learned that magic is real. And when it lirts over the French, I feel my breath hitch. It’s a beautiful sound, deep and silky smooth, falling effortlessly from his tongue like he’s spoken the language all his life. He did, of course. Just not this life.

“Will you tell me about it?”

“I can do better than that, *Margeaux*.” It’s not my name, and it is, and it’s strangely erotic to hear it spoken to me like that. He says it like a moan, like he’s tasting the most edible delicacies the world has to offer. He seems to sense the effect it has on me, because he licks his lips slowly and then stifles a groan. “I’ll show you just how well I know you, angel. But right now, you need to shower.”

“Do I smell bad?”

I’m not sure what the hell possessed me to ask that. Part of me curls in on itself in humiliation, but Rev only chuckles. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but...” I’m indignant for half a second before I remember Nick tried to drown me in swamp water. Never mind how I smell... I probably look like the creature from the black lagoon. “I’m only teasing, angel. Even with their scents on you, you still smell good enough to eat.”

He doesn't linger to watch me turn tomato-red, turning with a smirk and heading for a door halfway down the long hall. He opens the door and flips on the light without stepping in so that I have to brush by him to enter. "Fair warning, belle sorciere?"

I tilt my head back to look up at him, hyper-aware of his eyes swooping down to take in my body. I may be half-drowned and wearing a ridiculous shirt over an elegant dress, but he still seems very interested in what he sees.

"Yes?"

"This may be the last time you get alone for a while. We have a lot of time to make up for." He's grinning, teasing, but his words make my stomach twist.

I don't know how much time we have to do all this making up he's speaking of. Surely, Detective Morgan is smart enough to put two and two together to figure out where I went. It's only a matter of time until he shows up at Hadley's doorstep, ready to drag me away in a pair of handcuffs... and not the fun kind. "But also, don't take too long. If you do, I can't promise we won't bust the door down to join you."

I manage a smile for Rev, who sweeps me into his arms and plants a kiss on my mouth as if it's the most natural thing in the world, as if he's done it a million times. His fingers are tangling in my hair. His strong arms are all that's holding me up now that he's swept me off my feet, and his kiss is so deep that I think my brain shuts off before it can overload. And despite all of that, it's so fast that I'm practically spinning when he pulls away, my chin still tilted up for him, my lips waiting for his. He taps me on the nose once, winks, and then sweeps out of the hallway and down the stairs, leaving me to turn and take in the bathroom alone.

I don't feel any kind of *déjà vu* in here... probably because the bathroom is

glaringly updated. It's beautiful, honestly. How am I supposed to *not* take forever in the largest shower I've ever seen, especially considering it's stocked to the brim with anything I could possibly need? Shampoo and conditioner, hair masks and scalp scrubs, shaving cream, and razors. It looks like every product has been picked out and set up according to the needs of some micro-influencer on showertok, all the way down to the eucalyptus leaves hanging from the shower head.

I take my time perusing the products while I wait for the water to heat, letting steam fill the room. When I shed the dress that wasn't even mine, it peels off like a second skin, leaving me feeling oddly liberated.

This is incredible.

I think it just before I step under the stream of the showerhead mounted on the ceiling, but then the jet of water hits the back of my neck, my shoulders, and I decide it's more than incredible. It's luxurious.

I consider staying there forever since the water stays hot for an obscene amount of time, but I don't want them to make good on that promise of beating the door down and finding me with nothing but a mud mask on. Though I suppose it would serve them right after chasing me around in masks of their own all night.

By the time I step out of the shower, I look like a brand-new person. And I feel like one, too, when I brush my teeth with the new toothbrush on the counter next to the toothpaste, set up right next to a pile of clothing.

Calling it 'clothing' is generous, but generous is exactly how I'm feeling by the time I've primped and preened and slipped into the slinky little nightgown that barely covers my red-thong-clad ass. There's a tag on the panties, at least, but I have questions about whose clothes these are and how

they knew which skincare products would be good to keep on hand. I stave them off as I find my reflection in the mirror again.

The girl who came home after years of hiding from her problems is gone. I feel lighter, refreshed, reborn. I don't fail to recognize the irony in that.

When I traipse into the kitchen, Rev and Colton are seated at the marble island, one shoveling fries into his mouth and the other swirling a straw around his Styrofoam cup. "I stole your cherry." Rev grins, nodding at a cup next to him. "Hope you don't mind."

Other than the obvious sexual undertones, I'm not sure what he's talking about, so I draw close enough to glance at the contents of the cup cautiously. "Strawberry peanut butter cup, right?" Tripp asks as I glance up at them, confused.

"It's pretty good, Mars, I'll give you that." Colton sighs, leaning back contentedly.

"Their milkshakes are the *only* redeeming quality of The Last stand." Tripp slinks into the open seat on my other side. "But our girl gets what she wants."

"How—?"

I'm busy looking at the spread of food, the cups emblazoned with a little red biplane, the crumpled-up burger wrappers littering the countertop. "How did you--?"

"Uber Eats," Tripp shrugs, taking a bite out of his burger and moaning a little in spite of himself.

"I know I was in the shower for a while, but there's no way. Do they deliver by drone now?"

"Maybe." Colton laughs. "But conjuring it is faster. That's what we did."

I stare at him, unblinking. "You...*conjured* it?"

"Tripp did." He waves a dismissive hand as if that answers all my

questions.

It doesn't even come close.

“Does that mean it's... not real? Like, is this... a hologram or something?”

Rev pauses with a handful of fries halfway to his mouth while Colton appraises me like he's trying to figure out what language I'm speaking, and Tripp busts out laughing. “No, Princess, it's real. As real as you or me.”

“So, you just...?”

“Eat your dinner before I find something else to occupy your mouth, okay, baby?”

As enticing as that threat is, I unwrap the yellow paper on the burger in front of me and appraise the too-stuffed burger. It looks exactly like it did the last time I had one of these—grilled mushrooms falling off the sandwich, the bun soggy, cheese sticking to the wrapper. It smells like greasy heaven, just the way they always have. “So, you're telling me you just... what, snapped your fingers or twitched your nose, and this appeared?”

“You're watching too much TV if that's how you think this works, angel.”

Rev quips.

“I *ordered* it, just like you would order it.” Tripp rolls his eyes. “And it killed me a little to do it, so the least you could do is eat it.”

I take two bites—the first to appease them, the second because it's delicious, and I am actually starving. “Okay, explain it to me like I'm new to this.”

Because I sort of am.

“Well, you see, there's this thing called Google, and it—”

Colton breaks off into laughter when I smack him on the shoulder.

“I called and placed the order, and then I conjured it here. I don't know how else to explain that,” Tripp laughs, looking to Rev for a bit of backup.

“Can you just... conjure up anything you want?”

“Pretty much.” Colton grins. “You want the panties I ripped off of you yesterday?” He lifts his hand like he’s about to do something magical, and I shake my head vehemently until he lets it drop with a laugh.

“So, you could conjure a million dollars?”

“No need.” Tripp shrugs. “I’m something of an investment wizard, remember?” He’s lost his suit jacket, his sleeves rolled to just below the elbow, and he’s got one of his backward ball caps in place. He looks edible, but he doesn’t look like an investment wizard.

“But you could?” I press, trying to wrap my head around the idea of simply *willing* a million dollars into your checking account.

“You can’t conjure something that doesn’t exist, so if you knew someone who has a million dollars, sure.”

“Don’t you?” Rev asks sharply, turning to look at Tripp like he’s horrified by that answer.

“Why? Are you only with me for my money?”

“Your money... and your ass,” Rev says, glancing at him appreciatively.

“Okay,” I say, undeterred by their sidetracking. “But what about like... a winning lottery ticket?”

“If a ticket is dispensed with the winning numbers, then I guess I could conjure it... but I’m no thief.”

I laugh at that, thinking he’s joking. But their silence speaks volumes; I’m the only one who found that funny, and they clearly want to know why. I press my lips together, wondering how to say this without offending them. “You just killed four people in the space of a few hours, but you sound offended at the idea of being considered a thief.”

I nearly choke on my laugh when I feel their eyes on me. The silence only

thickens, so I take a bite of my burger and stare at the cheese that's melted on the wrapper. "As far as I'm concerned, what we did tonight was self-defense." Colton shrugs. "If we let them live, we'd all be dying soon for the fifth, sixth, tenth time. And if you're worried about Whit, there are worse things to be than a killer. Whit was worse."

"Think of it as vigilante justice, angel." Rev's words whisper over my neck as he leans closer to me, brushing a strand of my hair off my chest. "Whit screwed us time and again, and now he's dead. He got what he deserved."

"And I'm probably going to go to jail for his murder." I snap, clamping my mouth shut as my cheeks flood with heat. That kind of came out of nowhere, but it's the one thing I haven't been able to figure out. How the hell are we going to get out of this? How am *I* going to get out of this?

"You're not going to jail." Colton rolls his eyes while Tripp reaches his hand across the counter and covers mine with it. In the light, I catch sight of his scar again. I glance at Rev, whose fingers still rest on my shoulder, and turn my head just enough to see the same mark on him. I knew it would be there, but something in me hums at the confirmation.

"Colt's right." He says gently. "You're not going to take the fall for this."

"Well, somebody has to! I don't care what kind of voodoo magic you have. You can't just undo his murder."

"Nor would I want to." Colton says coldly. "But you're right. Somebody has to take the fall for Whit, for Nick and Carson and Mark and that piece of shit who put his hands on you last night."

"You did that?" I whisper, though I'm not sure why I phrase it as a question. I already figured that my stalker and the pirate's murderer were one in the same, but that was before I knew that it was them. Before I knew who they truly were.

Killers. Witches... or wizards, whatever the technical name for a male magic-wielder is. They're dark and dangerous and... mine.

"Don't forget Jake. And Audrey." My chest feels suddenly tight. "How many people have you killed, anyway?"

"In this life?" Rev asks seriously, ticking off his fingers like he's running down a mental list. He mutters something to himself, and then I hear, "Carry the four..."

My laugh is more of a sigh, partly a gasp. "Killing people is *bad!*"

I think we all learned that lesson right around the same time, but I'm guessing they've forgotten. "You're spiraling, Margeaux," Rev says gently, swiping his thumb over my cheekbone like he's brushing away a tear. "Calm."

"Calm?" This time, my laugh is high-pitched and nearly hysterical. "How am I supposed to be *calm*? I'm in love with murderers!"

Tripp looks solemn, but I see the slow grin spread on Rev's face. I clap my hand over my mouth, realizing too late the gravity of what I just confessed. It's been two days, and I just told them I love them like a freaking psychopath. Although, to be fair, it's been a really long two days.

"If you don't want to calm down, we'll just have to *make* you calm."

Colton stands all at once, catching me around the waist and throwing me over his arm before I even have a chance to fight him off. "Colt!" I warn, anger edging my tone. "If you use magic on me against my will, I'm going to ___"

"You're gonna what?" Rev asks, his tone husky as he follows us excitedly. He strips his T-shirt over his head, tossing it to the ground as we go.

"As much as I'd love you to finish that threat, baby," Colton chuckles, "I don't need magic to calm you down."

I'm not sure what he means by that, but I'm half expecting him to drag me into the dungeon and shoot me up with a needle full of sedatives or something. Instead, he carries me like a puppy who escaped their cage and tosses me onto a couch, where I immediately scramble up defensively. But Tripp's laugh soothes the fight. As he drops onto the couch and pulls me onto his lap, he begins to massage my shoulders, and I melt.

"Oh, *god*." I groan as he digs his thumbs into the space between my shoulder blades and neck.

"There she goes again," Rev muses from somewhere in front of me. I can't be sure where because I think my eyes have rolled all the way into the back of my head. "Talking about Sky Daddy when it's a mere man making her feel unimaginable pleasure."

I'm not sure *unimaginable pleasure* is the word for it, but *bliss* would do nicely. *Zen* works too. "What are you doing to me?" I moan, feeling Tripp's touch chase away the tension that has been stored in my shoulders for the last... who knows how long? It feels like it's lived there forever.

"It's just a massage, Princess." His breath on my ear and his hard cock under my ass assure me the direct opposite of his words— it's not just a massage. This is an appetizer, and as delectable as it is, I'm ready for the main course. I'm turning to kiss him when Colton seizes me by the neck, his fingers perfectly poised on either side of my throat.

That's when I catch sight of the last of their scars, the red mark where he drove a knife through his own hand centuries ago, binding our souls so that every time our bodies were knit back together, we'd find one another.

His bright eyes are smoldering, either with a little bit of anger or desire, maybe both. "Do you really think we'd let you rot in a jail cell?"

"I—"

“You still don’t seem to understand how much we need you, Mars.” Rev sighs, sinking onto the couch next to Tripp. I can’t see him with my eyes locked on Colton, but from my peripherals, I think he locks his hands behind his head and leans back.

“I—”

“Haven’t we shown you how much we love you? We killed for you.”

“I never asked you to—”

“We’ve died for you…” Rev laughs, echoing the same thing he told me earlier. “A lot.”

“You guys—”

“We’ve shown you how we worship this body.” Tripp dusts a finger along the crest of my cleavage and then trails the column of my neck, right over Colton’s hand to tilt my chin so that I’m looking at him. “What else is there?”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.” I finally manage to get out a full sentence. “I believe you.”

“I don’t think you do, love,” Rev whispers, his breath sending shivers down my spine. I don’t doubt they can see my nipples tight and hard under this flimsy material.

“I guess we’ll just have to try harder.”

Present Day

I'VE KNOWN FOR A while I must be a masochist, but it's never so clear as this moment. They've shed their clothes like I'm in my own private Chippendale's, and they move in perfect synchronization. They're all three dangerously gorgeous... more than any men I've ever seen, and the way they work together is like they're all connected. I suppose they are, but it's as if they understand each other on such a base level that they don't even have to speak out loud to communicate. I don't know a single heterosexual woman who wouldn't give *anything* to be where I am right now.

The problem is, I can't help telling myself I *can't* be the only one. How often do they share women like this, to the point where their movements are as natural as breathing? How many people have sat where I do right now with Colton sinking to his knees before them, those eyes alight with equal parts desire and devotion? How many women have had Rev's hard cock under their lap, his soft, warm skin pressing around them, while Tripp's hot breath fans across their neck and his need burns a hole through them?

I torture myself with these questions right up until Rev grabs my neck and pulls me flush against him. My body contours to his warm chest, which happens at the same time that Colton pushes his hands up my thighs, chasing away the flimsy material of the nightgown. He doesn't even tug the panties down my thighs, choosing instead to slip a finger beneath the elastic and sink straight into me without prelude. "So tight, baby. So tense. You're going to have to relax, or this isn't going to be any fun for you... no matter how wet you are."

The furious blush spreads first across my cheeks, and then I feel it on my chest as he looks at me from between my knees. And what a fucking sight he is. The high school quarterback, the perfect all-American boy next door. I never would have imagined he had a dark side or that we'd ever be together in any capacity. When Audrey came into the picture, I pushed aside any and every slightly sexual thought I'd ever had about these guys. Colton became her boyfriend, and Tripp pulled away, and Rev sort of disappeared. Jake and Audrey became my life, and then my parents died, and I hated myself for not spending more time with them. I hated myself for taking the weekend to go to the beach with my friends instead of having mocktails with my mom. I hated myself for not telling my father that he was the best guy I knew... the best guy I would ever know. I hated myself for hating myself, for wanting to be more like Audrey, for mourning the me that died with my parents.

I've lived a dozen lives, and I've died probably a dozen more. Little parts of me have withered up and been pruned back time and again. I am a work in progress—a painting that's been layered and manipulated and turned into something so far from where it began that it looks to be a whole other piece. But now those layers are being blended out, restoring me to something more like the original.

Colton's tongue brushes against my clit, so gently and so quickly that it draws a surprised sound from the back of my throat. It quickly blends into a moan. "Mmm."

The stubble on his chin offers me at least some friction as he presses his face into me, and then his warm tongue darts over me, swirling around that swollen bud like he's tracing the pattern on an ice cream cone. And just like ice cream when it's met with a hot tongue, I melt.

Surrendering to their desire, to my own, to this moment, is all that I need. I don't care how many women have been where I am now. All I care about is that I'm the one here now... the last one I *ever* want to be here like this. The last one I want any of them to ever have. It's a shocking realization and a greedy one, but I never wanted to leave them the first time. I don't want to do it again—I *won't* do it again. If I have to fake my death and hide out here forever, I will. As long as I have them and Hadley can come visit, I never need to leave... not if they don't want me to.

And at least for now, they *don't* want me to go anywhere. That's proven when Tripp's arms wrap around my shoulders and he presses his lips to my temple, planting a gentle kiss there.

Tripp and Colton shared me earlier tonight, and we all watched each other play together last night, but something about having part of Colton all over me while Rev holds me tight is erotic on another level. Or maybe it's just the heat in Tripp's gaze when I glance up at him—it washes over me, making me flush as it spreads through me like wildfire. "I don't think it's a coincidence that we met in that first life," Tripp says, pressing his lips to the base of my neck and planting another sweet kiss over my carotid artery. I can feel the pulse there, wild and erratic, just like my heartbeat. "I think you were meant

for all of us in one life or another, Mars. I think each of us was made for you.”

Made for me.

He didn't say that I was made for him, or even that I was made for any of them. He said '*we were made for you*'.

There's a collective chuckle as I flatten myself against Rev, letting my head roll back onto his chest. He presses a kiss to the top of my brow and then, in one swift motion, frees me of the satin slip, yanking it over my head and tossing it behind him. "You're so damn beautiful, Angel." He mutters, hurriedly running his hands over everything they can reach like he's too eager to wait. I start to squirm as he brushes over the side of my stomach, an embarrassingly ticklish spot, but he's not looking to make me squirm in that way. His hands grip my hips, arching me upward.

The new angle allows Colton to get a better angle on me, holding me hostage under the rippling pleasure of his tongue. The blossoming fire spreads further across my stomach as the beginnings of an orgasm build. I'm faintly embarrassed, honestly, at how easy it seems to be for them to bring me to this helpless, quivering mess.

Colton sucks me into his mouth at the same time the tip of his tongue probes my clit. I'm encompassed by him, his mouth wrapped all around me. It's the most wonderful thing I have ever felt. The pleasure takes me the highest I've ever been—higher, even, than the Ferris Wheel he fucked me on earlier, higher than any of the summits they've brought me to. It's treacherous, dangerous, and brutal as he drives me so fast toward the edge that I barely get a chance to register going over it before I'm hurtling through the air, a few moments of floating in space before the free-fall.

The free-fall never comes, though. I've not even started to come down

when he releases me with a gentle smacking sound that only fuels the filthy need in me. I know well enough that if he doesn't stop, this orgasm will snowball into the next one, and I want that as much as I want him inside me, as much as I want them to fill me so well it chases away any of the emptiness I've ever felt.

"I think she's calm now," Rev says lightly, his fingertips trailing along my stomach. His voice is so velvety and husky I could come to the sound of him singing me a lullaby right now.

"Good girl, Margeaux."

It's the first I've heard that name fall off of Colton's tongue—the tongue that just did magical things to me. Now, that's single-handedly the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

I am not a good girl, and I haven't wanted to be one since I was a teenager, hoping that my good behavior and hard work would be enough to keep my parents from ever having to worry about me.

A good girl would have stifled her trauma and tried to work through it with proper therapy instead of accepting the help of a kinky therapist who only had his own interests in mind. A good girl wouldn't be doing *this*. And yet, the praise unknots something in me, letting me fall deeper into contentedness. A moan rolls through me in the wake of the shifting pleasure.

"You're divine, Marley." Rev pants, smoothing his palms over my stomach before dragging them up to my breasts. His hands are lightly calloused—I never noticed, but the roughness is a wonderful complement to his feather-light touch.

It's torture, having them like this, teetering between trying to enjoy the last release and wanting so much more as they take their time touching, tasting, and teasing.

“Colt...” I whimper as he strokes me slowly, slipping his thick fingers inside of me and burying himself to the first knuckle. It’s not enough—not nearly enough. But it’s all I get because he pulls away quickly, making me howl at the loss. “Please!”

“Please?” He murmurs, the word kissing the inside of my thigh and sending a shiver through me. “Please what, baby?”

I know what I want—more.

Him.

Them.

I want it all.

And I think they’ll be more than happy to give it to me.

My voice is small, but I’m not ashamed to admit what I’m coming to understand. I am *not* a good girl. I am the kind of girl who fucks murderers, who lets them do wicked things to her, who is done backing down or running from what she wants.

“I need you.” I pant, desperate for the release that only they can give.

“Not as much as we need you.” Tripp sighs, his teeth nipping at my earlobe.

He hasn’t let me forget he’s here this whole time, as if I could ever. His hands are busy alternating between massaging my shoulders and Rev’s, relishing the sounds of pleasure and relaxation he’s pulling from both of us. Every once in a while, I hear his breath hitch with desire, but he doesn’t act on it.

I guess Colton must approve, because I open my eyes to see an infuriatingly sexy smirk spread across his lips, and then he grabs me by the hips so fast it makes me dizzy, breathless with anticipation. He whips me around, pulls my legs to the ground with him, and bends me over Rev’s lap, my ass in the perfect spot for the taking. It seems that’s exactly what he intends as he

strokes the curves of my hips, but then his thumb presses against that puckered hole. I suck in a breath and consider burying my face in Rev's thigh, trying to hide the sounds that I know are going to come tearing out of me in a minute.

But then his cock springs free of his boxers, and I'm so relieved I could cry because now I have something to stifle my screams. I'm not looking to tease him, to build him up, to give him the best blowjob of his life. I don't need a medal. I just need to taste Rev's cock, salty and musky, as much as he needs me to do this. So, I don't waste time licking him, don't waste time exploring what touch he prefers or figuring out if he favors slow circles around the head to being buried deep. I just spread my hands over his thighs, getting my balance, and close my mouth around him. Colton's fingers probe inside of me just a moment, and then he's dragging my own arousal back to the spot where he's hoping to gain entry. It's surprisingly slick as he spreads it around, and that feeling alone is so good I feel myself fighting to maintain some composure.

Rev, also, is struggling. His chin is tipped to the sky, and he looks to be praying for his life, his fingers digging into the armrests, a crease between his thick eyebrows like he's focusing hard on something. I don't get to study him for long—I'm too busy bobbing up and down along his shaft. But when I steal glances at him from beneath my eyelashes, his reaction tells me that my distraction is serving him well.

The last time I glance up, my eyes collide with Tripp's. His hands are braced on Rev's large shoulders, but he's staring at me hard enough I think he's trying to set me on fire with his mind alone. I don't know if it's lust or jealousy or both, but I'm just about to beckon him closer so that I can share

the love when Colton pushes a finger slowly inside of me and I forget my name.

His fingers are slick as he slips them past my defenses, easing in at a glacial pace that steals my breath, makes me freeze with my mouth still poised on Rev's cock. I draw in a sharp breath as he inches in, fire breaking out over my skin as he gets to the hard part—the last line of resistance. I bury my mouth against Rev's thigh in case I need to bite down on something... I doubt he'll mind too much as long as it's not his cock.

“F-fuck.” I slam my eyes shut and remind myself not to tense up, breathing through the burn as he takes his time to ease another finger past the ring of muscle before letting me sit there, adjusting to the intrusion, to the size. It's nowhere close to the girth of his cock, and that thought terrifies me as he stretches me wider. “Every part of you belongs to me.” He growls, pumping his fingers into me like I've personally offended him. “To us.”

I muffle the cry that slips past my throat when he stacks a third finger on top of the others and pushes deeper, making my limbs tense with the peal of pain teetering just on the edge of pleasure. The hand on the back of my thigh makes me jump, so Colton slips an arm around my waist, keeping me trapped in the position he has me in.

Nope, I don't need to bite. I need to stuff my mouth so full that I can only breathe through my nose, the way you do when you need to focus on letting go of a sharp pain. I slam myself back onto Rev's cock, but it doesn't stifle the moan that rumbles through me when I feel a tongue swipe over my clit.

It's so languid and also so intense that I dig my nails into Rev's thighs as he arches his hips toward me, desperate for me to take more of him. So I do, swallowing him into my throat as a second stroke of what I can only assume

is Tripp's tongue makes me cry out in ecstasy. He uses just the tip, and it's enough to destroy me all on its own. "Fuck!"

Colton doesn't try to fuck me, doesn't try to move. He just fills me, letting me adjust to the simultaneous feeling of Tripp's mouth working me at the same time as his fingers plug me, trapping all of the pleasure inside of me, letting it burn down low. I squeeze them tighter as I struggle to hang on a moment longer, letting the tension build inside of me.

My sounds are garbled around Rev, who groans so loud I think he's about to explode against my tongue. But just as I'm picking up my pace, recognizing how close he is, Colton yanks my head back and Rev's cock pops out of my mouth, leaving me with spit dripping down my face, my eyes half-lidded as the pain tangles with the pleasure. Rev still looks like he's in agony, a thin sheen of sweat on his bronze skin, the veins on his cock looking particularly strained as a bead of pre-cum leaks from the tip. I want to dart my tongue out and lick it from him, but Colton's holding me around the waist, keeping me trapped, only granting me as much access as he wants to give me. "He's not allowed to cum yet, baby." Colton croons, nipping my earlobe with his teeth.

My disappointment only doubles on a whimper as his fingers retreat, leaving me empty. And as Tripp licks me furiously, he stays just out of reach so that as my hips buck, searching for more of that friction, I can't get any closer to my only remaining source of stimulation. But it doesn't last long because I feel the distinct nudge of Colton's cock against my asshole.

I freeze, terror shooting like lightning through me. At the same time, Rev leans forward and takes my nipples in his hands, pinching them between his fingers, sending an electric shock to my clit, which Tripp pulls into his mouth just the way he watched Colton do before.

I try to breathe through it, push the pain through my stomach and out of my lungs. Heat breaks out over my entire body, a fire that spreads fast as Colton pushes past my defenses, stretching the muscle inside of me wide to accommodate him. “Ahh!” I cry, feeling like flames are dancing over my flesh as he eases in so slowly I want to sob. I *do* sob, a dry, gasping breath. Having him wrapped inside of me feels like having a current of air pushing me higher at the same time a riptide is trying to pull me under.

I know why he’s going slow, stretching me to let me accommodate him, but I almost wish he’d just bury himself to the hilt in a single thrust and be done with it.

He doesn’t, taking his time giving me all of him until I’m gasping, my nails leaving half moons on Rev’s thighs. The pain takes over for a minute, making me forget about Tripp... until he rolls the ball of his piercing over the top of my clit and I go limp. My limbs become jelly, the tension and resistance gone as I fall over Rev’s lap like a whore at the feet of her messiah.

I like the way pleasure chases after pain, like two lovers in constant motion. I like the reward for bearing it, the way it takes over your entire body, the way it makes you feel like you’ve been doused in kerosene and forced to balance on a tinder box. It’s already swirling through me, reaching around from the point of contact, and sending shocks through my lower stomach. By the time he’s buried inside of me, my ass spread flat against his hips, I’m already trying not to lose the battle with my impending orgasm. If I come apart again, I don’t know if I can take him like this for long. It already feels like he’s going to split me in half.

And then I bite my lip so hard I taste blood because Colton starts to draw back. Getting it in is only half of the agony—the movement is the other half as my body clenches, preparing to close and then realizing that the intrusion

hasn't disappeared. That pain just gives me something else to focus on, another thing to siphon my attention toward so that I can distract the nerve endings inside of me as Colton eases out of me and then back in, making tears well up in my eyes. The deeper he goes, the more my need grows, the harder it is to sit still and keep from trying to make room for him on my own.

"Colt!" I cry, my voice rising in desperation as he tips his hips, letting me feel him deep inside a place where he shouldn't be. "Please, I—I can't—Ahh!"

The pain softens around the edges as Tripp sinks a finger straight into my pussy. I act on instinct, my body squeezing around him—around both of them. I feel too full in some ways, and too empty in others. I need more, I need him to move, to fuck me, to put me out of this beautiful misery. I can't think—I'm too full for my brain to function.

"You can take him." Rev's words whisper across my mouth, and when I open my eyes, he's there. I don't know what it is in his gaze, but the agony he seemed to be in earlier is gone. He's focused wholly on me, his hands framing my face, blocking out everything except him. "You're doing so good."

As Colton starts to pull out, I take a breath, not sure when I'll be able to do this again, only to have it ripped away from me as he pushes back in. My lips part to cry out, but Rev crashes into me, his mouth meeting mine, our tongues tangling. It's desperate, sloppy, passionate. My sounds are hungry as the different sensations come together, an overload of the most beautiful kind, the peak so close and yet so far away. Tripp's hands are gripping my hips, his fingers on my spread ass, and the pleasure of his tongue has slowed as Colton's thrusts pick up in response to me backing into him, trying to meet his thrusts.

He doesn't like giving up control, I guess, because he takes over, setting the pace so fast I stop moving altogether, focusing instead on Rev's tongue tangling with mine, the way he swallows my gasps as Colton's speed picks up, as he loses his composure. He damn near bottoms out inside me, crying out his release, a guttural sound that fills me with pride at knowing I made him lose control of himself.

When Rev lets my lips go, they're quirked into a smirk as Colton slows, his breathing ragged, pumping out the last of his release, working it into me. He stays sheathed inside of me as he plants a kiss on the top of my spine, right between my shoulder blades. I've adjusted to the stretch of him, so I don't squirm as he takes his time... though I certainly do when Tripp's tongue returns with a vengeance. He's not playing with me, not trying to build a slow burn. He's throwing us straight into the inferno, pulling my clit between his lips and *demanding* that I come for him.

The pleasure is relentless, and as his teeth nip at my swollen nerves, I fall apart all at once, like I was being held together by chewing gum and paper clips. The force of the orgasm this time is almost painful, coming on so fast and strong that it rockets through me at light speed, the pressure rushing all out at once. And he doesn't let me go, doesn't give me any reprieve. Maybe he doesn't realize I came, the undulations making me squeeze Colton's cock in time with the desperate shuddering all throughout my body. The scream should have been clue enough for that, though he's certainly lost in his work. And if it wasn't, the fact that I'm squirming to get away from him should be enough to bridge the gap in understanding. But he doesn't stop as I struggle to form words or even as I press my face into Rev's thigh, my teeth grazing his flesh. He keeps me teetering on that orgasm, not letting me feel the relief

as he demands another with his frantic sucking. “Please!” I finally manage to scream, my voice choked by the sweet misery that’s sharing my body.

The relief is immediate—not just for me, but for Colton, who sighs in exhaustion as I stop thrashing about in a futile attempt to escape the pleasure. “Fuck, Marley.” He groans, slipping out of me with a hand still planted on my shoulder. “You trying to kill me?”

I can’t speak to even try and refute that, but it’s okay because he’s laughing as he pulls me to standing, an effort that makes me feel like I’m going to split right down the middle as he has me face him so that he can claim my mouth in a soft kiss. It’s the most gentle kiss he’s ever given me, softer than I’d have even thought him to be capable of. I’m the one who pulls away first, needing to come up for air because I still haven’t recovered.

I don’t know how long I kiss him for, but I can feel his cum sliding out of me, feel how slippery I am, the essence of our combined arousal pooling between my legs, sparking new arousal. “You’ll never be empty again, baby.” He whispers the words against my mouth and then seals them with another kiss as his thumb strokes my cheek. “You’ll never have to run, never have to be afraid, never have to want for anything. I’ll fuck you senseless every day if that’s what it takes to keep you.”

I don’t tell him I have no intention of leaving. That conversation would probably be better suited to a time when we’re clothed, or at the very least, not when I’m dripping with his cum and aching for more. He seems to sense as much because his mouth twitches into a smile, and then he guides me backwards. “Sit on Rev’s cock, baby.”

The direction is enough to make me clench, so when I glance back to see Rev’s still-hard cock at attention, I feel a wicked thrill in me that’s as much terror as it is excitement. “Let him feel how good I soaked your ass.” He

says, guiding me down to the tip of him. The crown of his dick spears me with minimal effort; I'm surely still stretched from Colton's adventure, still slick too. I gasp when Rev's cock starts to disappear inside of me with relative ease, filling the space his friend vacated. It's easier to adjust to him, but the angle, me being in control of the speed as Rev restrains himself with Herculean effort, makes this a challenge of its own. It's a good challenge though, one that fills me with a dirty pride and pleasure as I take him entirely inside of me, fitting him like a key into a lock. "Good." Colton says, "Now spread those legs so we can see your pretty pussy."

Well, fuck.

Tripp is getting to his feet as I do exactly what was asked of me, though the effort bounces the pressure around inside of me, making Rev groan as I tense. "You've got such a good grip on my dick, angel."

Heat prickles at my cheeks as they stare at me, Tripp's eyes ravenous as he watches me. "Goddamn, Princess. I think you take him better than I do."

Oh, double fuck.

The thought of seeing Tripp in my place with his legs spread for me to take his cock makes me distinctly wetter, the embarrassment of being on display segueing into relishing the moment. "I told you to quit calling her that," Rev groans, dragging his teeth across the nape of my neck. "You really think a Princess would let us fuck her like this?"

Rev is still, like he wants me to adjust to him, but I don't have the patience to wait. I need friction, need to feel him move against me. I'm just starting to move when Tripp steps between my spread thighs, his hand at the base of his cock, the piercing at the tip glinting in the light. "A Princess might not let us fuck her like a whore." Tripp says thoughtfully, snaking an arm behind my head and dragging my mouth to his so that he can kiss me hard. It's rougher

than I expect from Tripp, unhinged. He throws himself to abandon, kissing my lips until they're swollen, and I'm aching, my pussy throbbing. I'm pretty sure I've soaked Rev's lap for a second time tonight, but I'm nowhere near done right now. That's why I almost cry in relief when Tripp pushes the head of his cock into me as easily as if he's slipping a ring on his finger. There's no hesitation, no resistance, no push back. I'm soaking wet and so desperate for him that he slides in without incident.

It's excruciatingly incredible. I think I may come apart in shuddering waves just from the feeling of being this full.

"I can't— fit you." I gasp, glancing between us to see his shaft is still slipping inside of me. I can feel the cool metal of his piercings tracing a path inside me, making my eyes roll as he caresses my walls. Colton pushes my knees back, bearing more of me to him, making Rev slip out of me just a little, and procuring a choked little moan from the back of my throat as Tripp slides in deeper.

"You can fit us all." Colton assures me, rubbing small circles on my leg as Tripp experiments with the feel of me, sliding in a little and then stopping. "You always do."

I'm so full I think I may explode—not just with an orgasm, but from the pressure of fitting them inside me at the same time. It's horribly erotic, beautifully depraved. I should feel filthy, disrespected, maybe used. But they aren't just taking their pleasure without giving me anything in return. In fact, they may be giving me more than they're taking, based on how fast the heat is spilling in my abdomen. It's not the same as the overstimulation, not a furious pleasure—this comes together from every cell in my body, the culmination of every pleasure I've ever felt. It doesn't throw me over a cliff

and demand more—it seduces me, pulling me into bliss, dragging me into what I can only assume is nirvana.

“Ride on his dick, baby,” Colton tells me. “Let me see those gorgeous tits bounce.”

I try, but I have no leverage here. And even if I did, I don’t think I have enough strength left in my body to make a single one of my muscles move.

“Fuck,” Tripp groans. When I look up at him, his eyes are locked on a spot over my shoulder—on Rev. “I can feel you through her. Fuck, it’s so good.” He’s practically purring, and the lust in his silky voice only amplifies my own.

My eyes flutter closed again as he picks up his pace, sliding in experimentally and then pulling back slowly just to do it all again. When I open my eyes next, it’s to see him pull his lip ring between his teeth, looking for something to anchor himself, trying to focus.

And then they begin to move in tandem, first sliding into me at the same time, matching one another’s pace and then alternating.

We become a tangled web of limbs, moving parts. Our cries mingle in the air, grunts, moans, the sound of slapping skin and gasping breaths. The sounds we make are animal, just like us. The need, the passion, and the chaos have transformed us into something that’s not entirely human.

I thought I couldn’t think with Colton’s dick in me, but I can’t breathe now either. I’m too gloriously full, too stuffed to be anything other than *theirs*. Their little whore, their baby, their angel, their princess.

“You’re right, Tripp.” Colton says from somewhere before us. I know he likes watching, know he’s getting hard all over again seeing this play out before him. I can hear it in his voice. “A Princess wouldn’t let you do this to her.”

When I feel the gentle weight on my head, I don't fight him, don't question it. I'm too high, drugged on the bliss of the moment, appreciating that I'm not rushing toward an orgasm, not chasing a destination. It's an infinite sort of pleasure, the kind that nothing will probably ever compare to again. So, I don't question any of it until he seizes my chin, demanding a kiss. It's quick, but it's brutal enough to pull me back to reality, to bring me down just a little from the cloud I had drifted to.

"If you ever try to leave us, I'll steal your last breath just like that." Colton rasps, his eyes full of molten desire, soft in spite of the cruel nature of his words.

I'm not bothered by them, though. It's a moot point, a waste of his own breath. I'm not leaving him. Not leaving *them*. I don't even want to leave this moment.

"Damn, you look good in a crown." Rev gasps, pressing a kiss to my shoulder as he thrusts into me from below, chasing his own orgasm.

"Fuck us like the queen you are, Marley!" Tripp groans, thrusting faster and spurring Rev to do the same.

I don't know how it's possible to feel so much for three people. I don't know how it's possible for magic to exist, for souls to be twined, for people to live multiple lives. I don't know how it's possible to be this full, to take everything they've given me, to move on from here. I don't know how it's possible that they send me past the moon, delivering an orgasm that blows me apart at the atomic level and sends me careening into the fucking galaxy. At the same time they press me tight between them, caging me in their arms as they find their orgasms together while I convulse, too thoroughly exhausted to escape the pleasure.

I don't know how it's possible to love someone who is capable of dark and

wicked things. I don't know how someone who is capable of such things could also be capable of making me feel like I'm the reason they breathe, like I hung the moon, like they watched me fall from the heavens.

But I don't care about any of it.

I'm drunk on their love, their cum, my own orgasms, the power they give me.

I don't care about anything, I realize, as I catch a glimpse of the four of us in the mirror located on the dining room wall. It's a massive thing in a gilded frame, as vintage as the rest of the house. I don't know how I didn't notice it before, but now that I do, I'm grateful.

I see now what Colton placed on my head—the crown from the auction. The one Tripp bid an ungodly amount of money on.

Our reflection is even sexier than what I imagined we looked like. I look good pressed between them, the both of them still buried inside of me. Tripp's ass is on display in the reflection, Colton smirking behind me, Rev tipping Tripp's chin to his mouth to steal a kiss too.

It's unspeakably hot.

And Rev is right. I do look good in a crown.

Present Day

I WAKE TO A beam of sun on my face, a hard cock nestled against my ass, and arms trapping me against the mattress. And Tripp, smiling at me like he's never seen anything quite like me before.

“I could get used to waking up to your face every day.” He says, reaching out a hand that had previously been resting against the small of my back and chasing away a strand of hair that's slipped into my eyes.

It takes a moment to register where I am. My muscles don't feel capable of movement, but I am able to lift my head enough to see around the room. I recognize it as the one Colton carried me to, half asleep, after he peeled me off of Rev's cock. I have a faint memory of nuzzling into his bare chest before he laid me in this bed. I don't know if *bed* is the right word for it... it looks like a life raft meant to keep the passengers of the Titanic afloat. It feels like sleeping on a cloud.

“How can he possibly be hard?” I moan, inching away from Rev, whose arm is wrapped around my waist, trapping me against him.

Tripp chuckles. “How could he not be? He’s probably dreaming about all the possibilities we have now.”

“You guys are trying to kill me,” I whisper, shaking my head but unable to deny the small smile stealing across my lips.

“Death wouldn’t be a deal breaker.” Rev whispers, his voice gravelly with the first use of the day. “At least, not until you start to decompose.”

I whip around in shock, flinging his arm off of me. “Would you really?”

Rev rolls his eyes, lying flat and raking a hand through his hair. The dip of his abs is delectable, the gym shorts hanging loosely on his hips doing nothing to hide his arousal. “Really, Mars? It was a joke. I am willing to take you while you sleep, but necrophilia is a bit much even for me.”

He wants a joke? I’ll show him a joke. I force a little incredulity into my voice when I say, “So you’re telling me you *wouldn’t* fuck my corpse?”

That stuns him a moment, until I crack a grin.

“As charming as this conversation is,” Tripp laughs, “It’s a moot point. Whit’s gone, so now we’re only linked to one another. Rev wouldn’t have time to do anything because we’d be following you to the grave one last time.”

“Well, that’s bleak,” I say, pulling the sheet against me as I sit up and look between them. “Where’s Colton?”

“Probably burning toast or something,” Tripp sighs. “He doesn’t sleep much.”

“I think I slept too much,” I squint at the window, the light softened by a curtain over it. “What time is it?”

“Not time to get up yet,” Rev answers, grabbing my wrist and trying to pull me back to him. He almost succeeds, and part of me wants to lie in bed with them all day, just like this. But I can’t.

“I have to pee,” I whine, wrenching my arm out of his grip as he reluctantly lets me free.

“Fine,” He turns his attention to Tripp, wrapping an arm around him instead and dragging him closer. He wastes no time, rising to his elbows as I slip off the bed. I’m almost jealous enough to crawl back up there and slip between them, but the urgency in my bladder demands otherwise, so I close the door and leave them to it as I rush toward the bathroom Rev accompanied me to last night, which is thankfully just across the hall.

While I’m in the bathroom, I take my time to brush my teeth and smooth my hair back. Now that I’m moving, my body doesn’t feel nearly as heavy or sore as it did when I woke, but I can still feel the evidence of last night in all the right places.

By the time I make it downstairs to find Colton in the kitchen, nursing a mug of coffee, I feel good. Somehow, I’ve shed years’ worth of tension and turmoil in just a few hours, and I’m not sure if it was that magical mattress or their magical cocks. Or maybe the combination of it all.

“Damn,” he whispers when his eyes land on me. “We’re going to have to have Hadley bring you some real clothes, or you won’t be able to walk for weeks by the time we have our fill of you.”

His hungry gaze backs up the truth in his words, and I’m reminded of the feeling of being split in two last night. A sadistic little part of me wonders what it would be like to add him in with the others... if it’s possible. Rev and Tripp could probably take my ass together and still not stretch me as wide as Colton did. That’s a downright filthy thought— and one that makes me feel like I’m sweating despite the chill in the air. I clear my throat, swinging onto a stool to try and hide the evidence of my arousal, crossing my arms over the counter. “Shouldn’t you be at work... saving lives or... solving crime?”

It's hard to string words together when I'm focused on the veins in his forearms straining as he braces his hands against the counter, leaning into me. He smells good, and the way he's looking at me makes my mouth dry.

"Solving crime?" He laughs. "No, actually. I submitted my resignation about eight hours ago."

It takes me a moment to process what he's said, but when I do, I shake my head. "Eight hours ago?"

"Yep. As soon as I got the call. Mayor Archer is looking for a new appointee."

"Mayor Archer," I laugh, thinking of the man I hoped to one day call my brother-in-law. When Hadley had left him, I wasn't so sure they'd ever fall back together, but now I don't know what the future holds for them. Maybe he will be my brother-in-law after all, though that could make my situation with Tripp a little weird.

I shake my head. Thinking of Axel as the mayor is already weird enough. Though, I suppose it's not really as weird as thinking of Colton as the chief of police.

He seems to sense what I'm thinking because he moves a hand across the counter to slide his phone over to me. I catch it before it can sail off the counter, not pulling my eyes off of him until the phone is in hand.

It's open to a news article, and the photo that accompanies it steals my breath. I glance at the caption, even though I know exactly what I'm looking at. The steel frame of the Ferris Wheel that Colton fucked me on last night peeks above the gates, the pinks and purples of dawn breaking through the dark sky behind it. The flash of the camera illuminates the parts of the park that fell into disarray in the years it's been abandoned—the padlock that hangs open is rusted, the brush growing up through the concrete is almost too

high to allow the gate to open. There's no doubt that this photo was taken recently... very recently.

I glance at Colton quickly before reading the headline out loud.

“Cold case solved as security guard stumbles upon grisly murder/suicide scene.” I let the words sink in, trying to understand their meaning. And then I see it—her name jumps out at me in the middle of all the others.

Audrey Graves.

“I had to resign,” Colton explains, drawing my focus back to him. His eyes are dark and hungry, glinting with the slightest hint of amusement. “Because what kind of police chief doesn't realize his best friend murdered his girlfriend?”

I hold his gaze as the words settle in and then swipe up on his screen, skimming the article for any information I can latch onto. “Jacob North, son of Former Mayor North, was found dead when the security guard went to do his monthly check of the park. Found with him was a group of his high school acquaintances. Responding officers say that they made the connection to the 2019 slaying of eighteen-year-old Audrey Graves as soon as they were called to the scene. North left behind a letter detailing his brutal attack on the young woman from years prior, naming his friends as accomplices. Among the list of accomplices was a name that authorities have connected to the Boston murder of Dr. Logan Whittier, which occurred earlier this week. He called the string of murders ‘penance’ and claimed he needed to ‘purge his guilty soul’.

Graves, who he claims was his accomplice in the double homicide of Serenity Hollow police chief Mitch Lavigne and his wife Bridget Lavigne, was a close friend of the deceased. The confession details their spiral after

killing the Lavignes, and the subsequent attempt to keep all of their secrets undercover.

Authorities haven't yet released the names of the other male bodies found at the scene, who North implicated as his accomplices in the theme park murder.

Following the incident years ago, the company shuttered its doors and sold off the property after coming under heavy scrutiny around its safety protocols."

I stop reading, not caring to know the logistics of what happened to the park in between me leaving it three years ago and me leaving it last night. "You framed Jake?" I say, glancing up at Colton to find he's still watching me like he's trying to see into my soul.

"Does that bother you?" He challenges, waiting for me to refute him. "Have you had a stroke of conscience this morning?"

I snort. A stroke of conscience? What would possibly weigh on my conscience after everything we'd done last night... after everything I'd seen? Mark, Nick, and Carson were complicit in Audrey's death, and then they ran me out of town, letting Logan banish me as if he ever really held dominion over me. All of them would have hurt me last night—all of them tried. Logan manipulated me, confused me, kept me drugged for the duration of our relationship. And Jake fucked my best friend behind my back, killed my parents, and never had enough spine to stand up to the bitch who ruined my life.

I don't even feel bad about what happened to Audrey now. She was a liar, a cheater, a manipulator, and a murder. She was going to let them kill me that night three years ago, and she played me the whole night, preying on my insecurities to get me to take the pills they had offered me. She looked my

mother in the face and pulled the trigger as if my parents hadn't welcomed her into their home with open arms. Her betraying me hurt, but her betraying my parents was downright evil.

I don't feel bad about any of it, honestly.

"Conscience? No." I shake my head, pushing the phone away from me so that I don't have to look at the photo anymore. One side of his mouth lifts in a rueful grin as if he likes that answer. "So, you just quit? Just like that?"

"Just like that." He nods. "I played my part while I needed to. Now, we'll just have to protect our town in other ways."

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering what he means by that. "Last night, you said something about how I never paid attention to the town's history." He hums in quiet agreement, so I continue. "What did you mean by that?"

"The witch trials. Everyone knows about the Salem ones, even if they don't actually *know*." I press my lips together, waiting for him to go on. "But most people don't know that the stories run so much deeper. There's a whole world out there, Mars, in the spaces where people are too blind to look."

"A world full of what?" I press, needing more.

If I am taking their claims at face value, I once had magic of my own. I don't know anything about it... not what it feels like, not what its purpose is, not what to do with it.

Colton's smirk spreads across his face, and then he reacts quickly, dragging me onto the island so quickly I don't even have a chance to resist him. I simply wrap my legs around him as the force of his attack knocks the stool out from under me, and he cradles my head as he lays me down on the marble, the cold surface meeting with my warm flesh. He climbs over me as my pulse kicks into high gear, my heart hammering as he eyes me like he's going to eat me alive.

When his hot breath grazes my neck and he brings his mouth to my ear, I stop breathing, never taking my eyes from him. “A world full of possibilities, baby.” He presses a kiss to the soft space there before trailing more of them over my neck, dipping down to my collarbone.

I fist my hands in his hair, enamored with the feeling of him, of his adoration, his love.

I think he’s going to move further south, but his lips traipse back up the other side of my neck and he nips at my earlobe, pulling a soft moan from somewhere deep inside of me. I arch into him, hungry for more. “And a world full of freedom.”

Possibilities. Freedom. I moan again, the words sounding as good as his hard body feels, caging mine against the marble.

I’ve never really been free. I’ve spent most of my life tethered to *something*... the need to be a good daughter, a good sister, a good friend. And when all of those things were pried away from me, I tethered myself to Logan. He took advantage of that in his own way, binding me to him by keeping my trauma at his will. He controlled how I lived, how I got by day to day, giving me dopamine rushes in the form of his special therapy, while never addressing the root of my problems... the fact that he *was* the root of my problems.

Colton has told me in no uncertain terms that he’ll never let me go, and I truly believe it. I don’t think he’d ever hurt me, but I do think he’d go to just about any length to keep from having his heart broken again... to keep his friends from having their heart broken again. And yet, trapped under his hard body, his promises of never letting go echoing in my heart, I’ve never felt so free.

I catch his chin in my hand as he moves over me, forcing him to meet my

eyes. “I’ll never leave you,” I tell him. “I’ll never leave any of you.”

I don’t know what kind of future awaits a girl who has three suitors that she doesn’t intend to choose between. I wanted the ring and the white picket fence and the kids... the dream we’re sold as children before we learn that the world is, indeed, full of possibilities. But that was before. I’m not sure those things are in the cards for me anymore, and I’m oddly at peace with that.

Colton doesn’t speak. He doesn’t even waste time, crushing his mouth against mine as soon as the last word leaves my lips, grinding his hard body into me and causing me to moan into his mouth, begging for more.

“Pussy for breakfast?” It’s Rev’s laugh that punctuates our bubble, though it’s not enough for Colton to stop. He trails his hand down the front of my nightgown, lifting the lacy hem and cupping his hand against me without any hesitation.

“Didn’t you get your fill upstairs?” Tripp chuckles. I feel his fingers brush against my cheek, over my lip, down to the swell of my breast.

The faintest ache emanates from somewhere deep inside me, but I want this. Him. *Them*.

God, they’ve corrupted me in the best way.

It’s not the high of the orgasm that I’m chasing now, like it was with Logan. He wasn’t unattractive, but our chemistry was nothing like this. I crave their attention, their love, their eyes on me.

“You know I love your cock,” Rev says, his voice husky. “But you also know that I have a voracious appetite.” His words whisper over my lips as he leans over me, pressing his kiss to my mouth.

The fact that he just had those same lips wrapped around Tripp’s cock makes me kiss him harder, sliding my tongue into his mouth, angling for a taste of him. Colton’s laugh brushes my thigh, and I tense in anticipation,

heat pooling in my stomach. I'm so consumed by them, I don't hear the front door open.

"Put your cocks away!" Someone calls, their loud voice ringing through the hall and carrying into the kitchen.

I jump up quickly, prepared to play as if we weren't just caught in a compromising position. Colton licks me once, right over my seam, making me gasp into Rev's mouth as he adjusts the hem of my nightgown, letting it fall back to mid-thigh.

Rev doesn't release me for a beat longer, his tongue swirling over mine on the retreat, coaxing chills over my arms. When he finally pulls away, I'm breathless and surely pink-cheeked as I slide off the counter with Tripp's assistance. He twists his hand in the air and a dark robe appears between his fingers.

It's a dark piece of satin trimmed with feather boas and a train that belongs on a wedding dress, and it's ridiculous, but I slip into it, knotting the belt just as Axel guides Hadley in, her hand pressed over her eyes. "Is it safe?" She asks, looking around the space without seeing anything.

Axel laughs at her, tapping her elbow so that she lets her hand fall to her side. When she sees me, she grins. "Nice dress. Did I miss the wedding?"

"Funny," I say, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "What are you doing here?"

"Official mayoral business," Axel waves a hand. "Sorry to interrupt your... reunion."

Colton smirks, but Tripp pulls me into him. "We've got all the time in the world."

God, I love the sound of that.

"Yeah," Axel agrees with his brother, flashing him the grin that no doubt

won him his position. He's charming... always has been. All the girls wanted him, wanted him to look his way. But he only ever had eyes for my sister. "But we don't have forever to clean up this mess, so let's get down to business."

"Same, actually," Hadley says, grabbing the arm that isn't trapped against Tripp's side and threading her own through it. "I'm going to steal her while you guys talk shop." She smirks at Tripp, who takes a step away, raising his hands to show he isn't going to argue.

"It's a nice day," Hadley says, and I think she's seriously trying to make small talk about the weather for a minute. And then she pulls me to the front door that she just walked through, letting the heavy wood close behind us on its own. She spins on me as soon as it does, her eyes full of mischief. "So, what happened?"

I open my mouth, preparing to ask what she's talking about, and then pause. "What?"

"Last night," she rolls her eyes. "After you guys left the gala? They brought you home. Did they...?"

I'm not sure what information she's angling for. She can't possibly know about...

Hadley rolls her eyes, lifting her hand and sweeping it through the air like she's smoothing down the sheets. Just as she does, the withered flowers lining the walkway come alive, the petals smoothing out, the colors brightening. I watch for a minute, shocked, and then turn my eyes to her. "You too?"

She nods, a small smile lifting her lips. "So, you know... everything?"

For a minute, my sister and I face off the way we used to when we were younger, and neither of us wanted to back down in the fight over the remote.

I don't know the extent of what she knows, and she doesn't know the extent of what I know, but I'm going to assume it's a decent amount. I settle for a small nod, and relief breaks across her face as she throws her arms around me. "Thank God. I wasn't sure how you'd take it all." She shakes her head, letting out a small laugh.

I stare at her, incredulous. There's no way she signed off on their plan to kidnap me last night, is there? I may have forgiven my lovers for their scheme, but they're going to be spending forever making it up to me. If Hadley knew what they had planned...

She laughs. "Gotta hand it to you, Mars, you always wanted an epic love. Is there anything more epic than star-crossed lovers?"

"Star-crossed lovers?" I feel like she's talking too fast for my brain to comprehend anything she's saying.

"Yeah. And not just one star-crossed lover. Three of them." She purses her lips together. "I guess go big or go home."

"Hadley..." I stop her before she can open her mouth again, looking out at the flowers she just brought back to life, as easily as if she were sweeping her hair into a bun. "You're a witch?"

"Was." She shrugs. "In another life... just like you."

"Then how did you...?"

"Axel." She bites her lip, trying to stop the grin from spreading. She fails, and the slight pink that tints her cheeks is an unusual look for her. "It's new to me, but Axel wanted to share this part of himself with me."

"But how did he...?"

I'd just started to think I was beginning to understand things, and now she's giving me more questions. "We'll talk about it," she assures me. "But later, okay? Right now, I just want to celebrate."

“Celebrate?” The word sounds foreign on my tongue. “Celebrate what?” I’m happy. I woke up this morning more at peace than I’ve felt... maybe ever. But I’m not sure what’s worth celebrating.

“You’re home.” Hadley throws her arms around me, like she still can’t believe I’m really here.

I start to tell her that it’s not that simple. No matter how confident I was when I told Colton I wouldn’t leave him again, I can’t just wave a magic wand and make everything fall together. “Home.” It feels good to say it, to mean it. “I don’t have a job. And I’m not sure the detectives are done questioning me about Logan’s murder. And I—”

“They’re done.” She waves a hand. “Axel called Detective Morgan today, asking that the case be turned over to us since it’s a resident of our town who confessed. Boston P.D. was surprisingly happy to rid themselves of the nightmare. And as far as a job, not that you need one, I have a proposition for you.”

I want to ask what she could possibly want from me, but she doesn’t make me. “For starters, I need someone to take over mom’s shop. And that’s really just the tip of the iceberg. I’m going to need a lot more help around here in the next couple of months.”

She doesn’t even give me the chance to process that request, because her hand snakes around her waist and she caresses her stomach a moment before pausing to hold her hand there protectively. I don’t fail to see the large black stone in the band glittering on her finger—I’m not sure how I missed it this long—but I’m more surprised by the way her normally taut stomach looks softer, rounder. I hadn’t even noticed, though I suppose when we were in our Halloween pajamas I’d thought she looked a little softer all around. I chocked it up to her happiness, to healing. And maybe that’s what this is for her.

“You’re...?”

“Pregnant.” She nods, beaming. And then she rushes to add, “Just a few months.”

I look up at her to realize that she’s glowing. Like, truly glowing. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her look happier, more radiant. “Oh.” I nearly laugh through my shock.

Hadley was not the maternal type—I’m pretty sure she swore she didn’t want kids. But whatever her feelings may have been in the past, however chaotic her attempt to mother me in the last year of my childhood had been, she is beaming as if she’s gotten the greatest gift she never thought to ask for. Tears well in my eyes unexpectedly, and her face falls. “What?”

“I just wish our parents were here for this,” I shake my head, wiping the ridiculous fluffy sleeve over my face to chase away the tears. It’s stupid. They died so long ago that I’ve learned to live with their loss. But sometimes, the strangest things will set me off, and it’s like the grief is fresh all over again.

As much as my tears are sad, they’re also happy. I start to tell her that, but the door opens, and I turn to see Tripp with panic on his face. He stays there just a moment before rushing over to wrap an arm around me. “I just... you brought the flowers back, right?” I gesture to the driveway, and Tripp turns to look at it. “Couldn’t you?”

Hadley senses the direction of my thoughts, and I see the tears begin to fill her eyes now too. “I would if I could,” she holds herself a little tighter like she’s shielding the new life in her stomach from all this talk of death. “But magic doesn’t work like that. It’s about balance, about nourishing the source.”

“Don’t worry,” Rev’s voice joins our conversation as he does, stepping out

into the chilly afternoon with his hands in his pockets. When he gets to my side, he slips his arm around my waist. “We’ll be doing plenty of nourishing the source.”

The innuendo is thick in his voice, leaving no question about what he means by that. Hadley snorts, and I erupt into laughter with her. It’s unhinged, lighthearted, and deep. The tears I’m wiping away by the time Axel and Colton appear in the door frame are from laughing so hard I can’t breathe, and I’m not sure why. It wasn’t even that funny... until Hadley doubles over, cackling. Through her gasping breaths, I hear her squeal. “I’m—going—to pee.”

Rev’s laughter joins ours as Tripp swings an arm around my sister, helping her inside as she waddles with her legs pressed together like that’s going to keep her bladder from bursting.

As she passes into the house, Axel takes over, and Colton and Tripp come back to meet me at the edge of the drive. “Everything okay?” Colton ventures, arching an eyebrow in confusion.

“It’s the hormones.” I tell him dismissively.

His face goes so white I’d think he saw a ghost. “The—hormones?”

It takes me a moment to realize Axel must not have told them yet. Maybe they were waiting until she’d told me. Either way, it’s my news to break now as I burst into a grin. Colton eyes me like he’s considering having me committed, but the rush of emotions that’s working its way through me is almost starting to stabilize. “Not mine,” I laugh. “Hadley’s. She’s pregnant!”

Tripp’s eyes go wide as he glances behind him. “I’m going to be an uncle?”

Colton looks almost relieved when understanding takes hold. But Rev grins, spinning me to face him. “Do you want that? Because I happen to enjoy the art of baby making.”

I nearly choke on the air as his hand skates down my stomach, resting for a moment too long. I shift out of his reach, ignoring the question as I head to follow my sister inside. “And I wouldn’t mind being called daddy.” Colton grins, getting in on the joke too.

I cringe, pushing past him only to have him catch me around the waist.

They box me in, their hard bodies cutting off my escape, blocking me between them so that I have nowhere to go. “I don’t have a daddy kink, sorry.”

Tripp laughs, pulling me against his chest. “Think about it, Princess. We could take turns trying to put a baby into you so that when it happens, you’ll have no idea who’s responsible.”

I don’t know how I feel about children, but I know how I feel about *that* idea. My pussy clenches, my stomach tightening unreasonably with how hot that thought makes me.

“And we could take shifts for feedings and diaper changes.” Rev whispers.

“Maybe one day.” I say, laughing at the visible relief on Colton’s face. “But I’m not in my mommy era yet.”

“Oh?” Colton muses. “What era are you in?”

I press myself into him, rising to the tips of my toes to bring my mouth to his. Before I can let them touch, I whisper, “In my fuck around and find out era.”

Confusion pulls his face into a scowl. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tripp and Rev exchange a questioning glance. “As in what?”

“As in I fuck around,” I unknot the tie at my waist, letting the robe drop to the floor as they watch me, wondering where I’m going with this. “And then I find out how you’ll punish me when you catch me.”

Before he even has the chance to register my words, I shove past him,

darting through the house before I even hear the laughter behind me.

Maybe it's wrong to antagonize them when my sister is in the house, but it's not like she got pregnant by being a sweet little virgin. Besides, I'm not going to stay in the house.

I run straight through it, blazing a path to the garage we came in through last night.

They saw where I went, and they don't bother pretending they didn't. Tripp's the one who opens the door, letting the others through as I watch them from behind one of the trucks parked near the exit. A decent amount of sunlight pours in through the windows, which is good because the motion sensors don't turn on to betray my location.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are..." Rev calls, turning away from me and heading in the opposite direction.

"You really want to find out what we do to you when we get you?" Colton's voice is teasing as he heads down the center of the garage, glancing both ways, looking for any sign of me.

Tripp closes the door behind them, and I hear the small scrape of the lock. I don't even bother to ask why there's a lock on this side of the door—it doesn't matter. I'm not looking to escape.

"You can't win at this, angel." Rev says, his voice getting further away as he continues down the wrong path.

He's wrong, of course. I've already won.

I hear Colton lunge for something, thinking he's found me. As I'm pressing my hand to my mouth to stifle my laughter, strong arms close around me, and a scream unleashes itself from my throat. "I'll always find you, Princess." Tripp's words make something in me melt even before he spins me to face him, grinning. "But you know that, don't you?"

He doesn't need an answer as he grabs me beneath my ass, lifting me into his arms and dropping the tailgate of the truck with his other hand. He transfers me onto it with ease, wrenching my knees apart and fitting himself between them. "I do."

"Naughty girl," Rev chuckles, coming to join us.

"Brave, baby." Colton croons, taking the space at Tripp's other side. "Very brave."

Maybe he's right. Maybe I *am* brave. After all, giving my heart to three men, trusting them not to let it break again sounds like an awfully big ask.

And yet as they look at me, their devotion filling every breath in my lungs, I know there's nothing to worry about.

Because as long as I have them, I have everything.