

Can she save him
before he destroys her?

VOW TO SEVER

STOLEN OBSESSIONS
BOOK TWO

AURELIA KNIGHT

**VOW
TO
SEVER**

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This book is dedicated to the shitty promises we never should have kept and the broken ones we should have fought harder for. Tear out your guilt and stomp it to death.

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CONTENT WARNING

Vow to Sever contains graphic violence and sexual content that is not suitable for all viewers. Please reach out on www.AureliaKnight.com or in Aurelia's Facebook group Aurelia's Illicit Library for specific concerns or a more comprehensive list. Please take warnings seriously, your mental health matters.

Some of the larger ones to note are: murder, stalking, self-harm, self-flagellation, manipulation/coercion, blood play, breath play, dub/non-con, sacrilegious themes, extreme voyeurism involving dub-con, attempted suicide, extreme knife and impact play.

CHAPTER 1

**THE FUNERAL OF ALEXANDRE
BOUCHARD**

MAGDALENA

“MERCIFUL LORD, turn toward us and listen to our prayers. Open the gates of paradise to your servant...” The voice of the weathered priest booms through the yard as he prays over the corpse of the most feared man in our city—the man who killed my father.

“That’s highly unlikely.” Sister Constance’s words carry beyond her intended audience of Sister Mary Katherine and all the way back to Mother Superior. I don’t mean to smile. Constance and I are far from friends, but I can’t help but agree with her. I shouldn’t be glad anyone is dead, but here we are.

The crush of starched fabric and a slight breeze surround me as Mother Superior bustles past. She tucks her face close to Constance as she admonishes her so no one can hear the nature of their conversation. Sweat beads on her crinkled forehead, and I wonder how Constance doesn’t gag at the proximity.

When I’m the one in trouble, which is often, she makes my humiliation a public spectacle. I’m far past caring about a little unfairness, especially today when the man who killed my papa is dead.

My controlled smile breaks out in full when she swats the back of her hand. The favorites don’t usually get that treatment, and I have to check myself for all the petty satisfaction I’m drowning in this afternoon. I’ll pray for forgiveness later and hope I mean it by then, but for now, I’ve won.

“I’m sorry, Mother Superior.” She sniffs and rubs at the reddening mark, but her pride hurts worse than the smack.

“You have extra chores this week, and you’re leading teen night.” She looks back and forth, making sure no one overheard them. “Remember where we are right now.”

This is our home, our sanctuary, so it shouldn't be unsafe, but a mobster's funeral isn't particularly safe for anyone.

Mary Katherine chuckles lightly at her friend's misfortune, not even bothering to hide the ugliness for once.

"You'll join her," Mother Superior snaps.

I keep my mouth shut lest they involve me. Mother Superior returns to her place behind us, and my back automatically straightens. She's been in charge of my care since I arrived ten years ago, when I was fourteen, and we've never had a warm relationship.

She doesn't think I'm suited to this life or belong here at all. She wanted me gone the day I turned eighteen, and if it weren't for Father DiMarco, who took me in to begin with, she would have gotten her way. I still don't know what I did to make her hate me as a scared homeless teen, but clearly, there was something. I've often wondered why the line I'm expected to walk differs from the others. But it doesn't really matter; no amount of obedience has tempered her hatred of me.

The two who she actually likes continue murmuring, but much quieter, and I tune them out as the procession slowly but surely moves across the manicured yard. Today is strange and frightening but, ultimately, a cause for celebration.

My eyes drift to our in-house cemetery, and thoughts of death and my final vows roll around my mind. Will I be able to devote my life to God, die, and be buried here as I wish? With the politics, that's not always a clear answer. Mother Superior can't live forever, but my only real friend is Father DiMarco, and I often worry his favor isn't enough. Who would take her place, and would they make my life worse? The bitter, petty enjoyment settles wrong in my stomach.

My head throbs with the buzzing speaker system, and my worries crack apart the veneer of celebration, leaving the truth exposed. It's wrong to feel joyous that a man was murdered by his own *son*, and I will have to face that murderer. Suddenly, I wish more than anything I'd faked an illness to avoid this funeral. I should have lit a candle for my father in peace.

The turned earth fills the air with hints of cloyingly sweet death. Father DiMarco once told me that flowers covered the smell of decay in the days before formaldehyde, and I'm left to wonder why I can smell the body when he's surely embalmed. He must be. I glance at the too-bright sun overhead, hoping he's not roasting in his own juices right there.

My God, this is awful.

I try, but I can't ignore the odor, and from the way Mary Katherine's nose twitches, I'd say she smells it too. I'm not sure how the useless petals ever did the job. They're not helping now, and the bouts of lilies, chrysanthemums, and hydrangeas surrounding us only accentuate the wrongness. I might imagine the rich taste of iron sitting heavy on my tongue, but his blackened blood clouds the air.

The church bells chime twice, informing us that one hour has passed since the conclusion of the traditional Catholic service. We're close now. Close enough that Father DiMarco offers me a controlled, comforting tightening of his lips from his place above me, but I can see the true concern around his eyes. He knows what Alexandre Bouchard did to my father and is nervous about what I might do now.

Why everyone here constantly expects the worst of me is something I've prayed on and still haven't come up with any comforting answers.

One small, somber step after the other, we finally reach the table beside the dais, where a photo of Alexandre Bouchard, my father's murderer, sits surrounded by an additional pile of prayer cards. I don't know if it was Alexandre himself who pulled the trigger that night. It likely wasn't, but I know he called the hit. He's the reason I have no family.

"Finally," Constance mutters, but Mary Katherine shushes her before Mother Superior notices.

"Pax Bouchard is up there. I hoped he'd get tired by now," Sister Yelena's reedy voice pulls me up short. She's the eldest of the sisters and took her vows here nearly forty years ago. We're not *enemies*, but she seems unsure of me, which is better than the rest.

"Nikolai is up there too," another of the sisters answers.

"He has to be. He's the boss now."

I've never spoken to either of Alexandre's sons, but I've seen Pax several times. I watched him if I'm being perfectly honest. The first few times I followed him around the monastery, I had enough rage burning in my heart that I convinced myself I really meant to kill him. It didn't take long for me to realize that wouldn't be the revenge I'd imagined because Pax was nothing to his father. He despised his youngest son.

Pax's reputation is somehow even worse than his father's, crueler—a killer who does it because he enjoys ending lives for *fun*. My fingers trace the edge of the table and then one of the memorial cards, appreciating the

memento rather than thinking about the sinful softening of my thoughts.

Pax Bouchard is a killer, not my hero. He's the animal his father made and not one who needs shelter.

I'm dreading stepping up on that stage and facing the man I've been slightly more than morbidly obsessed with for the past few years, cursing how I'm feeling, but what scares me more is the fact I want to see his victim, the man who killed my father.

I lift the card by one edge, pressing it into my finger as I stare down the living image of Alexandre Bouchard. The sharp little prick of the laminated corner centers my spiraling thoughts.

You're so small now. How does it feel to be powerless?

I tuck the card into my pocket before someone notices my odd behavior.

The line of people on the stage moves a bit quicker now, or maybe that's my anxiety as Constance stands on the top step, and I shift away from the table and take my place at the bottom. Even in the relative shade cast by the dais, the spring sun is bright overhead, and beads of sweat spill down my back. It's unseasonably warm today, feeling more like the coming summer.

This is a performance rather than a funeral, and hungry eyes creep along me as I take another step up. I'm not approaching the gallows, but tell that to my racing heart. There's no bomb beneath my feet, but I can feel the ticking as it counts down toward my doom.

Hundreds of people stand on the ground below, watching the spectacle. Their eyes pass me over easily. I'm one of the many with the other sisters surrounding me, and it provides me a sense of anonymity I cherish. I've never seen so many absurd hats and designer clothes in one place, and the desire to stand out like that mystifies me. It reminds me of the fashion show I watched when Mom left me with the neighbor for a week.

The people leave a wide berth. After paying their last respects, they linger no closer than twenty feet. I search the nervous, whispering faces for a hint of sorrow or a single tear and come up blank. A line of men divide the general crowd and the dais, dressed just like the rest of them, but instead of frightened, they look eager. Alexandre's inner circle.

Where does their master's death leave them?

Constance sinks to her knees before the coffin, and Mary Katherine waits directly behind her as I reach the top step. The sun blinds me momentarily, and I can't see anything but the colors splashing my closed lids. As they adjust, I see something I wish I never had. What everyone else on the other

side already has. Pax opened the lid.

I lean around Mary Katherine, but still can't see more than the foot of the coffin, the white satin lining, the lid now propped up when it was closed inside the church. The men don't flinch as Constance sobs. She doesn't bother to cover her tears as she pushes off the kneeling bench and rushes down the stairs on the opposite side.

At least someone cried at this funeral.

A slightly green tinge colors her fair complexion as she joins the sisters who have already said their prayers. There's a sense of welcoming and comfort as they silently converge on her. No one touches, but there's an obvious need to be near one another and an ease in that closeness. Loneliness crushes my heart, and I realize my instincts proved correct faster than I imagined. My revenge today is hollow.

Mary Katherine kneels before the coffin. The pale blue scarf she prefers peeks out from beneath the black, and her hands shake as she presses them together, but she doesn't hold my attention for long. This is the first time I've gotten a good look at Alexandre.

Now I understand why Constance ran off crying. She was one of the naive girls who believed Pax couldn't have possibly murdered his own father, but seeing this removes any remaining doubts about the validity of the rumors. My lips murmur a prayer before my brain catches up with my surroundings. I'm in the presence of true evil.

Mary Katherine stands and offers Pax a hurried blessing that catches. Rather than correct herself, she scurries away. I peel my gaze away from the coffin, finding Father DiMarco standing beside Fathers Campbell and O'Rourke. All three men are watching me, but I barely see them. Standing in the place of pride next to the coffin is the killer, Pax Bouchard.

Sinking to my knees, the thick layers of my tunic and scapular bunch uncomfortably beneath me. My lips form the shape of a prayer, but I don't dare utter a sound. Cold chills break out on my overheated skin, and I do everything possible to ignore the paranoid feeling of being watched. It's like someone is savoring my reaction to his work.

I've seen Alexandre a few times since the night my father died. The exposure was enough to teach me to control the worst of my rage, but it never truly dampened it.

A delighted and repulsed shiver goes through me at Alexandre's unnaturally sculpted face, a little too wide and lumpy. Globes of makeup fill

the bullet hole between his eyes, and he's covered in foundation to make him appear livelier. It's not working. His skin has a waxy, doll-like quality. He's a creepy marionette rather than a man, and the texture of his freezer-burned skin doesn't match the melted makeup. And that smell? It's so much worse here.

How did it feel to die like my papa, Alexandre?

Are there bits of shattered bone mixed up in the modeling compound?

Why does your son hate you enough to open that coffin?

His neat blond hair sits artfully combed on his ruined forehead. Somewhere around his nose, he looks more normal, though still withered. He's most definitely not embalmed, and the man has been in a refrigerator for days.

The crisp black suit is so neat and pristine compared to his destroyed face that it's especially horrifying. I wonder if the garish red pocket silk displayed prominently on his chest is a joke. Did Pax also shoot him in the chest?

My prayer ends, but my mouth hangs slack. I stare, learning every detail and storing them away in a dark, fascinating place I keep closed off. It's what formed when I watched my father die, and I try to keep all the ugly parts of me stuck in that one box buried beneath piety, devotion, and grace. But today, its lid hangs open just like this coffin.

I know I need to move, but instead, I stare at the diamond-encrusted watch affixed to his wrist. A deep and familiar dread fills me, haunting and overpowering. The world is collapsing, and my vision goes wonky at the edges, not because I'm going to pass out but because my consciousness is trying to rip itself away from my brain in its desperation to escape.

My spine burns as I force myself through all this emotion and silently beg for help, guidance ... anything. Instead, I find Pax watching me.

He stands only six feet from where I kneel, less than his six foot four inches. His eyes bore into mine, startlingly green, just like his father's. I hadn't allowed myself a single glance in his direction all day, fearful of my reaction to him. This is worse than I imagined.

He's so tall he towers over the men beside him. He's not overladen with muscles but broad and strong through his arms and shoulders. Sharp features, curly black hair, and full lips make me ache in forbidden ways. His black suit and red pocket silk match his father's perfectly, and I'm certain Alexandre's chest contains bullets. Sickness grows in my stomach until saliva pools in my mouth, and I think I'm going to vomit.

I'm attracted to a murderer wearing matching suits with his dead father.

Pax flips through my soul as he stares in search of my deepest secrets, and I'm horrified he may see them. Does he see how little I regret this death? Does he know the sickness is from the shock of the presentation rather than what he's done? He's slayed my dragon.

His lips quirk ever so slightly around the edges, just enough of a smile to remind me to be afraid—but not enough for anyone else to notice—and heat chases the ice out of my spine. I'm terrified he sees all those things and more.

Everyone here knows what Pax is, and the current boss stands beside him rather than condemns him. A subtle current of crushing power emanates from the two of them, and my attraction ebbs as my determination flows.

I will not give either of us what we want. He's not my hero for taking his own father's life, and he didn't get revenge on my behalf. He's another source of evil to detest as his father's legacy in this world.

All false idols fall, Pax. I vow to him silently, and his eyebrow notches up in interest. His slight smile rolls away to reveal the cruelly white flash of his teeth.

I give him nothing. Well, that's not true.

I smile back, broad and bright.

But before I'm too satisfied with myself, my gaze stumbles on something I wasn't meant to see: a line of purple bruises beneath his collar.

CHAPTER 2

GRAVE DIGGER

MAGDALENA

A HAND RESTS on my arm, and I look up into the brown eyes of Father DiMarco, the priest who brought me to the monastery nearly ten years ago. I'm still kneeling, staring, and mortified to think he's seen each facet of Pax's and my interaction, but there's the slightest sliver of suspicion behind my embarrassment.

"Come now." He offers a tight smile to the bystanders. He leans into me, pressing his cheek into my habit so the words are spoken into my ear. The move is too familiar and makes me shiver. "You are staring at a corpse, Maggie. Have a little respect and keep your eyes downcast if you can't manage to behave."

My cheeks burn as shame and anger rip open like a catching flame in my gut, but pure relief squashes them. He didn't realize who I was actually staring at or why. I push up from my knees and stand as I face the man who has been like a father to me since my mother collapsed beneath the weight of her addiction and gave me away ten years ago.

"I'm sorry, Father."

He smiles as he speaks through his teeth. "We'll talk about this later."

He pushes me to the end of the dais, and Pax's gaze weighs my feet down. The slight tip of his lips grows wider until I'm directly in front of him, and there's nothing between us but breaths. I've never felt more like an animal, a collection of nerves, meat, drives, and instinct. He'd crush me in his teeth, given half a chance, yet I'm warm from the fluttering of my heart.

I choke on nothing as I try to speak. I want to ask him what happened to his neck. Did his father cause those bruises? Is that why he opened that lid or told the coroner not to embalm him?

What did he do to you?

The muscles in my throat catch on their weakness, but I finally utter the correct words.

“May God bless his soul as he ascends into heaven.” The words taste and sound like bitter lies and sacrilegious guilt.

Pax's smile stretches across his face, and I swallow hard, unsure why the instinctual terror has me practically writhing in need. It's been a long time since I felt desire, and guilt stabs me that *a murderer* is the cause. Do I want to die with his hands around my neck? The image doesn't stop there, and I'm as horrified as I am aroused. He didn't kill his own father for me, and I'm so wrong for wishing he did that I can barely begin to chase the belief out.

Dear God, please forgive me.

“Thank you for your wasted prayers, but I'm sure someone a little *spicier* blessed his soul on his swan dive into hell.” His awful words carry the slightest French accent.

My hand flies to my lips as Father DiMarco pushes me, barely giving me time to put my foot out and avoid a fall down the stairs. He stops moving me along as I step down, and when I look over my shoulder, he wordlessly points toward the other sisters and dismisses me. He returns to the dais, ordering the men to lower the coffin into the ground.

“You're always causing trouble, Maggie.” Sister Constance's remark hits home. How hard can you try to do the right thing without anyone seeing your efforts? *God sees them*, I remind myself as I resolve to keep my mouth shut.

“It wasn't my intention,” I answer simply before tucking myself to the back of the group where the other less popular sisters stand near each other. You would be wrong if you thought that devoting your life to God would exclude human politics, gossiping, and social climbing. A life devoted to God is a pursuit, not a destination to be reached.

Pax and his brother step down from the dais as the line of waiting men take up position around the coffin and carry it toward the opening in the earth. Nikolai clasps his hands and bows his head in prayer. When Pax refuses to follow suit, Nikolai elbows him in the ribs, and he finally tips his head in mock solemnity. I can't see the bruises from this distance, and it's easier if I pretend they don't exist.

For a moment, I delude myself into thinking Nikolai is a better man than his brother. We're lucky it's him and not Pax filling the boss position. The younger brother would surely be worse. Then they both *smile* as they toss handfuls of dirt onto the closed lid. I was so little, but I'll never forget the

agonizing way I cried when they lowered my father into the ground. They're both evil.

Pax's gaze finds mine again, half a smile this time, just a ragged tilt of his full lips. I watch in fascination as he peels off his suit jacket and drops it to the ground. He continues to stare at me, and I wonder if I'm supposed to take it as a threat or a challenge. Nikolai says something, but Pax waves his hand, brushing his brother off.

A collective gasp echoes through the crowd as Pax grabs a shovel beside the grave and flips a pan of dirt onto the coffin. He doesn't stop there, repeatedly digging into the earth and tossing.

A deluge opens, raining dime-sized water droplets on our heads. People scatter. They were waiting for an opportunity to bolt, and this unforecasted spring storm descends on us like an act of providence. The scent of wet earth and funeral flowers grows sickeningly thick in my nostrils as thunder and lightning crack across the sky.

The other sisters move beneath the safety of the gazebo, not willing to miss out on whatever this is but unwilling to get soaked through for their gossip. I stay locked in place. The rain doesn't touch me beneath my habit. I don't feel anything but his stare when he finds me between the *shink* sound of the metal cutting into dirt.

Nikolai watches impassively for a few minutes before turning and leaving his brother to his self-imposed task. It's as if he's used to his antics and lacks the time and energy to fight him.

He murdered your father. Do you care? I want to shout at him and wonder when I went from reveling in this death to wishing the world was better.

The rain continues to fall, and more and more people file to their cars. The ground grows muddy beneath my sensible black shoes. The sisters abandon the gazebo for the dry comfort of the convent. The younger sisters run while the elders shuffle after them. Yet *I'm* still watching Pax. He looks up at me, and his lips peel back to reveal a bone-chilling and tempting smile.

Rain streaks down his face, over his midnight lashes, and across his sun-kissed cheeks. The white button-down sticks to his skin, revealing broad shoulders and rows of lean muscle. The muddy hint to his skin makes him look like he really did climb straight out of hell.

Dark Prince.

"Magdalena, go inside with the other sisters," Father DiMarco snaps.

I jump, whipping my head to the right, and find him beside me. How long has he been observing me as I watched Pax do the work intended for the confused backhoe operator?

His shovel clatters as he drops it to the ground, drawing both our eyes across the yard. His green eyes shine like summer leaves, and his black curls twist on his forehead. He wipes his muddied hands against his white shirt, pulls the pocket silk out of his discarded jacket, and swipes it across his face. He tosses it over his shoulder into the hole when he's done.

“Fill it the fuck in! DiMarco, you lazy fuck, get over here and help me.”

A little gasp leaves my throat just like it did on the dais, and he hears it. His excitement fills the space between us, and my stomach quakes with something akin to anxiety.

“Pax, please mind your language in front of Sister Magdalena.” Father DiMarco's voice is smooth enough, but I hear the undercurrents of his stress, the fear he's doing his best to keep hidden as he stands up for me.

“Your sweet little cherry nun will just have to run along then. I don't plan on minding my language today.” His eyes run over my body, and though I know there's absolutely nothing for him to see, I feel indecent.

“Let me know if you need anything from me later, Father,” I babble, ready to run for more than my life, my very soul.

“Little Nun.” The dismissive and belittling nickname causes me to shiver. “You're not going anywhere just yet, and Father most certainly will *not* need anything from you later.”

What's that supposed to mean? Pax shoots him a threatening look, and I stop but don't fully turn. I stare at Father DiMarco and wait for him to insist I go inside. Surely, he will tell Pax his attention doesn't belong on me and that he has no business dictating the inner workings of our monastery.

My only friend in the world doesn't do any of that.

Pax steps in front of me. The smell of earth and death is thicker now with it coated on his skin. I may be sick, but beneath that hangs the scent of sweat, expensive cologne, and a masculine musk that must be him. The pleasant smells even out the worst of my reaction.

“I saw you watching me today. Why were you?” Green eyes crush me.

“Everyone was watching you.” The words slip out, thin and nearly silent.

“On the contrary, not a single fucking person looked at me today, outside my big brother and then you.”

He grows taller in front of me. I crane my neck to see his face rather than

look away because something is so deeply wrong with me that I need to devote my life to piety to have any hopes of fixing it before I meet my maker.

“Maybe they’re afraid of you.” My honesty is a boundless thing that I have no hope of controlling.

“Why would they be afraid of me?” He reaches for my hand, but I jerk it away.

“Because you didn’t embalm him, and you opened that coffin.” I don’t understand what’s happening. The raw connection between us is as intense as the deepest levels of my meditation and prayers. It’s like God himself holds us together. *This* isn’t about sex or any sinful attraction. This is something more.

“Are you sure it’s not because I killed my father?” His achingly sweet tone is nearly a croon.

I swallow hard, and this time, he does grab my wrist. I’m so distracted by whatever message is slamming home inside me that I forget to pull away. I don’t know what God is trying to tell me or if the devil plans to lead me astray, but I’m praying on it as soon as I escape.

I say nothing, jerking my wrist away from him, but he holds tight, his face closing in on mine.

“Waited until he looked into my eyes and shot him in the forehead?”

He waits, but there’s nothing to say as my heart pounds in my chest. His hot touch sends little sparks trailing from his fingers up my arm. Would he kill me too? Is that what he’s trying to impress upon my skin? Or does he know what his father did to mine? Is this a threat or a thoughtful description of a thing I’m desperate to hear but wouldn’t dare ask?

“I’m kidding, obviously.” His words don’t match the undoubtedly serious gaze he levels on me.

“Obviously,” I agree, pulling my wrist free.

“But that is what they all think. I murdered and propped him up like a trophy kill for everyone to see. So the question remains, Little Nun. Why were *you* looking at me? When full-grown men and cold-blooded killers were pissing themselves and staring at their shoes?”

“I’m not afraid of you.” I look him in the eyes, the righteous sense of conviction I’ve always loved so much rising high. There’s evil there, but something else too. Pax is not irredeemable.

He smiles as bright as the afternoon sun shines on his father’s dead, makeup-coated face.

“Are you one of those silly girls who think I wouldn’t hurt someone pretty like you?”

“No, I simply know my earthly body is nothing but a vessel, and nothing you or anyone else can do will tarnish my soul if I don’t allow it.”

He grazes my cheek, fingering the edge of my habit until he finds my hair beneath. He peels the fabric back to see the color, and I slap his hands away.

“Oh, I think I could tarnish your body enough to taint your soul. I’m very creative, Pretty Cherry.”

“Then you gravely overestimate your own importance in this world, Pax Bouchard.”

“We’ll see about that.” He leans forward and slides his nose along my cheek. “Run along now.”

I do exactly that, turning and quickly putting distance between us. I’m nearly through the convent doors when another hand grabs my wrist and brings me up short.

“What were you thinking? You shouldn’t have goaded him,” my closest friend and confidant lectures me as the rain pours over the gray stone. The properties of the monastery are vast. The cemetery sits on the back portion overlooking a gulching river. The monks’ quarters have their own building on the north end, and we’re on the south end. My room is on the top floor, and I’m desperate to get there and dry off.

“If he’s so dangerous, then why is he here?” My gaze runs over the cherry trees, their flowers dried and hanging limply as the fruit grows in their place. *Cherry*. Was he really thinking about screwing me right there as he taunted me with his father’s murder? The circle of life seems more obvious, having stood toe-to-toe with a killer.

“You’re not here to ask questions, Maggie. You’re here to obey.” DiMarco’s strides lengthen beside me, betraying how irritating he finds the conversation.

“I am here to serve God,” I argue as I try to keep up.

“They are one and the same,” he answers, and not for the first time, I doubt him.

CHAPTER 3

PARIAH

MAGDALENA

MY EARS BUZZ in time with the monotonous hum of the dryers. The loudspeakers turned off hours ago, but my brain is still keyed into that frequency, skittering away from productive thoughts and repeatedly back to how Pax's gaze seared me. My back burns more intensely than his attention did. I spent twenty minutes taking the leather belt to my skin until it was raw and aching, but still the beating I gave myself as an act of contrition wasn't effective.

Goose bumps break out over my entire body at the memory of him calling me "Little Nun," filling me with shame and lust that somehow make each other more potent rather than dampening the other. My mind tries to panic, but the soft scent of laundry soap grounds me. The ache of the welts on my back as the stiff fabric of my clothing moves over them centers me. Pain brings us closer to God.

I shouldn't still get tingly at thinking of Pax, not with the pain in my back or my heart after Father DiMarco's lecture as he walked me *all* the way back to my bedroom. He rarely comes inside the convent, and his insistence was the first sign that something was terribly wrong. While he's never wanted me to leave the monastery, he's never wanted me to choose this life. His doubts in me have always stung, but this time hit more deeply than usual. Everything about today affected me more than I expected.

"A wrathful nature is unbecoming to a nun. Mixed with someone easily swayed by wickedness? That's a recipe for disaster. Where can I even begin with how wrong today was?"

Perhaps with your own hypocrisy? But I wasn't brave enough to voice those thoughts. So I simply said I was sorry and promised to do better.

It's been a few hours since I tucked the leather belt back into my box of

relics, changed out of my wet clothes, and headed down to the laundry room to get ahead on chores. The last of the endorphins have faded. Everything is clean and immaculate. I'm surrounded by perfectly folded piles, crisply starched linens, and perfectly neat corners. They're ordered in a way that people never will be. The satisfaction of a job well done takes the worst of my worries, but it can't last much longer.

My stomach rumbles, revolting at just how empty it is. I can't complete any other chores without seeing another person, and I've put it off too long already. I have to face the rest of them if I want to eat, and considering I skipped breakfast and lunch, I can't afford to go hungry.

I leave the little sanctuary, finding the stone halls longer and tighter than normal. My heart beats out of my chest as I palm the oversized handle to the dining room. One deep breath and pull.

All eyes immediately shift to me, conversations dull, and their expressions range from disgust to irritated haughtiness. I try not to look too closely at them, try not to see what they're saying in the shape of their lips.

Despite my efforts, my eyes meet Sister Yelena's. She's the only one not gossiping with the sister beside her, and she's actually looking at me rather than staring. In her black gaze, I find pity rather than judgment, and I break the contact before I can read anything else.

I shake off the sensation as I walk to the buffet line. Why aren't my legs longer? Each step comes up short as their attention burns my skin and needles at the readily waiting well of shame. I'm close to tears as I grab myself a plate.

Deep breath. I force myself to ignore everything, but my lungs and hands as my fingers tap along the thick rim of the plate. The same kind of plates they had in the group home the few times I was taken away before Mom left me. I'm as small now as I was then, meaningless, nothing, a burden.

Dinner smells amazing, and I'm so hungry the rumbling has broken into a constant stream of aching gurgles. My trajectory is the mashed potatoes; nothing else exists.

"What were you thinking?"

The sharp voice comes from behind me, and it's so laden with judgment and condemnation that my back shoots straight. I look in shock to make sure that Constance is actually speaking to me.

In the eight years I've known her and the six we've lived together, she's never addressed me more than necessity absolutely demanded. She's

convinced my status as the abandoned offspring of drug addicts is contagious—so much for a charitable spirit. I scoop mashed potatoes onto my plate and move on to the carrots.

“You’ll need to be more specific, Constance. I have a lot of thoughts in a day.” I don’t know why I’m baiting her when it will only result in this awful conversation lasting longer, but I don’t want to roll over right now. Maybe that’s what Father DiMarco sees that he’s so concerned about, but I wouldn’t call my determination wrath.

A flush colors her pale cheeks, and her black brows turn down over her honey eyes. The perfect white of her coif sharpens the effect. She’ll wear a habit next year when she takes her first vows. I realize Constance is incredibly pretty. So are a lot of the sisters here.

“You know exactly what I mean. In God’s name, why did you do it?” She’s so upset I think she might cry, but those tears are for what she saw today and the part of her that died with Alexandre. The same part of me that was fed.

“I didn’t do *anything*, Constance. You saw what I saw. How am I responsible for any of *that*?”

“We all saw you up there, Magdalena.” She shakes her head. “We all watched you.” Her voice carries. She wants everyone to overhear her act of bravery.

“*You* didn’t see anything. You were running away like your skirt was on fire.” I keep my tone much lower as I slap a slice of beef onto my plate, trying to decide whether I should grab anything else before I go. I’ve gone to bed hungry enough times that I won’t do it flippantly.

“Were you trying to get his attention?” She continues at the same volume but then leans in and adds just for me. “Are you that messed up? You want to die like your dad or join your mom on the streets?”

The spoon I held clatters in the meat pan, and the juices splash us both. She jumps back, but I’m still in shock and pain.

“Are you serious? You did that on purpose!”

I didn’t, but I don’t deny it. Her accusation is nothing with the slap of her insult still red on my cheek. Waves of agony overtake me as I think about my father’s smile and how he hugged me when he came home. How different my mom was when he was still alive, and how much worse she got once he was gone. Where is she now? Would I hear if she died? Would anyone know?

“Is there something wrong with her?” I don’t see who she’s speaking to.

“What is wrong with you?”

There is nothing productive for me to say. I could tell her the truth. I lost too much too early, and pieces of me are missing, but she wouldn't care. She'd call that evil, but I know the truth. There is no satisfying path for me. There's only doing what's right. So I focus on breathing because launching myself at her and tearing her throat out is definitely wrong. My fingers itch with the violent desire, twitching to tear into her skin and teach her a lesson. How dare she mock that kind of pain. I want to give it back to her.

My father was killed after he started running drugs for Alexandre Bouchard, and I accept he was a criminal. But how was my papa somehow more guilty than his boss, who sold drugs and killed people? Are any of us less guilty, for that matter? Every last one of us stood there for that fucking charade of a funeral today. What do they think the new boss will do in the same position?

The soft, tittering laughs of the younger sisters and the stern, disapproving glares of the older ones eat at me. It's been a while since I've been made into a spectacle like this. I try so hard to fade into the background, and I've been much more successful these past few years than I used to be.

“I was not trying to get his attention.” I finally answer Constance, then turn my back on her and the rest before I do something stupid, something I can't take back. They would use any excuse to get rid of me, and I can't give it to them. I need to take my final vows, and then, if this convent really won't have me, I can find another.

“Where do you think you're going? I'm not done speaking to you.” Constance is only a novice while I've taken my first vows, and under normal circumstances, this wouldn't be acceptable.

“Yes, you are.”

I head for the door, focusing on my steps, ignoring the insidious feeling of otherness. That unbecoming wrath is so strong right now I could kill. I want to hurt them.

It doesn't matter what they think. I repeat the words until they taste like mush, but I know I'm lying to myself, which is a sin. I'm sinning to make myself feel better, and I'm suddenly sure they're right about me.

I don't belong. I come from bad stock. There isn't a place or a person in the world for me. I'm nothing.

The silence that fell during our conversation breaks with a hum of quiet chatter. I close the door behind me. Searching the lower level for a spot to

eat, I come up blank. Every inch of this place is laden with the type of scorn I'm desperate to escape. Mother Superior forbids us to take food to our rooms, and she would lose her mind if she found out I did.

I slip out the door into the chilly night and our rose gardens. The unseasonable heat has faded with the rain, but the air is still foggy while the ground steams. Everything is soaked through, and I don't have a chance of sitting without getting wet. My best bet is a stone bench beneath a willow tree at the garden's edge. The roses form a loose maze, and while it's not the place to get lost, it can sometimes seem that way.

As I take the path I know well, the sun peeks out from behind a cloud in its low-slung position. There are only moments left before it sinks below the horizon, leaving me behind, but before it goes, it touches my face. The warmth reaches deep inside me to that intangible place where the Holy Spirit lives. Where God's love beats beside my heart, and he tells me to have faith. Be the bigger person. That warmth chases away the aching loneliness and reminds me that the only person in the world who can make me lonely is myself.

As that sinks in, I accept that I cannot and will not get revenge on Constance. She's a petty girl, and I hope that changes one day, but it's not my place to force anyone into growth. My acceptance mixes with the sting of helplessness, and the other emotions of the day spill out.

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I pray for forgiveness, and I mean it.

I eat my sides first, as it's hard to cut meat in your lap, but I'm only halfway through my potatoes when footsteps clatter on the gravel path. I find Constance alone, taking the final turn that points her toward me. Her gaze sweeps back and forth, checking that no one is around, which worries me, but not as much as her nasty smile.

In a few quick strides, she stands in front of me with her back held straight. Honey eyes stare down at me like I'm less than nothing. She doesn't speak and neither do I as she smacks the food out of my hands, knocking the plate to the ground. The thick ceramic clatters but doesn't break. I jump to my feet too slowly, and the rest of the potatoes and gravy splatter across my skirt. The untouched beef lands in the mud.

"What the—?" I nearly curse but catch myself at the last moment.

"How do you like being covered in food, druggie trash?" Despite the open hostility of her actions, she whispers. She's fine with this as long as no

one knows.

“I’m sorry?” I ask in utter disbelief. She’s danced around her opinions for years, but this is the first time I’ve heard her voice them. She too comfortable for this to be the first time she’s said these words.

“You’re right, you’re sorry. You do not belong here. I know it. You know it. Everyone else does too. Do us all a favor and choose to leave before they have to refuse you your final vows. You’re an embarrassment, Magda.” Her face holds such vindictive satisfaction that I need to ruin it.

I flip my skirt to shake off the worst of the mess, splattering bits of food in her direction.

“Ugh!” She jumps back. I guess she missed the part about *do unto others*.

“I won’t be leaving for your benefit or anyone else’s, Constance. But if I were you, I would remember that Mother Superior’s favor isn’t the goal in devoting your life to God. You may not have to answer for your actions today, but you will one day.” There’s a fierceness in my chest, and fear twists her expression.

“You’re delusional if you think God will punish me for chasing out evil.” She swallows hard. Which one of us is she trying to convince?

“I’m not evil, and you won’t be chasing me out,” I tell her, with that righteous conviction still swirling.

She glances over her shoulder like she hears something I don’t.

“We’ll see.”

She turns on her heel, slipping into the rose maze and away from the mess she made. Once again, I take the high road and let her go rather than tackling her to the ground and beating her senseless. Her words batter my insides, and if it weren’t for the unsecured grounds, I might collapse right here and cry into the dirt, but you never know who might show up. The pain rips my chest open as I stand and head back inside, leaving me to bleed on the cobblestone winding through the rose maze. *My faith is strong enough*. I repeat the words, trying to convince myself they’re true.

I drag myself back to my room, every step weighing me down. I always knew those things Constance said were true, and while Father DiMarco and Mother Superior have tried many times to talk me out of taking my vows, no one had ever put it quite that bluntly.

I want to leave. I want to run, but that spot in my chest tells me to hang tight and have faith. God has a plan for me.

CHAPTER 4

A BEGINNING AND AN END

PAX

MY PRETTY CHERRY runs away to lick her wounds, assuming the other nun went inside, but I know the truth. Much like myself, Constance is a predator who waits tucked into one of the maze's corners where she can watch Magdalena leave with tears streaming down her cheeks. She can quietly enjoy Magda's suffering, and I share a kindred understanding with her.

I like to savor my kill's pain too, but she made a mistake and not one even I could have foreseen.

The ache in my chest as Magda's expression dipped and the red blush bloomed on her cheeks more than surprised me. Even more so was how it triggered this protective instinct, something completely foreign to me. I don't know what to make of it, but it took all of my self-restraint not to charge between them and kill the bitch right there.

I'm so distracted I'm not even enjoying today's victory. I finally killed my father and made an example of him to everyone who knew what the bastard was like. I killed the baddest man around, and now they all know it. Nikolai gets the official title, but I'm the one they really fear. All of that should feel amazing.

Instead of enjoying that victory, I'm lurking on the grounds of a monastery, scarcely understanding my own actions.

A quick look in the binoculars tells me Magda is safely going to her room. The poisonous little bitch, Constance, looks around, but I'm unsure what for. Maybe it's that instinctual sense of being watched tripping her alarm bells, but she doesn't run. I creep through the light gray night. The stars are so bright there's only the barest hint of cover, and the sensation of hunting her in the open is electric.

Constance is clearly a chosen name. Her real name is likely something as boring and petty as she is. It reminds me of Mattie, my first girlfriend, first screw, nanny, and the first woman I murdered. Usually, I like that in a victim, but tonight it's tiring. It reminds me of my cousin, Shane, who she cheated with, and all the stress he causes. I'll deal with that asshole another time.

Once I'm close enough, I choose my path with care, creeping along the backside of the hedge Constance leans against. It's slow and steady until the last moment when I jump to catch her by surprise. She screams as I wrap my hands around her throat and tighten my fists until it cuts off. The pitiful attempt didn't last long enough to alert anyone.

"You shouldn't have been such a wretched little bitch if you didn't want to die," I tell her wide eyes as the vessels in her sclera begin to pop. Her tongue sticks out like she wants me to fuck her open mouth, and desperate nails claw at my skin as she tries to peel my fingers away and save herself, but she only succeeds in drawing blood.

Her struggle fades beneath my fingers, yet I don't let go until I think I've cracked the bones. I'd like to cut her up and really make a point about what happens to those who touch Magdalena, but that would interfere with my other, more important plans for the evening. I've already wasted enough time today on my good-for-nothing father's funeral. I'm still covered in dirt from making my point to the world: no one fucks with Pax Bouchard, not even the boss. As if that wasn't enough, I'm already making another fucking point.

This is so ridiculous that I think I must be in love with my Little Nun or whatever it is someone like me experiences. I fell into a deep obsession with her as she stared me down over my father's body, and I've never felt anything so unnerving as her watching eyes. Her beauty is otherworldly. Her bravery borders on stupid, but it wouldn't be the first time I've seen that with a true believer. I can't keep living like this. I need to know everything about her.

This may not be the real love that people write songs about, but it's the best I've ever gotten so I don't plan to let go. I hold on until Constance goes cold beneath my fingers to prove my point to both of us. *I'll never let you go, Magda.*

Constance's eyes stay wide open in death, her lips parted and blue, revealing her graying tongue. I wait for that hungry monster inside me to feast on the vision, revel in taking her life beneath our fingers, but it never comes. There's nothing but pure satisfaction that someone who hurt my girl is dead, that anyone who has ever hurt her will die beneath my hands.

I'm shaking, not because I killed someone, but because I don't know what's becoming of me since that raven-haired nun stared me down over my father's corpse. Everything in this world is about her now, and I doubt I'll ever be okay again.

Rather than working hard to hide the body, I drag her back into the rose garden, past where she knocked the plate from Magda's hands and into a copse of trees. It won't take them long to find her, but that's what I want. No one else saw what Constance did out here, but everyone saw her in the dining room. I hope I've made my message clear.

You touch Magda, you die.

Constance's arms and legs are spread wide from her struggle and being dragged. Her skirt rides above her knees, and I'm very close to seeing the goods. I don't fuck the girls I kill after they're dead, but I've never been shy about looking before. This is different, like infidelity. I fix her skirts and prop her up against one of the trees so we're sitting together rather than me just hanging out with a dead body.

I wait on the ground beside Constance, occasionally laughing to myself about all the expressions on Magda's face today. I imagine her expression when she sees Constance dead and how I can ensure she's among the first to find her. What was she thinking today, and what wouldn't I give to see inside that perfect head?

"It shouldn't be too terribly complicated," I reassure the dead woman with a pat on her shoulder. "When Magdalena sees you, she'll know exactly what she means to me. She'll be *dying* to tell me her secrets." I laugh at my pun and imagine the bitch does too. I may be a murderer and a generally terrible person, but if there's one thing I hate, it's a bully.

Constance is pretty good company now that she's quiet, and the rest of the evening passes smoothly as we wait. My pretty nun settles down about two hours later. Her window is wide and her room small, allowing me a view of her undressing with her back turned to the window. She moves too quickly for me to catch more than a sheet of black hair and a flash of smooth, olive skin. While I'm aching to cut into her and see her bleed, I have no desire to push the knife deep and finish the job. So strange.

I pat Constance again, wishing her a good night and apologizing for how my fixation affected her. She's probably been a cunt to my Little Nun for years. How could she know today was the day it would get her killed? It's almost sad, really. Oh well.

I creep closer and closer to the building. It doesn't make my line of sight clearer, but the need to be near Magda overpowers me. I have to stop about fifty feet away, or I won't be able to see anything, and I need to know what she's doing. My plans rely on observing her, not this senseless urge for her nearness.

Magdalena places a chest on her table and pulls out a few ritualistic Catholic items. She sits down, surveying the convent, but not seeing me. My heart is in my throat as I wish for her to find me, but her gaze skitters past. She turns to light the candles. Then wraps her rosary beads around her hands and wrists for her nightly prayers. What does she pray for anyway? What is her salvation?

My blood is on fire as I study her upper half, the sweet curves of her breasts revealed through her nightgown.

Her cunt might be my salvation, but *I* will be her destruction. The destruction of her enemies and dreams alike. Her lips tremble as she murmurs her prayers, fingering the cross with her thumb as she speaks to her God. *What has he done for you, Little Nun? Why do you still pray to him when I'm the one who comes to your rescue?*

Magda's eyes are puffy from her tears, and I'm swamped with jealous competitiveness. I want to drag her outside, show her what I've done, and let her know what I would do to anyone willing to hurt her. Watching her cry was hard in an all new way: aching powerlessness. I assumed that would fade once I killed the bitch responsible, but her words hurt my girl worse than I imagined, and for some reason, that upsets me. I consider returning to mutilate Constance, though at this point it would only provide an outlet for this rage.

I watch in rapt fascination as Magda moves through her rituals. The red fades out of her cheeks in her concentration, her breathing steadies, and a peacefulness washes over her that she has lacked all afternoon. Her calm brings some of my own and the death I dealt starts to feel like enough justice.

I'm so taken with her and the effect she wove on us both that I palm my hard dick through my slacks. Watching Constance die did nothing for me, but the concentration on Magdalena's face and the way she mastered herself has my cock about to burst in desperation to get inside her.

She presses her lips to the cross as she murmurs her final prayer, and my cock twitches, eager to smear the leaking slit over her lips.

"Pray for your God, Little Nun. I'll be there soon."

CHAPTER 5

HOLY COMMUNION

PAX

DARKNESS FALLS on the convent in a wave and then dying flashes of individual light. It's nearly midnight when Magda snaps her curtains closed and climbs into bed. I assumed she would go to sleep early, but she's a constant surprise.

I wait a few minutes after that, then pull the master key out of my pocket and cross the lawn with the assured steps of a man on a mission. Every building on these grounds opens with the skeleton key, one of the many perks to the crooked priest being deeply indebted to my family.

There must be decent men of the cloth somewhere, but I've yet to meet them.

There is nothing DiMarco or anyone else can do to me now other than my brother. The same brother offered me control of this territory this afternoon as a reward for my "act of terrorism," as he called it. The remaining families have been kissing his ass ever since in a desperate bid to keep peace.

The key fits into the lock and I push open the heavy wood. The scent of faintly incensed air greets me. The halls are empty, filled only with the sound of my steps and the occasional snores of the sisters tucked into their beds. This stupid joke I heard once pops into my head, and I think about cutting all their throats for an absurdist comedy piece.

I don't kill the rest of them because it would take too much work to clean up, and Nikolai will already take issue with tonight. That and I'm ready to be with Magdalena again.

I climb the spiral staircase leading off to each floor in odd directions. Magda's room is near the top, with a stellar countryside view, but it sucks to climb day in and out. Why do they keep her up here all alone? That coupled with Constance's treatment? I'm rethinking how much of an inconvenience

killing them all would prove.

The air is musty and stale. I counted from the outside; only six windows on this floor. She's definitely the only one living up here. I twist the knob, but the lock doesn't budge. A silent sense of pride fills me. Most of the sisters are far too trusting of their surroundings, but my Little Nun is smart. That won't stop me, though. The lock gives easily beneath my key and a satisfied tingle runs up my spine. Nothing she does will keep me out.

I push it back, sighing when I'm smacked with the concentrated scent of Magda. Musky and spicy but feminine and slightly sweet. *Fuck, I need to taste her.* That thrill I wanted when I killed Constance rushes me in her presence. This is all I really needed. Magdalena.

I walk through her space, not worried about being quiet. I'm light on my feet naturally, and Magda's snores are loud enough that I wonder if that's not why they tucked her away alone up here. She doesn't have much stuff, even for a nun, which only leads to more questions.

I sink into the chair beside her window, enjoying the fresh air. Her trunk lies closed on the floor, and I flip the lid without bothering to keep an eye on her. If she woke up, the snoring would stop. More of her ritualistic items sit neatly stacked. These weren't used in tonight's prayers. Which occasion does she use each for and why?

I pull the candles back out and line them up the way she had them. Next, I take the box of matches and strike one, lighting the candle and smiling at the sight of the warm glow on her face. I've never felt so peaceful in all my life, let alone so soon after a kill, but something about her is special.

She doesn't stir, so I move on to lighting the next and the next. She doesn't have enough candles to complete the image I have in mind—her surrounded by flames like an avenging angel—but this will do. She lies in a halo of warm light, and I've managed to mostly mimic the serenity from earlier. Once the box is nearly empty, I notice a vicious strap of leather tucked away in the bottom. Strange. What do you need that for, Little Nun?

Now that I have proper light, I take my time looking at her. I don't see any marks, but there's so much tantalizing skin hidden. Her pink lips part in her sleep as she sags in noisy breaths. Her brows furrow like something upsets her, and while her nightgown is still quite modest, I see far more of her than I could beneath those dull black layers or through the binoculars.

She's fucking stunning, absolute perfection, with long black hair, lashes the same rich color as her eyes, and round, pinkish-tan lips.

I could peek beneath her nightgown to see the pretty parts she has hidden and find out if she's been using that strap on herself, but I don't mind waiting. Besides, this is a getting-to-know-you, and there's so much to learn about the slopes of her face and how her black hair plays with the light. It's different from mine, with rich red undertones rather than blue.

She hasn't even discovered what I've done for her yet, and I'm desperate to know what she thinks. I'm so excited to show her I almost shake her like a child on Christmas morning. I don't, because she's had a hard day and needs her sleep. I've decided to be patient, but part of me still wants her to open her eyes. Would she scream if she found me removing the rosary she prayed with and touched to her perfect lips? The thought of her screams brings my blood to the surface.

She doesn't wake, and the light beads slide through my fingers as I stare at her and imagine all the ways I'll defile her. From my time as a young boy on these grounds, I know they're made of olive wood and carved by the sisters. These are irregularly shaped, and one has an old rusty blood stain on it. Magdalena carved these with her own hands and something about the physical manifestation of her effort turns me on. Tenacious thing didn't even stop trying when she hurt herself. I want to see how hard she tries after I hurt her.

I smile as I bring the beads to my lips and run the dried bit of her essence against my skin. The phantom taste of her coppery blood kisses my tongue as I reach into my pants and take out my achingly hard cock. I bet she's sweet like fucking communion wine, her blood and her pussy. I certainly feel as out of control as the teen I was when I stole a bottle and got shit faced just a few hundred yards from here.

I've been waiting hours to be close enough to smell her and count her breaths. While I didn't expect the snores, they do nothing to quiet my excitement. I've already killed for her, and I doubt there are any lines I wouldn't cross to have her where I want her.

I wrap my hand around the base, jerking myself in quick, short pulls, bringing a wave of pleasure up from my balls, but before I spill, I squeeze hard. The pain radiates into my thighs and drags a groan from my lips. Pain and delayed gratification always make my orgasms better, as does a fresh kill.

I pull up the memory of Constance struggling and dying beneath my hands, and again, it does nothing for me. My dick actually softens in my

hand, and I squeeze it tighter as I switch to the memories of Mattie dying in a river of her own blood, which has gotten me hard for over a decade. This time, it doesn't.

The metal cross slips into my mouth, and I savor the shock of cold before it warms on my tongue. The tang of salt from Magda's skin is enough to get me off, but mixed with the sight of her? This girl could unman me with a couple of pumps. I want to crawl on my knees for a taste of her, but instead, I grip my balls and massage each one.

Working myself in slower, longer strokes now since my release isn't far off, I force it back to the base of my spine where it belongs. I plan to take my time and rub my cock all night if I can get away with it. No one will find the body before I'm ready, and I imagine Magda's face in a range of expressions as my cock grows heavier and wetter sounding with each stroke.

Giving in to my desperate need for her, I wrap the cool wooden beads around my cock. I imagine her lips pressed against them in prayer, whispering feather soft over the tip just like she did with her cross.

"You're fucking breathtaking," I speak the words to her sleeping form. I could christen my cock with her virgin blood, and then receive the deepest confessions of her soul, her greatest worries, hopes, and dreams, spoken into my leaking slit rather than an inanimate object. The thought jerks my cock and my balls draw up.

"Confess your sins to my cock, and drink my cum for your penance." Why whisper when her snores are louder than normal conversation?

I finish wrapping the length around my cock, aroused by the sacrilegious sight of myself with her innocent form in the background. I squeeze my fist, digging the beads into my hard flesh. I enjoy the brief bite of pain and the way it keeps my orgasm at bay. The beads roll back and forth as I move my hands, creating a liquid tension. Would she be angry if I shoved myself inside her like this? How far would that tight cunt need to stretch to accommodate me and a physical representation of her life's work?

The lights dance, casting us both in an ethereal glow, and it's spiritual here in the convent. The tension in my balls echoes in my chest, and the rush overtakes me. She and I are communing at this moment, the culmination of her heart's desires and mine crashing together in one space.

I don't want to believe in God because if I do, he has to die for holding a place in her heart that I never can. After all, she promised herself to him when she'll never be anyone else's but mine again. I'm already angry with

her when I fucking come. All because she stretches, and her full tits press against the thin fabric revealing a flash of her nipple.

I breathe hard, my anger with myself for coming too soon mingling with my anger toward her. If she didn't arch her back like a little fucking sex kitten, I wouldn't have lost my game. I could start again, but I'm already covered in so much cum it would just be ridiculous. Plus, there's something else I'd like from this experience.

I pump my cock into my palm, working out every drop of my cum, and let it pool on the cross and drip through the beads. I roll my softening flesh back and forth through them, making sure there isn't a single spot that isn't laced with me. Once I'm satisfied, I lay it on the desk to dry. Standing from the chair, I leave my pants open and my cock out as I move around the room, blowing out the candles. My leaking dick hangs heavy and wet between my legs. I let it and my hand drag across her belongings like a dog, glad for my scent, my cum to coat her space. I wipe my hand off on her habit.

“You're going to smell just like me, baby.”

I stack the candles and close the trunk, leaving the rosary beads on the counter for her to find. She'll realize I was here and know what I've done, or she'll be too innocent to understand what happened and be left to wonder. Either way, I'm dying to see what my Little Nun does.

First, I open her curtains, then I go to her bedside and lean over, pressing my lips to hers with excruciating sweetness. I have no idea if it's her first kiss, but God's little wife will be spending a lot of time cheating. This is just the beginning. No need to rush. I lean back, swiping the last bit of cum from my cock onto her mouth, relishing the impossible warmth and softness. Then I kiss her once more, sealing my release between us.

“You're such a pretty little cherry, and I can't wait to see you bleed.”

CHAPTER 6

THE BLOOD

MAGDALENA

A SOFT TAPPING draws me from a deep sleep, but by the time I'm awake, I forget to search for its source. I sit up, cradling my sore head in my hands, and curse myself for letting Constance, of all people, get to me. I wouldn't have a headache if I wasn't crying over the words of a girl I don't even like.

My father's murderer was laid to rest yesterday, and I still don't have any more closure than I did the day before. Everything hurts just as bad, and I'm left to wonder if I'll ever heal or if this sore will simply gape for eternity. Did my father make it to heaven? Will we ever see one another again? Or will my soul forever ache from his loss?

I swallow back the stinging in my eyes and tightening in my throat, but my mouth is parched. Salt and bitterness coat my tongue as it darts across my lips. What is that taste? My gaze shifts to the windows, realizing why I'm awake and so tired—that light is the dawn. A hot flash of nerves lights my stomach because I know I closed them before I went to bed. I do it every night.

Part of the reason Mother Superior dislikes me so much is that I'm a naturally late riser. She considers it an indicator of a sinful nature. Personally, I don't think God begrudges me having nightmares and an incredibly hard time getting to sleep, but she disagrees. I always close the blinds, protective of what sleep I can come by.

I climb out of bed feeling normal, aside from the exhaustion. But my suspicions claw me. I'm a little too alert, too aware of that bitter taste clinging to my tongue. Everything is just slightly out of place, close to where I put it but not quite right.

What in God's name is going on?

I walk around the room, checking the smallest things and finding them ever so slightly moved. Each item ratchets my nerves higher and makes me wetter, more excited. It was probably just Constance trying to mess with me, maybe scare me away. She could have been looking for something to use against me and force me out.

I sigh. I was so tired last night, and I'm so tired now. My eyes are swollen, and I'm out of sorts. I'm feeling paranoid and, more than that, stupid. Why do I want it to have been Pax? Why does that excite me? Why am I so sure it was anyone at all? I sit on the edge of my bed. I'm acting insane.

I'm wet and throbbing, my thighs press together to relieve the sensation. I need to move past this. Maybe I had a filthy dream. That would explain why I'm lit up like a live wire this morning and keep licking my lips.

I just need to pray. My prayers always give me clarity and peace, two things I'm in desperate need of. I shift to the floor, kneeling by my chest, and pull out the candles for my morning prayers.

My brow furrows as I pick up the thickest stacked on top. They're not in the usual order. That's very unlike me. When I pull out the matches and find one burned inside the box, my heart stops before picking up in high gear.

I certainly didn't do that, and neither would Constance.

I'm on my feet, throwing open my closet and dipping under my bed to ensure I'm alone. I whip the curtains closed and lean against the wall, breathing heavily. The light switch sits on the opposite wall, and I shake as I go to flip it. Once I'm convinced no one is about to jump out at me, I check the rest of the box and realize my rosary beads are missing.

My gaze flicks around the room, landing on my desk. It's nothing more than a table, multipurpose and utilitarian with no bells or whistles, and on top of it lay my rosary beads.

Minutes pass as I stare at the puddle I'm growing positively certain is semen, cum, ejaculate. Is there any Godly way to describe the fact that someone broke into my space and orgasmed on the beads I carved by hand, bled into, and use as a conduit to my relationship with God? I'm burning with rage, and I'm so turned on I could scream in frustration.

The focal point of my prayers sits in a half-dried, sticky puddle of fucking jizz, and all the walls I've built up in my thoughts to keep myself from cursing come crashing down. How fucking dare he? I'll kill him. I know it was Pax Bouchard, and I'll kill him like I planned to the first time I saw him.

But beneath the anger, I'm downright terrified.

I pick the beads up, ignoring the texture, and bring them to the bathroom across the hall; I have it to myself as I'm the only one on this floor, and right now, I'm so grateful that I could cry. Turning the water on hot, I'm about to scrub the beads and cross as clean as possible when I change course and lift them to my nose. The bitter scent is familiar. It matches the taste on my tongue.

I lick my lips again, a third time. Am I turned on? Am I furious? Do I need revenge?

Yes.

Will God forgive me?

I have no idea.

I won't throw those beads away. I carved them with my own fucking hands. My father wore that cross. That's my blood washing out of the beads as I scrub, but its essence will never leave entirely. The disrespect is astounding; it rips at my self-control and makes me unhinged.

Once I'm satisfied there's nothing left of him but a memory, I towel off the moisture, quickly dress, and put on the more casual habit that shows flashes of my hair and neck. I walk across the campus to the meeting hall in the monastery, where I know Father DiMarco will be finishing up his morning men's AA group. The spring air is chilly on my skin but refreshing with the burning anger.

I stop outside the door, thinking through my course of action. I don't see the benefit of barging in when I'm not even sure what to say. The strength of my anger melts beneath the wet heat, and I'm suddenly sure I won't get the reaction I'm hoping for. Father DiMarco won't be able to stop Pax.

My eyes snap up in reaction to an instinctual itch, watching eyes. An inch-wide gap in the door allows a sliver of light to fall on the inhabitants. If I focus, Father DiMarco's voice drifts out to me, but I don't understand what he's saying. The light carries through the slit, slicing across the front row where the fucking animal himself, Pax Bouchard, sits.

He's a hundred times more handsome seated in a church bathed in the early morning light than he was the day before in a suit that matched a corpse. I can pretend he's not a monster. That his glittering green eyes are simply a miracle, an act of God echoed in my chest rather than a perversion intended to lead me astray.

His gaze drops to the rosary in my hands, and he smiles so fucking bright

it knocks the breath straight out of my chest. I stare for another few seconds, not strong enough to break the connection.

Dear God, please forgive me.

I rip my eyes away from Pax and scurry along the building until I find the door that leads to the covered bridge and walkway connecting the monastery and the Sunday School. It's an odd bit of architecture designed to keep passers dry in inclement weather, and it's always been one of my favorite hiding places.

An immediate calm descends on me as I leave the sunlight behind, and the musty stone surrounds me. That same light I escaped flashes through the slatted windows as I pass, and the dappled light plays over the bricks beneath my feet and the sullied beads in my hands. Why don't I hate Pax the way I should?

I pray on it as I slip out of the light and briefly into darkness as I pass through an old section with empty candelabras mounted to the wall. I take the path by memory. No one can see me here, and that's exactly what I need until Father DiMarco finishes. I resign myself to wait until they're done, but maybe I'm just being cowardly now that I'm not sure what to say. Will Father DiMarco even believe me when I'm not crying and in distress? Would he if I was?

Father DiMarco usually sees people after these meetings. Still, it shouldn't be much longer. I should be able to hang onto my anger longer than this. How did I go from so furious I was going to march in and demand action to hiding? I'm huddled in a dark corner, holding my own rosary beads, while the man who *came* on them is smiling at his sick joke.

Why is he here now?

The idea of him being an addict or alcoholic just doesn't track. He's fucking crazy. He's not high. I need to stop swearing even in my head, and I need to get myself under control. This is exactly why Father DiMarco always tries to convince me I'm not cut out for this, but he's wrong. The man doesn't know me half as well as he'd like to think he does.

"Did you really think escaping me would be so easy?" A smooth voice with a soft French accent slips through the darkness.

I jump. Can he see me, or is Pax just guessing? A window sits six feet down, shining sunlight across the floor, but it doesn't touch the alcove, where I sit in near darkness. His shadow creeps across the floor as he steps into the room, stretching him until he's ten feet tall. That seems small compared to

Pax. The slap of his designer shoes on the stone sends a chill down my spine. His hand searches along the wall for a switch, but he won't find the string hanging in the corner.

"Magdalena, I can smell you. Do you really want me to hunt you down instead of coming out to play on your own?" His words are a coo, and my stomach clenches in my need to respond to them.

He can't smell me, but that answers my question. He hasn't spotted me yet. He must have watched me come down this way.

"Did you come once you realized I visited last night? That was considerate of you, Little Nun."

I cover my mouth, trying to hide my overly loud breaths.

"Do you know how fucking hard it made me when I saw those beads in your hands? Your blood and my cum looked so pretty together. Didn't they? And you brought them right to your priest, naughty girl." After a few loud steps, I think he's walking away from me, but I can't be certain now that he's surrounded by darkness as I am.

Terror courses through me, turning my stomach and threatening to double me over and reveal my hiding spot. But I'm so wet as he stalks the room that my thighs tremble. I've been desperate for him all morning, and now he's near enough to touch. It's all I can do not to run and hope he chases me.

"Don't hide from me, Pretty Cherry. I know we both missed each other. Did you taste me when you woke up, or did you lick all my cum off those pretty lips in your sleep?"

I touch my fingers to my lips, stifling my gasp.

I knew what he did, but it's different hearing him say it.

He's only a few feet away now, definitely heading in my direction. His silhouette is just barely visible before it disappears again. Maybe he *can* smell me because I smell him, and he's like a shot of pheromones, powerful and impossible to ignore. A desperate stupid part of me that I didn't know existed wants to roll over and show him my throat.

He grabs my wrist before he comes into sight, and I squeal as his fingers dig in hard.

"That's a pretty sound."

His body is against mine in a flash, pushing me flat against the wall, with his hips in the lead. The more casual habit I'm wearing falls easily when he pulls the lengths out of my hair, but there's a pinch where the bobby pins take my hair from the root.

I shout, and he grabs my face in his hands. Now that I'm not staring at the doorway, my eyes adjust to the limited light. There's enough to make out the bridge of his nose, a flash of green. He stares into my eyes for one deep, electric moment before pressing his lips to mine. Lightning, life, God, there aren't words for the explosion in that one point of contact. I'm raw from the connection to another human being. Eviscerated and laid bare by a touch I didn't know I lacked. Is that what affection feels like? I need more.

His tongue slides into my mouth, answering my unspoken demand. It takes me a full minute to remember to fight him. My knee comes up at the same time I shove him as hard as I can. He doesn't lighten his hold, deflecting my knee with his own and radiating pain through the joint. I doubt he felt it, but I'm throbbing as my hands on his chest prove utterly ineffectual.

He's kissing me like he plans to make good on his threat yesterday. Like he intends to defile me so thoroughly and make me enjoy it so intensely that my soul is truly damaged. I want it. I want more. When was the last time someone touched me who wasn't yanking or shoving? I can't remember a soft hand or a comforting pat on my shoulder. My legs ache to wrap around him, just to relieve the pressure of the injury. I lie to myself, but it's really so I can understand the warmth of someone else's skin on mine. Instead, I do the only thing I can.

I bite him as his tongue tries desperately to play with mine.

My teeth break the surface, and his blood explodes in my mouth. It's hot and wrong, and fuels the sinful desire ratcheting up my system. I expect his anger or maybe him to force himself on me, but I get a delighted smile.

"You're not a Pretty Cherry or a Little Nun, are you? You're my fucking Snapdragon."

"Your what?" I splutter, torn between begging him to stroke my hair the way I'd seen men do to their wives after church and trying to attack him again.

"The pious little virgin who stared down the Big Bad Wolf over his kill. Who ran to face him after he fucking came over the most precious thing in the world to you." His fingers slide along my jaw with the word precious, like he holds in that consideration. Stupid, stupid, lonely girl.

"You knew what you were doing," I nearly growl the words, ready to try my hand at attacking him once more, but more from my own embarrassment than anything else.

“Of course I knew. Snapdragon, there’s nothing I won’t know about you given time. So tell me right now how you chose this life when you’re goddamn hellfire in human form?”

I shake my head. This is ridiculous.

“I’m not.”

“Don’t lie to me when I’m ready to burn for you.”

Pax shakes my hands as if force will make my situation add up for him. The beads clang together as they drape around my wrists like we’re both praying, but for what I can’t say. He understands the significance of what he’s done, the depth of the disrespect he’s shown God and me both, and he’s ready to burn for me? Does he mean ready to drag me to hell along with him?

“Why would you do something like this?” I demand, staring him in the eyes once more. It’s too dark to see most of his features, but I find them fine. Why are they so perfectly green? Where has the force of my convictions gone for the first time in years? Where is the anger I know he deserves?

Pax leans in, so close I can taste him again if I wanted to, but he’s the one who drags his bleeding tongue along my bottom lip. He pulls back, and despite myself, my tongue flashes out to relish the metallic tang of his blood. He catches the move, relishing it with a groan. *God, please help me.*

“I watched your prayers. The way your lips quivered as you murmured your heart’s desires and how plush they looked as you pressed them to that cross. You’ll learn soon enough, Snapdragon. You’re worshipping at the wrong altar. Those are my lips and my prayers. I own you, your body, heart, and that precious eternal soul. You only kneel for me now.”

“*Nothing* of mine is yours. Who are you to deserve my worship? You’re not even a false idol, Pax. You’re evil. You’re disgusting.” My heart pounds, tense sweat gathers on my neck, and his smell fills every inch of space in my lungs.

“Your first kiss is mine.”

“You’re wrong.”

Anger flashes hot and fast across his face. His fingers tighten painfully around my wrists. He quickly slides the expression away, but his grip doesn’t loosen. He simply ignores my words as he speaks in my ear.

“That’s how you speak to me after what I did for you yesterday?”

My heart stops. He simply can’t mean killing his father. He doesn’t mean that. He didn’t do that for me. His smile is bright and vicious.

“Oh that’s right, you don’t know yet.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re right about me, baby. I *am* disgusting, but I don’t disgust *you*. I fascinate you.” He pulls back enough to look at my face, putting both wrists in one hand to stroke my hair back. “Don’t look so distressed. You can press those pretty lips to my cock to thank me once you see what I’ve done.”

“I don’t want to see what you’ve done, and I will never do that.”

“I think you do, and you’ll be wrapping your lips around me soon,” he corrects, sliding his nose along my jaw.

“I hate you.”

He stills for a moment but then continues gently skating over my skin and drawing goose bumps to the surface.

“You carved these yourself?” he asks when his lips reach my ear, touching the beads in my hand. The tension between us is the most delicious thing I’ve ever felt. The guilt and shame of that truth burn me from the inside out and turn me on almost as much as Pax himself. These touches are everything I have ever wanted, everything I decided I never needed. They undo me.

I can’t respond.

“I know you did, and while they look like shit, they tell me everything I need to know about you.” His lips run up and down the other side of my neck, the renewed sensitivity drawing a shiver. A smile forms at the corner of his perfect mouth. I know because his flesh bends against my skin, the prick of his canine tooth.

“What do you think you know about me?” I snap, weighing what might attack stands the best chance of getting me loose before striking.

“That even when you’re struggling and have no clue how to do something, you’re a tenacious little bitch who doesn’t give up.”

“So what?”

Loud footsteps come around the corner.

“Meet me in the rose garden behind the willow tree if you’re brave enough.”

Pax steps out into easy view before Father DiMarco can spot me.

“DiMarco, I wanted to talk to you.”

He glances my way but doesn’t make my presence obvious. He’s giving me a choice: step out and say something or stand down. I want to meet him head-on, but I’m shaking in fear and need, and I’m too scared of what this looks like.

It looks like he kissed me in a dark corner, and I can't even pretend I didn't enjoy it.

I say nothing, a pathetic part of me hoping for another kiss, another soft touch. He smiles as he walks away with the man I thought might keep me safe. I'm starting to realize there's no such thing now that I'm on Pax's radar.

CHAPTER 7

SCAPEGOAT

MAGDALENA

I'M NOT PLANNING to meet Pax in the rose garden, I'm really not, but that's where my feet take me as soon as I'm able to move again. I know I'll get there before him, seeing how he and Father DiMarco headed in the opposite direction. I'm hoping that time is enough for me to clear my head and change my mind because right now, I only want more bloody kisses in tight, dark corners. How did I forget how good it feels to be touched? Did I ever know?

The peaceful setting always calms me, even in the winter when the bushes are barren. I love something about their spindly presence, like an old friend you accept even at their worst. I run my fingers across the leaves and flowers, pretending it's an accident when the pricklers inevitably catch my fingers and draw little drops of blood. I like the sting, I enjoy the color, but I never knew I liked the metallic tang. I slip my finger into my mouth and think of Pax's blood on my tongue and wonder why it felt so incredible.

My feet carry me behind the willow tree, exactly where he told me to go, and I find that I like following his instructions. I want to do what he tells me, which makes me more concerned. Maybe I am too easily swayed by evil.

The fronds from the tree tangle around me. They're so thick and bountiful that it's like being trapped in a hidden world. Something about the coverage of the soft, wispy spring buds is miraculous, and my smile is as natural as them as the sun warms us both.

I wait for a few minutes, thinking about what I'll say to Pax when he comes. I know I have to tell him he can never kiss me again. An odd pain radiates through my chest, but I can't keep doing this. It's time for me to prove I'm supposed to be a nun and this convent is exactly where I belong, no matter how tempted I find myself or how eager the others are to push me

out.

Pax doesn't meet me, and instead of going inside, where the other sisters attend morning prayers and start their chores, I sit beneath the tree. I'm not hoping Pax will change his mind and show up. I just need this time alone and always have. I'm drained from being around so many people at that funeral, from that confrontation and my grief. Everything's heavy and impossible to hold up. The taste of his cum was replaced with his blood, and they both linger, adding insult to the injury.

I lay my head against the bark and take a deep breath to clear that sense of being watched. It's so silly. He stood me up, and he's certainly not watching. I'm so overridden by grief and guilt that I couldn't lift myself to my feet for anything. I splay my hands at my side, digging into the mossy earth just to touch something I can affect, something that breaks and gives beneath my fingers. The cuts I already gave myself sting as I dig and tear.

My left hand rips out of the ground automatically when something sharper than I intended digs into my finger, slicing it open, but that's not why I'm strangling a scream in my throat. I look to the side, finding the cold, fleshy thing I touched. A white hand lies on the ground palm up like a waiting trap. I push to my knees, unable to stand with the world spinning, and crawl around the tree to find Constance, dead and propped against the opposite side.

She's perfectly dressed, her clothes straightened, and her eyes open like a creepy doll—if she's sitting, they're open, but if you lie her down, they close. The honey color of her irises seeped away, leaving a dull brown, and her skin is a horrible gray. The only part of her that looks right is her hair, and that somehow makes it worse, like she's wearing a wig.

I sat next to her for at least an hour while she was dead like that. I touched her.

"That's how you speak to me after what I did for you yesterday?"

He killed her, but for what? How much did he see?

"Meet me in the rose garden behind the willow tree if you're brave enough."

He must have been watching us yesterday and seen what she did. I'm repulsed, but there's a sick comfort in knowing someone else witnessed my suffering. I have never had anyone willing to protect me, especially a monster.

A deep purple ring of bruises sits on her throat, and burst blood vessels

speckle her eyes. He did this for me, and I hate and love it in equal measure. I'm revolted, sick for her to die for such a petty reason, but vindicated in a way I never have been. Someone treated me badly and paid for it. This is the first time I've ever been given justice, even if it was incredibly heavy-handed. Maybe it's because his touch revealed how much I'm missing, things I didn't even know I should miss, but my feelings about this are all wrong. He's not my hero.

I double over and vomit on the ground beside Constance. I heave, staring at the puddle underneath me rather than running for help or continuing to look at the dead bully who made me feel alone, miserable, and unwanted as often as she could. She often made Mary Katherine do her dirty work, too far above me to even get her hands dirty in my suffering. Little words whispered in Mother Superior's ear, enforcing her doubts in me. Years of mistreatment spill free in my thoughts—like how I was put upstairs alone because I made her uncomfortable even though I never bothered her.

Druggie trash.

I force myself to breathe, my stomach contorting on itself for several minutes before it eases enough for me to do anything but surrender to the discomfort. I need to think logically, despite every wall I've built inside myself being decimated beneath Pax's fists in less than twenty-four hours.

Years of pain and neglect claw at me, sitting just beneath the surface because of a couple of kisses. I'm on the ground beside a corpse because of soft touches. Sheer disgust is the only thing preventing me from collapsing in my own vomit. I have just enough strength to roll to my side and avoid it. So I lay beside Constance and my own puke.

I stare up into the tree and recognize how odd it is that I haven't run for help. I'm not feeling like myself, or real, and I think I might be in shock. The rational part of my brain is suddenly loud as can be as it reminds me of the altercation with Constance yesterday and all the witnesses. Isn't that why Pax did this, because of how she treated me? I count a thousand of the puffs hanging from the tree as I wonder if any of the sisters or monks would believe me if I went back and told them what I found. Would any of them hesitate to accuse me of doing this? Did Pax think of that before killing her?

I stand as fast as I can. The head rush from the sudden shift in elevation nearly knocks me back down, but I sway and right myself. *I can't leave this here*, I tell myself as I kick the ground to bury my vomit.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Steeling myself, I grab Constance under her arms, cringing at how cold and stiff she is. How long has she been out here? Her body doesn't bend, locked in the seated position she was left in, and her arms and legs stick out like a mummy. I tip her backside to the ground and use the leverage to maneuver her like a wheelbarrow as I drag her into the wood line overlooking the cliff.

I constantly check my surroundings, making sure no one watches us. My gaze turns to the drag marks, and I wonder how I can best cover those. How did I get into this mess? I'm heaving for breath as the comparative darkness of the trees closes around us. I have to stop. My arms shake, and my lungs burn. I can't look at her or think too deeply about what I'm about to do.

I could leave her right here, and I want to, but if they call the police and find my vomit, I don't think any one of the sisters here would point their fingers elsewhere. Pax fucked me, and I intend to find out if he did it on purpose. He will pay for this. This time, I grab Constance by her feet.

I push my body to its limits, dragging her all the way to the edge. I drop to the ground panting and sobbing as the wet wind blows across my face. The river is a deep gray today, matching the sky overhead. We're in for more rain.

I finally face the dead woman on the ground beside me. I can't tip her body over the edge of a cliff and not even pay her that respect. I realize with a twist of guilt that seeing her like this is objectively horrifying, but it doesn't bother me like it should. Maybe I've seen too much death or maybe I am wrathful. Either way, I don't fall apart. I already did that under the tree.

To the best of my abilities, I deliver her last rites, then say a silent prayer for forgiveness as I use every ounce of my strength to push her over the edge without toppling after her. Tears stream down my cheeks as her body crashes against the rocks, snapping her stiff limbs at odd angles before she splashes into the water and the current sweeps her away.

"I'm so sorry, Constance. May God forgive me."

CHAPTER 8

KEEP YOUR GIFTS

MAGDALENA

“MAGDALENA, HAVE YOU SEEN CONSTANCE?” They’re the first words spoken to me today, outside of my conversation with Pax, and they make me want to scream. Mary Katherine’s face pinches in worry, and the remaining sisters bustle around, discussing where she could be or what could have happened. I’m going to be sick.

“Not since dinner last night,” I answer, convincing myself the words are honest. If Mary Katherine meant the last time I saw Constance alive, then I’m not a liar. But myself and God both know the horrid truth.

“You’ve been gone all morning. Forty minutes ago, I went to your room to ask if you’d seen her, and you weren’t there.” There’s a glimmer of accusation in her blue eyes, but nothing more than their usual distrust and suspicion of me.

“I went to talk to Father DiMarco and spent the morning praying in the old cathedral behind the rectory.” The lie comes too easily, and I think I’m going to suffocate in my guilt long before anyone figures out what I’ve done. *Pax likely already knows*, an insidious voice teases me.

Mary Katherine furrows her brow, but she doesn’t hurl any accusations.

“Are you sure you haven’t seen her? I know she followed you out to the garden last night.” How nice of Constance to tell her friend. Did Mary Katherine enjoy the details of me getting covered in my dinner rather than eating it? I push the resentment down.

She’s dead, time to let the grudges go.

“I’m sure I haven’t seen her. Didn’t you see her after our conversation?” That’s a nice word for what happened.

She must have. The two of them room together, and I have no idea when Pax killed her, but I watched her go inside.

“No, she never came back.” She sniffs as a tear rolls down her cheek. “I’m really scared for her.”

“I’m sorry, Mary Katherine, I haven’t seen her. I was inside within twenty minutes of talking to her. Mother Superior checked me in.”

She looks at the old woman in easy hearing range, who nods, confirming what I said.

Mary Katherine shakes her head, her line of questioning forgotten as she drifts away from me and on to her next useless theory. Her friend is dead, and I wish I could just tell her and put her out of the misery of wondering and into the agony of grief.

But why is Constance dead? Is it because she hurt me or because a psychopath got bored, and she was an easy target?

What I don’t understand is why she was an easy target. Pax didn’t go inside to get her, or Mary Katherine would have seen her before she went to bed. So why was Constance still outside when she pretended to go in? Was she planning something else? I have so many questions, and none of them are the innocent kind that the rest of the sisters have.

They’re all clustered, and I’m sure that if I leave now, I’ll only look guilty. I’ll seem like the outsider they accuse me of being, and I suddenly agree that I am. I excuse myself twice to go to the bathroom and throw up, but I rinse my mouth and come back each time.

About an hour later, I’m strongly considering confessing what I’ve done and letting God and a jury of my peers decide on the right punishment. It sounds better than this awful regret tearing me apart. The sisters are crying, so nervous for Constance they can’t cover it. We all saw what happened yesterday at Alexandre’s funeral. We all know these grounds aren’t safe.

The central PA system buzzes before Father DiMarco’s voice carries through the speakers, telling us to gather immediately in the chapel for a meeting. A frenetic energy runs through the crowd as we all walk together. I have never been the interloper that Constance accused me of being like I am right now.

We file into the cool stone church, each of us taking our seats. Father DiMarco stands behind the pulpit, doing his best to smile though his eyes are red-rimmed. My heart sits in my throat, wondering what he’ll say. They didn’t find the body already, did they? The river is incredibly wide and walled by cliffs on either side, but I suppose I didn’t weigh her down. There’s no guarantee she didn’t float.

“It’s with a heavy heart that I bring you all here. Our dear Constance has had a change of heart overnight and has left your ranks. She’s told me she holds no ill will but prefers we not attempt to contact her.”

The women around me break out in a quiet uproar, similar questions spilling. “Where, why, how?”

This doesn’t add up to any of us, least of all me, who pushed her dead body over a cliff two hours ago. Father DiMarco looks up, meeting my stare with a hard one of his own. It’s not necessarily an accusation, but I’m sure he knows exactly what happened to Constance. How much he knows about my involvement is left to be seen.

“This is a huge and unexpected change. Everyone, take the day off from all but essential tasks. You can return to your quarters or walk the grounds, but I would suggest you do the latter in groups of no less than three.”

His words leave a noticeable chill. No one speaks up and questions him, but there’s a distinct air of uncertainty. As if this blow coupled so close with that funeral has finally shaken a little bit of their confidence in him.

“We’ll be perfectly fine if we all stick together,” Mother Superior adds with her own ominous lilt and glare in my direction. I’m certain she doesn’t know more than the rest of them, but she won’t miss an opportunity to exclude me.

That’s fine, provided no one suspects what I did for now. It’s strange wanting to confess and rid myself of this guilt while acting to protect myself and my secret almost instinctively. It’s another thing I’ll need to pray on, and the list seems to grow endlessly.

Seeing as my essential chores were all done while I was hiding yesterday, and I’ve never been involved in the kitchen, I’m truly free for the day. Just yesterday, free time would have been a wonderful turn of events, and now I need to spend it on my knees praying and doing some good old-fashioned flagellation. It will be miserable, but I need to bleed for my sins, and hopefully, God will allow my repentance.

I push open my door and nearly turn around and walk back out. Sitting in the chair by my window is Pax. His black curls gleam in the morning light coming through the window, and his green eyes shine just as bright. I don’t understand how anyone can be so beautiful, and my heart clenches and stutters as I choke down my scream. I don’t let anyone know he’s here, but I’m still considering running. I take a step backward, and he shakes his head, subtle but commanding.

“Close the door, Snapdragon, before someone gets curious and comes up here.” He drags his thumbnail across the edge of his lip, catching his five o’clock shadow with a sharp scratch. “You don’t want anyone to hear what we’re discussing. I can assure you.”

The stairwell is an open spiral, a hint of conversation always carries from the floor above or below. I close the door, sealing myself inside with him. I know it’s a dangerous choice, but my sense of self-preservation is not only stronger than I thought, it’s warped, because it has me convinced that between the sisters of the convent and Pax, he’s my safer choice.

“What are you doing here? You need to leave now.” My hands shake and it’s all I can do to keep the vibrating out of the rest of my limbs. He’s already too excited to have me off kilter. His eyes run over every inch of me.

I stood face-to-face with Pax yesterday, filled with righteous indignation and the knowledge that he killed his father. Yes, there was a sinful softness in my regard for him, but it was passable, something I could live with and eventually ignore. That all changed when he broke into my room, desecrated my most valued possessions, and our confrontation ended in the single most exhilarating moment of my life. Our kiss, his blood.

Did he kill Constance before or after? It must have been before with how stiff and cold she was, his parting words for me, but why do I wish it were after? Everything felt so different when it was just his father’s murder and his cum between us. When he cornered me in that dark alcove, I kissed him back. I hate myself for it, I really do, but before I bit him and intensified everything I kissed him back. Constance was already dead, sitting underneath that tree. She was the gift he left for me. His touch was the best thing I’ve ever known and he gave me a corpse.

Facing him this time is different. I can’t pretend Constance deserved to die like I can with Alexandre Bouchard. What he did is evil. I can’t pretend I didn’t see the ring of bruises on her neck so much like the ones I believe his father left on him. If I look hard enough I can see them now, older than I imagined yesterday, yellowing around the edges. How could he kill her that way, knowing how afraid she must have been. But more importantly why don’t I hate him?

“You are the most surprising woman on planet earth,” he laughs and the sound is so pretty my eyes snap to his.

“What do you mean by that?”

He gestures toward me. “You don’t even look afraid, confused maybe.”

That's a relief as it's certainly not true. "I'm not afraid of you. That doesn't make me unpredictable."

His head tilts. "Agree to disagree. Well, the vomit was fairly predictable." He holds up his index finger like he's giving me a point. "But dragging her corpse through the woods and pushing her off that cliff? That was so intensely surprising I couldn't have imagined it. Making you..."

He wants me to finish his sentence for him and when I don't, he sighs and rolls his eyes.

"Surprising, but not much fun."

Asshole.

"You were watching me." My cheeks practically glow in my humiliation but the guilt isn't as severe as it should be with his mischievous smile and pleased gaze pointed at me. Has anyone ever looked at me like that?

"Not just watching you."

He pulls a phone out of his pocket, presses the screen and turns it to me. I had an old stolen phone before mom left me here, but that and the old computers when I still went to school are the only experiences I have with technology. I didn't even continue my education in a traditional sense, converting to a strictly canonic homeschool regime taught by Father DiMarco.

I'm shocked by how vivid the picture is. I've never seen any technology this crisp, and for the first time in a very long time, there's a pang in my stomach for what I must be missing in the outside world. Then I see exactly what that clear picture is showing me, and I wish more than anything the technology didn't exist. Pax has evidence of what I did. The entire miserable scenario unfolds until I push her over the edge and the video cuts short.

I'm a monster. I want to die, but I know God won't give me that relief. I don't deserve it.

"See what I mean? Dressed up in your whole nun getup and everything, you just throw your enemy's corpse off a cliff. You're perfect. Stunning and wicked and I'm completely obsessed with what you'll do next."

I swallow hard at his summary, hating how true to the woman in the video it sounds, but that's not me.

"She wasn't my enemy, and I only did it because you set me up. There's nothing for you to see me do next." My hands shake harder, but it's not terror or some other normal reaction, and I know how dangerous it is that my fear shrinks in direct proportion to my anger.

He laughs, soft and happy.

“Do you know why I killed her in the garden rather than in her room, or dragging her somewhere else?”

“Your sick enjoyment. You like killing in the moonlight.” I offer him two of the kinder options that spring to mind. Mom once had a client who liked dead girls. Is Pax like him?

“No, actually, I didn’t get much out of killing that bitch. What I did after that turned me on, but you know all about how I spent the rest of my evening.” He runs his hand along his slacks, and my gaze follows the suggestive gesture.

“Is that all you did to her?” The words slip out, and he laughs softly.

“You jealous, Snapdragon?” He waits for my response, but I don’t answer. “That dirty mind surprises me on a nun.”

“It’s a fair question.”

“I’ve never fucked dead chicks, but these days I only like you.”

He winks, and my cheeks burst out in flame. He came here after. He waited to find me in the morning. This is nothing but a game to him, but that kiss has me mixed up.

“You have a lot of nerve to talk to me like this.” I drop my gaze from his staring at my shoes to chase out the stupid butterflies. Why does he have to look like that too?

“I have nothing but nerve, baby, but you’re distracting me with your morbid little curiosities. I was telling you *why* I killed Constance in the garden. You don’t want to know?”

I do want to know. I watched her go inside, and if he saw our altercation, so did he. Why didn’t Mary Katherine see her before bed? I’m aching to know. Instead I look past him, determined not to ask, but he looks so damn comfortable I’m sure he could sit there all day and not tell me if I don’t give in.

“Why?” I give in a moment later.

“She was waiting out there to watch you cry. She wanted to see her handiwork up close, and she got exactly what she wanted. I let her enjoy your suffering before I ended her. Isn’t that generous of me?”

The picture he paints forms in my head all too easily. Her honey colored eyes lit up with rabid excitement the way they were just before she pushed my food out of my hands. Her gloating sense of success, feeling like she had come that much closer to pushing me out for good. She savored the pain she

caused.

“No, it’s not generous! Please stop!” Feeding and encouraging a sadistic nature and then taking their life for that very thing isn’t generous, it’s insanity. “Just stop.”

“Why? Does knowing how awful she really was make you feel better about her dying?”

“No.”

“What she did makes you angry, doesn’t it? She hurt you and she fucking liked it. She humiliated you. She was most definitely your enemy.”

“Even if she was my enemy, she didn’t deserve to die for it!” I shout back and quickly lower my voice, realizing how easily someone could hear me. Thankfully, no one does.

“I’ve already changed your mind on the first part. We simply disagree on the second, but I’m sure you’ll come around in time.”

I open my mouth to argue but close it. He can twist anything I say to suit his needs. He’s already pushed me so much further from my beliefs than I ever planned to go and he’s too good at talking to give him more room to fuck with me. I breathe deep, relieved he hasn’t made a move on me, but that ratchets my nerves for when it will come. His touch blows apart whatever sense is left in my brain when he’s near.

“Why did Father DiMarco say she chose to leave? He knows the truth, doesn’t he?” It’s not a true change of subject but I need to temper this intensity and these answers are as important as anything else.

“Because my brother told him to of course, Nikolai is the boss and he’s granted me control of this little slice of heaven.” Pax flips an elegant finger to indicate everything around us. “My word is his word and his word is law.” He doesn’t bother confirming that my priest knows. My suspicions about Father DiMarco’s involvement with their family have been growing more intense lately, and none of his actions have proven him innocent.

“So we’re not going to jail?” It’s not my top concern, but that self-preservation keeps peeking its head out, reminding me how shitty I truly am beneath all the work I’ve done to pretend I’m something else.

“You don’t sound relieved.”

“I don’t believe you for one thing, who would willingly put you in charge of anything.” His smile widens at that. “And for another, *hell* is a lot worse than jail.” My eyebrows bend in genuine distress. I don’t want to spend eternity burning in hell fire and at this point I can’t imagine a path that

doesn't result in that. How did two days change everything?

A genuine looking flash of concern twists his perfect features, before he stands from the chair, erasing the distance between us. He leaves me just enough room to breathe, to ache for him to have come those few inches closer. He reaches out and touches my cheek, achingly gentle. That affection travels beneath my skin, filling vast holes I only recently knew existed.

"I suppose that depends on whether or not hell is real, Snapdragon. You know what Shakespeare said?"

"No, I don't. Shakespeare isn't part of Father DiMarco's curriculum." I press my cheek into his palm despite my better intentions. The oddest expression crosses his face and his eyebrows push together.

"Hell is empty, all the devils are here."

CHAPTER 9

SACRIFICE

MAGDALENA

“WHAT IS that supposed to mean, Pax?”

A delighted shiver runs through him all the way into the tips of his fingers still trailing my skin. “God, I love the sound of my name on your pious tongue. I’m going to buy you so many books, take you so many places, teach you so many filthy things you’re not supposed to know.”

I ignore his sweet nothings as that’s exactly what they are.

“What does that mean about hell being empty?”

“It means you shouldn’t worry about afterlives when I plan to do much worse to you here. Especially, when the people you consider good and righteous would do worse to you than I plan to given the opportunity.” The light of information dances through his gaze and I ignore it. Sometimes knowledge only brings evil, like Eve in the Garden.

“How could you do worse to me here?” I ignore the second part of his statement, refusing to entertain the idea any further, but here I am begging for other details I shouldn’t want.

“I’m going to build you a prison of your own making. You’ll enjoy every moment with me, so much so you’ll need me, Snapdragon. You’ll hate yourself for loving me.” He has this way of telling me the most horrifying things and making them sound like everything I want.

“I’ll never love you.” *But why can’t I hate you either?*

His disturbing smile rips an aroused shiver from deep inside me, which makes me worry I’m truly crazy. I already hate myself for how strongly he makes me feel, God I hope he’s not right about the rest.

“Take off your clothes and climb up on your bed, my pretty Little Nun. I’ve waited way too long to get a look at you, and I’m not feeling particularly patient today.”

I blink, not understanding his words at first.

“Get naked.”

“You really are insane. I’m not going to do that.” I look up at him, truly appreciating how much taller and broader than me he is. He takes up so much space in my room, and I’m not sure I have it in me to stare him down after watching that video. I’m shaken to my core. He could overpower me so easily, but maybe he sees my weakness.

“Please?” He runs his hand along my neck, but I step back, breaking the delicious contact before it can make me more stupid. “Not even for the man you’ll never love? To make it up to me?”

“Absolutely not.” I’m going to leave this time. This is too much. I need to get away from him. My hand is on the doorknob.

“Magdalena, take off your clothes and get on that bed, or I’m going to play this video for every last woman in this convent.”

I freeze in the act of turning the knob. He can’t be serious. He wouldn’t.

“Let go, or I’m going to play it for the priest you idiotically love. They won’t just know what you *did*, they’ll see it. There’s a big difference between knowing and *seeing*, Magda. Trust me, even if you plan to confess and unburden your soul, this will be so much worse.”

I let go of the doorknob and swallow hard, my eyes pricking with tears because I know he’s right. I watched the video myself, and as terrible as the words are, as the memory of doing it is, the image is a million times more damning. I can’t bear for any of these people who I want to be good enough for to watch it and know I’m worse than they imagined.

Shame, humiliation, arousal, and dread all race through me, but once again, it’s self-preservation in the lead, a horse I didn’t even know was in the race but consistently appears to be the one to bet on. I turn to Pax, trying hard not to let what I’m about to do sink in too deep. Like when I was a kid and Mom would be fucking guys in the other room. I did my best not to listen, not to see their faces when they left, sometimes with Mom bruised and in tears.

I start with my habit, pulling the pins out of my hair as my tears fall in earnest. The fabric and metal hit the floor alongside my first shreds of dignity. I did everything I could to fight this, but somehow I ended up a whore just like Mom anyway. Unlike her, I won’t have any drugs to numb the pain after.

Pax doesn’t say anything for the first time since I’ve met him. He just

watches me like he wishes he was recording this instead of my heinous crime. My nerves grow worse without his steady monologue. How do I know what this psychopath is thinking if he doesn't tell me in excruciatingly hot detail?

I'm of two minds, two souls as I judge his predatory hunger. I want him to sink his teeth into me, and I want so desperately to preserve my relationship with God and the vows I made. I sob, trying my best to hold the breaking sound inside my chest. There's so many things Pax could do to me that I would love and hate. He's the most confusing person I've ever met. He seems to tell me the truth at every turn, but is it another part of his game? Are his words really him, his gaze, his skin?

Why does Pax Bouchard seem like the most genuine person I've ever known?

I keep my back carefully pointed away from him as I peel off my remaining layers and dignity one by one, dropping them in a pile at my feet. He's gotten too much of me these last days. I don't need to give him pieces of my vows and virtue as well as my secrets.

I'm shaking nervous as I drop the cloth revealing the wounds on my back. He can't see them from here, and I have no interest in what he thinks of my chosen penance, but it's second nature to hide them. Historically speaking, self-flagellation isn't an uncommon practice in Catholicism, but these days, people don't view it the same.

I stop my worrying immediately, my skin growing an impossible shade redder. Pax is more interested in the front of me anyway. With a small sob, the last heavy bit of fabric drops to the floor. I'm in nothing but my bra and panties, standing in a pool of fabric and my own dignity.

"Little Nun, you're so good for me. So pretty, so scared. Now let me see those tits."

Flames rush my body. They're made of shame and need, reckless desire for him, and hatred for myself tearing me up and threatening to destroy everything I am. I reach around, unclasping the hooks, and say nothing as my bra drops. My breath sticks in my throat, and my tears pick up speed. I'm braced for something awful and degrading, but the look on his face is so far from what I expect my tears stop.

Instead of predatory interest, amusement, or even arousal, pure reverence is written in his features, the kind of adoration the devout reserve for God in holy spaces. He licks his lips as he *marvels* at me, but it's more like his mouth

is dry than a suggestive gesture. I need him to keep looking at me like that. It's like air, and my chest expands as it continues.

He shakes his head, clearing the innocence and obsession like they never existed and he says, "Panties too, Snapdragon. Let me see what's wetter: your cheeks from all those pathetic tears or your needy little cunt."

My cheeks and cunt fight for supremacy as my tears and arousal both pick up. I pull off my underwear slowly because I'd rather keep them on, but I realize too late I've only made their removal more seductive. The outline of his cock in his pants is glaringly obvious, and I'm suddenly even more terrified by his size. He growls a frustrated sound of sexual tension.

I'm naked; the breeze from the open window caresses my breasts and hardens my nipples. I'm shaking nervous, but part of me is relieved he still looks interested. I've never been naked in front of a man before, and even though I decided to leave this part of myself behind, it's a relief to know I'm attractive. It's a natural instinct to want to be desirable. It would hurt if he didn't want me.

"Climb on the bed and spread your legs." He runs his hand over his hard cock, and I'm fascinated by the movement. Does it feel good for him? I want him to describe it to me, to know what I do to him.

I shake my head, clearing the distraction that pours off him in waves. I can't do this. Letting him kiss me and see me naked, those are bad enough. I can't have sex with him too. I seriously consider screaming, but once again, I've found myself in a position with Pax where I have no options or allies.

"I'm a virgin, Pax. Please don't do this."

He closes his eyes and visibly shivers like he savors my words.

"Don't be afraid, baby. You'll still be a virgin when I'm done with you. Now get on that bed and don't make me show this video to them. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you make me."

I shake so hard my knees knock together, but I do as he says. Climbing up, I keep my back to the wall and grab the blanket to cover myself.

"No, Snapdragon. Put that down." I drop it with a whimper. It was my last hope of preserving some of my dignity. It's impossible to keep everything hidden as I take my place on the bed. "God, you're so very good. Let me get a look at you."

I force myself to think of the disgust on the other sisters' faces as they watch what I did. How all the affection Father DiMarco ever held for me would wither and die if he saw what I was capable of. It's the only thing I can

do to make my body comply as Pax runs his gaze over every naked inch, rubbing his cock the whole time.

“Spread your legs, nice and wide.”

I peel them apart, sobbing as I do. His green eyes glow with his excitement.

“I think your cunt is wetter,” he comments as he sinks to his knees in front of me. He’s abandoned his cock in favor of getting close to me. “Bring that sweet little ass right up to the edge of the bed and put your feet here.”

He grabs my legs, not giving me a chance to comply. He’s too excited to have me where he wants me to go at my tentative pace. I wouldn’t be doing this if he wasn’t forcing me, and he seems to have no qualms about that.

“Scoot your ass forward, now.”

When I don’t move, he leans forward and bites my calf hard. I squeal as his teeth sink in. He doesn’t let go, and my tears fall freely. It reminds me of being a kid and my mom telling me she would give me something to cry about. Shedding tears over spreading my legs seems downright laughable compared to this pain.

It’s hard to think when your skin is breaking, but I realize he won’t stop until I comply and scoot forward. I struggle through the pain and bring my ass exactly where he asked me to put it.

He releases my flesh from his teeth and licks the spot that’s stinging so badly I’m sure he broke the skin. “Good fucking girl. Hands on your knees and don’t you dare move.”

He stares at the spot where my parted thighs meet. “This is very pretty. It’s a good thing I didn’t see it last night. I already came quicker than I wanted to, and this would have pushed me straight over the edge.”

I hate myself for it, but that doesn’t stop the heat or the increased wetness his praise draws. He runs his finger along the seam of my lips, playing in my juices. This touch is so different from those soft affectionate ones, but it fills the same needy places inside me. God, I never want him to stop touching me.

“It turns you on that I jerked off to you while you lay there sleeping and entirely unaware. Doesn’t it, dirty girl?”

I don’t answer him, but he’s right.

“Magdalena, I asked you a question.”

“I don’t care.”

A vicious smile.

“You’re going to learn things with me are very straightforward. I tell you

what I want, think, feel, and you have as long as my limited patience allows to respond. My advice is twofold: don't keep me waiting and never lie." He bites me again, this time on my upper thigh. He's so close to my parted wet flesh that I wouldn't be surprised if he can taste what's dripped down my legs.

"Yes, it turns me on!" I scream in hopes he'll let go, but I don't dare lie for fear of him leaving scars and enjoying himself while disfiguring me.

"Yes, that's a good girl." He kisses the lightly bleeding bite mark; the pain is so intense it feels like pleasure. "You're so pretty marked up by me. That wasn't so bad, was it? I'm going to give you more."

He doesn't wait for me to answer before he dips his tongue between my pussy lips, swirling it against my clit. A ragged moan rips out of my throat. I've never felt anything so fucking good. "Keep quiet, unless you want the rest of them to hear you. Do you want the rest of them to know where my tongue is?" he asks when I moan just as loudly. I really don't, so I do my best to keep my voice down, but I don't have any hopes of stopping the keening completely as he licks, then literally sucks my clit into his mouth.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I chant, so far beyond reason I don't even care I'm cursing while he's eating me out. "God, why is it so good?"

"My name is Pax, baby. Say it." He resumes that insane suction that has my eyes rolling and my mind blanking. My toes curl so hard they hurt.

"Pax, Pax, Pax," I chant his name because the single sharp syllable is the only thing in my world that makes sense right now.

"So good." He dips down, and I whine at the loss of the suction, but before I can get too upset, he shoves his tongue inside me and presses his thumb to my clit. His tongue prods deep inside me, pressing against my walls.

"I'm a virgin, how are you doing that?"

He laughs, and the vibrations echo deep inside me. "Didn't get much sex ed around here, did you, baby? Your hymen is flexible, or maybe it's broken. It really doesn't mean shit. Virginity is a social construct created to make you feel bad about yourself. I'm just excited to have your firsts because I'm obsessed with you." His tongue swipes over a spot inside me that echoes through to my clit and little throbbing pulses have me clawing at my knees.

"I may not be on great terms with God, Snapdragon, but I don't think he would have given you all this if he didn't want you to use it."

His tongue slides back in me, his thumb increases the tempo on my clit

that never paused. It's so damn good I forget myself, and I let go of my knees in favor of his curly black hair. I dig my fingers in, winding through the curls, loving the way they hold me back. Goddamn is it soft and luscious. It's sinful perfection under my fingers as he tongues my cunt and does exactly as he promised. He makes me love every minute of him defiling my body.

“Your pussy tastes so good, pretty little Snapdragon. So fucking good and sweet for me. When you come, make it nice and messy, baby. I want you running down my chin. That's the only apology I'll accept for you taking your hands off your knees.”

I moan, long and loud. Has anyone ever spoken to me like that? And I don't mean sexually because that's a big fat no, but with so much approval in their voice. Have I ever been good for anyone before? Have I ever disobeyed and been given an easy way to make things right?

He pulls his tongue out of me in favor of sucking my clit. My first ever orgasm is barreling toward me with the force of a freight train. It's so intense that for a wild moment I think if I had only known what this could be like I never would have taken *any* of my vows.

He reaches up with one hand and ever so gently twists the tip of my nipple between his fingers, shooting sensation to the tips of my extremities. I come on a scream, and rather than letting me reveal myself like he threatened, he slaps his hand over my mouth and silences the worst of my shouting. He doesn't stop, milking every drop of my pleasure and cum out of me as he switches from covering my mouth to shoving his fingers in it.

I let him finger fuck my throat with one hand and toy with my nipple with the other as wave after wave of pleasure assaults me. I choke and moan around the digits as he gets every drop of my orgasm dripping down his chin. His palm and wrist are dripping too with my spit.

He loosens his hand but he hasn't given up gently sucking on my clit and every bit of sensation is equal parts agony and bliss. My back burns as I slump against the bed writhing, unsure if I need to escape or get closer. The muscles inside me clench around nothing, and this deep hollowness screams to be filled. *Climb on this bed and fuck me. Right now. Please.*

He kisses my clit twice once he's sure I'm done coming and then smiles up from between my legs. His full lips shine with my release, and just like he requested it's dripping down his chin. He wipes it off on the back of his hand and runs his tongue quickly over the juices as he stares me in my eyes.

“When you're crying and hating yourself later tonight, beating yourself

with that fucking whip you think I didn't notice. Remember that I forced you, remember the video I showed you and the position I put you in. Hate me, Little Nun, but don't you dare fucking hate yourself. You did far too good for that."

Then he kisses me with my own flavor still thick on his tongue, and I'm fucking speechless. He already knew.

"I'll be back for you later."

And he fucking leaves me there, naked and panting on my bed, wishing more than anything he hadn't gone. Wishing Pax Bouchard had climbed into bed beside me after giving me my first orgasm and taken my virginity entirely.

I do nothing but lie in bed the rest of the day. It's the only day I imagine I'll ever get the chance again, and I simply don't have it in me to get up.

CHAPTER 10

PATRE MORTUO

PAX

MAGDALENA'S TASTE clings to my tongue later that night when I sneak back into her room for a little uninterrupted time with my girl. I need to be close to her in a comfortable way, but the truth is, I have no idea how to do that. My relationships with women have always been strained, inappropriate, purely sex, or a predator-prey style.

None of that is what I want with the beautiful girl I'm growing deeply fucking obsessed with. I don't think I could ever give her the type of love girls dream about, but she could be my most prized possession. I look over her serene sleeping form. There really is nothing quite like a good orgasm before a nap, and that was Magdalena's first one even if it was hours ago.

Her black hair spills down her back, her matching brows tip down in some dream-based distress, and she's so fucking pretty it hurts to look at her. Now that I know how she comes? It's nearly unbearable to be near her without touching her. I need to make her come again, this time around my dick. I will do anything to make that happen. Once I get inside her, I'm not sure how I'll do anything else.

Even without getting that tight cunt around my cock, I breathe deeper simply by being in her presence. She hasn't showered since earlier, and I like knowing she's coated in her own juices and my spit still covers her skin. There's a little bit of her blood in the mix, but I'd like more. Add some of my cum and it would be perfect.

I'm relieved and pleased with how she accepted her gift of a dead bitch beneath a willow tree. There were some understandable tears, and of course, she needed to display some righteous indignation to live with herself, but I could tell she appreciated the gesture. Her tan cheeks aren't the type to easily show a blush, but she was red and glowing from my attention. It made me

fucking desperate for more.

So tonight, I'm on a mission—get to know as much about Magdalena as I possibly can. I've heard all the standard rumors and gossip, but I need something real. Her last name would be a good start, but I haven't found any mail or an ID yet. I don't understand the exact circumstances that resulted in Magda's mother handing over her care to a priest rather than social services, but something tells me there are a lot of these standard government issue things missing for my girl. Was her birth properly reported? Does she have a social security number? I really don't know. It's hard to imagine she does, and she disappeared so easily.

How much of what I've heard is even true? I should question that slippery fuck DiMarco about her? I really consider it, but that too seems cheap, like cheating. I want thing to develop with her, not behind her back.

I open the drawers of her jewelry box and find a couple of crucifixes. The details of Jesus's dead body are intricate, exposed ribs, ripped skin, a crown of thorns and dripping blood—the Catholics are a morbid bunch. My father was devout, and I remember my earliest memories of the church involving my obsession with all the violent proclivities. Their obsessing over the body and blood, the sacrifice, their rituals, were ultimately very appealing to a fucked-up kid like me preparing to cut into his first body.

Pushing the crucifixes aside, I find two sets of rosary beads Magda didn't carve by hand, and consequently, I won't be jerking off with them. There's an oversized gold ring with an inscription in Spanish. That's odd. It's certainly sized for a man, and not a small one either. I type the words into my search engine and furrow my brow. It's actually Portuguese.

Honor thy father, Honor thy family. GM

That sounds uncannily familiar, though I can't place it exactly. I've seen a ring like that before. A thread of suspicion winds with my doubts about Magda and I wonder if I should ask my brother, seeing as he owns a similar piece of jewelry with a French inscription. Answers from Nikolai always come at a cost, and I'm not sure I'm ready to pay the price of what this truth may mean.

My phone goes off and I silence the ringer at once, hoping Magda doesn't wake up and catch me snooping. I laugh to myself when she doesn't react in any way. Her snores, and the positively deep way she sleeps are pretty impressive. I read the caller ID, annoyed with myself for summoning my asshole brother by thinking of him.

I put it to my ear and whisper down the line, “Brother.”

“We have a problem, meet me downtown.” He has such a polite way about him, always warming me up before telling me what to do.

“If you have a problem, deal with it, Niko.” I slip the ring into my pocket and shift to her underwear drawer. My fingers dig through the cotton, looking for the best option for her to peel off for me when I take advantage of her later. Maybe in a few minutes if I can talk my brother out of seeing me.

“Did I say I, or did I say we?”

“I wasn’t strictly paying attention.”

The image of that leather strap in the bottom of her box has become a matter of my fascination rather than fading into my memory. I’m desperate to find what else she may have hidden. I’m going to beat her ass black and blue, but is there something else I can use on her, something else she used to beat herself?

She doesn't have anything, but fuck, her panties are soft. Because of that, I’m not as disappointed as I could be. This white pair has a line of lace, that’s naughty.

“Pay attention and get down here, asshole. We have a problem.”

“I’d rather not. I’m a little busy right now.” I pick up a pair she’s worn more than the others and smell them, but they’re clean and soapy.

God, Magda’s pussy tasted so good. It's all I can do not to get on my knees and wake her up on my tongue. It throbs where she viciously bit me and broke the skin. Running that wound all over her was the sweetest torture. I tap the muscle against the roof of my mouth just to feel the twinge of pain. I want her cunt pulsing around it again.

“The nun you killed floated up on the banks of Gemelli territory. Get your ass down here now.”

I roll my eyes as I pick the dirty panties she wore today from her clothes piled on the floor and crush them to my face. That’s better. My cock jumps at her scent and the visceral memory of her body against mine, her flavor on my tongue, how she sobbed before I started eating her, and how similar the noise was while she came. I know nothing will ever feel like this again. I can never let her go.

“You said you’d take care of it.” Now, I’m really irritated that he's calling. Violently horny and a conversation with my brother don’t mix.

“I said you could use my resources to enforce that district. I didn’t think that would include killing nuns and dropping their bodies in the river for

other people to clean up.” I don’t bother telling him the second part wasn’t me. I’m more than happy to take the blame for my girl.

“But that’s what you did, isn’t it? You cleaned up my mess?” I’m sure he did, so again, I don’t know why he needs to see me.

He sighs, sounding so much like my cousin, Shane, when he does. “Tell me you’re not going to keep killing them. This shit is bad for business. You can’t kill fucking *nuns*, Pax.” Last we spoke, he wanted me psychotic because it was good for his brand. Today, the winds have shifted.

“I thought you wanted people afraid of your dog.”

“I want my dog on a fucking leash.”

That’s not a promise I can make, so I offer him a distraction. “I’m doing other more interesting things with the nuns, so I’m not planning on killing any more. In fact, I’m here now, and I’d rather not come down there if I can avoid it.”

He laughs. “That’s more what I was expecting when I offered you the territory, not that I have any sympathy for your dick. You still better get your ass down here. But which one are you fucking? Out of professional curiosity.”

“A few of them.” It’s a lie but better than the truth. No one needs to know what Magda means to me just yet.

“Steer clear of Patrice; she was dad’s favorite. She sucked more loads out of the man than—”

“That’s really enough, Niko.”

He laughs at my discomfort, probably the only person left living who can give it to me. Shane is too damn serious, and when he wants to fuck with you, it goes deep.

“Unless you’re into that kind of shit. Personally, I don’t want to fuck in my dead dad’s load, but to each their own.”

Nikolai never hated our father as much as I did, which allows him to joke about the piece of shit. His mother is fine. She got a lot of money in the divorce and bitter feelings. He can go give her a hug and ask her for advice.

My mother was abandoned to a mental institution where she eventually died under my cousin, Dr. Shane’s care. That was only a few months ago, but he’s relocated and changed his name since. I still don’t know if he and my father conspired to get rid of her, but I have my suspicions about why his practice burned down.

At least pretending I’m here to take advantage of the nuns is a

controllable avenue of conversation. It's not even untrue aside from the fact there's only one I'll ever be interested in. But my brother assumes the worst of me, and that gives me some freedom to hide my hand.

The Bouchard men and our business partners have been availing ourselves of the nuns in residence for years, part of the intricate deal Father DiMarco struck for his position and influence. A few of his nuns are whores and most have no idea what's really happening. Niko needs a man to oversee them, and I'm that man now.

I slowly push the drawer closed, and Magda's snores kick up in volume. It's absurd how appealing they are coming from her. It means she's alive and near me. I'd do anything to sleep next to that rhythm.

"I won't be fucking Patrice anytime soon. I have standards."

"Good to know you have lines you won't cross, baby brother. Now come meet me before I send someone to break your fucking knees. I'm not a patient man."

"Wouldn't even break them yourself, Niko?"

"You know I could never hurt you," He mocks before the line goes dead.

Before I go I take a photo of a young Magda, smiling at the camera. It's one of only a few photos, and I know she'll miss it. She'll miss the ring eventually, but maybe not for a while. This will have an instant effect. I put it into my pocket. I want the picture, and I need to learn more about that ring and I'm not interested in hearing no.

About an hour later, I'm meeting my brother in the backroom of his favorite club. He has several offices now that my father's position is his, but this is the only one where he's comfortable. He won't admit to anyone how big the shoes are that he's required to fill. He didn't just inherit a position; he inherited a decades old war that resulted in unbelievable bloodshed and whole family lines dying out. It's a mess, but it would have gotten worse if my father lived.

"You're lucky Martin was there to intercept on your behalf," Nikolai tells me from over the rim of his scotch.

"You're the one concerned with insulting the Gemelli princess, so I guess you're the lucky one."

"It's not funny, Pax. Keep saying that shit, and we're going to have problems." He looks toward his guys in a sly enough manner that none of them notice, but he's cataloging their reactions. Who's listening. Does my brother suspect a rat?

“Fine, fine. Why did you need me to come down here if you already took care of the body?”

“For one, I needed to tell you in person to get your shit together. The phone is rarely a good way to impress a point to you. I figured if you wanted to be difficult, we could make the lesson permanent.”

“Not looking to be difficult. Is there another reason you brought me down here?”

“We found something strange on the guy we picked up. We questioned him after he found the body and was dragging it to the Gemelli’s. He said some whacked-out shit, which isn’t unusual when you’re cutting off someone’s fingers, but he had a fresh Medeiros family seal tattooed on him.”

“Why the fuck would he have that? All the Medeiroses are dead.”

“Not really, most of them died including Gregorio and Duarte, but not all of them. I’ve heard murmurs of their sympathizers for years, but our father always stomped them out where they could be found.”

“Who would be rallying people now, who would be worth getting a tattoo for?” I don’t mean to say the words out loud. I know my brother won’t confide in me regardless. He was hoping to catch me by surprise and possibly get something out of me. It wouldn’t be the first time I was involved in something a little duplicitous.

“That’s a question I was hoping you could help me answer.” He takes a sip of his drink and signals to the server to bring one for me.

“You know I don’t like that shit.” I point at his glass. I couldn’t give a shit how I look, but if I’m drinking booze, it better taste good. “Good wine or fruity drinks only,” I call to the server.

I turn back to my brother, my irritation more evident than I’d like it to be. Nikolai prides control above all else, a big part of why he looks so far down his nose at me.

“You know as well as I do it’s bullshit that you’re asking me for intel. You don’t look at me for anything unless you already suspect something. So what is it?”

He looks at me for a long moment, deciding how much of the truth to tell.

“That priest DiMarco came up in our torture session earlier today when we were cleaning up your mess.”

“What did he say about him?”

“Nothing really, but they knew his name. They mentioned it when we were discussing the nun. Why would they know this one priest in our

territory by name?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re right that I don’t trust you, Pax, but that is your territory now, whether it’s ten square miles or a hundred.” It’s ten. “You’d do well to keep those under your control in line. Other people might be afraid of you, but I promise I’m not one of them. Find out what the priest is up to, Pax. Make yourself useful.”

I’m getting a little tired of all of Niko’s doubts in me. I’m thinking about teaching my big brother a permanent lesson, realizing he’s a few inches shorter than me and not as wide through the shoulders as when we were kids and I looked up to him. People fear me more, and if it weren’t for how I hate leadership, I might actually kill him. It would be nice to knock the smile off his face permanently.

That’s what I tell myself anyway, but I never could. I love him.

“Don’t worry, Niko. You can count on me.”

CHAPTER 11

**THE HAMMER IS THE WHOLE
TOOLBOX**

PAX

I'M REALLY FUCKING angry as I go to confront the priest early the next morning instead of heading to Magda's room to have my way with her again. The dawn is quickly approaching, but I don't want to wait for daylight. This probably isn't what Nikolai meant when he told me to get things under control, but it's not my fault I'm a straightforward type of guy. I don't like loose ends when there's an option for resolution.

I stomp through the grounds of the monastery like I own the place, and I may as well. Even if I wasn't a Bouchard, I have enough money to buy the place from Niko. The majority of my money comes from my mother being one of a set of twin oil heiresses. My cousin and I could live a thousand years and not spend all our money. DiMarco doesn't want to fuck with me.

The front door of the rectory is locked, which makes sense given it's somewhere around four o'clock, and they know I have free rein now. Instead of revealing my hand and the fact Nikolai gave me the master key, I bang on the door as loud as I can, shouting until one of the fucks gets out of bed and unlocks it for me.

I expect one of the priests, but I have the delightful surprise of a ruffled young man who is most certainly not a man of the cloth. He's no older than twenty with blond hair and pretty blue eyes. His cheap shirt is turned inside out and his lips are swollen. There are only a few priests here who are younger than eighty, and I hope for his sake it was one of their cocks he was sucking.

"Naughty," I comment as I push past him. His cheeks are burning red. He tries to hold me back, but I have about six inches and fifty pounds on him.

"Can I help you?" I brush his hands off me and keep moving, ignoring the instinct to hurt him. He doesn't need that in addition to whatever he's been

doing tonight.

“Not really,” I call over my shoulder as I head down the hall that leads to Father DiMarco’s “private chambers,” the pompous fuck. The boy follows me for a few steps, but then he decides better of it and runs off to get help. Too bad for him there’s no one here who can.

I knock on the door and voices murmur to each other before it opens and DiMarco pops out one wrinkled eye. He has a similarly disheveled look as the young man at the door, but DiMarco doesn’t like the guys, and I’m sure his guest is still inside.

The beady wrinkled eye blinks at me.

“What are you doing here, Pax?”

“Aging in the hallway while you stare at me like an idiot.”

“You need to come back at a reasonable hour.”

I’m not playing this game. I shove the door open, pushing him back with it and step inside. He gasps as the door hits him in the face, and I can’t help but laugh. It’s exactly what he deserves. He rubs his wound, and I look around the wide, opulent room. The old priest has a hell of a lot more than Magda.

His button-down shirt hangs open, the last two still barely hanging on, his worn out tighty-whiteys stick out between the parted panels, his pants lay bunched on the floor, but his guest remains hidden.

“You don’t even have enough balls to fill out briefs. Huh, DiMarco? Is that why you chose the priesthood? No one talks about how small your dick is when you’re a priest. Except maybe the boys you fuck. I hope the one who opened the door didn’t start here too long ago. You know Bouchards don’t let pedos live.”

He brushes himself off, rushing to the piled fabric. “Whatever this is could have waited.” He’s red and furious as he pulls his pants on and does the button. “None of this was necessary, you just wanted an excuse to humiliate me, and I have no idea what boy you’re referring to.”

“Probably wasn’t necessary,” I agree with a laugh. “But I’m not terribly patient, and I think you’ll like me even less when I’m irritated.”

“So now I’m the victim of your moods?”

“My whims too,” I assure him as he throws himself into a chair and pours a whiskey.

I let him have a long sip of his drink before continuing. I’m not cruel.

“Which one of your little nuns are you fucking tonight? It can’t be the

one I killed, seeing as she floated up in Gemelli territory, but I see why you're so put out over it."

He glares at me, a little glimmer of knowledge passing through his eyes. Huh, Niko is right. He knows something he shouldn't.

DiMarco's pissed but certainly hasn't shed any tears over Constance, who I only discovered he was fucking after I killed her. Him confronting me for ruining his plans was a fun twist. I would have done it for that reason, so I pretended I did. Keeps Magda safer for him to think that.

Constance wasn't one of the "nuns" who service the powerful men of this city. She was a true believer who Father DiMarco fed all kinds of pious bullshit about serving God to get his cock inside her. It took him years, and he was really mad about all that wasted effort. I've never actually had someone worship my cock like my cum is Christ's tears, so who knows what I robbed him of.

A startled feminine noise escapes the closet and then a crash. I'm amused by the embarrassment and misfortune of whatever hypocrite is hiding in that closet. I really hate double standards, and while DiMarco is more guilty than the young women he takes advantage of, they're all full of shit. Every one of them pretends to be something they're not and make promises they have no intentions of keeping, except Magda, I note with a hint of pride.

Her beauty is otherworldly, any man with eyes could see that. Further, I've never detected even a hint of falseness from her, but she reeks of innocence. Her complete sincerity is a profound weakness. A horrible jealous suspicion jumps into my head. What if Magda is in that closet? I've already swayed her so far from her morals and enjoyed every moment. Could DiMarco be reaping the rewards of what I've taught her, her body is capable of?

I walk toward the door, hand out, with every intention of killing DiMarco right now if it's my girl in there.

"Stop it, Pax. I am entitled to my privacy." He jumps out of the chair, but he's too old and slow to have a real chance at stopping me, but I guess it's a nice show for his new girlfriend.

"You're not entitled to a fucking thing, DiMarco. I own the ground you're standing on, the clothes on your back, the food in your stomach. Check yourself before that generosity is rescinded."

I step up to him, puffing up my chest in the most ridiculously outweighed show of aggression and machismo I think I've ever succumbed to. He meets

my stare for a moment too long before realizing what will happen to him if he doesn't yield.

He steps back, and I throw open the door finding a mostly naked twentysomething-year-old nun, crying big fat tears. Strawberry-blond curls surround her face, and big pink nipples hang distractingly from her chest. I considered fucking and killing this same girl last week, but she does nothing for me now. Huh, apparently, I'm not into naked women who aren't Magda. Interesting.

She's definitely not my girl, but she may still be my problem. As Niko pointed out, I am in charge here.

"Did you want to fuck the priest, honey?" I kneel to her level and softly ask her, but she refuses to look at me. "Tell me if you wanted to fuck the priest, or I'll hurt you instead of him." I try, the words coming much more naturally to me.

"I wasn't doing that! But I wanted it." She sniffs. "He has needs. God understands he has needs."

"What's your name?"

"Mary Katherine."

"You and the priest both took vows, honey. How did you convince yourself this was okay? That you're not a filthy, lying, sinner sucking off old men at the cost of your soul."

She opens and closes her mouth, but she doesn't respond.

"Do you know he used to fuck your friend Constance too?"

Her eyes widen, her head shakes.

"No, it can't..." She turns it over for a moment. "Is that why she really decided to leave?"

"I couldn't tell you for sure." She wasn't thinking of leaving when I choked the life out of her, but who knows how she felt before that. "I wasn't the one fucking her, but it wouldn't surprise me if that's why she decided to leave. She knew he was working up the nerve to stick it in her friend. Must be hard to sell out your morals and pussy for an old man and not get anything out of it, even a scrap of loyalty."

She chokes. "That's not what's happening."

"He's not a good man. He's not even an attractive man. Stop giving him your pussy thinking it's somehow righteous. You're just screwing a hypocrite. *You* are a hypocrite, and if your God is real, he sees you. Now get the fuck out of here."

She scrambles to her feet, grabbing pieces of her clothes, her sobs picking up as she goes.

“Mary Katherine, go in the bathroom and get dressed. We’ll discuss everything once Pax goes.” She jumps at DiMarco’s command, but she doesn’t obey, and his face shifts to a deeper shade of red.

She shakes her head hard, throwing on just enough clothes to cover her tits and pussy before running out the door. It slams behind her.

“That was rude. People are sleeping.”

He turns to me, deliciously furious.

“What’s your problem? Are you determined to ensure there’s no good pussy left? Your family wouldn’t have much use for me if there weren’t.”

“I couldn’t give a shit less if my family can come here and fuck your nuns or not. I also couldn’t give a shit less about all the Catholic fanfare my father did. I don’t need you to bless me and turn the other way so I can feel righteous and pious at the end of my blood-soaked day. You’re barely more than a leech at this point, a high-priced homeless shelter.”

“Then what the hell do you need from me in the middle of the night? Was it the opportunity to shame Constance as well as me?”

“I’m fairly certain Constance is the one I killed. That one said she’s Mary Katherine, but hey, names are harder than your dick, right?”

His sagging cheeks turn even redder. “Tell me what you need and go.” I’ve crossed a line with him, really pointed out how much of a piece of shit he is. That’s hard for a man like him who lives in the fantasy of his own image.

“I have a few questions about one of your nuns.”

DiMarco immediately relaxes, satisfied with that turn.

“This was a dramatic way to make the request, but fine. Which one do you want? I’ll bring her to you later tonight.”

“Magdalena.”

His expression freezes, and his hands tense up. “Magdalena is one of the sisters who’s off the table. You know only a select few are aware of our arrangement.”

“Neither was Mary Katherine, but that didn’t stop you. You have to know that none of them are off the table for me. If I wanted to fuck *you*, it wouldn’t be off the table.”

He huffs, blinking rapidly, and I take pity on him before he combusts.

“Calm down. I don’t want to, even if it would be entertaining to put you

in your place like you do with those girls.”

He searches the room for something, perhaps for divine intervention, more likely a gun.

“Look, Pax you can have whoever you want. Fuck Mother Superior if it suits you. That old bitch could use some loosening up, but stay away from Magdalena. I’ve put too much work into her, and she’s off-limits.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Too much work?”

He swallows audibly.

“It’s nothing. Just do us both a favor and leave her alone.”

That was already the opposite of what I intended, but if anything the priest said could make me want her more, that was it. Having Magdalena for myself is now a personal challenge, and I live for a little competition. Still, I’m not stupid enough to forget this interaction in my attempts to win. What kind of work has he done?

I know my brother right about the priest, but how does my girl factor into it?

“I just want you to know, DiMarco. There is nothing and no one untouchable for me. Especially Magdalena.”

His eyes flash toward the corner, telling me there's something hidden. I turn my back on him, giving him the chance to out himself. He’s sixty something years old, and he was just getting his nightly cardio in with a twenty-year-old. I’m not actually worried about him getting the jump on me.

Like I thought, he reaches for the shotgun he had stashed, but before he can cock it, threaten me, kill me, whatever he planned, I turn and take it from him. I hit him with the butt of the gun, but I don’t knock him unconscious. He’s bleeding, whimpering, staring up at me in shock.

“I’ll give you three days to figure out a solution, but this weekend, Magda is mine. You’re going to hand deliver her to my home, ready to be owned by me, or you’re going to die. It’s your choice. You have my number, but I wouldn’t wait too long to make up your mind.”

“She would never go with you.”

“Then lie. Say whatever you have to. You’re excellent at that.”

“I’m not lying about anything.”

I flip his gun in my hand, deciding it will make an excellent trophy.

“I’ll need you to be more convincing than that. I would also advise sharing whatever you know about her with me because those secrets won’t make you any friends.”

“I’m not hiding anything. I’ve cared for the girl since she was fourteen. I simply don’t want you anywhere near her. I love her like a daughter.”

“That’s a convenient excuse. Too bad it’s not true.”

But he doesn’t speak even when I kick him at the very least bruising his ribs. Why won’t he tell me? What is he keeping hidden about *my* girl. I’m shaking, a step away from killing him when I force myself to leave. There are too many unknowns for a rage killing.

“Three days,” I tell him, closing the door behind me.

CHAPTER 12

POUND OF FLESH

PAX

I CROSS the yard in a rage, barely seeing. I'm not thinking, shaking with rage and a kind of helplessness that's self-imposed. There's nothing helpless about me. I'm about to kick in the door to the convent when I remember that I don't actually want to hurt or embarrass Magda, so I pull the key out of my pocket, silently opening the door.

Lights shine from down the hall, which I would have noticed before I came in had I been paying attention. Mary Katherine must have come back here because soft snuffles carry all the way to me, and the voice of one of the older nuns wordlessly vibrates down the hall. I'm assuming she's telling her the revelation about Constance leaving after fucking DiMarco. If it's Mother Superior, she won't be the least bit surprised. It's convenient if they all believe the lie.

I'm in slightly better control of myself, but I'm still feral as I walk the halls and climb the spiral staircase leading to her room. I've never been normal, but I haven't been right even for me since I saw this fucking girl. I twist the knob, and I smile because it's not locked. She wanted me to come.

She's asleep in her bed, the curtains drawn closed, and I know from watching her these past couple of days she wakes up early when they're open. I could just toss her out of bed and part of me would enjoy her fear and discomfort, but that odd twinge tells me I'd rather let her sleep.

I open the curtains and sit in the chair I used when I jerked off the first night and watched her sleep the second. I watch the sun rise in the distance and really understand that today is the third day I've known her. If I'm in this deep now, how will the next year look? Ten?

She's not snoring, and I should be quick enough to realize that means she's awake but I don't. I'm wrapped up in the calm of her space, the anger

and competition still hot in my blood but muted beneath her scent and warmth.

“Why did you take my picture?” she asks from her place on the bed, and my gaze flicks up to find her deep-brown eyes watching me, warm olive skin glowing, pretty lips in a pout. She’s afraid of me on the best days, and she’s scared to find me here, but it takes her a moment to catch up and realize something else is wrong.

“Because it’s mine now,” I tell her simply. Wondering if I have any hope of keeping these emotions from effecting her, of teaching myself a lesson rather than her. I wouldn’t bet on her odds.

“Why would you even want an old picture of me?”

That’s a good question, and I can’t even begin to explain myself. I can’t tell her I like how she looks happy and free, two expressions I have never seen on her face.

“I don’t need to explain to anyone why I need you. Least of all you.” I look at her with all the malice I possess at this moment.

She scoffs, outrage in her tone. “In three days you have destroyed my entire life, and you don’t think you owe me an explanation for how you apparently *need* me.”

“No, I don’t.” My hands are shaking, clenched in tight fists.

“Why are you so angry?”

“He told me I couldn’t touch you.” He’s hiding shit and my brother doesn’t think I can figure it out. No one believes in me.

“Who?”

I don’t answer as I lean forward and pull the box filled with her prayer items and the leather strap out from under the bed.

“You’re not supposed to touch me, Pax. Or my things. What are you doing? Stop it!”

Her mouth pops open wide as I dig to the bottom, pull out the brutal piece of leather, and point it at her.

“Why the fuck do you have this?” I’m shaking. If that fucking piece of shit priest has used this on her, I don’t know what I’ll do. He’ll die for it, but will that happen before or after I fuck her and stake my claim?

She swallows hard but doesn’t answer.

“What do you do with this?” I push, starting to itch beneath my skin as my imagination runs wild.

“Put it away. It’s not yours.” A sheen of nervous sweat breaks out on her

skin.

“Everything you touch is mine. Now tell me, has anyone else ever used this on you?”

“Put it away.” She scrambles up in bed, tucking her knees to her chest, covering herself in her blanket like that will do a damn thing to keep me away from her.

“I’m not going to ask you again. Has anyone ever used this on you?”

I stand, using all of my presence to intimidate her, and it’s even worse than when I was bullying the old priest. She’s a third of my size, but I don’t care. I’ve never cared about hurting weaker things than me. I know I should, and maybe I could with her to take my worst.

“No, no one else has ever used it on me. It’s mine, now put it away.”

I don’t. I grip it tighter and twist it in my hands.

“It’s mine now, Magda, because I own you. If you need someone to beat you, it’s going to be me. I’ll enjoy it.”

I grab her by her hair, and she squeals in terror as I force her face down into the mattress. With the piece of leather, I push her nightgown up and over her body, seeing the older blackened welts along her back. I’m uneasy at the sight, something uncomfortable flipping in my stomach at the thought of her alone doing this to herself, but I’m just as fucking turned on by that thought. I’m nothing if not a sick bastard.

I release her hair, running a gentle hand over her back, touching the wounds softly to let her know I don’t plan to go over them again. No, there’s all this perfect olive skin covering her peachy ass that’s begging to be marked up. That seems like the perfect way to prove exactly who she belongs to.

“Don’t cry too loud, or the other’s will hear you.”

I swing the leather and the snap as it collides with her flesh is brutal and sweet. Goose bumps and sweat break out on her skin, an immediate reaction to the impact, and she shouts into the comforter.

“Do you know why I’m doing this, Snapdragon?”

“No!” she wails as I swing again, the leather cutting into her ass cheek and jiggling the delicious globe.

“Because if you need someone to beat you, it’s going to be me. You need someone to fuck you? It’s going to be me. I am everything to you. Not that old fucking priest. Me.”

“What are you talking about?” She sobs again as I strike her even harder for playing ignorant.

“I don’t know what secrets he’s keeping about you, but he wants to fuck you. He wants what’s mine.” I whip her again, not sure if there's any rational sense left in my mind. She doesn’t seem to have any clue what I’m talking about, which is comforting, but I know he wants her. He has plans for her, and even though he won’t admit it, I recognized the look in his eyes. She will never be his.

“He doesn’t want to fuck me, please. Please, Pax. Please.”

“He wants what’s mine, and I don’t trust you not to give it to him. I’m going to beat this ass for pushing that girl off the cliff, for fucking teasing me at my father’s funeral. I’m going to make you suffer until you have nothing to feel bad about, until you’re sure you’d never spread your fucking legs for anyone but me.” She’s panting, her shoulders heaving as she listens, her hips twitch, her legs inching apart.

“I’d never spread my legs for anyone.”

“You spread your legs for me this morning, you lying little slut.” I whip her again.

“I would never spread my legs for Father DiMarco. That’s awful. Please.” I whip her again, and she’s sobbing in earnest now. Raised red welts line her ass and I know she won’t be sitting anytime soon.

One, two, three.

“That’s not what I want to hear, Magdalena. Tell me what I want to hear and you better be sure I believe it this time.” She says nothing, refusing to break or give in to me. She’s going to regret that choice. I whip her again and again until she’s screaming.

“I’ll never spread my legs for anyone but you! Never, never, never!”

The words are enough to take the worst off my rage, and as my sense returns to me, I worry I’ve gone much too far this time. She’s sobbing, lines of blood well on the worst of the whip marks. But her cunt is so fucking pink and ready, puffy lips swollen, wet and kissable. So I do. I drop to my knees behind her, grab her by the hips, and pull her against my face. She’s hot all over, delicious, and once more, I slide my tongue against her, drawing a long, low moan.

“Would you like me to lick your cunt until it’s all better, baby?”

She cries into the blanket, but she nods, and I turn her over, letting her sob her heart out while I eat a slow deep orgasm out of her.

“You never need to feel guilty again, baby. I’m happy to punish you until you’ve atoned. I’ve always got you.”

CHAPTER 13

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

MAGDALENA

“I’VE ALWAYS GOT YOU.”

Those were the last words Pax spoke to me after he beat me senseless and made me come for the second time. I can’t believe how stupid I am for believing him. How comforted I was by the idea of someone “having me.” I never really knew I was desperate, but that’s obvious now—desperate, naive, and easily swayed by wickedness as Father DiMarco warned.

But there aren’t really words to describe how Pax made me feel the other night. The shame and stupidity of my actions crush me. I should have done more to stop him. At least I tried to fight the first night, but I know that time I gave in.

He brought my body to a breaking point, where I could hardly stomach the pain, shaking, and crying, ready to vomit. I never could have done that to myself, and I am much more relaxed for it. Not just less guilty but it’s as if he released years of stress and pressure. He hurt me worse than I’ve ever physically been and then brought me literal euphoria.

I’m liquid, the spots where my skin split are well scabbed, but the bruises are thick and intense. They will be for a while. Every inch of my body still aches from my muscles tensing as he whipped me. I could have spent the next day in bed, but I forced myself up and to attend to my chores. It was part of my penance, to work through my suffering. If I’m being entirely honest, I was also hoping I would see Pax. That I could prove something to him about how good I was at taking it, but he never showed.

It’s been two days, and I haven’t heard a word from Pax. I can’t exactly start asking around about him without raising an army’s worth of red flags, so I’m left in the dark. Part of me is relieved. The last thing I need is to spend more time getting in deeper with him. The rest of me is desperate to know

where he is and why he's stayed away.

How could he? He's all I can think about. Was that his game? To fuck with my head and leave? I suppose I should be grateful. In the short time I've known him, he had me believing it was impossible for him to stay away from me for any length of time. What other bullshit could he convince me of, if he hadn't decided I wasn't worth it just like everyone else?

I haven't felt those creeping eyes since, and I'm starting to believe I wasn't crazy when I thought he was watching me. I really could feel him. Now he's gone.

Sometimes I'm convinced it was all a dream. I'm going to go down to breakfast, and Constance and Mary Katherine will be giggling to each other at my expense. Everything will be right. I'll forget the sound of her bones breaking on the side of that cliff. I'll never have orgasmed on a murderer's tongue or cried as he beat me for my sins. None of it is a dream.

Constance is still gone. The memories of the way I dragged her body, how I pushed her off that cliff are as vivid as the memories of Pax touching me. Where was my self-preservation when I allowed that?

The ugly poisonous drive kicked in just in time to outweigh my reason when it came to a murder I didn't commit but not sex. I still believe they would have blamed me for her death, and in some ways, that would have been worse, but at least I would have had true innocence in my heart. But what I did is all real, and my heart and soul match the torn and bruised skin on my backside.

I deserve this pain that won't allow me to sit or sleep on my back. There's no denying now that something awful is inside me, something that sets me apart from the rest of them, but Pax gave me an outlet for that pain, a release valve on the pressure. Now that I know what it's like, will I always need that to keep me away from sin?

Leaving the sisters' ranks is an option I don't really want to consider. Despite my crimes and the fact I've never belonged, my intuition tells me it's the wrong choice. Clearly, I should be kept away from other people, and being part of a cloistered sect of nuns seems like an excellent way to do that without inviting more problems. I'm unlikely to stumble onto more criminal behavior here if Pax continues to leave me alone, and I'm worried I'm too corrupt for jail. I'd just use it as an excuse to sin.

I've been doing my chores as I'm supposed to. I've always worked in solitude, and I guess my life isn't much different from normal, but it feels

especially cold and lonely. I find myself shedding tears for Constance, who would have and wanted to drive me from the only home I've ever truly known. Not because I miss her, I'm not that much of a masochist, but she shouldn't have died for her actions. It wasn't fair. She deserved another chance.

I hear Pax in my head telling me over and over again he hates nothing more than a bully, and while I don't disagree with him, who the hell is he to choose who gets to live and die? Why does he keep making these decisions? Is he sick enough that he needs it? Somehow, I don't think that's true. I think there's more at play. Something that can be controlled.

I want to yell at him, punish him somehow for what he's done to my life, peace and sanity, but I have no clue how to contact him. I don't have a phone, and even if I did, I don't have his number. He had all the control the whole time, and that's only obvious to me now that he's gone and I want him back.

Nothing between us has ever been my choice until he whipped me and then asked me if I wanted him to kiss it better. I'm stupid enough to miss the man who beat the hell out of me and then made me consent to him eating me out. Taking it from me that first night was a gift. At least I could enjoy that without making the choice to sin myself. He's more of a monster for forcing me to admit what I wanted.

Pax would have done it anyway, but at that moment of weakness, I lost another part of my soul. Every time my guilt surfaces, I do as he said, lean into the whip marks and try to blame him. Does it make it easier if he's the bad guy? Not really when I'm desperate to see him, and he's not here.

I've tried to see Father DiMarco a few times since I pushed Constance off that cliff, still undecided if I should ask him to hear my sins or not, but he's been busy. That, or highly invested in avoiding me. I don't know what to think of it. Maybe he knows exactly what I did and he's just too disgusted to face me. I guess I wouldn't blame him. Looking in the mirror isn't as simple as it used to be.

It's Friday afternoon, and all my chores have been done for an hour. That's what happens when you wake up at three o'clock and get to work rather than trying to force yourself to sleep through sexual dreams about Pax Bouchard. I've paced the grounds as much as I can while avoiding the rose maze. I'm not ready to be there again. It's too soon to face what I've done. Someone would see the truth written all over my face.

I'm so lonely and raw my vulnerability seeps out of me in waves, and

though I feel it in my bones that Father DiMarco is trying to avoid me, I need the fatherly comfort he provides. I head toward the monastery, assuming he's in his offices at the base of the cathedral.

The heat wave we saw during the funeral has faded away. It's chilly again, it will be another six weeks before the world starts moving into summer. The wind sweeping across the property cuts like a bad omen rather than a change in pressure. I'm being silly, too human, too swayed by the darkening of the clouds overhead. God and science work hand in hand. Still, I doubt he's using a few chilly rain clouds to send me a message, but I'm shaken.

The rest of the sisters have been following the advice of groups of no less than three, and I realize a beat too late that makes me stand out to the wrong people. As I'm walking the stone path that loops every building on the property, I pass a few brawny men dressed in dark suits. They're comfortable here, laughing openly as they discuss something. I look at them only as long as necessity demands and instinctively keep my head down. Pax says Nikolai gave him control of the territory, but those are the bosses' men, not Pax's.

Masculine laughter and chatter come from their group. I keep moving, but they turn to stare with an obviousness only excusable in small children. I'm regarding my shoes when one says, "Bet that one has a sweet ass."

There has always been a level of bad men coming and going on these grounds. They were all but gone after the funeral, but since Constance disappeared and Pax went too there's more. They're getting bolder. Things are getting scarier without Pax, and that's really saying something. Or am I just that desperate to see the good in him?

I push open the heavy door to the cathedral, and the slightly moldy smell of wet stone and incense calms me immediately. I walk through the pews, over the worn red carpet. I stand before the pulpit and dip my fingers in the holy water, making the sign of the cross. It doesn't burn so I have to hope that's a good sign. I pray that I'm redeemable.

I keep moving despite wanting to spend the rest of the day praying, meditating, enjoying the deep spirituality implicit in this space, the nearness to God that tells me I'm alive and loved. That makes me believe I can be forgiven for what I did to Constance and all the sinful thoughts I've had that I haven't acted on. I can't pretend I don't have more of them than the normal person, more dark places that need to be hidden. I'm wrong, but I don't think I'm evil.

My nerves pick up as I near Father DiMarco's office and hear voices. I wanted him to be there, but I'm terrified to face him. Does he know what I've done? He's the closest person in the world to me, and I hate that things aren't right between us. That they never may be again.

I'm about to knock but wait a moment to see who he's speaking to. I'm not eavesdropping, it's just I have a lot of enemies around here. Fortunately, very few of the fathers take issue with me, but I'm not close with them either. I swallow when I hear Mother Superior's voice and consider turning around, but I've tried so many times to see him over the past few days without success. I can't give up. But that doesn't mean I dare to interrupt.

"The girls heard a rumor you were screwing her, so that's convenient if you're trying to cover up her death, but not great if you're interested in maintaining your reputation and the reputation of our entire outfit." Her judgmental tone drips disgust but not surprise, and my eyes fly open.

If she knows Constance is dead, then nothing in my life makes sense anymore. I thought the older woman cared for her. She treated her as if she did, but Mother Superior has been acting as if nothing happened, and she certainly doesn't sound grief stricken now.

"It couldn't be helped. You know he's like a rabid dog. I don't know why Niko hasn't put him down yet or what Constance could have done to offend him, but what's done is done."

She scoffs. "You say a lot of things that would damn you as if they're nothing. Constance is dead, and she died with broken vows and unrepentant for her sins. Nikolai is his brother, Francis." Mother's Superior's chastising tone can't compare to my insides tearing apart. Was Father DiMarco *actually* sleeping with Constance? And if Mother Superior knows Constance is dead, why hasn't she done anything?

Is there really no justice at all here?

"He choked one of your nuns to death, Lucille." The weight of his chastisement lays into us both.

"I'm still a servant of God, Francis. I can abhor the idea of brothers killing each other."

"It would solve most of our problems if they killed each other."

"Be that as it may it would still be wrong." She's silent for a moment. "What are you going to do about Magdalena?"

My heart stops before kicking up in high gear. What is there to be done about me? Unless...

“I don’t know yet. There aren’t a lot of good options for me, are there?”

She laughs without humor. “Especially not since Constance washed up in Gemelli territory, no. Too many questions are being asked.”

“Pax doesn’t have nearly as tight a lid on things as he thinks. I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m starting to worry it’s you who’s no longer in control of the situation, Francis.”

“I will come up with the best possible solution.”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“A lot can go wrong if you don’t. I’ll come by later so you can tell me what you’ve decided. Don’t damn us all with your own inaction.”

I quickly scurry away, all thoughts of talking to my priest and clearing the air forgotten as I begin to hyperventilate. They know what I did. They know what I did, and they’re trying to figure out what to do with me. I’m strongly considering packing my bags and running, but where the hell would I go?

No, I have to stay, they haven’t decided what to do with me yet. I need to pray they make a choice I can live with, but I know they’ll choose whatever God’s plan dictates. I’m starting to wonder if I’m really the villain in this story after all, if my fall from grace won’t be some great tale about how good eventually triumphed over evil. What part does that leave Pax, and how long can I pretend this is all his fault?

CHAPTER 14

FRIENDS LIKE THIS

MAGDALENA

THERE'S a knock on my door, and I call, "It's open," over my shoulder, not really caring who it is at this point. Mary Katherine pushes the door open with a bland expression. Her hands shake slightly, and I wonder if she's still worrying over Constance, not believing the lie Father DiMarco fed them. Although, after hearing what Mother Superior had to say inside his office, I don't trust any of them.

I'm sifting through my things looking for yet another item I think Pax stole, my father's ring. I don't know when he took it, but I don't consider it a sign he's been back. I only noticed its absence because I was going through my things deciding if anything is worth keeping in the event I'm sent to prison.

Mary Katherine eyes my room doubtfully, like something menacing will spring from the stone walls, but she must not suspect what I did. Otherwise, she wouldn't have come up here at all. None of the sisters do if they can avoid it. Mary Katherine may be snotty, but she's a decidedly better person than me or Constance, who was apparently sleeping with Father DiMarco.

"Are you looking for something?" I close the last drawer the ring could have been in and turn to face her. Blond brows push together over soft blue eyes, and I'm not sure what to make of her asking. She's never been inclined to make conversation with me before.

"I lost my father's ring," I answer in my distraction.

"Oh, he died, right? I'm sorry." She tucks her strawberry curls behind her ears.

"Yeah, he's gone. God rest his soul." I really look at her this time, wondering what she's up to. "Did you need something, Mary Katherine?"

"Uhm, no, but Father DiMarco needs your assistance."

My heart pounds in my chest, and I can't breathe. Clearly, he's come to whatever decision he needed to make last night regarding me. This is the end.

"Did he say what he needs help with?" I choke down my panic, sounding close to normal.

There's a long beat of silence, and my guilt explodes. I need to distract myself before I drop to my knees and tell her exactly what I did to her friend.

"No, he just wants you ready to go to town as soon as possible."

"Ready to go to town?"

"That's what he said."

She's spending more time here than usual, which is more than odd, but she's not angry like I expect. The cowardly Mary Katherine I know wouldn't be able to face me head-on if she had any idea what I did, but something is most certainly wrong. What does she know?

"Is everything okay, Mary Katherine?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I have no idea."

"Oh, okay. Well, don't keep them waiting. I'll see you later."

She makes an odd little sound in the back of her throat before she scurries out of the room. She knows something is about to happen, but I sincerely doubt she knows what. I get dressed for the day, making sure all the ceremonial vestiges of my clothing sit correctly. Something tells me this is the last time I'll get the chance. If DiMarco isn't turning me over to the authorities, he may be having the archbishop relocate me. He steps in in the case of problem priests and nuns.

My scapular hangs to midthigh, and I tighten the belt at my waist, enjoying the brief bite of pain as I pull it too hard. My self-imposed wounds are nothing compared to Pax's, but they still do the job. I release the leather, letting it settle into the correct position. I flatten my hair with a few pins and don my habit. I look myself over in the mirror. It's the first time I have in days. I used to consider myself an appropriate ambassador for our faith in this world. Now I'm an impostor.

Nothing is worth keeping other than my rosary beads since Pax took what he wanted. I consider bringing the beads as a memento to the life that I wanted and almost had, but I know they'll remind me of *him* more than anything else. I say a sad goodbye to the room that's housed me these past few years. I close the door behind me, not knowing how Father DiMarco will handle my crimes, but sure in the pit of who I am this is the very last time I'll

be here as a resident.

I cross the lawn to the rectory, wishing I could find it in me to smile. Birds chirp from their seats in the brilliant sage-leafed trees, and puffy clouds float across the sky. I'm awed by God's work and the brilliant majesty of the natural world, the unmistakable beauty that makes me feel like I'm a part of something great. There's a weight on the back of my mind in the size and shape of Pax Bouchard that I am certain will never fade, but maybe that's a part of God's plan. I have faith that wherever Father DiMarco plans to take me, at least Pax won't be able to touch me.

There are two paths to Father DiMarco's office, so I take the one that I avoided yesterday when I became a cautionary tale: the eavesdropper who heard bad of herself. It leads through the meeting rooms where Pax attended AA. The dark little section of stone where he cornered me, and I tasted his blood. It was that dark magic that started my fixation, or maybe I just didn't believe myself when I said he didn't kill his father for me.

Either way, this ending is coming like a cataclysm, and since he will no longer be able to touch me, I want to revel in the feelings exchanged in those moments. I want to remember the intensity and agony seeping out of us and into the stone.

A chill runs down my spine as I pass over the bridge. The familiar slats of light mean something wholly different now that I can admit what Pax means to me and determinedly, decide to be done with him. I'll live forever electrified by the memory of his touch and his smell and everything that made him him, even the fact that he was a killer. But thank God he won't be able to touch me.

I knock on Father DiMarco's door, and rather than inviting me in like normal, he opens it and strides forward, straight passed me with a harried expression. The greeting is far from what I expect, which is a deep and fatherly accusation of how far I have fallen from grace, an honest statement that I simply cannot be here any longer.

The lengths of his robes drag across the floor as he sweeps ahead of me. Something about his face is off, but he doesn't give me a chance to look closer.

"No time to waste, Maggie. We ought to be going." His feet smack against the stone, echoing along the hallway, and I stare for a full second before I chase him.

"Where are we going?" I've never seen the old man move so fast. Is he

really that disgusted with me that he can't even face me?

“I need to stop over at the food pantry on Sullivan Ave, and I need help with the heavy lifting. My day is jam-packed, Magda, I don't have time to waste.”

“Oh, okay,” I answer, so stunned by this turn of events that I can barely think straight. I was sure he was about to turn me in for my crimes, but is he actually taking me to the food bank? He's certainly acting odd, but not in the way I would assume for someone about to turn me over to the authorities.

I chase him, and we're crossing the yard a minute later, headed toward the parking lot. He's inside the car with it started before I reach the handle.

“Why are we in such a hurry?” I'm terrified of the answer I'll receive, but it has to be better than this, not knowing, wondering if I'm literally running to my doom.

“Get in, Magda.”

His tone has me worried that he is turning me in after all, and just hates me more than I assumed he would for my crimes. I sit down beside him. The scowl on his face is so harsh and obvious, I can't just ignore it.

“Is everything alright, Father?”

“It is, Maggie.” My eyes run over him, and I realize he has a bruise on his cheek, which he's poorly covered with cakey foundation.

“What the hell happened to you?” I'm speaking so far out of turn, but I'm not worried about myself anymore. I'm worried about someone I love, an elderly man who is clearly injured.

“Language!” he snaps with aggression I rarely hear from him. “No more questions. Just be quiet.” He turns the key over, starting the car and putting it into gear before pulling out. It takes a few minutes for the horrible silence to grow too thick for me to bear.

Something is seriously wrong here, and I'm suddenly sure it's not what I imagined.

“Father, tell me what's wrong. I can help you. Please let me.” I'm begging but terrified of who put that thick purple bruise on his cheek. Why Father DiMarco seems to be angry with me for it.

“Another word and I'll transfer you out of state, Magdalena. Do not test me.”

“What?” I gasp before I shut my mouth. Pain sears my chest at the thought of being given away again. But what in God's name is happening right now?

The farther we drive, the more his hands tighten on the wheel until fine tremors run up his body. I flip through different scenarios of what he could be planning, why he would be so upset about it, and if I can do anything to prevent it. A few years ago, one of the priests committed a crime, and Father DiMarco was fond of him. We all watched as Father DiMarco turned him over to the authorities with an unbendable self-righteousness. He's not acting how he did that day.

“Are you upset with me, Father?”

My small and pathetic words are broken and nearly meaningless. That seems to get to him. He shakes his head and offers me the weakest smile I've ever seen.

“No, Maggie. I'm not upset with you. I just have a lot on my mind today. Everything is going to be fine. No more questions. We're just going to the food pantry, and then we're heading home.”

I force myself to smile back, but I notice he says it's *going* to be fine and not that it already is. Things are obviously anything other than fine, but I'm silent as we drive. I pray as I take in the familiar roads, when suddenly, they're not so familiar anymore.

“Where are we going?” My voice is thin and reedy, completely forgetting that he demanded I stop questioning him.

“The food bank on Sullivan.”

I don't say anything. My heart rate doubled from when I thought he knew about what I did to Constance because we are most certainly not headed toward the food bank on Sullivan or the police station.

The road climbs up and up, pitched toward the sky with narrow winding turns. I contemplate jumping out of the vehicle, but the doors are locked, and there's not enough of a shoulder to be certain I won't simply roll down the edge of a cliff to my death.

“Where are we going?” I ask once more, my survival instincts kicking in, telling me this is so much worse than whatever my conscious mind is willing to believe of the man who's been like a father to me, the man who took me in when no one else wanted me. I never doubted he would make me pay for my wrongdoings, but I'm sure that's not what's happening.

“I'm sorry about this, Maggie.” I rip my eyes away from the perilous edge and catch a tear clinging to his lashes.

He pulls to a stop. I can't see a single landmark, but he's staring at something that tells me he's found whatever he's looking for. I turn to open

the door and fight with the lock for a moment. I'm shocked he doesn't try to stop me. Is he just leaving me on the side of the road like a stray dog? It doesn't make sense, but nothing is.

I scramble out of the car, falling to my knees in my haste, but my skirts are thick enough to shield me from the pain. Pushing to my feet and slamming the door behind me, I grab the lengths and hoist them up, preparing to run like hell, though I'm not sure where.

A terrible scream tears from my throat as arms band around me from behind. I shout Father DiMarco's name, but the engine rumbles, and his tires tear up the dirt road as he pulls away.

I don't need to look to know who it is, crushing me to his chest. I recognize his scent, and my tongue tingles from where I tasted his blood.

Desperate heat swells inside me right before I remember to fight like my life depends on it because it does. I kick and punch, fighting as hard as I can. I connect over and over again, but he laughs, enjoying this. It doesn't help that my position only exhausts me as he drags me toward his car.

"God, Snapdragon, I fucking love the way you fight me. I've missed you so damn much these past three days, but I had a lot of work to do to get ready for you."

A petty part of me wants to accuse him of lying. To tell him that he didn't do anything for me just like he didn't kill his father for me, and he didn't kill Constance for me. But another part is thrilled by the thought of his attention. He not only took me but prepared for me, making room for me in his life like no one ever has.

I can't just go quietly no matter how good his touch feels. I need to be strong enough for both of us because if I've realized one thing in three days without him, it's that I am not supposed to give in to Pax or give up on him. I need to save him, before he ruins me.

"You better hit me like that every time I fuck you."

Before I can respond, he rips the veil and wimple off my head, tearing the bobby pins out with strands still attached. His nose presses into my hair, and he inhales so deeply a chill skates along my ear and continues over my skin.

"How the fuck do you smell like sin and salvation?" His voice barely sounds human. I barely am human. His tongue follows the path of his nose, and I can't help my whimper of shock. "You taste even better." His teeth softly scrape the same path. My body is a riot of sensation, none of which make sense. I'm still waiting for someone to help me.

I look over my shoulder, finding that Father DiMarco pulled down the road but hasn't left. He's watching from the driver's seat, and while I see something like fear or regret on his face, he has no intention of saving me.

"He sold you out," Pax whispers in my ear, not sounding the tiniest bit sorry. "Don't worry, Magdalena, I'll never betray you. Your body will be the one to do it for me." His teeth sink into my neck, and I shout as the pain rips me up, but it drags intense pleasure with it, and a moan marks my scream's finale. Every whip mark he landed on me, sings in time with the pulse of his bite.

"I didn't know that you liked pain when I saw you over my father's corpse even though I knew you were mine, but it only makes sense, my pretty little flower. It only makes it sweeter, my cherry nun. I'm going to take everything from you, and you're going to love it."

As if to prove his point, he bites me again, a few inches closer to my shoulder, shoving my sleeve off to gain unfettered access to my skin. My response this time is even stronger, less weighted toward the scream with a longer, sultry moan.

I try to fight, but he turns me, smiling once before my feet are off the ground as he throws me over his shoulder. He takes off my shoes and socks with the arm not banded around my thighs. A tear drips from my eye as he rips and drops my scapular, then my cincture.

The hard ridge shoved into my diaphragm is like an exaggerated version of how I pull that belt too tight each morning. I'm too breathless to moan, the vibrations catch deep in my throat. I'm humiliated and debased, defeated, conquered. I'm filled with emotions too intense to process. All I understand is the adrenaline he's forcing through me, and I want more.

His rough hand searches for my leg beneath the layers and slides all the way up until he palms my ass, and I shriek in renewed terror and pain. The skin is still agonizingly raw. A brief wave of sense and clarity washes over me as he pushes the skirts up, revealing me to the air, pulls my panties down, and smacks my bare cheek hard. The pain is ungodly, unimaginable, and I sob in earnest.

Dirt, stone, and bracken flash beneath my eyes, and I punch and kick like crazy, not caring if he drops me on my face because each strike rips liquid heat and agony from me right alongside my terror. He's going to fuck me, and I want him to. I'm not in a position to save him before he ruins me at this rate, and I'm terrified of what I stand to lose. My immortal soul could be a

lost cause, but there's still hope. There's still a chance.

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“I was planning on having you sit in the back seat, or even beside me if you behaved well enough, but clearly, that’s not happening, so in the trunk you go.” He waves his foot under the car and the lid pops open. He tosses me in, and I scream as loud as I can when I see the pile of rope and tape, but he doesn’t tie me in either. He simply pulls a knife from his pocket and aims it at me as he takes a step back.

“Stay still, or I’ll cut your throat.”

And the lid to the trunk closes itself between us.

CHAPTER 15

WHO NEEDS ENEMIES

MAGDALENA

I DON'T FIGHT, scream, or cry. There is no point in wasting my energy. I'm numb, I think, possibly broken. I truly expected to pay for my sins, and I needed to. I never imagined this betrayal. Pax was right; there isn't another word for it. The deepest part of my soul breaks, knowing no one on earth wouldn't abandon me.

So I sit quietly and wait, my fingers twitching over the scratchy material and my breaths coming too quickly. I dig my wounds against the rough carpeting to distract from the emotional agony. I close my eyes and pray, forcing my breaths to slow, preparing myself to conserve oxygen. I'm angry and devastated but not as afraid as I should be. Pax may kill me, I remind myself. But that naivety I didn't know I was suffering from rears its head again, and I don't truly believe he will. I hope repeatedly believing in the wrong people isn't why I die.

The car tips uphill, rolling me to the back. The air thins as the car climbs up and up but stops only a few miles later. There's a hint of premature relief. I may have a chance of escaping if I'm in a familiar area, but where would I actually go now that everyone I would have run to would turn me away? I would have been better off if he took me somewhere far away where I could have slipped into a crowd.

The door opens, and gravel crunches beneath his feet. A beep, the hissing sound of the lifters as they reveal him standing in front of me. Tan skin, green eyes bright like the leaves overhead, and a smile that could gut me. Too much has passed between us too soon. I've known him a week, and it already feels like we've been damned together for a lifetime. I hate him. I'm terrified of him. I'm aching for him.

The sun and the sight of him are too bright in comparison to the darkness

of the trunk, but I force myself to meet his gaze. It hurts to look at him, but I guess that's not too much different from normal, knowing that he's determined to ruin everything I am. I hold my breath, waiting on his decision to cut my throat right here like he threatened on the side of the road. I swallow hard just to do it once more before I die.

"Be a good girl, Magdalena," he orders as he grabs me by the upper arm and drags me out. "I really did miss you."

I struggle to gain my footing beneath the slip he didn't strip off me on the roadside. I catch myself on his arm at the last minute, a rock cutting into my bare foot. He runs his hands up and down my arms as he steadies me and studies the spot where I touched him. I don't let go immediately because he seems more affected by this than anything else.

"How are you feeling? I wanted to check on you, but I was busy."

"Why would you want to check on me?"

"I was worried I pushed you too far, and despite myself, I don't actually want to hurt you."

"Please take me back." This gentle side of him may be my only opening, this soft bit revealed by my stumbling step and innocent touch. He pretends it doesn't bother him, smiling even brighter, but I see the way his eyes tighten at the edges.

He touches my cheek, again so gently that I almost forget to remember the pain that often follows in the wake of his touch. Every brush of his fingers makes me less hollow, and I forget that I just rejected him, and he'll hurt me back.

"You have nowhere to go back to, Magdalena. I wasn't lying when I told you he betrayed you. He sold you, traded you for his own safety, actually, and it's not just him. They won't take you back because they know better. You know better. No one in the world will touch you now that they know what I'll do to them."

His words are a slap and the warmest embrace. I need to be needed, especially after what Father DiMarco just did to me. And I wouldn't have believed a single one of Pax's claims even an hour before had I not watched him turn his back on me myself. The only person I trusted in this world tricked me and gave me away. At least when my mother left me at the monastery, she told me the truth on the ride over. She even cried. Not that it made a difference in the end.

My lip quivers despite my best intentions, and a miserable little sob pries

itself out of my throat.

“Does he know what I did? Is that why he gave me away?”

There's a softening in Pax's lips, a squint around his green eyes, the expression appearing sincerely concerned. His thumb runs along my bottom lip, and it's so gentle I almost forget he could still kill me. This may all be a trick.

“No, baby. I didn't tell anyone. Why would I when you were so good for me? No, he betrayed and abandoned you because he's a wicked and selfish man, and you made a mistake placing your faith in him.”

“You're a wicked man.”

“I never asked you to place your faith in me.”

The honesty breaks me, and tears stream down my cheeks.

“Don't be sad, Snapdragon.” He kisses me so fucking softly. I just stand there, stunned, terrified, every aspect of my life falling to pieces around me. “I apologize for hurting your feelings.” His breath skates over my lips. “You just have to accept your pathetically blind faith in him is the entire reason you're here. It's not your fault you're too brainwashed to see what's right in front of you, but I do expect you to learn from the experience.”

Then he pats me on my fucking head like a dog and drags me up the drive.

My chin shifts back and forth as I try to take in as many details as I can about my surroundings. I will escape. I'll get away from him. Lush, dense forests on every side, but we're nearly above them. My ears pop as I look out over the stunning vista. A single road stretches behind us. This is the top of the mountain, and I don't have a single chance of outrunning him on unfamiliar terrain in what I'm wearing.

The hopelessness of my situation nearly sinks in before I get a familiar nudge, a warmth in my soul that tells me to persevere. God is with me. It's the first time I've felt it since I pushed Constance, and I was almost certain my actions left me abandoned by my heavenly father as well. Father DiMarco's actions certainly made me believe that. Deep in my soul, I know I'm on the right path. I need to persevere.

I can't run now. I'll have to bide my time and wait until I have a real head start. That doesn't strike as true, and I look over at the supremely fucked-up man dragging me up the path. My hand in his fits despite everything being so drastically wrong, and I believe I'm meant to save him, but does that include running?

We crest a small hill, and to my right, I see something downright shocking. I'm shaking, collapsing in on myself in overwhelmed disbelief. His soft laughter tickles up my spine and rips me apart.

"Is that a castle?"

"It's just a mansion built out of stone."

"And into the side of a mountain, like a castle."

He rolls his eyes. "You're terribly dramatic. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yes, but I disagree."

"I murdered someone on your behalf, and instead of turning me in, you covered up for me. You're, at the very least, interesting."

"I wasn't covering for you," I correct his very incorrect assumption. "No one cares what you do, I know that. But those women all hate me. They would have found their precious Constance dead, and they would have blamed me. I would have paid for your crime anyway." I sigh long and loud. "Though I'm starting to believe that would have been the preferable option."

"Well, that's just nasty," he comments, but he sounds amused.

"Why are we here, Pax?"

He smiles at me using his name, and not the trademark one that scares me as much as it turns me on, something soft like his touch. He really loves it, which is unsettling that anything affects him that way.

"This is my home, and we're here because you live with me now. Your precious priest gave you to me in exchange for his life. You don't have any idea how awful the man actually is, so you'll be paying steeply."

I say nothing because there's nothing to say. Not too long ago, I would have considered suffering for Father DiMarco's life a worthy cross to bear. I certainly don't think so now. I need to breathe, to keep Pax's taunts from sinking too deep, from pushing my burgeoning terror into full-blown panic. I may have complicated emotions for Pax, but I do not intend to break any more of my vows.

I need to ignore him until I can get help. I have no shoes, no knowledge of the terrain. I need to be smart about this, especially considering I have no clue where to turn if—no, when I escape.

Who would be able to help me? The Bouchards are incredibly powerful, though they certainly don't have control over the entirety of the Catholic faith. I may need to go far to find a group who's not afraid of them. But what would Father DiMarco have told the archbishop about my absence? That may

be a dead possibility for me as well, one not worth risking.

“You gave me such a hard time before. I’m surprised to see you give in so easily.” He tuts as he digs his fingers in deeper, perhaps to goad me into reacting. “Where’s that fight, Magda?”

“I haven’t given in to anything, least of all you.”

His smile is brighter than the sun. “God, Snapdragon, I can’t wait until I break you for real. Don’t ever fake it.”

He squeezes harder, pulling me toward my stone prison. The thought of that door closing behind me and what he may do to me when he gets me inside makes it impossible to breathe, and panic shreds me.

No, no, no.

I shove him off me and bolt. The rocks and pine needles cut into my feet, and my breath saws in and out, becoming painful much too quickly. I wasn’t doing as good a job taking deep breaths as I hoped, and I’m already exhausted.

“Don’t excite me, baby,” he calls after me, and I run even harder.

I don’t get more than a few hundred feet before my skirt catches on a branch. I’m snagged too hard to keep moving but too afraid to stop. Still in motion, I turn to rip it loose and catch my foot on a fallen branch. The fabric rips, releasing me and throwing me off balance. I tumble head over heels, the forest blurring past me in a flurry of green and brown before I land flat on my back. What little air made it into my lungs huffs out on impact, and pain sears along the back of my skull. He’s above me a moment later, and I can’t hide my pained whimper.

He straddles me with the weight of his body pressing against my stomach. The layers protect me from his actual touch, but heat sears my skin. I’m panting in terror and arousal. I have no idea as his fingers find the hard points of my nipples and roll them until I’m writhing. I had no clue the sensation would echo in my pussy, and I’m desperately wet.

He pulls the knife he threatened me with out of his pocket. This is it. It’s over. Tears stream down my face, and my eyes slip shut.

“Dear Father, who art in heaven—”

Smack.

My eyes fly open at the impact as his hand lands across my cheek. It stings, but my humiliation burns worse.

“That’s enough of that.” He taps the tip of the blade admonishingly against my lip. “I’m not killing you. I’m just desperate to get another look at

you. How did your sweet ass hold up?”

He presses the tip of the knife beneath my collar. The cool metal raises a chain reaction of goose bumps. It takes him only a moment to saw through the thicker edge of the hem, but once it's torn, the blade easily cuts through the slip.

First, he exposes my breasts with a grim ripping sound. He struggles at my bra, briefly nicking the skin beneath as he cuts the cups apart. Sharp pain rips a gasp from my lips, and my nipples stiffen painfully as the breeze sweeps over them. A smile curls his lips.

“Such a pretty sound.” He touches each of my nipples gently before he shimmies down my body onto my thighs and continues cutting. He leaves me in my panties, and I'm grateful.

Tears slip down my cheeks. The single spot on my chest where he broke the skin burns, but it makes my whole body hot in an entirely different way. I'm cold and exposed on the ground, like an actual whore for the second time in my life.

I'm stuck in the arms of my ruined clothing like a baby on a changing table, and I'm just about as helpless.

“You're lucky you got hurt, and I pity you.” He touches the marks left from the fall rather than the slice he placed on my chest. “Also, I'd rather not fuck in the mud.”

He peels my arms out of the sleeves, leaving the worst of the mess on the ground, then yanks me up and over his shoulder, slapping me hard on my shredded ass. The branches scratch my exposed skin as he carries me out of the forest, before heading across the yard, and toward his fucking castle.

Dear God, please help me.

CHAPTER 16

HEAD OVER HEELS

MAGDALENA

CRUNCH. *Thump. Crunch. Thump.*

The sun rises in the sky behind us, reflecting its warming glow off his soft black leather shoes. They're much nicer than anything I've ever owned. I've never paid particular attention to someone's shoes, but it's hard to look at anything else as he drags me upside down and over his shoulder to the mansion built into the mountain. I can't imagine how much the soft leather cost, and I don't want to think about where he's taking me or why. What he just did to me on the ground and what the hell is wrong with me that him cutting me turned me on.

The gravel he carries me over is as fine as his shoes, too uniform and smooth, a soft pink-like coral. It can't actually be coral. That's beyond illegal and the cost of that would be insane. No, it must be something else absurdly expensive but less morally hijacked.

But pink gravel? I've never seen anything like it, and contrasting with his black shoes digging in with each determined stride and his palm on my ass. This moment seems special, intimate, and I hate myself for that weakness.

No one has ever paid as much attention to me as Pax Bouchard, and I've never felt so alive as I do over the shoulder of a murderer.

"Pretty Little Cherry?"

His hand slips over my ass as if he's thoughtlessly caressing me, like touching me is normal. But being touched is far from normal for me, and being touched like this? It's downright alien. I have no idea how to respond to that. Should I be offended? I am, but it's not everything I feel. He smacks me again, harder this time, and the strike ricochets heat through me.

"Please, Pax. It's too much."

"That's such a good girl, telling me what you need." The warmth of his

praise washes over me. “Does that mean you’re coming around to the idea of your new position in life?”

Gripping my thighs, he pulls me down his body, forcing me to slide against him and feel the hard press of his excitement in his slacks. I’m staring down at our touching bodies, focusing on nothing but his heat against me. The affection starved part of me rears its head, trying to gobble up as much of the contact as possible. Today has been so violent, and this is like a sweet reunion, like the homecoming he claimed it to be.

He grips my chin between his finger and thumb. “You know that you’re everything to me, don’t you?”

“Why would I know that?”

“Because it’s obvious.”

“You’re delusional.”

I’m too affected by his heat and proximity. Did my mother ever cuddle me when I was small? She must have, not that I would remember that far back. His thumb runs back and forth over the sensitive skin beneath my chin before prodding the seam of my lips like he’s hoping I’ll bite him again. I don’t, and he smirks.

“Don’t be rude for my benefit, Snapdragon. You take a lot more shit than I’ve given you without complaining back at your little hideout. I happen to know you kiss Mother Superior’s ass and she treats you like a dog.” He puts me down as he says it, taking the warmth of his embrace and leaving me with the sting of his words.

“That’s not true. I’m no one’s dog.”

“No, you’re worse. You were a good Little Nun ready to obey, and the other sisters didn’t even like you. You tried so hard for nothing. At least dogs get a treat.”

“Fuck you,” I breathe.

“They’re probably making up nasty rumors about where you’ve gone right now rather than looking for you. How upset are they all over Constance? And they believe she’s fine.”

“Stop.”

“And you know who will feed into the rumors to make his life easier? Father DiMarco, who’s already back without you like nothing is wrong.”

“Please.”

“He was the only one who *cared*, wasn’t he? And he gave you away. I’d never, Snapdragon.”

A small voice whispers another name in the back of my head. Yelena—quiet, old, unobtrusive Yelena. She was more afraid of the Bouchards than anyone, and she wouldn't be able to look for me. But someone will notice my absence who may know what really happened.

I stare at him with my mouth hanging open. The weight of my situation crushes me. The pain of my continued rejection, the loneliness of my abandonment. It's enough to curl up and die beneath. Like a defense mechanism, the anger starts somewhere beneath my belly button, burning up and out of my chest.

“Deny it if you can, Magdalena. You try your very hardest to be one of them, to be good and pious, to obey, and they still make you feel like you don't belong because of where you come from. Deny it.”

I want to, but I can't. The hatred festering inside me isn't just for him; it's for that feeling of otherness. The fact that I tried harder than Mary Katherine or Constance and I'm still treated as less.

“None of them know what you did, Magdalena! None of them! They still don't care. They still don't want you.”

I'm burning alive that I did something so terrible that I'll never be able to prove I was more than what they thought of me. He doesn't see that none of this has ever been about them. It's always been about me doing my best, and he took that.

I lift my hand, rational thought entirely absent as I swing my open palm toward his face. But if I was embarrassed before, I'm humiliated as he catches my hand. My breasts sway, mirroring the momentum, and my shame nearly crushes me. With his leverage on my wrist, he pulls me into him and my body crashes against his. His slacks are soft on my thighs, button-down coarse against my oversensitive and exposed nipples.

“I may have bought you, but *I* at least like you.” His breath is hot on my face, the lack of space between us shatters my concentration. The pain ripples through my chest from his accurately placed digs, and my rage eats at me with no external outlet. My embarrassment over my failed attempt at attacking him is only just overwhelmed by my surprise.

“You *like* me!?” I can't help but waste the air in my abused lungs to voice my confusion.

There's no wild smile, no sinister glimmer in his eyes. Where is the taunt? I'm lost in green eyes, tan skin, and black hair as he answers in what appears to be all sincerity. “I'm *crazy* about you. I thought that was clear.”

He kisses me. So fucking softly. It's like magic and air and the place inside me that overflows with the Holy Spirit sings for him.

"This isn't funny." I'm panicking. What the hell is happening?

"Of course it's not. Nothing is funny about how captivating you are. Everything you do fascinates me." Another kiss. "You just need to let go of the shitty attachments holding you back."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Your silly response to the inevitable is the least of our problems, Magdalena. Now are you going to walk into our home nicely, or do I have to carry you?"

He leans forward to kiss me, like the answer is obvious, and I'm going to behave. I just have to disappoint him and headbutt him. For the first time, an attack of mine lands against him, aside from the time I bit him, and just like that time, he smiles, fucking thrilled.

"That was a good one," he comments as he grabs his bleeding lip. While he's distracted, I knee him in the balls. As he falls to the ground, I try to run, but he trips me, pulling my foot out from under me. I hit the ground with an oomph and a pained shout.

"God, I love you."

"I fucking hate you, Pax Bouchard! I fucking hate you!"

He climbs on top of me, holding me down, and licks me from the cut he left on my chest, up my neck, and over my breasts covering me in his spit, tasting me like an animal.

"I should fuck you in the mud, take your virginity right here to teach you a lesson about how much worse things can be on you if you're going to speak to me that way."

"Who says I'm a virgin?" I say, grasping at straws, hoping to do anything to upset him the way he's done to me. His carefree expression turns murderous in an instant.

"You've fucked someone else, Magda?" He bares his teeth and leans into my face. "You told me you were a virgin. You're lying to me, which I told you never to do. So which one was the lie?"

"It's already gone. You can't have it." His hands shake, and I wonder if I'm stupid to instigate him, but maybe he'll let me go. He wants a pretty little cherry to pop.

"Who did you fuck, Magda? He'll die for touching you, and you'll pay for your lies."

I open my mouth and close it once, then twice.

“No one. I haven’t had sex with anyone.” My admission leaves me on a broken whisper. “Please don’t punish me. I won’t lie again.”

“I wish I could believe you, baby, but you’re not very convincing.”

CHAPTER 17

AM I A REAL BOY?

PAX

MY FINGERS greedily squeeze her ass as I bring her into the wood-lined entryway that's as familiar to me as my own name. I'd like to watch Magda's reaction to my home, but her ass in the palm of my hand is consolation enough.

"Stop touching me." With our height difference, her complaint is muffled by my mid back.

"Kiss my ass." I couldn't stop touching her if my life depended on it.

"Let me walk."

"You're all out of privileges for the day, Snapdragon."

Portraits of my mother and her sister line the walls, and a few of Shane and I as small boys. None of them include our fathers as if the criminals our mothers married simply never existed. My father is a mobster. The Nelsons are old money, and their crimes humanitarian in nature and perfectly legal at the time of their perpetration. Somehow that makes them better than me, though I've never seen it that way. All of our money is blood money.

The average person might think it was all the same woman and the same boy if not for the portraits of us all together. Our mothers were identical in every way, and my cousin, Shane, and I share an uncanny resemblance because of it.

I want to point them out to Magdalena. Tell her about the absurd time we stood with that pure white swan for six hours while some half insane and fully drunk Italian painted us. I have this stupid urge to explain the ancestry that my parents considered so important. I never have cared about it, and I doubt very much Magda would either, but I'd like to tell her anyway.

"Put me down!" she screams as her fists collide with my back, breaking me free from my musings. I admit the state of my fingers wedged between

her ass cheeks is a little rude even for me.

“Punch me again, and I’ll finger your ass instead of fondling it.” My absentminded response is perhaps too much in the moment because a shiver runs through her entire body. My cock twitches in interest while a spot in my chest squeezes.

“Please don’t.” She drops her fist. “I won’t hit you again, just please don’t.”

“Stop making promises you have no intention of keeping, Magdalena. If you want to talk about shitty behavior, that’s top tier.”

“You’re threatening to finger my ass. I’ll say anything.”

“I’m not such a monster that I wouldn’t let you come.” I try to comfort her. “That’s one thing I’ll never do to you, Snapdragon. Leave you without an orgasm,” I assure her as I dig my fingers in further, and her entire body tenses. “But I won’t finger your ass *right now* if you keep your pathetic fists to yourself.”

She lets out a series of miserable little snuffles, and I feel, well, I think I feel guilty, especially given the last punch actually hurt a bit. So calling it pathetic was hardly fair. I don’t want her to be sad or hurt. I want to see that serious look on her face crumple beneath wave after wave of pleasure and pain, but I don’t want her to suffer. *What the hell is happening to me?*

“Don’t be like this, Magdalena. It’s your own fault I have to carry you.” Her head sways gently behind me like a metronome.

“How is it my fault?”

“Considering I had to tackle you to the ground twice, I won’t dignify that question with an answer.”

“I’ll behave.” She lies again.

“You’re a runner, and I find myself averse to the idea of you hurting yourself.”

“So you carry me upside down and over your shoulder?” she grits out, and I admire the effort it takes for her to stand up to me in this position.

“It was the gentlest option I thought of at the time, yes.” I reward her by running my index finger along the cotton-clad seam of her pussy, and a shiver runs the length of her body.

“Stop it,” she complains, but her back arches even at this awkward angle, subconsciously hoping for another touch.

“How’s your ass holding up since the beating? You never did answer me?”

“You don’t want me to lie, and I’d rather not answer.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m confused.”

I expected her to lie, so in my surprise, I say, “Thank you for your honesty.”

“Come on, Pax, there has to be a better option than this.”

“Would you have rather I intimately scoop you into my arms, hold you to my chest, and whisper sweet nothings into your ear while I drag you away from everything you’ve chosen in this life?”

She’s silent for a beat too long.

“Well, fuck me, I’m already further with you than I realized. You like it when I’m nice to you, don’t you, baby?”

“Fuck you.”

“See what I mean? You already want to fuck, and you want me to hold you.”

“I want you to drop dead.”

“Now *that* is not very nun-like behavior. What would God have to say about that?”

She says nothing, and I smile, feeling like I’ve won. I note the out-of-place items I left after breakfast as I pass by the small breakfast nook that sits off the enormous formal stone dining room. Usually, I have a full staff, or at least enough to keep the place running immaculately with only one person living here and very little of my input, but I’ve sent them away.

They couldn’t do much to me with how deeply local law enforcement is indebted to the Bouchards, but it’s best no one gets any noble ideas about helping the Little Nun I stole. My Snapdragon may get hurt in any escape attempt, and the thought of that turns my stomach in the oddest way.

There’s no help for my sweet Little Nun now. I couldn’t let her go if I wanted to, not after she bit me, tasted my blood, and bound me to her. The Catholics are so obsessed with the body and blood of Christ. She has to understand the significance of what she’s done, the ritual implicit in her consuming me.

I make my way up the sweeping marble staircase. My hand pats her ass in time with my steps, and I take stock of the place. I find myself oddly nervous about her approval. I’m tempted to put her down just for the sake of her expression, but I’m almost certain she’d run. I couldn’t help if she made me chase her again, and that’s not my vision for our first time.

I reach the third-floor landing and do my best to hide my heavy breaths. I'm in great shape, but walking up three flights of stairs with a woman over my shoulder is enough to wind me, but I'm also not mature enough to let her know that.

"Can I please walk?" she finally asks nicely, and I smile. "My head hurts."

"How much did that cost your pride, Little Cherry?"

"Can I please walk?"

"No, we're almost there."

I push open a door and gently drop her on the ground. I would place her, but she's really pissed me off at this point, and I don't want her thinking I'm going to reward bad behavior. I haven't been in my room in days. I needed help arranging everything for her, but a lot of it had to be handpicked, and I've been busy with the construction.

She's lying on the ground, not moving, except the rise and fall of her chest, doing her best to keep quiet but losing the struggle to little pained gasps. Being carried upside down for so long isn't exactly comfortable. Other than that, she's a little bruised from the rest of the day's antics, but she's ultimately fine.

"Take your time standing, Snapdragon. You're probably lightheaded." I mean the words with the utmost sincerity. She looks a little gray, and I'm faintly worried I've been handling her too roughly. I move to the dresser, pulling out different odds and ends and placing them on top.

"Fucking asshole," she corrects my concern.

I whoop in excitement. "God, I love it when you curse at me, baby. You're such a pious little bitch."

Magda pushes up to her hands, gently shaking her head as she sits on her gloriously round ass. She looks up at me through the messy tresses of her hair. It's long and impossibly thick, so rich in its blackness with hints of red shining through. It makes her deep brown eyes shine like obsidian, so black until flashes of light reveal the chocolate's warmth.

Her full tits heave with each breath, and I count the bobbing of her pinkish-brown nipples against the beat of my own heart. The slice between those breasts wells with perfect ruby droplets of her blood, and I can't wait to cut her again, taste her blood, and fucking lose myself in her.

She sniffs the air, her pretty upturned nose alerting her to all the work I had done.

“New construction,” I tell her, knowing she’s going to absolutely blow her top when she sees it. She’ll pretend she doesn’t love it, but she will.

“What. New. Construction?” Her words strangle in her throat. Slight discolorations are forming all over her arms and legs. She’s really had a rough entry into her new home, and I feel for her. *Why the fuck do I feel for her?*

“I told you I prepared for you, Snapdragon. Do you want to see? You’ll have to get up if you do.”

I offer her my hand, and the stubborn girl struggles to stand on her own instead.

“You know it’s foolish to deny help that could serve you long term. Being prideful is a sin, isn’t it?”

“Accepting aid from the devil is just as bad.”

“If I’m the devil, then evil as a cause is greatly outnumbered and outmaneuvered. I’m just a man, baby. A bad one, I’ll give you that. Give me your hand.”

“You’re a murderer.”

“Are you reminding me or yourself?”

She gets to her knees and realizes just how worn out she is. She holds out her hand, and I pull her to her feet. I wrap my arm around her and smile when she doesn’t fight me. I know I haven’t gotten what I want out of her yet, but this comes so close. Her head bobs against the side of my shoulder. She’s so tiny compared to me.

Her brow crinkles as we approach a door on the opposite side of the room, and when I open it, her mouth drops in the prettiest shock.

“Do you like it, Snapdragon?”

“Pax, what is this?”

“It’s your bedroom.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s your walk-in closet.”

“It was my walk-in closet, but I had it remodeled for you. Plus, it’s twice the size of that shit hole back at the convent.”

I take her inside, and her eyes run over the blood-red walls and the black silk sheets on her comfortable full mattress. There’s random satanic items around the room that I handpicked just to mess with her. Ram’s heads, upside crucifixes, and pentacles in varying sizes. The space appears entirely redone, but a couple of pieces of the closet are left. The wall-length mirror, for one, and the bar that spans the length of the room, which used to hold a million

bucks worth of suits. Now it holds a series of restraints, long shackles, chains, and other paraphernalia with which to enjoy her.

The panic spreads so deliciously across her face. Her bottom lip quivers, her hands shake, and tears gather on her lashes. Her reaction is just right, exactly what I wanted, and I enjoy it. Sort of. *What the actual fuck?*

CHAPTER 18

I AM NOT A REAL BOY

PAX

“PLEASE DON’T MAKE me stay in here. This isn’t funny, Pax.”

I pull her into my arms, staring deep into her nearly black eyes. She’s so perfect like this, her soft body against mine, her cheeks wet with tears. There is no twinge in my chest.

“It is funny. It’s fucking hilarious. You’re mine to play with, and this is how I want to play with you.”

The misery doesn’t fade from her expression. Rather, it intensifies, and I would think that would excite me, but it only makes me angry.

“Stop fucking looking at me like that, Magdalena.”

“Like what?” she cries.

“Like I’m, like I’m—”

“Like you’re what, Pax?” She says my name again, and I fucking tingle like a schoolgirl with a crush. I can’t let someone have this kind of power over me. What was I thinking, bringing her here? This is just like Mattie all over again. Didn’t I learn then that caring for women is the surest way to wind up hurt?

“It’s not going to be like that was. It’s never going to be like that was. I’m not a kid.”

Her tears fade beneath her confusion, and as her misery ebbs, so does my patience. I’m fucking fuming actually. How dare she ruin this for me? She was supposed to hate it and be scared, which was what I got, but I wasn’t supposed to *feel* like that watching her. I wasn’t supposed to feel anything at all but a wicked thrill and then my own emptiness.

“What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.” Her hands peel at mine, and I realize it’s because they’re around her neck. They’re firm on her flesh, but she can breathe.

“I’m not fucking soft.” I press my forehead to hers and rub my nose against hers. “I’ll never be soft for you.”

“I know you’re not soft. You’re a murdering, evil psychopath. Please, Pax, you’re scaring me.”

“You should be afraid, Snapdragon. I’ve given you a lot of time to work up to this, but I’m fucking you tonight, and if you beg and cry, it will only make my cock harder. I’ll only come harder as you sob.”

It’s true. I swear to God or the devil or whoever the fuck will listen that it’s true. My joke was funny, and she’s not fucking ruining it.

“Please, Pax. Please. I’ll tell you the truth, okay? I’m so attracted to you. I liked what you did to me, even if I hate myself for it, but I don’t want this. I don’t want you like this, please.”

Her words cut deep into my gut and lay my entrails on the ground. It’s worse than when I saw Mattie bobbing her fucking head on my cousin’s cock when I thought I loved her. This rejection burns in every cell of my body, and as much as she’s hated me, I hate her for it.

“I don’t care what you want, baby. Can’t you tell from the decor? I don’t give a fuck.”

She struggles against me, but I squeeze tighter. She tries to hit me, but I just hang on, waiting until she passes out. Once she’s down, I drag her to the bar. It’s probably twenty feet long, and I could leave her shackled here all day with how the cuffs are set up. And depending on which I chose, she would be stuck with the length of the mirror or able to reach her bed and sleep like a dog on a chain.

She’s loose, flopping to the ground, but I push her face-first against the mirror, shove my knee between her thighs, and quickly put her wrists in the leather cuffs. These ones keep her hands over her head and close the six-foot-tall bar, but she can be turned and twisted so I can fuck her whichever way I want. Her breath steams the glass, and she’s slowly coming back to when I pull the longer set of ankle cuffs over to bind her. She’s sort of dangling by her wrists at the moment, with her knees and ankles completely lax as she groggily peels her eyes open. Her knees hang open, and I relish the wet line in her panties as I tighten the last strap on her ankle.

“Please, Pax, don’t.”

I pull the knife I threatened her with in the car out of my pocket and use it to slice her panties off. She whimpers and shakes as I work, and I force myself to think of all the women I’ve killed and how much I’ve enjoyed

every one. I'm not a serial killer because I have to be. I don't have any fucking rituals, and I don't take trophies. I do it because I'm an empty, gaping black hole, and nothing will fill me. If she doesn't fill me, I don't know what will.

I stand behind her, swelling to my full height, chest expanded. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror as I pull the scrap of fabric away, revealing her pretty, curl-covered cunt to the air and her delicious whip-marked ass. I take a step back, enjoying the ability to fully observe both sides of her. I guess I lied. I do want to hurt her after all because I would love to mark up her back that's faded since the last time I saw her like this.

Her terror is just as pure and sweet as any of the girls I cut apart, and it only increases as she watches us both in the mirror. I wonder if she's ever spent any real time looking at her naked body. How strange it must be for her to see herself this way. Is she ashamed? How does she see herself?

I don't have real emotions. I see others enjoy excitement, and I crave it so fucking deeply, even fear. I've cut it out of others before, and I felt my own brand of excitement, but it's never been like this. I've never felt like this, and suddenly, everything I've ever been jealous of seems stupid to have wanted.

Her pain and fear aren't entertaining. They are agonizing. I'm sick to be in their presence, and I'm beside myself that I could feel this way about anyone. I knew from the moment I saw Magda at that sham funeral that she belonged to me, but this weakness is different, and I'm going to fuck her until it's out of me.

She's fully awake now, staring at me with tearstained eyes, and something inside me snaps, but not enough to be gentle or, God forbid, stop me.

I reach around her body, palming her breasts. The animal part of me wants to sink inside her and painfully tear her virginity apart, but again, that damn softness I denied possessing won't let me. I play with the pretty tips until they're stiff and begging for my attention. The tears on her cheeks slow, her mouth rounds, and her cheeks turn red for an entirely different reason.

My Little Nun has incredibly sensitive nipples, I'm quickly realizing, which is so fucking hot that my cock leaks pre-cum into my boxers. I turn and twist, applying just the right amount of pressure. She seems to like the bite of pain, and she's squealing for me so pretty I forget that I'm supposed to hate these emotions and mistrust what she does to me. All I want is to be inside her.

I pull my button open with one hand and slide the zipper down. The high

from being choked out is likely entirely worn off as I pull my cock out and squeeze. I lay it in the cleft of her ass, admiring the round cheeks, wondering how she would cry as she took me there. I'm not small.

"Is that your...? Oh God," she chokes out, but there's excitement there too. I see it in her blushing cheeks. She already admitted how much she wanted me, and that was dangerous ammunition to give someone who only understands boundaries in the textbook sense.

"It's yours now, baby."

I grab one of her thighs and spread her legs open, lining the head of my cock up with her entrance.

"No, Pax. Please no, not like this."

I run the head of my cock along her pussy, spreading her wetness from her entrance to her clit. I watch us both in the mirror, never loving the sight of my own cock more as it gets slick with her juices. She can cry and complain all she wants, but she's fucking horny. She's ready for this. I rub the head of my cock against her clit until she's moaning, and then pull it back and slap my cock right against the bundle. She squeals, and it's the prettiest sound. I do it again.

"Snapdragon, you're going to be so good for me now. I'm going to slide my cock deep inside you, and I'm going to cover it in your virgin blood. You're going to come for me so pretty. Because you're going to be such a good little slut for your first time, I'll remove one satanic artifact every time you come. Sound fair?"

Her reflection is almost more poignant with her back flush against my body. She stares me deep in the eyes and says, "I'm not giving it to you. You haven't broken me."

I thrust my hips, forcing my cock deep inside her.

CHAPTER 19

UN-HOLY COMMUNION

MAGDALENA

I'M surprised it doesn't hurt more when Pax begins shoving that monster inside me. I thought having my dignity, sense of self-worth, and purpose in life stripped away would at least have the decency of being agonizing, but it's not.

He's toying with my nipples in a way that puts me close to the edge all on its own, and the way he's carefully stuffing himself inside me, stretching me to my limits? I nearly finish right there, and for a moment, I think I'm stupid to hold back. I should let myself enjoy this and get as much of that satanic stuff out of here as possible.

His eyes meet mine in the mirror, and there's pure triumph.

"You've stopped crying, Snapdragon."

I look over at myself, and he's right. The tears have stopped, and what does that say about me? The vows I've made or my position in the universe? My gaze drifts to his cock between my legs, and I realize he's only halfway inside me. I'm sure he's going to try to shove twice as much inside me. I'm insanely nervous he will make sure he fits no matter what.

My fingers are numb, and I'm not sure if it's from when he choked me unconscious or the tight leather cuffs cutting into my wrists. I've never felt anything like I did when I came back from unconsciousness. The closest thing I can think of to describe it is high.

I intended to avoid it, considering my mom is a drug addict if she's still alive. I've always worried that I have addictive tendencies, and that's probably true in some respects, but I didn't like the sensation. It was scary and disconcerting. I prefer controlling myself. I'm comforted by that knowledge, and I kind of hate Pax for being the one to give it to me.

He catches my attention with his trademark wicked smile and lurches his

hips forward. The whine that escapes my throat doesn't sound half as agonized as I would like it to. It reveals that I'm enjoying this much more than I should and that hatred for myself burns in my gut, somehow making my pleasure more intense. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

"It's kind of sad. I can't call you Cherry after this. You're all popped."

"God help me."

"Oh? You want to come? Should have just asked."

He changes the angle of his hips and sinks an inch deeper. I scream in pain before he pulls back and hits something insane inside me. My eyes roll back, and the last thing I see is a raw animosity in his features. It's painful being smashed apart this way. My joints protest as the restraints shake on the railing. My feet go numb first, but my legs aren't far behind.

I'm liquid, horribly uncomfortable, and so close to coming I'm seeing stars. When there's a sharp slice in my back, I scream in agony while coming harder than I imagined possible.

Pax curses, "Dirty fucking slut, I was trying to stop you from coming."

He lifts the knife to his lips, wiping my blood onto his tongue. "The blood of Magda shed for me," he mimics the words spoken during the serving of communion wine.

"You're sick," I argue as my internal muscles wring him for more.

There's another deep sharp slice across my back, but it curves and arches this time. I scream as loud as I can, sure like I've never been that no one will hear me. As he finishes that intricate cut, he thrusts in and out of me a few times. The knife hangs bloody in his hand as he lazily watches the spot where his cock disappears inside me.

He's so much larger than me in every way. It's hard to fathom how I ever imagined fighting, why I ever imagined I could fight. The accompanying guilt is intense, but God, I've never felt better or worse. There's another slice, shorter this time, but he twists the knife back and forth, and I shriek in a mix of agony and enjoyment I can't comprehend from my limited life experiences. I'm so sheltered, and I'm only realizing that now as I'm barreling toward a second orgasm.

At least I can get rid of two of the upside-down crucifixes and ram's heads. I'm not as bothered by the pentacles as he imagines. The nature-based religions aren't that frightening.

"The body of Magda," he says as he slices his tongue open this time, tasting my blood and mixing ours at the same time. He kisses my neck, open-

mouthed, teeth sharp with his bleeding tongue sweeping back and forth over me.

“The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb, Little Nun, and you’re mine now.”

Hot blood drips down my back from the multitude of wounds, searing my skin and staining my soul. It dribbles down my backside and slips into the mix of fluids he’s created between us. His chest and stomach bump the wounds, and I cry and moan in tandem. This is going to hurt so bad once he’s done with me.

“So pretty fucking in your blood, Cherry.”

“I thought you said I’m all popped.”

“You will be when I’m done.” He picks the knife back up. “Don’t worry, you gorgeous girl. You’ve done so good for me. I’m just going to finish my artwork, fill you with cum, and put you to bed.”

“Your artwork?” I scream as he delivers a long series of short cuts.

“All done!”

He drops the bloody knife to the ground, grabs my round hips in both of his oversized hands, and drives into me with a force that takes my restrained feet off the ground and rips an agonized scream from my throat. He’s so big. He’s too big.

I can’t help but watch his expression as it moves through the stages of appreciation until he’s back at that raw animal place where his green eyes shine and his pheromones pour off him.

“You’re so tight, Magdalena. So fucking good for me. I can almost forget I forced you.”

“I won’t,” I tell him, and I mean it. I know how good this is right now, but the reality will catch up with me later. I will hate him. I tell myself it’s true over and over as he hammers into me.

A deep burning feeling of pain is mixed with pleasure, and I realize I’m going to come again, but this time it hurts, and it feels like I have to pee. What’s happening?

“You’ve never felt hot cum inside you, baby. I think you’re going to like it.”

Before he can finish I go off, coming so hard my knees buckle and I see stars. He holds me up through it, but there’s a splashing sound, and everything is so wet. It’s running down my legs, pooling in the carpet.

“What the hell just happened?”

Pax roars like a goddamn animal and the hot cum he promised fills me, soothing the edges he tore apart with his giant cock. He's still moaning and thrusting as he answers.

"God, you squirted. So fucking hot, going to lick it off your thighs."

He pulls out of me, his cum leaking down my legs with whatever the hell that was.

"What was that?"

"It's our cum mixed, Snapdragon." He pulls my thigh up to his face and licks it up. "Fuck, do we taste good."

I'm scandalized and somehow aroused again despite how hard I came all three times when the pain in my back kicks in fully without the endorphins to distract me. I turn my back to the mirror. My wrists still hang above me, and my mouth drops open in horror as I see what he's done.

There's a big round heart, and Pax and Magda in the center with a plus symbol. Tears well in my eyes and spill over my lashes. I'll never be able to get rid of that, and it's too deep to fade.

"I wasn't really planning this. Just so you know. But I am flexible, and you liked our binding more than I imagined you would, so I improvised. Pretty, huh?"

CHAPTER 20

HOLY MISSION

MAGDALENA

WHAT HAS *he done to me? What has he done to me? What has he done to me?*

“Come on, I’m putting you to bed.”

I rock slightly as he moves to my ankles first and unbinds them. His hands slide along my body, touching the still tender swell of my ass and then my breast. He avoids my back, and I hate myself for being grateful. My wrists are next. His fingers dig beneath the straps to loosen the leather, and while I barely noticed the first set, these ache as Pax pulls them out of my divot-covered skin.

I whimper as my arms drop to my sides and my whole body slumps, my gelatinous legs unable to support me. Pax catches me under the arms, stopping me from hitting the ground, but my head still lolls. He’s too pretty, and it’s not fair for evil to look like him. It’s not fair that he’s claimed me as his on my own skin.

He seems calmer than before, less of that mania that terrified me, just in time for me to lose it completely. I’m shaking. The adrenaline is gone, leaving me empty.

He carved his name into my back. He marked my skin, which is an egregious sin on its own. I was made the way God intended, but his disrespect didn’t stop there. He intertwined his name and mine, claiming our love on my skin until my flesh decays. I’m so angry I could scream, but liquid satisfaction replaces the usual heat in my gut, and I hate myself more than I ever imagined I could.

He lifts me into his arms the same way he teased me about as he hauled me in here over his shoulder, however long ago that was. It’s like an eternity, a whole other lifetime where my soul was purer and my path in life clear. My

legs wrap around his waist, and I hug his neck, not out of comfort but rather to keep myself up. His hands wrap around my back, carefully avoiding the slices, and all of a sudden, this feels intense in a completely different way.

That spot beside my heart that overflows with God's love swells as Pax holds me, staring longingly at my lips. He kisses me, and I have a sudden sense of assuredness that I am exactly where I'm supposed to be, but certainly not for the reasons Pax imagines. I'm not here to be his toy or someone he can play with. I'm here to save him and anyone else he might hurt. There won't be another Constance if I can help it.

I assume he'll put me in the black silk sheets in the red-painted closet, which is, in fact, twice as big as my old room back at the convent. What have they done with the few things I did own? Have they already gotten rid of them? What the hell did Father DiMarco tell them all about leaving with me and coming back without, and do any of them care?

Does anyone in the world care about me besides Pax Bouchard? And he only cares for the wrong reasons.

We head out into the main bedroom where the sheets are similarly black silk, but the walls are painted a soft blue like a robin's egg. It's lovely, and while it's oddly sparse, much like my own space, it doesn't have anything objectionable. Part of me wants to argue that he put me in that separate room, but when I pull back and check his expression, that's exactly what he wants.

He wants me to push his kindness back in his face so he can make the place he keeps me worse, but I understand him better now that I see how upset he got before he stole my virginity. He's starting to feel things too, and he's terrified. He begged me to stop looking at him like he was a monster, even if he couldn't find the words himself.

His brow crinkles in confusion when I don't complain or ask him to put me in that room with two less satanic articles. He lays me down on the bed, and when I cry as the pain rips through me, he quickly rolls me off the wounds and onto my stomach. Then he climbs into the bed beside me, letting the length of his body infuse my skin with much-needed warmth.

He's very still for a long time, and so am I. I just lie there and breathe next to a man I hate and don't hate at all, wondering what the warmth in my chest means and what God is trying to tell me.

How do I save him?

"I'm sorry this is so hard on you, baby." It's been so long since either of us have spoken I jump at the sound of his voice, but settle back quickly.

“What? You’re sorry for kidnapping me, and what you just did being hard on me?” I mean it to be scathing, but my soft voice is sated, more relaxed than I’ve ever been in my entire life despite the grief pressing at the edges.

He lifts his hand and gently runs his fingers down the slope of my cheek, along my shoulder and down my arm to hold my hand in his. It’s so close to the softness he promised me he’s not capable of that I wonder if there’s even more than I imagined behind the monster.

“No, you silly girl. My kidnapping you will be the easiest thing you’ve ever done. I’m going to lavish you in luxury, fuck you into boneless oblivion, and I’m not just gilding your cage; I’m crusting it in diamonds and rubies.

“The part that’s hard for you is how badly you want me. How good it feels when I’m close to you and how guilty that makes you. I’m sorry that I have to do all this to prove to you that you’re mine. I wish I could make this easier.”

“You can make it easier.” My voice is softer and kinder than I’ve ever used with him.

His fingers stop in their path, and he’s so still for a moment, I’m worried I’ve said the wrong thing.

“How?” he grits out like he’s resentful of wanting to know.

“You said I’m yours, right?”

“You are.” There’s deep suspicion laced in his words, but the plan God intended for me suddenly lays out clearly.

“Are you mine?” His fingers pick up their circuit.

“I have been since you bit my tongue and tasted my blood. You have to know how sacred that was.” I’m not sure what to say to that because it’s not how I saw it or imagined it, but it makes sense after what he just did to me. That devastation to my agency will sting for years to come, but I’m starting to understand.

“Then, if you want to make this easier. I don’t want you killing. I want you with me.”

“I certainly cannot promise you I’ll never kill anyone, and I won’t make you false promises.”

I swallow hard, not too surprised by the answer but still hurt. Then I realize, there’s a very important distinction. My plans still have hope.

“Can you promise to never kill another innocent woman? If you have me, do you promise? Only kill if you have to for business but no other time.”

He turns and stares at me. There’s a softening around the edges of his

eyes and then a tightening.

“I told you I won’t be soft for you and I’ll kill whoever the fuck I want.”

“You’re cheating on me,” I try, truly desperate to meet my life’s purpose, save people, and let myself fucking enjoy how deeply I’m falling for this damn psychopath.

“What?”

“What do you get from killing those women?”

He doesn’t answer, staring off into space like the answer exists out there. He’s quiet for several minutes before he says, “You’re right, the things I get from them are things you should give me. If another man gave you what they gave me, I’d gut him slowly and feed you his pieces.”

That wasn’t exactly as comforting as I hoped, but progress where progress can be found, I guess.

“So you won’t cheat on me, Pax?”

He gets down to my level, his eyes staring deep into mine.

“You won’t run?”

“Never,” I answer with all the honesty and integrity of the vows I already made, vows I don’t consider broken. I am God’s servant, and I will do my best to serve.

“Never,” he agrees, and I hope the other shoe doesn’t drop for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 21

**UNDERHANDED, NANNY FUCKING,
MOTHER KILLING BASTARD**

PAX

SHE'S BEEN asleep for a few hours. It's only one o'clock in the afternoon, and the watery spring sun is still high in the sky, but the blackout curtains give the place a timelessness. I can't see her, but every inch of her warm body presses up against my side, and I'm content. Not empty, hollow, or hungry. I'm content.

I'm not sure what to make of that or what happened between us. I've been playing this game with her and enjoying every moment. But when did I start to take any of it seriously? Everything in my life is a game, a way to seek entertainment, but Magda is just more. I realized she was getting too close, and I thought if I hurt her badly enough, I could prove how little I give a shit. I should've known there was no way for me to do that with Magda because trying to hurt her only made me even more obsessed. I'm starting to realize just how dangerous my fixation really is.

I'm listening to the ripping sound of her snores, wondering if I'll be able to sleep next to all that noise. I think she's worth it, even if I never get a good night's sleep again. She's so small and so damn warm. I'm tempted to wrap myself around her like a greedy dragon guarding his hoard. My thoughts are so sickly sweet it kind of makes me want to die. I try to shove that tenderness away, but it's nearly impossible now that our names are carved into her skin and she's sleeping beside me.

The smart little bitch didn't even complain about being brought to my bed, which shocked me so much that I lay down beside her, which I certainly didn't plan to do originally. I'm thinking about all of this and wondering what the hell I'm going to do with her and myself when my phone rings in my pants.

I climb out of bed carefully so as not to wake Magda, not because I care

about her comfort but because she probably needs to sleep after I took her virginity and carved the shit out of her. I don't want her to get an infection and die on me when I've put so much into getting her here and making everything perfect.

The call ends by the time I make it to my pants lying on the floor of her closet room. My eyes roll nearly to the back of my head when I see it's my cousin, Shane. Why does he always bother me when I least want to be bothered?

I answer it this time, pressing it to my ear and keeping my voice down so I don't disturb my extremely loud sleeping beauty, who's also ruining my life. I stare at my naked body in the mirror. I'm positively covered in Magda's blood, and I'm hard at the sight of myself. I really am a fantastic specimen of a man, and I couldn't be more pleased with myself at the moment.

"Nelson Psychiatrics," I purr down the phone, knowing I'll enjoy bothering him no matter what he wants. "Oh, that's right, the practice was absorbed by Sunrise Mental Health Services because our building burned down under suspicious circumstances." I'll likely never know exactly what happened to the building or my mother, and I don't care all that much because she fucking hated me anyway, but I still take issue with him killing something that didn't belong to him.

I also don't care if that makes me a hypocrite. I may have been a terrible person in the past, but I've promised Magda I'd stop killing innocent women, and I do mean it, so I must have changed. And if my elder cousin has taught me anything, it's that our sins and transgressions can be forgotten if we simply move a few hundred miles to the east and pretend they never happened.

"Pax, I do not have the time or energy for you." His voice sounds too much like my own missing my slight accent, and once again, I resent the fact that, genetically, we're half-brothers, because our moms were identical twins. I'm equally related to Shane as I am to Nikolai. And both think they're better than me, so that's always fun to deal with.

"Then why are you calling, Cousin? You wouldn't have to deal with me if you weren't fucking bothering me."

"I have a bit of a situation. I need you out of the house by tonight and get rid of the staff." His tone is perfectly serious, but I laugh in response.

"Fuck you, Shane. You're five hours away, and why the hell would you need that? I'm so fucking angry my hands are shaking, my vision shakes

along with it and if he were here right now I'd attack him without a doubt.

"I'm coming with a guest, Pax. Just get the fuck out and take the staff with you."

"You can't just come here and tell me to get out, Shane. I fucking live here. Where am I supposed to go?"

"You're disgustingly fucking rich. Go to a hotel or some shit, you overgrown baby."

I can't, but I don't fucking tell him that. Over the past few months, I've had to make myself scarce whenever he's wanted. As the eldest in our family, the house passed to him when my mom died, and the fucking prick has certainly enjoyed lording my own home over me, a home he hates because he thinks he's better than the absurd wealth we were born into. Like he's better than me cause he hypnotizes and brainwashes his patients until they think he's God.

"You're as disgustingly rich as I am, you hypocritical asshole."

"Have you forgotten who owns the house? I already told you I don't have the patience for you, and my generosity is wearing thin." The stress in his voice is obviously deep and has nothing to do with me. It makes me smile that shit might be difficult for him. Miserable asshole.

"I let you stay there and don't even charge you rent. You literally commit murders there. Now I need it, and you're going to go."

I open my mouth and close it a few times. Most of that's bullshit, but I do agree the killing in the house may be over the line.

"Fuck you, Shane. What will you do if I don't go?" The big problem with me is the angrier I get, the less I think, and the more bored I am, the crazier shit I'll do to alleviate it. I'm a bit of both.

"I'll sell the place to Nikolai and see what he does with you. We both know your odds are better with me."

"That's cold, even for you, Shane."

"You haven't seen cold, Pax. I happen to love you."

The worst part is that while I don't *love him*, I know I'm loyal to him, admire him, and ultimately want his approval like I do Nikolai's. Though I gave up on that hope with him when I saw him with my girlfriend.

"What kind of guest are you bringing all the way here, you fucking freak?"

"Big words coming from you, Pax. She's just someone special, the future mother of my children, so don't get any fucking ideas about sticking a knife

in her.”

“I’ve been on a strangling kick lately,” I tell him, perhaps a little too honestly as I imagine doing the same to him. Beneath my anger is a little glimmer of appreciation. He just gave me everything I need to finally get back at him. He’s bringing his future to me in a soft, breakable package. It just couldn’t have possibly come at a worse time because I promised Magda I wouldn’t kill innocent women.

He laughs, and the sound raises the hairs on the back of my neck. “Have you ever considered people might record your conversations? I don’t, but I know Nikolai does. Watch yourself, Pax. I’ll be there in about six hours.” He disconnects the line, and I stare at the phone, squeezing it as hard as I can before I hurl it at the mirror, leaving a giant fucking crack, but it doesn’t help. I don’t feel better.

“Goddammit! Goddammit! Goddammit!” I shout as I stalk the room. I spent so long preparing for her and for him to come and ruin everything I’ve worked for now? I pick up a shoe rack and smash it into the glass. My chest heaves, the crusted blood makes me appear deranged. This is fucking bullshit. I want to kill him.

I take out as much of my rage as I can on everything I can get my hands on. I don’t ruin her clothes because I’m not sure where I’m going to take her, and I don’t want to leave her exposed to the elements. I have a fuck ton of money, and I answer to very few people, but one of them is Nikolai and I certainly do not want to have to answer to him about this. Shane’s a fucking bastard.

Think, think, think.

I’m coming up blank. Everything I’ve worked so hard for is falling apart in front of my face, and I have this incredibly inconvenient worry in my chest that I won’t be able to provide for Magda. I wonder when exactly I switched from wanting to own her and play with her, love her like a well-groomed pet in my lap, to wanting to provide for her on any real level. I really fucking hate us both for getting here.

An idea occurs to me, and I’m not one hundred percent sure it’s a good one. It may be okay, but it’s all I’ve got at the moment for a serial killer and his kidnap victim. It will certainly require backup and some of the staff that I sent away after preparing for Magda. Convenient for my cousin that I already kidnapped a girl and now he needs to bring a “guest” here.

Knowing what I do about my cousin, I suspect she’s not so willing, or if

she is, he has been working on her for so many months that she has no idea what willing even is anymore. I've never seen my cousin have a romantic relationship with his patients, but the things he does to them are sick.

He claims that he is simply making them better, and I guess that's true. He orders their lives, helps their careers forward, and improves their relationships. He just also controls them like puppets on a string, deriving deep satisfaction from the knowledge that he's truly the one in control, and to me, that seems more nefarious than simply killing them. Underhanded, nanny-fucking, mother-killing bastard.

"Pax, what's going on?" Magda stands in the doorway. If I were paying any attention at all, I would have known she woke up. I guess all the breaking shit didn't help my situational awareness.

"Pick any shit you actually need to wear and throw it in this bag. There's a lot of stuff designed to upset you, but there are serious items too. Grab those."

"Why? What's happening?" Her delicate brows push together over the darkest eyes, and I hate her once again for making me care so goddamn much about anyone at all.

"My asshole cousin is visiting, and you need to be gone when he gets here."

"Where am I supposed to go?" She's trembling, probably because the idea of going somewhere even worse doesn't appeal to her. Me neither, Snapdragon.

I don't want to lie to her and tell her it's going to be okay or I have it taken care of, because I don't. So instead, I say, "I have an idea, but I'll need to make a few calls. You have ten minutes." And I leave her alone in the closet.

CHAPTER 22

WELCOME TO PARADISE

MAGDALENA

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we're piled into a golf cart with several suitcases of belongings rolling down the rocky mountainside in a way that sparks my excitement while also making me indescribably nervous that we're about to roll over and get crushed to death. I look over my shoulder, wondering what he plans to do with his car. It must cost a fortune, and it's not even big enough to sleep in, go figure.

"Shane will expect me to be here when he arrives. I'll come back for the car and a few other essentials, like the million cash I keep under my mattress."

I splutter, "Cash?"

"If they made larger bills, I would have more."

"Right. That makes sense." That makes absolutely no sense at all.

I bounce in my seat as we go over a particularly rocky bit of terrain, and his hand clamps down, trying to hold me in my seat.

"It didn't sound like he expected you to be here." I speak loud enough for him to hear me over the engine.

"You were eavesdropping," he accuses with an approving smile. "He doesn't *want* me to be here, but trust me, he expects me anyway. I don't have a history of doing what I'm told, little eavesdropper."

"I would have said something instead of listening if you weren't acting *insane*." He was so sexy and horrifying destroying that room while covered in my blood.

"Wasn't acting, Snappy. I'm the real deal."

I am in so much damn trouble, but I'm also probably lying. I would have wanted to hear whatever he had to say. I know he was talking to his cousin, but I never knew he had one. What else don't I know about him and his

family? I've only ever heard of Nikolai, and this feels like it's going to be one of those curiosity-dead-cat situations. Suddenly, his words sink in, and I'm disgusted.

"Dear God, please don't call me that. Of all the indignities I've had to suffer, please spare me that one."

He laughs, and it's happy rather than evil or calculating. It's just not fair how handsome he is when he's happy. My heart aches for him in the strangest way at the sight of it. What the hell happened to Pax to make him like this?

The terrain doesn't let up and his fingers clamp into my flesh through the leggings I chose among the *real* clothes. What kind of an asshole buys a bunch of shit he doesn't really plan to make me wear to scare me? *He planned to make you wear it, dummy. He just got kicked out first*, a small voice chastises me.

"You better hang on. It'll hurt like hell if you fall with all those cuts on your back, and you wouldn't want to mess up my handiwork."

I'll never admit to him that he did a better job than I feared he would. He has a steady hand for cutting flesh. Lovely. The reminder burns. I'm still so angry about every aspect of earlier, still reeling from my revelations about my purpose in life, and barely caught up from the whiplash of losing my virginity in such a harsh and thrilling way.

"Did you really have to do that to me?"

I wipe my hand across my cheek as a betraying tear slips free. He doesn't answer for a minute, getting that uncomfortable look he always does when I ask him questions he'd rather not answer. Though I can't help but notice he still takes me seriously. He never bats away my curiosity as stupidity and a gossiping nature, the very reasons Father DiMarco Claimed I needed to be schooled at the monastery.

"No, I didn't have to. I was trying to prove a point."

"Did you succeed?"

"Not really."

We're on the golf cart for a lot longer than I imagined we would be, and I have no idea why we are until I suddenly see a very old, dilapidated stone building through the trees. It clearly coordinates with the mansion on the top of the mountain, though it's probably only four or five bedrooms in comparison and is completely square with only a slight edge around the roof to give it that castle flair.

“Where are we?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer, looking presumably to see if anyone has been there. It’s the absolute middle of nowhere toward the bottom of the mountain where the terrain begins to flatten out again. The homeless could take refuge or maybe local teenagers wanting to party. I probably would have stopped off had I escaped from the main house.

The road in and out has all but vanished into the forest with boulders and fallen trees lying and growing through the path. I have no idea where he plans to put his car once he gets it, but he can’t be thinking of bringing it here. You might be able to make the trip with a Jeep, but I don’t know how bad the road really is farther out or if there’s not something permanently blocking passage. He pulls up out front and turns the key off in the golf cart.

“Home sweet home. Hopefully, Shane will get lost quick.”

He hops out and grabs our bags before heading into the house without saying anything else to me. He doesn’t tell me to follow him, and frankly, I don’t want to. I enjoy the dappled sunlight on my face for a few minutes and listen closely as something rumbles in the distance. I’m suddenly sure I hear engines coming closer.

“Pax? What is that?” I call, hoping he’ll come and get me, which has me wondering when the hell I started seeing him as my protector. And better yet, why?

He pops his head out the front door. “That’s some much-needed backup. I have no idea what to do with this place.” His face is comically disgusted, and I find I enjoy the sight of him uncomfortable.

I get out of the golf cart then, satisfied that he at least knows who it is. It’s so strange to be dressed in form-fitting clothes, and I find Pax’s gaze following me more than normal as I approach the building and step inside. The smell is the first thing I notice, damp and wet like the stone of the convent but so damn stale.

“Prop the door open,” I tell him as I pinch my nose shut. To say it’s in rough shape would be an understatement. What furniture is left is eaten through by moths. Clouds of dust and spiderwebs hang in the air, and the grime is so thick it’s unsettling. The space is huge, though, and it’s a testament to the main house that this looks small in comparison.

“Did you bring cleaning supplies?”

“What now?” He crinkles his face and looks at me like I spoke an alien language.

“Supplies with which to clean, Pax.”

He shrugs like the words don't mean anything to him.

"No, but the noises you heard are some of my servants coming to make this... livable."

"This isn't going to be livable without a construction crew."

"Well, look who's so picky, Miss Vow of Poverty."

"I didn't make a vow of death by pneumonia in an abandoned building in the woods, Pax."

"Don't worry, Snapdragon. These people keep *me* alive. They can do anything."

"Let's go outside and wait for them then. This place needs some serious work."

"At least it's a nice day." There's just a hint of vulnerability in his voice.

"You appreciate the sunshine?" I ask him as we step back outside, shocked to find he likes something so human.

"I require vitamin D like the rest of the species," he answers, reading my thoughts.

"I wasn't aware you were actually a member of the species." I'm only half joking.

He smiles again, crooked and so startlingly beautiful my knees shake.

"Sometimes I think it makes you feel better about yourself if you pretend I'm some powerful evil. I don't think you believe it even a little bit, but if you make it some grand thing, that I'm evil and you're fighting it, it makes the pointlessness of your existence more tolerable."

"You think my existence is meaningless?" I don't let his words sink in. I have a lot more faith than that.

"I think all of our existences are meaningless. Cosmically speaking anyway. I don't think we'd matter more to your God than ants if he were real."

That thought kicks me right in the gut because I've had it before. God's love is something I feel in the sun on my skin and the air in my lungs, but what if that's the extent of it? What if man isn't special, and we're all ants?

"You're wrong, Pax Bouchard, and if it takes me my entire life, I'm going to prove it to you."

He wasn't wrong when he said that pretending he was something greater and more evil than he is made this easier on me. Another thing I hate him for pointing out to me. Why is he always questioning the beliefs that keep me safe?

“You know, sometimes your faith is so attractive I want it for myself.”

Could he already be coming around to the idea? He promised me he wouldn't kill innocent women. Could I get more?

“You can have it, you know. If you want it, you can have forgiveness and faith.”

He looks up through the trees, admiring the natural world the way I often do. How can a killer care about the sunshine?

“No, I absolutely cannot because if I do, I'm already damned, and I just refuse to be that negative. Forgiveness comes from true repentance, right? I can't do that, and I like to enjoy my life, not pretend to regret things I don't really feel bad about for fear of punishment later.”

“That's not why I have faith.” I step back. Again, he's hurting me, and I wonder how we went so quickly from that bit of softness as we cuddled back to this. My heart aches, and somehow, he's got me wishing to be back in his bed in the mansion, wrapped in his silk sheets and pressed up against him.

He comes to me, cups my cheek, and stares deep into my eyes. The green once again blends with the brilliant leaves, and he has this ethereal look to him. I wonder if he's as startling in other seasons, and I pray to God he's not.

“I know that, Magdalena, trust me. If you weren't the purest soul I've ever encountered, I would have never taken you for myself.”

“The purest soul? Tell that to the other sisters who think I'm defective or Constance, who I pushed off a cliff.” The words rip out pieces of me as they go.

“It doesn't hurt my opinion of you that you have the perfect twist of psychotic rage to keep things interesting. I may doubt your God, but I don't doubt your intentions.”

“Should I doubt yours?”

“Always.”

Why is he always so damn honest with me?

The rumbling engines grow louder as they crest the hill. His staff are all riding four wheelers strapped with supplies that tell me they had some idea of what they were getting into. They quickly park the vehicles, climbing off and arranging their supplies for the task at hand. They're mostly women, but luckily, a few men are here to help with the arduous tasks of moving out the old rotten furniture.

I smile at them tentatively, thankful for their help and wondering if any of them would help me. I can't imagine screaming, crying, or begging now

would get me very far with Pax right here, but maybe he'll let his guard down, and one of them will talk to me. So far, none of them will even look my direction, and I suspect that was part of Pax's instructions.

They all file inside, and I sit down beneath a tree, expecting to wait for an extremely long time. There's no way they'll get the whole place done today, and I don't have high hopes for what they'll manage, which isn't an insult to them but rather the condition of the refuge Pax picked for us. I'm sure the part where he kidnapped me is limiting him, but I think he has more than enough money to do better. I did take a vow of poverty, but the local economy would appreciate the money, and I wouldn't be doing anything wrong by staying in a motel. Though he's right that I would view it as an opportunity and try to escape.

Pax leaves me alone, which is kind of him whether he means it to be or not. He goes in and out of the house, ordering them around even though the majority seem to be ignoring him. This is clearly his usual staff, and they're very comfortable with ignoring his insanity in favor of doing the job right, but not a single one of them so much as utter a word in argument. He's a spoiled fucking brat, and they're afraid he'll throw a tantrum and hurt them. Asshole.

I look up, and a pair of familiar eyes catch mine. Small and dark with wrinkled lines and white lashes. *Sister Yelena*, the older nun who never treated me badly, works among the servants dressed in plain clothes. I've never seen her like this, but she appears completely natural, modern like none of us are supposed to be. She carries a pile of fabric out of the house, likely the moth-eaten curtains. She gives me a small smile and holds up her finger to say shush.

Pax steps past her and smiles like he knows her well, and my stomach flips. *What the hell is going on?* The questions surge, battering me until I'm disconnected from my limbs, but I don't say a word. I don't try to get her alone. I just wait until they finish cleaning.

CHAPTER 23

THE PRODIGAL DICK RETURNS

PAX

THE STAFF TAKE hours and only manage to get the central living space cleaned, but they do bring in a bed and some furniture. Magda fell asleep quickly upon their leaving. I'm impressed with the difference if I remember not to walk farther down the hall than to the bathroom, which has running water and electricity despite fire concerns and some plumbing issues.

Whether or not the water source is clean or potable is an issue we won't be able to remedy in the limited time we'll be staying here, but at least the toilet flushes. I look around the room, wondering what exactly they used this building for and why. My mother always said it was an old carriage house, but where are the stables and why was it renovated in the last thirty years or so? The interior is shabby but definitely not as bad as it should be.

Judging from when Shane told me he was coming, he should be here soon, and I need to make my presence known. If he thinks he can make one call and I slink away with my tail tucked, he'll take advantage of owning this property a lot more often. We both grew up here when we weren't at school, but I've never left. We have the same amount of money, so how is it fair that it's his?

I get out of the makeshift bed, enjoying a few more of my girl's snores as I put on my clothes. Twilight is disappearing behind the mountain as I step outside. I avoid the golf cart or the ATV my staff left me for fear of waking her up, and instead jog the mile to where I parked the car. I hop in, start it up, and head toward my home, the place I should be right now, enjoying having finally taken Magda's virginity, not running, planning, and trying to solve problems. I live my life avoiding those exact things.

I pull up the driveway slowly. The rose quartz has been a bragging piece for our family for generations, but it will ding the hell out of your paint job if

you're not careful. I'm shaking mad as I think about how we were tossed out earlier. I don't really know how Magda feels about the relocation, and I hate that I care. It was bad enough to kidnap her once and get her settled in a day, but twice? I feel cruel, and normally that would tickle me, but I've been off since I met her.

I go inside the house, trying to move quickly as I grab a bunch of things I forgot and stuff them inside the car, including the duffel bags full of money I most certainly was not joking about. Everything is packed up and looks inconspicuous. I'm waiting in the entryway for him to pull up. If he's anything, it's punctual, so I don't have to wait long. The car turns up the stones long before he comes into view. His door opens and closes then another. One set of steps comes up the walkway.

I open the door, and there he is. Black hair neatly styled, blue eyes as bright as my green but less pretty if you ask me. Shane is nearly as large as me, but he's missing the lilt I got from my French father and the years I spent at boarding school in the Alps. He's holding a petite blonde, tucking her so tightly against his chest she can't even move her neck. From what I can see, she's certainly attractive, but she's got nothing on my raven-haired beauty.

"What's the problem, Shane? Afraid I'll see how pretty she is and want her for myself?" I greet him from my position by the door. It's best to keep the bastard distracted and off guard. The less he knows, the better. Information is Shane's greatest weapon.

"I'm afraid she'll see how pretty *you* are and tell the authorities about the mansion where she was held." Shane's such a mocking bastard, like he gives a shit. If she turned me in, he'd be relieved I went to jail for his crimes. Although, from the way he's holding her, I'm guessing he's not so willing to let go. This is getting better by the minute. I smile and run my eyes along her, like I care at all about the girl in his arms just to piss him off.

"You don't believe that." I stand in his way, distinctly unwilling to make any aspect of this easier, although I do notice that the girl he's holding is awfully cold. I suppose I don't feel for her, but I have a renewed sense of kindness created by Magda, so I take pity on his latest victim. Does she need to suffer more than having to spend time with my cousin?

"Let me in, Pax." I laugh at his expense, loving just how much this bothers him.

I step aside, allowing him to pass. Making a sarcastic sweeping gesture, I follow it with a bow for the fucking king of the manor, who's come home to

fuck up all my plans. The girl shakes in his arms, and I wonder what's happened to me that I no longer find that exciting.

"*Only* because your girl has a marvelous ass and a wet spot on her crotch." She shakes harder, and I still find nothing exciting about it. Who knew I was monogamous?

"The girl's ass is mine, by the way," Shane tells me, misreading my interest as he sets her on her tied-up feet. She looks around like a frightened little kitten. I can tell just from her expression she's a hundred times softer than my nun. She'd probably break and sob if I did those things to her, and I'd wind up killing her. It's a good thing the soft psycho became obsessed with her.

I do, however, understand his interest. Something is beguiling about that level of innocence, and she's incredibly beautiful with yellow and green eyes that remind me of flowers. She's very pretty, but I don't care, yet he's staring at me like he's ready to tear out my throat for looking at her. Not my fault he brought her here in a thin silk robe soaked in her own cum.

"Fine." I throw in a little disappointment as I pull my lip between my teeth. I don't fucking want his sloppy seconds. "I guess I'll just have to steal my own pretty virgin, Cousin." I need to keep him from suspecting who I have stashed away in the woods.

"Are you only in the market for virgins now?" he asks like he's so much better than me, with infinitely purer motivations.

"I suppose I could say my interest is in virginity, but I'd be lying if I told you someone special hasn't *already* struck my interest." My father was an excellent liar, and he always taught me the best lies are infused with truth. If I admit I'm watching her, he won't think I've taken her.

"Is the place stocked?" Shane asks as he bends over and unties her feet. She has this blissed-out look on her face, and I can't tell if she's hypnotized or in subspace, but either way, she's obsessed with Dr. Shane.

"Of course," I answer like I'm sure, though I have no clue. I never go in the kitchen.

He puts his hand on her back and pushes her deeper into the house. The house I live in and prepared for Magda. For a minute, I genuinely consider killing them both for having the nerve to come here, but I don't. I promised Magda.

I can't take any more of this, or I'm going to hurt them, so I move to the door. My jaw clenches, and my limbs shake. I'm still not sure I won't slip up

and kill them. Shane turns back to me.

“And the staff?”

“Have been dismissed.” I’m choking down my rage. I’m so fucking furious I need to do something, anything.

“Perfect.” Shane turns to her with a smile that looks too much like my own. “I have you all to myself.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” I say as I flip them a sarcastic wave and slam the door behind me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and unlock it as I jog back to my car. The arrogant asshole had an entire security system installed a few years back that covers every room in the house, including the one I sleep in, and didn’t think I would notice. Well, I disabled the camera in my room and paid someone to hack his system. So now I have access to everything. There’s an industrial-grade lock on the door to my wing and a fingerprint scanner on my bedroom that I only bother to turn on for his visits. He's not quite as smart as he thinks he is, though I will admit that he isn't as dumb as I would like him to be.

If it weren't for Magda, I would spend the night outside, thinking of ways to fuck with him and watching everything they do, but I have better ways to use my anger tonight. An innocent Little Nun needs my attention.

CHAPTER 24

FAIR PLAY

MAGDALENA

WHEN I WAKE UP ALONE, I don't know where I am for a full minute, and when it all comes crashing down on me, I'm dizzy. I'm no longer a virgin, my back is cut to pieces with a killer's name forever etched on my skin, everything I ever wanted is gone, and I was given away by the last person I trusted in the world. Not only that, but the room that was apparently prepared for me is no longer accessible, and oddly, I really miss Pax's space. At least it didn't vaguely stink despite hours of cleaning. Nothing makes sense or feels right anymore.

I climb out of bed, throwing on some clothes and slipping on a pair of sneakers I was shocked Pax provided to me. Once I'm dressed, I try the door, desperate for fresh air, and find it locked. I can't believe this asshole really locked me in. I promised him that I would not run, and I meant it. God put me here to help him and prevent him from killing anyone else innocent. Why would I break that vow? The vows I've broken so far, I didn't do intentionally. In fact, he forced me into that.

I'm so angry as I shake the door, but it doesn't budge. I look around, considering my options. I try the window, and that's locked too, or it's just rusted, but either way, I'm trapped. This asshole cannot be serious right now. What if there was a fire? Would he want me to burn to death? Somehow, I don't think he's so interested in losing me anymore.

Finally I find a brand new frying pan in a cupboard to go along with the hot plate, and I smash in the window. I thoroughly beat the pane until there's no chance I'm going to get cut, and then I carefully climb out. The spring air is chilly, a little bit too chilly for what I'm wearing. I'm not used to how permeable regular clothes are.

I hop down from the windowsill, landing in the intensely overgrown and

mostly dead shrubbery skirting the building. The sky is dark, but the stars are relatively bright despite still being far away. I'm relieved and a little touched that among the things Pax bought for me, he got me shoes. Part of me truly thought he wanted me dead or would keep me locked inside forever never to see the light of day again, but that couldn't be his intention having bought me sneakers.

The breeze sweeps across my face, clearing my head, and I'm still unsure of everything in my life. I'm trying to figure out what God wants from me, what I want from myself, and where the line is between giving in to Pax enough to keep the world safe but not so much that I lose my soul. I don't have any easy answers, and before long, I hear an engine in the distance. It cuts off before it gets too close, but a few minutes later, someone is running through the woods.

The beam of a flashlight cuts across my face and the footsteps pickup, I'm hoping it's Pax when I start to move toward the door, afraid that maybe it's not. A hard body slams into mine, forcing me violently against the building.

An "oof" is forced out of my lungs as he presses all his weight against me, and a pained whine escapes my throat.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing out here? Are you trying to get away from me? You never will."

"No, I wasn't," I grit through the pain. "I needed some fresh air because it stinks in there."

"Liar." His teeth cut into my neck, and I'm sure he tastes my blood.

"I'm not lying!" I cry as the pain rips me apart and turns me on. "Why would I stand here if I was running?"

He doesn't answer as his hands move to my leggings and pulls them down my thighs. My ass and thighs are exposed, my knees and calves covered, but the thong he bought me remains.

"Pax, please don't." The rough edge of the building scrapes my face, and my breasts are under painful pressure.

"I love it when you beg me not to, Snapdragon, but let's be clear that you traded free access to all of your holes to keep me from killing, remember? I wanted to kill someone pretty tonight, and I didn't, for you. I'm going to use you however I want. I think I'll take this ass."

His long fingers split my cheeks open, and he slides the thin strip aside, massaging the hole without penetrating. I'm intensely uncomfortable, but it's

a nicer sensation than I imagined. Nothing like his hand on my clit, but oddly exciting. He rests his other hand right below the disfiguring marks he left on me.

“Did I give you my skin too? Did I say you could carve me up?” I want to sound angry, but my devastation leaks through. I would never get a tattoo, I would never have anything pierced, and I certainly wouldn’t carve my own name into my flesh. I didn’t agree to that, and I think I’m angrier about that than anything else he’s forced me to do.

He’s quiet for a moment but doesn’t let up playing with the ring of muscle.

“I get what this is about, Snappy.” There’s that fucking nickname again. “You’re jealous and hurt. Everyone who sees your back knows exactly who you belong to, but I haven’t done the same for *you*. I don’t blame you for being offended, sweetheart.”

Well, that’s not at all what I meant.

“No, I’m mad because—”

His hand slaps over my mouth, cutting me off.

“I don’t need you to explain it. I need you to hold momentarily.”

He removes his hand from my ass, leaving the one on my mouth and digs around in his pants until he pulls something out of his pocket. I realize it’s a knife when he cuts my panties off, again. I wonder if it’s the same one he cut me up with.

I shiver from the cold and anticipation. Every time he has a knife near my skin, this aching dread quickly becomes directly wired to my sex drive.

“Why does it seem like you enjoy a knife in my hand, Snapdragon? You have to know how stupid that sentiment is.”

“I do,” I tell him because lying to him just seems so damn pointless.

“Sorry to disappoint, but it’s not for you this time. I’m making things fair before I take your ass. The last thing I want to hear you complain about is me not being a man of my word.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about until the distinct sound of a knife cutting into flesh interrupts the night air, then hot drips plunk against my skin and slide down. Is that his blood? And why am I panting in response? He grunts as he works, but it’s nothing compared to the way I shrieked as he did the same to me. I look over my shoulder the best I can, and while I can just make out the twist of his features by the starlight, I don’t have any hopes of seeing how he’s doing on his self-inflicted wound.

His hand grips my mouth tighter as he works, and I don't think he realizes he's gripping me against the pain, and the idea of Pax Bouchard bleeding, in pain, carving himself up for me is so intense I grind my body against his. He drops his hand from my mouth and wraps it around my neck.

"Needy Little Nun. I won't be fucking that pretty pussy tonight. You still need to be punished."

The knife drops to the ground, and his body is against mine—hot blood, shredded skin, cut muscle.

"You didn't even say you were sorry," I tell him stupidly.

"Sorry for what? Marking you?" He laughs as he adjusts his footing and undoes his pants. "It's because I'm not, and I'll never do you or your God the disservice of apologizing for something I truly do not regret."

His hand spreads my cheeks apart, finding that same ring of muscle, but he inserts his finger this time. It burns, and I wriggle against the intrusive sensation. I try to run, but there's nowhere for me to go, and I wonder if this is the most literal interpretation of being caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Shh, shh, Magda, behave." And for some sick reason, I relax into his voice as he gathers more of his blood and sinks his finger in deeper. Even before I decided to dedicate my life to God, I had no interest in anal sex, so I'm shocked by my arousal. Once I stop trying to push him out, there's an echo of the sensation deep inside me similar to how it felt when I came on his dick. This is different, much more uncomfortable and intrusive, but I can't say I hate it. I can't say I want him to stop.

He works his finger in and out of me, and I whimper softly, wanting to fight him off for the sake of my dignity, but not in case he wasn't lying, and another woman almost lost her life tonight. Did he really walk away because of me? The idea of having that much power over him is intoxicating, much better than the rush when I came back from being choked unconscious, and as his finger pumps in and out of me, the sensation only increases.

I'm thinking I can take this just fine when he pulls his finger out, spits on my ass, and starts working a second finger in.

"Oh my God," I grit through my teeth. This is a much more difficult stretch, but my eyes roll back in my head at the strange and absurdly pleasurable pressure.

"It's Pax, baby. We've had this problem before, and I know names can be confusing at a time like this, but it's only three letters and one syllable."

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“I’m the only one here right now, baby. When I’m inside you, no one else exists in this fucking universe, let alone someone for you to speak to.” His voice sounds more off kilter than normal, and suddenly, I regret pushing him.

“Better hold the wall,” he tells me just before he rips his fingers out, grabs each of my hips, and lifts my feet off the ground to position my hips the way he wants. My hands slam out just in time to catch my weight before I take it against my cheek. A wet hand wipes over my ass, more of his blood, and he lines up the head of his cock.

He’s slow but not nearly as careful now that I’ve pissed him off, and I realize how foolish I was to assume two of his fingers would have any comparison to his girth or length. He pushes in farther, and I scream in a mix of agony and pleasure.

“That’s barely an inch, baby. Better get used to it because it’s going to get a lot worse.”

He spits again and slips another inch deeper. I feel him so much more than I did when he was inside my pussy. This is completely different, but God, it’s so damn good. It hurts so damn good. One more inch and I’m moaning instead of screaming.

“You like this too? You make it hard to punish you, Magda.” He laughs as he really starts to move his hips. He slips deeper each time until his hips are flush against my ass cheeks. I’m sobbing, barely able to feel my fingers, and about to go off like dynamite. He reaches around and smacks my clit hard, but directly against the bundle, and my orgasm rips out of me like an endless tortured thing, wailing, shaking, pleasure, and torment all rolled into one.

Pax isn’t far behind me, and he bites into my shoulder once more as he spills.

“Your soul is mine, and your vows are mine. I’ll never let you go.” He pulls out, leaving me emptier than I’ve ever been.

He turns me around. He’s covered in blood, and in the light of the stars, the sight is muted and not nearly as frightening as it should be. He presses his lips to mine.

“Promise me right now.”

When I don’t answer right away, he bites my bottom lip, but not so roughly as I once did to him.

“I’m sorry, Pax. You’ve never lied to me, and I can’t bring myself to lie

to you. I meant what I promised, and I'm not going anywhere, but you'll never own my soul. It belongs to God."

He stares at me for a long time, saying nothing, and I wish there was enough light to discern every emotion, but there's not. If he meant it when he said he was going to kill another girl tonight, I'm afraid I'll push him back into that, but my complacency depends on his compliance, and I'm starting to think he likes me willing.

"That was a mistake, Magdalena. Now go inside and take a shower before those cuts get infected. I wouldn't want you to die and let God get his soul back too quickly."

His weight is gone, his touch is gone, and I've never felt so cold.

CHAPTER 25

NOT ANOTHER CRYPTIC WARNING

MAGDALENA

PAX WASN'T there when I came back from my shower, but I had that feeling I used to get back at the convent that his eyes were on me, and he wasn't far away. I dressed in some of the pajamas he had picked out for me. There were scandalous and embarrassing ones, but there were also serious ones that were warm enough for the cold spring and the eventual winter, which he must've seen as an actual potential future between us.

I climbed onto the bed that was much more comfortable than I expected on such short notice and very silky. What is it with Pax and silk sheets? How do you even have sex on them? Don't you slip instead of having leverage? And what has he done to me that I would even consider such a thing?

I fell asleep, quickly, exhausted to my bones, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually spent. I still haven't truly recovered from the emotional trauma of seeing my father's murderer shot through the head and rotting, to pushing the dead body of someone I knew and lived with off a cliff. From being betrayed by the only person I thought I could trust and being left behind and forgotten by everyone who was supposed to care about me but clearly did not.

When I wake in the morning, he's still not there. I don't know where he's gone, and a strange part of me really misses him. I want to see those nearly glowing green eyes, those black twisting curls, and the lips that are so sinfully soft when they kiss me, lips that cushion the intensity of his bite when it cuts my skin.

I look around the house briefly, avoiding most of the unclean areas, but the kitchen and bathroom have been scrubbed, and the small refrigerator they brought in has food. A note from the staff says not to use the water for any cooking as they're not sure if it's potable, but several things are prepared and ready to go.

I eat a few pieces of fruit and cheese because I am so incredibly hungry, but it's been a long time since I've had a proper meal. I've lost a lot of blood, and the idea of real heavy food sickens me. I'm fairly certain I'd throw it up because the few bites I eat now unsettle my stomach if I don't wait a minute between.

There's a knock on the door a little while later, and I assume it's Pax because who else would come here, but then again, why would he knock? I go to the door and peer through the clouded glass. The same crew from yesterday waits, presumably to start work on the rest of the house, and I can't help but notice Yelena stands among them. She stares at me with a small smile on her face like she knew Pax wouldn't be here, yet from the way he addressed her yesterday, maybe they're close. Why are they close?

“Hello, miss, I apologize for how strange this whole situation must be, but we ask you to please step outside so we can work on the house.” The man addressing me is in his late fifties or early sixties with pale skin, a bright white smile, and an extremely kind demeanor, but his request is incredibly odd, considering the entire central area is clean.

“You want me to go outside so you guys can clean?”

He smiles and his cheeks turn pink. “It's not actually me who wants you to go outside while we work. It's Master Bouchard. He was very clear that he would like you to sit outside in the sunshine, and for none of us to pay particular attention to you, miss.”

“Okay, I guess.”

I walk away from him, and he gives me a warm smile before turning his head and his attention to the room. He immediately starts pointing for people to move in various directions and complete different tasks. I go to the still open door out into the sunshine, and it really is a gorgeous spring day. I would consider arguing with the man about staying inside if I didn't know what arguing with Pax often resulted in, and I have no idea if he would claim that man was guilty of some minor infraction just to kill him.

It's not so unseasonably hot as it was the day we buried my father's killer, but still warmer than I expect in the sun. The day I saw the ring of bruises beneath Pax's collar. Those bruises have faded entirely now, yet I still haven't asked him where they came from. The part of me falling for him is desperate to know what made him kill his own father. I want to know everything about him, and I hate myself for that curiosity.

What happened to make him kill all those women, and why is he like

this? It doesn't make any sense because the Pax I know doesn't seem like a cold and heartless killer. A killer, sure, but certainly not a heartless one. I pace for a while, thinking about Pax, myself, my own feelings, and my relationship with God.

I've always been an introspective person, and I've never fit in well with people my age, preferring the quiet of a book or the silence of my own thoughts, but since Pax came into my life, my thoughts aren't a solace. I've never had a happy life. I've been mistreated and abandoned by everyone who should love me. My father's death was the result of him partaking in criminal activities that he did not have to do. I know addiction is a disease, but at the end of the day, my mother chose drugs over getting better and me.

But Pax Bouchard is what makes me uncomfortable in my own head. I walk around, running my fingers along trees and fronds. The new growth that comes with the springtime, trying to connect with God and commune with nature to find that place in myself that offers me peace and comfort that I've always been able to hide in during the worst times.

I'm preoccupied with trying to distract myself when someone says my name, and I jump halfway out of my skin. I turn to find Sister Yelena staring at me with narrowed eyes and pinched lips. She looks back and forth between me and the building to make sure that no one has noticed her absence or is currently watching us.

“What are you doing here?” I ask her admittedly, fairly loud.

“Be quiet, Magdalena. You don't want anyone to hear us talking.” Her darkly tanned cheeks pale, and she stares at the house, waiting for someone to find us talking. When no one does, she turns back to me and smacks my hand. I don't make a sound, but I rub it. What is with the older nuns and smacking?

“My safety is not a joke, and I'm not here for fun. I need to know what's happened to you since you've been here. Are you okay?” She's staring at me with a concern I've never seen on her face as long as I've known her. She's a quiet observer who pays attention to everything but never gets involved. I can tell how uncomfortable she is and how she hates putting herself out in the open. So why is she doing it, and why is she here?

“I, I can't tell you that. I'm okay enough. I can't leave. He'll keep killing if I leave. If whatever you're doing is putting you in danger, you shouldn't be doing it.” She's making me nervous, and I'm not sure I want anything to do with what's going on with her. I know I can't trust Father DiMarco, who

handed me over to Pax. Mother Superior isn't a friend of mine, and I'm sure if any of the nuns there cared for my safety at all, Father DiMarco wouldn't have handed me over to begin with.

“Stupid girl,” she mutters, shaking her head. “I told him this was a bad plan. I told him he should've turned you over to social services.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone told him taking me in was a bad idea. You're not special. What are you doing here? What are you doing away from the convent at all?”

She sighs, her lips bending in impatience.

“I don't have time to answer all your questions right now, but I need to warn you. You can't trust him. He'll come for you, and you can't trust him.” She speaks vaguely, a part of her personality I remember well now that she's standing here and I'm not so obsessed with Pax that I can't see in front of my face.

“I know I can't trust Pax, that's obvious.” It takes everything in me not to give her an attitude, walk away from her, and roll my eyes because right now, she's making me so nervous I could scream. My gut instinct is to lash out when vulnerable, and I'm much more than that.

“I'm not talking about Pax, Magdalena.” She grabs my hands, shaking them, trying to impress a message upon me while still making sure no one in the house notices her absence. “I need to get inside before someone sees us talking. One of them will come for you, and you cannot trust any of them. Please, Magdalena, whatever you do, do not tell them who I am.” She points at the crew in the house.

“I won't,” I agree, and I don't have a breath of air left in my entire body.

“Trust me when I say I know you're a better woman than any of them believe.” She drops my hands and bustles away with far more agility than she pretends to have at the convent. I am left stunned, wondering what the hell just happened.

CHAPTER 26

THE BEST LAID PLANS OF SOCIOPATHS AND MEN

PAX

SHANE'S pretty blonde lies on a lawn chair. She's stoned, giggling, and surrounded by slices of pizza. Yeah, she definitely got the soft psycho. I stand over top of her for a full five minutes before she even notices I'm here. In that time, I debate how easy it would be to kill her. God, how satisfying would it be to see the look on Shane's face when he saw her dead and crumpled beneath my hands? It was pretty satisfying after I killed Mattie, but somehow, I think this would be better.

The other thing I consider is how much or how little I would enjoy it now that Magda is in my life, and she seems to be the only thing I actually want to do. I am so mad at her for telling me I can never own her soul that I could scream, I could kill her, I could cut her into pieces, but that still wouldn't give me her fucking soul. She's the only one who can do that, the fucking bitch. She made me promise I wouldn't kill anyone innocent, and something tells me that if I start doing that now, I will never get what I want. I won't just let her get away with it. I'm punishing her for it tonight.

Seraphina, as I learned she's called, blinks her pretty yellow-green eyes at me. At first, she smiles. She likely thinks I'm Shane. The two of us are nearly identical in low lighting, though I am a bit larger. While she is still happy and love-drunk, I snap a few pictures of her on my phone. The flash constricts her pupils, which seems to snap her out of whatever trance she's under. With a confused expression, she realizes I'm not my cousin. I really wonder what's left of her brain after he's been playing around in it for weeks, if not months. At least this one looks happy.

“Pax!” She jumps, adorably startled.

“Shush, I'm only here to check he hasn't killed you yet.” I place a finger on her lips, telling her to stay quiet. She closes her mouth, and her eyes

soften. I'm satisfied she won't remember I was here long enough to mention it to my cousin. I slip into the night with everything I need to teach my little Snapdragon a lesson.

I jog through the woods all the way back to the house because part of me expects to run into Magda in the woods, running for her life. That's why I've left her alone all this time. She's been remarkably well-behaved, and if I give her enough rope, I hope she'll hang herself on it. If she's trying to escape, I'll tackle her and fuck her on the cold, hard ground.

The trees blur by me in the dark, and I keep an ear out for anyone else, but I don't encounter her anywhere on my run. When I return to the house, she's not waiting outside like she was the night before. Maybe she's already gone, and I'll have to look a little bit farther for her. The idea is titillating. I throw open the door, and much to my surprise, she's lying on the bed in the center of the living space.

"Pax, where have you been?"

She sits up, black hair falling around her face in waves, and she's staring at me with more concern than I've ever seen from her. Normally, she regards me with contempt or poorly concealed lust, but this is different. I've been trying to prove a point since last night, giving her the silent treatment, keeping my distance, and last these pictures. My stupid heart lets me think that maybe I've already done it. I don't need the last step. She's still here, and she's not telling me the thing I want most in the world can never be mine.

That man is a soft fool, and I need to stop listening to him. I walk to the bed's edge and sit with her.

"I've been very busy since you told me your soul will never be mine. Would you like to see?"

She doesn't answer, and I can practically smell the fear dripping off her. She thinks I've killed a girl. She thinks I'm going to show her the pieces I cut her into, and I kind of wish I had done that. It would've been a good message to send, but that's the one stipulation she set for not running from me, and she hasn't broken it yet. I'll keep up my side as long as she keeps hers.

I pull up my phone and flip through the photos of Seraphina lying on that lawn chair looking so blissed out I could be eating her pussy beneath the part showing on the screen. I could be dick deep inside her. It wasn't actually what I was planning when I took the pictures. I was simply wanting to show Magdalena how easily she's replaced, but it's only too perfect now that I'm seeing them out of context.

“Pax. What the fuck is this?” Her voice is deceptively soft and sweet.

“You said I could never have your soul, so I went and found someone who would give theirs to me. How do you like your replacement, Snappy? Pretty, huh?”

She opens her mouth and closes it. A part of me expects her to actually be relieved. For her to say thank God you'll stick your dick in someone other than me so I can be free of you. But she doesn't say anything, her tan cheeks growing pinker by the minute until they're so red they must be hot. Her fists shake, and I'm not sure what she's going to do, but I'm suddenly sure I'm going to love it.

“You said you wouldn't cheat on me.”

“I also told you to question my intentions.”

“You told me you're a man of your word.”

“Isn't that what a liar would say, baby?”

Her hands shake harder. Her teeth grind, and her lips press together into a thin line. “I told you you couldn't have my soul, so you went and fucked someone else? Did you kill her too, or did you just fuck her?”

“I just fucked her, Snappy. Don't worry, you kept your promise. You didn't run like a good little girl, so I kept mine. I didn't cut her throat open after I pummeled her cunt.”

Magda lets out a guttural scream as she launches herself at me and lands her fist in my eye socket. I'm so taken off guard I fall back, and she's on top of me, straddled over my hips, fists flying as she hits me over and over. Tears stream down her face. She's breathing so hard she's nearly hysterical.

“How fucking dare you? How fucking dare you?”

She keeps hitting me and keeps screaming. “You took everything from me, everything! You couldn't even keep your dick in your pants after fucking me in the ass last night? I hate you, Pax Bouchard! I hate you so much. If I could kill you, I would.”

I laugh beneath her, and not because it doesn't hurt. She really is kicking my ass.

“What's so funny, you piece of shit? Fuck me until I need you, and then you cheat on me? That's hilarious! Are you going to leave me too? You are nothing like I thought you were, Pax. Nothing like I thought you were.” She smacks me a few more times, but her tears pick up in volume, and her strength wanes.

What the hell does that mean? Did she actually think something good of

me? There's no way.

“I lied, okay? I'm sorry. I didn't fuck her, and I wasn't even planning on telling you I fucked her until you made the assumption, and it was too good to pass up.”

Her eyes widen in outrage, and she raises a fist to strike me again. I hold up my hands, preventing the blow.

“I could've killed her, and I wanted to. Not to break the promise I made to you, but because I hate my fucking cousin, and killing his girl would bother him. But I didn't fuck her, Magda. I just wanted to hurt you.”

She's quiet for a second, stunned, and I'm not sure why what I said was so wrong.

“You want to hurt me?” She sounds so small and sad. Her eyes are wide pools of black. I want to fall into them, but I don't know how to answer that question.

“Of course, I want to hurt you.” How could she not know I want to hurt her after everything I've done. I've loved every moment of hurting her.

“No, Pax. I don't mean cut my skin, or beat me with a whip, or choke me until I pass out and chain me up. I mean reach into my heart and hurt me because that's what you've done.”

“I, I...”

“Just answer the question Pax, do you really want to hurt me?” Her lip trembles, and I want to lie to her, but I know that more lies won't help now.

“Yeah, I did. That's why I took the pictures. You hurt me, and I wanted to hurt you back.” My honesty hangs in the air, and her soul slips further from my grasp.

“See, I was stupid enough to think you were starting to care for me. Despite everything you've done. I realize now I made a mistake.”

“What mistake, Magda? You're not leaving me. You can't leave me. I'll kill everyone in this fucking town.”

“You're right, Pax. I won't leave you. You're just not the man I hoped you were.”

A venomous rage rips through my system. I don't have words for this aching, shredding, tearing in my chest as her words sink in. What man did she hope I was? Was there a chance that she saw more of me than a monster? It can't be. There's not a chance. There never was a chance.

“Fine, Magda. That's how you want it? That's how it's going to be. Now shut the fuck up and let me come, or I'm going to go back up there, and I'm

going to cut her throat and carve *your* name into her body.”

“You're serious?” Her lip quivers, and her eyes widen. How could she even question it?

“Deadly.”

Tears stream down her cheeks, but I ignore them as I flip her over and pull my cock out of my pants. I'm already hard from her show of jealousy, and my dick hasn't gotten the memo from my aching chest and stomach. I push up her nightgown and enter her tight cunt without any foreplay. The dirty slut is fucking wet already, and that only makes me angrier, hornier.

I slam in and out of her, and she tries desperately to choke back her moans but fails. I thought we could be more too, but if I'm not worth it anymore, neither is she. It doesn't take long for my cum to pour into her, and I'm too angry to be patient, too enraged to care. The promise I made to her about never leaving her without an orgasm is the only thing that drags my fingers to her clit and has me rubbing until she flies over the edge on my semi-hard dick. Once I'm done, I slap her ass and leave her in the puddle of our cum.

“I didn't fuck her, Snapdragon. I'll never fuck anyone but you again.” And I slam the door shut between us.

CHAPTER 27

FORTNIGHT OF THE SOUL

MAGDALENA

I DON'T SEE Pax or what he did to his chest for two days. His words, actions, and absence all haunt me. The time I used to spend in quiet contemplation, praying, or doing chores is spent with idle hands and wondering about Pax. When did he go from being a mission to being my only thought? From something to fix to the only thing my mind can stumble over? I can't tell if he's done with me or doesn't know what to do with me.

During that time, the crew comes once more, and when I hear people outside the door, I'm so excited I'm shaking, hoping it's him. My heart falls when I discover it's not, and I realize how stupid I am to want Pax Bouchard to show up so badly. They're only here to finish their task and restock the kitchen, but my last hope for more information, Yelena, isn't among them.

I float around them, hoping someone will speak to me, look my direction, but they don't. Eventually, I give up, because I'm only making them nervous and coming nowhere near my goals. I sit on a boulder outside, just a little bit too cold, wondering if the rest of my life will be this painfully lonely. How long does Pax plan that life to be after our disagreement?

I count the sun inching across the sky to mark the time, and they leave hours later. I would have been less lonely had they never come. I make my way back inside, dragging my feet in the hopes of inspiring another ridiculous reaction out of Pax, but he's nowhere to be found. I finally consider exploring the upper floors but find the door is locked anyway. How limited will my existence become now? How limited has it always been? My mind chases itself in circles without answers.

Dusk sweeps the sun out of the sky, and I'm staring out the discolored window when the door bangs open. Pax's frame occupies the doorway, and his presence shoots adrenaline through my system. I'm more than excited to

see him, I'm relieved and laid bare by how keenly our separation affected me. I need his soft touches, those pillow-soft kisses I've come to live for. Then he walks into the house, and the light reveals his missing shirt, the mud and blood covering his torso and splattered on his jeans, whose I don't know.

The jagged wounds he cut into his chest as he took my ass are on proud display, and I gasp out loud, almost having forgotten that was even real. That he shed his blood for once and not mine. It's a horrible juxtaposition of cuts, barely forming words. It's much closer to Fox plus Noyda than our actual names. My cheeks pale, and he gives me a disgusted glare.

"They weren't innocent," he tells me, misreading my thoughts. I'm concerned about the blood that doesn't belong to him, but his wounds really worried me.

"That's not what I was thinking."

He regards me with open distrust and doesn't bother speaking again before grabbing my hair and bending me over the table. My leggings slide down my thighs, his zipper tears, and he's inside me without warning. His fingers dig into my hips as he has his way with me while covered in someone else's blood. My face smacks rhythmically against the table. I should be horrified by him forcing his way inside me or disgusted by all that blood. Maybe him killing someone should turn me off, but it's the image of his ruined chest that sticks, that makes it so hard to come.

The wounds are jagged and awful, barely reminiscent of what he did to my back, which I've come to appreciate as thoughtful and artistic compared to what he's capable of. My wounds are healing just fine, with no sign of infection, but I know he hasn't given his the same care. I want to beg him to stop because the need to help him is overpowering. He can use me after I fix this.

He doesn't give me that chance. He fucks me hard, saying nothing. The distance he's trying and failing to force between us cuts at me. Pax wants to convince me that I'm nothing and this is all about him, but just like always, he reaches around to make sure I come. Is he trying to demean me, or does he really think it makes this better? Why does my love-starved brain interpret it as a cousin of the affection I need so badly.

He tries to remain silent as he comes, but I savor the broken gasp as he releases inside me. When he's finished, he slaps me on the ass and heads up the stairs, pulling out a key to one of the bedrooms on the upper floor. I think my feigned disinterest bothers him more than anything else, but once he's

gone, I stay bent over the table, and I cry as his cum drips out of me.

My suspicion that my lack of attention bothers him most is proven correct the next day when he brings me the diamond-and-ruby-encrusted collar he promised. I'm sitting on the couch, having just finished eating my lunch, when he strolls inside. I'm hoping to see the Pax I used to know, the one who didn't take a picture of his cousin's whatever she is and tell me he fucked her just to hurt me. Just because he can't be more to me than God. But that's not who I get.

His face is emotionless as he walks over to where I'm seated. The casual clothes are becoming more comfortable for me, and he stares at the spot where my sweater hangs over my leggings for a minute too long. I think he's checking on me, using this brooding silence to be near me while still maintaining the distance he clearly needs so badly. That's what I'm desperately hoping is true as my body aches to reach out to him and my soul cries along with it.

He tosses the collar at me. No evil smile, no mischievous light in his gaze.

"Put it on." His voice is low, but it runs under my skin.

"Pax, come on," I plead with him. This is ridiculous.

"Put it the fuck on, Magdalena." His cheeks grow red and his jaw grinds. I'm making him angry, and I don't actually want to die.

There is no hint of giving or caring. I'm his pet, his possession. He owns me, and he's made that clear. How was I ever stupid enough to think this was more? Why did I need to believe those touches meant he cared? How could I be so desperate? That spot in my chest that overflows with the Holy Spirit gapes in its emptiness as I pick up the leather strap. It's beautiful, actually. Thick and black, smooth and supple in the spots without the stones. The gems are unlike anything I've ever seen. This must have cost a fortune.

He watches as I obey, tightening the leather around my throat and losing another piece of my soul. He wanted it so badly, didn't he? How could I have guessed the way for him to get it was to slowly pry it out of me, piece by piece? That he would win. I meet his gaze once before lying on the couch in surrender.

"Don't you dare beat yourself with it." Those are his parting words, and he doesn't even bother to fuck me this time. I'm nothing to him. I couldn't muster the energy for a self-flagellation even if I wanted to.

Pax leaves me alone most of the time. Occasionally, he comes back to

fuck me. He always makes me come yet leaves before I get the misguided notion he cares. I wear the collar even when he's gone, and I'm not sure why. Is it because I secretly like how the bright red stones and black leather play with the color of my eyes and the highlights in my hair? Words like pretty, beautiful, and sexy suddenly apply for the first time in my life. Or is it because I miss him?

I tighten the leather around my neck until I can barely breathe, and I touch my clit to the thought of him. I haven't mastered the art of the self-induced orgasm, but I think I'm getting close. I do it in the open, hoping he'll catch me, punish me, react in some fucking way so I don't have to go insane in this place, but I fall asleep slick with my own juices, dissatisfied and a step closer to the insanity I hoped to avoid. What does God think of me now?

Days pass, and I make little marks in a notebook I beg the staff to leave for me. They wouldn't tell me the date when I asked, and only one would even address me directly, the man who asked me to go outside that first day I was alone. But he simply tells me, "I'm sorry, miss, Master Bouchard says we're only to talk to you as necessity demands, and"—he clears his throat and makes air quotes—"your obnoxious questioning does not qualify as necessity."

I nearly lash out at the man before I remember he doesn't deserve it. He just doesn't want to die. I stomp off to see if there's anything of interest in the forest surrounding his home. I find some comfort in this activity and start pretending I know how to forage. I'm looking for berries, mushrooms, anything really, while not actually collecting them because it's just a game to keep my bored and confused mind from spiraling into oblivion.

Two marks in the notebook later, I'm in the woods, looking at an extremely ugly collection of possible mushrooms, when I hear a woman screaming.

"What the hell?"

CHAPTER 28

THIS PLAN HAS TO WORK OUT

PAX

EARLIER THAT DAY

I'M WATCHING Magdalena on the cameras I made the staff install while they were cleaning, and she's still wearing her collar. It's been days, and she hasn't taken it off. I almost want to reward her for it, but that exact weakness got me into this problem in the first place. I've watched her fuck herself to no avail three times now, and I'm desperate to punish her for her behavior, but I'm almost certain that's what she wants. She's spoiled, desperate for a reaction. I jerk my dick alongside her each time she touches herself, but I won't give her what she wants.

She's been in that shitty fucking carriage house for two weeks now while my asshole cousin has been up here fucking and manipulating in the height of luxury. I've been moving around as much as possible, doing work for Nikolai and anything I can to keep myself from curling up beside her. Avoiding my senseless affection would be so much easier if we had more space. Shane needs to go. It's time for him to get the fuck out, and I'll do whatever I can to make that happen.

I don't spend much time paying attention to politics and current affairs, but Lenny, who's worked for my family for years, called this morning and told me to turn on the local station. Imagine my surprise to find pictures of Seraphina and her *husband* plastered all over the news: young married couple missing, no immediate suspects.

This is my chance to get this motherfucker out of my house once and for all. I could have just turned him in, of course, but that would lead to a lot of mutually assured destruction, and I'd rather be alive and free to enjoy Magda's pussy.

I walk into the house unannounced. I don't care what the papers say. I'm the one who actually fucking lives here.

"Hello? Anyone home?" No one answers.

"Seraphina, have you wondered why your husband isn't looking for you?" I call, making sure my presence will be known. That's what I want most. Again, no answer.

"Come on out, pretty girl," I croon.

"How did you do it, Cousin? Did you enjoy it? You're always looking

down on me and—”

I round a corner, and Shane steps out of his study.

“Cousin!” I call cheerily, and his gaze runs distrustfully over me.

“How long have you been in the house, Pax?” He goes to close the door, but I put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Barely a minute. Come on, let’s catch up.” I pat him on the shoulder and gesture for him to go back inside. Having twin mothers means much of the house is duplicated. His wing is like mine, but he doesn’t actually want it, making it especially frustrating to have him here.

I prop the door nearly shut before dropping into the chair on the opposite side of the desk and watching with a smile as he sits down. It’s nice to be unpredictable.

My cousin is a handsome guy, given that he looks like me, but he wears cheap clothes beneath his station, and he thinks “working hard” makes him better than me. Well, digging around in people’s heads for fun isn’t hard work when you get a sadistic thrill out of it. I look him up and down, weighing how effective I believe my plan will be.

“You look delighted, Shane. I can’t say I’ve ever seen you in such high spirits.” That’s true. He doesn’t look so stressed and dour. There’s a softness near his eyes, and he looks as if he’s been smiling. This girl seems to be much more meaningful to him than I imagined. How convenient for me.

“I’m alarmed to admit you look happy too, Cousin.” That’s a relief, as I’m completely faking it. The oddest sense of misery has set in since the standoff with my Snapdragon began. I still don’t understand why she’s so scandalized by my desire to hurt her. I want to punish her, but she’s been so submissive she hasn’t given me cause to. Did I really think breaking her was what I wanted?

“I’ve found a pretty little thing to keep my interest, just like my big cousin. A nun. And God, is she sweet.” It’s part truth, part lie, just like every interaction. There are so many things I’ll never thank my father for, but I’ll forever appreciate that one lesson.

Shane runs his finger along his bottom lip the way he does when he thinks hard. I’d really love to see this fucker knocked off his game. My palms tingle with an anticipation I haven’t felt in a long time. You know that sensation when someone watches you? It’s an instinctual thing, and I feel it now. She may not have heard my words, but I think Seraphina heard me.

“An actual fucking nun, Pax, or are you speaking metaphorically?” The

judgment in his tone is tiring, and given what I've learned about his recent crimes and the source of his toy, he doesn't have much room to talk.

"Wouldn't you like to know, Cousin?" She was a nun, but I don't know what she is now. The priest who gave her to me is as corrupt as they come, and now that I think about it, he's been painfully silent. I should probably check in with him before Nikolai pays us all a visit.

"You're not planning on killing her, are you?" He sounds genuinely concerned, which tickles me. I do kill a lot of people, but he's now a member of my club. I roll my eyes because it's typical of him to bring up Mattie. He does every time I see him.

"*Cousin*, it's not very forgiving of you to keep bringing up the one time that I *accidentally*—"

"Murdered your nanny?" He finishes my sentence, and I grit my teeth to keep from attacking him. I'm not usually such a planner, but this one time I believe my patience is worth it.

The dismissive noise in the back of my throat covers the tremble of rage. "You know Matilda had it coming. Are *you* planning to kill Seraphina?"

His deep blue eyes narrow to slits, and his brow tenses. He's entirely red, and I crack a smile. God, this will be easy.

"I'll take that as a *no*." I laugh. "Don't say stupid shit, Shane. I could never hurt my Snapdragon." I don't know why I say it. Does a part of me want it to be true? Am I trying to mock my own suffering or hers?

He seems to take it as the latter as he drops his head into his hands.

"Fucking Christ, Pax. Please don't do anything so extreme you can't dig yourself out."

My hands shake as I work not to choke him and scream *get the fuck out of my house, you judgmental asshole*.

Instead, I say, "You're one to talk. You know Seraphina and her dead husband are all over the news, right? How long do you think it will take for her to notice?"

He lifts his head, his eyes shifting to something behind us I've been aware of for a while now, a weakness I've been trying to decide how to take advantage of. He gets up and shuts the door before sitting back down.

"I know it's going to happen sooner or later, but I was hoping for later. I underestimated her loyalty to that piece of shit. She won't forgive me if she finds out too soon." I wonder why he was a piece of shit, and if he was so awful, why won't she forgive him? It's just one murder.

“What will you do if she doesn’t forgive you? Will you let her go?” If I’ve learned one thing from Magda, it’s that the expert lying I learned from my father really doesn’t count for shit.

“No, I’ll toss your shit in the yard and take this house for us. You know it’s mine anyway, don’t you, Pax?” If this fucking bastard continues to bait me, he’ll get what he wants.

“Of course, I remember, *Cousin*. No need to be a dick about it. I would never keep you from any of my *properties*, and some of them may interest you with your newfound proclivities. Don't think I missed the rope.”

It occurs to me then that I do own several properties from my mother, vacation homes and villas the world over. I’ve never even considered visiting them since my mother was sent away, and I wonder what's happened to them. I should call the man who attends to my money. My wealth manager. If this doesn’t work, I’ll take Magda to one of them. It's been a long time since I’ve been to France.

“Of course, you wouldn't.” He doesn’t believe me, but it’s true. This is the only property I wish he would stay the fuck away from.

“Well, I ought to be going.” I slap my knees as I stand. My job is done, and I’d rather not be here for the fallout.

“You never even got to the point of this little visit.” He stares at me like he suspects I’m up to something, but the damage has long been done.

“Sure I did.” I wink. “Until next time.”

I walk out of the office whistling, ensuring my presence is well known to the skittish little blonde scampering around. He doesn’t follow me, which doesn’t really matter. I head down the hall to the front door, desperate to get back to Magda. I hate being away from her even when it’s necessary, and I’ve been so out of control these past weeks it’s been necessary a lot. Thankfully, Nikolai has needed a lot of people dead.

Seraphina hides behind an awful marble statue my great-grandfather was proud of. She’s shaking, practically screaming as she pants in terror. I continue past her, allowing her to think she’s succeeded, and head to the door. I turn back to her and wink before leaving it wide open and heading outside to wait.

It doesn’t take more than a minute before she’s running as fast as she can, hopefully away from my cousin, forcing him out of my house. Since I already stirred the pot, I’m off to provide another lesson to my Snapdragon.

CHAPTER 29

CRISIS OF FAITH

MAGDALENA

NOW

THE SHOUT COMES AGAIN, and a pained whimper follows this time. I don't know where it's coming from, but I'm desperate to help whoever it is. Stepping on the mushroom I was observing, I head off in a direction I've never gone. I can only pray that Pax isn't responsible for her cries. He promised me he wouldn't kill the innocent, but I've seen him covered in blood too many times now to believe him without some reassurance.

I take off running in the direction of the noise. My plans are fluid, meaning I have nothing to do other than find and help this girl. Something is desperately wrong. It twinges in my gut and forces my heart into double time. The misty air chills my skin as I run. The sounds grow louder, but not loud enough that I'm heading in the right direction. The mountain echoes like crazy, so it's hard to get your bearings.

Panic claws at my chest. I don't think I'll get to her in time. Whatever is happening is out of my control. I'm not paying enough attention to my surroundings as I spiral, and suddenly, a hand clamps tight over my mouth, and a broad chest is flush against my back. I try to scream, but Pax covers the sound.

"Stop screaming, Snapdragon. You'll only make things worse for her." There's an evil hint to his tone I haven't heard in weeks. Not like the man who seemed to be falling for me, but the evil man who enjoyed toying with me for sport. I guess it's better than the silent man who kills and fucks me each night. Or is it?

The other hand slides provocatively up my body, over my stomach, and up to my breast, where he hangs on. I've grown accustomed to him taking me without any more stimulation, so this is fairly generous. Despite our surroundings, I'm hot and responding to him. He's fucking evil.

I stop screaming, and he moves his hand, cuffing it tight around my neck so that I can barely speak. I'll never get the chance to scream for help or let that girl know she's not alone out here.

"Stop it, Pax. We need to help her." My body writhes against his as I struggle, but he doesn't let up. His fingers find my nipple, pinching hard.

"No, we don't. She's getting exactly what she deserves for running, and

I'm giving you what you deserve for being so fucking difficult. For not giving me what I want."

"Difficult?" I choke, and he laughs as he tugs my nipple until I'm whining in earnest, and his hand around my throat hurts because I need to voice the stimulation.

"You're so responsive, Snapdragon. I hope you know you're special." He lets the words sink in. It's exactly what I need to hear after being ignored and used by him interchangeably for two weeks. "Your body was made to take pain and come, and I plan to use you exactly as your *God* intended. He's the one who owns your soul, right? Why isn't he stopping me?"

I can't answer him as I moan and writhe. He's paid so little attention to me, and I'm so desperate that the points of contact at my neck and nipple are every bit as powerful as his mouth around my clit.

The girl in the background keeps crying and screaming, and I hate myself so much I honestly wish God would take me now rather than allow me to suffer through this indignity. What's happening to her? I start to wonder if Pax is right. I've been faithful as much as I could. Except for the one instance with Constance, I have always done what was right to the best of my ability. So why do the blows not let up?

"Why are your nipples so fucking hard, Magda?"

"You own my body, Pax. Not my soul." That poisonous honesty once more slips free.

"Little fucking bitch, I swear to God." I smile because I've been aching for a way to affect him every time he's come to me, and I've failed, losing bits of myself with him as he goes. "Come on, keep quiet."

He pushes me forward about twenty feet. We're higher up on the mountain, so the view below us is clear, but even if they weren't fully occupied, we wouldn't be seen. There's masculine grunting and a nervous squeak rips up my throat, but it's caught in Pax's grip.

"Is she the girl from the pictures?" My heart is ice cold in my chest as I take in what's happening. She's wearing light clothes that are already all wrong, but her bottom half is exposed, and a man who looks a little too much like Pax is deep inside her ass as she cries and begs him to stop. She moans between her cries, and I'm so torn on my emotions that I could vomit.

"She's what you get for trying to defy me. I set this up all for you, so you could see how badly others suffer because you're so selfish you won't give me the one thing I really want."

“You’re making me listen to this because I wouldn’t say my soul is yours? Are you insane, Pax? You can’t own a soul.” He squeezes even harder until I have no choice but to be silent. I’m sick at the sound of her sobs, close to losing my mind, but there’s nothing I can do. Even if I could shout to her, what would I say?

“Yes, the fuck I can.” He’s in my ear whispering. “I can have whatever the fuck I want.” His fingers are back to teasing my nipple, and the sensation ripples through me. The guilt and disgust alongside it intensify the feeling.

“Please, stop!” she shouts, and her cry cuts me to ribbons, but I orgasm beneath his fingers without him even being inside me because I’m oversensitive and pathetic, and he’s shown me a little bit of affection for the first time in weeks. I hate him. I hate him more than I hated his father.

“You can have anything you want?” I ask as the last wave of my orgasm subsides.

“Stop!” he rips through the air.

“Then why the fuck aren’t we inside that mansion right now? Why isn’t my collar hooked up to your custom leash?” He tightens both his fingers, and I whimper in silent agony.

“On your knees, Magdalena,” he grits, and when I don’t obey him, he literally sweeps my knees out from under me, knocking me to the ground with only his hand around my throat to slow my fall. My knees hit the stony mountain earth with a painful crack, and I cry out in time with the girl not so far away.

“It hurts!” she shouts.

Pax already has his dick out, and it’s so hard it looks dangerous.

“Open your mouth.”

“I’ve never—”

He shoves his cock across my tongue as I part my lips to argue.

“Do *I* look like I give a fuck?”

He certainly does not, but he’s salty, clean, and masculine as he runs over my tongue and moves to the back of my throat without pause. I gag around him, and he uses the movement to sink deeper. There’s no hint of me on him, and I almost resent it until I remember the crude *Magda* carved into his flesh. He’s right about my jealousy. I didn’t want to be the only one to bear a carving, but it was still an afterthought to my deep resentment.

I can’t breathe as his thick cock batters my throat. It hurts so bad tears spill, and my throat flexes to work him out. His hips move back and forth, my

spit drawing down my chin, and over his balls that repeatedly rest there.

“Where the fuck is your gag reflex?” he asks as he sinks deeper.

I want to say *Right here, I’m going to puke the second you move this thing.*

He grabs me by both sides of my face, working his thick length in and out of my throat. I gag repeatedly as tears stream down my cheeks and my spit flows freely.

“I wish you didn’t look so pretty right now,” he tells me, and it’s the first thing he’s said in weeks that feels unguarded.

I wish I had some hope of surviving this. I stare deep into green eyes as he comes down my throat, and we listen to his cousin and his kidnap victim. From what I can tell, she’s the only one who comes. Did someone teach them this shit?

He pulls himself out of me, and it feels like he takes my soul with him, but I manage not to throw up.

“If I wasn’t already sure that was God-given talent, you’d be in trouble, Snappy.”

The man beneath us throws the girl over his shoulder and carries her back up to the main house. Pax looks at me with a smile, shrugs, and does the same. He whistles as he carries me back to the carriage house, and I wonder what the hell was I thinking? Was it ever God sending me that feeling of love and acceptance or was it my own delusion? Because there is no way I can fix this man.

“It feels good to finally have you where you should have been all along, Magdalena. I hope you feel the same. Things will be so much easier now, and soon enough, those two will be gone. I didn’t actually set up this little demonstration just for you. I want them the fuck out of my house, but I wasn’t about to waste an opportunity.”

He babbles all the way back, but I tune him out, thinking about my life and if there has been a genuine moment among the bullshit or if everything I’ve ever known and loved is a lie.

CHAPTER 30

SALVATION

MAGDALENA

THAT NIGHT, Pax sleeps beside me, and I'm not sure why he does it other than perhaps to prove another point or assert dominance. I can't possibly let myself believe there's a softer reason after everything he's done. That would make me stupid, but in my sleep, I sidle up to him, and I wake warm and pressed deliciously against his body. Why is he so sexy? And how has he made it so I'm obsessed with every inch of him despite hating him? Why do I hate and need him? Why can't I tell which is more pressing?

He doesn't offer me any of those tender kisses I'm desperate for, and I'm sad and relieved equally. They were one of the absolute high points of my life, but they were a point of serious weakness I can't accept. I no longer know if God wanted me here or if the Devil was simply leading me astray. It's so easy to blame myself, but I have to remember Father DiMarco was the one to hand me over. While I was tempted by Pax and swayed into wickedness, I had no intentions of leaving the convent. I've repeatedly been the victim of wicked men.

Pax gets up and leaves early the next morning. He looks at me briefly, noticing the collar is gone. It has been since he fell asleep.

"Put it back on, Pet. And don't tempt fate." His voice sounds like he's enjoying himself, but his eyes are flat, hollow, and despite his crazy bullshit, that's not how Pax is supposed to look at me.

I do as he says because my intuition tells me to obey, and when I do, he leaves, finally giving me some much-needed space and peace. I take a shower, eat breakfast, and put on street clothes. I'm ashamed to admit I'm growing much fonder of them than my ceremonial vestiges. I've dressed in some manner of habit since I was fourteen, and I certainly never tried these riskier styles. It's an odd balance, going from being entirely unsheltered for

my first fourteen years to knowing nothing of the world now.

I'm outside the next morning, and the spring sunshine is so bright. It may be another one of those unseasonably hot days like Alexandre's funeral, but I don't mind it so much now that I'm not beneath six different layers. A light layer of sweat coats my skin as I hike, pretending I'm an expert forager. In all honesty, I'm looking for Pax too. I don't feel him watching me, but I guess you could say I hope. Last night was so strange, so intimate after such a gruesome day.

Judging from the position of the sun in the sky, I've been walking for a few hours when feet crunch through the bits of leaves and pine needles that never fully leave the forest floor. I stop in my tracks, listening for a moment before tucking myself quickly behind a tree, trying to keep my breathing silent. I wait as they come closer. I'm wondering if I should attack, run, or what. I know for sure it's not Pax. I can't explain why maybe they sound too small or the clumsy cadence of the footsteps. Either way, it's not him.

Utter shock and confusion punch through my system when I see Father DiMarco walking through the trees. He's clearly looking for something or someone, and I don't know what. Occasionally, he puts his hands over his eyes, trying to guard from the bright sun overhead. He's alone, and I can't imagine what he's doing.

I watch him for a little while as he ambles seemingly aimlessly through the forest. I leave my spot behind the tree to keep an eye on him and make the mistake of stepping on a branch. The loud crunch echoes, and his head snaps to me.

"Magdalena," he gasps. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I don't say anything in my shock. It's a habit I've picked up from dealing with Pax who is so explosively unpredictable that being quiet is the safest way to handle any situation.

"Maggie, are you okay, child? Say something." He takes a few rapid steps toward me, and I hold up my hands to halt his progress. His expression buckles with regret, maybe pain, like my aversion to him truly wounds him, and despite myself, I thaw.

"What are you doing here? You gave me away." There's bitter resentment in my voice instead of the indignation I'm entitled to. My gaze darts back and forth, waiting for someone to pop out.

His face falls. "You should know I didn't have a choice, Maggie."

He takes another step forward, his expression patient and kind. He's the

man I remember when I was fourteen and scared, crying when my mother left me. When Mother Superior didn't want me there, and everyone pushed him to send me away, he would take me aside and make me feel like I belonged, like God loved me. It's hard not to fall back on that as he stares at me with his small brown eyes.

“Please let me help you. Pax is a monster. He would have killed me if I didn't hand you over, but I didn't stop planning or looking for you. I came back for you.”

My indignation falters, and my stupid, abandoned, orphan heart hopes beyond hope that he's telling the truth. It does make sense. Pax is the most dangerous person I could imagine, and everyone knows what he's capable of. How could my elderly priest fight him off on the best of days? The betrayal still hurts, but I can see where he's coming from.

“I can understand why you doubt me, Maggie. But please, you have to come quick. I have a car waiting to take you to safety. I can't bring you back to the convent. He would know. He would find you, and then kill us all. But I have a plan, somewhere safe you can go. You just have to trust me.” Everything he's saying sounds right, and I'm tempted to run, but there's a very good reason I can't.

“I, I can't leave,” I tell him. “I promised Pax that I wouldn't leave him as long as he didn't kill any innocent women, and he hasn't. I can't break that promise. If I leave, innocent people will die.”

“You're an innocent person. You're going to die,” he argues.

His concern nearly makes me falter, but then I shake my head. “I can't go.”

“I didn't want to tell you this, Magdalena, because I didn't want your sacrifice to be in vain, but he never stopped killing. Now you need to come with me.” His words hit me like a wrecking ball, and the fact I remain standing is no minor miracle. The blood covering his body when he fucked me over the table.

“Who?” I ask him, not wanting to believe his words, falling apart as I think about everything I've taken for the sake of keeping other women safe.

“Mary Katherine.”

I fall to my knees as his words hit home. I let Pax screw me every single night in all kinds of vile ways, and he left me to murder Mary Katherine, another innocent girl I lived with. Bitchy, sure, but deserving of death? Absolutely not. And he admitted himself that the things those dead girls gave

him certainly counted as cheating.

“Dear God.” I'm pretty sure I'm going to be sick. My hands press against the ground, and I heave, wishing I hadn't already swallowed Pax's cum the night before, that I hadn't taken it so many times. He's already a part of me. It suddenly occurs to me that I could be pregnant, and I realize I am so much more than naive. I'm stupid.

“You don't have any time to fall apart, Magdalena. We need to go now.”

Father DiMarco yanks me by my arm, forcing me off the ground with more strength than I would imagine him capable of. That spot in my chest that overflows with the Holy Spirit wakes up for the first time in weeks, rebelling against the touch of my priest like a warning. I ignore it, realizing that it's only ever led me astray, led me in deeper with Pax. Maybe the Devil is in my heart rather than God. Against my instincts, I allow my priest to drag me away. The sinking in my chest gets worse as I follow him.

It takes an hour, but eventually, we reach a narrow, poorly maintained road that winds along the property. A car rumbles on the shoulder, and three men sit inside. I don't recognize them from this distance, but they all appear to be men of the cloth.

“Good, they're already back,” Father DiMarco says as he grabs my arm for the first time in a mile or so and leads me forward.

“Who are they?” He doesn't answer, his hand tightening. “Is that Father O'Rourke?”

“You didn't think I could search the whole forest for you by myself, did you?”

I don't say anything because that is exactly what I naively expected. I didn't think that inferiority could get me into any more trouble, seeing as I was already abducted by Pax, but I grow nervous as Father DiMarco's demeanor changes.

“Get in the car, Magda.” He's cold as ice, the caring father figure put away like he never existed at all.

“I'm not sure I want to,” I whisper, just loud enough for him to hear me.

Sister Yelena's warning about not trusting them suddenly pops into my head. She didn't warn me against the murderer, who already had me in his grasp, but the only other people we had in common. I still don't know why we have anyone in common outside of the convent, but I'm suddenly sure this is exactly what she meant. She knew they were already in the woods searching for me.

Father DiMarco stares me directly in my eyes, and all pretenses of feeling bad or caring for me slip away so easily my chest aches. Every ounce of affection I've ever known is wiped clean. His smile is grim, cruel.

“Taking care of you has been nothing but a struggle and a burden. Now get in that damn car before I have to hurt you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demand.

“Yes, DiMarco, what are you talking about?” a deep and sinister voice asks behind us. It terrifies me and fills me with comfort all at the same time.

CHAPTER 31

**WHAT'S BLACK AND WHITE AND RED
ALL OVER?**

PAX

EARLIER

I WAS FINISHING up a rather interesting job for Nikolai when I received a text message.

Get back to the cottage now. Go in the back way and stick to the service road. Don't waste any time, Pax.

Lenny is one of the odder members of my staff. She comes and goes as she pleases, and I've never fully understood the deal she worked out with my mother, but I've also accepted it's not my business. The woman is old as dirt and has proven trustworthy, so why bother her about her secrets now? I suppose my mother taught me respect for the elderly, and despite it not applying to the old creepy priest, I haven't fully broken the habit.

Though Lenny does have a tendency to know things that she shouldn't, which as someone who has a tendency to do things I shouldn't, I don't question too deeply. The part that really has me concerned today is that the back service roads are exactly how the cleaning crew has been coming and going.

I text her back, still covered in blood. I'm going to need a new phone. This is disgusting.

Why?

She doesn't answer, and my nerves ratchet up in intensity as the moments pass. The man whimpering in front of me has not given me the information that Nikolai asked for nor will he. Nikolai and I both know that tortured men are unreliable with their secrets, and the ones they give are often untrue. No, he has me torturing him to prove a point. To ensure honesty before enforcement becomes necessary. I turn around and knock on the door until one of Nikolai's goons opens it.

"There's been an emergency. Tell Nikolai I'll be back for him later." I gesture over my shoulder to the broken, bleeding lump of a man.

"When's later?" The man is almost as large as me, a fact that I don't miss, and I smile. I still make my brother nervous. The man doesn't step aside, clearly not understanding what he's dealing with.

“Don’t know.” I shrug. “If he dies, call me.” I punch him in the gut, and he doubles over but doesn’t actually fall. I push him once more and run past him out of the warehouse and to my car. I’m shaking and nervous as I press the push start. Lenny doesn’t give me bad information or false warnings, and I care about only one thing out in those woods: my Snapdragon.

A part of the reason staying here has worked so well for us is that when the property was modernized, the security was focused toward the front where the main house sits. The back side of the mountain is all but unaccounted for. I’ve always followed Lenny’s advice, and she’s never led me astray. The sick feeling of dread in my gut isn’t doubt in her but fear of what she’s warning me about.

I pull out my phone, check the cameras, and find Magda gone. I wired up the house but haven’t had time to wire the entire six-hundred-acre property. Plus, part of the fun of leaving her alone was the hope of catching Magdalena in the act of escaping and enjoying her guilt in person. There are too many places for her to run to catch them all on camera. God, please let her be okay.

It takes longer to get home than I hope, and every moment I’m away from Magda cuts into me. What are the chances I’ll be able to find her in all that woods? I’ve been working so hard to stay away from her and avoid my emotions, but sleeping next to her last night broke loose big chunks of what I’ve been hiding from myself: how much I really need her.

I drive along the road, eyes peeled for any signs of my girl, when I see the old sedan parked on the shoulder. I know for a fact DiMarco is looking for her. It’s the same car he put her in when he handed her over to me. But why the hell would he be stupid enough to come back?

I pull into the wood line and park beneath a low-hanging branch. Once I get out of the car, I jump, grabbing onto it until it snaps over the hood. It will most likely damage the paint job, but I could not give a fuck less. I step back to check my handiwork. The car is still visible, but it wouldn’t be obvious if you weren’t looking for it. The black mostly blends in with the dark green pine needles, and it will have to work for now.

I run to where the sedan is parked and head into the forest, ready to search, when the approaching rustle of feet makes my job incredibly easy. Pausing, I have a few different options, but the easiest seems to be climbing the tree next to me, which I’m quite adept at after years of playing in these forests.

Hand over hand, I quickly make it up about twelve feet and perch waiting

to see who it is. When the God squad steps into my line of sight, missing their leader, I must say I'm surprised. DiMarco alone having the balls to come and do this is really astounding, but all of them? *Why the fuck do you want my Snapdragon so bad?*

"How long did DiMarco say they would be?" a round priest whose name I don't remember asks.

"He didn't, just that he has the girl, and for now, she's coming willingly. He'll meet us here as soon as he can," O'Rourke, the ass-kisser, answers.

He has her, and she's coming willingly? Why?

"You don't think she knows what he's planning?" the third asks. I don't know his name either.

"Of course not. That delusional girl thought he might let her take final vows." The round one laughs.

"Yeah, more like vowing her pussy to whoever wants to pay," the priest formerly named O'Rourke agrees with a snort. I hope he enjoys his joke. It will be the last time he makes one.

It takes every ounce of my newfound self-control I've practiced these past few weeks not to descend on them and tear them limb from limb like an animal. I use all of it to hang on, seething through the rage. The fear for Magda's safety is much more compelling than I imagined, and it suddenly makes sense why people do reckless shit for those they love. I don't drop out of that tree. I wait because they said he's bringing her this way, and I don't want to risk giving them a chance to warn him off. He could hurt her.

I'm going to find out why they came for her, and they are all going to pay for it.

"I hope that freak didn't fuck her yet. I want first dibs," the youngest of the three says.

"You know, DiMarco will want that. Plus, what's the likelihood that the psychopath didn't?" O'Rourke asks.

"He fucks dead chicks, and she's not dead. You do the math." The round one is getting on my last fucking nerve.

I do not fuck dead chicks.

"I've had a little thing for her since she first showed up. She might've been fourteen, but she looked more like seventeen." O'Rourke's last words are an interesting choice.

Well, that does it. I'm not that patient.

I stand carefully, grab the branch over my head and walk to the end. It's

bending by the time I reach my destination, more like nine feet overhead instead of twelve. Oh well, I don't need it to stay stable much longer. Pulling the knife out of my pocket, I drop out of the sky on top of the pedophile who's been eyeing up my girl since she was fourteen.

He grunts at the impact, and his lips part on a scream, but my knife plunges into the side of his neck, cutting off the sound. I twist, feeling the tip scrape the bone before I pull it out, his gurgling and blood trailing after. I don't waste any more time on him. The wound will be fatal.

Next, I stab the one who said I fuck dead chicks. I've never said more than five words to him, but apparently, he knows what gets my dick hard. He barely manages a step back and a widening of his eyes before the blade cuts through the tissue, making a singular sound when the blade pulls free. His blood splashes his white collar, and he falls to his knees. I have to admit, despite my anger, I'm having more fun than I've had in weeks. All the crimes I committed for Nikolai were nothing but a way to relieve rage. This feels like I'm serving a purpose. Protecting the woman I... Well, I don't fucking know.

I turn to the third priest. He holds up his hands, most likely begging me not to. I don't even hear his words before I stab him upward through his chin. I leave my blade inserted so he doesn't die as quickly. I won't need it. I have other plans for DiMarco. The priest drops to the ground, and then he's quiet, but he got more of a chance to scream than the other two. For a while, I'm concerned his voice may have carried.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I chastise myself.

I look around, trying to think. I know that objectively I'm a smart man, but I don't admittedly practice using it very much. I'm mostly a fly by the seat of my pants and let other people solve my problems kind of person, and at the moment, there's no one to do that. It's just me, some son of a bitch who wants my girl, a girl who doesn't want me, and a pile of dead priests.

I can't leave them here if I'm going to have any chance of finding out why DiMarco is doing this, and something tells me that I need to know if I'm going to keep Magda safe. I take the priests one by one and drag them back to their car, piling them into the seats and arranging them until they look like they're just sitting staring off in the opposite direction waiting for someone to emerge from the trees.

I'm sweating, covered in blood, tree bark, and dirt, fuming angry. I'm not sure what the hell has become of my day when I turn around and hear them. I

find another tree, but I don't climb as high this time, going only far enough to gain a vantage point on them and see from which direction they're coming.

DiMarco walks five paces ahead of Magda. She trails behind him with a devastated look on her face. She does seem willing as they accused, but something is terribly wrong, and I wonder what the old priest has told her to make her follow him after how he betrayed her. I should be angry with her. I should want to punish her, but all I feel is an overbearing need to protect her from harm and put her back where she belongs.

They miss the blood stains on the ground by only about thirty feet, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I don't want DiMarco alarmed yet. I don't want him on the defensive, partially because I want information, but if I'm going to be honest, I don't want her harmed.

The two of them are talking. Their voices carry now that they're directly below me. I quietly slip down to the base of the tree.

“Taking care of you has been nothing but a struggle and a burden. Now get in that damn car before I have to hurt you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” She wants to sound commanding, but her voice breaks in her fright.

“Yes, DiMarco, what are you talking about?”

CHAPTER 32

NO CROWN OF THORNS

MAGDALENA

PAX IS warm at my back. All six foot four inches of him casts a shadow on DiMarco and me. Black wings, a fallen angel, dropped from heaven or risen from hell to save me, just like when he killed the man who took my father from me. Just like when he killed a girl who did her best to make me hate myself. Blood drips off him, the viscous texture sliding down my back.

Father DiMarco's mouth opens and closes like a fish as he looks well above his head to see Pax's face. He takes a step back, looking toward the car where the other priests sit, expecting them to help him. Maybe pull up so he can hop in, but none of them move.

"Pax, I was just coming to check on how you and Magdalena are doing since your cousin arrived," His face immediately smoothes out the anger and aggression he just pointed at me when he called me a burden and told me to get in the car. His eyes beseech me, but I'm not sure what for. "Nikolai put you in charge of the monastery, and there are problems. I was looking for you." Another pointed stare.

He wants me to lie for him because he knows what Pax will do to him for taking me. Pax is the only person to ever care what's happened to me. My heart is in my throat, trying to escape my chest rather than face the heartbreak of believing Father DiMarco again and being betrayed by him again. Was he telling the truth when he said he only turned me over because Pax would kill him? It seems believable, considering they all came back, but why? None of the options appeal to me after what he said.

"You've never had a problem going over my head before, but I've spoken to Nikolai nearly every day for two weeks, and he hasn't brought up my taking Magdalena. So I know you haven't."

Father DiMarco scratches his neck beneath his collar and fiddles with his

robes with the other hand. His cheeks turn pink with his nerves.

“I was checking on her, Pax. I’m entitled to worry about someone I’ve spent years caring for.” He stares at the ground now instead of me, and I wonder if it’s because my expression doesn’t comfort him.

“You just told her she was a burden when you were trying to force her into that car. Why did you say that? Child services would have taken her, so why did you? If she was such a burden? I’ve been wondering for a while now.”

Father DiMarco takes another step back, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender, then pressing them together in prayer.

“I was doing what the Lord asked of me, Pax.”

“He’s lying,” I say so softly, hating that I can smell his deceit now, and I think that most of our interactions were filled with it.

Pax presses tighter against my body, wraps his hands around my waist, and speaks into my ear. “I know, Snapdragon. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along. You had faith in one of the worst men I’ve ever known.”

“I am a servant of God,” Father DiMarco argues.

“No, you’re a thief, taking what is rightfully mine, and you’ll pay for it. How many times have you come lurking for something that doesn’t belong to you?”

He swallows hard and looks at me for a moment before flicking his gaze back to Pax.

“I’ve only come twice, and I was only checking to see if Magdalena was alive.” He stares deep into my eyes as he says it, and he looks so sincere. It nearly breaks my heart. Too bad he’s already shown me a few times that he can take that on and off at will.

“Is Mary Katherine really dead?” I ask him.

He grimaces. “Of course she’s really dead, why would I lie about that?” I’m starting to believe he has a lot of reasons.

“How the hell did a twenty-year-old die?” Pax demands from behind me.

“You killed her,” he insists, but his voice shakes. “Stabbed her to death.”

Pax laughs, and the sound comes from deep in his stomach. He finds this genuinely amusing.

“I haven’t stabbed a girl in months. The last girl I killed was your nun, Constance, and I choked her.” He says it so matter-of-factly, and I have to admit I’ve never known this man to be a liar. Most of our problems are caused by his inability to keep his thoughts to himself.

“You're covered in blood right now.” Father DiMarco shakes his head.

Pax smiles and says, “You know I would think you'd be more concerned about that. Aren't your friends supposed to be meeting you?”

My gaze moves to the car, and I realize that while there are three men in there, and they are most certainly the fathers I know, none of them look right. Heads hang at odd angles, there isn't the faintest sign of life or movement, and there *is* blood dripping off Pax.

“It's not all theirs, Snappy. I was busy before I got here, but I promise no one innocent, or female.” He winks.

“Does that matter?” Father DiMarco asks with a disgusted tone, staring at Pax's hands on me with more judgment in his gaze than should be possible for a lying hypocrite.

“Yeah, it does,” I answer truthfully, staring at him with perhaps more disappointment and revulsion than he holds for me.

“Snapdragon, please step aside so I can deal with Father.” Pax pushes me aside.

“Magdalena, you wouldn't let him harm me,” Father DiMarco gasps, staring like he's never seen me before.

“Why did you all come back for me?” I ask, but I don't move an inch.

“I needed to make sure you were okay.”

“You didn't make plans to get me to safety, did you?”

“Move, Magdalena. The truth is less important than me ripping him apart. I'm going to enjoy killing him.”

Father DiMarco lunges forward and grabs me by the wrist, attempting to yank me into his body. Before he gets anywhere, Pax pushes me roughly out of the way, loosening his grip and slamming me to the ground.

“Asshole!” I shout as pain ricochets through my hip.

Pax launches himself at the old man, leading with his skull instead of his fists. One solid headbutt breaks his nose and opens a fountain of blood. Father DiMarco bends over to grab the wound, and with their difference in height, Pax kicks him to the ground. He beats him mercilessly, not bothering with fists as he kicks him into the dirt.

Choking, gurgling, cries of pain.

“Stop, please stop!” I scream, unable to keep quiet when a man I've loved for ten years is being broken to pieces in front of me, even if he deserves it.

Pax looks over his shoulder at me. More blood coats his skin and the contrast makes his eyes impossibly green. His deep black curls are richer,

soaked in crimson, and that mischievous look I've missed so much is on full display.

"I'll do about anything for you, Snappy, but not that."

Pax turns and kicks him again.

"Why the fuck did the four of you come back for her?" He leans over, shouting in his face.

"How did you know we were here? I almost had her." Father DiMarco babbles just before losing consciousness, his head lolling against the ground.

Pax stands above him, the picture of vengeance and male beauty.

"What are you going to do to him?" I need to stop him, but a part of me really doesn't want to.

"Teach him a lesson."

"Please, Pax," I beg on his behalf because I know this is wrong. "He can't learn a lesson if he's dead." This is a sin despite anything he's done, and I can't sit here complacently. It's wrong, and my soul still, always will, belong to God.

"Fine, then I'm just killing him."

"Pax, please, this is wrong."

"Magdalena, I think I've done enough to prove what type of man I am. Now, shut the fuck up and sit there while I finish what you started."

"How did I start this?" I gasp, surprised by the intensity of my offense, but I think, out of all of us, I'm the least responsible for this situation.

"You fucking went with him!" he shouts, his voice ripping through the air and up the mountain, scaring the birds from the trees. "You fucking went with him, and if you don't want me to fuck you over his dead body, then you will sit down and shut the fuck up while I finish what you started."

He's nothing if not a man of his word, so I do as he says. I sit down and shut up, but I add one step. I close my eyes so I don't have to see. There's breaking and snapping sounds, so loud I open my eyes because they can't possibly be coming from a human body.

Pax moves between trees, choosing certain branches for what, I'm not sure, before using his own body weight to snap them off. The green wood breaks on jagged edges, leaving thick sharp branches. He collects four of them, as I watch with my face twisted in a mix of confusion and horror. What is he doing, and why the hell can't I ever guess with him?

He walks back over to Father DiMarco, who is just starting to come to.

"Sorry, I was going for biblically accurate as possible, but I can't think of

anything for your crown of thorns.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Pax lines one of the branches up with his forearm and stabs as hard as he can, using his weight to drive the wood into the ground. An agonizing shriek rips up the mountain.

“Huh.” Pax shakes it, proving it’s not as deep or as sturdy as he imagined it would be. “That was anticlimactic.” He turns, searching for something, and while he’s distracted, Father DiMarco yanks until the branch falls, freeing his shredded arm.

“Perfect!” Pax shouts as he pulls something large out of the ground. It’s a stone.

Father DiMarco makes it to his knees before Pax kicks him flat on his back and starts again. The scream as the branch pierces the already mutilated flesh turns my stomach, and like I did when I found Constance, I puke on the ground. I really need a stronger stomach if I intend to stay with him. This time, he uses the weight of the rock to drive the branch into the ground. The fresh spring earth, wet from the recent rain and primed for new life, eases his task as he resolutely traps Father DiMarco there.

The old priest screams in agony, and my stomach turns, but not my heart. I don’t care about this loss the way I thought I might, especially after the lies he told me to lead me out of here. I still don’t know what he really wanted, but I agree with Pax that none of them would have come out here to check my safety. Why come out here for a burden?

Pax lines up the next arm, and the screams tear through the air, through me. He drives it deep into the earth with the stone. *Thump, thump, thump.* The deep hammering embeds itself in my brain.

“I want to know why he came for me. Why did he take me in to begin with? We can’t find out if you kill him.”

“We’ll find out, baby, but not from him. He’s going to be too busy screaming until he’s dead.”

The look on Pax's face is more crazed than I’ve ever seen. He moves to his feet next. The noises as he crucifies the old priest, driving his limbs deep into the ground, are worse than anything I’ve ever experienced, and at this point, that’s saying something.

When Pax is done, he’s still not dead, but he’s not going anywhere.

“Father into your hands, I commit his spirit.” Pax mimics the words spoken by Jesus before taking his last breath with a sinister twist.

I want to close my eyes and ignore what happened right in front of me, but just like with Constance, I owe it to him to face what was done in my name.

I puke again.

CHAPTER 33

PLUCK IT OUT

PAX

A SPRING BREEZE carries through the field as I stand over the body of the priest, considering the fact that his arms and legs are called limbs, as are the branches now protruding from them. His blood spills slowly, soaking into the wet earth fertilizing the earth and priming it for industrious new life. How much blood has been spilled by my family on this mountainside? He'll have many friends among the ghosts.

He's not technically dead yet, but he's not far off from meeting his maker, the God he so shittily devoted his life to. A kinder man would stab him and put him out of his misery like I did to his friends, but he tried to take my Snapdragon. There's no mercy for that crime. Broken gurgles spill from his throat since he's too tired for screams. Eyes roll, but they don't see, and his limbs twitch, but they'll never truly move again.

This was one of my more creative murders, and it should be a point of pride, given I've hated this man for a long while now. He helped my father feel better about being a shitty man, about being a cruel father and husband. My mother went into extended psychiatric care after my first murder, but my father had her headed that direction long before. This man blessed my father and heard his sins. I should have done this for myself or maybe my mother a long time ago, but I didn't.

I did this for Magdalena. Not because I wanted revenge or had a craving for killing. Not because my older brother called and told me how high to jump. I did it because DiMarco tried to take her, because he wanted to hurt her.

Soft sniffles come from where I left her. She hasn't moved an inch since I told her I would fuck her over his dead body if she did. Is she still afraid I will, or has her ridiculous belief in me softened that too? Looking at her tears,

I'm grudgingly tempted to agree. I couldn't do that to her. I could do a lot, but as she pointed out to me two weeks ago, I don't actually want to cause her pain.

The terrified woman on the ground once again sits beside her own puke and one of my murder victims. Her black hair falls over her shoulders in waves. The normal clothes she wears don't make her any less stunning, but they do make her more approachable. Perhaps I'll put her back in the nun garb just to keep other people from looking at her. Her lips are a plush mix of pink and tan, so delectable I would do anything to kiss her.

Oh no.

Fuck me, I'm in love with her. The thought rings true in every part of my body, filling me with the unique sensation I can only describe as Magda. A deep and soul-shaking love that will not allow me to harm her for my own enjoyment. That makes me think of her and her needs before I might see to my own. This is very, very bad.

I run. The fuck away from her.

"Pax, what the hell?" she shouts after me, but I ignore her.

I am very fast.

My legs are much longer than hers, so I'll reach my destination before she does. It doesn't hurt that she's probably pretty turned around. I'm *worried* about what's going to happen to her, but I refuse to consider her safety, as my only plan to save myself solidifies. I know exactly what I have to do. Magdalena will be fine.

My feet tear up the mountainside back to the carriage house, where I've fucked her but we've never really stayed together other than last night. The best night of my life. The birds sing overhead, celebrating the warmth coming back to these hills, but I can't think of anything but that one Bible passage I've been ruminating over for weeks. *If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.*

A.k.a. take responsibility for your own actions and remove the source of the problem instead of blaming others. I'll remove the problem no matter what it takes, and I won't blame Magda for my weakness. She may have pointed it out, but it must have existed on some level for her to exploit it.

I suspected that I was at a point of no return with Magda after the two weeks I intended to ignore her completely and came home to fuck her every night, but I hoped I could prolong the inevitable for a few more weeks. That bitch, fate, intercepted and tried to take Magda from me. Killing that priest

wasn't enough. I'll never be able to unlearn the knowledge he forced on me. I cannot live without her, and I cannot live with that weakness.

By the time I arrive, I'm pouring sweat. My breath heaves in and out of my lungs. Which I suppose is a good thing, considering how lonely they're going to be with my heart missing. Heading into the kitchen, I lose precious time trying to find the silverware, and when I do, none of it is nearly sharp enough. There have to be knives. Magdalena's been cooking for herself. In a cabinet, I find a block stuffed with them. Sorting through them, I grab a filet and butcher knife. Despite this being one of the few times I've been in a kitchen, I know my knives.

My gaze lingers on the rumpled bed where we slept as I head up the stairs to kick in the door that's kept Magda out. I never did get the key from Matthias. In hindsight, demanding he lock it just so Magdalena had even less to entertain herself with was sort of a dick move. I only slept up here once and it was cleaned even better than downstairs because it's in far better condition. The entire house needs work, but this floor definitely was at some point. How odd.

Well, I don't have time to worry about it now.

I head into the bathroom, checking myself in the mirror. My appearance is the same—green eyes, curly black hair, and tan skin covered in blood—but how is it that nothing inside me matches? I am not the same man I was when I shot my father in the face and opened his coffin for all to see. Somehow I'm better—less evil, wicked, harsh, and cruel.

Hurting the innocent has no appeal because I don't need to when I have Magda. How can my chest remain hollow when she is beside me, and she's everything? It's supposed to be hollow. I am a shell. It has to be this way.

Magda's not perfect, but her intentions are so pure. She hates herself because of her "fall from grace," but if she only understood how far she's pulled me back, she would know she succeeded. I can't ever fucking give that to her or her God.

"How the hell have you let yourself fall so far?" I shout at the man in the mirror. He looks right, but he feels all wrong. "How the hell were you stupid enough to not only become obsessed with her, to take her instead of killing her, but also to fall in love with her?"

I rip off my shirt, staring at the jagged Pax plus Magda in a heart that I put on my chest while I pummeled her ass in the woods with my blood. It's hideous and disfigured, but I've cherished it ever since that moment. It hurts

now to think about disrupting it, and that is further proof that I have to.

“You fell in love with her and wrote her name in your chest. You’re fucking pathetic. Love makes you weak.” I quote my father. “You’re too weak.” I quote him again. “Too crazy. Disappointment.”

Lifting the knife to my skin, I stare into my own eyes instead of the words I’m cutting up. The blade drags over my sternum with intense, hot pain, quickly eviscerating the skin and muscle and cutting me down to the bone. The cut stops just before it opens my belly.

The blood pours too thick to see. How am I supposed to get my heart out if I can’t see? So I make a secondary slice. This one hurts infinitely worse than the first, and I struggle to complete it as my hand shakes. The full chunk of flesh falls and thickly slaps against the sink. A flash of yellow bone, before there’s once again too much blood to see.

My gaze drifts to the sink, filled with my blood and a much whiter piece of me than I would have imagined. Funny, I do look the same inside as other people. The strip is only about a half inch thick, but it actually makes me a little sick to look at. How strange I never considered my own dismembered flesh might be off putting. The other times I planned to do similarly drastic things to myself, I assumed I would enjoy it. I did enjoy carving my chest, but then again, I didn't see that until the next day.

Nausea fills my mouth with spit, my fingers tingle, and my head goes a little fuzzy. The man staring at me looks like he’s seen better days. Then I realize I’ll have to crack open my own breastplate to rip out my heart. This may be more complicated than I anticipated.

Before I get the chance to find another tool, the adrenaline or the self-mutilation, or my own sense of ineptitude catches up with me. I stumble back, take two steps to try to correct myself and wind up smack against the floor, chest cut open and bleeding with no hopes of ripping out my heart. I’ll die with the damn thing beating in my chest for her. But perhaps I will die in time to be spared the indignity of Magda thinking she saved me.

I realize just before my eyes flutter closed that this is technically suicide, but I really don't see it that way. I see it as doing my best to preserve my nature before I let this freaking nun *save* me.

CHAPTER 34

BARE HEARTS

PAX

“PAX, I swear to God, you better be here!” she screams, and it pulls me back from wherever I went. Unfortunately, I am alive, with my heart still beating in my chest, and the woman I love is here to mock me and everything I stand for.

I say nothing, but it only takes her a moment to find the door to the stairs open. Her feet clomp as she walks up. Between the way she snores and the way she comes, is there anything this woman does quietly? She's in the hallway, so I know she can hear me, but she can't see me yet.

“How did you get here so fast? You have short legs, and you were supposed to get lost.” I'm still lightheaded from my fall and the blood loss, but I'm becoming more certain my injury is not life-threatening if I get medical attention soon. I should have skipped the religious theatrics and just stabbed myself in the heart.

“I guess you shouldn't have left me alone for so long that I learned my way around.”

She comes around the corner and walks into the bathroom.

“Pax, are you okay?”

Her brow furrows. There's a lot of blood on me, and it takes her a minute to understand that some of it's my own. Her gaze flicks to the knife I dropped, then to the sink where my strip of flesh lays. Her eyes fly wide, and her skin turns green.

“Oh my God, what are you doing?” She drops to her knees beside me, pulling a towel off the rack and shoving it against the wound painfully.

“Fuck,” I grunt.

“I asked you a question, Pax,” she tells me with genuine worry written in her expression. She looks around the room as if she's trying to think of a

solution.

“Trying and failing to fix a problem.”

“What problem is that?” I've never heard her sound quite like this. The night she thought I fucked Sera, she was enraged for an entirely different reason. Her jealousy was delicious. This time, she seems to be mad I've hurt myself, and I find I enjoy it even more. *Fuck, she's made me soft.*

“If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,” I tell her. “Matthew something or other.”

The adrenaline from the four murders I just committed and the self-mutilation are starting to wear off. I'm seeing now that my actions weren't precisely reasonable, and I suppose that happens to me fairly often. I'm not sure exactly what it means, but at the moment, I can see pretty clearly that I've made a lot of poor decisions today. Not only do I have a gaping wound in my chest and I still have to face Magdalena but now I also have four bodies and a car to get rid of.

“I don't know if you noticed this, Pax, but that is your chest you cut, not your eyes.” She kicks the knife out of the way as if she thinks I'll turn it on her. Hasn't she figured out by now if I could, I would gut her and save myself?

“It's my heart causing me to sin,” I grit through the pain. “So I'm cutting it out.”

“You seem to be lying on the floor with your heart inside you.”

“You just have to rub it in, don't you?”

She goes to the sink and gets a towel wet before coming back to my side. Why does it feel so good to have her there?

“You're probably diseased, you know that, right?” She moves the dry towel she used to staunch the bleeding. I hiss as she swipes the newer wounds and the deeper spots on Pax plus Magda. I've cut myself to make a point a time or two, but I will admit that removing a chunk of my own flesh and slicing myself to the bone took a little more *out of me* than I expected. The blood trickles out, but I'm conscious, which is a good sign.

“Shit, Pax, this is really deep.” Her concern is like music to my ears, but I ignore it. “We need to get you help now.”

“Well, I wasn't diseased three weeks ago when I was last tested. Getting tested before fucking you is another stupid thing I did because of my heart.” I scoff, but it hurts my chest

She stills, but instead of answering me, she forces another dry towel

against the wound to cut off the bleeding and goes to the sink to wet a new towel to continue cleaning me. I enjoy her caring for me, yet another indignity.

With her back to me, she asks, “Are you suggesting you killed four priests because of your heart?”

“I did,” I tell her with great annoyance. “But the killing is not the problem. The reason I killed is the problem.”

“Oh?”

“I didn't do that for the sheer love of killing, which is why I used to kill. I did it for you. You've ruined me.”

“So you're not considering the murders one of your sins?” She faces the mirror as she asks like being unable to see me makes this easier, but I see every facet of her expression. “You sliced open your chest because of your sins, but the murders are not your sins.” She's trying to do Pax math, and it's not her forte.

“No,” I strive for patience. “I'm sinning against my own nature because I'm in love with you.”

“I'm sorry, you are what now?” she asks as she turns to me. The expression on her face would be funny under better circumstances.

“Of course, you would make me suffer the indignity of repeating myself.” My chest is burning, my head is light, and all I want is for her to make it all better.

“How many indignities have you made me suffer?” She walks back over to me, standing above me, lording over me. Proving to me how powerful she is. She is the only person in my life who can make me do anything or everything. I'd even tell Nikolai to fuck off for her. As much as I love her, I hate her for it too.

I acquiesce, not because she's right about all of the indignities but because I am powerless to do anything when she holds everything I am in her tiny fucking hands.

“Fine, I love you, Magdalena. I love you so much that I don't even want to kill to entertain myself anymore. I love you so much that when I'm near you, I don't feel empty, but the second you're out of my sight, it's worse than it ever was. I love you so much that I feel bad I hurt you, and I'm sorry!”

“You're what now?” she asks as she kneels beside me with the new towel in her hand.

“Tired of you embarrassing me for your own enjoyment.” I push myself

up ever so slightly, not ready to stand. She shoves me back down and continues cleaning my face and the wounds. If she were anyone else, I would kill her for her actions, but because she's her, I'll lay there and let her clean me like a cowed pound puppy.

"I think after all the ways you've embarrassed me for your own enjoyment, I'm owed at least a little verification," she tells me, and the note of pain in her voice softens my venom.

"I am very sorry I hurt you. I never should have told you I screwed Seraphina."

"Wait a minute, is that all you're apologizing for?"

"I suppose it was petty to lock the door to the upstairs so that you had fewer things to do while leaving you alone as punishment."

She opens and closes her mouth a few times.

"Is that an apology?"

"I'm sorry that I pettily locked the upstairs door so you had fewer places to go while I was punishing you."

"You're unbelievable."

She pushes a bit harder on the wound than she needs to, and I'm sure it was intentional.

"Pax, this is really serious. You need medical attention. This will get infected. It's going to scar terribly. You could die from the infection alone, and quite frankly, I'm not interested in seeing that happen."

"And why not? I thought you would be relieved to be rid of me."

She stares deep into my eyes, presses her lips to mine once, and says, "Because I love you too, and there isn't a place in the world I could go now that I know what it's like to be loved by you."

"That actually sounds like a negative."

"I never said it was positive, but I do love you. Now, what should I do? Should I take you to the hospital? Should I call your cousin or your brother?"

"So help me God, Snapdragon. If you do any of those things with the mess I just made, I will punish you, and you will never forget it."

She smiles softly. "Okay, Pax, what should I do then?"

"My phone is in my pocket. Call Lenny."

She immediately starts digging, pulls the little rectangle out, turns it so that it can see me, and then searches my contacts. She presses it to her ear—ew—and it rings a few times before the old reedy voice answers. I keep my volume very high because I don't like to touch my phone to my face with all

the blood I get on it, so I can hear easily.

“Did you get to her in time?”

“Pax is hurt. He needs help,” she practically shouts down the line, revealing she's more worried about me than she seemed. There's warmth beneath the pain in my chest, an unfortunate side effect of my insipid love for her.

“I'll come now. Don't worry, Magda, everything will be okay.”

Her brows push together in confusion and anger. “Wait a minute, who the hell is this?”

“Three weeks in his company shouldn't be enough to change your language that much, young lady. I'll see you soon.” The line goes dead, and she places the phone on the ground with a far-off expression.

“How do you know Lenny?” I ask.

“Lenny? Oh, God help me.” She drops her face into her palms, and I can't tell if she's laughing or crying.

“Why, what's the problem?”

“Do you know her full name?”

“No, why should I?” The blood loss has slowed, but it has not stopped, and the pain is making things tedious.

“Yelena, Pax. Her name is Yelena.”

CHAPTER 35

SISTER YELENA

MAGDALENA

IT TAKES MORE strength than I thought I had to haul Pax to one of the bedrooms. Seeing how much more modern it is up here, I'm a little miffed and also curious. Who was staying here and when? While it wasn't recent, it wasn't so long ago.

I don't manage to get him into the bed, but I put a pillow under his head, pressure on his wound, and wait. He's lost a lot of blood, and I'm praying he'll be okay. He's still breathing, and his heart is still beating. Pax has always felt superhuman, but I know he can die like anyone else. I'm trying to place when he became so important to me, but it feels as if he always has been. When he killed my father's killer and he touched me, I was already long gone.

He's unconscious, snoring, as I learned he does last night when he slept beside me for the first time.

I don't know what to do with him or myself now that those priests are dead. I'm not sure that it really changes anything other than how I may feel about myself and Pax. Things at the monastery will never look the same, but Nikolai won't allow it to slip very far anyway.

As horrible as it was to see them all dead and watch Father DiMarco die, they weren't innocent, and they weren't good men. I'm sick over what Pax did and what I saw, but I'm sick over so many other things. I still don't even know if Mary Katherine is alive, and I'm hoping "Lenny" has some answers.

I lift the towel occasionally to check the state of his wound, and while it's incredibly grim, the bleeding has slowed. I hope that's a good sign that his blood is clotting and not that he's running out of it. After an hour of thinking and applying pressure on his wound, I hear the downstairs door open, and someone shouts, "I'm here."

“Bedroom at the end of the hall,” I call back, unwilling to leave his side.

I meant what I said when I told him I loved him, even if it's crazy and doesn't make any rational sense. I thought I had misinterpreted God's signs, or that I had been led astray, but I realize now neither of those things were true. I wasn't spending my time trying to reform someone who could never change. I wasn't wasting my time on a monster. I was caging the other half of my soul. Pax and I need each other.

I can't pretend that I have never suffered from the same violent thoughts he has. I may not want to kill people, but I'm not innocent or clean. I'm full of wrath, vengeance, and hate. I fell for him because he murdered his own father, the man who took my papa away from me. I pushed Constance off that cliff to save myself. None of that makes me noble. But I'm disciplined and strong enough to control him. Why is he so wild, reckless, and untamed? That may take a lifetime to discover, but I'm sure of one thing—he's mine. God gave him to me.

The door pushes open a moment later, and I look over my shoulder to find Sister Yelena, this time wearing the clothing I'm accustomed to seeing her in. A big leather bag is slung over her shoulder, and she's shaking her head as she approaches us and comes to kneel beside Pax.

“What happened this time?” She opens the bag, pulling out different supplies first to clean his wounds.

“He said he did it to himself because he loves me.”

Her hands still briefly, but she continues preparing swabs with different liquids to disinfect him.

“Can't say I expected that.”

“What did you expect?” There are so many things I want to know, yet now that she's here in front of me, all I care about is having Pax fixed up.

“What are you going to do for him?”

“I'm going to clean this and stitch him. It's far from the first time I've done this for him. Pax tends to get injured.”

“How do you know how to stitch someone up at all? You're supposed to be a nun.” My eyes narrow on her as she pulls out a few different bottles and looks over the labels. Dumping liquid into the swab in her hand, she sets to work on him.

“Lots of nuns have medical training,” she answers. Eventually, she adds, “My papa had me taught when I was a little girl. I practiced for years so I could do it for him and his men. But he died a long time ago, as did the rest

of *our* family.” The way she says our family carries a special weight, but that can't be what she means. She means her family.

“Why would your papa need you to know those things?” I can't imagine a little girl learning to do this. What did she practice on? What has she *seen*?

“He was the head of a crime family.” She shrugs like it's no big deal, but the information feels heavy. It tugs on memories that don't make any sense, like degraded film.

“Why are you telling me this?” I shake my head, frustrated by the sensation. She doesn't answer me. Instead, she finishes cleaning the wound, then places a series of injections along the cut. Next, she arranges some nylon thread and medical needles on a roll of plastic she pulls out of her bag. Everything is wrapped and sterile, lending to the idea that she knows what she's doing, but I still shake with nerves. She applies betadine to the wound, and I hold my breath as her needle pierces his skin.

“He really did a number on himself this time,” she says. “But he shouldn't be feeling very much at this point.”

“You've been taking care of him for a long time?” I ask, wondering about the other injuries she may have mended.

“Versions of caring for him for his whole life. My commitments haven't always allowed me to be present.”

“Like living as a cloistered nun.”

She smiles but doesn't answer as she continues her work. It's slow and steady, but I must admit the stitches are beautiful. About two inches along the incision, Pax wakes up with a grunt of pain and instinctually reaches out to stop her. I catch his hand in mine. He's not really awake, so I just give it a squeeze, trying to offer him some comfort through the pain. He may be an idiot for doing this to himself, but he's mine.

“When my papa got too old, my son took over, Duarte. He had a cousin, Gregorio.”

My heart stops and picks up again in double time, that nagging feeling of memory becoming stronger but no clearer.

“Is there a reason you're telling me this story while he's hurt?”

“Because it's important, obviously, and time-sensitive.”

Pax whimpers, and my heart clenches. The pierce and drag of the thread makes me a little lightheaded.

“The Medeiros, Bouchards, and Gemellis have been warring for this area for a long time. There was a tenuous peace between the Bouchards and

Medeiros when Sergei Gemelli came up with the plan to get rid of us all. The effort was headed by his younger brother, Marco, and over a decade, they systematically picked us off. Only two of the Medeiros line are left, though our sympathizers and supporters are still in great numbers.”

“And who are these two people you need to tell me about *right now*?”

“Myself and you. Your father was Gregorio Medeiros.” The memories are closer. I feel them just below the surface. My mother and father arguing, my uncle who I only met a handful of times, Duarte.

“My father’s last name was Santos,” I argue. My father was so young when I died that I don’t remember much about him other than him being shot in the face in front of me. It’s the kind of trauma that erases more pleasant memories.

“Your mother’s maiden name is Santos. She gave it to you after your father was killed. Why do you think your father's ring says GM? Because his name was Gregorio Medeiros, and that's why Father DiMarco took you in.”

“How the hell do you know about my father’s ring?”

“All the Medeiros men wore that inscription and all the members of the top families wore a similar one. I remember it well.” She shrugs. “Plus, Pax stole it, and I've been going through his things for years.”

I want to chastise her for that, tell her it’s wrong to invade other people’s privacy, especially because I fear she did the same to me while I was at the convent. Unfortunately, that makes a lot of sense. Pax is unpredictable enough that searching his stuff sounds necessary on occasion. Which will likely be my job now.

“You’re missing the point, Magda. That’s why DiMarco took you in. Because he knew exactly who you were and how many people were willing to follow your blood.”

“Why would he take me in just because my father was the cousin of a mob boss? He was a priest.”

“Your father, and now you, are the closest relation to that mob boss. He wanted to take the seat left open by the Medeiros family and take control from his big brother. Despite his hopes, he has never been the man to lead. I’ve known him all my life from one thing or another, and he was stupid enough not to recognize me. I've used that arrogance to sabotage him every step of the way.” I don’t know what she’s talking about, my own confusion mixing with her patented way of dancing around the point.

“Father DiMarco didn’t know that you’re Yelena Medeiros?”

Her brow raises in question at my use of the past tense.

“He’s dead.”

She smiles and nods. Pax’s wound is halfway closed now. She inspects her work, seemingly pleased. I’m collapsing, and my head hurts.

“No, my name is not even Yelena. He had no idea. You don't realize how much power is in a name, child. You never give it to someone who does not need it. You don't need mine today, nor does he.” She nods to Pax. His eyes are flicking open as he groans.

“You've been keeping a lot of secrets, you old bitch.” He laughs. “I thought I recognized you at the funeral. You lied.”

“It’s not the first time, but your mother knew my secrets and decided to keep them. I owe none of them to you, and the only ones I owed to Magdalena, she's been given.”

“You couldn’t have given me all the answers I’m owed because I still don't understand why a priest would be involved in any of this.” I interrupt their squabbling.

“Money, power, or the fact that DiMarco is a chosen name, and his real name is Gemelli. Marco Gemelli. Sergio’s younger brother who was tasked with wiping us out.” The air forcibly leaves my lungs as if I’ve been kicked. Accepting what she’s telling me about my father is one thing. There’s a glimmer of recognition in the names she’s speaking, the stories she tells, but this. This isn’t possible.

“No, I, he...” I’m at a loss for words, stunned and broken in a way I no longer thought possible.

“Well, that's something. A Gemelli playing priest in our territory and spilling our secrets. Nikolai is going to lose his shit.” Pax groans and thumps his head against the floor to distract himself from the pain in his chest.

“You don’t need to worry about that. He’s dead.” I pat his arm, trying to encourage him to shut the hell up and let her fix him.

“How?” she asks.

“I crucified him in the woods, and I killed the other ones too. Slippery fucks.”

Her laughter makes my jaw drop.

“It's about time those bastards got what they deserve.”

“Lenny, are you even a nun?” She rolls her eyes, but I'd love an answer to that question as well.

She sighs as she works but doesn't answer.

“There’s one more thing.”

She’s watching me, and I’m not sure how things can get worse, just that they will.

“Why do you *think* Alexandre Bouchard killed your father, Magdalena?”

I open my mouth and close it. Blink. A few times. My heart tries to run straight out of my body rather than letting me feel this dread.

“I watched him die. That’s who my mother said killed him.” She was inside when the shots were fired. She found me covered in his blood, crying on the ground beside him. Blood, so much blood. I shut the memories out before they can take me back with them.

“Did you see who killed him?” she presses, her voice gentle.

“No,” I admit as I shake, trying to push away the blood. There’s a reason I keep such a tight lid on these memories.

“Your mother was a drug addict. She needed a fix. When DiMarco offered her money and told her he had plans for you, she helped set your father up. DiMarco killed your father just like he killed my son.”

Pain rips along my chest one hundred times worse than anything Pax has ever done to me. This doesn’t make sense. My mother cried for me. She told me she would do anything to change this. She wouldn’t have let my father die for money and given me away for the same reason.

“She wouldn’t have left me with him if she knew he killed my father. What if he killed me? She may have been a drug addict, but she cared if I died.”

Her expression is incredibly sad, but she doesn’t comment on that belief.

“DiMarco planned to use you, sweetheart. Killing you was never part of the plan.”

“So you’re telling me that my entire life is a lie.” The reason I let Pax in to begin with is a lie, but I don’t bother saying that. It doesn’t matter now.

She reaches over to hold my hand but doesn’t comment.

“I’ve been telling you that from day one,” Pax drawls.

“Yes, but you had no clue why you were saying it. Now, shut up,” I snap at him. Everything I’ve ever known is falling apart, and this asshole is the only sure thing I have. The only thing I truly know and can count on. How messed up is that?

“Be quiet, Pax. You’ve lost a lot of blood. I’m going to have to call in extra help to get you an IV.” Not Yelena tells him as she drops my hand and starts to clean up. “Miss Medeiros here is only about ten times the woman

you deserve, so I expect to hear you're on your best behavior when I check in on the two of you."

"I also need you to drive the car full of dead bodies back here, please. They're right on the road." His voice wheedles.

"I'll call Matthias. Now, shut the hell up because I only have another minute. Magdalena, I know this is a lot, but has your life ever made sense? Have you stopped to consider how many fourteen-year-olds wind up in a convent these days? Not many."

Her frustration is written all over her face. I realize now the standoffish way she would look at me was her waiting for me to realize something obvious. She's staring at me with the same expression now, and I notice we have the same eyes.

"I'm telling you this because you are my great-niece. You seem like a good girl, and you are the only one of us who has any chance of continuing our family line. Don't tell anyone your name. Don't show your hand. If you're happy with him"—she points at Pax with a disbelieving look and a shrug—"stay here and be with him. He can keep you safe, and if you ever get the chance to kill a Gemelli, take it."

"So you've just been playing double agent to my family and everyone else for years for your own vengeance against the Gemellis?"

"Not exactly, young man. Your mother knew everything. She wanted the Gemellis dead too, but that's not my story to tell either."

"I should kill you," he complains, and from his prostrate position on the floor, it's a hilarious threat.

"I heard you're out of the business of murdering innocents," she tells him without concern.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I have eyes and ears all over the place, Pax. You don't survive as the second to last of a powerful line without having some friends."

"What if I don't believe you're innocent?" he challenges her.

"Then I'll take you out right now while you're still down." She doesn't sound like she doubts her ability to for a second.

"I don't think either of you will be doing that," I say with more authority than I possess. "But seriously, DiMarco never taught me to drive. Can you please help with the car?"

She sighs long and loud. "Matthias will help with the car, and I'll send a real doctor for him. This is the last time I'm going to help you. I've only stuck

around so I could keep an eye on you, but it's time for me to leave town. Make more Medeiros babies and one day they may be ready to get revenge for our family.”

“Why can't I get revenge for your family? I love Magda.”

She turns to him with a fierceness I never would have expected from her. “Gemelli blood spilled by a Medeiros hand is the only thing that will satisfy the debt.”

“We can get married, Snapdragon, and I'll take your name. That way, you don't have to kill anybody. I know you don't like that shit. I love that shit.”

“Jesus Christ, I'm done here. I'm leaving,” Not Yelena tells us both before shoving her dirties and sharps into a trash bin and closing her bag. She stops off in the bathroom and spends a few minutes scrubbing herself. I don't really blame her. I believe Pax when he says he got tested three weeks ago, but after everything he's done in those weeks, he needs to get tested again, and so do I.

“Do you think we have to be worried about who she's sending?” I ask him once I hear the front door close.

“Not really, she's always been trustworthy. Do you think we have to worry about what she said about your family?”

“I'm not even sure I believe her.” That's a lie. I know it's the truth as much as it hurts. She wouldn't have any reason to tell me all that if it weren't.

“Once the dust here has settled, I should talk to Nikolai about this.”

“I'd rather not involve your brother if we can avoid it.”

“Look who's getting with the program. But I think we're past that on this issue.” He pulls himself to a sitting position, grunting the whole way.

“She said to keep who I am a secret.”

He settles against the bed.

“I have no intention of outing you, my love, but she already said she's skipping town. I don't need to keep her secrets. And Marco Gemelli has been playing a very long con. He may be dead, but I promise you the effects of that are much farther reaching than you or I can imagine.”

“Okay, I guess I understand that.”

“She'll be awfully pissed about one part of her plan.”

I look over at him, slightly suspicious of the smile creeping up his cheeks.

“Oh yeah, what's that?”

“We can't have kids. I got myself snipped the day I turned eighteen. I really didn't think the world needed more of me.”

I'm silent for about thirty seconds before I burst out laughing.

“I really love you, Pax, but I think that's one thing we can both agree on.”

CHAPTER 36

**HAPPILY EVER AFTER... PLUS A FEW
CORPSES**

MAGDALENA

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS, the same doctor comes and goes, seeing Pax and giving him IV antibiotics to treat his infections and a slew of other drugs to keep him calm and pain-free. We talk and spend time together, and I learn more about him and find that I really do like him, even in the quiet moments without spilled blood.

He confides in me about how his father used to beat him as a child and how it continued into adulthood but less frequently. How three days before he shot him, Alexandre nearly choked him to death and only stopped because Nikolai intervened, but Alexandre pulled a gun on Nikolai. Pax knew then that he had to kill him or live in fear forever. So he killed him.

That act started our entire journey, and apparently, Alexandre didn't order the hit on my father. The man I spent most of my life loving and admiring as a father did. I'm so sick over it I could scream and cry for an eternity, but neither will help anything, so I keep it all inside.

I resume my daily prayers and meditations now that no one is trying to stop me or mess with me. I assume he'll go back to tormenting me when he's feeling better, but he really did a number on himself when he sliced a chunk of his flesh out. The staff still have not come to clean the bathroom, and while I managed to flip the skin into the trash I don't have the stomach to clean his blood. Apparently, I love him.

On the third day, the doctor deems Pax fit to be removed from the IV and put on "light duty." When I ask what that means, I'm told he is a mob doctor and it's best not to ask questions. We head downstairs for the first time in days other than the few times I've gone into the small refrigerator or the pantry to grab food.

We're sitting on the couch when the door crashes open without a knock.

Pax jumps to his feet, but when he sees it's his cousin, he sits back down. He still isn't that strong yet. It turns out that he already had several infections from his previous mutilations.

"Pax, you owe me big, and I've come to collect."

"Cousin, how the fuck did you know I was here?"

Shane's deep-blue gaze shifts to me, and his eyes widen in shock before his face settles to something perfectly neutral. He's nearly as tall as Pax, though not quite as broad.

"Hello, I'm Shane."

"Magda," I answer. He clearly has a million questions for me, but instead, he turns back to Pax.

"I didn't realize you were here until yesterday, or I would've come to bother you sooner. You've been causing trouble." There's a fierceness in his expression that almost promises violence, despite how clean and tamed he looks compared to Pax.

"How did you find me?" Pax asks, not even feigning recalcitrance for the trouble he's apparently been causing. I wonder if Shane knows about the pictures and what Pax did with them. He probably knows about what happened in the forest since Pax claims he was responsible, but does he know we were watching? Somehow, I doubt it, and my cheeks turn bright red. Pax really is a freak.

"Your doctor got lazy and drove past the house a few times. It was only a matter of connecting the dots from there."

His gaze narrows on Pax, and he seems to notice for the first time that he's actually hurt. He takes a few steps forward to get a closer look, but not that close.

"Hey, are you okay? What the hell happened? Did you have problems with the job for Nikolai?" What appears to be genuine concern disrupts his features before Shane makes sense of the confusing mix of cuts. Black brows push together in confusion while Pax rolls his eyes.

"Don't pretend you give a shit, Cousin."

Shane sighs. "I do actually give a shit about you. I don't know how many times we have to have this conversation, but I didn't know your nanny was molesting you. I would have killed her myself rather than dating her. You were a child, you stubborn fucking idiot."

"Wait, what?" I shout.

Shane turns his glare from his stubborn fucking idiot cousin to me.

“He's a psychopath.” Shane shrugs.

Pax grabs my hand, and I look at him. He's giving me these questioning eyes that beg me to believe his side. I get hot all over, but I know better than to fall for his superficial charms. Not because he's a liar—that's the last thing Pax is—but because I actually think he's a little insane. Maybe more than a little. God, he is going to keep me on my toes.

“The first girl I killed was my nanny. I did it because we were sleeping together, and I was in love with her, and apparently, she was cheating on me with my big *dick* cousin.”

“Not the phrasing I think you were going for, Paxxy.”

“My tone made it clear.”

Shane chuckles, and I actually see a little bit of the affection he promised he has for his cousin.

“But I think it's important for your nun.” He gives me a very pointed look, and I wonder what Pax could have told him about our situation. “To know that you were only *thirteen*, and I had no idea this inappropriate relationship was going on given I was in my early twenties and she was nineteen.”

“Thirteen, Pax?” He doesn't answer so I know it's true.

Since we've come here, and Shane displaced us, there has been nothing but intense animosity on what seemed like both sides. To think it all comes down to this is a little shocking.

“So you hate him because he screwed your nanny? Who was sexually abusing you?”

“He's also a fucking asshole who kicked me out of the house I live in just because he technically owns it when he doesn't even want it!” Pax leans back against the couch, tired from the exertion. His chest is an awful sight. Still covered in stitches, red and swollen. It'll take a long time before that starts to look better, and even then, it won't be pretty.

“And you hate him because he murdered your girlfriend?” I turn to his cousin.

“I do not hate my cousin at all, though I am somewhat resentful of the fact that he killed Mattie when she was mine to kill.”

Okay, so they're both fucking insane.

Pax makes a noise of disgust. “Oh, that's fucking rich. Get out of my house.”

“This isn't your house either, Pax. I own the entire mountain.”

Pax turns bright red. He's about to do something that might result in his stitches tearing. I stand, putting my hands between the two of them.

“This doesn't seem productive. Shane, why are you here?” I smile, going for a conciliatory expression that might defuse the tension. “I really hope it's not to kick us out, seeing as Pax is definitely injured and not in any shape to be moved.”

“What the hell happened that you are here willingly?” His gaze is even more piercing than his cousin's. The difference is, it doesn't connect with my soul. He's not my other half, but I see how he could get anything he wanted out of anyone with that look alone.

“That's a story for another day. Now, what do *you* need?”

About an hour later, we're standing in the woods next to the dead body of Shane's girlfriend's father? He's very dead and has been for a couple of days. Stabbed in the neck, which seems to be another strange familial preference. I don't vomit this time, and I'm wondering what is actually wrong with me.

Shane briefly describes the mistreatment this man leveled against his small daughter and the things he thought of the woman she grew into. As a devoted woman of faith, I'm sick someone would misuse God's teaching to justify beating their child. I'm not as naive as I once was, and I know that evil will always shock me. The church isn't a place of righteousness just because it should be. Humans are profoundly flawed. I don't know that this man deserved to die, but that's not my choice to make. That's not my place in life.

That warmth in my chest, where the Holy Spirit resides, fills and tells me that as dark as it may seem, I'm exactly where I'm intended to be. Not all of God's work is done in the light. *Do not assume that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

“So I need your help getting rid of him.”

“What did you do with her husband's body?” Pax asks with his trademark mischievous smile.

“You killed her husband?” I gasp.

“He was also a piece of shit,” Shane tells me like that makes everything better.

“Well...” He seems to hesitate before he answers. “I called Nikolai, and he lent me some supplies.”

“Ooh, Cousin,” Pax whoops in pure excitement. “You knew better than that.”

Shane's cheeks turn slightly pink, and I'm surprised he's capable of such a

thing. The way Pax described him, I didn't think he had any feelings at all.

“I did, and I also knew better than to commit murders. It's not exactly my forte.”

“This won't come cheap, Cousin.”

“What do you want?” he grits.

“I want my house, you fucking asshole. Permanently!” Pax shouts at the top of his lungs, scaring the birds from the trees.

“Fine, Pax, you can have it. You'll get rid of him, and you won't involve Nikolai?” Shane stares down his cousin, like the force of his glare will affect him. We all know it won't.

“I will dispose of him and avoid involving big brother at all costs. Funny, how the two of you have always looked down on me, and now you're sitting on my side of the table.”

“I don't look down on you. I look down on your inability to control yourself.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I change my mind. It's better if you don't know anything. I'll be saving evidence until I get the deed.” Pax turns his back on him, arms crossed, hilariously indignant.

“Call Matthias, it's already signed over to you. I knew you wouldn't help for anything less. And let's be clear Pax, you would suck my dick for this house. You wouldn't back out on getting rid of one body.”

Shane jogs off back to where he's parked. I expect Pax to be angry about that last comment, but he's laughing with a smile on his face that tells me Shane is probably right.

“I'm terribly straight, Snapdragon. But I do really love that house.”

I'm glad he has what he wants, though that's the least of my concerns now.

“What are you going to do about the four dead priests plus him?” I nod to the body. On the other hand, I'm absolutely thrilled by the prospect of returning to the main house and enjoying those diamonds and rubies he promised me. I am where I'm meant to be in life, and it's okay to enjoy the pluses when there are so many downsides.

“Shh, he has ears like a bat. Besides, that's a problem for future Pax.”

The End

EPILOGUE

MAGDALENA

20 YEARS.

MY DREAMS ARE indecipherable swirls of color when the delicious stretching feeling pierces between my legs. I'm not awake, but I'm slightly more aware than asleep. Moisture pools as his cock slides in and out of me. Hands dig into my thighs, sharp and rough, ratcheting my pleasure higher, but I'm still not awake.

Until he says, "I was expecting you to fight me, but fucking me back in your sleep is a welcome surprise."

"Why fight when you make me come so hard?"

My husband's hips slam into mine, and I moan as his cock hits so deep it feels impossible. Our wedding was untraditional, to say the least, and I may have been coerced, but all said and done, I'm glad I did it. He took me home to his castle on the mountainside, and we've lived together here ever since. He occasionally kills the guilty men that Nikolai asks him to, but since he made his promise to me, he has never killed another innocent woman.

My days are spent in quiet contemplation, praying, meditating, learning the nature of God through my own soul and the natural world. The rest of my time is spent keeping Pax's demons caged, busy, and sated. I cannot pretend to understand God's plans or the intricacies that come with divinity, but I do know that I am grateful for my lot in life.

"Your soul is mine. Tell me your soul is mine," he demands as he thrusts in and out of me for what always feels like the first and last time.

I smile as my orgasm builds low in my belly.

"Pax, it's not yours. You know it's not yours."

His fingers dig into my hips, punishing me, driving me higher.

"I'm going to fuck you until it is," he promises.

"You're going to die fucking me."

"Fine by me."

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To my husband William, who is the best partner, "story time" listener, and scene tester a girl could dream of. Sorry about the teeth marks, babe. I'll try to be nicer next time around.

ABOUT AURELIA

Aurelia Knight is a hot mess, doing her best to keep it together most days. Words are the greatest love of her life second only to her husband and sons. If she's not typing away, getting lost in her own world, she's reading and slipping away into the worlds of other writers. A caffeine addict who believes sleep is secondary to the endless promise of “just one more chapter”.

