



I'M GOING TO BE THEIR
WORST NIGHTMARE
IMAGINABLE

CONSEQUENCE

LOUISE ROSE
SCARLETT SNOW

CONSEQUENCE

HOLLY OAK ACADEMY



LOUISE ROSE &
SCARLETT SNOW

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*For the badass women who never needed a prince to save
them.*

I did something terrible.

It's a nasty secret, one I never want the world to find out.

But now someone knows and they want me to get revenge for
them.

Ethan Remington, Josh Dedicán, Hunter Cross, Nathan Cross
and Lucas Georgian are my targets, and they just so happen to
rule the little town of Holly.

I have to end their rule at the local Academy I've just moved
into or else my secret is out.

That *cannot* happen.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep my secret safe—even if that
means taking down my unlucky victims one by one.

Don't feel sorry for them.

They did bad things too, *almost* as terrible as me.

I'm going to be their worst nightmare imaginable.

And the best part?

They don't get to wake up from it.

If I'm going to hell, they are coming down with me.

Welcome to Holly Oak Academy, where money talks more than education and the rich boys do very bad things. Now they've met their match — me — and I'm bringing them down no matter what it takes. I have to, or else I'm a goner.

18+ RH Bully Romance.



Chapter One

There is something so terribly addictive about lying. You know it's bad, appalling really, but sometimes you can't help the words that escape your lips.

Sometimes it even feels good to say them.

I *should* feel awful for the lie I just told, the lie that adds to the hundreds I've already told my parents.

To everyone.

But I don't.

"I've told you, Mother, I didn't know him very well," I tell her, the words swiftly leaving my lips with little effort at all.

Maybe I spoke too soon, but that is the only way she could tell I am lying. My mother and father are judges for the courts. They can smell a lie before it's even uttered. They brought me up to never lie to family because it always gets you trouble. They never told me what to do once you are already in trouble and have no other option because your family can never find out.

"I'm just concerned about his disappearance—"

"Mother, I'm fine," I cut her off before she can say anything more; I can't talk about this with her.

It's another lie, of course, because I'm not fine, not one little bit, and I know she can tell. Sometimes it's like she sees straight through my pale blue eyes and reads my every thought.

Thankfully, she can't do that, or she might be a tad horrified by what she finds.

“Fine, fine. Are you looking forward to seeing the new boarding school?” she inquires casually, her eyes drifting to the front of the limo just briefly enough to let me know she likes this driver. It's always the drivers for my mother—usually the handsome young ones with dark hair. As for my father? It's the pretty secretaries that strut around with their peroxide blonde hair and augmented breasts. My parents love their affairs and the revolving door of drivers and secretaries. They don't love the people they fool around with, of course, just the thrill of the chase and the sex.

Love is for the lower class and the weak.

That's what they both say if you ask them why they bother staying married. Everything is about money and appearance. It's why my light brown hair is perfectly cut, straight and highlighted blonde. My peach dress fits my body like a glove. I have a strict diet and fitness regime to make sure I stay in control of my figure. No junk food whenever I'm with my parents. My body is just an engine to them and they want to keep it running perfectly for as long as possible. It's been this way since before I can remember and I've always hated it.

Life must be more than this boring routine.

It has to be.

But not to my parents.

“What was the school called again?” I ask her, because until this point I've been so scared of the past and my secret that I've hidden away in it. The future was never really important to me. Now, things have changed, and I need to focus on the future. Every mile we get away from my old boarding school, the more I can relax and actually breathe in this tight dress.

“Holly Oak Academy,” my mother answers me, her eyes still busy checking out the driver. “It is one of the most prestigious schools in England and only the best go here. Honestly, I have no idea why we sent you to that school by London in the first place.”

“Because you work in London and it meant I could see you often?” I dryly respond. “And it meant I could carry on my other training in secret.”

Mother looks at me for a second, her gaze reminding me that I shouldn't have brought up the training. Assassins never talk about their past, after all. Not that I'm an assassin. At least not officially. In the eyes of the Veil Council—the syndicate of lords that rule the criminal world—I'm not an assassin until my twenty-first birthday. Only after I present my sacrifice to the council during my Blood Oath am I considered anything of worth. Until then, I've simply been trained by my parents to be just like them: perfect on the outside, empty on the inside.

Deadly to our enemies while living a picture-perfect life.

My father wants me to take his place at the High Table. I'll be the youngest member to ever be sworn into the Veil.

Lucky me.

“Oh, well, yes there was that. We all have busy lives,” she says, waving a hand at me, a signal to drop the subject.

I bite back my retort and look out the window at the rolling hills. They're covered in wildflowers and towering fir trees, and the sky is streaked in dark rain clouds, ready to erupt. I hope this isn't a bad omen of some kind. I've had enough misfortune this past year to last me a lifetime. I lean back in my seat and watch the landscape slide by, allowing my thoughts to drift into mindless contemplation.

“Do not slouch! We didn't bring you up that way,” my mother snaps, nudging me in the ribs with her elbow.

I automatically straighten in my seat. Sometimes I swear my parents hold the strings to my mind and body, and there is nothing I can do but obey them. It's like I'm just their puppet. I follow their orders to the point that I hate my life, and the one time I tried to cut my string and do something for myself... Well, that was when it all went so horribly wrong.

Now I'm lying to everyone, including myself. I can't risk my parents, or anyone for that matter, finding out the truth. It will ruin us all.

I watch my mother from the corner of my eye, the way she holds her head high and keeps her back straight in her perfectly tailored light blue suit. Her legs are crossed, her black heels have light blue on the bottom to match her perfect image.

Perfect.

Perfect.

Fucking *perfect*.

I hate it all, and there isn't a damn thing I can do to escape it now. I'm stuck in this hell, like I have been since I was born. After all the things I've done...the lies I've told...there's no way out. Even if there was an escape, the Veil would put an end to it.

No one ever rescinds their Blood Oath and lives to tell the tale.

“Ah, we are nearly here,” my mother sighs with relief, pointing at the window on her side.

I look through the glass at the beautiful mansion on top of a hill in the distance.

Holly Oak Academy has no idea who they have just let into their halls.



Chapter Two

The precious Holly Oak Academy is just what the brochure says, at least from the outside. The castle is mostly grey stone, with new extensions on the front with large glass windows that burst light into every corner of the building. The front lawns are all fake grass, kept pretty with vibrant flower beds and little pots attached to the windows. The driveaway is made of paved brown bricks set in a classy design, leading up to the pebble stone pathways. In the centre of the castle is the entrance hall, marked by the large academy symbol that clearly says ‘Holly Oak Academy’, and a small sign underneath the word entrance written. Our driver opens the door to our limo and I step out, followed by my mother who doesn’t move away from the door.

“Are you not coming in with me?” The question tumbles out before I can catch it. I can tell just from her posture that she isn’t accompanying me. She never does. The driver starts getting out my suitcases as my mother and I stare at each other, both of us silent.

“Go and tell the academy that Miss Regan Hall is here,” she orders the driver, her eyes still pinned on me.

“Yes Paloma—I mean, Mrs Hall,” he replies, quickly making his way to the entrance hall as fast as his feet can take him.

“Isn’t he a little young and stupid for you?” I snort and my sweet mother just smiles at me, a mere tug of her thinly pressed

lips, before lashing her hand out and slapping me hard across my cheek. I stumble back, tasting blood in my mouth, and my mother hands me a satin napkin as if I only sneezed.

“Careful with that mouth of yours. You open it far too often to say things you wish you didn’t,” she warns in a deceptively calm voice. “I have told you once before that words, like actions, have consequences. When will you ever learn?”

I take the napkin from her and wipe the blood away from my lips. I want to give her a sarcastic reply but deep down I know I’ve pushed my luck already.

“Have a good trip home, Mother,” I say instead, forcing a smile.

“Goodbye, Regan,” she replies coldly, placing her hand on the door and pausing before she slips inside. She looks back up at me, her light blue eyes a little like mine in some ways. I like to think I have more life in them than she does. “Do not embarrass us here, Regan. Your father and I do not need your drama at the moment. Keep your head down and I will be back for you in three years. It should not be that difficult for you. You can even forget your past and have a new life here. A *safe* life. You should thank me and your father.”

“It’s hard to thank someone you never see.”

“Your father is—” Mother snaps her lips together, pursing them in thought. “Whatever your father is, he does the best he can to protect you in all his decisions. Remember that. Goodbye, Regan.”

She closes the door in my face, her body obscured by the tinted window. I stare at my own reflection, my expression deadpan while inside rage fills me to the core. My father protects me in all his decisions? *Bullshit*. He couldn’t care less about me and it’s the same for my dear mother. They wanted me out of the way, so here I am. I look up at Holly Oak Academy, where the rich send their children to get them out of the way and know they will be ‘safe’.

Yeah. More like they just can’t be bothered with them.

I guess I’m going to fit right in.



“Miss Hall, I presume?” a snotty woman in a designer suit dress that is *far* too tight asks me. I’m surprised she can breathe in the damn thing.

I slowly look around before smiling at her. “I don’t see any other new students, so you can presume you’re correct.”

Her ashen cheeks turn a violent shade of red. In fact, her whole chest turns the same colour as her hands shake and I wonder if she would like to hit me right now. They always say it’s the quiet ones who have a taste for violence.

“That kind of sarcastic behaviour is beneath the standard of the girls at this academy. I suggest you find a way to behave more correctly, Miss Hall, to be a shining example of who a daughter of two very important judges should be,” she suggests, harrumphing under her breath. “Now, my name is Mrs Beach and I am the headmistress here. I expect nothing but good behaviour from you, considering your record.”

“Of course,” I plainly reply, smiling at her. I know better than to rise to the bait every time. I lost my temper at my old school, just once, and unfortunately a lot of people saw it and I was expelled. That didn’t go down well with my parents. Now I know to calm myself and seek revenge behind closed doors while also nailing down a watertight alibi.

Those are important.

“Perfect. This way.” She turns around on her heel and click-clacks her way down the entrance hall. “Everything past this door is safe and protected, and students are not allowed to leave without permission and two bodyguards with them.”

“So the academy is a fancy prison? Perfect.”

“Don’t see it as a prison. See it as a protected place for teenagers who are valuable.”

“Like me...” I mutter, and I didn’t mean it as a question but she answers anyway.

“As the only child of two very important and wealthy judges? Yes. You could be kidnapped and held against them, therefore you must be kept safe,” she explains as she finally finds the right key and unlocks the door.

I’d like to see someone try to kidnap me, that’s for sure.

It would be a fun exercise training as one of my old professors used to say.

Of course, I highly doubt my captor would come out of it alive.

I imagine that’s part of the fun.

Mrs Beach holds the door open for me, and I walk out into a stunning vestibule with a domed ceiling made of crystal-clear glass. The sunlight pouring through cast prisms around the room and they bounce off the fountain in the middle of the floor. The tiles are a pristine white and every wall has lockers on them, each with doors in-between. Thankfully, there are no students around, but I can hear them in the classrooms behind the doors.

“This is the main part of Holly Oak Academy, where most of your lessons are,” Mrs Beach informs me, walking swiftly ahead. I look back as the door slams shut, an electric lock beeping to signal it’s locked. It makes me feel trapped rather than ‘safe’. Mrs Beach doesn’t stop chatting as we head through the large room. “This way leads to the girls and boys dorm rooms in the back of the castle, and if you carry on past the dorms it leads to the library, cafeteria, game rooms, beauty parlour, a door to the gardens and finally the greenhouses. You will need to find your way to each of these as there are classes in most of those rooms.”

I look up at the glass, seeing the grey clouds above. “Even the beauty parlour?”

“Oh, no. That room and the game rooms are for personal use on weekends.”

We reach a set of double doors. One has boys written on it and the other has girls.

“I hope this shouldn’t be an issue, but girls are not allowed in the boys’ dorms and it is the same rule the other way around.”

I nod at her. “Of course. It was the same at my previous boarding house.”

She opens the girls’ door. “Brilliant. Let’s continue on, then.”

As I follow her through, I try not to smile. I’m sure the same thing happens here as it did in my old boarding house—the girls and boys always sneak into each other’s rooms.

Making it forbidden simply makes it more fun.

At my old school, there used to be three balconies with ridges you could walk across to go to the other dorms. It was like the professors wanted us to break their precious rules.

I follow Mrs Beach up the curved staircase and towards a corridor with ten wooden doors, five on each side. The dark floorboards creak as Mrs Beach walks down to the third door on the right and pulls the brass handle. I smell dust and beach the instant the door is opened, and it only strengthens when I step over the threshold. The room is actually bigger than I expected it to be, but as modern as money can buy. That I *did* expect. This whole academy stinks of old and new money, and what do rich people do to keep their kids happy that they sent away? Throw more money at them. It’s a little laughable, really. I learned from a young age that money is the closest thing I’ll ever get to receiving affection from my parents. People like them can’t be bothered with children. We are simply pawns.

Mrs Beach leads me to my room. It’s tucked away in the farthest corner, and when we step inside, it looks like the penthouse suite of a posh hotel. Simple and elegant, the colour silver is found in almost everything, from the silver bed with the enormous headboard and base, to the glittering silver velvet lounge at the end. Thin white curtains flutter in the light breeze of the open floor-to-ceiling window, blasting light into every nook and cranny of the room. The white ceiling has pretty little spotlights with a ceiling rose encasing a crystal chandelier. On the other side of the room is a walk-in closet, a door I suspect leads to a bathroom, and in the middle of them is a silver dressing table with a huge mirror and a little coffee machine.

My suitcases are holding the door to the walk-in closet open. I can't wait to get my personal things out and splash some colour around this room.

I hate all the silver and white. It reminds me of being in a hospital.

I prefer pink, a pale baby pink to be exact.

“What do you think of your room?”

“Lovely,” I answer, yet another lie. This one doesn't feel that bad to say though, as it's a lie that doesn't harm her feelings. The woman couldn't care less about what I think of this room.

“Then I will leave you in peace. As it's your first day, there is no classes for you. Come here.” She waves me over to the dressing table. There's a tablet encased in the wall beside the mirror. She touches the screen and a white light flashes in my eyes.

“Welcome to Holly Oak Academy, Miss Regan Hall. May I serve you?”

I'm a little startled by the voice. It reminds me of Alexa from my iPhone but more posh. More British.

Mrs Beach nods to the tablet. “This is Daisy and she serves the academy and all of its students. You can ask her to see the food menu and times it can be served to you. You may also order drinks and snacks at any time of the day or night. Daisy is also in an app on your phone and she can direct you to classes if you get lost or if there is anything you need at all.”

“Sweet,” I say, and this time I mean it. Daisy could be very useful.

“The modern technology of the rich is such a delight. Daisy also has a feature that will show you any student and a brief summary of who they are. It is to help you fit in and make friends.”

I take an important note of that. If I make any enemies, at least I will easily be able to figure out how to bring them down with Daisy's help. Robots helping me take out my haters. What a time to be alive,

“Is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Hall?” Mrs Beach asks, her voice curt and not a hint of emotion on her face.

“No, thank you,” I reply just as impassively and she nods her head before walking to the door.

“I do hope you fit in well at Holly Oak Academy,” she adds over her shoulder.

I don't answer her as she leaves my room, closing the door quietly behind her.



Chapter Three

After unpacking my clothes, I spread my pink blanket across my bed and sit on the edge, looking at the window for a moment, the breeze lifting the curtains ever so softly. I dig my fingers into the fuzzy blanket, reminding me of a moment not so long ago. As the memory tries to flash into my mind, I shake my head and stand up, going to the window and harshly pulling the curtains open.

I look down into the grass fields behind the castle, which is littered with large oak trees that cast deep shadows across the grass. I catch the gaze of a boy standing in the middle of the field, his muscular arms crossed against his black sweater, his short brown hair lifting in the wind, though it's not short enough to put any girl off. From his sharp cheekbones, to his bright grey eyes, he is one hell of an attractive guy. You certainly wouldn't kick him out of bed for any reason.

He openly stares at me, and the more I gaze back, the more I don't want to look away. He's addictively attractive, like many of the rich are, but in a way I've never seen before.

A sudden knock on the door pulls me from the trance, and I blink, trying to forget the strangely alluring guy. Sex with hot guys is not what I need right now. *Or is it?* No, not since... I pause, seeing a black envelope slide under my door.

Frowning, I walk over and pick it up, scanning the messy silver writing on the front. I go back to my bed, cross my legs over the blanket and slide my finger under the envelope,

dragging out a letter. The handwriting is elegant and loopy, indicating a well brought up person wrote it, but I can't tell if it's a girl or boy. It doesn't matter because as I read the letter, the emotions I usually have a tight grip on scatter to the wind and my heartbeat makes me nothing but fearful.

Dear my pretty liar.

I would start this letter off with a "I know what you did last summer" statement, but that would be redundant.

We both know exactly what you did last summer.

Only one of us wants it kept a secret.

And that one of us is not me.

Now we have a problem, but I have a solution.

Kill Ethan Remington, Josh Dedicar, Hunter Cross, Nathan Cross and Lucas Georgian.

Simple, isn't it?

And don't worry, they have done terrible things. Almost as bad as you.

Almost.

Before you kill any of them, you have to find out what they did.

It's part of the game.

If you fail, I will know, and the world will know your secret in less than an hour.

Don't fail, my pretty liar.

Sweet dreams,

Your Truth

“Shit. Shit. *Shit!*” I throw the letter onto my bed and run over to the door, my heart thrashing in my ears. When I pull it open, nothing but an empty corridor stands before me. I’m not sure what I was expecting. The sender clearly doesn’t want me to know who they were. I slam my door and rush over to my bed, grabbing hold of the letter again. I read it three more times before coming to the conclusion that I don’t have a choice. This letter isn’t a bluff. They know. *They know what I’m hiding, fuck how do they know?*

My secret would destroy me, my parents and so many more people.

I have to protect it at all costs. Any cost.

Looks like I have a game to play.



Chapter Four

First stage of the game is easy. I need to make friends—
ASAP. Not just any friends. I need the popular girls to like me because they're the ones who have all the secrets of the academy. Fortunately, my best friend, Anne, goes to this school and I think she's already friends with them. I just need to worm my way in.

From what I've worked out from Daisy, my unlucky victims are the typical hot rich guys.

Ethan Remington is the son of the vice president and I expect he will be the most difficult to befriend, seeing as there is zero information about him online. No photos of him at night clubs, drunk, no ex-girlfriends selling their story of him to the press. He is elusive and there isn't a recent photo of him anywhere. The only one I could find hides his face, so that's no use. Daisy doesn't have photos of him, either. All I'm able to get is a brief rundown on Google. Indeed, he'll be the hardest to crack.

Lucas Georgian is the only son of a tech billionaire, but it turns out he's a good boy like Ethan. Well, publicly at least. Usually boys like them hide everything from the public eye for a reason.

Hunter and Nathan Cross are entirely different matters. Their faces are shown everywhere as the party boys they are. Their parents are both inventors of some medical cure, of what I

could not find out, but either way, they're millionaires that fit right in at this academy.

Josh Dedicán is an interesting one. There is little information about who his parents are, which means they must be someone important.

Overall, the game so far seems easy. Make the rich guys pay once I figure out what they have done to deserve it. I have no doubt they've all done something. My little Truth seems adamant they're to answer for their sins. I just need to find out what they are and kill them. Sounds straight-forward for someone like me, doesn't it?

Maybe if we weren't surrounded by hundreds of other students.

And maybe if I had only one target.

I've never killed more than one person at a time. A little part of me dies every time I do which is always on my birthday. The first velvet box I ever received was when I turned twelve. I'd woken up excited, thinking it was something sparkly, but it wasn't.

It was a gun.

And underneath the engraved handle, there was a handwritten note containing one name, one time slot, and one address.

Mother drove me to the location that day. It was my first time killing someone. I guess she wanted to make sure my father's secretary was gone for good. She even disposed of the body for me when I broke down into inconsolable sobs. Sometimes, when I close my eyes at night, I can still see the blood spilling onto those horribly white tiles, framing the young woman's skull like a work of art. That's what Mother called the way my victim's blood poured out—art. Beautiful, incomparable art.

It's been six years of this 'tradition'. Six years of constant venom creeping into my veins, poisoning me from the inside out. Every scream, cry or useless plea squeezed out from my victims are all part of my parents' plan to turn me into the perfect, cold-blooded killer. I've tried to disassociate myself, to

hold on to that tiny part of my soul that's not covered in blood, but with what happened last year, I'm beginning to think it's a lost cause. Whatever used to be me is now buried six feet under along with my secret.

The secret I must now kill four people to protect.

Just when I thought life couldn't get any more unbearable.

I smooth my hands down my uniform. I've literally been trained to kill since I was a kid. While most people get nice presents for their birthdays, perhaps even a cake to blow out and make a wish, I get a hit. Whoever wrote that damn letter was well aware of that. At least this uniform will help me blend in as a 'normal' person.

Being normal makes assassinating people that little bit easier.

Turning around in the mirror, I take a final look over my uniform. The plaid skirt is different to my last one. It's dark green with a white shirt that I've unbuttoned at the top. I decided to go with a simple pair of flats today, the same black as my thigh-high socks with the little pink bows at the top. I grab my leather bag off my bed, and with Daisy's instructions on where to go, I make my way to the cafeteria. My first class is English Lit and I'm surprisingly looking forward to it.

Yesterday I thought we were headed for a storm. As I make my way down the hallway towards the cafeteria, everything is bathed in sunlight. Streams of morning light bleed through the stone archways and there's not a cloud visible in the clear-blue sky. Autumn leaves cover the ground, crunching under my shoes. The sound of laughter coming from the cafeteria carries to my ears. Feeding time at the zoo. I wonder if Anne will be there. Or doesn't she have a hospital appointment today?

I pause outside the entrance. Halloween decorations hang above the door with colourful posters running down the wall beside it. I stop to read one of them. *'A spooktacular night awaits at the Halloween Masque Ball on the 31st October! Contact Ethan for tickets at the Student Council, Room 1.'*

"Ethan..." I whisper, taking note of the room. Looks like I've just found my first target.

“The last time I checked, that *was* my name, cutie,” a male voice announces beside me. “Ethan Remington. A pleasure to meet you, Miss...?”

I turn to see a gorgeous boy standing in front of me. Everything about him is pristine, from the tight Windsor knot of his plaid tie to his shiny black shoes. He smiles at me, and his pearly-white teeth are straight with a slight gap between his two front ones. He’s dazzlingly cute, all blond hair and blue eyes. He’s also the person I need to kill. Figures.

“Oh, uhh, hi! I’m Regan Hall,” I answer quickly, forcing myself to come across shy and awkward. “Sorry. I was actually going to look for you after class. I’d like to buy a ticket, please?”

Ethan gives me a quick once over, his lips pulled into a lopsided smirk. “We have a few left. Why don’t you come look for me at lunch? I’ll be in the student council room from twelve to one.”

I give him my sweetest of smiles. “Oh, thank you so much! I’m super grateful.”

“Are you new here?”

“Is it really that obvious?” I squirm and look away, twirling a strand of my hair.

He shakes his head. “Not really. It’s my job to know everyone as Head Boy of the Student Council. I’d remember a face like yours though, cutie.”

To my astonishment, this time I do blush. It’s been a long time since anyone’s said anything nice to me. I’ve kind of forgotten what it feels like to be hit on.

I inwardly shake my head.

Hell. No. Regan! We’ve got a job to do here. Now isn’t the time for wishy-washy compliments.

“*Ethan!* What the hell are you doing?”

A girl marches up to us, her face turning purple with rage. She’s pretty and petite, and she’s wearing the same uniform as me. But her buttons are loosely done, deliberately showing off her cleavage, and her skirt is an inch or two shorter. She places

her hands on her hips and purses her cherry red lips at Ethan. I'm surprised she doesn't have any steam whistling out from her ears.

"Hounding the new girl already?" she spits at him. "Why didn't you return my call last night?"

Ethan holds out a poster to her. "On the contrary, I was here to hang up this." He points to the letters BYOB written boldly over the pumpkins. "Mrs Beach finally gave us the go-ahead."

The girl leans in and squints her eyes at the letters. "Bye-obb. What does bye-obb even mean?"

Ethan rolls his eyes at her. "Bring your own booze, Matilda. Way to make yourself look like a fool in front of the new girl."

Matilda turns to me, and I swear if looks could kill, Ethan would be dead right now.

Pity. That would have made my job all the easier.

"Don't let Ethan bully you into signing up for any of the council's bullshit," she tells me, gesturing to the posters. "He likes to rope newbies into doing his dirty work for him."

Ethan doesn't even dignify her with an answer. Instead, he simply tacks the poster to the wall, turns on his heel, and hums his way down the corridor. I feel like I've just been involuntarily included in a lover's spat.

"Urgh — *men!*" Matilda shakes herself, turning her dark brown eyes on me. "Apologies about that. We dated once. He's an asshole, it ended badly, and now he preys on the innocent every chance he can get. He thinks he can get away with it because his daddy is the vice president, but don't let him fool you. He's a total sleazebag."

"Thanks for the heads up," I say quietly. This girl has got to be one of the popular ones. Time to wiggle my way into her little clique. "I really appreciate that. He told me to go find him at lunch so I can buy a ticket for the ball..."

Her eyes nearly bulge out from her sockets. "Of *course* he would. Don't even bother. I can get you a ticket through my friend. That way you can steer clear from Ethan. He's honestly such a waste of air."

Then why were you calling him last night, I want to ask, but that's not part of my 'shy new girl' persona.

The cafeteria doors open and a pair of female students walk out. They cast a glance my way and I offer them a smile, which only one of them returns.

"Would you like to sit with us?" Matilda offers, nodding to the doors. "We're a mixed bunch but you'd be more than welcome."

I smile bashfully at her. "That would be lovely. Thank you, Matilda."

"Call me Tilda," she says, leading me into the cafeteria. "All my other friends do."

If things keep going as smoothly as this, these boys will be dead in no time.



Chapter Five

“This way,” Matilda instructs, waving her hand at me and her ‘followers’ like she rules the damn world. I’ve never liked the popular girls, not once, especially the rich ones. The only girl I’ve actually ever been friends with used to live near me—rich, too—but Anne Hopkins is a nice person.

These girls aren’t nice.

Charlie May, Imogen Miller and Matilda May. Holly Oak Academy’ version of Charlie’s Angels, except they don’t kill people.

That’s my job.

Charlie and Matilda are cousins, but as I glance at Charlie in her ‘custom’ uniform which is little more than a crop top and a tiny skirt that doesn’t cover her ass, I figure Matilda got all the brains of the family.

Imogen is quiet, to the point she hasn’t said a word to me over breakfast. She has bright auburn hair, natural I suspect, and a seriously attractive body, but she has that look in her eyes I’ve seen a thousand times before. It’s a look that suggests she has all but given up with the world. So far, she’s a mystery to me, one I intend to find out.

As we round a corner, a guy with dark spiky hair and a crazy muscular body crashes into Imogen. He swoops her up into his arms and kisses her like he hasn’t seen her in years. I catch how Imogen tenses and practically freezes in his hold. Matilda and

Charlie carry on walking, and I follow, looking back to see the guy still smothering her, and no one seems to care or notice.

“So gross. Why she doesn’t move schools, I will never know,” Charlie says, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger.

“What do you mean?” I ask softly, playing the innocent and dumb with a worried look on my face.

“Oh, you are too new to freak out. Just stay away from Hunter Cross, and his brother too, for that matter. They’re trouble,” Matilda informs me, pointing to her mouth and pretending to gag.

Dammit. Maybe I played the innocent card a little too well...

I look back at Hunter as he crushes Imogen against his chest, and she looks empty as she stares down the corridor at something I cannot see.

At least I’ve found another one of the guys on my checklist. I reckon his sin has something to do with Imogen and being her friend is exactly how I’m going to find out the truth. No girl looks that broken without having their heart shattered. I’m going to find out Hunter’s sin one way or another, and if that means using Imogen as bait, so be it.

I have too much at stake to play fair.

“Daisy said you have English Lit first, and neither one of us are in that class,” Matilda says, pausing in the middle of the large room full of students. That makes me aware of two things about Tilda: one, she has her eye on me enough to research all the classes I have, and two, she’s sneaky. I never saw her look up my details. It makes me wonder if it is her that knows my secret and wrote the letter. It has to be someone after all. “Anyway, see you later, Regan.”

“See you later,” I echo, pulling on a sickly sweet smile.

Charlie wiggles her fingers at me as a goodbye, then the two of them link arms and strut down the hallway like God’s gift to man.

It’s not hard to find my first classroom, considering the sign on the door written in large white writing. The door is shut and I

glance at my Apple Watch. I'm ten minutes early. If it were any other class, I would be annoyed, but I've always loved English Lit. I guess it's the romantic at heart side of me that connects with the stories in the books.

Reading has been the one escape my parents can't take away from me or control.

Without books, I'm not sure I would've survived beyond my thirteenth birthday.

Turning the handle, I push open the door and step inside, not quite expecting to see a guy kissing a woman who's clearly a bit older.

And I *think* she's the teacher.

"Oh my God," the teacher exclaims, jumping off the desk and pushing the guy away.

He just laughs as he strides over to me, a look of pride on his face. I don't move as he pushes the door shut with one shove, and then looks down at me. The first thing I notice is his eyes, their smokey topaz colouring sucking me in. I've always loved shiny things. His skin is dark, matching his long Cornrows braided hair that is tied back. He smirks, drawing my attention to his lips, which are large and look like they could be really, really good at some naughty things.

I bet the teacher is well aware of that already. Tut tut.

She's frantically patting down her pinstriped suit. "Josh, what if she tells someone?"

She repeats this a few times but Josh only grins as he steps closer to me. Easy there, tiger. I move one step back until he's boxing me into the door. He places his large hands flat against the door and leans down, putting us at direct eye level.

I could get him to move in the blink of an eye.

But I could also see what he's going to do.

The latter wins as I play innocent once more and stay so perfectly still.

"She won't say anything, will you?" His voice is so damn deep, and gravelly, that it makes me shiver. It has a slight

southern American twang, and damn does it turn me on. “A pretty little thing like you doesn’t want to get in trouble, does she?”

“You want me to say yes, don’t you?” I spit back at him, my tone just as condescending as I tilt my head to the side. “You want to make trouble for me.”

“Darling, you see right through me.” He leans down closer, so close I’m stuck breathing in his smokey cinnamon scent, and the peppermint from his toothpaste. It’s not bad, to my annoyance. It’s a little intoxicating. “What’s your name?”

“Regan Hall,” I answer flatly.

“Joshua Dedicán. Nice to meet you,” he says and leans back, crossing his arms. “If you mutter a word about this, I’m going to make you pay for it. Understand?”

I only grin as I push past him and find a desk that is empty near the back. I sit down and cross my arms as Joshua tries to calm down the teacher who appears even more frantic about her scandal. It’s honestly quite amusing. I can’t say I’m not going to have fun reporting this later on, because I am. Mrs Bitch—I mean, Mrs *Beach* is going to love me for this gossip, and hopefully, she will stay off my back if she thinks I’m a goody two shoes.

What can I say? I’m a jealous bitch and I quite like Josh Dedicán. Plus, I need his full attention if I’m going to find a way to kill him later on. He has a bigger secret than just screwing around with our teacher, and just like with Hunter Cross, I’m going to find it out. While I really don’t have a choice in the matter, I’m actually looking forward to finding out what delicious sin Joshua has committed.

The classroom fills with students only a few moments later and I watch Joshua sit in the seat in front of me, his broad shoulders causing a shadow to slide over my desk. He looks back just once, and I know what he’s saying.

Don’t tell.

Shame he doesn’t realise exactly who he’s dealing with. I’m Regan Hall, and my secret is worth more than this one.



Chapter Six

Even assassins have fears.

Mine is general sports.

I know that's such a silly thing to be afraid of. It's not the physical requirement that puts me off, either. It's that I need to do it in front of so many people. That's the good thing about being an assassin: we hunt alone.

We *kill* on our own.

But all of this fitness malarky in front of other students is my idea of hell.

The only plus side is that Anne is here. It's been a few weeks since I've seen her. The last time we were together was at the funeral, but my vision had been obstructed by so many tears that I barely saw her. I had also been filled with too much shame and regret to talk to anyone. Anne simply held my hand throughout the service, reminding me that I would honestly be lost without her. I'm not even certain I'd be alive if it weren't for her.

My dearest mother forgot to mention that Anne was transferring to this hell hole academy with me, but it doesn't completely surprise me. Anne's parents are senior cops that are determined to keep her safe from the world and they wouldn't leave her in London where someone just died in those circumstances. With Anne also at this academy, it's like having

a touch of my old home here, my *real* home, and it makes me smile.

“Are you ready?” Anne asks, knocking on my cubicle door in the female changing rooms. “Everyone’s heading out to the field.”

“Just a minute,” I say, pulling on my cotton shorts.

All the other girls, including Anne, got dressed together. I decided to use one of the cubicles. The last thing I want is people questioning me about are the scars on my body—all thanks to my victims’ futile attempts to stay alive. The worst scar is the one I gained on my sixteenth birthday. It runs down the length of my spine. The target was called David Ray Jamieson. He was forty-three, divorced with twin children, a Civil Servant who just so happened to owe my father a lot of money and had resorted to blackmailing his way out of it.

Life tip number one—never try to blackmail an assassin.

Father thought it was time for me to take on a more substantial target, so he gave me the hit. I had crept into David’s house while his children slept in the other bedroom. They were young, around five or six, and I remember locking their door before sneaking into David’s bedroom.

After the hardest fight for my life, I managed to put a bullet through his skull. But it wasn’t easy. He’d used a piece of broken glass to slice into my back, and he would’ve ripped out my spine like he was gutting a fish if I hadn’t reached my gun in time. It was hands down the most terrifying experience of my life. It was like he knew I was coming that night.

To this day, I’m still not sure how I reached my mother’s car before passing out. The only reason I’m even alive is that my parents have one of the best surgeons in the United Kingdom at their beck and call. He flew out that night, and one kidney transplant and several broken ribs later, I was forced to stay home that whole summer. As my mother always says, a scar is a trophy of survival. Better to have plenty of scars than be dead. I just think of them as reminders that while I didn’t die that day, it’s only a matter of time.

“I’m ready,” I tell Anne, opening the door.

She's wearing the same light grey t-shirt and shorts like me, but she's much smaller and on the frailer side. Her hair is gathered into a messy bun at the top of her head and her normally pale skin is slightly flushed which is unusual for her. Even her hazel eyes don't have any dark bags framing them. I wonder if her new medication is working?

A sharp pang tears through my stomach. I still can't believe my best friend is dying.

We grew up on the same street in London since we were seven. We even moved into our houses the same week. She had a cool Raleigh Chopper bike, and she loved my electric scooter, so we swapped them when our parents weren't looking, and from then on, we became best friends. She's literally been there for me through everything. Despite that doesn't know about my secret or my dark past, I can still trust her wholeheartedly, and that's rare to come by in people.

I never in a million years thought her headaches and nosebleeds, which turned out to be a tumour, would become a terminal illness that is slowly but surely killing her. Anne is still adamant to live a normal as can be life, though. She's such an inspiration to me. I aspire to be just like her...strong, kind, and not a coldblooded killer.

"Are you ready to kick ass?" I ask, linking arms with her.

Anne giggles. "As always, girl. Let's go catch up with everyone." As we leave the changing rooms, she adds, "Do you still hate sports?"

"Fuck yeah. There's a special place in hell for the teachers who force me to do it."

She shakes her head at me, smiling weakly. "It's a little ironic that you're the most confident, bad-ass girl I know and yet you're terrified of jumping around like an idiot in public."

"Have you seen these girls?" I point to my breasts. "Two words: Black eyes. I don't fancy sustaining more injuries than necessary."

Another weak smile, followed by a yawn. "Yeah, well, I don't think I'll be much involved today either."

“Are you still having those bad headaches?”

She nods. “Always. Mum’s taking me for another scan on Friday.”

My heart clenches at the words. I hate hospitals and I especially hate the thought of Anne being in one. I’m always worried I’ll never see her again.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I offer gently, touching her arm.

Her eyes light up a little and she smiles. “No, I’ll be okay. Anyway, what about you? How are you finding the academy?”

We step onto the field where all the others have gathered. I spot Charlie May, who scrunches her face up at Anne before turning away to talk to another girl. I glare at the back of her skull. I don’t like that look she just gave my best friend.

“Well?” Anne probes, nudging me on the shoulder.

“It’s...interesting for sure. Lots of secrets, drama, and gossip. You know, my kind of place. *Not.*”

A tiny old woman in a tracksuit blows a whistle and waves everyone over. “Come on, gather around.”

Anne drags me over to hear what torture the teacher has lined up for us today. She whispers the teacher’s name, Ms. Lyons, and I’m surprised that for such a small woman, she has an incredibly deep and powerful voice. I spot Hunter talking to another boy who looks almost identical to him. His jet-black hair is shorter and he’s a few inches taller. He must be Hunter’s brother, Nathan Cross. According to Daisy, he’s a year older than us, so I’m not sure why he’s here today. Maybe he got held back a year? Not that it really matters. He’ll be pushing up daisies soon enough with the others.

Mrs. Lyons blows her whistle again. “I want two volunteers to be the team captains.”

I look away, but the old woman’s small, pig-like eyes latch onto me.

“Ah, Miss Hall. Perfect. This will help you fit right in.” She throws me a red ball, which I catch on instinct. Dodgeball isn’t my favourite sport but it could be a lot worse. “Hunter Cross,

step forward please. You'll each pick eight players. Go on. We haven't got all day."

Hunter smirks at me. "Ladies first."

I return his smirk. "Why, thank you. Such a gentleman."

I choose Anne first. Hunter picks Imogen, much to her obvious reluctance. I then pick his brother, Nathan, who arches an eyebrow as he comes over to stand with me. I pick a few random people, too, including Charlie May. Once we've picked our teams, I turn to Nathan.

"Hope you don't mind being on the new girl's team," I say quietly, dragging my bottom lip in between my teeth.

My inner Regan is totally gagging at how innocent I sound. But this is all part of my Shy New Girl persona. I need to keep up this pretence for as long as possible. A single crack in the facade could expose not only their sins, but my own, too.

Nathan runs a hand through his hair, his bowed lips pulled into a lopsided smile. "I don't mind. It means I get to help kick my brother's ass."

I grin at that. "Your help will certainly be useful. Does he have any weak spots?"

He snorts. "Try his face."

Ms. Lyons signals me and Hunter to join her. "Place your balls on the line and then join the others."

We do as she says. Plastic cones have been littered around the field, along with thick chalk lines, to map out our court. Ms. Lyons places two more balls at either side of mine and Hunter's, then steps back and raises her hand. I've played this game enough in previous schools to understand the rules. Five balls in total, the two on each team's left belongs to them, and the remaining two belong to whichever captain can grab it first. At least, that's how I played it in the past.

I look over at Hunter, and he's grinning at me, hunched over like he's about to run a marathon. If Nathan told me to go for his face, that's exactly what I'll be doing, preferably hard enough to give him a serious brain injury. Unlikely to happen, but one can certainly dream.

Before we start, Ms. Lyons comes over and asks Anne if she would like to sit this one aside. Anne is quick to brush off her off like she always does, and at the sound of Ms. Lyon's whistle, I lurch forward to grab the extra ball.

Nathan and Charlie seize our allocated balls and start to throw them at the opposing team. I just manage to touch the extra one when Hunter slides his foot in front of my face and kicks it behind him.

"Try better next time," he sneers, only giving me more incentive to crush him.

I dodge out of the way before he can hit me. He looks surprised at my agility. He hasn't seen anything yet. I join my team, picking up any of the balls I can get my hands on, and aim for Hunter. It's comforting to see Anne actually enjoying herself. Hell, I'm not hating this as much as I normally would. Maybe it's because I have a specific target.

While everyone launches balls at each other, I keep Hunter in sight and aim only for him. I almost smack him right between his eyes, but he's quick to dodge me and throws his ball my way. I duck out of the way, laughing at his pathetic throw. There's tension crackling between us like static electricity, and I love it.

Crave it.

The adrenalin.

The way he glares at me like he wants to fuck my brains out, and the way I look back at him like he's a prized cut of meat. I'm the predator and he's the prey. He might think otherwise, but I'm about to prove him wrong.

I dive for one of the balls, and mustering all my strength, I throw it at his smug face.

It hits him—*bingo!*—and he falls back, startled. He touches his bleeding nose and glances down at his finger. Ms. Lyons whistles at him, signalling he's been called out. I watch his other hand dig into his ball, turning his knuckles a peroxide white. A look of murder shadows his face and it gives me a thrill. I might not have given him a concussion or brain injury but blood is still

blood. All things considered, this hasn't been a total waste of time.

I move away to join my team. We have the most players already which means we're winning.

Nathan high-fives me. "Good one, Cap'n."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Pleasure was all mine. Next time, aim for his balls. That'll really piss him off."

I laugh, bending over to pick up one of the balls. There's clearly no love lost between these brothers. That's actually a good thing. I can use Nathan's help to get this over and done with sooner.

Anne lets out a scream. I spin around and find her crouched over, covering her face with her hands.

Panic grips hold of me and I rush over to her side. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Before she can answer, Ms. Lyons marches over, frantically blowing her whistle to stop the game. Anne does, however, point across the court. I follow her finger, and there's Hunter smirking at me, no longer carrying his ball. What. The fuck.

A veil drops over my eyes, and all I can see is red.

Hunter turns to walk away but I'm faster than his cowardice. I reach him before he can scurry off, and I grab his t-shirt and pull him down, knocking him off balance. My heart pounding in my ears, I can scarcely register what I'm doing. I'm all rage and instinct at this point, my body filled with white-hot fury, and Hunter knows that. I can see the realisation in his eyes—the fear and shock quickly settling in and clouding his features.

He deliberately struck Anne just so he could get back at me. Now he's regretting his move. *So he fucking should be!* He will suffer dearly for hurting Anne; no one hurts my best friend and gets away with it. But for now, with so many witnesses around me, a light warning will have to suffice.

I pull him down, bringing our noses so close I can feel his breath tickling my cheeks. "If you *ever* touch my friend again, I

will shove your dick so far up your arse you'll be giving yourself a fucking blowjob!"

I half expect Hunter to fight back but he doesn't. Coward.

Ms. Lyon wedges herself between us and pries my fingers off Hunter's shirt. The rest of the students are gathered around us, some of them smiling and others shooting daggers into my skull. Imogen, I notice, looks like she's just been told she's won the lottery.

"Wow, new girl. That was pretty fun to watch," Nathan tells me, tapping my shoulder. "You did good."

I'm still too worked up to respond to him. If I do, I'm pretty sure I'll be telling Nathan to watch his back.

Because he's next.



Chapter Seven

“Daisy, what classes do I have today?” I ask as I roll my black, thigh-length socks up and straighten the pink bows at the front. I’ve decided to tug my hair up into a tight bun, with a few slides holding it in.

“Maths, followed by a study class. If I may suggest an idea, the beauty parlour is quiet on Tuesday afternoons. It may be the perfect time to visit,” she says, and I roll my eyes. I don’t have time to have my nails done again or a massage. Every day is important—too important to spend getting pampered.

“Are you saying I’m not pretty, Daisy?”

“Everyone in the world is beautiful, Miss Hall.”

I chuckle at the robotic answer as I stand up and slip my shoes on. Grabbing my bag off my bed, I make my way to the cafeteria for breakfast, knowing Anne is waiting for me there. She’s an early bird, always has been since I’ve known her, whereas I don’t like mornings and never have done. Thank goodness for coffee or my hit list would be triple its length by now.

As soon as I get to the bottom of the steps and push the door to the girls’ rooms open, I hear the commotion. I jog down the hallway and around the corner, following the noise to see half the school in the main part of the castle, crowded around the door to the reception.

I push through the crowd and find Charlie and Imogen at the front, watching as the English Lit teacher is handcuffed by two policemen, and she struggles against them in her once tidy suit.

“Turns out Miss Hector has been super naughty,” Charlie jokes, clicking her tongue and laughing at the same time.

Other than me and Imogen, every other student has their phones out, recording as Miss Hector is dragged away. I’m sure one of these videos is going to go viral, or at least be a big scandal for the parents to complain about.

“I didn’t do anything. Someone is lying to you, Mrs Beach!” Miss Hector exclaims, her eyes searching the crowd until they land on me. She narrows her gaze and curls her lips, and I get the feeling she would try to kill me if she could.

Mrs Beach holds her head high, looking down on her like a tiny little bug she wants to stamp out from under her shoes. “I have video evidence taken from the CCTV cameras. There is no point lying your way out of this. You were placed in a position of trust with these students, and you have grossly let us down. Now get out of my academy.”

With a flick of her wrist, she gestures the officers to remove her from the building.

I almost feel bad for a second when Miss Hector stops resisting and hangs her head in resignation, a solitary tear slipping down her cheek. But then she looks up and twists her face again, her eyes burning into my own as she thrashes in the officers’ grip.

“You *brat!* Wait until I get my hands on you, you little snitch!”

I just smile in response. Karma’s a bitch and I love to watch her work. It’s such a pity Miss Hector won’t be able to get her hands on me where she’s going.

Once Miss Hector is dragged out of the academy, Mrs Beach turns her incinerating eyes on us. All the students holding their phones out slowly drop their hands like a wave just from her death stare. “As for everyone here, go to breakfast. Now.”

I'm impressed at how quickly she scares everyone into action.

"I'm sorry about what Hunter did," Imogen says quietly, and I didn't even notice she was still at my side. "Anne didn't deserve that."

I smile tightly at her, seeing her red puffy eyes, but then I see something more concerning. On her neck, there are bruises, recent ones too, with dark finger indentations. Imogen sees me staring at them so she tightens the silk scarf that she always wears and looks away. Makes sense why she wears it now.

"Did Hunter do that to you?" I ask but she doesn't reply. She just stares with an empty look as Hunter appears behind us and wraps his arms around Imogen's waist.

"You don't want to be friends with *her*," Hunter all but growls, glaring at me from over Imogen's shoulder, and holding her so tightly to his chest that she lets out a strangled protest. "She's a crazy bitch. I already told you, Imogen."

"I'm not the crazy one," I reply with a smirk, silently begging him to keep pushing my buttons.

"That's what all the crazy people say," Hunter shoots back, pulling Imogen away.

Fuck. I likely just got her in a shit load of trouble with her psycho boyfriend. I can't help but feel a little guilty as I watch Hunter drag her away.

Turning around, I head to the cafeteria, my stomach grumbling all the way there. Just before I push open the doors, a large hand grabs my wrist and drags me into a cleaning closet, slamming the door shut behind us. I know it's Joshua from his scent alone and I knew he would be coming for me. I just took his toy away, after all.

"You fucking bitch," he growls.

Well, he isn't wrong there.

"Tut, tut, Joshy. You do have a temper," I tease, grinning as he grabs my other wrist and pushes me against the door with his body. I'm half tempted to put him on his ass, but then again, I need to get close to him to find out what his sin is. He looks

stark raving mad, and I find it rather sexy on him. Anger suits Josh, like it is how he's meant to be. "Were you in love with your teacher? Was it that special of a fuck to you?"

His eyes darken into slits, and he growls venomously: "No, I just want a replacement."

I chuckle at how ludicrous he sounds. "I'm no one's replacement, Josh. Go find some desperate girl who is happy to suck your magical cock."

"Yeah, but that would be no fun. I like a challenge and you fucking owe me. Come to my room, number eleven, at midnight or you won't like the punishment you'll get," he demands, digging his fingers into my wrists.

I don't answer him. Watching his temper flare is so fucking hot.

He lets me go before pulling the door open, and I walk out first. He storms past me and I watch him go, amused by his temper tantrum and intrigued by his punishment idea.

That was unexpected.

I'm not going to his room, though, and the thought of him waiting makes me smile.

I head into the cafeteria and quickly grab a tray of food. Charlie's Angels wave me over to their table, but Hunter is sitting with them and I'm not interested in being near him. Anyhow, Anne isn't there and no matter how much I need the popular girls on my side, I won't let her down. I spot Anne in the corner, her eye swollen and bruised, and to my surprise, she isn't alone. There's a cute guy checking over her bruise. He's the one from outside my window on my first day here! The gorgeous face and dark gray eyes—it's him alright, and my pulse quickens.

I walk over and they both look up as Anne giggles. Actually giggles like I don't hear her do that often. I smile at her as I sit opposite them and place my tray on the table, my eyes on the stranger instead of my food. His russet hair looks softer and messy in a sexy devil-may-care way. His muscular but lean shoulders fill out his white shirt and his sleeves are rolled up, something that always makes a guy ten times hotter. I spot a

tattoo hiding just under his collar, which has been tugged loose, and the green tie makes his eyes appear somewhat brighter. Without really admitting it, I've been keeping an eye out for him. He's even hotter than I remember.

"This is Lucas Georgian," Anne explains, patting her friend on the shoulder. "We've known each other for a long time. His family and mine go skiing together in France every year. Do you remember me telling you about him?"

Oh, I most certainly do. Anne has had a crush on this guy for years, and it's one of the main reasons she hasn't dated anyone else. Figures he has to be off-limits for me, the only guy I've looked at since...

"You must be Regan Hall," Lucas says, offering his hand. "I've heard about you from Anne."

"All bad things, I hope." I wink at them, and reach over the table to shake his hand. The second his hand touches mine, I feel a connection I really don't want as we stare at each other. There's that draw you get sometimes when you meet a guy, like your body is saying *hey cute fella, I choose you!* Only this time my body can piss off, because no. He's off limits.

Off. Limits.

I roughly tug my hand away from his and look down at my food, pretending he isn't here.

Lucas Georgian is Anne's crush, and one of the guys on my list. That means he did something bad—bad enough that someone wants him dead. Anne is too kind to have a fucked-up boyfriend, so I need to figure out what he did. Just not the way I planned to seduce the others. No, this target is going to be the hardest of them all.



How I ended up in the beauty parlour with Charlie, Imogen, Tilda and Anne, I don't know. Maths and study class were a total breeze and I'm glad the day is over. I might not have killed

any of my boys yet, but there's still time. Besides, I'm due a little pampering.

I slip into the hot tub and lean back as the other girls join me. Anne looks pale and uncomfortable in her white swimming suit but I think it's good for her to spend some time around other girls. Charlie and Tilda are wearing skimpy red bikinis that barely cover anything. In comparison, Imogen and I have chosen black swimming costumes that cover-up a lot, only I suspect we have different reasons. Now I can see the extent of the bruises on Imogen's wrists and they're bad. Real bad. She usually hides them with bracelets and long tops, but she wasn't able to do that here, and seeing all the marks on her body makes me livid. I'm sure there are plenty more.

"Anne, you have super pretty hair," Charlie says with unexpected sincerity. "My hair is filled with extensions to get it that long. It just doesn't grow well."

"I've always been blessed with thick hair that never stops growing. It's a family trait," she replies in her sweet little meek voice. I can't understand why anyone wouldn't love her.

"So you and Lucas. Are you dating?" Tilda asks, and I suspect this is the only reason she asked Anne to come with us. And the fact that I said it was up to Anne to decide after our maths lesson.

"No, no," she quickly mumbles. "I can't date anyone with how sick I am. It wouldn't be fair."

An awkward pause stretches between us. There's always an awkward pause when Anne openly talks about her illness. I don't understand why people need to act so weird about it. Anne doesn't, so why would they?

"Oh, well, you'll get better and then you two can date," Charlie replies, leaning back against the tub.

I swallow the lump gathering in my throat. I'm one of the few people who know that Anne won't be getting any better. It's only a matter of time now. One day, I'll have to say goodbye to my best friend for good, and I don't know how I will ever face that day.

“But Lucas and I are going to the Halloween Ball together. That should be fun,” Anne adds excitedly, unaware of how much I hate that new fact.

Lucas did something terrible. He isn't safe for Anne.

That's what I don't like.

Or at least, that's what I'm telling myself...

“It will! We will have to discuss dresses soon. I don't want any of us wearing the same colour,” Tilda states and the other girls nod in agreement.

“Good idea!” Anne beams, and just like that, they're the best of friends and I don't have to worry. “So who are you guys going to the ball with?”

“Hunter,” Imogen answers first, her voice dripping with disgust and it goes awkwardly silent again, with only the sound of the bubbling water to fill the void until Charlie speaks.

“Tilda and I are going with the Hanson twins. They're good in bed so they'll do just nicely.”

They all turn to look at me then, and I sigh.

“I'm not going with anyone. I prefer to fly solo.”

Charlie seems to choke on her own spit. “Flying solo is no fun and it's 2019! Sex is just another thing we do,” she exclaims in shock. “Come on, girl. Live a little.”

“What can I say? I'm boring, and don't like to be tied down by guys,” I explain to her.

“I don't blame you at all. Ethan was my last boyfriend and look how that turned out,” Tilda mutters. “Men are arseholes.”

“True that,” Charlie replies just as the door to the room opens and a waiter comes in with our drinks, mini cupcakes and bowls of handmade crisps.

One perk of this rich ass academy, the service and food are damn good. The waiter places all our things on the gaps on top of the hot tub for them before coming back to me.

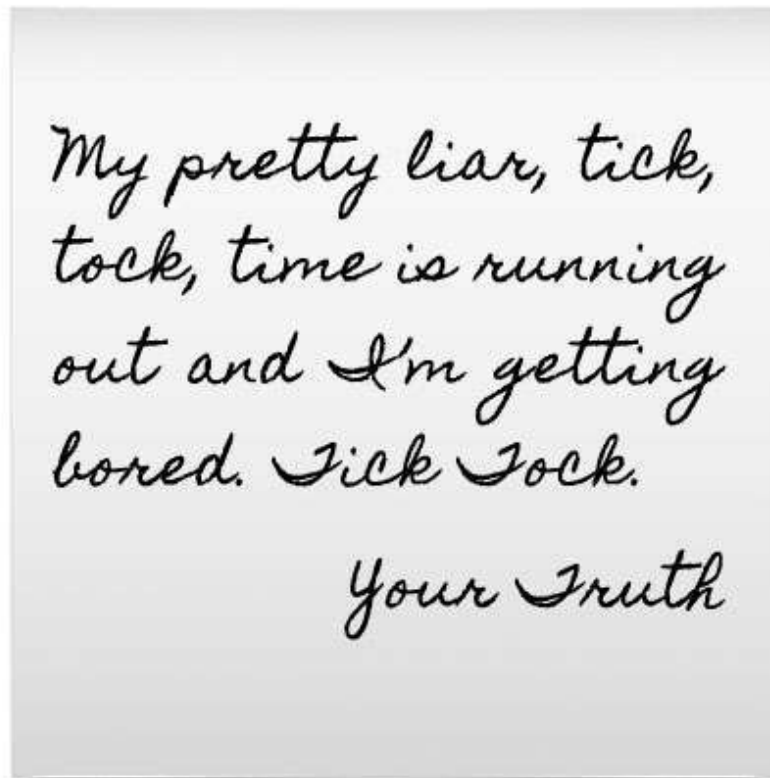
“This was left for you at the reception, Miss.” He hands me a black note, and I freeze in fear for a long pause. There's only

two people in my life who have ever sent me handwritten notes, and one of them is sitting right beside me. If it's not Anne, it must be my blackmailer.

“By who?” I whisper to the waiter as I turn around and take the note from him.

“I'm not sure. It was left and we didn't see. There was a big group of students that came in at the time and it could have been any of them. I'm sure if you open it, you will find out.”

I can't help but frown at his reply. Of course my letter sender covered his blackmailing ass. I rip the letter open, expecting to see another list of unlucky victims, but there's only one sentence. One sentence that makes my heart drop into the pit of my stomach.



My pretty liar, tick,
tock, time is running
out and I'm getting
bored. Tick Tock.

Your Truth

Fuck.



Chapter Eight

I feel like death warmed over when I wake up the next morning. It's far too early and my little coffee machine was maliciously broken sometime during the night. Well, more like I took a Louboutin to it when I got back to my room after receiving Truth's letter. The machine never poured fast enough and one thing led to another. While it was a good way to let off some steam without hurting anyone, or myself, I'm regretting it now. I could really do with some coffee.

As if on cue, my phone chimes in my bag. I take it out and read a text from Anne.

Got breakfast. Meet you in the rotunda xx

Anne Hopkins. Angel in disguise.

I reread the last part and scrunch up my face. "Where the hell is the rotunda?"

Daisy's little flower icon appears on my screen. "Holly Oak's rotunda is a popular meeting point for students and is located in the main vestibule."

Oh. Yeah. Duh. I really need some coffee.

"Thanks, Daisy."

I leave my room and head down to the main part of the castle. Lucas is waiting by the fountain with Anne, his arm draped protectively over her shoulders. He smiles and winks at me when he sees me approaching. I can see why Anne fancies him so much. He's got a killer smile, and those dimpled cheeks...

Anne hands me a Belgian waffle half-wrapped in a brown paper bag, followed by a cup of coffee. "Figured you'd be running a little late. You looked exhausted when we left last night. Are you feeling any better?"

I nod and take the items from her, super grateful for her sweet nature. She's always been kind and thoughtful like this even when she can't eat any of this herself.

Shoving a large bit of waffle into my mouth, I say, "You have no idea how thankful I am right now."

"Not a morning person?" Lucas asks, pinching a bit of my waffle.

I smack his hand away. "Eh, eh. Go get your own."

Before he can snatch any more, I gobble the rest of the waffle and flush it down with some coffee. Lucas just stares at me as if I've grown an extra head. Poor Mother would be mortified if she saw me do that. She always said 'leave some food for Mr Manners' but screw that. I scrunch the paper bag into a ball and toss it into the nearby bin, giving him a mic-drop look.

"Yeah, I should have warned you," Anne tells him, giggling. "Regan doesn't like to share food when she's hungry."

I fold my arms over my chest, adding, "I will kill a bitch before I ever do that."

Lucas lets out an exaggerated huff. "Fine. Duly noted. Are you ready for art?"

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Yes... Are you stalking me now as well as stealing my food?"

Anne giggles again, and it's such a lovely sound to hear. I wish she'd do it more often. "Lucas has the same class with you, Rae. He said he'd walk you there in case you got lost."

I turn my steely eyes onto the boy in question. “Next you’ll be strapping a toddler harness to my back. Don’t worry. I know to look both ways when crossing the road, Mr Georgian, and yes, I made sure to go to the ladies’ room before coming down here. Fear not, my good friend.”

Both Anne and Lucas burst out laughing. I’m pleased Lucas isn’t horrified by my sense of humour. Most people take me too seriously. I suppose they should. Sometimes I’m not joking when I say I’ll kill a bitch, depending on who that bitch is.

“You are a funny one, Rae Rae, I’ll give you that,” Lucas says, ruffling my hair with his big hand.

Him touching me and calling me that should *really* piss me off.

But it doesn’t.

It actually feels kind of... good. I can’t let him know that though, so I lift my chin and wave a dismissive hand at him, saying, “Well then. Lead on, noble steed.”

He chuckles and gives Anne a quick hug before stepping away. I hug her, too, and she’s grinning at me from ear-to-ear. I think she knows I’ve taken a shine to Lucas. I’m not the easiest person to befriend. Sure, I can put on one of my many masks to make friends if need be. That’s just part of being an assassin. We hide behind different faces in order to reach our target, but actually allowing myself to joke in front of someone I just met? Someone I need to kill? Yeah, I think that’s a first for me.

I follow Lucas up the spiral stairs, drinking my yummy coffee. “I thought all the classrooms were through there?” I point out, gesturing to the doors on the ground floor.

“Most of them are. Mrs. Fleur is in the west tower. She’s a bit of a...quirky soul. You’ll see what I mean.”

He leads the way to the tower, making a drastic point of opening the doors for me. I shake my head at the way he bows like I’m some kind of queen. A part of me actually likes it, seeing a guy bowing to me. I could get used to watching Lucas do that amongst other things.

My stomach clenches. No, no, no. I've got to stop this. Anne likes him. Not me. I need to get a grip. After everything that happened, I shouldn't *want* to date another guy.

Especially not someone on my hitlist.

Scowling at my treacherous thoughts, I follow Lucas down another hallway and into a glass elevator. It lifts us smoothly to the top of the tower. When its doors ping open and we step out, I'm surprised to find this part of the academy more rustic than the rest. No more white tiles or bland walls. Up here, the interior is a rich polished wood, with ornate furnishings and old tapestries hanging on the walls. The door to the classroom is actually a beautiful arch that has intricate details carved into the wood. The smell of incense envelopes my senses, and while it's not a bad smell it is rather suffocating.

"You'll get used to the smell," Lucas whispers in my ear, ushering me through the archway.

Even the layout is different to anything I've seen so far. Three rows of dark wooden benches run down the length of the floor. Some of them are filled with other students who are busy chatting with each other. I dump my coffee in the bin and Lucas steers me to the bench tucked away against the oval-shaped window at the back of the classroom. As soon as we sit down and drop our bags at our feet, an old woman pops out from a hidden door in the wall. I nearly jump out of my skin. Damn woman just popped up like a daisy!

"Welcome, welcome, my little turtle doves. I hope everyone is feeling energised after the New Moon we were blessed with on Monday."

She widens her arms as if she's hugging the air around her and speaks in a soft, whispery voice that's almost difficult to hear. Going by her many layers of eclectic clothing and the bangles decorating her head-to-foot like a wind chime, she must be a tree hugger. I have a weird feeling I'm going to like her compared to the other teachers here.

"With Mars in retrograde, now is the time for reflection and assessing one's deepest desires," she continues, cupping her hands against her heart. A few of the students groan. Now I know what Lucas meant by quirky. More like deluded if she

thinks astrology is legit. “I would like each of you to draw a portrait of the person sitting beside you. What do you think they desire? Take a wild guess and incorporate it somehow into your portrait. It can be an object, a symbol, or whatever your little heart whispers to you so long as it’s not anything *crude*. Malcolm,”—she motions a red-haired boy over—”please will you do the honours and hand out the materials?”

“Fine.”

The boy grumbles and heads over to the cupboards stacked against the wall. While he hands out paper and charcoal sticks, I look out the window and try to think of a way out of this stupid assignment. It’s like the universe has paired me with Lucas for this just for the fun of it.

What do I think he desires? I don’t know. Anne?

I look over at him, and he’s staring at me.

“So. What do you desire, Miss Hall?”

I swallow. Hard. I really don’t want to answer that.

“A way out of here?” I reply quickly, giving him a nervous laugh.

Lucas leans over the table and gazes into my eyes. I pull back slightly, my heart racing, and I’m almost tempted to move away or punch him in the throat. Either way, I don’t want him to see the blackness in my eyes—the blackness my parents have tried so desperately hard to see consume me. What if it’s true when people say the eyes are the windows to our souls? Does that mean Lucas can see how dark and twisted I am inside?

Tearing my gaze away, I grab a piece of paper, and ask casually, “What about you, noble steed? What do you desire?”

He takes a moment to reply me. I can feel his eyes still pressed on my face and his scrutiny makes me a little uncomfortable. Maybe he was able to glance at my soul. Maybe it sickened him like it does me when I’m haunted by my victims’ screams at night.

“Forgiveness,” he answers softly, and I look up at him, startled by his response. All the mirth has gone from his face and he’s dead serious now. “A fresh start.”

“Don’t we all desire that?” I counter, handing him some paper and a charcoal stick. “But you’ll have to go to church if you want forgiveness.”

His eyebrows lift. “You’re religious?”

I snort. “Do I look religious?”

Another unsettling pause.

It really is like he’s seen what I am deep down: a monster.

“Nah. Bible-bashing ain’t really yours or my style.” He leans back, picking up his charcoal. “I tell you what, though, I could do with some pancakes right about now.”

“Did you miss breakfast?”

Talk about a rapid change of subject. I’m relieved though. That was rather intense.

Lucas crosses his arms and tilts his head. “I was too busy getting the waffle you so very kindly shared with me.”

He makes me laugh, and I quickly cover my mouth to suppress it. “So that’s what you desire? Pancakes?”

I watch him wet his lips and nod. “Pancakes.”

“Funny,” I say to him, “so do I.”

And then I do something completely out of character.

I smile at him, *really* smile, because I know that whatever he saw lurking within me, it didn’t horrify him. We wouldn’t be sitting here chatting about pancakes if it did. I’d be in a straitjacket on my way to the asylum, or back to my parents for further ‘training’.

I don’t know why, but there’s something about Lucas Georgian that puts me at ease.

By all accounts, there shouldn’t be anything I like about him. Not when his name is sitting on the list tucked inside my bag...



Chapter Nine

By the time class is over, my stomach hurts from all the laughing I've been doing. I can see why Anne has a crush on Lucas. He's such a doofus and spent most of the lesson pulling faces at me while I tried to draw him.

It took little convincing for me to switch off my assassin side and just have some fun for a while. They do say keep your friends close but your enemies closer. I need to get close to Lucas if I'm to find out his sin, *right?*

"And now for the grand reveal," Mrs. Fleur announces, clapping her hands. Her bangles clang off each other like a tambourine. "Please show your partner what you created."

Everyone turns their paper over to the person sitting across from them. I hold mine close to my chest, waiting for Lucas to show me his first. When he does, my breath hitches in my throat. In almost every childhood picture I haven't managed to destroy, I'm frowning.

That's not the case with Lucas' portrait.

He's drawn me so beautifully. So happy. I'm smiling across the table at him, my hand threaded in my hair, my elbow perched on the table, and loose strands of my hair falls over my shoulders. He's even drawn the heart-shaped freckle on my brow bone.

"Wow. You're crazy talented," I tell him, feeling a little embarrassed about my own. I might as well have drawn a

stickman in comparison to this. “You drew birds for my pupils. Why?”

It took me a minute to catch on to that.

Lucas shrugs a shoulder. “There’s something about you that screams freedom. Gut instinct.”

Shit. He’s got good instincts.

“Well, mine isn’t as good as that. In fact, I’d rather not show you.”

I try to slide the paper under the bench but Lucas reaches over and snatches it from my hand. He holds it in front of his face and takes a very, very long moment to assess the damage. I cringe, hoping he doesn’t take my drawing personally. I took more of a caricature approach to this task and gave him a slightly wonky, horse-shaped face and juicy pursed lips that are sloppily kissing a pancake. It’s meant to be a joke, of course, because it looks nothing like him. And my drawing skills are extremely limited.

Mrs. Flora claps again, addressing the class. “Don’t forget to take your portraits home and reflect some more on what you’ve learned today.”

Learned today? I nearly scoff under my breath. All I’ve learned was how to offend someone I need to get close to. Good one, Regan.

Lucas peers around the edge of my drawing, then hides his face again, studying my terrible artwork his utmost sincerity.

“I see what you did here,” he says at last, putting the paper flat on the bench. He purses his lips at me and winks. “You think I desire to kiss you. Okay, newbie. Pucker up then.”

“K-kiss me?” I choke out, dumbfounded. “No! I was just joking around. I didn’t even follow the brief.”

“Pssht. Yeah, I can see that.” He grabs his bag, slings it over his shoulder, and nods to the door. “Come on. You can get my lunch since I got your brekkie.”

“What about the drawings? Aren’t you going to frame mine?”

“On the contrary, I’m going to carry it with me for the rest of my life. It’s made me quite emotional.”

“Oh, please. I know you hate it.”

He watches me pick up my bag and carefully place his drawing inside.

“Actually,” he says, shooting me a wolfish grin, “it was fucking hilarious.”

“Oh.” I gawp at him. “Well, you can keep it then.”

He mimics my ‘oh’ expression, then throws me that sexy smirk of his.

Damn, he’s cute.

And he’s also not on the menu, I bitterly remind myself.

Yes, I can be friends with him in order to learn his secret. But under no circumstances can I flirt with or grow feelings for him. That *cannot* happen. Not only because I don’t want to hurt Anne, but because I need to kill him eventually.

I have one focus right now and that’s keeping my secret safe.

As I follow Lucas out, I glance at some of the other drawings spread over the surface of the benches. Looks like I wasn’t the only one to mess up the assignment. Someone has drawn Malcolm with a massive cock on his face.



We find Anne in the rotunda and head off to lunch. I’m not sure if Lucas is just pushing his luck, but he makes me order him the biggest lunch on the menu. It takes at least fifteen minutes to get everything ready. I’m not sure he spent the same amount of time throwing a waffle in the toaster for me. But it’s not like I’m in a hurry and I do need to get on his good side.

So far, he hasn’t given any information about his sin, but he has hinted at being guilty about something. No one wants a

fresh start in life unless they're running away from their past.

After we've eaten, Imogen is waiting for me outside the cafeteria. I say bye to Anne and Lucas and follow her to our next class.

I'm really not looking forward to science. It's something I've always struggled with since primary school. However, it's an opportunity to chat with Imogen and get more information about Hunter. She's got her usual scarf tied around her neck and a long-sleeved t-shirt underneath her shirt. I know by now that both items are an attempt to hide whatever fresh bruises she's got.

The thought of Hunter laying a hand on anyone, even one of Charlie's Angels, boils my blood. It takes tremendous effort not to go looking for him and beat him to a pulp. The only reason I'm not doing that is because revenge is a dish best served cold. I'll wait until the right moment to choke the life out of him. It'll taste sweeter that way.

"You can sit next to me," Imogen says, smiling weakly. "Sorry if I'm a little quiet today. I barely got any sleep last night."

That sonuvabitch is going to get what's coming to him.

I give her a reassuring smile. "Hey, don't worry about it. I didn't want to get out of bed this morning."

"You too, huh?"

"Yup."

I follow her to the back of the classroom. It's a little farther back than the rest of the desks, which will give us a little privacy to talk about her abusive as fuck boyfriend. As soon as sit down and take out our notebooks, I waste no time.

"Were you out with Hunter last night?"

Imogen flinches, staring down blankly at her butterfly notebook. "Yeah."

I can see that the subject is making her uncomfortable. I'd drop it if I could but Truth's 'tick tock' keeps ticking away in the front of my mind. I need to start getting answers.

“You don’t sound too happy about seeing your boyfriend,” I note gently.

Imogen sighs, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “Hunter isn’t the kind of boyfriend to write home about. I’d leave him if I could.”

“Then why don’t you? You’re way too pretty and nice to be stuck with someone like him.”

She smiles, just barely. “I know that. I’ve not really got a choice though.”

Realisation seems to dawn on her. I don’t think she wanted to tell me that.

I watch her fiddle with the corner of her notebook, her eyes on the paper.

Lowering my voice, I ask her, “I know we’ve just met but you can trust me. I promise. If there’s one thing I hate in this world, it’s bullies, and you don’t need to be Einstein to see that Hunter is bullying you.”

Tears well in her eyes. “It’s that obvious?”

“Yes, and it’s killing the girls. I’m pretty sure I heard Tilda threatening to beat him up, too. Okay. That was a lie. It was me threatening to do that. With a baseball bat. Starting with his knees.”

A single tear slips down Imogen’s face. She wipes it away with her sleeve and lets out a quiet laugh. “Trust me, it won’t stop him. If he sees me being friendly with anyone else, he always manages to take them away from me. He’s...” Her voice cracks and she looks away.

I reach out and tenderly touch her arm. This girl is broken and it’s devastating to watch.

“He’s what?” I probe softly.

Imogen wipes more tears from her eyes, muttering, “No one believes me. Even Charlie thinks I’m insane but I know it was him. He did it.” Looking at me, her expression hardens and her voice turns cold. “He messed with the brakes, I’m telling you, and that’s why Matty’s car...that’s why he...on his way home...”

“Shh, shh. It’s all right.” I wrap my arms around her, glowering at the students nosily glancing our way. “What did Hunter do?” I whisper in Imogen’s ear, seconds away from learning the truth. My pulse spikes and I hold my breath.

She sniffles and rubs her face with a handkerchief. Finally, she looks up at me and whispers back, “He killed my boyfriend. It was the only way he could force me to go out with him. My fingerprints were all over the car since Matty had just dropped me off home. Hunter, he was there that night. I saw him from my window. He—”

The teacher walks in and Imogen shakes her head, turning back to her notebook.

Before the class begins, I ask Imogen quietly, “Did he kill Matty and then blackmail you into dating him?”

A simple teary-eyed nod is my answer.

I bend over to grab something out of my bag, but it’s really to hide my smile from Imogen. It takes a killer to know one. I knew Hunter Cross had blood on his hands the moment I laid eyes on him. Now that I’ve learned of his sin, I can finally kill him and score his name off my list.



Chapter Ten

“Cutie, you didn’t come to the student council room to see me.”

Ethan nearly makes me jump as he appears by my side, pulling out the chair next to me.

Man, that guy managed to sneak up on me, of all people? Now that is impressive and a little worrisome. Mind you, my head hasn’t been in the game since I came to this academy and I received the first letter. I hoped I’d run far enough here that my past couldn’t touch me, but it feels like a storm that is heading in only one direction.

Straight towards me, and when it blows over, more than one life will be destroyed.

I look around the room at the other five empty desks. There’s a guy slouched over one of them, sound asleep, and he has been since I got here. Ethan could sit anywhere. Why the hell does he want to sit with me?

“A little birdy told me that’s where you invite all the girls,” I counter as he sits down in the chair, so close that his shoulder presses against mine. He turns to face me as I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and pretend not to notice him. Damn him and his bright, sky blue eyes. They’re so clear and alluring, almost like the ocean, and I’m sure more than one girl has fallen for them.

“If the little birdy let me fuck her on my desk, would you do the same?” he proudly answers and it snaps me right out of my little daze.

I almost thank him for it.

“You’re ever so charming, Ethan,” I state dryly, rolling my eyes.

“Liar.”

He chuckles and so do I, much to my own surprise.

We sit comfortably for a long pause as we wait for the law teacher to come into the classroom, but of course, Ethan has to talk again. He seems like the type to break a silence. Not that I’m totally unhappy about that. I want to get him comfortable with me, enough to possibly let his guard down so I can ask questions that might help me figure out his sin.

“Why are you studying law, cutie?”

“Why are you?” I retort, arching a brow at him.

“I asked first.”

I’m quick to push off his question. “That you did. Doesn’t mean I’m going to answer you.”

“Fine, I’ll play.” I only watch him as he turns to me, not giving any indication that I care either way. But of course I do. Why he is studying law might be something to do with his sin. “My parents want a lawyer in the family. Well, at least to begin with. They have dreams of a promotion to a judge.”

He tells me that so effortlessly, but there is something in the way he holds himself, the slight tension building in his shoulders and even the quick way he talks, that tells me he’s lying. Of course, I can’t call him out on it. I know what he might tell me though.

“Do you want that?” I ask as I wonder why his family would want him to be a lawyer. Surely a politician is better and keeping it in the family business? They could have much better lawyers at their beck and call with his family’s position already in power.

His lips form a tight smile as his eyes stay rooted on mine. “Of course. Now tell me why *you’re* in here.”

I shrug casually. “My parents are judges, and I can tell you now, it’s a shit job they both hate.”

Ethan laughs, a real, deep and fucking sexy laugh that sends shivers right through me.

Damn. I see why Tilda went out with him now. The playful nature, the beach boy looks, and sexy as heck laugh, he could convince anyone out of their clothes.

Except for me.

I need to convince *him* into a body bag.

The classroom door opens and a middle-aged woman enters.

“Welcome to Law, your specialist class selection. I am Mrs Anderson. As there are only three students in here, and one looks asleep...” She stares long and hard at the guy snoozing on his desk, growing more and more annoyed as he continues to snore. I watch her grab a notebook off her desk, awkwardly tear out a bunch of pages and roll them into a ball. She throws it at the student, whacking him on the head.

Good aim.

He jumps in his seat, nearly falling out of it as he stares around in shock, trying to work out who hit his dumbass head.

“As I was saying,” Mrs Anderson resumes, smoothing a hand down her red dress. Her heels and lipstick are the same colour, and they really bring out her blond hair that she’s tugged up into a neat ponytail. A wedding band glints on her ring finger as she tucks a loose strand away. “Since there are only three students, I will spend one class at a time with each of you individually. The other two students can start reading the textbook on your desk. The entire book will be part of your test at the end of the year, so do take it seriously.”

We all don’t move, well aware she hasn’t said who’s going first. But as she stares down the guy who had fallen asleep, it becomes clear. He groans and sulks in his chair.

“Mr Johnton, come to my desk. Miss Hall and Mr Remington, start reading.”

I pull the textbook over and flip the first page. Once I flick by the content pages, there's a drone of boring information on tax law to begin with. How riveting. Why my mother forced me to take this class, I'll never know. Perhaps she just wanted to bore me to death.

I look over to see Ethan concentrating hard on his reading. His eyebrows are knitted together and his white teeth are busy puncturing his lower lip. He licks the tip of his finger and turns the page, then he looks up and a cheeky grin stretches over his face when he catches me watching him.

"Why did you leave your last school? Where were you before?" he whispers to me, leaning in closer than before, his leg pressing against my own.

"How do you know I was in school? I could have been homeschooled," I whisper back, carefully looking to the front to see Mrs Anderson is completely engrossed with lecturing Mr Johnton. The guy seems more interested in flicking his fingers off the side of her desk.

"I'm good at judging people," he says and I don't know if he's being funny or real.

I can't figure Ethan out yet and I don't like it. Sometimes when he looks at me...it's more than attraction. It's like he wants to own me, and I know it because someone else used to look at me like that.

And I loved it.

As I stare at him, he looks right back, and something about him is so inexplicably familiar. I just can't put my finger on it since I have never seen him before until now.

"I went to a school in London, near where my parents live," I finally tell him, knowing he isn't going to drop the subject and it's public knowledge anyway. He could ask Daisy and she would know. I've already checked what information she has about me.

"Why did you move then?" he probes, spinning a pencil between his fingers, never once looking at his hand as he does so. I almost think he isn't aware he's doing it.

“Ask my parents, they decided it. They decide everything,” I mutter bitterly, and suddenly I realise that I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t want to open up to this guy, and how the fuck is he finding out everything about me and I’m finding zero information back?

Regan, get in the game! Ethan Remington is on your fucking list.

I place my hand on his forearm, just gently, enough to let him know that he has my interest. “Enough about me. Did you always come to this academy or did you go somewhere else before?”

His eyes flutter down to my hand and a little smirk pulls at his lips. “You know, our parents can only tell us what to do until we are eighteen. For me, that’s a month away. What about you?” This time I see how smoothly he moved the conversation. He’s always doing that. “Tell me when your birthday is, cutie. Maybe I can give you a little gift.” He leans in closer, leaving us a breath away as I return his wicked smirk.

“Is it little? I prefer bigger gifts, Ethan,” I whisper back and he chuckles, his eyes widening.

“Miss Hall! Mr Remington!” The teacher’s loud bellow forces us to jump away from each other. “Get back to work or you will both be in detention for the entire weekend.”

I look back down at my textbook and a frown steadily creeps onto my face. I’m so disappointed in myself. Somehow Ethan has managed to confuse and distract me when I’m supposed to be finding out information about him. This isn’t how I planned for things to go. The only game I have left is seduction, but I have a feeling I’m going to enjoy playing it with Ethan Remington.



Chapter Eleven

Anne zips up my white jacket at the side of me as I tighten the collar. The material brushes my chin and holds the chest protector in place. It's extremely hard to hold the protector on as you put the jacket over the top and do it up, and as I look around the changing rooms, the other girls are having the same issue. My hair is pulled up tight in a bun, easy for me to fit under my hat. Thankfully, the fencing uniform here doesn't smell like sweat and God knows what other germs like they did at my last school.

I swear they never washed the helmets. In fact, I'm certain. I deliberately stained one last spring and it remained there until the day I was kicked out of the school.

My breeches are tight which is perfect for moving around. I smile a little sadly at Anne, remembering how only a year ago she could do fencing class like everyone else. Now she's too weak and has only a hospital appointment today to look forward to.

I hate it. Almost as much as I hate the black eye she's walking around with thanks to that douchebag Hunter. I can't wait to get him back for that. Properly, this time.

"Perfect," Anne comments, stepping back to admire her work; she practically insisted on helping me into my fencing uniform. "Wow, Rae. Only you could *still* look drop-dead wearing this getup."

I smile, tightening the straps on my white leather gloves before picking up my mask. The thick wire is black at the front and the back is made of green leather with Holly Oak Academy written all over it.

Anne sniffs the mask and grins. “They actually wash them here then. These don’t smell like a dead animal,” she comments, and I chuckle. Thank goodness they don’t.

I watch her closely for a second. “Are you sure you want to sit this out? I know you love fencing almost as much as me. You could take it easy and—”

Anne interrupts me as she shakes her head. “No. I can’t and I only loved fencing because I got to spend time with you. Now I can watch you beat everyone’s ass.”

“I don’t know about everyone,” I mutter.

“You always hold back. I know you do,” Anne tells me and she’s right.

But not for the reasons she suspects. I always hold back because being the centre of attention isn’t good for an assassin and my mother always makes sure I know that.

‘Come in second in every test. That way no one will look twice your way’.

I hated that saying more than I ever admitted to myself, but just like with Anne, my mother’s right. No one ever looks at the person in second place all the time.

Anne and I head out of the changing rooms and into the gym. The entire floor is littered with blue mats for practice. As if I just know that they’re looking at me, my gaze drifts over to Ethan, Josh, Hunter, Nathan and Lucas who are all in this class, all standing near each other with some other students. In a line, they place their masks on, hiding their faces and there is something so creepy about how they do it while staring at me. What isn’t creepy is how fucking hot they look in their tight as hell fencing breeches and jackets. It’s like a fencing calendar, like the firefighters one I always buy for charity, with each of them lined up like this to show off their...equipment. Yeah, fire or fencing ‘equipment’.

“Welcome to Fencing everyone. My name is Mr Hines. Now, the first important question is this: Who has never fenced before?”

We all turn to see the teacher striding into the hall. He’s a short, chubby man with thick glasses and an entirely shaved big head. Can he even fence? When no one says a word, he chuckles and turns it into a full-body laugh that’s awkward as fuck when no one joins in. We all awkwardly stare between each other as Charlie’s Angels come to stand beside me.

“Who is the weirdo laughing to himself?” Charlie asks, loud enough for Mr Hines to hear.

“The fencing teacher,” I tell her.

“Oh, right. We had a teacher that could *actually* fence last year,” Tilda comments, and she yawns. Imogen is nowhere to be seen despite that she’s usually always with them.

I glance over the hall to find her standing next to Hunter, pulled to his side where’s she always stuck. The sight boils my blood. I need to get rid of him. ASAP.

“That’s good news,” Mr Hyena finally says after composing himself. “I would expect all of you to have brilliant talent in fencing. Now we need to find out who is the best and strongest student.”

I’m used to this sort of introductory spiel. I’ll just come in second like I always do. That way I’m near the top, but not actually in the lead.

“You don’t need to look far, sir, I’m right here,” Ethan shouts across the room, and all the other guys laugh. Some of the girls fawn over him. I roll my eyes and fold my arms over my chest, waiting for the lesson to actually begin.

“We will find out, Mr Remington. Now place your hand up if you want to have a practice fight and the last one standing will win my signature on all tests as a pass. You won’t have to attend this class for more than fun if you win.”

Of course, all the guys in the room shove their hands into the air while the girls try desperately to avoid his gaze. Come

on, what happened to girl power? I sigh and lift my hand into the air, which seems to surprise the teacher.

“Are you sure, lovely girl?” Mr Hines asks, running his beady eyes over me.

“My name is Regan Hall or Miss hall to you. Shall we begin?” I drily answer and someone whistles although I don’t catch who.

“Go Regan! Go Regan!” Charlie shouts and several of the girls join in her chant.

That’s the kind of girl power I was looking for.

“Regan, you can go against me first. Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you, cutie,” Ethan comments, waving me over to a blue mat in the centre of the room.

“Now, now. Regan is a girl so I expect you to act like a gentleman,” Mr Hines chides him, walking over and handing me a sabre. It’s lightweight with a firm rubber grip that is moulded to the core from the feel of it. The leather cover cups my hand nicely as I head over to the mat, where Ethan is already in position. I place my one hand behind my back as I face sideward, steeling my back and watching Ethan closely, from every breath to every movement that he’ll make.

“The first one to strike, wins. No hits below the waist or above the neck. Begin.”

The teacher steps back and I don’t wait for Ethan to strike first. I slash my sabre, aiming for his arm but he swiftly jumps to the side and aims back at me. Our sabres strike against each other as we move, and I quickly notice Ethan is particularly good at this.

Not good enough, though.

I feint to the right and he falls for it, leaving himself open as I hit his left arm.

“How the fuck did you do that, cutie?” Ethan breathlessly demands, pulling off his mask. His face his flushed and he looks damn near furious. Damn if it isn’t hot.

“No one has beaten Ethan, other than me. My turn,” Hunter growls and I shrug, not giving any of them an answer as the

boys continue to stare at me.

Mr Hines blows a whistle. “Only Hunter, Lucas, Josh and Regan remain. Everyone else, please sit down. Hunter and Regan, you two are up next. Lucas and Josh, you as well.”

Hunter gets into place and I just wait in the same position I started with Ethan. Hunter, as suspected, rushes straight for me with a hard hit, and it’s more than easy to dodge out of the way of the giant. All strength, no speed. And in fencing? Speed is everything. I spin around and block his hit just as he goes to make it. I push him back, surprising him I suspect from the look in his eyes, and I jump, using his shoulder as a post to somersault over his back and aim my sabre just under the nape of his neck, cutting him ever so slightly because he’s a massive dick.

“Bitch,” he growls, turning around and I try not to chuckle as he glares at me. The cheers from the girls are deafening as Mr Hines runs over and talks softly to Hunter. Poor little baby. I glance over as Joshua gets the advance on Lucas, and in one swift move, he catches his side.

“Good work, man,” Lucas says, holding a hand out to Josh. They do that weird manly shake as Joshua looks over and smirks at me.

“Now it’s time to have some fun,” he tells Lucas, who just laughs.

“How the fuck is she that good?” I hear Hunter grumble to Nathan as he tugs his brother away before he makes a scene. Nathan looks back at me, and even though he can’t see my eyes under the mask, I suspect he somehow can.

“I think Miss Regan Hall is much more than any of us know,” Nathan states, and I smile. He’s not just a pretty face.

“Ready? Don’t think I will go easy on you. You owe me,” Joshua states coldly, and I shake my head slowly. I owe him nothing. It wasn’t even me that called in his teacher/student sex life to light. Everyone has their kinks, but it’s none of my business and I have little interest in making enemies. I already have one big enemy that takes up all my time.

Truth, and his or her letters.

“Are you ready or do you want to talk all day?” I drawl and he bows his head, almost respectfully before swiftly striking.

We effortlessly move around each other, blocking blow after blow, step after step. For a fleeting moment, I really think I’ve met my match at fencing, his moves are so swift and effortless, until he hesitates. I don’t know why he does so but I take my chance to strike, hitting his shoulder. Everyone cheers as Mr Hines walks over to us and I pull off my now sweat-covered mask.

“Why...why did you hesitate?” I ask between pants, trying to catch my breath.

Joshua pulls off his own mask, and beads of sweat trickle down the side of his head, his powerful chest rising unevenly. “I didn’t. Meet me tomorrow at the fountain. Twelve o’clock. You double owe me now, Miss Hall.”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

He pays my comment no regard. “Wear something nice, darling. We’re going out for the day.”

Joshua walks away just as Mr Hines gets to my side and pats my shoulder, going on about his new star student. It’s not a win. Not really. Josh hesitated for a reason, and I need to know why. I need to know everything there is to do with Joshua Dedicán so that I can eradicate him.



Chapter Twelve

Josh has more than just my attention. He has my curiosity, and curiosity, according to my mother, is a dangerous vice for an assassin. It's the next weakest thing to possess after love.

Curiosity doesn't just kill the assassin like it does to the cat. It destroys their motives, and that, she said, is a fate worse than death.

At noon the next day, I'm almost tempted to stand Joshua up. I really don't owe him anything and I most certainly shouldn't be feeling curious about what he has in store for me. From the top of the stairs, I can see Joshua leaning against the fountain. He's busy scrolling through his phone while everyone else moves around him. It's the first time I've seen any of the boys out of their school uniform, and I must admit, I'm pleasantly surprised.

Joshua's army-green polo-shirt hugs every muscle in his powerful chest, showing off the tattoos that snake around his bulging biceps. Fuck, they're huge. He can lift me with those guns any day. When he sees me approaching, he shoves his phone into the back pocket of his jeans and winks at me.

"Right on time, darling." He pushes off the fountain and his gold watch gleams in the light, momentarily blinding me. "I'm impressed."

"I'm not the late kind." I stop beside him, and damn does he smell good. "You scrub up well, Joshyboy."

“Yeah? You ain’t half bad yourself.” He sniffs and gives my outfit a quick once over. “You always smell like pancakes and it’s fucking sexy.”

“This isn’t a date,” I remind him, which is why I chose a pink blouse and high-waisted skinny jeans instead of a sexy dress. I tucked the blouse into my jeans and it’s low enough to show ample cleavage but still classy. I want him to drool not have his tongue wagging.

“That it isn’t,” he agrees flatly, peeling his gaze off my tits. Typical. His pupils are blown and he pokes his tongue out to lick the seam of his lips. “You ready to go, *darling*?”

“I don’t really have a choice.”

In actual fact, I do. But I’m letting him think he has all the power here.

“You’re bad at lying, you know that?” Joshua pivots on his heel, walking towards the exit without glancing back at me. “I don’t think you’d be here if you weren’t at least interested.”

Interested in what, he doesn’t say, but he is right; I am here for a reason.

I follow Joshua out into the main courtyard. Mrs Beach is standing there with four bodyguards and two sleek SUVs.

“Here comes the calvary,” I mutter to Joshua.

He chuckles, the sound deep and sexy. “We can’t leave the academy without at least two bodyguards each. I’ve organised everything. Just get in the car.”

Now call me crazy, but there’s something about the way he orders me that has me weak in the knees. And then he goes and opens the door for me, and I half expect him to slap me on the arse when I slip inside. Or maybe I wanted him to do that.

Why did I want him to do that?

Joshua watches me pull my seatbelt on. Meanwhile, Mrs Beach hovers over him at the door and goes through her list of rules. No alcohol, always have the guards with you, the usual boring stuff. Once she’s finished, Joshua sits beside me, two of the guards slide into the front, and we hit the road with the rest of the entourage following behind.

It's hard not to notice the way Joshua's arm and leg brushes against my own. Whatever aftershave he's wearing is extremely intoxicating. I open the window in the hopes to smack some sense into me again.

Enough.

Plan of action time.

I don't know what Joshua has in store for me but every opportunity is a blessing. The only thing is, we've got to have bodyguards with us at all times. How am I supposed to kill Joshua with so many witnesses? I might be able to take out one or two of the guards, but four? It's more hassle than it's worth. Truth and his precious tick-tock clock will have to wait a bit longer.

"So where are we going?" I ask Joshua again, glancing out the window to see if I can pick up any clues. "I know we're going into town. But what for?"

Joshua drapes an ankle over his knee and looks me dead in the eye.

"What?" I press him, turning around fully in my seat to scowl at him. "Are you not going to tell me?"

"It's a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"That's what I said, darling."

"Sounds like you're taking me on a romantic date, Joshy-washy."

"I suppose I am."

My heart skips a beat. I didn't expect him to say that. "So this *is* a date?"

He shrugs. "Call it whatever you want. You just better do what I say."

"Or else what? You're going to spank me?"

A glimmer of lust flashes in his dark eyes. "That wouldn't be a punishment, now would it?"

“No. I suppose that would be wishful thinking,” I retort, grinning at him. “Am I going to like this surprise?”

Little does he know that I hate surprises.

I’ve got to go along with this one, though. Seduction has always been my best asset and it’s not like I can slit his throat with two bodyguards less than a meter away.

“Maybe. We’re stopping off somewhere first.” He looks out the window, nodding, as the car pulls up outside a German bakery. “Wait here.”

I watch him dip out of the car and enter the shop. Two of the guards go with him and the other two remain with me. Through the shop window, I watch Joshua pointing at the cake display and handing a bunch of notes over the counter. The baker gives him a small white box and he leaves the shop. One of the guards opens the car door for him and he slides onto the seat next to me again.

“Are those for me?” I nod to the box on his lap. “You’re ever so generous.”

Joshua breathes through his nose. “No, they’re not for you. You’ll just have to wait for your reward.”

I wasn’t aware punishments also came with rewards. Curious, I lean back in my seat and watch the world skate by the window. There’s something about Joshua that reminds me of... him. Perhaps it’s the way I feel so naturally at ease in his company, or perhaps it’s because I want to fuck him six ways from Sunday right here in this car. Whatever the reason, it needs to go away—pronto—because I cannot fraternise with the enemy.

Death by seduction, yes, that I can do easily. But I never fuck my prey.

I *can’t* fuck my prey.

That introduces a whole kettle of emotions I really don’t want to be dealing with right now. This is exactly why curiosity is such a bad thing for an assassin. I shouldn’t be curious about how much of a good fuck Joshua will be. The only thing I should be curious about is how long it’ll take him to bleed out.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. He's on his iPhone again and his big hands make it look tiny in comparison. I bet he could crush a skull between them if he tried. I definitely think he'll be the strongest of the five, so I'll need to have the element of surprise on my side. While I try to think of the best way to kill this handsome beast of a man, the car comes to another halt and Joshua unbuckles his seatbelt. I peer out the window to assess the damage awaiting me.

"I don't understand." I turn around to face him, searching his eyes for an answer, but he swiftly looks away. "Why have you brought me here?"



Chapter Thirteen

Joshua's answer is to open the car door and step out with the box tucked under his arm. The guards are all quick to follow him, but when I don't move immediately, Joshua ducks his head back inside to glare down at me.

"I had an arrangement with Miss Hector—an arrangement you fucked up. Now you've got to fill in for her, so if I were you, I'd get moving."

I nearly spit back that I never got the chance to report his scandal, someone else beat me to it, but I stay quiet. I'm intrigued and yet also nervous about this situation. Everything from the perfectly aligned flowerbeds to the Maritime Care Home sign sends a rush of unease through my body. I don't like hospitals or anything that involves people dying, which is ironic considering I'm a harbinger of death, but there's just something about these places that make me uncomfortable, particularly old people's homes. Maybe it's simply that these people got to live full and long lives, and I'm always risking my own and never really getting the chance to live the life I want. *If I even know what that is anymore.*

"Come on." Joshua grabs my arm and pulls me out of the car. "It's time to say hi."

He then places his hand on the small of my back, his touch surprisingly gentle, and steers me through the double doors. I like a man that suggests the way to go, without demanding it.

Once all six of us step into the care home, the smell of disinfectant and fresh laundry wraps around my senses. Thank you, Jesus. For a second I was worried this place would stink like urine and feces mixed with impending doom. So far the smell doesn't make me want to be sick.

Joshua's hand is still on my back as he leads me down a peach hallway. Nurses in mint-green uniforms smile as we approach the reception. Even the pretty young receptionist seems to light up when she sees Joshua, and she slides a form over the desk. Clearly Joshy is a regular visitor here, but who for?

"How's the love of my life been today?" Joshua asks the receptionist, filling out the form.

"A lot better," the nurse reports cheerily, looking up at Joshua with slightly dazed, lovestruck eyes. "She even came to play bingo with the others yesterday. Can you believe it?"

Joshua flashes a grin and winks at her. "Did she get lucky?"

"No, but she was smiling and seemed to really enjoy herself."

"That's all that matters," Joshua states, and turning to face the bodyguards, he orders, "Stay here, fellas. You'll just frighten the locals."

Three of them hesitate, sharing worried glances with each other.

The other guard, the tallest silver-fox one with the beard, steps forward and nods. "We'll wait outside like usual, aye?"

"Cheers, Rory." Joshua pats the Scottish bodyguard on the shoulder, then steers me toward another hallway filled with doors.

A few residents roll by in wheelchairs, chatting and laughing with each other. They don't seem unhappy so that's a little comforting. I always worry about the elderly getting taken advantage of in places like this. The fact that I do worry reminds me that I'm still human at the end of the day. I'm not fully corrupted yet.

I doubt Joshua will answer me, but I ask anyway. “Who are we going to see?”

This time, he does reply. “My Bibi.”

“You’re what?” I frown up at him as he pauses beside one of the closed doors. “Your baby?”

“My Granny,” he explains, knocking once on the door before entering.

There are so many questions I want to ask him. I bite my lip, forcing them down, and follow him into the room. It’s surprisingly larger than I expected it to be. While there are clearly things in place to assist an elderly person, such as pulley equipment attached to the ceiling and emergency call buttons everywhere, the room is spacious and tastefully modern. The flooring is a rich pinewood with high-gloss furniture and a large shaggy rug under the glass coffee table. There’s a fabric corner sofa at one side of the room and two chairs by an electric fire on the other. One of the chairs are turned away, but I can see the arms of a fluffy housecoat that I suspect belongs to Bibi.

“Who are you?”

The voice is quiet and shaky.

“It’s me, Granny. It’s your Joshua.”

A frail, bony hand reaches down to press the button on the side of the chair. Slowly but surely, Bibi turns away from the fire to look over at us, and I expect her to be holding a white kitty with a pinkie pressed to her lip. Instead, the person sitting there is a frail old woman with slightly flushed dark skin, probably from the stifling warmth in this room, and her eyes are deeply set in their sockets. I can tell just from her bone structure that she’s extremely thin underneath her baby blue housecoat.

When she picks up her glasses from the table beside her, and shakily puts them on, a horrified look creeps onto her face.

“Oh, no, no, no, no,” she says, rocking back and forth in her chair. “My grandson is just a little boy. You’re too big to be Joshua. Go on and get out of here before I call for the nurse! Go on now—*leave!*”

Joshua makes no attempt to leave. He crosses the length of the room, bends down at the woman's side and takes her hands between his own. He doesn't say anything. He just looks deeply into her eyes while gently stroking and patting her hands like she's an injured child. There must be something magical in his touch because the woman stops rocking. As some realisation dawns on her, a faint smile lifts her lips.

"You're the nice boy who comes to visit me, aren't you?"

Tears well in my eyes as I watch them. This is her grandson and she doesn't even recognise him. Anne's dad had dementia, and towards the end, he didn't even recognise the wife he'd been married to for over thirty-five years. Jesus, he hardly recognised himself.

I wonder if Bibi has that, too. It's such a horrible disease. It eats away at your mind until there's nothing left.

"Yeah, it's me, Bibi. I told you I wouldn't miss your birthday." Joshua reaches out to move strands of grey hair out from her eyes. "The nurses said you've been playing bingo with the other residents. Did you have fun?"

She nods quickly. "Yes, yes I did. But that Elsie Corbett is a bare-faced liar and a thief. She stole my lucky dabber. I warned her, boy. I said if you do that again I'll shove my dabber where the sun don't shine and you'll be shitting ink for a week. That shut her up, so it did."

Bibi leans back and laughs, a great loud one that makes me smile. Joshua laughs, too, and places the box onto the coffee table before dropping into the chair beside her. I linger in the doorway, not wanting to disturb them, yet also wanting to know why Joshua brought me to see his grandmother. I decide to make my presence as little as possible and lean against the door, watching them and trying to figure everything out.

"What's in there?" Bibi points a shaky, liver-spotted hand at the box.

Joshua leans over and opens it. It's a small cake with blue frosting and white letters that say Happy Birthday.

Bibi gasps. "You shouldn't have! All for me? Really now? You shouldn't have."

Her tired eyes glow a little as she smiles over at Joshua. You can see the love and happiness written on her face as clear as day.

Joshua helps her reach for the envelope, then she slowly shakes it to check if there's any money. It seems to be a running joke with them because they're both smiling at each other. Bibi giggles like a little girl who's just snuck into the cookie jar, but then she drops the card on her lap, and she stares at Joshua for a moment. The smile fades from her lips as if a shadow has been drawn over her.

“Where's my Dominique? He's supposed to be visiting me today. It's my birthday and he hasn't shown yet.”

Joshua pauses, his Adam's apple jerking nervously in his throat. “He's gone to the beach to fetch you more of the shells you like.”

“He has?” Her face brightens up again, like sunbeams breaking through the clouds after a terrible storm. It's both amazing and painful to see. “I already have six of them. Look at how pretty they are.”

She digs into her housecoat pocket and brings out a handful of colourful shells, and she's smiling so proudly at them that the tears I'm holding back begin to fall. I hurriedly wipe them away in an attempt to mask the fact that I'm a total sap at heart.

Assassins do not weep.

“And who are you?” Bibi asks Joshua again.

He gives her a name this time. “I'm Tyler. Dominique's friend, remember?”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes. I do. The nice boy who comes to visit me.” Noticing me in the corner, she points, “And who is she? Is this your fiancé...what's her name, Ashley? The one you were telling me about?”

Joshua smiles at me. “That's the one. Ain't I a lucky man?”

“Yes, she's very beautiful,” the woman agrees. “Go make her some tea.”

“But she doesn't drink—”

Before he can finish, Bibi smacks him weakly on the arm. “Boy, don’t make me slap you silly! Go on now and make the girl a cup of tea. And me one, too, while you’re at it. I’m sitting here with a mouth like Gandhi’s flip-flop.”

Joshua laughs and goes away into what I assume is the kitchen. I imagine this is how his grandmother used to be before she got sick. It must be hard to see her like this—to see anyone go from being a strong, independent person who takes no one’s bullshit, to someone who can barely recall their own name.

“He’s a good boy but he forgets to scrub behind his ears,” Bibi whispers, tapping the side of her head. “Only hears what he wants to hear, just like my son, Dominique, the soft lad that he is. Come sit over here and let me get a good look at you.”

Confused doesn’t come close to how I’m feeling right now.

Fiancé? Ashley? Is that why he brought me here, to pretend I’m his girl?

But that doesn’t make any sense. He could’ve asked anyone to come here with him.

I walk over to her anyway and settle down on the chair. Bibi takes my hand in hers and studies me closely. There’s a softness in her eyes that reminds me of Joshua. They’re definitely related. I just don’t think she can remember that Joshua isn’t a child anymore.

“Yes, I can see why he loves you,” she says at last, patting my hand. “You’ve got a good heart. Kind eyes. Strong will.”

It’s a shame she’s only right about the last one. Still, it’s the thought that counts. Bibi doesn’t know what atrocities I’ve done or the secret I carry inside me every day. Strangely, I like that she doesn’t know.

“I’ve been waiting to give you this,” Bibi tells me, turning my hand around. “It will bring you good luck on your wedding day.”

I glance down at the heart-shaped shell sitting in the hollow of my palm. “I couldn’t possibly!” I shout in a whisper. “These are yours, Bibi, and you love them.”

She gives me a hard look, one I bet used to put the fear in Joshua when he was a kid. “You’ll take it and I’ll hear no more.” Patting my hand, she adds quietly, “Please. It’ll make an old woman like me happy. My son is bringing me more today, anyway.”

Joshua appears then, carrying a tea tray with some biscuits. He sets it down on the coffee table and hands me and Bibi one of the delicate china cups. Luckily I’ve had tea plenty of times back home, mostly because of my mother, who feels I should be a lady as well as an assassin. Apparently you’re not a lady unless you drink tea from pretty petite cups.

While Joshua mixes sugar cubes into his and Bibi’s cups, I look over the birthday cake.

“Hey, are there any candles for the cake?” I whisper in his ear.

He regards me for a moment through narrowed eyes. “Yeah, should be in the kitchen.”

“Great.”

I set my cup down, grab the box, and carry it into the kitchen. If I’m supposed to play the part of a doting fiancé, I should put myself to good use. Bibi’s laughter makes me smile as I look around for plates and candles. I’m not even sure she’ll be able to eat cake but I cut her a slice anyway, then I find some used candles hiding in the cutlery drawer.

After I’ve placed the candles in a row along the top of the cake, I start opening all the cupboards in search of plates. That’s when I find an entire box filled with birthday cards in the cupboard next to the sink. Some of them have been crushed in, but they’re all the same pink color, and when I pick them up and read them, they’re all to Bibi from Tyler.

Tyler as in Joshua, her grandson.

There must be thousands of them in here.

His handwriting is a little messy, the complete opposite of Truth’s. That’s a good sign at least.

“Babe, did you find everything?” Joshua calls from the room.

“Yes, I’m just coming.”

I shove the cards back into the box, close the door, and grab some plates from the cupboard by the door. I’m just about to walk through when Joshua appears in front of me.

“Need a lite?”

I extend the cake to him, watching his face closely as he lights the candles with a lighter. Here I thought I’d finally get some information about him but I think I’m just adding to my list of questions. At this rate, I’m playing more of the detective role than the assassin.

With the cake lit, we go back into the room, and I start to sing Happy Birthday. Joshua is a little late to join in, probably surprised by the gesture no doubt, and Bibi is all teary-eyed as we sing to her. But as we sit down to eat the cake, I think we’ve overstayed our welcome. Something changes in Bibi again and she throws her cake on the floor, yelling at us to get out, then she starts rocking in her chair again and asking who we are.

“It’s time to go,” Joshua says, leaning over me to press the call button beside her chair. “The nurses will calm her down. Come on.”

He takes me out of the room before I even get a chance to say goodbye. It’s strange how quickly I grew to like spending time with Bibi. Sure, I had to repeat myself a few times, but she’s one of those people who just make you smile regardless of what it is they say.

Two nurses rush down to Bibi’s room and the bodyguards meet at the entrance of the care home.

“Everything all right, Josh?” the Scottish bodyguard inquires.

I watch Joshua closely, but his expression doesn’t falter.

“Yeah, all good, man. Can you take us back to the academy?”

Rory, I think his name is, gestures to his men and we all get into the cars. My head is swimming from the questions swirling around. Fiancé. Tyler. Bibi. All those birthday cards. What did

Miss Hector have to do with any of this? What, exactly, was the arrangement she had with Joshua?

As soon as the car starts moving, I tap Joshua on the shoulder. “All right, big guy. It’s time me and you had a talk.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but I hold my hand up to preempt him.

“First of all, the creepy birthday cards. When I went into the kitchen, there was a whole cupboard filled with the exact same card, all written from you. Now, I’m no mathematician, but there should only be around eighteen cards from you to your grandmother. There was easily over a thousand in that cupboard. Maybe five thousand. I don’t know. I didn’t stick around long around to count them.”

This subject is already making him uncomfortable. The tension in his shoulders pressing against my own is completely rigid and his thick eyebrows are knitted together. I think he’s bothered by how Bibi acted towards the end. Her rocking was rather unsettling to watch. Maybe I should interrogate him later and give him some time alone? Then again, sometimes talking about it helps. And the clock is ticking. Literally. I don’t know how long Truth is going to give me to get through this list, therefore every second is crucial to me.

I lower my voice and gently touch his arm. “Was it really your grandmother’s birthday?”

He glances at my hand and then up again, nodding hesitantly. “Kind of.”

“What do you mean by kind of?”

He shrugs my hand off. “It’s hard to explain and even harder to understand. Trust me.”

“*Try* me. I really do want to understand.”

I watch him gaze out the window for a moment, seemingly debating on whether or not to answer me.

“Joshua, I’m just trying to understand what I was thrown into back there.”

Still looking out the window, he whispers, “In my granny’s head, every Sunday is her birthday. It’s been that way since I

was a kid.”

“Is it because of her dementia?” I probe softly.

His head snaps in my direction. “How did you know she has that?”

“Anyone with a brain can see she’s got some type of memory loss.” I give him an apologetic smile, because I really do feel for her. “I’m sorry she’s suffering like this. Does the dementia make her think it’s her birthday every Sunday?”

“Nah. She took a nasty fall on her birthday the day after my parents...passed away,” he adds hurriedly, which certainly piques my interest. “It was the shock from that, along with hitting her head, that fucked with her memory. Then came the dementia a couple of years ago. That just made everything worse and more confusing. When she doesn’t think she’s five-years-old again, she lives the same week over and over. She still thinks my dad’s coming to visit her every time I go there.”

“Is that why she thinks you’re just a kid?”

“Yeah. Around the time as my parents died, my dad’s best friend, Tyler, was the age I am now. He was like a second son to Bibi. I figured when she gets upset, it’s easier to just pretend I’m him.”

“And the whole fiancée thing. Was that just to piss me off or...?” I trail off, eyeing him pointedly.

He laughs, and it’s the first I’ve heard him do that since we left the care home. “Tyler was engaged at the time. He was gonna bring her to meet Bibi on her birthday. She never remembers you or Miss Hector or any other chick I bring with me to see her. All she knows is that I’m Tyler, and the girl I bring with me—*must* bring with me—every Sunday is my fiancé.”

My stomach coils at the words. “So she’s stuck in an endless loop as well as suffering from dementia? That’s so sad.”

Joshua shrugs nonchalantly. “It is what it is. Miss Hector didn’t mind tagging along since I gave her a workout afterwards.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “That was

our arrangement. We can still do that, if you want, babe. Offer is still on the table.”

I roll my eyes and revert back to the previous topic. “If your grandmother remembers the real Tyler, why can’t he visit her?”

“She won’t recognise him,” Joshua’s quick to say, as if I should’ve known that already. “He’s forty-odd now. In Bibi’s mind, Tyler was only around my age before she fell. That’s why she doesn’t recognise me as Joshua.”

I know he’s trying to let on this doesn’t bother him, but I can see the pain in his eyes. He loves his grandmother dearly and yet she doesn’t even know who he is.

Who he really is.

“How old was your dad when all this happened?”

His stare hardens. “He was twenty-two when I was born. I was six when he died and my little brother was just a baby. Does that answer your all questions now?”

I flinch at his sudden tone of voice. Obviously, he’s got issues and I’m not the person he wants to talk to about them. Not that I can really blame him. I do only want to find out everything I can so I can kill him. So far, I’ve learned that Bibi, his parents, and little brother are touchy subjects for him. I think his sin has got to do with them.

“One last question,” I start, and Joshua rolls his eyes. “Why did you choose me? If she can’t remember which girls you bring, you could’ve taken anyone.”

He thinks for a moment, his eyes focusing hard on my lips. His tongue pokes out again and he licks them, forcing me to subconsciously mimic him.

“You sent my last *fiancé* to jail. It was only fair I dragged your sorry ass in there in as revenge, darling.”

Well, he does have a point even if I’m not the one who reported them.

I had debated about doing it until I figured making friends with my enemy was a better idea.

“What’s in your hand?” Joshua reaches out to touch my fingers curled into my lap.

Tentatively, I open my palm to show him the shell. “Bibi gave this to me. She said it’ll bring good luck on our wedding day.”

Joshua’s eyes widen into saucers. “She’s never done that before. Those shells are like gold to her.”

“I told her not to but she insisted.”

“Mind if I take it back? She’ll be freaking out on Sunday, wondering why she only has five instead of six shells in her pocket.”

“Of course.” I drop the shell into his hand, and he smiles at me. “Just don’t break it.”

“Scouts honor.”

I lift an eyebrow, not really believe those words. “Were you even in the scouts?”

“Fuck no. I went out with a chick from the Brownies, though. That counts.”

“No. It most certainly doesn’t.”

Joshua shoves his shoulder into mine and I let out a giggle that surprises even myself.

The gates to the academy appear within sight. After the car stops at the entrance hall, the guards step out, leaving us alone in the car.

“Now for your payment, babe,” Joshua starts with a grin, but I already know what’s coming. And while my body might be interested, my mind knows better.

I hold up my hand, leveling right in front of his face. “Back up there, sunshine. I don’t want to sleep with you.”

His smirk melts off his face. “Why not? I’m a fucking catch.”

“Maybe to Miss Hector you were.” I lean forward, bringing our noses close together, so close, in fact, I can feel his breath tickling my cheeks. “Me? Not so much, *babe*. See ya!”

Before he can grab a hold of me, I throw open the door and jump out. Flicking my hair over my shoulders, I deliberately do my sexiest walk as I head into the entrance hall. When I glance over my shoulder at Joshua, he's still watching me from the car window, a look of shock and desire on his face. I'm beginning to enjoy this little game.



Chapter Fourteen

I knock three times on Anne's door, juggling a chocolate cake in one hand, and a bottle of lemonade in the other. It's not just any lemonade. It's the posh handmade stuff that Anne loves. As she can't drink alcohol, I thought it would be a better drink for us to share on a Saturday night as we watch a movie.

I just pray she isn't going to choose *P.S. I Love You* for the one-hundredth time. That film always makes my cold heart cry and she loves it.

I don't expect Lucas Georgian to answer Anne's door. But there he is, messy brown hair looking softer than ever, his eyes playfully looking right back at mine. He has a blue sweater on, overworn jeans and I look down to see black Converse shoes. His clothes don't scream money to me. If anything, they just feel casual.

And it suits him.

He looks like the boy next door that your mother told you not to play with. Or in my case, fuck around with.

"Quick, come inside," he tells me, holding the door wide open.

Surprised by his appearance, I walk in and he shuts the door quickly behind.

"What are you doing in here?" I question Lucas, and he grins, taking the chocolate cake off me.

“Anne said you guys are having a movie night. I wanted to join.” He rests his hand on my upper arm. That thing happens again, the shiver of a feeling that makes me want to ask him to keep touching me and I hate myself for it. Lucas is a no-no. Super nope. I have to stop thinking about him and what he looks like minus his nice clothes.

I’m sure there is muscle, so much mu—

An amused voice cuts right into my imagination. “Regan, you alright?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat and pray my cheeks aren’t red as I pull my gaze from Lucas and look around Anne’s bedroom. She’s always loved the colour yellow and this room is a portrayal of that. She has mustard bedsheets covered in daisies and a light yellow four-seater couch that faces a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. Anne’s room is much bigger than mine, and she knows I’m a little jealous. One important bit of detail that doesn’t escape my notice is that Anne isn’t here, and if Lucas is alone in her room, I want to know why.

“Well, alright then. Where is Anne?” I ask, placing my free hand on my hip.

“In the bathroom. She just threw up. She isn’t feeling great today,” he admits and it makes my heart sink. Any thoughts of Lucas fly out of the window the second I’m reminded of Anne and how sick she truly is. Some moments I just forget, or in my utter foolishness, I pretend that somehow she’s going to be cured. But then reality comes back to hit me in the face.

“Any results from the scans yet?” I quietly ask, wondering, hoping they’ve come back with something positive. I know they should have the results by now and Anne has ignored any of my texts about it since yesterday.

“Not that she’s told me. She looks pale and exhausted, so I don’t want to pressure her into talking about it,” he explains in a similarly quiet voice. His protectiveness over my best friend just makes me like him more.

“Okay. I’m going in to check on her,” I say, taking a step forward, and Lucas’s hand falls away, reminding me that it was there in the first place.

“No need. I’m fine. See,” Anne states and I look over as she comes out of the bathroom.

She looks anything but fine.

Her cheeks are hollow, her complexion paler than ever, and the bags under her eyes have darkened considerably. She catches me studying her and glares.

“Don’t even say anything,” she warns, her tired eyes narrowing. “Let’s just sit and watch a film. Please...?”

Her voice croaks on the word please, and my heart squeezes.

“Alright,” I say as Anne comes over, passes me and sits on the couch.

I sit next to her and take her hand in mine, feeling how clammy she is. My pulse spikes as I think about how bad her results must have been. Her condition is clearly getting serious now. She’s trying to put on a brave face but no amount of make-up can hide the deterioration that’s consuming her from the inside. I feel hopeless and unable to help her.

Anne pats my hand, saying, “You know I love you, but stop looking at me like I’m going to die any second. I’m still very much alive and I’m not going anywhere. Not until the last *Quintessentially Yours* book comes out.”

“It’s not something to joke about, Anne,” I remind her, even if I do love how much we bond over that paranormal romance series. Our belief has always been why have one book boyfriend when you can have multiple.

“I know it’s not,” she replies, nodding grimly. “I know. Sorry.”

“I just worry about you. What did the scans say?”

She lets go of my hand and shifts uncomfortably. “I fell out with my mother over the scan. Please don’t make me argue with you too. Not right now,” she pleads and I sigh in defeat, unable to say no to her. Anne has survived this long being sick without anyone lecturing her or controlling how she handles her treatments. I guess she prefers it that way. She’s always been a bit of a lone wolf. It’s one of the many reasons I get on with her so much.

“Okay,” I mutter, kicking my slippers off and bringing me feet up onto the sofa.

“That means you too, Lucas.” Anne turns her gaze to where he’s leaning on the wall, silently watching us. He walks over to sit on the edge of the sofa and places his hand on Anne’s shoulder. The way she looks up to him is sweet even if I don’t like it. How on earth can I kill the person my best friend is clearly in love with?

“Only if you promise not to go to the party tomorrow,” Lucas tries to reason with her.

I’ve heard about this party. It’s at some rich kid’s house nearby and his parents are away for the week. Everyone in the school is going to get hammered, and apparently, someone has even found a way to make sure the teachers and bodyguards won’t notice anyone leaving.

“Oh, I’m going,” Anne replies stubbornly, shaking her head at him, “and you can’t stop me.”

I watch Lucas’ face darken and he glowers at her. “I can’t go since my dad is in town and wants to see me tomorrow night. Without me there, I’m worried that—”

“Hey, hold up,” I interject mid-sentence. “I’ll be there and Anne will be fine.”

Anne hugs me, and I feel shitty as I hug her back. The only reason I’m going is to kill Hunter and the best way to do that is to do it outside of the academy. I’ve been thinking about it since I heard about the party earlier this week, only I didn’t think Anne would want to go. A school party will be perfect for a kill, and Anne will be the best alibi. I’m a shitty person to use her though.

“I love you! You’re brilliant!” Anne shouts excitedly, then she sees the lemonade and chocolate cake, and her excitement intensifies into a squeal. “You brought my favourites! Do you two want a piece of cake? I’ll go and get a knife and some plates.”

“Thanks. I’d love a slice,” I mutter as she rushes out of the room. “Extra—”

“Frosting, I know, I know,” Anne calls over her shoulder, smiling.

“I’ll take a slice too,” Lucas says, dropping onto the sofa beside me. He reaches into his pocket and hands me a silver envelope. “Tilda asked me to get you an invite to the ball. Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“Who are you going with?” he asks, though the question feels like more. It certainly is more as he stares down at me, a possessive glint in his eye that makes me question more than I should dare to ask.

“You’re going with Anne,” I reply flatly, avoiding his question entirely.

An awkward silence fills the room as Anne comes back with plates and a knife, and starts cutting the cake for us, humming along softly.

“Yeah. I am going with her,” I hear Lucas whisper under his breath. “Hey Anne, my dad can wait. I’m coming with you to the party.”

Anne smiles so widely at him before rushing over and hugging him tightly.

It shouldn’t make me jealous but it does.

And I hate myself for it.



Chapter Fifteen

“Here,” Lucas says, handing me a glass of champagne. “It’ll be better than the cheap crap Wilson will have at his place.”

Wilson must be the name of the rich kid’s house we’re headed to. I look around the limousine. Besides me, Anne and Lucas, Charlie’s Angels are sharing the ride with us. It was them who pulled strings to make sure the teachers and bodyguards wouldn’t catch us sneaking out. They’re busy pouring champagne into glass flutes, the three of them dressed up as demons and devils which is a little ironic given my nickname for them.

Despite that the party is only five minutes down the road, the limo driver is obviously taking a lengthy detour since we left the academy grounds over twenty minutes ago. Not that I’m really complaining. It’s surprisingly nice to be partying with people I don’t need to kill. Well, excluding Lucas that is, but he’s last on my list for the time being.

I let Anne choose our costumes this year. Of course, Anne being a lover of all things gothic, chose sister witches. While my black leather corset dress and six-inch heels aren’t the most comfortable in the world, it’s a good excuse to wear something sexy enough to get my victims’ tongues wagging. I’ve done the cute new girl who’s terribly awkward and shy. Now it’s time to do the bad-ass sexy ‘I will fuck you up’ girl. The evil witch out of *The Wizard of Oz* seemed to fit this persona perfectly.

I cross my legs, smoothing a hand down my black stockings. “Who do you think will be here tonight?” I ask Lucas, taking a sip of my drink.

In the neon lights strobing around us, Lucas’ skull-painted face is rather unsettling to look at. I knew he had a creative streak when he drew my portrait, but I never expected him to be *this* talented. The bone definitions on his face and neck are so accurate that I feel like I could put my hand right through his throat. He’s chosen a tuxedo and shiny leather shoes to go with his skullwork, and damn does he look dangerously sexy.

“Probably the usual,” Lucas answers, drinking his beer. He hovers the bottle at his lips, and adds as an afterthought, “Us, obviously. Ethan, Josh, the Cross brothers, and anyone else Wilson felt worthy to give an invite.”

All my targets in one place with no bodyguards? This could be interesting.

I sit back in my seat and take another drink of champagne, absently twirling the ring on my left index finger. It’s a special ring—one my father gave me for my sixteenth birthday. To the untrained eye, it’s just a plain silver band with a trillion-cut sapphire that gleams beautifully in the light. But underneath the jewel is a secret compartment, a place where I like to hide poison.

My parents each have a similar piece of jewelry. My mother has a heart-shaped locket and my father a set of gold cufflinks that neither of them are ever without. It’s in case any of us get captured by our enemies. Just a droplet of this Middle-eastern poison is enough to kill you in seconds and it is completely untraceable.

Only the best for the Hall family.

“We’re here!” Anne cheers as the limo comes to a halt.

I swallow the rest of my drink, grab my hat and broom, and follow the others out.

The white-bricked mansion has been decorated in all things Halloween, from skeletons and pumpkins to six-foot spiders and illuminated ghosts on the front lawn. We walk up the gravelled driveway that is lined with pumpkin-shaped lanterns. Thick

black webs surround the porch, wrapping around the pillars like monstrous spider legs. I think this is the first Halloween party I've actually wanted to go to. Growing up, I wasn't allowed to go trick or treating, or celebrate Halloween at all. Mother said it's an American tradition and we shouldn't encourage it. I've always thought it was a bit of fun. Plus, it is a time when everyone, not just me, gets to hide behind a mask.

Lucas reaches the door first and turns the handle. He gestures me to enter, and the second I do, music engulfs my senses. The entryway is overflowing with girls and boys dancing mindlessly to the music, their costumes partially hidden by the fog streaming out of machines attached to the ceiling. Little orange fairy lights crawl around the butterfly staircase, leading up to rooms that already appear occupied. I'm impressed by whoever this Wilson is. The guy clearly knows how to put on a wicked house party.

Anne takes my hand and drags me through the crowd. I spot Ethan dancing, his tongue thrust down a petite girl's throat. One of his hands twists through her hair and the other grabs her fluffy bunny tail, pulling her against his groin. All the other students are grinding in a similar fashion, completely intoxicated and lost to the music.

Joshua, Hunter, Nathan, and a few other guys are playing beer pong in the kitchen. Joshua looks up when we enter and misses his shot, much to the delight of his opponent.

"You forgot this," Lucas says to Anne, handing her a bottle of lemonade.

"I'll take one of those, too, please." I prefer not to drink alcohol when I'm with Anne, and I've already had one glass of champagne on the way here. I need to stay sober so I don't mess up tonight's plan.

Anne and Lucas go to the kitchen island. While Lucas chats with a red-haired boy I recognise as Malcolm, Anne pours us both a glass of lemonade, and I notice her hands are shaking. I wish I knew how her scan went yesterday. It's obviously not good news. It's difficult because I don't want to invade her personal space or smother her in any way, yet I also don't want to lose her.

“Look who decided to show up.”

I peel my gaze off Anne and look up at Joshua. He’s wearing a dark leather trench coat that spills down to his ankles, a heavy black vest, trousers, boots, gloves, and sunglasses. When he crosses his arms, the coat seems to meld against his enormous muscles. I know straight away who he’s supposed to be.

“Let me guess,” I say, lifting my chin. “Blade?”

Joshua grins, hinting at a pair of fangs that look startlingly authentic. I certainly wouldn’t mind sucking his...

“You’re a Marvel fan?” Joshua asks, running a hand through his braided hair.

I raise my own hands. “Guilty as charged.”

He appears more surprised than anything. “I didn’t peg you for the kind.”

“What? Because I’m a girl and I like girly things?” I huff through my nose, pointing a thumb over my shoulder. “The nineteen-fifties just called. They want their sexism back.”

He nudges me playfully. “I didn’t mean it like that. So, what are you? Wicked Witch of the East?”

“No. I’m the Wicked Witch of the West, actually,” I correct him, “and I’m here for your heart.”

Joshua chuckles. “You’re ten years too late, babygirl.”

I keep my eyes on him, unsure exactly what he means by that.

Also, babygirl? What happened to his condescending use of ‘darling’? I should be happy about this change in dynamic, since it means he’s beginning to like me, but there’s something about the nickname that makes me uncomfortable. Then I remember... *He* used to call me his babygirl. I can’t believe I forgot that, but everything about him seems to disappear now and it makes me ache to remember more.

“I thought that chick was green,” Nathan jumps in, appearing beside us.

“Jesus! Where the hell did you come from?” I scowl at him, not particularly happy about how silently he keeps sneaking up on me. I give his costume a quick once over.. “Vampire? Really?”

“I was on a time crunch,” he argues, brushing a hand down his crimson waistcoat. “You’re one to talk. Wicked Witch of the West is green.”

“Oh yeah? Come back tomorrow when I’ve got a hangover,” I reply, adjusting my pointy hat. “We ran out of time, too. Terrible traffic when you’re flying on brooms, you know.”

“More like you and Anne decided to binge-watch *How To Get Away With Homicide* while giving each other mani-pedis,” Lucas interjects, handing me a plastic cup filled with lemonade. “I watched eight whole episodes with you two and I still don’t know what was going on.”

“That’s because you weren’t paying any attention.”

“How could I with Anne giving a running commentary?”

I laugh at that, sniffing my drink before taking a sip. I still don’t trust anyone in here apart from Anne. Hell, I’m beginning to not even trust myself anymore with how my train of thoughts that has been going on. I shouldn’t want to kiss my victims or pity them or want to spare their lives. But I do, time and time again. Well, *most* of them. Hunter Cross is going to die tonight one way or another.

That I am sure of.

“Who’s coming with me to the Haunted Maze?” Anne seizes mine and Lucas’ arms.

“I’m not really a fan of haunted things,” Lucas says, flicking the brim of Anne’s hat.

I grin at him. “What’s wrong, Georgian? Afraid of ghosts?”

He snorts, reaching over Anne to flip my hat off. “Have you seen it?”

I catch my hat before it falls, and look to where Lucas is pointing out the kitchen window. The entire garden is a sea of hedges floodlit with crystals and spooky decorations. A giggling group of girls jump back from the entrance before forcing each

other into the maze. I can hear their screams from here and it makes me smile. I wonder if Hunter would like to take a stroll through the Haunted Maze with me?

“Well, what are we waiting for?” I squeeze Anne’s arm and turn toward the back door. “But if anything jumps out at me, I can’t be held accountable for any injuries they’ll sustain.”

“I pity the ghoul that tries to scare you,” Lucas mutters, following us out. “Do you have your lemonade, Anne?”

She stops in her tracks. “Oh, gosh. I put it on the island.”

A loud cheer erupts between the guys playing beer pong. Anne flinches and hesitates.

“I’ll grab it,” I tell them, ushering them through the patio doors.

I watch them step outside and approach the start of the maze, then I turn to get the bottle. Just as I do so, someone blocks my way and I fall into them.

Nathan.

And the drink he was holding spills all over his fancy cravat and waistcoat.

“Damn it, new girl!” He glares down at me, wiping his wet clothes.

“Sorry.”

“You don’t look sorry.”

I hold my broom against my shoulder, curling the edge of my lip. “How does one look sorry, Nathan?”

“They start by fetching me something to soak up the damage.”

He does have a point.

While he fusses over his spoiled outfit, I grab the bottle of lemonade off the table, where I just so happen to find some kitchen roll on the floor. It must have been left there by someone who half-assedly tried to clean up a puddle of beer. I bend down to grab it, but Nathan’s voice booms over me, no longer containing the mirth he showed before.

“Don’t even think about it!”

Whoever he’s cautioning doesn’t bother listening, and a firm slap lands on my arse, the searing impact pushing me off balance. I grab hold of the island for support, admittedly stunned as well enraged at whoever just signed their own death wish.



Chapter Sixteen

“I don’t know, gentleman. Her arse feels just as frigid as the rest of her looks.”

Hunter laughs, because of fucking course it had to be him who slapped me.

Two can play at that game.

His beer pong buddies burst into laughter while I pick up the kitchen roll, straighten off the floor and toss it to Nathan. He catches it, his mouth slightly agape, and I train my gaze on his dick of a brother.

Hunter’s dark green eyes tumble up and down my body, his mouth pulled into a derisive smirk. “Maybe your pussy will feel better around my cock.”

My blood *boils*.

This guy is just begging me to slit his fucking throat.

“In your dreams, Cunter. You’ll need a real cock to start off with, not one of your mamma’s vibrators.”

This receives an even louder cheer from his comrades. I hold out my broom, jabbing Hunter in the stomach with the end, but also providing a safe barrier between us. It’s not that I can’t take him. Far from it. I just don’t want to make too much of a scene when I know by the end of the night, he won’t be breathing.

Hunter's face turns purple with anguish. He steps forward, and by his stance alone I can tell that he's going to strike me. I don't think he's used to girls standing up to him. Well, there's a first time for everything, right? I jab once more, this time causing him to wince.

"I suggest you bibbity-bobbity the fuck out of here, or I'm going to make this broom disappear up your arse."

Nathan grabs his brother by the scruff of his neck and hauls him to the side. I can't hear what Nathan is saying but his face is nearly as red as Hunter's, though if I suspect from rage instead of embarrassment. I slide Hunter's pack of hyenas a venomous glare, and their smiles suddenly vanish. They quickly avert their gazes, apparently more focused on the kitchen decor than his friend sexually harassing me.

When I train my eyes back on the motherfucker in question, he's no longer standing in front of Nathan. I watch Hunter stalk out of the kitchen, losing himself in the crowd of people dancing, but instincts take hold of me and I go to seek him out.

Nathan blocks my path, holding his hands up in supplication. "I'm really sorry about that." Not buying it, I try to sidle by him but he catches my arm, adding, "Really, I am. That was so uncivilized even for my brother."

"Then why do you hang around with him?" I counter, briefly pausing in pursuit to hear Nathan's lousy excuse.

Hunter's friends creep by us, giving me an awkward smile as they do so. I glare back at them.

"He's my brother," Nathan answers after a moment.

"And that's a good enough reason to excuse his behaviour?"

He furrows his eyebrows, his somewhat lighter green eyes fixed on mine. "Nobody's perfect."

I huff at him. "That's just another bullshit excuse. Besides, not everyone likes to blackmail others into being with them."

Realisation is swift to dawn on him.

"Imogen..." he whispers, his eyes darting to where his brother fled. "You know about her?"

I simply nod, gazing up at him in silence. It's strange how alike the Cross Brothers are, and yet the more time I spend with them, the more I'm beginning to see how vastly different they are. Nathan definitely has the brains of the two. Hunter just thinks his with his dick, and I bet it's no bigger than a fucking monkey nut.

“Regan?”

I jump at Nathan's voice, too busy thinking of all the ways I'd like to kill his little brother. “*What?*”

For the first time since I met him, a soft blush rises into Nathan's cheeks.

He runs a hand through his short, slicked-back hair. “Wanna walk through the maze with me?” he offers, biting his bottom lip.

It's hard not to find that attraction.

“Sure,” I hear myself say. “I'd love to.”

Only because it'll help me get to know you and figure out your sin.

I keep telling myself that as I follow him out into the garden.

Anne and Lucas are waiting for me at the entrance of the maze. Anne gasps when she sees who I'm with and tugs Lucas' arm, whispering in his ear. Before either of them get the wrong idea, I open the lemonade and refill Anne's cup. The little grin on her face conveys exactly what she's thinking. She opens her mouth to speak but I cut in.

“Ready to go?”

And with that, we enter the haunted maze...



“That was *insane*,” Anne squeals, clutching my arm as we finally leave the maze. “Now let's go dance!”

I must admit, I'm surprised it took us so long to find the way out. What surprised me even more was the look Lucas gave me when we decided to split up and Nathan chose me. I was more than happy to go with Nathan since it meant time alone with him, and while that did give me a great opportunity to kill him, I figured it'd be better to focus on his brother. I decided to chat with Nathan instead. Did I learn anything of importance? Not really. Daisy pretty much told me everything Nathan did.

Except for the part about Imogen.

"Hunter and Imogen have been childhood sweethearts for as long as I can remember. When Matthew entered the picture and took her away from him, it broke my brother's heart. They had a huge bust-up one night. My brother is a lot of things but he's not a killer. He never meant to hurt Matthew. He was just heartbroken over Imogen."

I played along with Nathan's story despite that I know the real version.

And I still believe that one; even if I didn't it's not going to stop my plans tonight.

One thing is for certain, Nathan is covering up for his brother because he, too, has a sin he doesn't want me to know. I've got a strong hunch it's something to do with murder. Why else would he try so desperately to cover up for his brother? It makes me suspect that Hunter knows what Nathan did, or at least has a clue.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and I turn to see Lucas. The moonlight shining down catches his eyes, and my breath hitches in my throat.

"Do you dance?"

"Are you asking me to?" I smirk, watching Anne drag Nathan inside to dance.

"Yeah, I'm asking."

"Then let's go!"

I grab his sleeve and pull him back into the house. We join Anne and Nathan dancing on the middle of the floor. The heat, the perfume and sweat cloying the air, is a little overwhelming.

It feels like forever since I've danced, let alone with someone I totally shouldn't have a crush on. But I let myself have this moment to just forget about everything —Truth, his list, my secret and my past, being an assassin, my parents, the Veil Council—and I move my body along with the music. Just like with books, music has always been an escape for me, and I need it now more than ever.

The song changes, and Lucas is tugged into Anne's arms and I end up dancing with Nathan. He holds me closer than Lucas, letting our bodies move in sync to the music.

"You're like this song," he whispers into my ear as a dance remix of the song *Dance Monkey* plays. His lips brush the tip of my ear, his breath tickling me. "A monkey playing the game of the rich, stuck in their webs. You aren't all fake despite playing their games. You're real as me, under a perfect picture."

"You don't have to make so much effort to see into my soul, Nathan."

"I don't want to fuck the fake version of you. I want to own the real you. It's something I've recently decided."

"You have no idea who the real me is," I warn him. Knowledge is deadly, after all.

"We all are hiding something, my dance monkey. The world makes us this way and we thrive in it nonetheless. The real, the fake, it all mixes into one sometimes, and honestly, I forgot what it was like to see anything real until I looked into your eyes."

"And now what?"

"I'm going to own you," he murmurs, brushing his lips against my cheek as he pulls back and the song ends. "And you are going to beg me to never let you go."

Anne grabs my hands and tugs me back onto the dancefloor with her, and when I look back, Nathan is gone.

Countless songs later, we stop to get some drinks. Me and Anne stick with the lemonade while Lucas grabs a bottle of beer from the fridge. I ask him where the bathroom is and he points me to the door beside the main entrance.

My heels stick to the stained carpet as I make my way through the writhing sea of dancers. I catch Nathan dancing with another girl, and his words whisper through my mind again despite how much I want to forget them.

When I reach the bathroom, it's locked and my bladder isn't fond of waiting for much longer. I climb the stairs up to the first floor. Surely must be some bathrooms up here? This mansion is huge. Students fill the hallway, some of them walking in and out of rooms. Even with the music, I can hear people having sex and someone vomiting. I pass by them and walk down a small hallway that leads to another set of stairs. I don't fancy intruding or using a bathroom stinking of vomit.

I place my hand on the mahogany banister and climb the stairs to what I assume is the third floor. Once I reach the top, it's a lot quieter with only remnants of the music vibrating the floor and the photographs on the walls. My poor bladder is about to explode, so I rush to the nearest door, and to my relief it opens. I enter what appears to be the master bedroom. The ensuite is off to the side of the massive bed, and I hurry over to it, quickly locking myself in the bathroom.

After I'm finished, I wash my hands with the most delicious smelling bar of soap I've ever come across. It smells like cupcakes and candyfloss. How the hell that's possible, I have no idea, but I want it. I dry my hands on one of the towels, taking note of the soap's name before walking out while pulling my gloves and ring back on. I might be an assassin but I'm not a thief.

I do have *some* morals left.

"Fancy meeting you here," a low, superficially calm voice mutters.

Before I can do anything, a heavy impact hits me in the stomach, driving the air from my lungs. Tears sting my eyes and as I struggle to breathe. Hunter drops a baseball bat onto the bed, but I'm quick to regain my strength. Since his foot is the nearest thing to me, I reach out and grab his ankle. He clearly underestimated my strength because I pull him right off his feet, knocking him onto his back.

We scramble to get on top of the other, but I'm smaller and faster than he is. I manage to overpower him by straddling his thighs and grabbing hold of his windpipe. His eyes bulge into saucers and he chokes, his Adam's apple fluttering under my grip. The most disgusting thing of all is that he's smiling as if not a care left in the world, and I can feel his erection pressing into me.

"You sick bastard! You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

He chokes again, this time from laughing. "So...are you..."

I increase my pressure on his throat. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Oh, I...d-do...you're like...me..."

His pathetic choking noises are annoying me, so I loosen my pressure enough for him to speak without gasping.

"What the fuck do you mean?" I growl, grabbing his cock with my other hand and squeezing to the point that Hunter lets out a hiss.

"You're...you're just like me. You like it rough."

I roll my eyes, choking him again. "Are you deluded?"

He laughs, evidently enjoying this predicament. I can feel his cock getting harder in my hand and his pupils are blown. I bet that's why Imogen is constantly covered in bruises. He likes to hurt girls. It's what gets him off. I hate men like him.

I lean in slightly, bringing my lips close to his face. "I'm not like the girl you've forced to be with you. I'm your worst fucking nightmare, and you've just made my night a helluva lot easier."

The smugness falls from his face. "What...do you mean?"

"I know all about your sin, Hunter. I know you killed Matthew just so Imogen would be with you. But what you don't know about me is that I'm the kind of girl who poisons hearts like yours, and even should you try to fight it, it'll be the sweetest thing you've ever tasted."

Now that my words are settling in, fear takes over his countenance and he writhes underneath me. I might look small

and puny but I know my strengths and this boy isn't going anywhere so long as I'm on top of him.

"H-how?" he chokes out, swallowing hard against my tightening fingers. "How...did you...know?"

"Because it takes a monster to know a monster," I answer simply, letting go of his cock. I bring my hand my lips and wrap my teeth around the diamond on my ring, carefully opening its secret compartment. All the while, Hunter thrashes underneath me, trying to throw me off him.

What a fucking idiot.

I dig my fingers into his throat, forcing him to gasp for air. The instant his mouth opens—completely unaware of what I'm about to do—I tip the poison onto his tongue and squeeze his jaw shut. He retches and tries to spit it out, but this poison dissolves instantly into the bloodstream the second it touches your tongue.

Bringing my lips to his ear, I whisper almost seductively, "If I were you, Hunter, I would enjoy these next few seconds of your life. They're about to be your last."

Hunter lets out a strangled scream that sounds like a suffocated cry. He thrashes and kicks and bucks his hips, tears and sweat streaming down his face, but I hold him there with every ounce of my being. When his body stills underneath me, I listen for his last breath, and I smile. One down, three more to go.

I push off him and straighten up, sealing the diamond again on my ring. Now how should they find his body? I look around, my gaze landing on the bed. Oh, that'll do perfectly.

Hunter is a lot easier to handle when he's not fighting for his stupid life. I manage to haul his ass onto the bed, then I pull his trousers and boxers down. I laugh at his little flaccid cock all shrivelled up. It looks and feels so funny as I tuck it into his limp hand. I step back to admire my work. Once more, I can't help but laugh at how pathetic Hunter looks holding onto his precious manhood all withered up like a prune.

Cruel and undignified. What a hilarious and deserving way for him to die.

I leave him lying there, close the door softly behind me, and go downstairs to look for Anne. I make it just in time for the firework display, meaning everyone is already gathered outside and are none the wiser of the boy lying dead upstairs.



Chapter Seventeen

“Emergency assembly,” Daisy announces, dragging me from a lovely dream; one that involved Hunter gasping for breath underneath me. “Attention all students. Please go to the assembly hall immediately. Attention all students. Please go to the assembly hall immediately. Attention all—”

“I heard you the first time, Daisy,” I grumble, turning around in bed.

“Thank you, Miss Hall. Please go to the auditorium by eight A.M.”

Through one opened eye, I peer at the clock on the nightstand. That’s only five minutes to get ready. Ugh. I don’t even know where the auditorium is. I roll out of bed and start pulling on a fresh uniform and tie my hair into a loose plait.

“Daisy, show me where the auditorium is,” I muffle over brushing my teeth.

Daisy’s screen changes and my phone vibrates on my bed. “I have sent you directions to and from the auditorium. It is located on the first floor of the rotunda.”

“Thanks.”

I grab my phone, shove it into my bag with all my books, and hurry outside, bumping straight into a guy. We would have tumbled to the floor but he catches me, holding me to his chest like nothing happened at all.

“You should be more careful, Miss...?” he asks and his thick Scottish accent takes my breath away.

I cast my gaze over him quickly. Tall silver-fox with muscles bulging through his tight black t-shirt... Fuck, he’s hot and a quite a bit older than me. I’ve never looked at older guys before, but whoever this is has my full undivided attention. Hopefully, he’s a new teacher here that I can play with. That would also explain why he’s in the girls dormitory. But why do I feel like I know him from somewhere? I look up at rugged face and try to remember where I’ve possibly seen him before, but I’m clearly not awake yet as I can’t seem to place him.

God, I hope he’s a teacher here.

Student-teacher romance books are always so fucking sexy.

“Regan Hall,” I answer hurriedly, realising I just stared at him like a psychopath. “And you shouldn’t be wandering around outside girls rooms, Mr...?”

“Call me Rory. Good day, Miss Hall.” He lets me go and walks out of the dormitory, catching every girls attention as he passes by.

Rory... I’ve definitely heard that name recently.

I’m in a daze until some girl knocks into me and I frown at her. This dormitory is in utter chaos. Girls only half-dressed scurry from room to room, slamming doors and frantically trying to get ready. I spot Anne waving at me from the end of the hall. As I make my way towards her, I see how frailer she is today. Her pale skin is almost translucent and she’s wearing a hat and scarf despite the warmth circulating through the school.

“Are you all right?”

She nods quickly. “Oh, yeah. Just tired. Last night was so much fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was, actually. I can’t believe we danced until three A.M. No wonder you’re tired.”

Anne yawns, nodding. “It’s almost eight. We should get going to the assembly.”

“Too bad we can’t eat breakfast first,” I grouse, following Anne out of the dorm.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure.” Anne shrugs her backpack off her shoulder and pulls out a paper bag. “I grabbed us some muffins.”

Tears prick my eyes. This is why I love Anne—she literally thinks about everything.

There’s nothing dark or bloody about her, and as I take a bite of my chocolate chip muffin, I realise that’s why I love her so much. She gives me hope in a world that repeatedly tries to destroy it thanks to my parents.

The rest of the girls follow us out and into the rotunda. Instead of going down, we walk around to where everyone is hurrying through a set of brass doors. Armed guards flank the entrance. One I recognise as Rory. So he’s a bodyguard instead of a teacher? Mmm, that’s even hotter. I try not to grin at him like an idiot as I slide through the doors, but it’s a little hard with how hot he looks in his SWAT uniform. And that’s when I realise he’s the bodyguard who escorted me and Joshua to the Maritime Care Home!

I never noticed how sexy he was until now. Dang.

“What do you think the guards are here for?” Anne whispers, clenching my hand.

I pat her reassuringly. “Probably someone choked on a peanut and died.”

The inside joke makes me giggle, and Anne reciprocates it rather awkwardly as we hurry into the auditorium. Mrs Beach is standing on the central stage and Charlie’s Angels usher me and Anne into the middle row of seats.

“It is with a heavy heart that I have gathered you all here today,” the headmistress starts off, quieting the chatter spreading through the auditorium. “There have been rumours going around since early this morning, and I am here to put them to rest. Hunter Cross, your fellow student and a member of the Student Council, is now dead.”

The chatter turns into horrified gasps. I look over at Imogen, gauging her reaction. Her eyes are completely dry and she doesn’t appear remotely affected unlike some of the others. I don’t know why but it makes me smile. She’s free of him now.

“Last night, as some of you may already know, Hunter attended an illicit house party,” Mrs Beach resumes calmly. “This morning his body was found unresponsive in that very house. While his death is being treated as unsuspecting, for the sake of all students at Holly Oak Academy, each pupil will now be assigned a bodyguard.”

More gasps and whispering from the students.

“Now, now,” Mrs Beach says, silencing everyone with a simple clap of her hands. “There is nothing to be worried about. As I said, Hunter’s death came from natural causes, as heart-breaking as it might be. Your bodyguard is simply a precaution while Hunter’s death continues to be investigated.”

“But you just said it’s being treated as unsuspecting,” a student calls out, and all eyes turn to him.

Mrs Beach clears her throat. “Yes, that is what I said. Well noticed, Mr Bradshaw.”

Some of the students giggle at her condescending reply. They stop the instant Mrs Beach glances their way. I might not like the old bat but her dominance over this school is something to behold.

She flicks a speck of dust off her dark grey suit, and once more clears her throat. “As I was saying, your bodyguards will simply be accompanying you between classes. You will find at least one of them at the back of each classroom and outside the doors. Until I am absolutely certain this academy remains a safe place for you all, your bodyguard will also stand watch outside your bedrooms each night. Under no circumstances are you allowed to leave the school grounds without my permission. That is all.”

I start to push off my chair but Anne grabs me, whispering, “Hold up. I don’t think they’re finished.”

Mrs. Lyons marches onto the stage, blowing her whistle and signalling around the auditorium like she’s marshalling an aeroplane. The doors to the auditorium open and bodyguards start marching down the stairs. Mr Hines appears beside our row, gesturing for us to come out. Anne takes my hand and we follow Charlie’s Angels out of the auditorium and into the

rotunda. There, more bodyguards await, and when I thought the girls' dormitory had been chaotic this morning, it's nothing compared to this. There's so many people and voices and assignments that I can barely hear my own thoughts. Even Anne is whisked away by the turmoil and assigned a female bodyguard who looks fresh out of training. I'd be more suited to protect my best friend by the looks of that guard.

“Regan Hall?”

I blink up at Rory waving his hand in front of my face. How long has he been standing there for? With him standing so close, I can see the colour of his eyes, and they're beautiful, burning through to my core like the sapphire glow in a smouldering flame. My gaze lingers on the gun in his leather holster and the way his muscles flex as he crosses his arms over his bullet-proof chest. He catches me checking him out and grins, flashing his pearly-white teeth. Damn, he's got one killer of a smile. I'd happily call him my Daddy Dom any day.

“What's up, Rory?” I ask, feigning complete ignorance to his blatant sexiness. “Wait. Are you my bodyguard?”

A grin lights up his face and he winks at me. “Aye, lass. Where am I escortin' ye to?”

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth, looking him up and down. I can certainly think of a naughty place I'd like him to escort me to. Rory is the first guy I've been attracted to here without feeling guilty.

Without having to plan a way to end his life.

“I have English Lit downstairs,” I start off, peeling my gaze from his lips.

Rory looks up from my lips, too. “Classes have been cancelled for the day. Under the circumstances, you know.”

“That makes sense.”

He drags a hand through his salt-and-peppered hair, widening that cheeky grin of his. “So, where are we going?”

I think for a moment, wondering if I should go to Anne, but an exhaustion I wasn't aware I had creeps over me, and I yawn, covering my mouth with my hand. I didn't get much sleep last

night and Daisy woke me up at the crack of dawn. It's far too early to be awake despite that I have things to do, people to kill. I catch the silver watch gleaming on Rory's wrist. Eight-fifteen. If classes have been cancelled today, I still have time to go back to my room for a nap.

Rory takes my yawn for an answer and puts his hands on my shoulders. "You need a good kip, wee one. Let's get you back to your room."

I nod, unaware of what the word 'kip' means. All I want to do right now is to curl up in bed and nap for a few hours, preferably with this man...and Lucas...and Nathan and Ethan and Joshua, because why choose if I can fuck them all, right?

In my dreams, that is.

Of course.

I mean, I'm an *assassin*. I can't sleep with the boys I'm supposed to murder.

And I'll keep telling myself this until I'm blue in the face. Maybe one day I will start believing the words.

I wave goodbye to Anne and Charlie's Angels as Rory steers me down the stairs. The warmth of his hands on my body is unexpectedly soothing. It appears Hunter's death has brought a surprising change in circumstances to Holly Oak Academy, and I couldn't be happier.



Chapter Eighteen

“Shh, don’t freak out.”

Those are the first words I hear as I wake up from my nap.

I react before I can think clearly and I grab the shadow of a man standing over me on the couch. With one effortless pull, I slam him onto the ground and use my strength to hold him down, my hand wrapped around his throat. As I blink down at him and he groans, I realise it’s Ethan. He looks shocked but not actually frightened as he stares up at me with his bright blue eyes, his messy blonde hair flat against the carpet. A strange and sudden *deja vu* creeps into me but I can’t figure out why. A few buttons on his pale blue shirt have popped open and I have to pull my gaze away from him.

“Why are you in my room?” I finally manage to question, letting go of his throat just in case. He’s still on my list and I can’t forget it.

“We need to talk, cutie. Didn’t mean to scare you but I can’t walk through the door with the new bodyguards,” he explains, rubbing his throat.

I sit back, well aware I’m still on his lap and how hard he’s getting under me. The whole situation reminds me too much of Hunter. I climb off him and straighten my pink crop top and pale pink tracky bottoms. His eyes trail over my bare stomach and I know he’s looking at the three tiny scars that are by my hip.

“When did you learn to defend yourself like that?”

I shrug at him, keeping my voice neutral. “My parents insisted on self-defence lessons. I’ve been training since I was seven.”

“And before you were seven you were in foster care. With me.”

I almost freeze, almost reveal my utter shock at his words.

“Wh-what?” I choke out, automatically stepping back as Ethan crosses his arms. I stare at Ethan longer, this time remembering a time in my past that I can just about reach. Most of my childhood memories are a blur, but there’s one coming to me now, something strange and familiar, and I reach out to grab it.

Ethan remains standing, his eyes locked on my own. “I understand why you don’t want to say anything. My parents pretend my adoption never happened either and they hate me talking about it. I’m guessing yours are the same.”

He knows about my adoption?

“Something like that,” I mutter, scrutinising him, and then it hits me like a train, jolting me to the core. “Wait. I... I remember you now.”

Ethan only smiles as I remember the boy I used to share a foster home with. Our foster home wasn’t a bad place but the old lady who looked after us only wanted the paycheck that came with caring for foster children. His name was Derrick before he was adopted and mine was different too. We used to play games when we were bored, but I can’t remember what right now. I just know I trusted Ethan back then, he was a good friend to me and I’d been distraught when my parents only adopted me and left him behind.

“You were adopted two months before me,” I say slowly as the memories come flooding back to me. “I missed you so much. I never thought I’d see you again.”

“Yeah, I missed you too. I tried to convince my parents to adopt you as well but they didn’t want a girl. Shame. I would have been a good step-brother.” He winks and I can only think

of the step-brother romance books I've read and loved the shit out of.

"Why? Girls are better," I eventually reply, still overwhelmed by this revelation.

"You always used to say that." He smiles, and I can see him now, just a little boy sharing his lunch with me at the park while our foster siblings played hopscotch.

I rub my arm, unsure which question to ask first. I guess I should start with the most important one. "How long have you known who I was?"

"Since we met. I wanted to see if you remembered," he admits, shrugging a shoulder. "Now I'm thinking I was an idiot and should have just said something."

"It's a small world," I mutter.

"Yeah, cutie, it is. Especially for the rich."

"Did you have a good life after you were adopted?" I dig my fingernails into my arm, praying he wasn't mistreated. So many children get promised a life of wonder but it turns out only to be torture. I'm one of them.

Ethan hesitates, just for a second but I catch it. "Other than a name change and having to pretend my real parents never existed, sure."

I frown as I remember Ethan wasn't in foster care as long as me. I was there since I was a baby, but Ethan was placed in foster care at five and he remembered his parents well. He must have hated having to forget about his life before his parents passed away.

"What about you?" he presses me, pulling my fingers away from my arm.

"It was alright," I mutter, stepping closer to him.

He lets go of me and waves at the sofa. We both sit down and a silence drifts over us that is equal parts sad as it is awkward. I have so many questions to ask him and apologies to make. Once I was adopted, I never bothered contacting him again, and the guilt twists my stomach into a tight knot. I should have made more of an effort to keep in touch.

Now I apparently have to kill him.

How can this be happening?

Ethan slides his arm along the back of the sofa and rests his hand near my shoulder, his fingers grazing my hair. “I wanted to ask you not to tell anyone about us being in foster care. Rich kids are judgy fuckers and they don’t need more gossip.”

I nod absently. “Agreed. I don’t want people to know either.”

“I looked for you,” he randomly tells me. “I even hired private detectives when I was fourteen to find you but they found nothing. Not a single bit of information on you. It’s like you were never born, never existed.”

That sounds about right. I once made the mistake of asking my parents about information on my real parents. I still remember my mother holding me down as father got out his whip and made the four scars on my lower back. I never asked again.

“Why?” I breathe, closing my eyes.

“You were my first real friend and I felt protective of you,” he answers, twirling a strand of my hair. “Fuck, I still do.”

“We aren’t kids anymore,” I remind him, my heart pounding in my chest. “The past is the past. We don’t have to mean anything to each other now.”

“Good. It means I can do this.”

I turn to look back at him, wondering what he means, but then he covers my mouth with his own. His hands glide through my hair as his lips explore mine, softly parting my lips as he deepens the kiss. As his hand slides down my body and rests on my hip, I freeze, and before I realise what I’m doing, I all but fall off the sofa to escape from him.

“I can’t,” is the only excuse I tell Ethan before I run out of my room, so lost in my thoughts I don’t even hear him calling for me as he follows. Kissing Ethan reminds me of kissing someone else with blonde hair, someone else who made my heart beat so fast and then shatter into a million pieces.

And I can’t remember that anymore.

I just can't.



Chapter Nineteen

I rest my head against my room door, taking a deep breath and praying to all the friggin' gods that neither one of my parents turn up today. I suspect they won't but I don't want to chance that they might do. I haven't replied to any of their text messages or answered my mother's calls. I know they don't want anything more than to make sure I'm behaving, but for once, I want an escape from them entirely.

I have to be kidding myself though. I don't get to escape them.

I turn the handle of my door and head out into the corridor, where some bodyguard is waiting that isn't Rory. He's young and I'm sure he's the bodyguard Charlie was telling me about. She is fucking him because he has a decent-sized cock. Good for her but I can't remember his name. I don't think Charlie can either.

"My eyes are up here," I remind the bodyguard, who shoots his eyes up from my breasts and clears his throat.

"This way." I roll my eyes as he practically runs to the end of the corridor and holds the door open for me. I make a point of walking ahead of him the rest of the way down the corridor and I only pause when we get close to the door. He steps ahead and opens it, letting out the noise of all the parents talking to their children.

Once a month, they have family day where any parents are invited in to see their kids. I glance around and see Anne with

her parents, who wave at me. Ethan, Nathan and Josh aren't here but Lucas is. I watch as he holds a small baby in his arms, and a woman who is stunning but a lot older sits opposite him, gushing over them both. Lucas doesn't look away from the baby and I find myself staring for a second too long, until I smell her perfume.

Rose and Citrus. Sweet and bitter, perfect for my mother.

“Darling, how lovely it is to see you! Come and sit over here so we can talk.”

I don't have a choice as she wraps an arm around my waist and guides me over to a table in the corner of the room, well out of ear shot from the others. I sit down and she sits across from me, her face as cold as stone as she studies me in silence. I briefly break our gaze to look over at the back of Ethan's head. With Ethan and my mother in the same room, it's like having my past and present sitting side by side. I haven't spoken or seen Ethan since our near kiss a few days ago.

“So tell me, daughter, why did you kill Hunter Cross?”

My mother's question is quiet but loud enough for me to hear, and I snap my head back towards her. I've thought about this answer so many times—this particular lie. I knew she would find out and suspect it was me; it was just a matter of time. Anyone else I kill here, I'll have to make sure it looks like an amateur did it instead of a professional.

“He became an issue for me and to protect our family, I did what was best,” I answer calmly.

“Understood. I have made sure the investigation is going to find nothing but natural causes for Hunter's death,” she informs me and I'm relieved as much as I'm now nervous.

I hate owing my mother anything.

“Thank you,” I force out just as she slams her heel into my foot, and I bite my lip to stop a whimper escaping. I feel her cutting through my skin as I try to control my reaction to the pain. I wish I wore boots today instead of sandals. Fuck, it hurts!

“If you want to protect your family again, I suggest you ask for help. One wrong move and all your training will be lost as you are arrested.”

“Understood,” I manage to say without gasping.

She slowly moves her heel and stands from the chair. “It was lovely to see you, Regan. Do behave now.”

With that, my mother walks out of the room and I remain still, staring at the white table that is as white as my mother’s suit. My foot is bleeding and throbbing, and I can feel my blood trickling into my sandal every second I sit here, knowing I should move.

Once I’ve got myself under control, I stand and slowly walk over to the door, making sure no one looking my way would even suspect I was hurt at all. I pass Lucas and he looks up, catching my gaze for a moment. Before I can get away, his eyes drift over me and he sees my foot. Even through my black tights, it’s not difficult to see the injury and the blood.

“You’re hurt,” Lucas states, smoothly standing up and placing his hand on my arm. “How did you do that? How are you walking around as if nothing has happened?”

“It was just an accident,” I smoothly lie. “I scraped my foot on a sharp part of the table. As you can see, I need to go and clean it up.”

“I’m coming with you,” he states before I can tell him no.

“But Lucas you haven’t seen Sofia in weeks!” the woman, still holding the baby that is apparently named Sofia, demands. I really look at her this time and she is the definition of mutton dressed as lamb. Her blonde hair is clearly dyed, almost white at the roots, and I would bet her entire face has had a lot of work done. Everything from her large fake breasts to her tiny waist screams trophy wife. I would bet she’s still only young, possibly mid-thirties, but the work she’s had done makes her considerably older. “You haven’t even introduced me to your new friend.”

“Regan, this is my step-mother, Denise, and my half-sister, Sofia,” Lucas gently introduces.

I glance at Denise as she openly glares back at me. What the fuck is her problem? I wonder if Lucas' sin has something to do with this Denise, but what exactly? She clearly doesn't like girls hanging around her step-son.

"Lucas, you will sit down and pay attention to Sofia," the woman orders him.

Lucas completely ignores her. "My friend needs help. I will see you next month." He leans down to kiss Sofia's little cheek. The baby is fast asleep though and doesn't notice. "Tell Dad I said hello and that I miss him."

"Of course. I will call you later," she replies coldly, just managing to hold in her temper but her green eyes burn with it.

"Okay," Lucas says, though he sounds anything but okay with that. I let Lucas place his hand on my lower back as he glides me out of the room and the bodyguard follows behind us. "The nurse's room is this way. I doubt she'll be there since I just saw her leave for lunch."

"Then I can clean it up in my room—"

"Please don't be stubborn," Lucas interjects. "I'm having a fucking bad day and I need a distraction, alright? Let me help you, dammit."

His snappy tone surprises me and I lift my brows at him. "As you wish, noble steed."

He looks at me and groans, rubbing his face as we slowly walk towards the nurse's room. "Sorry. That was really shitty of me. I shouldn't have snapped."

"It's fine. We all have bad days. Was yours caused by your step-mum and sister?" I press him, hoping he'll just throw me a bone already.

"Yeah...but can we talk about something else?"

I smile at him, confirming that the woman and baby are indeed his sore points. "Sure, like what?"

"Like how you're a terrible liar. How did you hurt your foot?" He glances down at my foot.

“If we are going to talk about that, then we need to talk about your family,” I try to wrestle more information out of him.

“Touche,” he replies with a chuckle. “I think I’ve met my match with you, Regan Hall.”

“Same,” I reply, though it’s a lie. Lucas is a good guy with one bad secret and he does a good job of hiding it. I’m a box full of death and lies and everything bad. We couldn’t be the same.

“Liar,” he tells me, his voice almost silent as we get to the nurse’s room. Lucas knocks once before pushing the door and holding it open for me to walk inside first. Such a gentleman. “We don’t need your help. Stay outside,” Lucas demands over his shoulder.

Hearing him command the bodyguards is strange because his whole demeanour shifts. His tone was cold and arrogant, a completely different side to the playful Lucas I’ve come to know.

Anne’s Lucas.

Anne’s.

I walk into the empty room and sit on the small table. The only sounds in the room are Lucas going through cupboards and my fingers as I tap the edge of the table. Lucas comes back with everything he needs and rests the box on the table before pulling a wheeled chair over, sitting on it in front of where I’m perched on the desk. I stay still as he looks up at me, pausing with his hands hovering on my leg.

“I need you to...” He stops and I clear my throat, avoiding his gaze. I tug my skirt up a little, revealing the top of my thigh high tights and the line of lace there. I roll them down until Lucas’s hands take over, the tips of his fingers grazing along my leg until he gets to my ankle. He gently takes my shoe off and then peels my tight off, revealing the cut from my mother’s high heels, and my blood-covered foot. “Yikes. You must have a high pain threshold.”

“Something like that,” I mumble as he opens a few packets of antibacterial wipes and starts cleaning my foot. The cut is surprisingly deeper than I expected it to be, but I won’t need any stitches. Mother was clever that way.

“You’re a mystery, Miss Hall,” Lucas says as he takes a plaster out of the box and covers the cut up. “A centimetre deeper and you would’ve needed stitches.”

The tension is thick in the room as he stands and throws all the rubbish away. I push down my other tight leg and step out of it, only to turn around to see him looking at me.

“Thank you, Lucas. It’s good to have a *friend*,” I tell him, making sure to empathise the word friend as much as I can.

He carelessly smirks, picking up my other shoe and walking over. He kneels in front of me and slides my shoe on my foot, reminding me of my favourite fairytale. Cinderella. But what Cinderella never realised, she didn’t need a prince to save her.

And I definitely don’t. No prince could save my soul now. It’s as damned as my parents. Before Lucas can say anything, I turn around and hurry out of the room, heading down the corridor. Lucas is on my list and no matter how much I like him, he isn’t worth my secret.

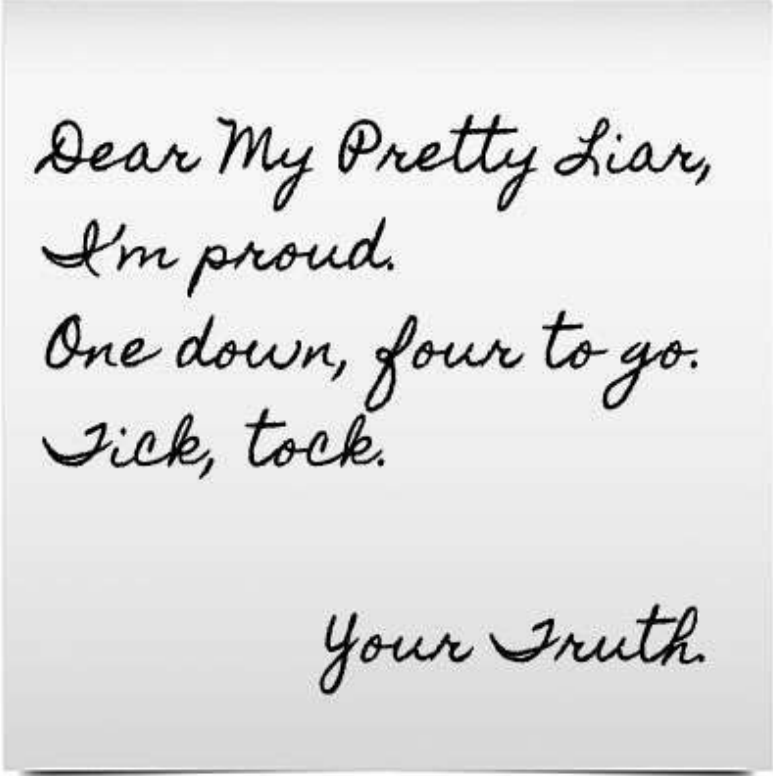
Nothing and no one is.



Chapter Twenty

Sliding my shoes on, I nearly trip as I see the glint of light reflecting off the black slip of paper resting on my windowsill. I rush over to it, my eyes flashing around my room even though I know it's only me in here.

Was I alone when I came home last night? Was my letter writer hiding in the closet or something? I don't know, but I sure as hell didn't notice a letter here before now, and I never left my window open. I unfold the letter, noticing how it's not in an envelope this time, and read the inside while holding my breath.



Dear My Pretty Liar,
I'm proud.
One down, four to go.
Tick, tock.

Your Truth.

I can't see past my anger as I rip the stupid note up and throw all the pieces in the bin before grabbing my shoes.

"Do you get bored standing there all night, Rory?" I ask him the second I walk out of the room and he's just standing there, my constant statue. A damn hot one though. He stares at me like I've got a million issues and he isn't sure which one to bring up first.

"I play Candy Crush on my phone when I'm bored, if that is what you mean, wee one. It's better than listening to your snoring," he casually remarks. I don't snore, so I know he's just winding me up. Luckily, I'm in an alright mood this morning and the view isn't all bad out here.

"You're so charming, Rory. Are you single? I can't imagine you married with kids." I tilt my head at him, resting my hands on my hips.

"I'm not in a relationship, but that is none of your business, Miss Hall," he drily responds, no more 'lass' ever since he became my bodyguard.

“It’s Regan. Seeing as you are always here, shouldn’t we at least be friends?” I step a little closer, and I don’t know why I do it. Perhaps because I know it will make him uncomfortable and he’ll possibly change his job. Following me around all day and night can’t be any fun. Trying to tease my bodyguard into bed, to avail, is no fun either.

“I’m not your friend.”

“Ouch. My feelings.”

He shakes his head, putting an end to our little conversation the second he steps to the side and points down the corridor. I glance at Anne’s room as we pass by, and I briefly wonder if I should check on her since she hasn’t responded to any of my recent texts. But I think that counts as fussing too much and I’m sure she has left for breakfast way before me. I glance at my watch, seeing I only have ten minutes to eat before I need to get to class. I’ll check up on her later.

I hurry along, letting Rory walk at my side as I make my way to the cafeteria. As usual, Rory waits outside with the five other bodyguards in a line, letting me know there aren’t many students in here. I push the doors open as a group of girls step out. I grab some food, finding there is only muffins and coffee left, and I happen to see Nathan sitting on his own, staring into his own cup of coffee. There’s one other guy on a far distant table but other than that, we’re alone. I should grab the muffin and leave, but my stupid ass feet walk me right over to Nathan. I tug a chair out and sit beside him, the silence deafening as I sip my coffee. It burns my tongue but the burn is less painful than this awkward moment.

“I’ve heard misery loves company,” I end up whispering, looking across at him. His black hair looks like he’s run his fingers through it a million times, though it’s still damp from a morning shower I suspect. His clothes are crisp and perfect, but he doesn’t have a tie on. Instead, he has several buttons left open, and he looks like a hungover sex God that I really need to stop staring at.

“You can leave, Regan.” He doesn’t even look up at me as he says the words.

“Nah, I don’t think so. Talk to me,” I gently suggest. Why the hell am I doing this?

“About what?” he drones, twirling the coffee in his cup.

“Hunter. Your twin’s death must be difficult,” I ask the most difficult thing for him to talk about. I guess some messed up part of me wants to comfort the brother of the guy I killed. Wow. I really am fucked up.

“Were you a therapist in another life, Regs?” he asks with a smirk gracing his lips. “And we aren’t twins.”

“I thought you were twins.”

“People always thought that. I got held back a year for fighting with him. My mother thought us being in the same year would solve the issue. Looks like it only made it worse.”

“Do you blame yourself for his death?”

He pauses, looking down at his untouched food. “Hunter’s heart had a murmur in it since the moment he was born. He put on a brave face, but he was pretty weak inside, constantly at the hospital on the weekends.”

I watch the last student leave the cafeteria, knowing I’m going to be late to class. But while this is an awkward opportunity, it’s an opportunity nonetheless. “And that meant Hunter could be asshole to literally everyone he knew?”

“His heart condition was treated in surgery when he was nine and the whole family was tested for the condition. My dad and I were clear, but my mum wasn’t. It was like Hunter got saved and my mum got the price. She had a stroke two years later and we had to watch her slowly die.”

I pause, thinking on it. “I guess that would make anyone angry.”

“That was never what made Hunter and I angry. Our dad was a piece of work. I swear he slept with the housekeeper from the second Mum had the stroke,” he bitterly snaps. “He couldn’t care less about her.”

“Your dad is dead?”

“Murdered by the housekeeper in a jealous rage,” he carefully tells me, too carefully as his green eyes meet mine for the first time since I sat down. It’s a practised lie, one he needs to see my eyes to make sure I believe him, and we both know that I don’t.

“You know it’s bad to tell lies, Nathan,” I murmur, and he grins in an almost sadistic way as he grabs my arm into a painful grip. He lifts me up onto the table in front of him and leans into me, all in one impossibly swift movement. I’m impressed by the display of strength and how he managed to do that without knocking anything over. I keep my eyes locked on his, noticing his heavy breathing and the pure undiluted anger burning his eyes.

Anger and desire. It’s a lethal mix.

“Lies? You can talk, Miss Regan Hall. You fucking hated Hunter like the rest of the school, so why are you trying to comfort his grieving brother? Why the fuck are you here?”

“I’m just surprised you’re grieving at all. He was an ass and you hated him. He’s better off dead.”

Nathan almost steps back in shock, clearly not expecting me to say that. “You’re a total bitch.”

“But I’m honest and no one else has been that way with you, have they?” I move my hands to his chest. He grips my hips tighter, his entire body practically shaking with anger now. “They’re all telling you how wonderful Hunter was and how sorry they are that he’s gone. Total bullshit and you’re smart enough to know it.”

“The trouble with being honest is that people tend to hate the one who was brave enough to speak it,” Nathan spits back at me.

He has a point but I don’t regret my words.

“Do you hate me, Nathan?” I whisper, sliding my hands down his body.

“I fucking wish I did.”

I shouldn’t be surprised when he kisses me, but I am.

His kiss is brutal and demanding as he pushes me further onto the table and yanks my legs around his waist. His lips are soft but they're punishing me with every kiss, and I want more. I'm craving it like a drug that only he can give and it intoxicates my senses.

In this moment, I hate myself almost as much as he hates me.

Nathan wants everything.

I gave him nothing.

And somehow we both ended up with this—this fucked up version of a love story that no one wanted to hear.

Not even me.

Yet we still kiss like two innocent people discovering how utterly addicted we are to each other in spite of the web of lies spinning around our bodies and dragging us deeper into darkness, a darkness that right here, right now, I no longer need to run from. It's been so long...too long...since anyone has kissed me like this that I find myself wishing Nathan's name wasn't on my list and things could be different between us.

“Miss Hall, you will be late to class. The same applies to you, Mr Cross.” Rory's stern voice cuts through my senses and I push Nathan away as realisation kicks in. He looks as dazed as I feel as I hurry out of the cafeteria, not even bothering to check if Rory is following.

This game is going too far.

I killed Nathan's brother. I can't kiss him and start to feel anything for him.

Maybe just once I need to listen to my mother's advice.

Emotions get assassins killed, so don't feel, just kill.

But therein lies the problem.

I already feel something for someone I must kill, and I don't know how to suppress it.

Fuck.



Chapter Twenty-One

Fixing the black, sequin-covered mask over my eyes, I tie the string tightly under my hair before letting it fall down over my shoulders in tight curls. The black feathers stretching out the side of my mask match the ruffled tiers of my darker than a night sky dress that falls to the floor. From the waist up, a dark violet silk bodice pushes my chest up and it's so tight I can just about breathe. My Gucci high heels fit my feet perfectly, which they should for the price they cost my parents. Just as I go to walk away, my own eyes catch my attention in the mirror. They look as empty as Imogen did the day I first saw her with Hunter.

Broken and tired, my eyes are reflecting what I feel it so deeply within my soul.

The pits of blue swirl around in the emptiness of my heart, begging me not to make the choice I know I must tonight.

I'm going to kill Nathan Cross.

I have to. I might not know his sin for sure, but I suspect it has something to do with his father's death. I wouldn't be surprised if it was him or Hunter that killed their old man. Maybe his sin is helping Hunter hide the truth for all these years.

Or maybe he's a murderer just like me.

I wish thinking that made it easier to kill him, but it really, really doesn't. I still have the feel of his lips on mine like they

never left. He will be another ghost for me to never forget it seems. I harden my gaze, lifting my head high at the same time and telling myself I need to do this. I promised myself to protect my secret at any cost and that's not something I'm going to go back on now. Not for a guy, no matter how I might feel about him.

Feelings get assassin's killed and their secrets revealed.

I've got to do this.

Walking out of my room, Rory is waiting for me. He might not be my technical date to the Halloween ball, but at least I won't be going alone. His eyes widen ever so slightly, the only indication he likes what he sees until he clears his throat.

"Black is your colour, Miss Hall," he gruffly tells me.

"It's Regan, Rory," I remind him, casting a glance over his padded uniform. "Black is your colour too."

"I'm well aware of your name. Is your boyfriend on his way to take you to the Halloween Ball?"

I clock my head to the side, wondering what gave him that impression. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Then do you have a date?" he enquires, seeming somewhat angry. Or impatient. What the fuck does it have to do with him, anyway?

"Nope. I like flying solo. Come on, Rory."

I don't give him a second to answer before I walk away, hearing him following close behind until he catches up and jogs ahead to open the door. The academy is near silent, only the sound of faraway music and footsteps fill the dark corridors. The closer we get to the auditorium, the more I see the candles in lines down the side of the pathways, and the hanging black webs falling from the ceiling. I slip my ticket out of the side of the pocket of my dress as we get closer to the double doors. Two guys in black suits and white lace masks flank the entrance.

"Wait." Rory demands and I stop, turning back to him as he moves closer. He lifts my hand and surprises me by very gently kissing the back. "A girl like you shouldn't go to a ball alone

and definitely shouldn't be used by fuck boys like Nathan Cross. You look beautiful and I hope you have a good night."

"You're the good guy, aren't you, Rory?"

"Always for you. If you need me, I'm here."

Strangely, his statement brings a smile to my face and makes me feel...safe. That isn't something I've felt since I came to this God awful academy.

I keep my eyes locked on Rory's until I turn around and hand one of the guys my invitation. They both open the doors to the ball at the same time, and I can't help but stare around as I walk inside, admittedly taken aback. The floor has projection lights in the shape of spider webs that float around. There must be ten arches framing the dancers in the middle of the room, each of the pillars painted black with white spider webs wrapped around them like ivy. Hanging above the dancers are rows of orange lanterns hanging off the string, and at the back of the room, a band plays modern Halloween songs with a twist. The band are all dressed in dark orange with pumpkin face paint, with large black mouths painted on. It's creepy and cool at the same time.

The left side of the ball has ten massive pumpkin-shaped domes, with some doors open showing sofas and a table inside each one. Most are filled with students, some of them making out and not giving a shit that everyone can see them. Purple and pink projector lights flash around the room in time with the music, casting an eerie glow around the whole room. It's impressive, tasteful, and screams money. It sure as hell must have cost a lot just for the decorations.

"Oh. Em. Gee. You look fantastic, Regan!" Charlie shouts over the music and I nearly jump out of my skin as she runs over to me in a sleek burnt orange dress and a black mask that glitters in the lights. She hugs me tightly and I try not to tense up, knowing hugs are no big deal. I guess I'm more tense than I thought. Over her shoulder, I see Tilda and Ethan talking, and Tilda is laughing her head off. Imogen is nowhere to be seen, but I wouldn't have expected her to come here after everything that's been going on. My victim is also nowhere to be seen.

"You look—"

“Bloody hot, I know,” she cuts me off, and I grin at her. I love Charlie’s self-confidence. Every girl in the world could do with a big dose of it. “Have you seen Anne and Lucas? They look like the dream couple. Come and see.”

Before I can tell her I’d rather not see them as it hurts me in a way I don’t want to confess, she hooks her arm in mine and drags me over to the dancers. We stop right on the edge by one of the pillars and I see them.

Charlie was right. They look like a pair of angels, with fake white wings on their backs that sweep the floor. The rest of their outfits are also white, including their masks, and when Lucas spins Anne around in time to the music, they dance almost as one. The song playing is *Halo by Beyonce* and it suits them, and the way they move together is like they’ve been with each other for years. For once, Anne looks healthy and in love and I could watch her smile like this forever. Lucas beams down at her, and I try to look away, finding that I can’t, my eyes fixed on his beautiful face. The seconds seem to stretch on as I stare at him, his white tuxedo clearly custom made, fitting him perfectly and making me ache to touch any part I can get my hands on.

God, I’ve got to stop this.

I’m the devil compared to them, and they’re the angels who deserve each other.

Neither of them deserve me in their lives. If they knew who I really am, they wouldn’t *want* me in their lives.

“You alright?” Joshua interrupts my inner thoughts and I blink, finding him right in front of me. I was so lost in my own head that I didn’t even notice his arrival. But now I’m noticing, and damn, just when I thought this handsome fucker couldn’t get any hotter. He’s wearing a navy tuxedo, a short ebony mask, with a light blue bowtie that reminds me of Doctor Who. He’s the perfect mix of dorky and fit.

I chuckle, nodding to his necktie. “Yep. You look good, Doctor Who. Nice Dickie bow.”

“Why thank you. Will you be my Rose and dance with me?” he charmingly asks, offering a hand.

“I thought you’d never ask,” I laugh softly, accepting his proffered hand.

Charlie looks between us like we are totally crazy. I guess if you don’t watch Doctor Who and know Rose was literally the best doctor’s companion, you wouldn’t get it. I’m so happy Joshua has the same interests as me though. I mean, I shouldn’t really be happy since I’ve got to kill him, but still. It’s refreshing to meet a fellow dork.

“I’m going to find my date.” Charlie wags her eyebrows at me before she walks away.

Joshua grins and tugs me into the middle of dancers, right next to Anne and Lucas as the song changes to *Perfect by Ed Sheeran*. Joshua effortlessly twirls me around as I try not to look at Lucas and Anne while I rest my head on Joshua’s shoulder.

“You seem sad tonight,” Joshua whispers to me. “What is it?”

“It’s a sad night. I have to wear a dress, you see,” I lie and I’m beginning to not know the difference between my lies and the truth anymore. I can hardly tell Joshua I’m sad because a guy I like is on a date with my best friend. I can’t tell him I need to kill another guy I’m starting to like because I’m being blackmailed.

I especially can’t tell Joshua that I’m going to kill him next.

A lie is sometimes the nicest thing in the world to say. It protects everyone.

“May I cut in and steal your girl?” Nathan asks, stopping beside us.

We come to a halt and I run my eyes over Nathan’s dark green tux. He’s not wearing a jacket and his sleeves are rolled up. His mask is dark green as well, and it certainly suits him.

It’s a nice tux to die in.

“No,” is Joshua’s curt answer and I smile, tugging my hands out of Joshua’s.

“Sharing is caring, boys,” I tell them both, moving to Nathan, who wraps his arms around me as Joshua frowns and storms off.

Nathan is silent as we dance. It should make me feel uncomfortable but it surprisingly doesn't. We twirl around each other almost fluidly for a few songs before we both decide we want a drink. I'm a little glad for the distraction. Nathan's eyes and the memory of his lips pressed against my own were beginning to ensnare me.

"Want a real drink? Nathan asks, wiggling his eyebrows. "There's a real party going on back there." I follow Nathan's gaze to the doors at the back of the room as two students sneak inside. "You wanna go?"

"Sure," I answer, smiling widely, but not for the reason Nathan probably thinks. I need somewhere less busy than here to do my work. I need to get my prey alone.

Nathan wraps his arms around my waist as we approach the door and head instead. The smell of weed fills my senses as we climb a small staircase into a corridor full of open doors.

"Let's find an empty one," Nathan suggests as we pass two doors where there's nothing short of orgies going on in there. We find a small room with only a desk and two chairs inside, and we head in. Nathan pulls out a bottle of vodka and two joints.

"You smoke?"

"When I wanna," I reply, and he grins, handing me a joint.

"Fuck, I don't have a lighter. Give me a sec. I'll find something. The science storage room is next door, I bet they have matches in there," Nathan suggests and I shrug, taking the bottle of vodka from his hands.

"I'll wait for you and keep myself busy. Don't be long," I all but purr, before taking a long sip of vodka.

"You're still a bitch, Regan, but fuck knows why I like it," he tells me before he walks out of the room and I place my things down. I undo my mask, holding it in my hand as I follow Nathan out, making sure he doesn't notice me. He heads into the room, switching on the light. I rest myself against the wall outside the door, looking around to make sure it's empty as I slip my shoes off and take a long, deep breath.

The clicks of my heels would reveal who I am and I can't take that chance. But they're also a good weapon. Moving quickly, I switch off the light and at the same time I whack Nathan in the head with my shoe. He falls to the floor face-first with a smack, and I jump on top of him, wrapping my mask around his neck and I start to pull with every ounce of strength in my being. He barely fights back as I suffocate him while tears fall rapidly down my cheeks, and I pray for someone to stop me, to save his life, to lock me away for good. Just before Nathan loses consciousness, a voice echoes down the corridor outside.

"I saw them head down here, sir," I hear them say, way too close for comfort, as if someone actually heard my prayer.

"Thank you. I will search the rooms," Rory replies.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

As I hear his footsteps getting closer, I know I have to leave it. Rory is a fucking nightmare and I'd have to kill him too if he sees this. I peel my mask off and quickly tie it on before doing the next best thing I can. I slide my shoes on and I scream.



Chapter Twenty-Two

“That must have been so scary. I can’t believe you found Nathan like that! You must have scared off the killer!” Tilda goes on and on over breakfast as I stare down at my cereal, twirling the milk and Coco Pops around with my spoon.

“Right? I’m properly scared now. Hunter must have been killed, and now almost Nathan?” Charlie states, shaking dramatically. “I never would’ve thought it.”

“At least they’ve doubled security around the school. Did you hear how so many students have been taken home?” Imogen adds in as she finishes her toast. “I’m not surprised.”

“Yeah, my mum wants me to go home for a bit,” Anne says and I look up at her as she stares at me. “You could come with us, if you want, Regan?”

“Nah, I’m good,” I hurriedly reply, because the truth is, I’m not going back to London anytime soon. London is full of both dead and living memories I need to forget for my own sake. My hand shakes under the table as I remember last night, and the look of suspicion on Rory’s face. Mrs Beach, of course, believed me when I told her a lie and said I went looking for Nathan when he didn’t come back.

Rory...I’m not so sure. It only means I need to be more careful.

“Any plans for today, babe?” Joshua asks, resting his hands on my shoulders as he stops behind me. I lean my head back,

resting it on his stomach as I look up at him. His eyes sparkle with humour as I frown at him.

“Other than napping? Nope. No plans at all.”

“It’s Sunday, which means you’re mine for the day. Come on, the car is waiting,”

He leads me out of the academy where Rory and three other guards stand by two SUVs. Rory opens the door for me and smiles, watching me climb inside. As Joshua slides onto the seat next to me, I watch Rory slip into the driver’s seat and start the car. His ice-blue eyes catch me staring at him in the rear-view mirror, but he just grins before turning his attention back to the road.

“Are we going to see Bibi?” I ask Joshua, peeling my gaze off Rory’s sexy face.

Joshua looks between Rory and me before answering. “Yeah. She really took a shine to you last week. I don’t think I ever heard her laugh with Miss Hector.”

My cheeks heat up and I smile at him. “Well, what can I say? I’m better than most girls.”

We laugh, recalling how Joshua had said those exact words to me when I shot him down. A silence stretches between us and it’s surprisingly comfortable. Rory takes us to the German bakery just like he did last week, and I watch Joshua collect the same white box before we make our way to Maritime Care Home.

When we arrive at the reception desk, the girl who’s totally crushing on Joshua swoons all over again. The poor girl nearly falls off her seat when she swings around to grab a piece of paper for him to fill out.

“What about today, Sylvia, how’s the love of my life?” he asks her, taking the paper and quickly scribbling down his details.

“Bibi is doing great, Josh. She played bingo again yesterday.”

“Did she win this time?”

“No, but Elsie did and Bibi wasn’t too happy about that.”

Joshua slides the paper across the desk. “I’m surprised she hasn’t pushed the old bat out of her chair.”

The receptionist giggles. “Josh! How could you say such a thing?”

I roll my eyes and clear my throat. Joshua winks at the girl, then puts his hand on the small of my back and guides me down the corridor to Bibi’s room.

The routine is pretty much the same as last week, except Joshua announces himself as Tyler this time, and that makes things go so much smoother. I’m immediately introduced as Tyler’s new wife and Bibi is ecstatic to meet me. We light the candles on her cake, Bibi blows them out, opens her card, and once more shows me her hilarious personality that begins to hurt my stomach from all the laughing.

Each time she forgets something or starts to freak out, Joshua remains so patient with her and helps to calm her down. It’s sweet to watch but also crushing, because the more I spend time with him, the less I want to hurt him. Even if he did do something terrible, does that really mean he should die? Who’ll visit Bibi in his absence? I imagine it’ll really affect with her routine and mental health. I can’t help but feel guilty.

As I watch them laughing and smiling lovingly at each other, my heart aches.

This is why my mother always taught me that love is only a weakness.

Joshua catches me frowning and comes over to me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I wipe my eyes and smile up at him. “It’s just nice to watch you two together.”

I’m not sure he buys it, judging by the sceptical look on his face.

But Bibi distracts him by offering us one of her precious shells. Joshua said last week that Bibi never gives these away. I clutch mine in the palm of my hand, touched by her kindness.

When it’s time to go, I wait until we’re back in the car before giving Joshua my heart-shaped shell. He almost hesitates

to take it back, but we both know the six shells are part of Bibi's routine, so he tucks them carefully into his pocket.

“Would you like me to come with you again next Sunday?”

Joshua freezes at my question. He then turns in his seat to look at me. “You mean, you *want* to come with me?”

I shrug. “I like Bibi. She's the kind of grandma I wish I had.”

“What was your grandma like?”

Now it's me who freezes. I had only one grandparent, on my mother's side, and she was more evil than my mother. I was relieved when she died of a heart-attack when I was ten. She actually died in a public bathroom, which was funny to me because she always said they were for peasants.

“I don't remember,” I lie to him, since lying comes so naturally to me. “She died when I was young.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“We weren't close. Anyway, I'll come with you on Sunday, on one condition.”

Joshua quirks an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Tonight you'll hang out with me.”

The car stalls, jerking us forward in our seats. Rory glances in the mirror at me and there's something dark about his expression. I can't quite read it. But it tells me I'll have to somehow sneak out later.

“Look, babygirl, if you want me to get naked, you only have to—”

“We're not fucking.”

He sulks like a child. “Aww, no fun, babygirl.” After a moment, he asks, “Well, if we ain't Netflix and chilling, what are we gonna be doing?”

“Amazon Prime and chilling?” I offer tightly, trying not to laugh.

In reality, I merely want to find out his sin. I spent all day distracted by his grandmother that I never paid much attention

to anything else.

“Okay,” Joshua says at last. “I’ll hang out and protect you from the killer that’s on the loose.”

He laughs, but for once I don’t copy him. If only he knew that the killer is me...



Later that night, I put on a sexy black dress, grab the bottle of wine I got off Charlie, followed by the bag of snacks, and open my room door. As expected, Rory is standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, a look of disapproval on his rugged face.

“Come on, Rory. Please?”

“Nope.”

Just one word and my excitement plummets into anger.

“Why not?”

“It’s the rules. You’re not allowed out past curfew and you’re especially not allowed in the boys’ dormitory.”

“Who said I was going there?” I argue, but I can tell he’s not going to budge. “Fine.”

I slam my door and lock it. I doubt there are any ridges outside that I can use to climb but it’s worth a shot. I shove the wine into a bag that I sling over my shoulder, then I throw back the curtains and climb out the window. I was right that there are no ridges connecting the dormitories here. Damn that Mrs Beach. Fortunately, however, I’m used to scaling buildings, and I’m wearing my comfiest trainers that work in my favour. Ethan must have climbed this way somehow, so I know it’s possible.

Carefully, I walk along the ledge, my curled hair swaying in the soft breeze. I hold my breath as I walk past the first window. The next one has their curtains pulled over, which is a relief, and by the fourth window, I think I’ve reached the boys’ dormitory

because I can smell weed mingled with sweaty socks. I don't catch a glimpse of Joshua in any of the rooms, so I keep going until I find a window that's already open.

Towards the corner of this part of the castle, I finally find a room with their window wide open. My legs shake a little as I bend down to climb inside. I step onto a messy desk littered with books and school work, and there's a boy lying in bed under the covers. He startles when I jump off his desk and I hear him kick off his blankets as I rush over to the door.

"Don't mind me," I tell him quickly. "Go back to sleep. This is just a dream."

"Regan?"

"Joshua?"

I turn back around only to see Joshua lying in bed with a comic book in his hand.

No. Fucking. Way.

What were the chances of climbing into his room, of all rooms?

It's obviously a fluke but I don't say that. "Of course it's me," I answer instead. "I was just making sure the door's locked." I jolt the handle before turning back to him. "Looks like we're good to go, babe. I brought wine and snacks."

He throws his legs over the side of the bed, looking between me and the window.

"Did you just—"

"Climb over the ledge to get here? Yes. Yes I did."

"That takes skill," he says, pushing off his bed. "I was gonna come to you, you know."

I already gathered that but I didn't want another repeat of Ethan in my room, so I decided to seek him out first. I walk over and throw my bag onto the bed.

"I brought wine and snacks. Do you have any movies we can watch?"

A naughty grin lights up his face. "I have Netflix."

“Have you ever seen *How To Get Away With Homicide*?”

He nods. “One of my favourite shows.”

I mirror his grin and climb onto his bed. “Then let’s watch that.”

Joshua leans over to grab his laptop off his nightstand. “You’re a weird one, you know that?”

“Babe, you have no idea.”

I watch him type his password—*BibiNKay*—and I wonder if Kay is his little brother. He didn’t seem eager to talk about him or his parents before. That tells me his sin is to do with them. But what did he do? He clearly loves his grandmother and I can’t see him capable of intentionally hurting any of his family.

After Joshua sets up Netflix, and we pour some wine into plastic cups, I lean back against his wall and randomly kick off my interrogation. No point in beating around the bush when the clock is ticking. I have questions that urgently need answers.

“Do you ever see your little brother, Josh?”

The blood drains from his face. “Not as much as I want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s just how it goes sometimes.” He gulps the last of his drink, his hands balling into fists on his lap.

“How does it go?” I question.

“He asks a lot of questions, just like you. Did you really come here to question me like some kind of cop?”

“No, I’m here because I like you. If that wasn’t clear.”

“You like me, babygirl?”

“Sometimes,” I drag the word out.

“Then why the fuck are we bothering with Netflix?” He grabs my legs and yanks me forward, pushing me down onto his bed. The effort drags an unexpected gasp from me, and I look up at his huge body towering over, so powerful, so fucking hot. “Just let me make you feel good, babygirl. We both know you want it.”

The words cause my breath to catch in my throat, and I bite my bottom lip, pleased by his perceptiveness. I do want it and that's why I hate myself so much. But I also want to feel the warmth of another body pressed against my own. *His* body. I do something that startles even me: I reach out and grab his t-shirt, dragging him down so that I can claim his lips in a deep, passionate kiss. A growl rumbles in the back of his throat and he fists his hand into my hair, snapping my head back, but my lips are still pressed to his, and the way he kisses me snatches the air out of my lungs.

“Fuck, you're so sexy,” he murmurs against my lips. “You're also a pain in the fucking ass.”

I bite his bottom lip and gently lay my head back against the mattress. “So what are you going to do about it? Punish me like you threatened to before?”

“Threatened? Who said anything about threatening to punish you?” He straightens and unhooks his belt from his jeans, the movement whistling as he drags it through the loops. “Roll on to your stomach.”

Curious now, I do as he says and roll over. His hands find purchase on my thighs and he runs his fingers down to the bottom of my dress. With an unceremonious yank, he pulls my dress up to expose my behind.

“No panties. Nice,” he regards softly, kneading one of my cheeks with his big hand. “I've wanted to do this since I saw you that day in classroom with Miss Hector.”

A sharp spank connects with my flesh, and the pain is searing. “Then why don't you get on with it?” I gasp out, writhing in an attempt to entice him to fuck me with his cock already. “No more talking.”

Joshua chuckles, and I feel him shuffle backwards. “Ten spanks should do...for now.”

This time, he uses his belt instead of his palm and it's three times more painful. Each time he strikes me, he caresses where he struck. By the tenth spank, I let out a protest.

“Please...”

He stops. "Please what?"

"Please...fuck me," I beg, craning my neck to look up at him.

The belt falls from his hand, and in an instant, he turns me over onto my back. One of his hands seizes my throat possessively, and the other tugs his boxers down and strokes his huge cock slowly, his eyes riveted on my face.

"You want my big cock in your pussy, babygirl?"

I nod, grabbing hold of his arms. "Yes!"

"Then beg me."

I gawp at him, repeating the demand through my head until I'm sure I captured his words correctly. He wants me to beg for his cock? That's certainly a surprise. And hot. So fucking hot. Then again, I did have a strong inkling he was kinky the instant I laid eyes on him. He oozes dominance in everything he does and always has that dark glint in his eyes, a glint that says '*Get on your knees*'.

"Please, Josh. Fuck me. I want your cock inside me. I want to feel every inch of you."

He runs his fingers over my lower lips. "You'll have to try better than that."

I watch him spit into his hand and push a finger into my pussy. I gasp the second he touches me, and when he eases another finger in, followed by a third, I'm already moaning, desperate for more as he twists his hand and flicks my sweet spot.

My fingers dig into his arms, and I let out, "Please fuck me, Joshua!"

I'm not used to begging which it's beginning to show. Fortunately, as he rolls a condom down onto his cock, my words seem to have an effect on him and he plunges into me. The hand around my throat tightens as I clench around his dick and he groans.

"Fuck, Regan, you're so tight."

His thrusts his hips, fucking me deep and hard. My moans turn into breathless pants as I cling on to him, my body filling with insurmountable pleasure. It clouds my mind, erasing the fact that I will soon be this boy's undoing. All I can think about right now is his cock stretching me, his hand choking me, and the way his eyes never leave mine as he stakes claim on my body and quite possibly a lot more.

My heart.

Joshua leans down to claim my lips, and we kiss passionately. This shouldn't be happening. I'm the wolf and he's the caribou. It defies all odds stacked against us, yet I can't seem to stop myself. I know it's more than just death by seduction. I'm opening myself up to him, literally, and he's touching and caressing me like I'm something special, as if not a monster that should be locked away.

"Regan," he murmurs in my ear, nibbling the side of my neck. "I'm getting close."

"Me...me too," I pant, squeezing around his cock as my own orgasm soars.

"Fuck!" Joshua moans and digs his fingers into my neck while I scratch my nails down his arms. "I'm cuming, babygirl."

Just as he says those words, he reaches down to circle my clit, and I let go, the two of us awash with pleasure. I can feel his cock pulsing inside me as I lay underneath him, my body shaking with the aftershocks of ecstasy.

"Stay right there," Joshua orders.

The command sends a shiver down my spine. I'm beginning to fall in love with this dominant side. I watch him push off the bed and go into the bathroom. He comes back with a towel, and he uses it to clean me up. In all my eighteen years, he's the first guy who's ever bothered to do that for me. And he had a condom on, to boot. It's not like I really needed his help.

"Don't say I'm not good to you," he winks, throwing the towel onto the floor. "Fuck, that was amazing."

"It was," I agree, slowly pulling my dress down. My legs are twitching like he's just fucked my brains out. "So amazing."

Joshua catches my arm. “Hey, wait. You’re not staying over?”

“For what? Spooning? That isn’t my style.” Another lie. I wouldn’t mind falling asleep with his strong arms wrapped around me. I just can’t get attached to him *that* much. “Besides, I can’t go breaking all the school rules, now can I?”

With that, I climb onto his desk and out the window before he can protest.

While I might not have got any valuable information from him tonight, at least I’ve started to creep my way into his heart. It’s a different poison technique to the one I used with Hunter, but this one is the most lethal. Nothing hurts more than a poisoned heart.



Chapter Twenty-Three

“You’re still mad at me.”

It’s not a question as I say the words into complete silence.

Ethan, who hasn’t said a word to me in over a week now, still doesn’t look my way. He is his usual charming self with everyone else, but me? Nope. I know I fucked up by pushing him away and literally running out of the room when he tried to kiss me, but in my defence, I wasn’t ready for anything serious.

And it feels serious with Ethan even when it goes against all reason.

It’s not like Nathan or Joshua, where it can be playful and the raw emotions we feel control everything. Ethan looks at me like he wants to own me and the last person I let do that...well, the nightmares of that time will haunt me for the rest of my life.

With a long sigh, he finally turns those pretty eyes on me. “And you’re still at law. What other truths would you like me to tell you?”

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly, feeling a little stupid.

“Look, you hurt my ego. I’m not used to being shot down so quickly,” he admits, crossing my arms. “And you haunt me for some reason.”

I purse my lips. “I didn’t shoot you down because I don’t like you. I’m just fucked up, okay?”

“I can deal with fucked up. I’m a master at it, actually.” He grins, his usual charming self coming back to me.

“Any chance you’re a master at this law test? I’m just randomly ticking boxes at this point,” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“Well, one out of four of your answers will be right. It’s the descriptive parts of the test you’re going to struggle with. But this is only a practice test, so fuck it.”

I laugh. “I’ll draw them a picture.”

“Smartass.”

“Where do you think our teacher has gone to?” I ask because she disappeared seconds after giving us these tests. The other student, whatever his name is, didn’t come back to class after the first lesson. I don’t blame him. I think Mrs Anderson terrified him.

“She likes to chat with her husband during tests. She won’t be back for another hour,” he says, leaning closer. “Tell me why you ran away from me.”

“You want more than a quick fuck,” I’m quick to admit, knowing he isn’t going to drop the subject. I bite my lip as I run my eyes over his soft blonde hair and think about how good it would feel to hold onto it while his mouth gets hard at work between my legs. I shake my head, dropping the thought before I do something stupid.

“Why do you think that?” He tilts his head to the side.

“It’s the way you look at me. It’s your nature, Ethan. You make sure everyone in this academy thinks you’re playful and that you don’t give a fuck about anything, but that’s not the truth. The truth is, you want to own someone like me, make sure you have something permanent in your life. I know it because I once wanted the same thing,” I explain to him the answer I was holding back. It’s a classic foster kid problem—wanting to own someone who won’t leave.

“I just want to fuck you, Regan,” he all but tensely growls.

“Then fuck me and let me walk away. If you can, I’ll believe you,” the words leave my lips before I’ve thought them through.

Fuck it. I want him and it's only sex. It doesn't have to mean anything more than feeling good.

Hopefully.

“Deal.”

And then he kisses me, grabbing me and pulling me closer to him at the same time as lifting me onto the desk and parting my legs.

I break apart our kiss for a moment to slide his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor and I stare in a daze at his perfect abs, the impressive muscles he has literally everywhere. I watch as he slowly flicks open the buttons on his trousers one by one until letting his trousers drop to the floor. He pushes his boxers down next and I grin as he grips his hard cock in his hand, rubbing it slowly as he watches me.

It's so fucking sexy.

His eyes flicker with a burning desire as he leans closer and kisses me, ripping my shirt open in the same moment. His hands expertly pull my bra down, revealing my nipples. He flicks them with his fingers as I moan into his mouth, rubbing myself against his hard cock pressed between my legs.

“You are fucking everything, Regan,” he murmurs again while trailing a line of kisses and biting my skin as he moves along my shoulders and neck. “I've waited so long for this. For you.”

I moan in response and roll my head back, enjoying the feel of him as his hands caress my body.

“I want nothing more than to fuck you.” Another kiss, followed by a little nip. “I want to fuck you until you remember nothing but my cock and my name.” He flips me over so quickly that I gasp for breath, and pushes me against the desk as he pushes my skirt up. I look over my shoulder as he slides his hands over my ass and then slaps one of cheeks, hard enough to hurt.

But fuck does the pain feel good.

“What are you waiting for then, Ethan? Fuck me.”

His eyes lock onto mine and within seconds he's pulling my panties down and stepping between my legs. He slides his fingers over my lower lips, grinning at me.

"Are you on the pill, Regan?"

"Yeah," I whisper almost breathlessly as he braces his cock at my entrance.

"You ready?" His eyes are filled with lust, reflecting exactly what I'm feeling inside, as he runs the tip of his cock over my pussy.

"Please," I beg him, a sudden need for his cock consuming me.

Fuck, I've never wanted anyone this bad before.

He's inside of me in seconds, filling me, claiming my within an inch of my life. I grab the edge of the desk for support as he thrusts hard in and out of me, making the desk screech as it slides against the classroom floor. I'm nothing but pleasure as he fucks me harder and his hand slides under me, his thumb finding my clit. I hold my breath as he makes me spiral uncontrollably. My body is building up so much pressure that it feels so good, so fucking good. I'm getting close to coming, and I know that he senses it because he speeds up, thrusting into me hard and fast while viciously circling my clit.

"Come on my cock," he orders me, his grip on my body tightening. "I want to know how it feels to own you, Regan. Fucking come."

I feel like I break into a million pieces as I explode with pleasure and he groans, thrusting one more time before I feel his come filling me up. We both collapse onto the desk, breathless as he pulls out of me and picks up his clothes. I pull my panties back on, feeling like Ethan is still inside me as I pick up my bags. Ethan grabs my waist, tugging me to him. His lips brush against mine like nothing more than a wisp of air before he lets me go.

"You were right. I'm not letting you go now." I knew he would say that, and it makes me feel good despite that I know it shouldn't.

“See you around, Ethan.” I say and I move away, knowing I need to leave before I say something stupid. I’ve now slept with two of the guys on my list. What the fuck is wrong with me? I head outside, where I totally forgot Rory was waiting for me, and his cheeks are stained pink.

Shit, he must have heard everything.

I watch him for a second as he meets my gaze, his breaths laboured and his eyes dilated.

I wonder if he liked what he heard. I wonder if he wanted to join in?

Before I can think about it any longer, I walk away and head back to my room. Law was my last class of the day and I need a shower. I bump into Charlie on my way back, but thankfully she doesn’t talk too long before I can escape to my room.

The second I enter my room and shut the door, I step on a letter on the floor.

Not another one.

I lean down, picking it up and quickly opening the black envelope.

Dear my pretty liar,

Walk into the woods and
you will find a pretty
surprise.

Want to know who I am and
end all these lies?

Across the clearing, and
stick to the middle path.

I wait for you at midnight,
or you will feel my wrath.

Your Truth.

For the first time since reading a letter from my Truth, I smile.

It's finally time to end this game!

I run over to my bed, pulling out the box from underneath and using my finger to unlock the fingerprint scanner. The box clicks open and I pick up my best friend, running my thumb along the word VYPER carved into the leather handle. My mother gave me this gun when I arrived home after my first kill six years ago. It was my father's and has been passed through the Hall family since we claimed our first seat at the High Table eighty-one years ago. I grip the gun into my hand, and smile.

This game ends tonight.
One way or another.



Chapter Twenty-Four

“Rory, can you come in for a second? I want to tell you something,” I say, steeling my gaze on his own as I stand in the doorway to my bedroom. I need to get him out of the way, or I’m never going to get into the woods like I need too.

“What is it, Hall?” he growls, stepping into my room.

I move closer, shutting the door behind him and making our bodies press against each other. Before he can ask anything else, I lean up and press my lips to his, and at the same time, I slam a needle into his neck.

“What the *fuck!*” His eyes widen ever so slightly before he collapses onto his knees, and his body slowly falls back onto the carpet.

“I’m sorry. You won’t remember much, and you’ll have a headache, but at least you’re not dead,” I inform the now passed out Rory as I cover him with a blanket.

Thankfully, the woods that Truth wants me to meet him or her in is located in the school grounds. Not so thankfully, the school has doubled up on security and it’s going to be fucking hard to escape here unseen. My eyes drift down to Rory, his black hat, his black army clothing.

Unless.

Not one would look twice at a security guard running around. Two birds with one stone, I suppose. I tug the blanket

off Rory and start stripping his clothes, trying not to notice his amazing six pack or the muscular... legs he has. Yes, his legs. Shaking my head, I quickly dress in Rory's clothes, which are a little big but not too bad. I tuck the trousers into my knee high boots, and my gun into the holder on my thigh. After slipping Rory's hat on, I head out of the room and down the corridor. No one looks my way as I walk through the silent academy, nothing but the sound of distant snoring and owls outside to fill my ears. When I get outside, I quickly run across the grass to the woods and slip through the trees, never once looking back.

Looking back is pointless.

If someone is following me, it's too late to play the innocent card now.

I slip my gun out of the holder and into my hand, knowing I need to be on guard in here.

My footsteps are anything but silent as I step on branches and dead leaves as I walk through the forest, my gun weighing heavily in my hand. My trainer would be livid at how clumsy I'm being right now, but I'm just eager to confront my blackmailer. I see a light nearby, and I jog over, spotting a bunch of tea-lights on the ground at the foot of a tree, and a note above it that reads: *Turn around to find out the truth.*

I spin around, holding my gun up but there is no one there.

"Hello, Regan," Ethan's voice fills my ear as a gun presses into my stomach, right where my liver is. If he shoots me there, I'm dead. Livers bleed out far too quickly, I know that and I bet Ethan does too.

"It's you?!" I exclaim and he just laughs, stepping closer but never moving the gun away from my side.

"Surprise!" He shouts, and then he laughs some more, the sound echoing through the forest. I shiver as he places his lips right against my ear. "Did you like my letters? Do you like playing my game?"

"Are you seriously so fucked up that you think I'd say yes to that?" I snarl, my body filling with red-hot fury.

“Possibly. Now walk and listen,” he growls and I gulp, stepping forward as he guides me with his gun pressed to my head.

I remain silent, looking around to find some way of getting out of here, but Ethan chose his area well. The place is completely secluded and when we reach the clearing, only the sounds of our footsteps and breathing can be heard. There is, however, something at the other side, by the trees, but it’s too dark to really see from here.

“You know the deadly sins, right?” Ethan asks in a calm voice, his words turning my stomach. “Part of our game was about sins, after all. I was impressed when you figured out Hunter’s so quickly. Honestly, I wanted to kill him for a long time. He really was a stupid motherfucker.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

“I don’t like to get my hands dirty and you do. It was my gift to you, you see.” He laughs, as if I’m supposed to think he’s fucking hilarious or something. What happened to Ethan to make him so fucked up like this? What happened to the sweet little boy I grew up with?

“Gift?” I question bitterly. “I would have preferred chocolates or flowers. Anything other than someone to murder!”

“Tut, tut. Don’t lose your temper now,” he warns.

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Fuck. You.”

“You already did and loved it,” he chuckles. It takes all of my strength not to react when we get to the other end of the clearing, where three passed out guys, all shirtless, are tied to three trees with thick rope.

Joshua. Nathan. Lucas.

“Lift your hand with your gun.”

I do as he demands, knowing I don’t really have a choice. If I shoot his foot or any part of him, he will shoot me before I can get out of the way.

“Choose a sin and I will tell you their truth,” he demands, his heavy breath hot against my cheek. My heart hammers against my ribs and my palm turns sweaty against my gun. I

grip it harder, trying to make sense of this entire fucked up situation.

Shit. Shit. Shit. How could I have been this stupid? It was Ethan all along, and I should have known it. He was the good guy, the one who played by the rules and he knew me before this place. I'm meant to be the smart one. Now I'm the stupid one who slept with the man bribing her and holding a gun to her head.

Fucking hell.

"Murder," I growl out. I don't want to fucking play this game anymore and I'm not killing any of these guys now.

"Ah, the easy one. You know it already, don't you? My pretty liar." He moves my hand, pointing the gun at Nathan. "He killed his father in cold blood. Murdered him right there in the kitchen and let the housekeeper take the blame. He made sure the police knew they were fucking behind his dear sweet dying mum's back so he would be a witness. He even said he saw her do it."

"His dad must have deserved it," I reply, knowing Nathan wouldn't have done it otherwise.

"Possibly. Now one more sin."

"Envy," I whisper, and once more he moves my hand, this time so my gun faces Joshua.

"This one is more complicated, more fucked up, if I'm honest. Poor Josh, the adopted baby boy who never knew his real parents. One day, he found them and went to visit, finding out they were married and even had a kid who was only three years younger than himself. The perfect twelve year old boy they loved so much. He envied his brother, the kid they kept instead of him. Guess what he did?"

"I don't know," I whisper. But I think I do.

"He set fire to their house, killing them. Now his brother is in the system he was in, waiting to be adopted," he chuckles. "At least the good boy goes to see his grandma to soothe his guilt."

"Lust," I almost whimper.

“Oh you know this one, my pretty liar. You knew it the day you met her, his step mom. Lucas wanted her, so he fucked her behind his daddy’s back. His half sister, the cute baby you saw on his step mum’s lap? Yeah, that’s actually his. Fucked up, isn’t it?” He asks, tugging my arm with the gun towards Lucas.

“Just as fucked up as you are,” I mutter, though I’m in shock and I know it. I didn’t want to know all their secrets. I didn’t even want to kill them, apart from Hunter. He’s the only one in my books that deserved to die.

“Now, choose. One must die, it’s only fair. We can’t play this game otherwise,” Ethan explains, nudging the edge of his gun lightly into the back of my skull. “I will even help you clean up the body. We can call it a bonding exercise.”

“I never wanted to play,” I softly say.

“The game started when we were kids, but then I left,” he tells me. “I want to finish the games we play.”

“You were adopted, Ethan. I didn’t leave so why am I paying the price? What game did we even play?”

“You disappeared and for years I was stuck in that hell hole with fake parents. The game never ended because you forgot, and I never took my eye off finding you.”

He’s a psychopath.

“Don’t make me do this. I’ve already killed one of your friends, wasn’t that enough?” I plead. That’s how far I’ve fallen, pleading with the crazy boy I’ve slept with.

“Do you want everyone knowing your dirty little secret, Regan?” He asks and leans his lips closer to me. “I thought I’d done bad shit, but you? Your secret is sweetly sad and cruel. Was it an accident? Is that what you’re going to tell her when she’s older?”

“No, don’t say it. Please. I will do anything,” I shakily say.

“Then shoot. I will count for you, just because I’m that nice.” He steps away and for the first time since I’ve held a gun, my hand trembles. “One. Two. Three—”

I close my eyes and pull the trigger.

Bang.





Chapter Twenty-Five

Blood hangs thick in the air but it's not from any of my victims. It's from me. I grip the gun tighter in my trembling hands and glance at my shoulder. A dark patch of blood quickly swells through my thin shirt and trickles down my arm. The pain is sharp and piercing but doesn't feel like the bullet has cut deep into my flesh.

What the fuck is wrong with Ethan?

Moving the gun so that it's pointing at the asshole in question, I rip my shirt to check the wound. Sure enough, the bullet hasn't gone straight through, merely skimmed the surface. That doesn't make it any less painful or annoying and I'm going to need stitches.

"You fucking liar," I growl at Ethan. "Was this part of your game, too? Tricking me so you could be the one to kill me?"

He shakes his head and lifts his own gun, pulling the trigger. It just clicks.

Blanks?

"What are you playing at?" I spit out, stepping towards him.

He huffs. "What are *you* playing it?" He walks over to the guys and points to where the bullet should have landed in the tree, right above Lucas' head. "I told you to shoot one of them."

“And you fucking shot me!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure, darling.” My mother steps out from the shadows of the tree, her gun gleaming in the pale moonlight. “I do not think the boy is brave enough to think like an assassin.”

It’s as if someone has just poured a bucket of ice into my body, leaving me frozen to the spot. A violent tremor works its way through my body, shivering up the length of my spine. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. My mother, holding the gun she just shot at me, with not a hint of remorse on her beautifully deceiving features.

“Mother, wh... *why?*” I blurt out, barely able to say the words. “Why did you shoot me, your own daughter?”

She just laughs, the sound light and scathing as the trees echo it. “Don’t exaggerate, darling. It’s simply a flesh wound. A warning shot, if you will.”

The blood in my veins turns even colder. “Warning shot for what?”

I watch her prowl towards the guys, moving with a sinuous grace that makes her every footstep scarcely audible. “This. You hesitated. You disappointed me, Regan.” Sliding Ethan a cold glance, she adds, “but I must applaud you, boy, on your sheer psychoticism and nerve. Did you really think I would let you tarnish my family’s reputation by forcing my child to partake in your silly game? Really, now.”

My ears burn with a sudden fury as I flicker my gaze over Ethan, Lucas, Nathan, and Josh. I do not need my mother to fight my battles for me.

But that’s not really what she’s doing here, is it?

I’ve seen this behaviour of hers many times before. She likes to play these games, too. It’s like a cat toying with a defenceless little mouse before eating it. She’s a master at getting into people’s minds. I know that more than anyone.

My head spins as I try to make sense of what’s going on here while ignoring the throbbing in my shoulder. Why is my mother here? How long has she been watching from the

shadows? Did she know about me being blackmailed this whole time? My parents have done a lot of brutal things to me over the years. They've put me through unspeakable things, but never have they shot me with their own gun. They always said that whenever one lifts their gun, the bullet must kill the recipient no matter what. Nothing pisses an assassin off more than wasted bullets.

“How long have you known?” I ask my mother quietly, my stomach churning.

She laughs again. “Mothers always know everything their child gets up to. I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

At that exact moment, Rory steps out of the bushes, his gaze averted to the leaf-covered ground. I glare at him, but it's like he's too angry to look me in the eye. I did knock him out with a mild sedative. But what is he doing here?

Wait. Is *he* one of my mother's spies?

Before I can register what he's doing, he smacks Ethan on the back of the head, letting his body fall into an unconscious heap by my mother's feet.

My mother clicks her tongue and nudges Ethan's face with the side of her stiletto. “Such potential sadly wasted. Pity.” She wipes her foot on the leaf-covered ground, her eyes still on Ethan. “The Veil will expect a tribute by the end of the year, Regan.”

“A tribute for what?” The words constrict in my throat. I already know what she's going to say. How did she find out it was me?

She snaps her steely eyes onto mine. “For the life you took at Prestine Academy. I thought I trained you better but your sloppiness cost not only *you* dearly, but threatened your father and I's position at the High Table. Have you any idea what your recklessness has done to our family name? You knew your father hoped to succeed The Duchess and yet you nearly cost him that. And why? Because you couldn't...contain... your temper.”

I make a mistake as I look back at Ethan before meeting my mother's gaze. She spots weakness like a hawk sees prey in a field even when it's hidden.

The tip of her heel digs into Ethan's cheek, threatening to draw blood as her lips tilt up. I should hate him and want nothing more than to see him suffer for blackmailing me, but...

"Stop!" The word tumbles out before I can catch it. "You said the Veil wanted a tribute," I add hurriedly, hoping to distract her.

Her heel lifts ever so slightly. "Yes, it would seem so. They wished for your head to be served to them. Fortunately, I was able to sway their decision by suggesting a more...fitting sacrifice." Pulling her foot away from Ethan, she steps towards me. The rage burning in her eyes is unlike anything I've ever witnessed from her before. My breath hitches at the sheer extent of her fury. "You have twelve months to choose which of these four boys will be sacrificed to the Veil. Do not disappoint me again, Regan. I may be your mother but you do *not* want to make an enemy of me."

I swallow the lump of fear rising into my throat and nod. "Yes, Mother. I won't disappoint you again. I promise."

"Don't promise, darling. Actions speak louder than words."

With that, she throws a glance Rory's way before returning to the shadows of the wood. My heart thrashes against my ribs. When I'm absolutely certain that she's gone, I shakily step back and sit on a rock nestled in the ground. My entire body is trembling.

Fuck!

She wants me to surrender one of the guys to the Veil as a sacrifice? They'd torture him for weeks on end before finally putting him out his misery. Even then, it's in the most barbaric way possible. All a stupid tradition of theirs every year.

"You knew all along?" I whisper to Rory, my eyes snapping to his. "You were working for my mother all this

time?”

For the first time since he got here, he looks at me, and there’s almost a hint of regret in his sapphire eyes. He nods, providing no answer, and I take a deep, shuddering breath. At that moment, Ethan rouses, groaning and touching the back of his head. I’m not sure how long the guys will be sedated for.

I point my gun at Ethan, who’s quick to look for his own gun. He grumbles when he notices Rory has it crushed under his boot.

“Enough of the games, Ethan. They end *here*. If you want to stay alive, you’re going to do what I fucking say, you hear me?”

He straightens up and brushes the debris from his clothes. “You think I’m scared of you, cutie? How sweet.”

I shake my head. “I know you’re not scared of me. But your stupid little game has put you in the middle of a war between me and my parents. You *should* be frightened of them. Trust me. You have no idea what they’re capable of.”

“Doubt they’re worse than my parents,” he mutters.

Frustrated, I shoot a warning bullet into the sky. Ethan flinches and one of the guys starts to stir.

“I’m not kidding anymore! You have no idea what you’re up against. If you value your pretty face, you’ll stop the games and help me.”

After a long, strained pause, he groans and nods. “Fine.”

“Take the guys back to their rooms,” I say, slinging the gun into my holster.

“No need. We were camping out nearby. Perfect setup,” Ethan tells me, grinning.

“Then let’s get them back there before they wake up.”

We approach the tree and start to unravel the boys. Rory decides to help us but he doesn’t utter a single word to me. I can’t believe I need to sacrifice one of the guys to the biggest

crime organisation in the world. How will I ever be able to choose?



Chapter Twenty-Six

Ripping the bottom of my shirt, I pull down my top to reveal my shoulder as I sit on a deck chair around the fire Ethan is slowly making. We look like normal teenagers in the woods, camping and messing about.

But in reality?

Three of the guys are still heavily drugged and just coming around, my bodyguard is a spy for a psychopath and Ethan... well, I suspect he is worse than a normal psychopath with a mere obsession for a girl.

And then there's me.

I'm the killer with an injury and a million levels of fucked up with a secret no one else can know. My mind flickers back to Josh, Nathan and Lucas's secrets I've just found out. How could my guys be worse than me? Or at least on par if we are comparing.

I shove the fabric against my cut and hiss at the sharp pain but at least that will help with the bleeding. The campground is starting to look a little too blurry to me and my blood-soaked top is telling me the reason is very simple: blood loss.

Dammit! I'm not passing out until I make something very clear.

"Ethan," I call him just as he finishes getting the fire going. The flames flicker shadows across his handsome

features and the trail of blood going down his cheek just makes him all the sexier. “You breathe a word about any of this and my secret, I will give you to my parents without a second thought.”

He only smirks at me.

I grit my teeth just as Rory steps between us, handing me a first aid kit.

“Let me stitch you up,” Rory says softly.

Ever the gentleman, isn't he just?

I smile sweetly at him, which puts him at ease, just before I kick him between the legs. He groans and falls to his knees. I grab his chin, making sure he's looking at me even through the pain clouding his vision.

“Choose a side, Rory. It's either me or my parents, and if it's my parents, get the fuck out of here.” I dig my nails into his chin. I can't believe I ever liked this traitor. Or Ethan. Or any of the others for that matter. What was I thinking?

“Choose,” Ethan demands from behind Rory, but his eyes on me and I hate that he's here. “My girl deserves only loyalty from here on out.”

My girl? Asshole just spent weeks blackmailing me and playing stupid little games. I'm no more his girl than the sky belongs only to birds.

Rory meets my eyes and his next words surprise me. “I've watched how your parents have treated you for years, how they treat you like dirt beneath their shoes. Since I saw you crying in the gardens, I've been on your side.”

“New Years Eve?” I question, remembering that night two years ago more vividly than I wanted to. The yearly Blood Party my parents throw at their estate. That one in particular had been just awful. The bodies lining the floors, the strippers dancing around the edges of the room, the guns, the knives... the everything. Countless lives were taken that night for sport and I had to watch it all.

I had to be there, cold and empty.

But for one brief moment in those gardens, I broke like I never had never broken before.

I thought no one heard my cries or saw my silent tears masking the pain I felt deep inside.

“At that moment, I knew I had to protect you the best I could. I watched you grieve the loss of your fiance and everything that happened in York...” He trails off and my own voice catches in my throat. My rage turns into hurt as tears race down my cheeks, dropping onto the ground between us.

He knows and my mother doesn't.

“You never told her?”

“I never told her anything I knew.” Rory places his hand on my knee, and my body fills with warmth. “I'm not sure how she found out about your fiance or what happened. The only reason I joined your household as a guard was to find a way to end the Veil and the sacrifices they demand for entering their ranks.” A dark, pained look flits over his face. “My sister was a sacrifice and she was only seventeen when her boyfriend took her. My mission is to kill him and protect you somehow. I might not have saved my sister but I'll be fucking damned if I let them hurt you.”

“I'm so sorry, Rory,” I whisper.

Ethan steps closer. “Hate to break this tender moment. Your parents probably found out the same way I did, the footage from a hotel on the Thames.”

The memory flashes into my head like a horror movie I can't look away from, can't see, can't forget...

“I love the way you dance, Regan-baby,” Adam says as I swirl around, laughing as I spill some of the champagne from my glass onto the shiny brown floor of the speed boat. The busy sounds of London flutter over the distant music we can hear playing. Our boat lights are off, and the Thames river is lulling the boat in the water. I don't even know whose idea it was to come out here but it's perfect tonight.

And I'm happy...something I haven't been in a long time.

My drop-dead-gorgeous fiance gets up off his seat, sipping his beer before throwing the bottle into the river and swaying as he comes to me. His lips devour mine and I laugh as I dig my hands into his suit.

"When are we going to tell our parents about us?" I ask, wrapping my arms around his tattooed neck. "We both know they will be happy."

"And we both know they'll want us married and you popping out babies asap," he playfully groans but guilt clogs my throat. I've missed a period and I'm sure it's nothing as we always use protection.

Always.

There's no way I could be pregnant.

And I don't want to bring a baby into this world.

My world.

Never!

It's all blood and darkness.

"Adam, would that really be so bad?" I ask, and he lets me go. He laughs as he walks to the edge of the boat, where it looks like the river will never end and the city will never die.

London is so alive, bursting with life in every corner. It's beautifully invigorating.

"I want to live," he shouts, throwing his arms wide. "I want to explore and be more than what our parents have turned us into. I want to fuck you in every single country and tell the whole world I love you before we think about settling down."

For a fleeting moment, I imagine us doing just that. How beautiful of a life I'd have with him. How carefree and happy.

I just want to be happy.

We are rich beyond our wildest dreams and young and fit. We could have everything and I really do love him as much as

he loves me. I open my mouth to tell him yes, to shout from the top of my lungs that we can do this, we can have it all, but the boat lurches and he slips. It's like the whole world has come to a crashing halt. Adam's bright green eyes widen in panic, filled with a fear I've never seen there before, and then he's falling off the boat while screaming my name. I run over to the edge and lean over, but the water is still...

The campfire flickers embers into the night sky, pulling me back down to reality. I know the water currents in the Thames are so harsh that he wouldn't have survived even if I did jump in after him, especially when I saw his blood rising to the surface. I could have run for help. I could have jumped in after him despite the uselessness of doing so. But for the first time in my life, I ran away and told no one. A few days later, his body washed up.

I was a coward and that isn't even the worst part of my past.

It's certainly not my biggest secret.

"Don't you think they should know your secret?" Ethan asks, not a hint of emotion on his face. "They are your parents, after all, and Mother always knows best."

I know he's just joking, but Rory stands up, his fists clenched. Before I can even blink, he punches Ethan hard in the face, who he stumbles back, looking surprisingly panicked with blood trickling down his bottom lip.

"Fuck, I was joking!" He spits a mouthful of blood into the fire. "This was all a game, a way of testing her and bringing her into our group. I grew up with these fuckers and we all know each other's secrets. We want Regan in our group and the only way to get in—"

"Was to have me kill Hunter?" I demand.

Ethan shakes his head. "Nah. He was a fucking bastard and deep down, Nathan wanted him gone. You were just a means to an end on that one."

I mean, he does have a point. I might have killed that bastard without being told to anyway. But still... I hate being forced to do people's dirty work for them. I've spent my whole life doing that.

"I could have killed Nathan!" I shout at him but he just chuckles.

"I was always there, always watching. I could have stopped you whenever I wanted to," he cockily replies, and I'm almost tempted to punch him myself.

What a complete asshole.

And why do I want to fucking kiss him?

I pounce to my feet, ready to stab Ethan in numerous places, but Rory gently pushes my dizzy-ass down.

"Stitches first," he growls. "And then I'll help you sort out this shit head group of royal, entitled bastards."

"Ouch, my poor heart." Ethan holds a hand over his chest.

Maybe choosing a sacrifice for my mother won't be so hard after all. At this point, I will happily hand Ethan Remington over tied up in a red ribbon.

I remain still, silently burning with anger as Rory works on my shoulder and Ethan shakes the other guys awake. Josh wakes up first and growls something to Ethan that I can't hear. Ethan merely laughs and Josh turns to stare at me. Lucas and Nathan wake up next and move to stand with Josh. They all get in a circle and start talking quietly, looking at me ever so often and whatever they see on my face makes them flinch.

Good.

They were all friends from the start and it was a murder game I happily played into.

Josh, Nathan and Lucas knew about the notes.

And I'm going to make them pay.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

For the next few days, I avoid all but one of the guys. Rory follows me to my classes like normal and hangs outside my room at night, never saying more than he needs to. I like his quiet demeanour. I like knowing he's outside my room and, even despite the doubts creeping into my mind, I like knowing he's on my side instead of my parents'. I'm still not sure whose side the guys are on. How can I trust them when they were playing the game all along?

"Regan, you've got a visitor," Rory announces, knocking on my room door. "Georgian."

I grumble and throw my bag over my shoulder, opening the door with an exaggerated huff.

Lucas smiles at me sheepishly, his messy hair still wet from a shower, and hands over a brown paper bag.

"I brought pancakes. Figured you'd like them," he says, and without even looking at or thanking him, I take the paper bag and close the door.

"Give her time," I hear Rory tell him.

I peek into the bag, my mouth watering at the plastic container filled with pancakes and syrup. I sit down on the edge of my bed and dig into them while calling Anne.

"Hey, Regs," she greets in a tired voice. "I'm just up."

“It’s nearly time for class,” I say over a mouthful of pancakes. “Shake a leg, Anne-banan.”

“Oh my gosh. I haven’t heard that name in years. Wait. Are you eating?”

“Yeah. Pancakes. Lucas brought them.”

“I take it you’re still not talking to the guys?”

“Nope.”

If only I could tell her the truth. But I can’t. That would risk her safety and Anne’s life means more to me than anything.

“Are you coming to fencing?” I ask her, devouring the rest of the pancake.

I can tell just by her voice alone that she won’t be, but I don’t let on. Anne prefers me to just act normal around her even if her illness is taking its toll.

She yawns. “Maybe next time. I need to go to hospital this morning with Mum. And no, I don’t need you to come with me, but thank you. Just kick some arse at fencing for me, okay? We can hang out when I’m back.”

“I’ll bring snacks,” I say, my heart squeezing at the thought of her in hospital. I feel like she’s never out of there. “And lemonade.”

“Mm, that’d be nice. Catch you soon, girlie.”

“See ya.”

Anne hangs up first, and I just stare down at my phone, my appetite suddenly gone. It kills me, it really does, to know she’s in pain and there’s nothing I can do to help her. Tears fall from my lashes and splash my plaid skirt. I wipe my eyes, dump the rest of the pancakes into the bin, and open my door.

Rory turns to look at me, his sapphire eyes searching my own. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I reply instantly, closing my door. “Time for fencing.”

My stomach flips. Fencing is the only class where all the guys are together. Well, since I can't avoid them, I'll at least be able to let off some steam by kicking their asses.

Rory walks to me to class.

"Do me proud," he says with a wink, then leaves me to change into my fencing equipment.

Once I'm ready, I step into the hall with Charlie's Angels at my side. Mr Hines is waiting for us, his beady eyes following every girl in the room like a starved predator. It doesn't make sense to me why Miss Hector was fired and yet Mr Hines remains employed at the academy. The guy is a total sleaze bag, always checking out his students and invading their personal space. I mention this to the girls but they just chuckle.

"What am I missing here?"

It's Imogen who answers, a grin spreading over her pink lips. "He and Mrs Bitch are... well, a thing."

I gawk at her. "You mean he's her slam piece?" I look over at Mr Hines scratching away at his bald head. "Ew. I just barfed a little."

Charlie May snorts. "Yeah, it's totes gross. Ugh. He's looking our way."

I'm tempted to flip him off. If only the creepy man knew how quickly I could snap his neck.

"Hall, you're up. Georgian, try not to embarrass yourself this time," he shouts, signaling us both.

I pull my helmet on, ignoring Lucas' attempt at conversation entirely. I'm still not in the mood to talk to the guys right now. More than that, I don't want to talk to them because then I'll end up getting close again, and I can't do that when I need to offer one of them to The Duchess.

I try not to imagine what they'll do to Lucas as I fight him. Each of the ceremonies I've been forced to witness were utterly barbaric, worse than any Blood Party I've ever attended. The memories invade my mind and I lose my

concentration. Lucas spots an opening and he takes it, overpowering me in two simple moves.

He rips his helmet off, his face flushed. “I won. Now you have to talk to me.”

I glare at him. “I never agreed to that. And you only won because I was distracted.”

“Spoken like a true loser,” he teases, flashing that dimpled smile of his that makes my heart jump.

“Fine. What do you want?”

“Meet me at the fountain at the end of the day, and you’ll find out.”

With that, he turns on his heel and joins his group of friends. Ethan casts an incinerating glare my way. I guess out of all the guys, he’s the one most livid about me ignoring him. I hope it continues to make him suffer.



“You know I’ll have to come with you, wee one.” Rory folds his arms over his broad chest as we wait for Lucas by the fountain. “I can’t be persuaded with money like Georgian’s bodyguard. I don’t fly like that.”

“Wow, you can fly?” I grin at him. “So cool. I wish I could fly the hell away from this place.”

His stubble stretches into a lopsided grin. “If I could take us away from here, I would.”

Those words make my heart do a stupid little dance.

I still have my reservations about him, as I should after finding out he was my parents’ secret guard, but I can’t help but feel... safe in his company.

“You know, I never really apologised for drugging you. That was a really shitty move even from me, and I’m sorry.”

He blinks at me, then narrows his eyes. “Do it again and I’ll make you really sorry.”

“Ooh. Sounds kinky.”

He huffs and shakes his head. “You’re some girl.”

“Admit it, you’re beginning to like me.”

Before he can reply, Lucas emerges on the staircase. I grab my bag off the floor as he weaves his way through the students. He stops in front of me and gives Rory an almost affronted look.

“Don’t need your money,” Rory spits out before Lucas tries to buy him off. “Where are you taking her?”

“Who’s her?” I demand, scrunching my face at him. “The cat’s mother?” I turn to Lucas. “Where *are* you taking me?”

He pauses for a brief moment, probably contemplating whether or not this is still a good idea.

“For a walk,” he answers, nodding to the front entrance. “Bodyguard, you can let us out.”

Rory steps forward, his hands clenching into fists. “Watch it, kid.”

“*Please* let us out,” I ask, appeasing him with my sweetest smile. “We’ll stay on academy grounds.”

After a beat, he nods and leads the way out. Instead of taking us through the entrance, he turns to a small side door and thumbs in a security number on the lock. The door clicks open and we step outside into the courtyard. It’s a beautiful evening, not a single cloud visible in the clear blue sky. The winter sun is blinding and I shield my gaze from it, watching as Lucas steps slightly ahead of me. There aren’t many people around save from a few students and guards lounging on the grass.

I fall into step with Lucas, asking, “So, we’re going on a walk. This is fun.”

He snorts at my sarcastic tone. “It was the only way I could get us alone. There’s something we need to talk about.”

I harden my features. “About the little game you were playing on me with the others? Oh, I’ve just been *dying* to talk about this too.”

“That’s not it. It’s about Anne.”

I stop in my tracks, my stomach clenching. “What about her?”

Lucas presses a hand to the small of my back and gently steers me forward. Rory follows us. I watch Lucas, the way the muscles in his face tighten as he clenches his jaw and grits his teeth. I know he and Anne are close, almost as close as I am with her.

“Just tell me,” I spit out.

“She doesn’t have long,” he whispers, closing his eyes. “I spoke with her mum today. That appointment she had this morning? It’s not just a normal appointment. It’s *the* one.”

“You mean... they’ve told her how long she’s really got?”

He gives a curt nod and opens his eyes, though he doesn’t look at me, his gaze turned toward the setting sun. “Two months. That’s all Anne’s got, at best. Two fucking months.”

I root to the spot again, struggling to breathe, to comprehend the words. Two months left with Anne? No, no, no. The lump in my throat turns into a crushing weight that snatches my breath away. I stumble back, but Rory catches me and sets me down onto a nearby bench. I shouldn’t be shocked by the news. We always knew this day would come. But it feels like losing Adam all over again, watching him fall over the boat and being helpless to save him.

“I... I...” Words fail me. I can’t even speak. My vision blurs as the grief inside threatens to erupt into sobs. “I know.” The words don’t make sense even to me.

I knew she was hiding something from me, is what I meant to tell him but I can’t seem to string a coherent sentence together. I lift a hand to my mouth and suppress the sobs.

Lucas sits beside me and gently rubs my back. I hold the cries in as much as I can, but a few tears escape my lids and

roll off my chin onto my thighs.

“You know something?” Lucas whispers. “All this time, I’ve been telling myself Anne will pull through, but truth is, some people just don’t. The world’s a cruel, shit place, and it takes people we love without a scrap of mercy.” “

“Yeah.” I practically choke on the word. “I know. I... I know...”

I repeat the words as though I’m incapable of saying anything else. I just can’t seem to wrap my head around this. My best friend, my only true friend, is going to be gone from this earth forever in the space of eight weeks? The world is a shit place; I already know that. But how...how can it take away someone as sweet as Anne Hopkins?

Letting tears of rage slip down my cheeks, I do something that shocks even me. I reach out and take Lucas’ hand. I need a distraction. I need something else to talk about before the shock *really* hits home.

“So about the game,” I start, wiping my tears on my shoulder and glancing at him. “Why did you do it?”

His features soften. “Honestly, we just thought it would be a fun way to initiate you. I never realised how fucked up it was until now. I’m sorry, Regan. I really am.”

I nod, just managing to hold back barely contained tears. “And your so-called sin... that wasn’t much of a surprise.”

“It wasn’t?” He turns in his seat to look at me fully. “Damn.”

“I saw the way that bimbo looked at you when our family visited. The baby was the spitting image of you both. What happened between you?”

Lucas glances at Rory, who tuts and walks some feet away to give more privacy. His eyes never leave my face though.

“My dad was away on a business trip and my stepmum always gets lonely then. One night, she called me down for pizza and she was...” His Adam’s apple jerks nervously as he swallows something stuck in his throat. “Dressed differently.

She told me to sit down and eat with her and made me drink one of her special cocktails. I wasn't much of a drinker back then, still amn't really, but I didn't want to piss her off so I did it. I drank and ate food and then... then I woke up as she was leaving my bed. I don't remember what happened, and I won't lie, a part of me used to fancy her. Fuck knows why, but I figured it was my fault she came on to me. Anyway, now every time my dad goes away, she orders pizza for us... You know, I thought it'd stop once she got up the duff, but I guess I'm just too much of a catch."

He gives a pained smile and my blood boils. That fucking woman raped her own stepson! The anger pulsing in my body surges in waves. It takes everything in me not to go back to my room, grab my gun and hunt her down like the beast that she is.

"Lucas..." His name catches in my throat, and I squeeze his hand as more tears gather. "What she did to you was *awful*."

He waves me off, shrugging. "It was nothing."

"Don't you realise what that scumbag did? She drugged and raped you. Tell me where she lives. I will kill her for you. You won't need to get your hands dirty. Rory will help me clean up. Just give me your damn address!"

This time, Lucas laughs, but I'm dead serious.

Why can't I offer a piece of shit like her to the Veil instead of one of my guys?

He looks back to watch the sun dipping behind the wall that surrounds Holly Oak Academy. All the while, I think of various ways to kill his stepmum. She doesn't even deserve to be called that. Animal. She's a fucking animal.

"What happened to you...what's *still* happening to you... it's not normal or just 'nothing', Lucas. She's hurting you and you don't need to brush it off." I place my other hand over his and gently squeeze. All the anger I felt towards him, all of the hurt over Anne, suddenly vanishes. "I'm here if you need someone. You wanna report her? I'm here every step of the

way. You just want someone to kill her?" I shrug. "Also here. You don't need to put on a brave face, especially just because you're a guy. Guys get hurt too and it's okay to talk about it."

For a long while, Lucas just stares at me. A tear escapes his lid and slips down his ashen cheek, splashing onto our linked hands. He quickly wipes his face with his other hand and clears his throat, putting on another brave face, but I can see the relief washing through him. He lets out a breath I wasn't aware he'd been holding and smiles at me. It's like this is the first time anyone has ever told him that what happened to him was wrong and he did nothing to deserve it. My heart breaks for him. As we watch the sunset in comfortable silence, I realise then that I would rather sacrifice myself to the Veil in place of Lucas Georgian.

He's a survivor. I'm a murderer.

It's only fitting that he gets spared.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You totes have to be excited about Winter Break, right?” Charlie leans across the table and peers at me as I chew on my overcooked bacon. “I mean, you’ve been grumpy for weeks now and I know it’s not because of your bandaged shoulder—”

“Winter what?” I snap just to stop her rambling. My bandages have been off for a while now and still she keeps mentioning them and trying to figure out what happened.

She frowns at me like I’m crazy for not knowing what she’s going on about. Turning away, Charlie looks around the room before pointing at a poster on the wall near the door. Sure enough, the words *winter break* are written above a detailed paragraph below. The blue paper and white glitter snowflakes are hard to miss. It’s just that I’m not focusing on anything at the moment...except them.

The four guys from hell who sinned as much as me.

I’m not stupid enough to think there is any point to my thoughts regarding them, other than desire. Each one of those boys is bad for me and I would be bad for them if they only knew what I really was.

Together we could destroy the entire world without meaning to.

I don't get a chance to ask Charlie what it says before she's telling me.

"In one week, we all are going to the South of France for the next month!" She squeals in excitement and claps her hands, causing a few people to look our way curiously.

Where are the other two members of Charlie's Angels today?

I miss Anne, but last week she caught a cold and that meant her ass is in hospital for another week and no one is allowed to visit.


A week is a long time when there isn't much time left with her.

"Everyone?" I ponder, wondering if my parents would have signed off on that.

"They take us somewhere every year while refurbishments are done to the academy," she explains.

"Cool," I mutter, feeling more eyes on me.

I turn around, knowing what I'll see long before I actually see them. Josh, Ethan, Lucas, and Nathan are all sitting together and each one of them is looking my way while they talk between themselves. I say goodbye to Charlie before leaving the cafeteria, barely looking at Rory as I come outside. I get to my room but before I can go inside there is a note on the door.



Come to the
nurse's office,
asap.

“We best go,” Rory suggests, even when I just want to ignore it. “Probably a flu shot because of Anne.”

I know it would be hard for Anne to come back to the academy with all the bugs going around anyway, and the flu could quite literally end her life. I rip the note off the door, stuff it in my blazer pocket and walk out of the corridor. It’s a short walk to the nurse’s office and Rory waits outside the corridor as I step in. Three of the doors I try are locked and only the open one is right at the back of the room. I knock once before grabbing the handle and stepping inside.

“Regan Hall, here. You left me a note?” I search the empty room. Other than counters full of random things on the one wall and a bed in the centre with a white blanket covering the thin mattress, there isn’t much else here.

“I always leave you notes,” Ethan softly murmurs from behind me.

Hidden well behind the door, he steps forward and the door slams shut.

“Creepy much?” I cross my arms and don’t take a step back when he comes closer. I’m not backing down. “Haven’t you got the message I don’t want to talk to you?”

He laughs and I hate so fucking bad that it’s sexy. I hate how his blazer is missing, and his crisp white shirt sticks to his fit body. I hate the sexy tilt of his lips, the burning desire and obsession in his eyes.

I hate it all.

I don’t love it. No. H.A.T.E. Not love. This can’t be love. It’s too messed up.

“Too late, Regan. You’re ours now, you passed the test,” he announces but he’s smart enough not to touch me. “So fucking hate me all you want. You and I aren’t over. We are fucking forever and you know it.”

“I do *not*,” I protest, though my voice cracks.

The asshole just laughs at me. “Yeah, you do.” His voice is deep and sexy, somehow luring me into forgetting how batshit crazy Ethan is. My breaths are laboured as he leans down and reaches behind me, cupping my neck and pulling my head towards him. He doesn’t kiss me. No, that would be too easy. He wants me to give in. He wants me to be the first to admit to our fucked up attraction.

“I hate you,” I spit out.

“Yeah, well, I’d hate to be a disappointment and let you leave without making you hate me some more.

He slams his lips onto mine, taking everything as always and no doubt cutting another inch of my frozen heart and taking it as his own. He kisses me like a man possessed and I can’t think of anything else as I rip his shirt off, and he does the same to mine, my buttons popping everywhere. His hands disappear under my skirt and he lifts me up onto the bed. In seconds, my panties are torn off and thrown across the room. Ethan lowers his head and presses his face in between my legs. I moan at the first lick of his tongue against my clit, and then I spiral out of control as he sucks, nips, and teases me

with that wicked tongue of his. Holy shit, he's good... so fucking good. He keeps going until I'm just on the edge.

"Make me come," I demand and he chuckles as he slides up my body, undoing his trousers as he goes. He strokes his thick cock and guides himself to my entrance. In one swift move, he thrusts into me, filling me up and God it feels so good. His lips find mine again as we lose control of each other, both of us only focused on the ending. I moan as I feel close to coming already and he speeds up, hitting my sweet spot while seizing my bottom lip with his teeth. I cry out as an orgasm explodes through me and he comes in me a moment later. He kisses me one more time before pulling out, and basking in that perfect 'just fucked' hue I love so much, I even let out a little protest. Thank fuck I'm on the pill.

I sit up and watch him climb off the bed. He grabs his shirt off the floor, pulls it on, and turns to me with a sexy smirk on his wet lips.

"Tell yourself you hate me all you want, Regan, but we both know you fucking love the shit out of me. I fucked up and I can't take it back. I wouldn't anyway. Life is shit for people like us, and yet here we are, living the life of the rich and playing their dirty games."

"What's your point?"

He places his hand on the door handle, his eyes cutting into mine. "We played their games and you played mine. Now we're even but you, my pretty little liar, are my prize. My *group's* prize. We like you and want you to give us another chance. Maybe then you won't ever need to be alone again."

He walks out and I lie back on the bed, letting out a huff directed purely at my vagina and hormones.

Sex was not a good idea..and neither is hating Ethan Remington.

Love and hate are too fine a line in my books.



“Let’s make one thing clear,” I state as I slam my bag onto the guys’ table and all four of them stare up at me. “I don’t forgive any of you for shit but I’m willing to call a truce.”

“I didn’t know we were at war, babe,” Josh jokes, but there is evident relief in his gaze.

“Oh, we were,” I counter, sitting down. “But there is no point of a war between us when all of us have something worse to worry about. My parents.”

“Ethan filled us in,” Nathan says, his voice cold. I bite down on my tongue, wanting to ask him a million questions but none of them seem like a good idea. At least not right now.

“Yeah, well, the fact still remains that my mother wants a sacrifice and you four are the candidates.”

Nathan crosses his arms. “We should have kept Hunter alive and used him.”

“Do you hate him all that much?” I ask, but he just smirks before eating his toast and making it clear we aren’t talking about Hunter anymore.

“What is our next move?” Ethan probes and I’m surprised he’s letting me take charge of our weird little group I’ve found myself added to.

Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe they all *do* want a second chance.

“We have time to figure something out, but I’m not sure yet,” I answer honestly. “My parents aren’t like anyone you’ve ever met. They always win.”

“Not this time!” Lucas slams his bottle of water down on the table, and a few of the others nod and grunt in agreement.

Then they all look at me, and for a second I imagine us somehow outsmarting my parents and surviving.

Winning.

But the second passes and reality is there like a snake in the grass, always waiting, always watching until the perfect moment to strike.

And not everyone is going to survive.

That I am absolutely sure of.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

It's time for Winter Break and the snow has started to fall as if on cue. I peer out the window, my hand pressed against the cold glass, and my eyes following the snowflakes dissolving into puddles along the pane. I used to love watching the snow fall. For a long time, there was nothing more therapeutic to me than watching the icy droplets descend from the sky. Not anymore. It all changed this time last year.

My mother caught me laughing with my trainer, Marco. He was always telling funny stories while we trained and he'd been my first real friend, besides Anne, who was permitted on my parents' estate. Unfortunately, Mother told Father of our friendship, and that night I was ordered to kill Marco in the snow-laden garden.

I couldn't bring myself to do it.

My father called me weak and slit Marco's throat before I could even blink away my tears. Watching Marco's blood stain the crisp white ground not only made me hate whenever it snowed, but it changed me. It killed the last bit of hope I ever harbored for my parents.

Friendship is a liability.

My father's words still echo through my mind as I turn from the window and gather my suitcase.

“You ready?” Josh calls from the other side of my door. “Your guard keeps giving me evils.”

I hear Rory huff under his breath and a smile tugs at my lips. Friendship might be a liability for assassins but it’s one I’m willing to have. Maybe this Winter Break will be a good time for all of us. I’m actually a little excited.

My smile fades as I remember Anne and Lucas won’t be there.

When Anne called me last night before bed, we both agreed it would be better for Anne to remain at hospital while she undergoes some treatment. Her health comes first before anything. I even told her I’d stay with her at the hospital, but as always, Anne refused and said have fun before hanging up on me.

“I’m just coming,” I call back, pulling on my pink v-neck poncho, fluffy white gloves. I look in the mirror and pull on my hat. “How do I look, Daisy?”

“You look beautiful as always, Miss Hall.”

I snort at the generic response. “Oh, yeah? Then what am I wearing?”

“Today you have chosen a shell-pink woolen shawl with sky blue jeans, tan leather boots, a pair of faux fur mittens and a matching hat.”

I gape at the little tablet on the wall. “Now that’s just plain weird. Can you really see me, Daisy?”

I think she answers, but Josh bangs on the door again, shouting, “Come on, babe! Everyone’s leaving.”

God, he’s so impatient.

“You’re lucky you’re handsome, Josh,” I snap at him after opening my door. “Also, Daisy just told me what I’m wearing down to the fabric and colour. Soon these robot overlords are gonna take over the world. Just you watch.”

Joshua’s lips spread into a lopsided smile as he looks me over. “You look hot as fuck, babe.”

“So romantic.”

“Lemme take your case.”

“I’ll take it,” Rory says, reaching out to take my Gucci suitcase. “It’s my job to take care of her.”

Even so, Joshua is quick to stand in his way and grabs the suitcase before Rory can even touch it.

“Yeah but my muscles aren’t just for *show*,” Joshua spits out, flashing me a wink.

Rory glares at him like he’s trying to burn a hole into the back of his skull.

Sensing things are about to get ugly, I step out into the hallway, saying, “Don’t we have a plane to catch, boys?”

“Already boarding.” Rory nods to the door where a girl drags her suitcases through. “Let’s go.”

Joshua gestures for me to go first. I lead the way out of the dorms, well aware they are both checking me out from behind. A quick glance over my shoulder confirms that. At least Rory has the decency to look away. Ugh, men. Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.

We follow everyone out into the main field. A private plane is waiting for us on the neatly trimmed grass. Only the best for Holly Oak Academy. Mrs Beach is talking to the pilot at the bottom of the stairs while Mrs Anderson, Mrs Lyons and Mr Fleur usher the students inside. Joshua hands our suitcases over to petite airhostess, and before I know it, I’m sitting with three of the guys in comfy leather chairs with complimentary fruit pots and bottles of water.

I take a long drink of mine. A few droplets escape my mouth and slide into the valley of my throat. In the corner of my eye, I catch Ethan, Joshua and Nathan watching, their eyes following the droplet right down to my cleavage. There’s something heavy in the air that reeks of testosterone. It’s like the three of them are waiting to pounce on me and tear my clothes off with their bare hands. The thought sends a shiver through me and I clench my legs, my insides turning wet at the prospect. I wonder what’s got them so tense.

“Is everyone seated? Malcolm—*Malcolm!* Seatbelt. Now,” Mrs Fleur demands, clapping her hands. “It’s a full moon, children, and I don’t want any funny business while we’re ten thousand feet from the ground.”

Full moon? That explains it. My boys are going to be wild tonight.

“Wait! There’s two more,” the hostess calls out, standing by the door.

To my utter surprise, Anne and Lucas board the plane. I stand up and wave them over, shocked to see them.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” I say to Anne in particular once she reaches my side. I hug her as gently as I possibly can. I know her bones are hurting even if she won’t admit it.

Anne smiles weakly. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I’m excited!”

She removes her fluffy hat and I can see more of her face now. My heart squeezes in my chest. She’s ghostly pale and turning increasingly frailer by the day. It’s like she’s lost an entire stone since I last saw her. Lucas helps Anne into the chair beside me and I take her belongings and slide them into the compartment above our heads. When I drop back into the seat beside her, Lucas is handing over a small bag.

“Your meds,” he tells her, and she smiles her thanks before tucking it under her chair.

A silence threatens to emerge, but Joshua mutters something to Nathan about Mrs Bitch, and Nathan, who was drinking his water, bursts out laughing. Water explodes out from his nose and mouth and the rest of us laugh while he gasps for air and tears stream down his face. Anne quietly giggles into her hand and it makes my cheeks hurt to see her happy. Now we can all forget the reality for a while and have fun together.

No sacrifice. No blood. No Veil Council. Just me and my friends.



Chapter Thirty

The coach comes to a crashing halt, the wheels skidding in the snow that falls heavily around us. I'm surprised the coach got us this far up the mountain in the first place but here we are. Anne's excited face greets me the second I look away from the snowy mountain outside.

"Isn't it beautiful?" She lets out a dreamy sigh as she, too, looks away from the landscape. Typical Anne. She always looks at the world for the beauty it is, never seeing the shadows, never wanting to know what lies beneath.

She's good. And kind.

And so much more than any words could ever describe.

Yet she's the one dying and not me. It *should* be me. I've killed. I've fucked up my life and my future is less than rosy. Anne should be the one able to admire the view without being in pain. She should get to live her life to the fullest and achieve everything her heart desires, including love.

I gulp down the sadness clogging my throat as Anne gets up, swaying a little, but she doesn't let me guide her as she follows everyone out of the coach. My guys surround us the second we get out. My boots sink into the snow and the cold breeze lifts my long hair. Rory just reaches my side when Mrs Beach claps her gloved hands, gathering our attention.

“We have a five-minute walk to the lodge and I expect all of you to stay in line. When we get there, you may choose your own rooms.” She turns to walk away but looks back. “Girls and boys are not allowed to room together.”

There are some low chuckles from all around as she huffs at us and starts walking up the footpath, the only part that has been shovelled. Everyone walks in silence for most of the trip and I start to suspect this isn't a five-minute walk when at least ten minutes pass. I hope Mrs Beach hasn't got us lost. I almost slip when I step on some ice and an arm wraps around my waist, holding me up. I lean my head back a tiny bit to see who it is. Nathan stares down at me, his face void of emotion.

“How did we get like this?” I ask him, my voice softer than usual.

To my surprise, he smiles at me as I straighten up.

Without saying a word, his hand slips into mine and he links our fingers. Anne looks back right at that moment, seeing our hands and wiggling her eyebrows at me. She winks and I know there will be a million questions later on about Nathan.

Thankfully, we come around a corner and the lodge appears within view. Large grey stone and dark wooden exterior make the main building with dozens of black-rimmed windows, roofs made of slate and a long triangle-shaped entrance with the Holly Oak Academy logo above it. Surrounding the lodge are lines of snow bikes of all different colours and beyond that is a huge forest with snow-capped trees.

“It's enchanting here,” Anne says as we get to the front door and the automatic electric doors swing open for us. “Wow.”

Turns out the inside of the lodge is just as impressive.

We all gaze in awe at the pinewood ceilings, the arches held between the thick stone with exposed beams and the dark wooden floors look old and hella impressive. In the centre of the excessively big room is a stone made fireplace with little archways to showcase the fire inside. The stone travels all the

way up to the ceiling, through the three floors, and the balconies made of glass swing around it. Two large wooden tables with dozens of chairs fill the back of the room, and the back wall is lined with glass doors showing three hot tubs outside. All our suitcases are already by the staircases on either side of the room.

Everyone makes quick work of grabbing their suitcases and running up the stairs to claim the best room. Lucas helps Anne with hers and Nathan grabs mine before I can get to it. He grins at me as he carries it up the stairs. Ethan and Josh take the first room they find, with Nathan and Lucas taking the one next to it. Anne and I find a room three doors away from them, right beside Charlie's Angels' room, and we head inside. The room looks sweet with two large double beds, a faux fur white rug in front of a lit fireplace. The bedsheets are white with red tartan throwovers, matching the fire painting above the beds. We find two closets, one large bathroom, and a balcony. We head out to the balcony after putting our clothes away and I admire the view.

"This is a beautiful place." Anne rests her head on my shoulder. "I'm so glad I came."

"Me too." I rest my head on hers, comfortable and peaceful for a long moment.

I wish moments such as this could last forever.

My stomach rumbles and Anne laughs.

"I'm going to get some food. Do you want anything, Anne?"

She shakes her head. "Nope, I'm going to nap for a bit."

I hug her gently before leaving our room. The lodge has descended into chaos with students running around, laughter filling the place and so much noise. I find the kitchen in the end and get to work making myself a jam sandwich just as Nathan comes in. He flips the lock on the door and I raise an eyebrow as he goes to the cupboard.

"Want a sandwich?" I ask him and he pauses in his cupboard search to look back at me and nods once. I shrug my

shoulder and make him a sandwich too, placing them both on plates. Nathan closes the cupboard and brings a large sharing packet of crisps over as I jump on the counter. He hops up next to me and we both tuck into our lunch, the silence slowly becoming more uncomfortable by the second.

“I live with my aunt, have done since I was twelve,” Nathan starts to tell me, and his hands shake as he places them on his knees. “Hunter needed to die because he was going to kill our aunt. He had it all planned out. The idiot kept bragging about it to his girl, and his girl hated him as you well know.”

I swallow the lump of food down. “Why would he want to kill her?” Nathan’s secret is complicated and I never truly understood why he would kill his father and frame an innocent housekeeper.

“Before I explain everything, remember that when I was a kid I loved my brother. Hunter was my fucking world.” His beautiful green eyes meet mine. Pain, loathing, regret and every little negative emotion haunt them. I’ve felt those a hundred times before. They’re tattooed onto my body in the form of scars. “A day after my eleventh birthday, I walked in on my dad banging our housekeeper in the swimming pool. He didn’t see me or Hunter, but fucking hell we saw them. Our mum was dying in hospital at the time. We literally just came back from seeing her and this was what my dad was doing?” Nathan laughs but it lacks all humour and reeks of pain. “Hunter took it worse than I did. He became a monster. Ten days later I went into my dad’s study and he was dead on the floor, a chunk of his head dug in. Hunter was stood over him and he laughed like it was all a big fucking joke.”

I reach over and place my hand on his, encouraging him to tell me the rest.

“I helped Hunter clean up the statue he hit him with and wipe our housekeeper’s gloves all over it. Then I called the police and claimed to see her do it.”

“I get it. You loved your brother and you were just a frightened kid who wanted to protect him. What did your mum say?”

He looks down at our hands, his jaw clenching. “She passed away almost at the same time dad died. It was like she could sense he was leaving her and she wanted to go with him. I thought I could be enough for Hunter but he only got worse as we got older. He liked pain. He was jealous and possessive of Imogen and I knew he killed her boyfriend. When I found out he was after my sweet aunt, the woman who took in two troubled kids and moved halfway across the world to look after us, I knew Hunter had to go. He was too fucked up, too crazy and far gone. I don’t mourn the man he was in the end. I mourn the brother I had before we walked in our dad fucking the help.”

“I’m sorry I judged you before I knew. And I’m sorry I killed Hunter when it should have been you that did it.”

Before I can blink, his lips are on mine and he pulls me onto his lap.

“Don’t say sorry. You are Regan Fucking Hall and I owe you a favour.”

He kisses me again with hard, vicious desire, and I almost forget everything we just discussed. His hands tear at my clothes and I pull off his, somehow the two of us still on the countertop. He lays me down flat, strokes his cock while looking deeply into my eyes, and then he’s thrusting into my wet pussy. I clench around him and twine my fingers around his neck as he continues to assail my lips with his own. My insides tremble as pleasure quickly builds. Our moans and gasps are nothing but nonsensical sounds in each other’s ears. He’s fucking me with all of the anger, passion and pent up emotions we’ve been feeling for each other.

For our families.

For our messed up crazy pasts.

And for the peace and fucked up love we seem to find in each other’s arms.

His hand slides between us as he plays with my clit and thrusts deep into me.

“Come around my dick, Regan. Let me feel you.” He grunts into my ear and his words send me over the edge. I cry out as I come and he comes with me, gasping my name like a prayer I want to hear over and over again.

“Open this door immediately!” Mrs Bitch shouts, banging on the kitchen door.

Nathan’s cock is still buried inside me as we glance at the door and burst out laughing. He kisses me softly on the lips before pulling out and we get dressed as quickly as we can. Thankfully, there’s a side door leading onto a balcony, so we use that to escape just as Mrs Bitch manages to find a key and charge into the kitchen.

I have a funny feeling this winter break is the escape we’ve all been looking for.



Chapter Thirty-One

“It’s hot tub time, baby!”

Joshua picks me up and swings me around playfully. He sets me down and takes my hand, leading me onto the deck where the hot tubs are. Ethan, Nathan, and Lucas are sharing one of the tubs. Anne is wrapped up in blankets on a lounge beside the outdoor fire. Charlie’s Angels are in the tub beside her, and I did invite Rory but I highly doubt he’ll come.

I let go of Joshua and unravel my robe. At that exact moment, all of my guys turn to look at me. I deliberately chose my skimpiest bikini so that hardly any of the gold material covers my body. I grin at them as I climb onto the tub and step into the bubbling lukewarm water. Joshua hops in after me and pulls me onto his lap. I can already feel his big cock pressing into me from under his white shorts. I squirm a little just to tease him and he growls in my ear.

“Regan, how many boys did you date before us?” Nathan playfully asks, but Ethan’s eyes narrow on me as I clear my throat.

Well, this turned from sexy to serious far too quickly.

“A couple,” I say, avoiding a real answer and hoping they will just leave it at that.

Of course, they don’t.

“Regan had a fiancée. Didn’t you know?” Ethan adds and I grit my teeth as Joshua tightens his hands on my hips.

“The idiot must be crazy to let you go,” Joshua says at last. “What did you do, babygirl? Stab him on your wedding day?”

My eyes lock with Ethan but he just smirks, leaning back.

“He *is* dead,” I muse, my voice cold and emotionless. “So you’re not entirely wrong.”

Lucas groans and drags a hand through his wet hair. “None of us here are virgins. Why don’t we leave it at that?”

His voice is laced with worry for me with a notch of humour.

“Hear, hear.” I chuckle and grin as I sink myself into the middle of the hot tub, letting the bubbles ride all the way to my chin before I stand up. The water drips down my body and I feel each droplet being watched by my guys. I’m curious who will move first. I sway my hips to the music as I drop my head back, closing my eyes.

“Oh, great. 007 is here,” Ethan grumbles.

I look up just as Rory steps onto the deck. I’m disappointed to see that he’s still wearing his uniform. Looks like he won’t be joining us after all but his eyes fight the urge to drop from my face to my body.

“It’s your father.” He stops beside me, his expression turning sour. “He’s just scheduled a call.”

“For when?” I look between the guys, giving them a casual roll of my eyes despite my heart racing away. My father rarely calls me and it’s never pleasant when he does.

Rory picks up my robe and hands me it. “In five minutes.”

Reluctantly, I climb out of the tub and slip into my robe. What do my parents want from me now?



Chapter Thirty-Two

Rory takes me through the lodge to a room hidden away at the back. He pulls a key out from his pocket and inserts it into the lock. He must be able to sense my unease because he pauses to look at me.

“I’ll stay inside with you.”

I nod, admittedly touched by his support. “Thank you.”

He turns the lock and we step inside. It’s more of a conference room with numerous chairs positioned around a long table and a flat-screen TV. I sink into the chair nearest the TV as Rory pulls out his phone and types away. Not two seconds later, my father’s face appears on the screen. He’s in his study, sitting on his high-backed leather chair across from his rich mahogany desk. Our family crest hangs on a huge silver shield behind him, almost the same colour as his short hair. Just ever so slightly, he lifts the corner of his thin lips into a smile, his almond eyes darkening.

“Ah, Regan. You are thirty seconds late.”

Rory steps forward. “Sorry, sir, that was my fault. Technical issue.”

My father casts him a sharp look before turning his steely eyes on me. “I trust you are well?”

I straighten in my chair and incline my head. “Yes, Father. Thank you for asking.”

The smile vanishes and his features harden. He's about to deliver the blow. A nervous feeling cuts through my stomach and I hold my breath.

"Your mother was unable to attend the call due to some last-minute business. She has decided to host our annual ball next weekend. I have organised everything with your school. We expect you to bring one of your potential tributes."

I school my features, hoping to convey a false sense of calmness. He's referring to one of the guys. The sacrifice. Shit, shit, shit.

"May I ask why I have to bring them?" I dare to question.

A cruel snarl works its way over his lips. "Nothing in particular, Regan. He'll simply be your plus one. This won't be an issue now, will it?"

"No, Father."

"Excellent. I do hope you enjoy the rest of your holiday, Regan, and I shall see you at the ball." Turning to Rory, he adds, "Protect my daughter at all costs."

Rory nods and my father's face disappears into a black screen. I stay seated for a long moment, my head buried in my hands. Why oh why do my parents always need to ruin my fucking day?

"There's no way he'll be a guest," I tell Rory, still covering my face. "It's all another game."

"Aye." He walks around the table and stands beside me, resting against one of the chairs. "Remington is your safest bet."

I peek at him through my fingers. "I know Ethan is. He's as fucked up as me. But what if this is just another sacrifice? My parents wouldn't invite someone outside of the Veil unless they're supposed to be some sort of sick entertainment. If I bring Ethan and he dies, they'll *still* expect a final sacrifice at the end of the year, which means I'll be losing two of my guys."

"Do you want Ethan to survive?"

I frown at him. “Of course I do. I don’t want to lose any of you.”

He nods. “Then we come up with a plan.”

Pulling my hands away, I stare down at the table in front of me. “It’ll need to be a damn good one if we all want to get out alive.” I chew on the inside of my mouth. “The plan should be to play them at their own game.”

“And how do you suggest we go about that?”

I bite my lip again. “Every year at the Blood Party, my parents have a guest of honor. It’s usually some twisted dignitary that helps to protect the Veil. If my parents want to shed one of my guys’ blood at the party, you’re going to kill this guest before they get the chance. It’ll be enough of a distraction that the event will be cut short, and my parents won’t suspect me or my guy since we were with them at the time.”

Rory’s eyes gleam and he tilts the edge of his lips. “You’ve got a wicked mind, you know that?”

I push off my chair and bring my face close to his. “I’m not just a pretty face. Whenever someone tries to fuck with what’s mine, I make sure they live to regret it. Now, are you ready to kill for me, Rory?”

“There’s nothing I won’t do for you, lass.”

His words make my heart soar and I kiss him on the cheek before making my way back to the hot tubs. If my parents want me to play their dirty little game this time, I’ll do just that.

And I’ll fucking win.



With my robe still wrapped tightly around me, I leave the guys in the hot tub to head inside and check on Anne. Rory trails

after me. At the top of the stairs, I pause at the view from the wall of glass in front of me. I walk closer, my eyes tracing the falling snow sweeping across the land outside.

It's so utterly peaceful here and it reminds me of the last time I saw snow. In York, on a day that was the best day of my life; a day filled with love and so much pain it still rattles my soul.

It always will do.

"Do you judge me?" I ask Rory, well aware of his presence like a blanket holding me down to the earth. "I mean for York. Do you judge what I did?"

"I admire you more *because* of York." He reaches out to catch the single tear falling from my eye. My breath catches when his hand cups my cheek, wiping away the tear stain like it was never there. "You're not the monster you think you are."

I don't move and barely breathe as he moves closer, pressing our bodies together, his hot breath heating my lips. I close my eyes. If only he would take that final step like I know he wants to do.

Like *I* want him to do.

Only cold air greets me when I open my eyes, and Rory is gone, but I'm sure not far.

I wish my bodyguard would just kiss me already.



Chapter Thirty-Three

“Settle down, settle down,” Mrs Bitch shouts, clapping her hands to keep everyone silent as we gather in the middle of the dining hall.

I wish she would hurry up and say why she has got us out here considering Anne isn't feeling good. I want to spend the day with her to make sure she's okay, not hang around here waiting for Mrs Bitch's spiel.

Joshua's hand slides into mine and I look up, catching Nathan's eyes watching our hands instead of the teacher.

“There is an amber alert in this area due to a snowstorm and it means we are staying inside for the next few days. All doors are locked, mealtimes are as usual and bodyguards will be staying inside with us for safety. Any further questions or help, please contact a teacher.”

The crowd bursts into chatter. I roll my eyes and stand up, letting go of Josh's hand as I head for the stairs.

“Miss Hall!” the lovely teacher I hoped I had escaped shouts after me, and I try to smile as she somehow finds her way to my side.

“Mrs B...each, what can I do for you today?” I ask her sweetly, though she isn't charmed as she frowns at me.

“It's about Miss Hopkins.”

Every time someone says her name, my heart gives a violent lurch.

Mrs Bitch straightens and flattens a hand down her suit. “As you know, Miss Hopkins hasn’t been feeling at all that good lately. We have decided to move her to her own suite on the first floor.”

I nod. “Can I see her?”

“I’m afraid she’ll be busy today with Mrs Anderson who’s a trained nurse and is looking after her. Perhaps you can visit tomorrow.” She looks out the window and gestures to all the snow. “Perhaps we even can go outside if the snow lets up.”

I watch Mrs Bitch pivot on her heel and busy herself with some other students. I glance at the stairs and a hollow numbness wracks through my body. I’m half-tempted to run up there and see Anne anyway, but the sound of Nathan’s voice stops me.

“We’re making s’mores. You in?”

Pulling on a smile, I turn and walk over to the fireplace with him, Ethan, Josh, and Lucas. I nestle on a cushion beside Lucas and watch Joshua preparing the s’mores while Ethan scrutinises his work. It makes me smile how dainty Joshua is trying to be with the marshmallows despite his big manly hands. There’s music playing in the background and everyone is laughing and chatting away. I almost feel guilty about enjoying myself. Should I be when Anne is holed up in her room upstairs? It doesn’t seem that fair to me.

“Why the long face, cutie?” Ethan plops down beside me on another cushion and crosses his legs. “You know I hate to see you frown. Are you worried about Anne?”

I look away and stare into the fire. “Yeah.”

“Well, I have an idea.”

“Uh-oh.”

“If Mohammed won’t come to the mountain, the mountain will come to Mohammed.” Ethan shoves a s’more into his

mouth and grins at me. “Let’s make a snowman so she can see it outside her window.”

Lucas peers around me at him, the corners of his mouth covered in marshmallow. “Talk about a missed opportunity.”

Ethan frowns at him. “What?”

“‘Let’s make a snowman outside.’ What you should have said is ‘Do you wanna build a snow—’”

“Don’t. You. *Dare*,” I warn Ethan, nudging him playfully. I take one of his s’mores and pop it into my mouth while standing up. “I’ll go grab my things.”

“Just watch out for Mrs Bitch. We’re not supposed to go outside,” Joshua warns, winking over his shoulder at me.

I rush up the stairs and into my room. I try not to focus on Anne’s now vacant bed as I pull on my white puffer coat, boots, mittens and scarf. I grab an extra pair of the latter and creep down the stairs. Mrs Beach is facing the fire with Mr Fleur and Mrs Lyons, sipping their mulled wine and laughing away. I catch Lucas peering through the kitchen door and he waves me over. I hurry inside to find all the guys waiting for me, including Rory who’s pulling on a coat.

“Operation Snowman?” He quirks a brow at me.

A big grin crosses my lips as I toss him my bag. “Let’s get wet!”

The guys all stop for a moment to stare at me, then they burst into laughter as Joshua opens the door leading to the balcony.

Fortunately, the amber warning isn’t in full swing because the snow isn’t brutal yet and I can still see perfectly well. It’s difficult not to imagine the snow-covered ground stained in blood, but with tremendous effort, I push those thoughts aside and get to rolling a snowball for the base of the snowman.

Rory stands guard. By the time we get to the head, Mrs Bitch stands in the doorway shouting at us.

“There’s an amber alert—get inside!”

A snowball just misses her, and the students gathered behind her burst into giggles before hiding away. I slide the sticks into the snowman's side and turn my head just to see another snowball landing above Mrs Bitch's head. She ducks inside, finally getting the hint, and Joshua tosses a snowball in the air, catching it with his other hand.

"Thought you had a good aim?" Ethan teases him, just as the snow starts to fall again.

"Oh, I do." Joshua grins, throwing the snowball at him. "Just ask Regan."

Ethan jumps to the side before the ball hits him. He shoves the carrot into the middle of the snowman's face and runs after Joshua.

"I hope one of them slips and breaks their neck," Lucas grumbles at my side, though he's smiling while thumbing stones over the snowman's face. "Think that's us."

"Nope. One more thing." I sling Anne's scarf around the neck and adjust it, aware of Lucas' eyes on me as I do so. "There. *Now* we're done."

On the first floor, smiling through the window, is Anne waving at us.

I wave back, delighted she can see our little gift to her.

Now she won't be totally alone up there.

"Get inside!" Mrs Bitch barks at us, and that does it for me.

I grab some snow into my hand and roll it into a ball, tossing it at the old bat. It hits her right in the face, much to the delight of every student present, including Anne. I know I'll be in trouble later, but seeing Anne laugh makes it totally worth it.



Chapter Thirty-Four

Anne

I sit down on the edge of my bed as I watch my best friend run around with her guys, throwing snowballs at each other. The way Josh teases her makes me laugh as I see the pure joy on her face. The way Ethan protects her assures me she will always be safe. Nathan is her home, the place she has always looked for, and finally Lucas.

Lucas is hers. Period.

I may love him, but he was never mine and I knew that the second he met Regan back at the academy. Lucas forgot I've known him since we were kids and I know every single thing about him. He was my obsession as much as I became obsessed with my best friend who stuck up for me when no one else did.

My best friend who I can't protect from her life anymore.

"You must rest, Miss Hopkins," Mrs Anderson demands and my chest aches at the very thought of looking away from my friends right now. I ignore Mrs Anderson who flusters around and picks up my phone, handing me it. I ring my dad and take a deep breath as I wait for him to pick up.

"Dad, I need you to do something for me when I'm gone."

“Anything.” My dad’s reply is swift and I love him so much for it.

I take another deep inhale as Mrs Anderson leaves my room. I’m about to do something Regan might never forgive me for: I’m going to tell my dad her secrets. The secrets Regan herself has never even told me before...at least not when she was awake. She talks in her sleep and has done since we were kids, and I’m about to tell my dad every single secret she’s ever uttered. He’s the only one who will be able to save her in the way I always hoped I could. I just hope Regan can forgive me in the end. I only want to help her one last time.

As I begin to tell the story of Regan Hall, a tear slips from my lashes. No matter how bad her past was, I’m going to make sure her future is amazing. Regan is going to get the fairytale ending she deserves, and before I leave her, I’m going to make sure of it.



Chapter Thirty-Five

The snowstorm lasts longer than a few days. After the fifth day, I start to wonder if Mrs Bitch deliberately chose this lodge so that we'd be locked inside and she can drink all the mulled wine she wants. But on day six, the last of the wine is devoured, and still no help arrives to dig us out.

Luckily, we have plenty of provisions and the electricity is still going strong. I spend most of my days just hanging out with the guys and trying to distract myself from the thought of Anne upstairs. I still haven't been able to see her since before we made the snowman. I know things are serious when I walk into Mrs Anderson and Mrs Beach whispering in the kitchen. I'm quickly shoved out of the room, but I hear Anne's name getting mentioned and the word emergency.

When Mrs Beach takes me aside after dinner, I know from just her expression that Anne isn't getting better.

"It's about Miss Hopkins," she begins quietly, and my heart jumps into my throat. The headmistress of Holly Oak academy has always looked like she's been sucking sour lemons all day, but for once, her expression is utterly neutral, if not somewhat kind. It terrifies me more. "I know you two are close. Perhaps, tonight, you could sleep in her room with her? I think she would like to see you as I'm sure you would, too."

I swallow the lump building in my throat, but a quiver catches my bottom lip. I bite down hard in an attempt to hide it and nod, unable to muster any words.

“She’s waiting for you,” Mrs Beach adds, stepping aside and nodding up the stairs. “Go and have a girl’s night. If you need anything, just call for me or Mrs Anderson.”

Blinking the tears from my eyes, I turn back to the guys and explain that I’m going to spend the night with Anne. They’re all supportive and Lucas even walks me to her door. I expect him to say something as we stand out in the hallway, but he just takes me into his arms and hugs me.

Once I watch him climb down the stairs, I reach for the door and quietly step inside. Anne’s bed has been moved to the window since the last time I was in here. She’s lying in bed, gazing out at the snowy mountains and beautiful scenery, but she turns when she hears me close the door. As soon as I see her gaunt face, see how much weight she’s lost in an impossibly quick time, I know why I’ve been brought here. Her bones are so prominent in her face that she looks skeletal in that big bed, puffed up with pillows, blankets, and even an IV that, upon closer look, contains morphine. She’s arrived at death’s door and it’s time to say goodbye. I numbly walk over and drop into the chair beside her bed.

“Please don’t go...”

The words tumble from my mouth before I can catch them.

Anne just smiles at me. “I’ll always be here, Regan.” Slowly, she lifts a trembling hand and I cup it with my own. My tears fall and splash onto our hands. “You know... I hate cliches... but will you promise me something?”

“Anything,” I breathe, my lips trembling.

“You and Lucas. I want you to be together.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she shakes her head, which must cause her a great deal of pain because she lets out a sharp hiss and briefly closes her eyes.

“I’ve seen the way you and Lucas are together.” Her eyes open again and there are tears glazing her long lashes. “He

loves you, Regan. I know you have feelings for him, too. I just want... I just want you both to be happy. I was selfish with him even when I knew his heart wasn't with me. I wanted one dance at a ball, one boy to hold my hand and in my head I could pretend I had an inch of real love in my life."

"But Anne—"

"No butts. And one more thing, since... since I'm dishing out requests here on the good ol' deathbed." Her other hand falls on top of mine and she squeezes me with an increasingly fading strength. "As soon as you can, I want you to move away from home. Get as far away as you can and leave your past behind. Don't look back. They'll only try to stop you. Find your secret, the one you cry about in your sleep, and find peace."

I know she's referring to my parents and my daughter. Only Anne knows how utterly miserable I've been since my parents adopted me into their cruel lives.

"How can I do that without you?" Now it's my turn to close my eyes, and I let my tears fall in a torrent. "I don't want to live in this world if you're not here with me. I don't want to let you go."

"You have to," Anne says quietly. "But it doesn't mean I'm gone forever. You know me. I... I like to hang around like a bad smell..." She laughs and more pain seizes her. "Ow! Why does laughing gotta hurt?"

I help her settle back on the bed where I know she's more comfortable. Her chest is rising rapidly, her breathing shallow, and speaking alone must take so much out of her. I had no idea she was *this* sick. She hid it so well. Or perhaps I never wanted to see how quickly I was losing her.

"You know something else?" Her grey lips tilt into a pained smile. "Mum wanted me to come on this trip. We had a long talk about it when I was in the hospital. The doctors said they could make me comfortable there or let me go home. But I just wanted to see my best friend one last time."

"Oh, Anne!"

I gently crawl up onto the bed with her and nestle into her side. My tears soak her nightdress as she wraps a frail arm around me and kisses my temple. I should be the one comforting *her* and yet I can't seem to stop crying. I feel Anne's tears falling onto my head, too, and we just stay like that for a while, hugging each other and crying until we have no tears left.

"I—I love you, Anne," I tell her between gasps.

"I love you, too," she whispers back. "Always have and always will. Please don't ever forget that."

"I never will."

I close my eyes and take a deep shuddering breath. Her coconut scent wraps around me like a weighted blanket. I breathe it in, committing everything about Anne Hopkins to my memory so that I might never forget. Her voice. Her sweet nature. Her bravery. Her kindness and compassion. I don't know when the day of final farewells will arrive, so I savour this moment, praying I have more time with my soul sister.

As selfish as it is, I'm not ready to say goodbye yet.



Strong arms slide underneath me and lift me up. In my sleepy state, I forget where I am and wrap my arms around Rory's neck. It's not until I see Anne lying in her bed, her eyes gaping and unblinking, do I realise what the hell is going on.

"Anne... *Anne!*" I scream out her name over and over again, but Rory just carries me away. I flail and kick in his arms as hard and fast as I can. "No, no, no, no, no, no, *no!* Not yet. Anne... Anne, please don't go, please don't go!"

I grab Rory's shirt and try to tear through to the flesh with my nails. He's taking me away from her...he's taking me away from my best friend!

“Put me down! Let me see her!”

He just keeps walking out of the room, and Mrs Bitch from hell closes the door behind her. I scream into Rory’s chest, my wails muffled by his ripped shirt as he carries me back to my own room. The rest of the guys are already waiting for me. Rory sets me down on the bed and I just crumble, breaking down like I ever never done in my entire life. The tears, the shattering wails, seem to claw out from deep within my being and tear me asunder. It’s everything I’ve been holding back finally rising to the surface.

“A-Anne’s gone... She’s really gone...”

Joshua slides behind me on the bed and takes me into his arms. He rocks me softly while Ethan and Nathan rub my legs and Lucas takes my hand. Rory stands beside us, watching, as a single tear rolls down his cheek.

“I... I thought I had more time.... more time with Anne.”

“I know, babygirl,” Joshua whispers, running his hand through my hair. “I know.”

I cry into his neck. “Why is this world so fucking *cruel*? I have n-nothing left for it to break.”

It’s Rory who answers this time. “You have us, and guess what, wee one?” He crosses his arms and stares hard at me. “We’re un-fucking-breakable.”



Chapter Thirty-Six

The world seems darker, crueller, without Anne here.

Never has that been more obvious than now as I sit beside her parents, staring at the wooden coffin taking my best friend away. The priest talks about Anne's soul being with God and how she's at peace now, free from all her pain. Her mother cries softly at my side as the priest asks if anyone wants to speak and I go to stand up, even when I have no idea what to say but a warm hand rests on my shoulder. I look up as Lucas lowers his hand and walks to the stand, clearing his throat while holding a piece of paper.

"I met Anne Hopkins on holiday and she made me scones with jam and cream on top, and from that moment on I was her friend. Anne was sweet and kind, and without a shadow of a doubt everything I strive to be on a daily basis. I am certain I am speaking for each one of us here when I say we will miss Anne's laugh and how she gave a hand to anyone who needed one and for that, we will all deeply miss her.

Missing someone and remembering them is a way of keeping their souls alive in this world. So I ask every single person here to dance in the memories they have of Anne Hopkins and never forget."

Tears fall freely down my cheeks as Anne's mother gets up and hugs Lucas who has tears falling down his cheek,

matching mine. His eyes meet mine and I am clueless how to tell him that was perfect, so I smile.

The rest of the funeral is full of hymns and songs until her coffin is lowered down and I realise that is the last time I will be close to Anne ever again. I climb out of my seat the second I'm allowed to and rush to the back of the church and out of the doors. I feel so empty as I endlessly walk past gravestones and towards the forest at the back of the church. The trees blur past like dots in a painting and I only stop when I get to a creek.

On the other side, two small deer lap at the water and their heads shoot up when they see me. A sob catches in my throat as one of the deer's eyes is the same colours as Anne's.

"It's time for you to go and be forever missed," I whisper to the deer and some part of me feels happiness as the deer runs into the forest, its friend running after it.

I know it's not Anne...but it doesn't matter. It was my only way of saying goodbye.

Arms wrap around me and I'm cocooned in Ethan's scent as he holds me to him, and he isn't alone. Joshua places his hand on my head, stroking my hair and Rory's hand rests on my own at the back of Ethan's neck. Lucas and Nathan sit behind me, stroking my back as Nathan rests his head between my shoulder blades.

If I fall, it seems I'm not alone in the dirt anymore.

Even with Anne gone...I'm not alone.



"They watch you like you are going to disappear at any second." Anne's father pats me on the shoulder while the band plays Anne's favourite songs at the wake. I didn't hear him sneak up on me. I follow his gaze to my guys sitting around a table, doing exactly what he just mentioned.

“I’m so, so sorry for your loss, Mike,” I tell him and he nods. Anne’s mother and father got divorced years ago but he never stepped out of Anne’s life, he was always there for her even when Anne’s mother remarried. Anne explained that it was a friendly divorce and they are still friends to this day. I’ve always admired her dad. It takes a good man to stick around like that.

“Anne is—” He clears his throat and it hurts my heart. “She was very much like her mother. I almost felt I had given her no genes at all.” He laughs to cover the pain and I do exactly the same. “Anne told me all about you from the first day you met right down to the last. See, I’m a detective as you well know, and if you ever need my help, Regan, you have it. No questions or demands. Anne made me swear to make you this offer and one more thing.”

“Yes, sir?” I shakily ask.

“If you want to disappear, completely, from everyone, even your parents—yes I know who they are—you need only tell me and it will be done.” His serious tone doesn’t match the smile he plasters on his face. I try to do the same, even when I feel insanely empty inside.

How could he possibly know who my parents really are? He likely doesn’t.

He *can’t*.

The thought of being taken away from everything is tempting, though. A fresh start with a new identity, a hidden one only me and my guys know about. I could live in the middle of nowhere and be free for once. Really free. If only it was possible. I know too much and my parents would never let me go.

“Anne was amazing at knowing what I might need before I ever knew I wanted it.”

Mike’s smile turns into a slightly proud one. “Now that she got from me. Perhaps my daughter was more like me than I realised.” He looks over his shoulder and then back again. “Do excuse me, Regan. Enjoy the wake.”

“Of course, Mike,” I reply and he nods once before disappearing into the crowd.

Anne has literally given me a ticket away from my life... and I’m never going to be able to thank or repay her. I look out the window at the blue skies. Well, I will certainly try and hopefully, wherever she is, she might hear me as I whisper, “Thank you, Anne Hopkins.”



Chapter Thirty-Seven

They say grief gets easier with time. It's been three weeks since Anne's funeral and while the pain has dulled a little during the day, it's still unbearable at night. I guess it's because, without the guys and classes to take my mind off things, I have time to think. My mind has always been a terrifying place. For the most part, I'm able to distract myself, but lately, my nightmares have been returning, and in each of them is Anne's dead body and Adam's bellowing screams.

I'm not really surprised when I wake up screaming for the third night in a row. I kick my covers off and throw my legs over the bed, taking deep breaths in through my nose to calm myself down. Too focused on settling my racing heart, I don't hear Rory step into my room. It's not until he's bending down in front of me and takes my hands into his own.

"Keep breathing," he orders, rubbing his thumbs in circles on the back of my hands. He reaches over briefly to turn my lamp on. "That's a lass."

Gazing into his eyes is enough to calm me. I continue the deep breaths until I'm able to shake the nightmare from my mind.

I give Rory a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

He pats my hand and then sits on my bed beside me, forcing me to slip closer when he sinks the mattress. "Nothing to apologise for. I was just playing Candy Crush. Can't seem

to get past this bloody level.” He slides me a grin. “You wanna try?”

I nod and he hands over his unlocked phone. I haven’t played this game in forever but it doesn’t take me long to pass it. Before I know it, I’ve completed another two levels, and it’s only when Rory chuckles do I realise.

“You weren’t stuck at all, were you?”

“Nope.”

I shake my head at him and smile. Pulling my legs up, I cross them and lean back, pressing my fingers into the fluffy pink blanket draped over my bed. Rory quickly glances away from my panties and clears his throat. My smile turns into a naughty grin as I realise I’m only wearing a tank top and a pair of lace pants. It was too hot to wear anything else. I watch Rory’s stubbled cheeks turn a similar shade as my blanket as I return his phone.

“You know something, Rory?” He looks back at me, and bless him, he’s trying really hard not to look down again. “I don’t even know your surname.”

“It’s Blaire. Rory Blaire.”

He looks at my breasts and then away again. The sexual tension percolating between us is utterly suffocating. The man clearly wants to fuck the living daylights out of me, so why doesn’t he?

Oh. Right. Bodyguard.

He’s way too professional for my liking.

Well, enough is enough. I need a distraction and Rory is as good as any.

I uncross my legs and dump my feet in his lap. Rory freezes and stares down at my pedicured toes. My breath hitches when he places a big hand on my ankles. Ever so slowly, he drags his palm up my leg to the top of my thigh. He seems almost transfixed as he touches me. But the instant he slips his palm over my inner thigh, he pulls back, and something inside me finally cracks.

I grab him by the shoulders and throw him back onto my bed. The lamp on my nightstand topples to the floor and turns off, allowing the moonlight to bleed over the floor in silver ribbons. Before he can utter a protest, I seize his lips and kiss him like my life depends on it. His big hands fall on my ass and he spans me before pulling me closer, denting my flesh with his fingers. I reach down to unzip his jeans and yank his t-shirt over his shoulders. Straddling his hips, I grind my pussy against his cock. My lips spread into a smirk as I continue to tease him. I'm positively delighted with myself for managing to overpower my Scottish bodyguard.

Unfortunately, the satisfaction is short-lived. In the blink of an eye, Rory has me pinned down underneath his body, his hands balled into fists at either side of my head. His pupils are blown and his chest rises unevenly as he stares down at me. There's lust burning in his gaze but there's also hunger—the ferocious kind that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Well, this is more like it.” I run my hands up his muscular arms to the tufts of light hair peppering his chest. “What are you thinking, Rory?”

“I'm thinking you should close that mouth of yours, lass, or I'll fill it with my cock.”

“Promises, promises.” I slide my palm down to the band of his jeans, but he grabs my wrist and slams it against the headboard. “*Ah!*”

His touch is considerably harsher than my other guys and I can't deny that I love it. I need this roughness. He trails his fingers down my side, and with one harsh tug, pulls my tank top off and seizes my breasts. I arch my spine and lift my hips, enticing him to take me already. He tears my panties off with a growl and uses them to bind my wrists to the headboard.

He kneels over me, his body bathed in the pale moonlight, and I open my legs to invite him in. Rory leans down, claiming my mouth, then he sinks lower, dotting a trail of kisses all the way down to my pussy. He pushes my legs wider and drags his tongue over my lower lips. Now I'm arching my

spine not to tease him but because of the toe-curling pleasure building inside of me.

Fuck, he's good.

His tongue circles my clit with dexterous, languid strokes, each flick sending shivers through my body. He sucks on my lips and eases his fingers into my wet pussy. He's slow at first, looking up at me through his hooded lids, but then he picks up his pace and I can feel my orgasm building like a crescendo. I desperately want to grab onto his silver hair, but I'm bound, at his mercy, and all I can do is arch my back as he assaults my pussy and clit mercilessly.

"Let go, Regan. I want to taste your come."

That simple command does it.

I let out a shattering moan as I come onto Rory's face. He laps at my juices like I'm the sweetest nectar in the world, the dirty, sexy bastard that he is. I lay completely boneless beneath him while my legs tremble and I try to catch my breath. That has to be up there with the best fucking orgasm of my life. Rory licks me clean and straightens onto his knees, his mouth glistening in the moonlight. With a smirk, he unties my panties and lets my arms fall numb at my side.

He rolls off the bed and I watch him dress, sighing a protest as he buttons his jeans. I thought he was finally going to fuck me, not that I'm dissatisfied. Far from it. Rory Blaire has the best tongue in fucking existence. Even his name gives me chills now. Odd that his surname happens to be Blaire. I've only ever met one other person with that name and she was a girl I went to school with in London. She was one of the quieter girls but I got on with her really well. She just sort of disappeared a few years ago. Her parents moved, too, and nobody ever heard from her.

"What are you thinking, Regan?" Rory keeps his back to me as he pulls on his boxers. It should be a crime to cover up such an amazing arse.

"I'm thinking about a girl I went to school with who had your surname. She sort of just disappeared when we came

back from summer. I was wondering what happened to her.”

Rory visibly freezes, the muscles in his back clenching. “What was the name of your school again?”

“Prestine Academy.”

He whips around, his expression dark and menacing. “That girl was my sister.”

I push up onto my elbows. “Leah Blaire?”

“Aye.”

“You... you said she was sacrificed.” My hand instinctively goes to my mouth as I put two and two together. “That’s why she never came back.”

The blood drains from Rory’s face as he pulls on his t-shirt, followed by his holsters. My heart thrashes as I watch him double-check his guns. There were only two people at the academy who knew about the Veil Council and one of them died before my eyes.

“She was lured by a scumbag who promised her the world. One day”—he twirls a gun around his finger before slotting it back into the holster—“I’m going to kill him.”

I swallow the bile rising into my throat. “What was his name?”

“Adam. The Duchess’ son. That’s all I know.”

My eyes close as soon as I hear the name. So it was Adam. I remember him talking about needing to attend the Duchess’ Blood Party that year. I never in a million years thought he had to bring a sacrifice who just happened to sweet, quiet Leah. She also had a terrible crush on Adam. I cover my mouth again, completely sickened.

“Adam is already dead. I killed him.”

I open my lids and stare at Rory, holding my breath.

“What?” His throat works.

“I...I killed Adam. That’s why my mother wants *me* to pick a sacrifice for the Veil. An eye for an eye.”

Rory walks over, and for some reason, I flinch. I sit up and wrap my arms around my knees. If only I had made sure Adam picked somebody else. Rory's sister could still be alive. He sits beside me and I feel his gaze on my face but I can't bring myself to look at him.

"It was an accident. We were on the boat and he fell over. I freaked and ran away." Finally, I meet his eyes and I choke back the lump in my throat. "I had no idea Adam was to sacrifice someone. If I'd known, I would've made sure he didn't... I would've stopped him."

For a long, painful moment, Rory stays silent. He looks away and just stares at the back of my room door.

"Wasn't your fault," he says at last, turning to me. "You're as trapped in all this as she was. Leah always saw the good in people. She was a bit like your Anne and now they're both gone. I might not be able to bring them back, but I will bring down the Veil even if it kills me."

"It's impossible," I whisper weakly.

Rory shakes his head. "Not if we work together."

The thought is so tempting. But I know my parents and I know The Duchess. People like that aren't easily conquered. They have too many hands in different pockets and eyes and ears everywhere. It's why I gave my daughter up for adoption. What chance would she have ever stood in this world? None. She'd be trapped, too.

I look at Rory and the determination I find in his gaze takes my breath away. I almost believe him...almost imagine a world without the Veil in it.

"It might not be impossible," I say, reaching for his hand, "but it won't be easy. You're on my side, right?"

He takes my chin and kisses me on the jaw. "Right."

"Then we can at least try to bring them down, not just for us or Leah, but for all the thousands of others those bastards have killed. First, we start at my parents' Blood Party."

His lust-filled eyes gleam with pride, and he kisses me again, this time on the lips, ever so lightly.

“You and me against the world, lass.”

I sink into his arms and close my eyes. It’s a tempting, beautiful thought indeed.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Everything is a meticulous process with Bibi Dedican. First, Joshua hands over the cake, then the card which Bibi always shakes for money, then we sing happy birthday. Every step is exactly like the Sunday before. While we drink tea and eat a slice of the delicious cake, Bibi talks to me about my ‘wedding’ and then she gifts me one of her shells. She’s such a lovely, genuine woman, and by the time we leave the Maritime Care Home, my stomach and cheeks ache from all the laughing.

“Here.” I hand Joshua the shell and he gently slips it into his coat pocket. “Now where are we going?”

Joshua walks off, away from the car. Rory frowns at me while the other bodyguard stubs his cigarette and hops into the driver’s seat. I shrug at Rory before following in Joshua’s wake. He’s been acting strange since we picked the cake up from the German bakery. It’s like he’s too lost in his thoughts to focus. I did ask him about it, but he shrugged me off and never said much when he was pretending to be Tyler. There’s definitely something bothering him. This isn’t the Joshua I know.

I follow him around the back of the care home to a beautiful private park. It’s completely empty here but there’s a small river with ducks and swans paddling away. Joshua walks up to the railing protecting the river and leans against it.

Quietly, I do the same and wait for him to speak. He glances at the clear-blue sky first before parting his lips.

“You know, sometimes I think the Big Guy is punishing me for what I did.”

I’ve never been a religious person, but I thought God was all about forgiveness. Joshua is clearly suffering though and I know why.

I know what he did.

Still, I ask him, “What did you do, Josh?”

Joshua watches the six little cygnets paddling after their mum. A smile threatens his lips but he holds it back with his teeth. For a long while, he just watches them, and I wait despite already knowing what he’s about to say.

“I never meant to kill my real parents, babe, despite what that dick Ethan might’ve told you. I was just a kid, watching through the window how happy they were with my bro, and I couldn’t understand why they never wanted me. I remember my dad, Bibi’s son, trying to light the candles on a big-ass chocolate cake but he couldn’t get his shitty lighter to work. I had matches in my pocket. Found them on my way there.”

Joshua glances at me, almost fearfully, and the pain in his eyes kills me to see.

“When they went upstairs, I snuck into their house and lit all the candles. I just wanted to help. Fuck knows why. I thought they’d maybe let me stay with them. But then I just sort of...freaked out. I hid the cake in the bin and ran away. The next day, it was all over the news. They died in the fire and my little brother survived. He ended up in the system just like me.”

Another glance, and this time there are tears in his eyes. I take his hand and link our fingers. He looks down at our joined hand. The smile he was holding back slowly surfaces.

“You didn’t mean to kill them,” I tell him softly.

“Nah, but I still did, and God punished me by taking my adopted parents away in a car crash two months later. Not only

my real bro ended up in care, but so did my adopted brother, Kay, all because of fucking me.”

I lean my face against his shoulder and watch the ducks skim over to the other side of the river. The sun bounces off the rippling surface and catches Joshua’s watch.

“The reason I’m telling you this, babe?” He looks down at me. “You don’t judge.”

“How can I when I’ve got a whole closet full of skeletons?”

“They kinky skeletons?” Joshua grins, wiggling his eyebrows at me. “That’s what I love about you. You don’t judge people no matter how messed up they are. No matter what mistakes people like me have done in their life.”

“I guess I’m just trying to be more like Anne,” I whisper, my heart squeezing. “She never judged anyone, and let me just say, I’ve done some pretty bad things in my life too, but Anne still stood by me. She still saw the best in me even when I couldn’t see it and thought I was nothing more than a monster.” Tears clog my throat and I look up at him through my wet lashes. “We’ve all done things we aren’t proud of and you know what? That’s okay. It’s part of being human. We make mistakes. We fuck up. We can’t let those define us. Your past doesn’t make me any less in love with you, Joshua.”

Joshua’s dark eyes widen. He stares at me for a long moment, then he nudges his shoulder playfully. “You’re gonna make me blush, babygirl.”

“Good. That’s much better than letting you beat yourself up over something you never meant to do.”

He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead, his lips lingering for a moment as his fingers graze my cheek. When he pulls away, his pupils are blown with lust and I can’t help but stare at his lips.

“Besides,” I say, grinning up at him, “if God was really punishing you, he wouldn’t have brought me into your life. I’m a fucking catch.”

We both chuckle. Joshua said those exact words to me not too long ago. Funny how things are changing between me and my guys. A few months ago, I was trying to kill them, and now they're each taking a part of my twisted heart and cradling it in the palm of their hands. I just hope they don't drop it. I hope I'm not making a mistake by trusting and protecting them.

"Let's go, babe." Joshua takes my hand and leads me back to the car. Rory opens the door for me and watches me slip in.

"Where are we going now?" I ask Joshua.

"Netflix and chill?" he suggests, sliding onto the backseat with me, his hand on my thigh.

"Sounds wonderful. Have you watched *How To Get Away With Homicide*?"

Rory jumps into the passenger seat and chuckles. "You and your damn serial killer stuff."

"What? It's the only thing I'm good—I mean, knowledgeable at."

Joshua stares at me with a mock horrified look, then he kisses my temple. "If it makes you happy, babe."



Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Not going downstairs for family day?” I ask Lucas as I open my room door the next day and find him standing there. He steps into my room and I sigh. “Yeah, me either.”

The chances of my parents being down there are slim to nothing, but even then I don’t want to risk seeing them. They can’t force me to walk downstairs without making a big scene which I know they don’t want to do.

Lucas sits on the edge of my bed, his head bowed and I don’t really know what to say to him. His stepmum is as awful as mine. Wordlessly, I step in front of him and let his head rest against my stomach as I stroke his hair.

“I should tell my dad everything... get it all out in the open because it’s crushing me, Regs,” he whispers, his voice laced with pain. “Life is so fucking short and my dad doesn’t deserve to lie in bed every night with a woman who slept with his son.”

“That woman raped you, Lucas. It’s okay to admit that. You are far too intelligent to not know it, and I agree with you. You should tell your dad the truth.”

I almost feel guilty being so upfront and harsh with him it’s for his own good. Baby stepping around the issue isn’t going to make this easier for Lucas to handle and he is too good to be ignored. The world should know what happened to him and the right people should pay for it.

“What about the baby?” His voice comes out small, barely a whisper.

“She might not be yours. Has a DNA test been done?”

He shakes his head. “But you saw her. She’s my double.”

“She could also be your dad’s child.”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out.” He grips the outside of my thighs, where I can feel his touch burning my skin. Finally, he looks up at me but I keep my hands in his hair, wanting to keep touching him. “I think you’re right, Regan. You’re so strong despite everything. I need to be more like you.”

“Trust me you don’t wanna be like me,” I thinly reply.

“Why not?” He slowly rubs circles into my thigh. I gulp as he stares up at me with his beautiful eyes. “You’re strong, beautiful, kind, and in my eyes, perfectly dangerous. I’ve wanted you since day one, since I saw you in that window right behind where we are now. I looked up and I knew I had to find you. I had to know who you are because we had a connection, even through the glass. Even when we hadn’t met yet. Something drew us together and I know you felt it, too.”

“But Anne loved you,” I end up whispering because we do need to discuss this. “And I felt like our connection had to be put away because I loved her...and I couldn’t take you from her.”

“Anne wrote me a letter,” Lucas starts off and I give him a shaky nod, knowing I will never be ready to hear what she said but I need to. “She told me to grab you, kiss you and tell you I love you before it’s too late. Anne told me she would be eternally thankful for our friendship but she knew my heart belonged to you. She told me to live, to find happiness and tell you how I feel. So here I am because damn, Anne was always right.”

“She was,” I chuckle, my voice thick with emotion.

“I love you Regan Hall. I know you’re with Josh, Ethan and Nathan—”

“And Rory,” I mutter with red cheeks but Lucas just laughs.

I really love hearing his deep throaty laugh.

“Damn bodyguard,” he grumbles, flashing me a grin. “But I’m not a jealous man. I want you and I know we can figure out our future together if you want. You know my secrets and I hope one day you will tell me yours, but until then, I want to be at your side. I want *you*.”

“You can have my secrets, Lucas. You can have me.”

I barely finish thinking the words before I say them.

And then his lips are clashing with mine and gods this kiss feels like it was always meant to happen. Lucas kisses me softer than I ever would have expected and my heart cracks a little bit more with every stroke of his lips against mine. He tugs me down onto the bed, covering my body with his and deepening the kiss. He pulls my shirt off and I push down my skirt as he takes his own top off. My mouth goes dry as I admire his muscular chest, the dip down into his six-pack and the V that disappears into his trousers.

I wet my lips and grin up at him as he unclips his trousers. He pulls his wallet out and takes out a condom—this time I had some in my drawer just in case—and then he rolls it onto his long, hard and delicious looking cock, his eyes pressed on me. I lie back in only my bra and knee-high socks as he crawls back on top of me, kissing me harshly. I part my legs around him as he lines up with me, his tongue battling with mine, and then slams into me, my wet pussy making it easy for him to glide in.

I moan into his mouth as he thrusts and uses his hand to pull down my bra. His lips slide to my breast, teasing my nipple as he continues to thrust into me. My orgasm comes crashing into me unexpectedly and Lucas groans as he thrusts a few more times before he stills. I will never forget the look on his face when he comes, the pure masculine pleasure that takes over. It makes me shiver and fill with a love I’ve never known until recently...until I decided to love instead of kill my guys.

That love explodes into a million stars as I bathe in the aftershocks of my pleasure.

“I love you, Lucas.”

He opens his eyes and stares down at me. His lips upturn in a pure, heartfelt smile before he kisses me and shows me how much he’s wanted me for the rest of the day and night. It’s moments like these when I truly believe that I might, just maybe, get my happy ending.



Chapter Forty

“We need to talk,” I state in the firmest voice I can muster when Ethan comes back into his room. He doesn’t jump like I hoped and instead he starts laughing as he shuts the door with his foot, dropping his gym bag onto the floor by the door. I should have known the crazy-ass dude would laugh instead of jumping. Any normal person would get a fright. But no, not Ethan.

“Lovely to see you as always, Regan.” He starts pulling off his damp shirt from the heavy rain outside. The droplets pelt the window behind, reminding me of my own mood this evening. My mouth goes a little dry as my eyes betray me and I stare at his muscular form. The rain falling from his damp hair and onto his abs causes my breath to hitch. Gods, he has an amazing body, and the asshole knows that. With a smug grin, he disappears into the walk-in closet.

I rest back on the leather chair, looking around his room. There isn’t much that even says it’s Ethan’s space. Everything from the grey walls to the blue sheets is plain and his personal belongings are scarce. The chest of drawers only has one picture on it of an older couple and Ethan when he was about fifteen, if I guessed right. I stand up, seeing another picture frame on his bedside cabinet that I didn’t spot before. I almost gasp as I pick it up and see me and Ethan as kids. We had to be only five, maybe younger, and our faces are covered in chocolate sauce as we share a pot of some cheap version of

Nutella. We look so happy, both of us laughing like we didn't have a care in the world.

Back then we didn't. Back then we weren't Regan Hall and Ethan Remington.

The fucked up world didn't corrupt us until we grew up.

"I wish I could remember that day," Ethan comments from behind me. I didn't notice him sneak up, like I should have, but everything about Ethan makes me relax more than I should.

"I wish I had clear memories from before my parents adopted me." I set the picture back down and face him. "They took those from me too and stained them."

"What do we need to talk about, cutie?" Ethan changes the subject, sitting on his bed and patting the space next to him.

I cross my arms and walk to the window, pacing up and down.

"My parents want a sacrifice, a victim I need to take to their party, fuck publically, and then kill. I don't *want* to do it and I will figure out a way to let my sacrifice go, but for now, I need to take one of you guys to my parents in a show of good faith."

Ethan's expression doesn't even falter. "Take me then."

I lock my eyes with his, making sure he knows what he's agreeing to. "My parents are cold-blooded killers and the group, no, *cult* they belong to think death is a game and blood means pleasure. They might kill you if I can't figure something out in time."

"That's why you hid her, isn't it?"

I freeze at Ethan's question. He picks up the picture frame and unhooks the back, then he slides out another photo and shows it to me. Tears fall from my lashes as I stare at the photo of my daughter as the only memory I have of her comes back to me.

“Push now, Regan!”

The midwife’s voice is comforting but I can’t think of anything other than the pain. I hold my breath one more time and push as hard as I can. The next few moments seem timeless as the midwife holds up my baby and places her on my chest. She has lots of blonde hair, and as she cries, my heart hurts like someone has just cracked open my skull. I shakily lean down, pressing my lips to her forehead and breathing in how she smells. I know I will never forget how perfect she is—her little nose, her tiny fingers, and that natural smell of complete and utter youth. The midwife cuts the cord and takes her from me, explaining she needs to clean her up. Everything is woozy as exhaustion creeps in. The next hour is like a distant memory while the midwife cleans me up and helps me sit enough to see my daughter, wrapped up in a pink blanket.

“They want to know if you’re ready to let them in, Regan?” the midwife softly asks and I pull my eyes from my daughter. She reads me like a book, like she knows I don’t want this. “You can change your mind. You can keep her if you want. I know you’re young but—”

“You don’t know anything,” I steel my voice despite the quiver catching my lower lip. Keeping my daughter means hurting her. It means forcing her to live the same life as me and I will never, ever allow that. “Let them in.”

The midwife sighs but she nods all the same and goes to the door. Tears fall in a silent torrent even when I beg them not to. The door opens and the couple I chose come in. Daisy and Philip Thornton. Both in their thirties, put together and unbreakable. Unlike me, a seventeen-year-old who is more broken than ever. They don’t have children, they lost three of their own due to birth complications and they are so sweet. Two primary school teachers who have been together since they were kids. They live in France, but came from London and speak both languages.

They will adore my daughter as their own, I know that, but it doesn’t make this easier. If anything it makes this just about bearable.

“How are you feeling?” Daisy asks me, her eyes flickering from my face to my baby’s. “Do you need anything?”

I don’t answer her questions, a way of making small talk. She is just a lovely woman, but either way, she must be able to guess the answers to her questions. I feel utterly broken and devastated as I glance at my daughter and then back to her new parents.

“One day I’m going to escape my past and I want to live near you. I won’t tell her who I am until you both decide she is ready, or if you want me to tell her at all.” My voice breaks and I take a deep, shuddering breath. “I-I would just like to be a family friend. Someone you invite to parties and see maybe once a month for a cup of tea. I need to imagine a future where I can see her as I let her go, even if I’m not sure I can ever promise her this.” My eyes are still on my baby girl as more tears fall.

I want to promise her the world.

But all I can do is give her whispers of promises and hope she can accept them.

“You are our family friend, either way. Promise me, or her, or Philip. We will write a letter every year and take a photo every month of her life for you so even if you can’t keep your promise, you will know her,” Daisy firmly says and her own eyes, wet with tears, find mine.

I look down at my daughter one last time, her pink little cheeks, her mass loads of blonde hair and how perfect she is. She hasn’t even opened her eyes yet and I have to let her go. I nod at Daisy and lift my daughter towards them. The joy on Daisy’s face makes my heart seem a little less broken as she admires her daughter.

Our child.

“Do you want to know the name we chose for her?” Daisy asks and I shake my head. Knowing will make it worse. Daisy seems to understand as she rests her hand over mine.

“Can you give her a middle name from me?”

“Of course,” Daisy quickly replies with a genuine smile.

“Anne,” I whisper and she nods in agreement. I look at the clock in the room, knowing I need them to leave before the sunrises in York. This place is as private as it comes but they have a plane to catch. I need them to disappear...because I’m never alone and never unwatched. I need to get back to the hotel I’m meant to be staying at. “You should go now.”

Daisy hands our daughter to her new dad and he heads to the door, waiting for Daisy as she looks down at our hands.

“Thank you for this. I am eternally in your debt and I will pay it off by loving our child and you if you ever become free,” she vows and I believe her.

I’d never let her take my child if I wasn’t sure.

“Our daughter is priceless and in danger if anyone knows about her. Stay quiet, okay? No social media, nothing online,” I remind her.

“I remember and I promise,” she says and removes her hand. “Goodbye Regan and good luck.” I watch them leave with my daughter and as the doors close, I cry harder than I ever have in my life.

The memory escapes my mind as I look at the chubby nearly one-year-old baby in the photo. She has light blonde hair in tiny pigtails, a cheeky grin as she smiles at the camera and holds a pink doll in her hand.

I run my eyes over every inch of the photo until my hands start to shake.

This is my daughter. *My daughter!*

“I hid the purest and best thing I ever did with my life. I hid her so she could be happy and free and actually live while I sure as hell didn’t. Where did you get this photo?”

“A French library took photos of all the kids that joined a mother and baby read-a-thon event. This was uploaded online, the only photo of her that is, and I have made sure no one else will see it. I have exceptional tracking skills and I’ve made sure no one can find her for you.”

“Why would you do that?” I ask, blinking back my tears.
“Why would you protect her for me?”

“Because I’ve loved you since we were kids and no matter who her dad is, her mum is Regan Hall and that makes her family to me,” he explains and oddly I know he isn’t lying to me. Ethan sees me as his family under all the games, all the fucked up mess of our lives. We are family...and we have always been since we were happy little kids.

Ethan really does have my back.

And now I have to save him from my life, just like I did her.

“Ethan,” I softly say and he steps closer, resting his hands on my arms.

“Tell me everything you can about her, about her dad. Tell me anything you want or need to get off your chest and I will not go anywhere. It’s me and you, baby.”

I wrap my arms around him, resting my chest against his heart.

I love him too.

And for this...I know I will always love him.



Chapter Forty-One

The Veil Council should be hidden from view but on the rare occasion they host a party, the world can't help but stare at the glitter and gold shining off them. Standing on the stone patio, I look up at the double doors in front of me, wondering if the man who made this house centuries ago was part of the Veil Council.

The enormous estate sits on the outskirts of London, the lavish building enough to put the royal family to shame. Ethan's hand slides to the small of my back, his warm palm resting on my skin as I try to remember to breathe. The silver dress I'm wearing is not helping me at all. A tight silver belt wraps around my waist just under my ribs, and nothing but a tiny wrap of silk covers my breasts and stomach, leaving my back bare. The dress skirt falls to the ground in a wave of silver silk and a split up to my thigh exposes my leg with every step.

I didn't choose this dress, nor did Ethan choose the silver suit he has on.

They both arrived at my room this morning, along with a note about coming here.

I glance back at Rory who is two steps behind us, his eyes fixed on everything around me.

Looking for danger in a world suffocated with it.

“Smile before they think something is wrong.” Ethan leans down, his lips brushing against my ear as he warns me I no doubt look like I’m walking into my own funeral. I tilt my lips up in a forced smile, remembering my training for this moment as we get to the entrance. The two masked bodyguards don’t even look our way. They know without a doubt that no one in their right mind would try to sneak in here.

I run over the plan in my head one more time. The plan Rory, Ethan and I came up with, the one we have literally no choice but to act out. Rory is going to kill the guest of honour tonight at the Blood Party and it won’t be hard to figure out which one of the veil council is the guest of honour when we get inside. The distraction of his death will put the party on hold, and they won’t make me kill Ethan. It will give us a tiny bit more time to figure out the next plan.

My mind flickers back to Anne’s dad, and the offer he made. We could disappear. I could see my daughter and we could have another way out of this. One that means we are together and my parents can’t follow.

But when they are still alive...it seems like escaping would only be a fairy tale.

And I’ve not believed in fairy tales for a very long time.

“Keep walking, you got this,” Ethan whispers as we head down a small corridor full of golden statues of knights, each holding swords made of silver. The beauty of the corridor does nothing to make the ballroom we’re headed to any less dazzling than it is horrifying. Ten poles hang in the centre of the room and each one has a woman dancing in lace underwear, with blood dripping all over their pale bodies from fresh welts, their faces hidden by masks. Every so often one of the men or women in the room cut another line over a dancer’s body, but they don’t react. Reacting means death and whatever got them to this place must be worth staying quiet for. Soft music lulls me into a false sense of safety as I try not to look around, knowing the horrors that will hide in the corners of this room. We walk past a table where a man with dead eyes is getting a blow job from a blonde woman while two others rest

at his side. I almost close my eyes to all the death and sex until I see my parents, dressed in silver like everyone else. My mother and father look so much the part as they laugh between each other like the world isn't burning around them.

Empty.

Cold.

Lost.

Everything about this world makes me want to run away but not until I've burnt it all to the ground like it damn well deserves. My mother and father turn to me at the same moment, like they can sense how close I am and I lift my head high.

I'm going to be what they taught me to be to save Ethan.

Our footsteps are hidden by the music as we walk to them and my mother's hand rests on my shoulder, her nails digging in.

"Welcome to the Blood Party, daughter. I see you brought a guest." My mother chuckles, tossing her coiled hair over her shoulder. "Lovely to see you again, Mr Remington."

"The honour is all mine," Ethan smoothly replies. Ever the silent man, my father says nothing as his eyes, the same colour as mine, rest on my face.

"Come now, Regan. We will get you ready for the next part of the ceremony." My mother turns me away from my guys. "This is always everyone's favourite."

Rory moves to follow but I shake my head softly, knowing I need him to stay with Ethan who will be alone with my father. Whatever crosses Rory's mind next makes him wince but he stays still as I let my mother lead me away into the next room.



Chapter Forty-Two

The High Table is protected by glass. Each of the ten gold seats sits in a row cradling a member of the Veil Council. I stare at my parents for a second before looking at the woman on my father's left.

The woman whose son I let drown and whose grandchild I hid from the world.

The Duchess' brown hair is nearly swept away with grey and held in a tight knot on the top of her head. Her silver suit reminds me of Ethan's but instead of his bulky body, her silhouette is thin and nearly non-existent. I don't let her appearance fool me though. She could kill a man four times the size of her and everyone in this room knows it.

The guest of honour is the only man in gold, sitting on The Duchess' other side. I don't know his name but it doesn't matter. He's a chubby man with a leer fixed on me as I walk naked across the room to where Ethan is tied to the stone altar. The altar is covered with layers of sheer white fabric that hide us. It's to make our bodies look like shadows to the people watching. When my mother said the word ceremony, I knew exactly what she had in store and why she made me bring one of my guys.

Ethan doesn't say a word as I step through the fabric. But his eyes cast down my body, his body reacting the same way it always does to me. While my mother undressed me, my father

explained to Ethan what was expected of him. He already knew we would have to do this.

The Blood Parties are about life and death, and what makes humans feel the most alive? Sex. Ethan's shirt and jacket are on the floor and his hard-on presses against his trousers as I climb onto the table. His wrists are shackled to the stone and I hate that every sacrifice had to do this. I try to push the thought out of my mind as I undo his belt and take his cock out. He groans as I stroke him and I get turned on as he watches me.

"Kiss me and forget they are here, baby," Ethan demands as I climb on top of him, lining him up as I lean down. I kiss him as I lower myself down onto his cock, a small moan of pleasure escaping me. Ethan always feels good. Fuck if I care who's watching. We're doing this to survive but we're also doing it because we want each other. We always have since the moment we first met. I lean back as I roll my hips, riding him fast and quick as the pleasure builds up. Ethan locks his eyes with mine and I know he is getting close. I can see him losing control even when he doesn't have any right now. "Touch yourself. Come on me, Regan. That's what they want."

I slide my hand to my clit and rub quickly as I ride him. Within seconds, I finish with a long moan, my back arched, and he comes inside me, groaning in pleasure as I collapse onto his chest. The Council all clap as I close my eyes and kiss Ethan's chest just once. The next part of the evening won't be long after this false sense of loyalty is destroyed, and never in my life have I wanted to run away with Ethan more than I do now.

"It's going to be okay," Ethan whispers but he can't know that.

What if Rory can't kill the guest of honour and they try to make me kill Ethan?

I kiss him on the lips, terrified of the prospect.

My parents have to know I won't do it. I'd rather die myself than kill any of my guys and that's the whole point. I have to believe that Rory can do this because one way or

another, Ethan is leaving this messed up world and it only depends on whether I'm going with him or not.

Come on, Rory. It's up to you now.



Chapter Forty-Three

Rory

In the years I've pretended to serve the Hall family, I've never met a guest of honor quite so fucking stupid. You'd think someone as twisted as this old bastard would have an entourage of guards sniffing his arse every minute of the day, yet Antonio Sanchez arrived here with only one escort. Strange for a member of the High Table. Really fucking strange.

I glance down at Antonio's dead bodyguard sprawled at my feet. Poor kid was no more than twenty. Must've just passed his training. Or it was Antonio's son. Either way, I don't really give a fuck. His age doesn't make him any less a monster than the rest of the people attending this Blood Party. Some of the worst killers I've ever faced were those I least expected. But that's the thing when you spend your life hiding behind a veil—looks can be deceiving. It's just another mask for them to lure unsuspecting victims into their trap.

Just like my sister.

And Regan.

And all those forced to march to the beat of the Veil Council's drum.

One day, I'm gonna slit every member of the High Table and make The Duchess watch. I want her to bear witness to the destruction of her entire empire before I hand her over to the government. I will bathe in her blood and there won't be anything she can do to stop me.

But first, I need to kill tonight's guest of honour.

Not a few moments later, Antonio's small, plump body steps into the dimly lit bathroom. I take up aim in the shadows of the room, waiting until he drops his trousers. The candles are sparse here but I can see him clearly thanks to the moon bleeding through the open balcony. He can't see me, though. That is until he starts taking a piss and I step out, cocking my gun against his head. His pale blue eyes flash up to the mirror and catch my reflection. Only my own eyes gleam in the darkness.

"Do as I say, you sick sonuva bitch, and I won't kill you."

"You *dare* threaten me, boy?" He reaches for his zipper, so I nudge the gun against his nape. His turkey-neck quivers. "What do you want? Money?"

"Nah, I ain't got a need for that. I want you to walk out onto the balcony."

A smirk threatens the man's thinly pressed lips. "Are you even aware as to whom you're threatening?"

"Oh, I'm quite aware." I grab him by the scruff of the neck and shove him forward. How in the name of fuck is this guy in any way powerful? I could break his scrawny little neck with a simple quirk of my wrist. "You're gonna make a speech for me, Antonio, and then I'll let you get back to your wee fucked up party."

"You will live to regret this."

With his trousers wrapped around his ankles, Antonio shuffles over to the balcony. A light breeze sweeps over me as I kick the doors wider and push him outside. He pauses momentarily, his cock still out, and peers at the guests mingling in the garden down below. When he tries to pull up his trousers, I kick him in the back but remain safely hidden in

the shadows. Antonio stumbles and clings on to the balcony for support.

“Keep your dick out,” I order him quietly. “The guests could do with a good laugh.”

Antonio snaps his head back and bares his gold teeth at me. “I thought you just wanted me to make a blasted speech?”

“Aye, well, sometimes actions speak louder than words.”

Before he can shout for help, the sound of glass smashes below and I pull the trigger.

The bullet slices through his skull and his brain leaks out everywhere. His body falls over the balcony and lands on the ground. A chorus of horrified noises erupts into the air. My job here is done.

One leader of the High Table down, only another nine to go.

But for now, I need to get the fuck out of here.



Chapter Forty-Four

My mother lifts her chin and affords a rare smile. “I daresay this has been the best Blood Party so far. And what about you, Mr Remington, have you been enjoying the party?”

Ethan doesn’t even hesitate. “It’s the best I’ve ever been to, Mrs Hall.”

“Your only.” The smile on my mother’s face no longer reaches her eyes. “Just wait until the grand surprise. It’s going to be spectacular.”

Dressed again and ‘mingling’ with the guests out in the ornate garden, I return my mother’s false smile. “We can hardly wait, Mother.”

I attempt to place my glass on the table beside us, but I deliberately miss, giving Rory his cue. The gun sounds and Ethan grabs me out of the way just as Antonio’s body tumbles off the balcony. He splats into the ground right before my mother, his blood spraying her beautiful gown. The guests gather around, including my father, who’s quick to check over Antonio’s body. Guards surround the garden and the house, while Ethan and I remain perfectly still and visible. My father turns to my mother and the look they share is utterly priceless. My heart skips a beat as I take in their look of horror. I have never seen them stunned into silence before. I keep my own

expression neutral but I watch them closely, committing their reactions to my memory.

“I... I can’t believe it,” I say, feigning complete innocence as I lift a hand to my lips. “Lord Sanchez is dead.”

While the chaos ensues and people take out their phones to snap Antonio’s dead body, Ethan takes my hand and squeezes. I look at him, a feeling of utter vindication blossoming inside me for the first time in my life, but it quickly fades when I turn to see my mother. She’s smiling at me. My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach. Slipping a note into my other hand, my mother walks over to assist my father. My stomach recoils as I shakily unfold the note and read my father’s handwriting.

Regan, our sweet child.

We have watched you since the beginning, and no doubt your cunning play tonight will work.

We know about York.

About her.

We know everything and we will talk about our next step as a family.

Walk away from your men and get into the car outside or I will kill them all.

It's time we focus on improving our broken daughter before she destroys her real family.

Your ever loving parents.

Without saying another word, I let go of Ethan's hand and ignore Rory as I walk away. I hear their shouts and my father's bodyguards stopping them as tears race down my cheeks. I don't blink or feel like I breathe until I get to the limo door. The door is already open and I slide instead. When I don't think anything can get possibly worse, I see who is in the limo, their blood painting the interior red.

And I know my life is over as I scream from the top of my lungs.



Chapter Forty-Five

Everything happens for a reason.

That's the excuse I've heard a million times, but nothing about the last twenty-four hours should have happened. Nothing. I stare at the dead bodies on the floor of the limo, their hands neatly folded against their chests and straight lines torn across their throats.

They are the adoptive parents I chose for my little girl. This was meant to be her happy ending—a family.

A real family.

And now I don't even know where my daughter is. I don't even know her name, only her middle name.

I stay plastered to the leather seat for the entire journey, which I'm sure is taking me back to my parents' home. They are going to kill me over all this, and part of me always thought that was the thing I feared the most. But it never was.

I fear my parents getting their hands on my baby girl.

The limo finally comes to a stop, and the door is pulled open a second later. I all but crawl out of the limo as quick as possible, stumbling across the stone path in a daze. The world spins as hands roughly grab my upper arms, dragging me forward, my dress snagging against the stones. Looking up at my parent's house, I shiver from the pure fear that slams into my chest, threatening to swallow me whole. The giant

mansion is brown and a rectangle shape, nothing at all out of place on it. The white windows are straight, the blue doors are shiny as the glass windows. Not a bush or flower is wrong in the large gardens that surround the property, just as I remember it. The house is a blur as tears fall down my cheeks and I try to remember why I am here in this position right now. I got in that limo to save the men I have fallen in love with.

And now I have to find my baby.

I hold my head high and pick up my feet, pushing down all the fear that threatens to devour me with every step towards my father's study.

A room that only brings back memories of beatings. Of being on the floor, crying in pain and begging him to stop. He was never a real father to me.

"I can walk from here," I snap at the bodyguards, pulling my arms from their vise-like grip. They don't even look at me and instead one of them opens the door. Walking in, I'm met with the last thing I ever expected: evil holding innocence.

My father sits in his large, high-backed leather chair with a cruel snarl tilting his lips, and in his arms is my beautiful baby girl, smiling blissfully to the devil holding her in his poisonous grip.

I don't give my father a second look as I come to a halt, fixated on the little girl I had to give away so she could be free, but thought of every single day since. Her blonde hair falls in locks around her tiny face, her button nose and pouty lips reminding me of, well, me. She looks almost exactly as I did at her age. For an eighteen-month-old, she is taller than I thought and her bright eyes lock onto me as she sucks on her thumb. The door slams shut behind me, nearly making me jump, but I refuse to show that sort of weakness. My father would never appreciate it.

And he is holding my entire world right now—a world he could crush with his bare hands.

My father turns his gaze to me slowly, his narrowed eyes glinting in the lights. "Emilie Anne Bonnel," he says. "Or

more correctly, Emilie Anne *Hall*.”

Emilie. For so long I’ve wondered what her first name would have been, if the adopted parents even listened and gave her Anne as a middle name. I wish I could have told my best friend everything before she died, including this news. Tears press close to my eyelids at the thought of her. God, I miss her so much. A tremor rushes through me and I begin to tremble, but Anne wouldn’t tremble before such cruelty. I need to stay strong for her and for the innocent baby clutched by the devil himself.

“I hid her to give her a better life,” I reply, holding my head high even as my hands shake. All the self control I’ve been taught over the years is nothing compared to how I’m feeling right now, yet I lift my chin and refuse to let my father see he’s getting to me. “I will never be sorry for doing that. I didn’t want her to have this life, to be brought up how I was. I wanted her to be a normal child!” A solitary tear escapes me, but it’s one of rage instead of hurt this time. I raise my voice and glare at him: “To have *loving* parents, something I never had! And now—now they’re dead in that limo!”

Emilie starts crying a little bit, and it cuts daggers into my heart. I take a step forward and my father clicks his tongue, standing up. I feel like I can’t breathe as he walks up to me and hands me my daughter. Shock slams into me and everything around me seems to vanish as I hold Emilie for the first time. I breathe in how she smells like cherries as she snuggles into my arms.

“Now, now. You didn’t have a bad life with us,” my father states. “You have money, security, and a purpose in life. You can kill anyone you want and will never be the victim. Is that truly so awful?”

I snap my head up at him. “Yes! Because I am the victim in so many ways, Father. Can’t you see that?”

He stares down at me through half-opened slits. “No.” And then he sighs, as if this is all a big inconvenience for him. “That’s always been the problem with you, Regan,” he says, lifting his hand and stroking his finger down Emilie’s cheek.

She whimpers and I step back, holding her close to me. “Go to your room and don’t think about trying to escape. I will kill your child if you do so.”

“Oh, god,” I whisper, shaking my head. “She’s your grandchild!”

“And a bastard child whose father is the son of an enemy. If his other grandmother ever found out about her, she would do anything to keep the child and kill you. Only the people in our family are aware of how you killed her son.” There’s no warmth in his voice as he speaks which only accentuates the false sense of protection he’s pretending to shower over me. “I was proud until news of the bastard child came to light.”

Images of Adam’s body flit through my mind and I briefly clench my eyes, my lower lip trembling. When I open my lids, I stare hard at my father.

“I didn’t kill him. It was an accident,” I say, hardening my voice. “I would never kill someone I love.”

“Don’t be so sure,” is all he replies before walking around me and out of the room. Emilie starts to cry straight away and as I rock her in my arms, I make a vow to her and myself.

“I’m going to make sure you’re free, little one,” I whisper, kissing the side of her head. “And anyone that gets in my way is going to pay.”



Chapter Forty-Six

Two weeks pass by in what feels like a matter of moments. Moments with my daughter sleeping next to me on the bed, moments of me spending hours just staring at her. Moments of learning how to feed and clean after an eighteen-month-old.

And the moments where I fear my father or mother coming back to the house.

In all of this, I try my hardest to find a way to escape or find a phone. I need to tell the guys where I am, and about Emi. If I can do that, maybe we can all figure out a way to get out of this. As if sensing how deeply I want to escape, the guard who's been hounding me every day reaches into his pocket.

"Take it," he whispers to me as I walk past. I glance down, seeing a phone in his hand, and I'm momentarily lost for words. Is this a trick? Or does he truly want to help me? He's been quiet since he became my guard, but once or twice I've caught him smiling when I managed to make Emilie laugh. Even if he is trying to trick me, this is too good of an opportunity to pass. I need to contact my guys.

I meet his brown eyes and swiftly take the phone, slipping it into my bra. "Thank you," I whisper, quickly walking on as one of the cameras slowly turns back my way.

Emi coos into my ear, snoring away, and I smile at how sweet she is. We fit together, it's almost natural to have her in my arms, and I think she feels the same even if she can't tell me. Sometimes she calls for her mama or dada, looking around for them before frowning.

And it breaks my heart. One day, when she is a lot older, I will tell her everything about her first parents, the ones who loved her so much.

Slipping into my room, I gently put Emi down to sleep and head into the bathroom, flicking on the shower and pulling out the phone. There is only one number on it that has recently been dialed. I ring it, hearing the tone go on and on before it is answered.

"Regan? Regan, baby, is that you?" Ethan's worried voice fills the phone and I sink to my knees, tears falling down my cheeks; tears I've been trying desperately to hold back every waking moment.

"It's me. Ethan... I had no choice but to go. My mother said she would kill you." My voice trembles as I choke the words out. "She killed the adoptive parents I gave my baby to, and now they have me trapped here in their house with Emi."

There's a slight pause, and then Ethan says, "Listen to me, Regan. We are in the house across the road and we have been watching you every day."

"Stalker," I mutter in relief, a small laugh leaving my lips. They've been looking out for me? My heart soars at the thought.

He chuckles quietly. "Always for you, cutie. Now listen, we have a plan."

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Does it involve killing my parents? Because I'm totally down with that."

"No, well, not tonight, but they will die for hurting you and your baby, Emi, I'm guessing," he replies. "Apart from the bodyguard on our side, they're all going to pass out at

midnight due to a little poison in their food, so will the housekeepers and every single member of staff.”

I feel no pity or remorse at the thought of them suffering. “How long do I have to get out?” I ask.

“A few minutes. That’s all the time we will be able to get the main gate open,” he softly explains. “Steal a car and send us a text. Then drive like hell out of there.”

“Got it,” I say. “How is everyone?”

“We are all here, listening to every single one of your words,” Lucas murmurs, and I sob a little bit.

“And we are saving you this time, Regan,” Josh speaks next. “Hold on for us.”

“I love you and need you, Regs,” Nathan tells me, and I almost gasp, hearing him say that in front of them all. I guess all our group needed was a little bit of kidnapping to make us work.

“Rory?” I gently ask.

“I failed to protect you,” Rory finally says, his gravelly voice making me want to hug him. I stare up at the steamy room.

“No, I didn’t protect Emi well enough. This is my fault. I just want to get out of here with her and run away from them. From it all,” I say. “This world isn’t what I want. It’s you guys. It’s always been you five.”

“Good, because we want to lock you and Emi away somewhere safe,” Ethan growls out. “Where your goddamn father or mother can’t touch you.”

“I love that idea,” I whisper. “I have to check on Emi. I don’t want to leave her alone.”

“See you soon,” Ethan states. Each of the guys says goodbye, each farewell hurting my heart more than a little because it might be the last time I hear it.

If things don’t go to plan tonight...then my father will kill me or Emi. And I won’t let her die without one hell of a fight.



I wake up with a start in the chair, reaching around for Emi. I never meant to fall asleep. My eyes widen when I see my father placing her in the crib, her gentle snores filling the room. I quickly glance at the clock on the wall, seeing it's 11pm.

I haven't missed my chance.

"Did you really think I wouldn't come back?" he asks. My heart pounds in my chest as I stare at him, knowing the guys' plan is not going to work with him here. My father moves across the room, taking a seat in the chair next to me.

"Is mother with you?"

He raises an eyebrow and pulls at his tie. "No, but she sent me here to tell you the truth."

"What truth?" I ask.

"You're my daughter," he answers.

I try not to laugh. "I thought that was clear. You adopted me."

"No, I mean you are my biological daughter. I fucked your mother, a one-night stand, and she gave you up. Never once told me," he carelessly mentions while I feel like my world is falling apart. I always told myself I could be better than him, than both of them, because I'm not really related to them; that my blood was cursed with whatever makes them evil.

But it's not true.

"How did you find out?" I ask, barely managing to get the words out over the bile in my throat.

He sighs. "Your biological mother came to me. Must have been guilt that caught up with her, or a death sentence. She was high on drugs and wanted money. Told me if I paid her, she would tell me where to find you. My child." He pauses to glance at Emi in the cot. I resist the urge to step in between

them and block his gaze. “I tortured her for hours before killing her after she told me where to find you.”

“You killed my mother?”

He just nods. Tears fall down my cheek as I stand up, shaking my head. “How could you?”

“She was nothing. She had no family, no money. Her only use was to fuck when she wasn’t cleaning my house,” he says bluntly. “And produce you. Something my stupid wife could never manage.”

I grit my teeth, stepping back as he stands up. “I can see you’re angry.”

“You think?” I snarl at him.

He straightens his dark grey suit and walks up to me, keeping his eyes pinned on my own. Before I can think too much on it, I slip the small knife out of my jacket pocket. “You’re my daughter and worth a million of your mother,” he says in a dangerously low voice. “My wife treated you as her daughter, even if she could be thought of as cruel.”

“Cruel is an understatement for how you both treated me! My body is littered in scars that *you* caused. You pushed me into being an assassin, to kill people, to be a monster,” I spit out, stepping closer. “You never loved me, hugged me, showed me affection. I used to think it was because there was something wrong with me. But your behaviour is simply a reflection of what is wrong with *you!*”

“How dare you—” He stops as he looks down, seeing the knife I’ve just slammed into his chest. I slowly push the knife up, knowing how much pain he must be in as I rip through his flesh. I push it up further before letting go and stepping back. Without even a flicker of remorse, I watch his blood spread like paint across his chest.

“Rot in hell, Father.”

His eyes widen, and then he laughs. A heartless laugh I’ve heard so many times before he collapses to the floor. I don’t know long I stare at him, watching for any sign of life when I know deep down he is dead. No one could survive a knife in

the heart. Not even a monster like him. I rush to the door the second I can make my feet move, flipping the lock and sinking down onto the floor. The clock on the wall seems to taunt me with every minute it ticks on and my father's blood slowly soaks into the carpet, spreading around him in a dark puddle.

At five minutes to twelve, I climb up and rush to the crib. Emi doesn't stir as I wrap her in her pink blanket and pick her up, resting her head on my shoulder. I grab my already packed backpack and unlock the door, heading out into the hallway. Just as Ethan said, the bodyguards are all out of it apart from one. He nods at me, and with a grin I run down the corridor to the garage as fast as I can, holding Emi's head in place with my hand.

The door to the garage isn't open, but I find a pair of keys hanging on the wall. I click the button and a red Bugatti's lights flash. Hell yes.

I have no doubt this was my father's favourite car. Seeing as I'm his daughter, it's mine anyway now he is dead. I climb in the seat, kissing Emi's head and wishing I had a car seat. I pull the seat belt around me and close the doors, turning the car on. It quickly comes to life and I slowly drive towards the garage door. It must have sensors as it automatically pulls up and I drive out, waiting for the ball to drop.

But no one stops me. I pull the phone out of my bag pocket and call Ethan, popping it on loudspeaker.

"You ready, baby?" he asks after one ring.

"You bet," I reply. "I love you, you know that, right?"

I can hear his smile through his words. "I love you too, Regan. Now get your ass out of there."

"On it," I say before putting my foot down.

The gate slowly comes into view at the end of the drive. It's wide open and three are unlicensed sports cars waiting outside with silhouettes of men in front of them. I speed out of the gate, skidding the Bugatti to a stop and climbing out.

"Let's go!" Nathan shouts, rushing to me. He kisses me before I can blink. I grin, tears wetting my cheeks. "I have a

car seat. Give me Emi and I will put her in.”

“Okay,” I say, trusting him with my life and hers. I pass him Emi and grab my bag before jogging behind him to the middle car. I see my guys in the others and I get into the passenger side of the middle car while Nathan climbs in the back.

“It’s good to see you, lass,” Rory says from the driver’s seat, reaching over and taking the bag from me. He pushes it down in front of the car seat in the back as Nathan puts Emi into it, clipping her up.

“How is she still sleeping?” Nathan mumbles.

“She is a good sleeper,” I reply, buckling my seatbelt.

Rory takes off down the road and the other two cars surround us. I sit back and breathe a sigh of relief, feeling safer than I have in a long time. My body shakes from head to foot as reality starts to kick in.

“My father is dead.”

Rory glances over at me, his tone full of promised death and revenge when he says: “Just your mother and the Veil Council to go.”



Chapter Forty-Seven

“You sure kept this place quiet,” I say to Rory, shooting him a smirk as he opens my car door.

I step out into the cool night air, holding Emi in my arms, sweeping my gaze once more over the two-story building. The entire front is made of glass and the rest is shadowed by luscious trees and a gorgeous, mountainous backdrop.

“I kept it quiet for a reason, lass.” He closes the door behind me and the car instantly locks. “Until a few weeks ago, I was the only one who knew about this place. It’s been my home since I went into the service.”

“But thanks to me,” Josh says with a grin, “there’s some real food. You’re welcome, babygirl.”

I arch a brow at him. “And by real food, you mean wine and snacks?”

He winks at me. “Abso-fucking-lutely. I even downloaded Netflix. Just like old times, am I right?”

At the sight of him smiling at me, I can’t help but frown. It feels like a lifetime ago I snuck into Joshua’s dorm room and hung out with him. So much has changed since then. Anne was still alive, my daughter was safe with her adoptive parents, and despite that I was being blackmailed by an asshole I just so happen to be in love with, I was happy. Or at least, it was the closest thing I’d ever come to feeling happy.

Looking down at Emi asleep in my arms, I realize that I wasn't truly happy—not like when I hold her in my arms with my guys beside me.

Lucas must sense my mood because he swings an arm over my shoulder and kisses me on the side of the head. I smile at him as I hold Emi in my arms and follow Rory to his house. He places his hand to the security lock beside the entrance and the doors swiftly open, the spotlights inside activating along with an electric fire in the corner.

I scan the open-planned room, the sleek furniture, the white leather sofas and patterned rugs, the modern kitchen, and I'm surprised by how tasteful everything is. Rory's always come across like such a man's man, but his taste is warm and yet stylish. I catch him watching me from the corner of my eye.

“What do you think?” he asks softly.

“It's... homely. I love it.”

His sombre expression brightens a little and he smiles. “Good. I'm glad. This is as much your home as it is mine.”

The rest of the guys step over the threshold and funnel into the room. Emi stirs a little in my arms, but she doesn't wake up. I consider laying on the sofa with her, but Rory moves to my side. He reaches out a calloused hand and gently strokes Emi's face. My heart does a stupid little dance. He pulls his hand back and squeezes my shoulder.

“I've got something to show you.”

And with that, he leads me to the stairs beside the fireplace. I step onto the first one, but Joshua's voice carries to me.

“Pepperoni or Hawaiian?” he shouts from the kitchen.

Nathan throws an empty pizza box at him that skims Joshua's head. “The baby's asleep, you fucking ding dong.”

Joshua smiles apologetically at me as he holds up two pizzas. I can't help but giggle, and I realize it's the first I've laughed in weeks. God, I've missed my guys.

“Pepperoni,” Ethan answers before I can. “She’s not a savage like you, Dedicant.”

Of course Ethan would remember my favourite pizza.

As the guys fall into a heated debate about the existence of Hawaiian pizza, I follow Rory up the stairs to the second floor. The same homely furnishings carry throughout the hallway. He leads me to what I assume is the master bedroom. But just before he reaches the door, he turns and opens another, switching the light on with a big hand. My breath catches in my throat when I see what’s inside.

It’s a nursery.

Dotted around the carpeted floor are toys and teddy bears the size of Emi. The walls are a soft baby pink and the crib in the middle of the room, tucked underneath a gorgeous window, is shrouded by a beautiful canopy. Tears prick my eyes as I walk over to the crib and take in the mobile. The planets, moon and stars are handcrafted, each with a name I hold dear to my heart. Emilie. Regan. Rory, Josh, Lucas, Nathan, and Ethan.

“Rory, I don’t... I don’t know what to say...”

In truth, words fail me. I can only turn and kiss him on the lips, hoping it conveys a fraction of my gratitude. His hand sinks into my hair and he gently caresses me while deepening the kiss.

“You did all this?” I ask, pulling away from him to look into his eyes.

“We did,” he corrects, nodding to the door where I can hear my guys laughing. He spins the mobile. “I did this to keep myself distracted.”

“From what?” I whisper, but judging by the dark look on his face, I can hazard a guess.

“From killing your parents the moment they took you away from me at the Blood Party.”

“Speaking of blood...” I lay Emi in the crib and tuck the tartan blanket underneath her arms. “I could really do with a

shower.”

I frown at the blood on my hands and clothes, the last remnants of my father’s existence. There’s a tinge of remorse that creeps into me when I think about how coldly I disposed of him. But it’s gone when I remember all the years of misery and pain he put me through, and would have put Emi through had I left him alive and stayed there.

Rory tips my chin and tilts my head to look at him. With his other hand, he slowly removes my clothes, layer by layer, not once breaking eye contact with me. My pulse soars and despite everything, despite that I need to face my mother soon, I want more than anything to feel Rory’s lips against mine.

He ducks before I can stretch up, and he kisses me gently. His hands make short work of my clothes until I’m standing in only my underwear. A growl rumbles in the back of his throat as he slides his palm over my breasts. He lifts me into his brawny arms and I wrap mine around his neck while hooking my legs around him. He walks through the door and into the master bedroom. I scarcely take in the rustic furnishings, too swept up in his affections, and I return his kisses just as fiercely, just as passionately.

The sound of rushing water fills the silence. Placing me on the ground, Rory removes his t-shirt and his jeans. The dark, hungry look in his eyes sends a shiver through me. There’s almost something animalistic in his gaze, especially when he sweeps it over my body. He drags a hand through his peppered hair, and then he’s crossing the room to me, removing my underwear with a sense of urgency that takes my breath away.

In one swift movement, he grabs me and pushes me against the wall. The tiles brush my back and I gasp at their sudden coldness, then the warm water and Rory’s large hands start to caress me and I moan. With every droplet, every expert touch, I’m dragged deeper into a cloud of lust.

“Regan...”

My name whispered from his lips is so erotic that I moan again. He smothers the sound with his lips. His hand slides down my body to the crux of my thighs and he grins against

my mouth when he teases my clit and I gasp, tightening my arms around his neck. I remember his dexterous tongue and how amazing it felt down there, how amazing *he* felt with his head between my legs.

As if he, too, recalled the moment of intimacy we shared, Rory dips down until he's on his knees. He looks up at me through hooded eyes as he leans in and slowly, so fucking slowly, he flicks his tongue over my clit. I gasp and instinctively thrust my hips, arching my spine against the wall to push myself closer to his wicked mouth. The feel of his stubble rubbing against me as he circles and kisses my clit just heightens my arousal.

“After what you've been through, I just want to make you feel good.” He kisses my mons, his eyes latched on me. “You're a beautiful lass, Regan. And so fucking ruthless. The way you took out your old man in the CCTV...” Another kiss, this time on my clit, his breath ever so light against me. “You're the only one for me.”

I gasp, then I grin down at him. “Because we're both so fucked up?”

“Aye.” He glides a finger over my slit, deliberately taking his sweet time before he slides inside me. “And the fact that we'd both kill to protect those we love.”

With his finger making short work of me, he continues his assault on my clit, his tongue moving with urgency now that causes my body to tense and stars collide over my vision. I thread my hand through his wet hair, the soft silver strands like silk between my fingers and yank him closer. He chuckles against me but doesn't stop his ministrations.

“Ooh, God...” I press my head against the tiles and close my eyes.

Rory grabs my thigh and lifts my leg over his shoulder, his rhythm increasing until the pressure gathering inside me explodes, and I can't hold back. I don't want to. I grip Rory harder and succumb to the pleasure coursing through my entire body. But fuck, he keeps going, keeps licking and thrusting and kissing until my legs shake around his head. Only when

he's certain I've orgasmed enough from his mouth does he stand. His cock presses between us as he leans in to brush his lips over mine. At that same moment, he hooks my legs around his waist and thrusts into me.

I'm lost.

Lost to the pleasure; to the incredible way he makes me feel, so loved and cherished, so safe and protected. His mouth crashes down against mine harshly and he spears my lips with his tongue and kisses me so ferociously I struggle to draw breath. The hunger incinerating his touch, the way in which he digs his fingers into my thighs as he holds me up, overwhelms me to the point of combustion. He pistons his hips and moves one hand to my neck, gently but firmly holding me there. The roughness of his movements has me climaxing again. I squeeze my legs together, taking his cock deeper, and shout his name as my orgasm explodes through my body.

His lips find purchase on my throat above his hand, then he works his way up, to the shell of my ear, to my jaw, my lips, and all the while he continues thrusting, faster, deeper, until he stills and drags my bottom lip between his teeth with a deep moan.

We stay like this for a moment, our bodies entwined, breaths ragged in each other's ears. I press my forehead against his and look into his eyes, my chest rising rapidly. Slowly, Rory pulls half-way out and then thrusts in again, as if he can't get enough of me.

I glance to the floor and watch the last of the blood-stained water disappear into the drain. My father's been washed from me forever. Now I need to erase my mother, and I can be free. Just me, my guys, and our beautiful little girl.



Rory drapes the towel over my freshly washed body and dries me gently. I'm perfectly capable of doing this myself, but the determined look on his face is so heart-warming that I let him.

“You like taking care of me, don't you?”

He rubs my shoulders and back, then squeezes my backside. "It's my duty, Miss Hall."

If not for the grin on his face, I'd be inclined to think he's being serious. But so much has changed between us since he became my bodyguard at Holly Oak Academy. I'm no longer his ward, but his girl.

His lass.

And that's all I ever want to be.

Once I pull on my dress and shoes, I check on Emi. Tears warm my eyes at the sight of her asleep in her cosy little nursery. Sliding my feet into my Doc Martens, I join the others downstairs. The guys have moved to the sitting area and on the coffee table are four pizza boxes. Two of them are empty.

I walk over to the space beside Josh and Ethan, my stomach rumbling, and reach for a slice of the pepperoni pizza. Rory goes into the kitchen and grabs a beer from the fridge.

Josh nudges me playfully. "You took your pretty time, baby girl."

I flush under their gazes and quickly change the subject. "Rory says my mother's hiding at the Veil Council's estate."

Lucas drapes a foot over his knee, the laces of his black Converse undone. "So what's the plan, then?"

"We kill her," Nathan says casually, and I almost choke on my pizza. "Obviously."

"Since when did you become the blood-thirsty type?" I ask, my voice light-hearted.

But there's a dark glint in Nathan's eyes that speaks of malice. "Since I found out what those sick dastards put you through."

Ethan shifts beside me, his gaze averted from my face. He must have told the guys about my upbringing and what my "adoptive" parents forced me to do since I was a kid. The fact that my "adoptive" father was my real dad sickens me so much that I lose my appetite. I dump the crust of my pizza down inside one of the boxes and turn to Nathan.

Rory leans against the sofa beside me, his hand comforting as he rubs my back.

“You’re right, my mother does need to be killed. But I’m the one who’s going to do it, and I need to go alone.”

Josh shakes his head, his braids whipping back and forth. “No fucking way are we letting you go in there alone. Either we go together, or we don’t go at all. There’ll be another time to get your mum.”

Now it’s my turn to shake my head. “Josh, I need to do this alone. If I go with all of you, there’s no way the Veil will let me step foot on the estate, never mind inside the mansion. But if I go alone, or with Rory who’s been there before, I should be able to get inside without anyone questioning the reason behind my visit.”

“She’s right.” I glance up at Rory as he says the words. “I know the estate better than any of you, and they won’t wonder why I’m there since I’m Regan’s bodyguard. But the rest of you?” He scratches his stubble. “You’ll blow our cover.”

At the sight of my guys frowning, I add softly, “Besides, I need you to look after Emi. You’re the only people I trust with her. Just trust me on this. Rory’s already got our cloaks and masks, so we’ll fit in with the Veil. Everything’s in order. I just need to go and—”

“Kill her,” Nathan offers for me, nodding proudly. “Yeah, that I can get behind. I just wish I could be there to watch her die.”

Ethan huffs. “You and me both.” Then he turns to me, his eyes narrowing. “What happens if he,”—he nods at Rory—“fucks up and you get hurt? We can’t just sit here with our thumbs up our arses. You’ll need backup.”

I bite my tongue and refrain from stating the obvious. My guys might be strong and fearless, but they don’t have the training that Rory and I do. Getting into the Veil Council’s headquarters may take skills that neither of them has experience in. And while we may slip past with no issues, I don’t want to run the risk of getting my guys hurt. I don’t think

my heart can take it. At least with Rory, I know he can handle himself.

This is a two-man job. Only me and Rory can do this.



Chapter Forty-Eight

It feels like only yesterday I was here. But it was actually two weeks ago, when the last Blood Party had been hosted by my mother and this entire nightmare began. Rory cuts the engine at the end of the long, winding driveway, and we step out. My cloak swooshes around me as I turn to face the mansion. The lights bleeding over the doors casts the entrance in ominous shadows, making this place look more like the gates to hell than anything. Thinking back on all the times I've been forced to come here, of all the blood that was spilled on the altar, all the death, it's a fitting comparison. But this time I'm not seeking the devil himself; I'm here to confront his faithful little hellhound. Despite that the figures guarding the entrance are masked and cloaked like us, I scan the profile of the one on the left. I recognize him from the distinct scar running down his chin. He's one of The Duchess' personal guards. Strange that he's out here instead of with her. But I'm glad it's Eden. Whenever I've been here, he's made a point of flirting with me. Although this time his attention is on Rory.

"Blair," Eden says curtly.

Rory nods in reply, but doesn't say anything.

"And what about me?" I practically purr at Eden, fluttering my eyelashes. "Are you not happy to see me?"

The edge of his mouth twitches. "I'm always happy to see your sexy face, babe."

Rory tenses at my side, and I cast him a fleeting glance, hoping to calm him with a smile. His eyes cut through Eden like shards of ice.

I turn back to the guards. “My mother asked me to bring her something.” I make for the door, ensuring there’s no hesitation in my steps or movements at all. “Is she up in her room?”

Each member of the Veil Council has their private room at the estate. My mother usually comes here when my father’s home, but something tells me another reason that brought her here tonight. I hope she knows I killed my father. I hope she’s up there suffering and crying her eyes out. Then again, I hope she doesn’t know yet, so I can take her out when she least expects it. She did always teach me that the element of surprise was one of our best weapons.

Eden exchanges a glance with the mute guard beside him, then reaches for the door. “Bathing, last I heard. You know where to go?”

“Of course...” I pause, watching the guard beside him scowl behind his mask. “But if I do get lost, will you escort me, Eden?”

A firm hand lands on my shoulder. “No need for that when I’m here,” Rory says.

The possessive note in his voice sends a shiver of desire through me.

Eden narrows his eyes and nods to the other guard, then they open the doors. I slide them my most seductive smile, and then I step over the threshold.

The foyer is surprisingly quiet. As I make my way over to the grand stairs, the heel of my boots echo against the gold tiles, mimicking my racing heart. But I keep my eyes forward and climb the stairs slowly with Rory, my hand trembling on the brass banister. With each step my pulse increases, but it’s not from nerves or fear—it’s from excitement.

A trio of cloaked figures walk past us and enter one of the many rooms lining the seemingly endless hallway. The public

baths are located at the end. My palms turn sweaty as the thought of the room being occupied with more than just my mother. Although, from what I recall, my mother never liked bathing with the others publicly. She always hires the room for herself and whoever she just so happened to be fucking that day. It's been weeks since I've seen her. In fact, the last time was at the Blood Party. I wonder if she's been hiding out here all this time as I come to a halt outside the bathing room.

Either way, she won't be leaving once I'm through with her.

And the moment I kill her, we need to act fast if we want out of here alive. I highly doubt the Veil Council will take kindly to my killing two of their members.

I glance at Rory, for what, I don't know, but he smiles at me and gently flicks my chin. My heart leaps into my throat and I nod at him, reaching for the handle. I twist and push, testing to see if it's unlocked. I'm surprised to discover it is. Slowly, I open the door and enter the room. I give my eyes a moment to acclimate to the heat and steam, then I search the baths for my mother. Out of the six pools scattered around the room, I find my mother lounging in the one in the middle.

Her back is to us, her long, slender arms draped over the sides, and her wet hair is pulled over one shoulder.

"You took your time getting here, darling." She tilts her head ever so slightly, just enough for me to see her red lips and downcast lashes. "I trust you had an...eventful evening?"

The scorn in her voice is palpable, and my hatred for her only grows. She knows. She knows I killed my father, and she's been waiting for me.

I reach into my pocket and withdraw my gun—the gun they gave me all those years ago on my birthday. The moment I cock it, my mother turns her head forward again and leisurely stands in the bath. As if not a care in the world, she approaches the other side, where her robe hangs on the stone wall. Water trickles down her naked body and her hair falls over her slim back, sticking to her pale flesh like a silk veil. Slowly she reaches for the robe and pulls the white material

over her body, then she turns and faces us. There's not a hint of emotion on her face, not even a flicker of fear at being held at gunpoint. As if reading my thoughts, she tilts her lips into a derisive smirk.

"Forgive me if I don't look surprised, Regan." She continues walking through the water and leisurely steps over the edge. One foot rests on the step, and she pauses, looking coldly at him. "I've known this day would come for a *very* long time. I'm actually surprised it took your father this long to find out about Emilie. Although, I must applaud how quickly he found her once I told him about her existence. You really should work harder at covering up your tracks, darling, particularly when your father's involved."

"*Shut up!*" I scream at her. "He's dead! I killed him, and now I'm going to kill you!"

She just chuckles, the sound dark and venomous, as she slowly climbs the steps. "Oh, of that I am certain. I would have failed you as your mother had you not sought your revenge, darling."

I tighten my grip on the gun, my hands trembling. "You were *never* my mother!"

Despite that I'm about to take her life, my mother walks up to me, slowly, like a predator stalking its prey.

"Think what you may, Regan, but legally I am your mother and I want to thank you."

"Thank me?" I snarl, glaring at her.

"Why, for disposing of your father for me, of course."

Words fail me as I register her declaration. There's no grief on her face, not even a flicker of anger. She's telling the truth.

"But you loved him," I hear myself say, my voice strangely small.

My mother chuckles quietly. "Do you really think I could love a man like your father, Regan?" She shakes her head mockingly. "If you knew what he was truly like, perhaps you'd understand why I am the way I am, and why I raised

you the way I did. Your father was a far bigger monster than you *ever* could have imagined. But I saved you from that—from him.”

I don't take my eyes off her when I ask, “Rory, what the fuck is she talking about?”

My mother smirks and gestures a hand to my guy. “By all means, Mr Blaire, inform my daughter of what you *think* you knew of my husband. I doubt it will be accurate.”

Rory growls behind me and steps forward, his own gun raised and pointed at her head. “He was just a scumbag criminal like the rest of you rats!”

My mother's smirk melts from her lips like poison. “Is that all? I'm sure my husband would be positively disappointed by such a short, and inaccurate, eulogy.” Her eyes narrow into cutting slits and she takes another step. “I thought you of all people knew what he was like since he's the one who hired you.”

“Stay the fuck back!” Rory bellows, spit spraying from his mouth and landing on the floor. “The bastard's record was clean and you know it! No doubt you paid some leeching bastard to erase it.”

My mother trains her gaze on me and her glare vanishes, her eyes no longer pinched and her eyelashes flutter ever so softly. “It had to be done. If the world found out, both your life and mine would have been endangered. You see, your father had very... peculiar taste in women. Or rather... in girls. And it all started when he bought you for less than ten thousand dollars.”

What the hell is she saying?

The floor sways underneath me, and bile rises to my throat. It's like my whole world is crumbling around me and at any second, I'm about to collapse and be dragged into oblivion.

“Stop it!” I slam my hands, even the gun, against my ears in an effort to drown her out. “You're a fucking liar!” But I

can still hear her voice, still see the cruel smile twisting her features with a satanic sneer as she delivers blow after blow.

“Darling, why do you think he told you you were adopted all those years ago?” She takes another step, only an arm’s length away. “He had wanted you even then, but it was I who stepped in. I sacrificed another in place of you, just as I did when you pulled that little stunt on the yacht with Adam and The Duchess found out. They wanted your head, not one of your lovers. Just like your father... wanted... you.”

“Nooooo!”

I move my finger over the trigger, but before I actually pull it, a rush of air whistles overhead, so close my hair moves over my shoulder. It takes a moment to register the bullet lodged between my mother’s eyes. It’s not until the blood trickles down her nose and she falls to the floor do I realize someone else shot her. However, when I glance at Rory, he’s facing the door with his gun raised, a look of confusion shadowing his dark features. There, in the doorway, stands The Duchess in a beautiful red gown, the barrel of her gun smoking.

“I should’ve killed her and your beast of a father a long time ago,” she says, her eyes cutting from Rory to me. I lift my chin and hold her stare as boldly as I can, despite the thrashing of my heart and the rush of nerves that trickle down my spine. For a long while, she just looks at me, and in her shadow, I spot several cloaked figures with their weapons raised at us.

There are too many of them to get out of this alive.

Beads of perspiration slide down my temple and my gun shakes in my hand, but I don’t look away from her. At last, she parts her ruby lips.

“Protect my granddaughter, Regan. Love her as I loved my son.” And with that, she pivots on her heel and approaches the door. But she pauses for a moment and her voice is quiet yet firm when she says: “I don’t want to see your face in my world ever again.”

The blood drains from my features. She knows about Emi, and yet, she's sparing our lives? Even after what happened to Adam?

"Wait!" The word tumbles from my lip before I can catch it. "About Adam, I didn't... it was an accident. I loved him and he loved me."

Her hand lingers on the door frame, her nails gleaming against the red brick. She leaves without a backward glance; the door slamming behind her.

The moment her footsteps fade from the hallway, the tears pressed close to my eyes fall, and I cry uncontrollably. It's like everything, the adrenaline, the fear, the disgust, horror, and relief, is catching up with me.

Through my blurred vision, Rory slings his gun into his holster and takes me into his arms. He tucks my head under his chin, but I still glance at my mother's dead body, and the horror of what she said slams into me.

"Is—Is what she said true?" I barely get the words out, a sob bursting from my throat.

Rory just holds me, his hand slowly moving through my hair in slow, comforting strokes.

"My father was never kind to me," I say, my voice cracking as I blurt the words out, recalling every hostile look my father ever gave me. "He never showed me any love, and now it all makes sense: it was because my mother denied him the right to violate me. All those cruel looks he used to give me whenever I saw him. I thought he hated me because I wasn't his biological kid, or at least they led me to believe that, but this is so, so much worse. He really was a monster. A beast."

I feel Rory tensing against me. "And now he'll rot in hell where he belongs. Your mum, too. You and Emi are safe now, lass."

Emi. My father holding her in his study. The realization suddenly hits me like a punch to the stomach, seizing the air in

my lungs. Did my father—I sob in Rory’s arms—did he take Emi because he wanted to...

I can’t even finish the thought. Instead of sobbing again, I scream and lunge over to my mother’s dead body. I kick, punch, scratch, and spit on her with every ounce of strength I’ve got. She’s just as evil as my father and as much to blame for everything as he was! They’re both monsters. Scumbags! And now they’re both dead, and they’ll never, ever be able to hurt anyone ever again.

Especially not my daughter.

“Come on,” Rory says, pulling me back with a strength that far exceeds my own. I’m shaking so much that I can barely stand, let alone walk. “Let’s go before that crazy bitch changes her mind.”

With his arm wrapped around me, guiding me out from the gates of hell, I don’t even look back at my mother. As far as I’m concerned, she’s right where she’s supposed to be along with my father. Now Emi is free from them and their monstrous ways.

Now *I’m* free.

And nothing will come between me, my guys, or my daughter ever again.



Epilogue

Five years later...

“**B**ienvenue. Puis-je prendre votre numéro de chambre?” I say in my French accent that I put on for new tenants at our lodge. We all decided if we were going to live in France, that we had to fit in the best we can. Leaning on the counter, I look at the woman in front of me, holding a newborn baby in her arms. She doesn’t have bags, so it’s likely her partner or whoever she is with is waiting for the coach to drop them off.

“I speak English, I’m afraid,” she replies, her cheeks going red. “My husband’s family is local, but I’ve never been great at the language. I doubt you are even understanding a word I say.”

“I actually do,” I reply, making her smile. “Welcome to Anne’s Lodge, can I take your room number?”

“It’s all here.” She pulls out her phone and unlocks it.

I find the number and get the keys, coming back. “The lift is over there. Hand these to the liftman, and he will show you to your room,” I say with a smile. Her baby starts crying as she takes the keys and she lightly bounces the baby. “How old is your little one?”

“Four months. We are here for a month so my husband’s family can meet her,” she tells me. “And everyone says this

place is the best in the area.”

“Glad to know as I own it with my partners,” I reply. “Please enjoy your stay and your daughter is lovely. Talking of kids, I have to go and check on mine.”

She smiles at me before walking to the lift. Josh comes over from the other side of the room, walking past the big sign that says Anne’s Lodge that we had made. Underneath is one simple sentence.

“May my friend sleep in peace.”

I still remember the day Ethan showed me this lodge was up for sale, the very place Anne passed away in. We had no real home at that point, always moving around to keep safe, but this place was our destination, we all knew it. It was easy to move in, change a few things, and with some fake passports, we will never be found here.

This is our happy ending, one where our children will always be safe. Talking of children, I drop my hands to my small baby bump as one of the twins kicks away. I never in a million years thought I’d feel safe enough to have another child, but then two come along as a surprise.

Josh wraps his arms around me, kissing me on the forehead. “Miss Emi is done with school and currently demanding pancakes,” he tells me, and I chuckle.

“Let me guess, there is an argument in the kitchen about who gets to cook them for her?” I ask. Emi has all of her dads wrapped around her finger, and she knows it. For a six-year-old, she is mighty bossy and reminds me of myself.

“I think Nathan won because he makes them into unicorn shapes,” he tells me, placing his hands on my bump. His breath warms my ear. “I can’t wait to meet these two.”

“Same,” I whisper back, turning around in his arms. “I’m sorry about Bibi.”

Two days ago we got news Bibi passed away. Josh had to leave with us, and I know he always regretted that he couldn’t be at her side for the rest of her time here. But we both know

somewhere deep down, Bibi would have wanted Josh to be happy.

The nurses told us in the end, her memory was gone so far that she didn't know who anyone was anymore.

“She is somewhere better now,” he answers, pressing a light kiss on my lips seconds later. “Now go and relax. You should be chilling in your condition.”

“I'm pregnant and quite capable of standing for a few hours,” I reply, even though my feet are swollen and I'm working to prove a point.

Josh doesn't say anything, but he smirks.

I huff, walking around the counter and into the main area. Emi comes running out of the door, her blonde hair whipping behind her and her green school clothes making her look even more adorable. She searches for me before running my way, and I lean down to give her a hug.

“Mama, there's a party and I've been invited! My first school party!” Her tone is full of unadulterated excitement, and I realise this is everything I ever wanted for her.

A normal upbringing, full of excitement over parties, later (much later) boys and every normal thing she will have. I lean down and embrace her tightly, feeling tears filling my eyes.

My life is coveted and there are no more consequences.

Because I have her.

Because I have them.

And because I escaped the life that had been given to me and replaced it with a much better one. One I fought for, one I would never in a million years trade. One without consequences.

The End

Excerpt from *Shadowborn Prison* (Dark Fae Paranormal
Prison Series: Book One)

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The shadows are my prison... and I can't escape.

I'm Izora Dawn, and I've been locked away for something I
didn't do. But that's what they all say, right?

When rumoured only the dangerous survive Shadowborn
Prison, I know I have no choice but to fight for my life.
Luckily my short time at Shadowborn Academy, home to
those with dark magic seducing their souls, has taught me how
to do just that.

Survival is what I'm known for in this world.

Seduction is what I'm best at.

I figure the quickest way to escape this prison is by seducing
the sexy new governor. With a handsome Shadow Warden
watching my every move, an alpha inmate eager to protect me,
and a hunky teacher from the academy desperate to free me...I
might actually get out of this alive.

*But in the shadows lie secrets that hold the walls of this prison
together.*

And no one can escape them.

Not even me.

Shadowborn Prison is a crossover spin-off to Shadowborn Academy. You do not need to read the latter to follow this series. One is for sure—not even the shadows can be trusted in this Enchanted Forest...

18+ Reverse Harem Dark Fae Prison Romance.

PROLOGUE

“Do you know the difference between light and dark fae, little one?”

The man towers over me, his face covered by the shadows lurking within the room. A panicked reaction grips me as I try to recall who the gruff voice belongs to and why I can taste blood on my lips. *Where in the name of Selena am I?* The stabbing pain in my head feels like someone has split my skull open, forcing my thoughts to pour out and leaving only hazy remnants. One moment, I was at Shadowborn Academy, partying with my friends who won this year’s Tryouts, and the next...darkness.

I try to move my arms, but they’re strapped down beside me on the metal table. I kick my legs out, but they, too, are trapped. My heart thrashes against my ribcage as I struggle to move or recall anything beyond the fleeting glimmers in my mind. What the hell happened? And who the *fuck* is this creep leering down at me?

“I know that the light... and dark fae... are all batshit crazy,” I scream at him, fruitlessly trying to break the bonds, “and I want nothing to do with them!”

I twist my body like a fish swept onto the sand. The leather straps merely cut into my wrists and ankles, and someone else chuckles in the darkness. An icy shiver snakes down the length of my spine. I shoot my eyes around the room, seeing nothing in the inky blackness but sensing more than one pair of eyes on me. The scent of bleach and an inexplicable sweetness invades my senses. It clings to the back of my throat and stings my eyes.

“Let me go! Let me go, you twisted fuckers!”

A blinding light pierces my eyes, blocking out the person above.

“The difference between light and dark fae,” he answers in an almost droning voice, “is that a light fae cannot be simply

created. Light fae are said to be only born and they are the true creatures of magic. Dark fae can be easily made from a human or shadowborn with an evil heart.”

Everyone in the forest knows this, so why is he telling me?

“Telling the poor girl fairytales isn’t going to make this easier,” a smooth, deep voice replies, right before a door slams shut.

I flinch at the booming noise across the room.

“I guess you’re right.” The man leans back, his shadow blinking in the light. “But she isn’t just any girl, and I suspect she will survive this treatment. Won’t you, Izora? I will be disappointed if you die on me. I’ve researched your bloodline long enough that I am certain you should survive this and become something incredible. Are you ready to be reborn, little one?”

Reborn? Die? Bloodline? My head swims with the words.

“What are you going to do to me?” I choke out, a tinge of fear crawling up my throat, threatening to strangle me. I summon my dark magic, the magic I’ve trained for years to learn to control, but nothing happens.

True panic kicks in, snatching the air from my lungs, and the fear tightens its grip. I let out a strangled scream and continue to thrash despite my inability to move. A hand presses down hard on my chest, pinning me to the table, while another yanks my head to the side to expose my neck. A sharp needle pricks my nape. I snap my gaze up, delving into a pair of gleaming green eyes. Those eyes are all I remember once the pain takes over.

My bones break and shatter, my heart clenches, my lungs clamp together, and my veins pulse with an agony that is like nothing I have ever felt before. It’s like every little part of my body is being ripped open and shredded apart. I scream until my throat gives way, and then I silently beg for death. I beg for my parents to save me. I beg for Selena, the Goddess of the Moon, to spare me.

But no one comes, and the pain doesn’t stop.

My heart thrums in my ears like a train racing off the tracks, louder and faster, about to explode under all of the pressure. And then power like I've never known surges into my body, filling me with warmth. A blinding white light shines around me, and a smile touches my lips as all the bindings holding me down disintegrate into dust.

I sit up, looking around at the six males in the room, each of them wearing lab coats.

The one who was leaning over me steps back, his eyes glazed with tears of joy.

“You're a light fae,” he says, seizing his colleague's arm. “It worked. It finally worked!”

The pain I felt before is now gone, replaced by a growing strength that heals every torn vessel in my body. I feel like I'm trapped in a dream as I slowly turn my head to see the most breathtaking white wings fluttering behind me. Their beauty is almost otherworldly, and they feel so utterly natural and painless attached to me. It's like they've always been there. Always been a part of my being, rooted in my soul.

Entranced by their beauty, I reach out to touch them. The snowy feathers are like silk between my fingers. So beautiful. But why... why did they do this to me?

I don't notice Green Eyes approaching me. It's not until he places a hand on my shoulder and everything in the room turns nuclear white. The walls crack and tumble and the floor caves into the earth. Dust invades my senses, and the sharp copper tang of blood infiltrates the air, but not once do I feel any pain or sense the blood is my own. It's like the whole world is crumbling at my feet. And yet, I can see the moon, so beautiful, so close, nestled in the inky-black sky. Only then do I let myself fall, praying that the goddess herself will catch me.

CHAPTER ONE



“This is the one?”

“That’s her, all right, sir,” the guard replies, his keys clanging as he opens the metal gates outside my cell. Only the small, barred window lets me know I’m still in the Enchanted Forest, the place that has been my home since I was born. Mortals can’t find it. Only the fae and magics of this world know of its existence. It’s where I belong, and I never want to leave.

I press my back to the padded white wall and shield my gaze from the light I know is about to assault me. The second they open the door, the blinding light claws through my skull and I shriek, cowering away. The light is excruciating and unbearable. I haven’t seen anyone since they brought me to this cell. Usually, they just open the door to deliver a tray of food. I have no recollection of what happened before I was brought here, and it annoys me to no end. My last memory is being at Shadowborn Academy, dancing and drinking with my friends and having the time of my life. The next, I’m waking up here, handcuffed and alone.

My pulse spikes as I watch the guards approach me. One of them is a Shadow Warden going by the badge pinned to his coat. The silver buttons running down his chest in two symmetric lines catch the light. I’ve learned not to strike out at any of

Shadow Wardens here as it never ends well. This is the first one I've seen wearing Zorya's black military uniform, complete with the raven cloak pinned around his neck with a wolf-shaped silver brooch.

"Watch out, sir. She's feisty," the guard warns his superior, easing toward me with his taser stick outstretched.

The Shadow Warden's shrewd eyes narrow on my face. "Not with me, she won't be." He crosses his arms and peers down his hooked nose at me. "Here's what's gonna happen, sweetheart. I'm gonna take you from this shitty little room. If you fight me, it'll be the last thing you ever do, you hear?" He holds up his taser, the sapphire electrodes at the end of the stick cackling. I nod, having felt the wrath of those many times over the past week. "Wise decision. It's time to meet your maker, kid."

The Shadow Warden grabs my shoulder and hauls me off the floor and into the hallway outside. Shadow Wardens are one of the highest forms of guards in the magics world and anyone who values their life is frightened of them, for good reason. They literally use shadows to move around and have superhuman combat skills to boot. Every fiber of my being is telling me to shut up and not push my luck, but I've got to at least try...

"Why am I here? I don't know what happened. Please tell me?" I beg, just like I always do with the guards, but they couldn't look more disinterested if they tried. "I really don't know what's going on!"

"She's been saying that since we found her," the guard scoffs, pausing outside a set of towering wooden doors.

The Shadow Warden grunts at me. "Well, I'm sure this will jog her memory."

Wrapping his hand around the brass handle, he opens the doors and ushers me inside. The guard follows, his taser close to my back. Everything happens so quickly. I'm shoved into a glass box. More light penetrates my eyes, and I struggle to see or hear anything. My senses try to adjust to the light and fresh air I've been deprived of for what feels like an eternity. My legs tremble in their sockets, threatening to liquefy as I blink up at

the lights. Slowly, my senses acclimate, and the blood drains from my face as I take stock of where I am. I know this courtroom all too well.

My mother often held hearings here and I was allowed to watch from the gallery. Now I'm up in the Box, facing the Grand Warden and his four High Wardens, but I don't know what crime I'm being tried for.

“Izora Dawn, do you swear on Selena to tell us the whole truth of the events of what we ask you?”

I blink up at the Grand Warden's sullen face. “Where... where am I?”

“Answer the question, Shadowborn,” another voice demands.

I follow the voice to the shadows at my left, where the darkness seems to gather. There are no lights at that side of the bar. I think it's where the jury's sitting, but I'm not sure. I can barely breathe up here let alone think straight.

“Quiet,” one of the other High Warden commands, the only female of the group. She casts a cold glance at the voice and then trains her eyes back on me. “Do you swear to tell the truth?”

My heart stammering in my chest, I choke out, “Yes, I swear. But please... I don't know what I did... where I am... what's going on...”

The Grand Warden waves his hand and light bleeds through the darkness concealing the rest of the room. The jury consists of two men and two women. Beside them are the Shadow Warden and the guard who brought me here. I spot my mother at the front of the gallery on the other side, her eyes bloodshot and face streaked with tears. My step-father is on her right, but he's not looking at me, and my step-sister glowers beside him. I feel dizzy and sick just looking at their faces. This can't really be happening, can it? It all feels too painful and surreal. Further up the gallery, my gaze lands on the men and women all dressed in white lab coats, just like...

Everything hits me in one ravaging wave.

The injection on the back of my neck. The pain. The wings. The power.

The memories come flooding back and I collapse to the floor, my fall cushioned by more white padding. Tears slide off my face and seep into the ground. Whatever those monsters did to me, I'm being punished for it. But I never asked for any of this. I never *wanted* to be abducted and tortured into a Light Fae. I search the courtroom in a daze, finding my mother again. But the pain I see in her eyes it too much, and I look away. Does she really believe that I'm innocent? Or does she think I'm guilty?

"Izora, you are charged with five accounts of murder," the Grand Warden resumes. "How do you plead?"

My answer is instantaneous.

"*Not* guilty! They took me from the academy and tortured me into becoming a light fae. I'm telling the truth!" My voice cracks and echoes around the courtroom. The only other noise is my mother as she sobs into a handkerchief. I can hardly look at her as she wipes her tears, pushing her silver hair behind her ears. A habit I've seen her do a million times when something is wrong. Usually, it's my evil step-sister who did something, not me.

I've never fucked up like this. I always follow the rules, just enough to get by and live a normal life.

There's whispering among the jury. The badges on their suit coats flash in the lights, and I realise some of them are junior wardens and others simply keepers.

"Lying to us will only make your case worse," the blond male High Warden at the end announces. "You were found in a wrecked building with the incinerated remains of five innocent Shadow Wardens. There is so much proof against you that I fear you will just lie no matter what we discuss here."

I gape at him, an immediate feeling of cold dread rushing into me. By his scathing expression alone, he's the kind of warden who won't listen even if I did have all the evidence stacked in my favour. I doubt any of the people here will listen. Five of their own kin—who kidnapped and tortured me—found

dead with only me as a survivor? Of course it'll be easier for them to pin their deaths on me. That way they can cover up their dirty work.

I look over at my mother, barely holding back my tears. "Mum, you know I wouldn't do this! Please, help me?"

I plaster myself to the glass. My mother shadowlocates to the front of the box and places her shaking hands opposite mine, her grey eyes completely empty. And that terrifies me. My mother's eyes are always lit up even in her darkest moments.

More voices talk and throw accusations at me.

"I didn't kill them," I tell my mother, letting my tears fall but standing tall.

Looking into her eyes, she knows it's true.

I'm being set up.

"...then it is decided. We find you, Izora Dawn, guilty of high murder of the five wardens you so viciously killed for your own selfish gain," the Grand Warden announces. "The punishment will be four years in Shadowborn Prison. Upon completing your sentence, you shall be sent to live alone in the mortal world, wherein you will be an outcast and shunned from this world for the rest of your life. The Enchanted Forest will no longer be welcoming to you, nor will the people and creatures who live in it."

As the Grand Warden declares my sentence with a knock of his hammer, I can only stare at my mother as she slides down the glass and bursts into tears. She's whispering something over and over again that I can't quite make out at first, but when I finally do, I really wish I hadn't.

"I always knew you would end up here. I'm sorry... I'm sorry I could not stop them."

"Do you accept your four-year sentence to Shadowborn Prison to repent for your sins?" the Grand Warden concludes, but I can't bring myself to look at them, too distraught by the sight of my mother falling apart before me.

I scratch at the glass in an attempt to reach out and touch her, my own tears flowing silently down my cheeks. My step-

father, without even looking at me, pulls her from the box and takes her away, leaving me alone, falsely accused and convicted of a crime I did not commit.

“Izora, do you accept your fate?” the Grand Warden repeats, his hammer ready to knock again.

“Yes,” I finally answer as they drag me out of the room.

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About
LOUISE ROSE

Louise Rose is a *USA Today* and International Bestselling Author of fantasy and paranormal romance.

She lives in England with her cheeky children, her gorgeous (and slightly mad) golden retrievers and her teenage sweetheart turned husband.

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Scarlett Snow comes from a big family in a small Scottish town and has always strived to prove that if you are passionate about something, no one can stop you from chasing your dreams. She lives with her wolf dog and kitties and is unashamedly addicted to coffee.

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