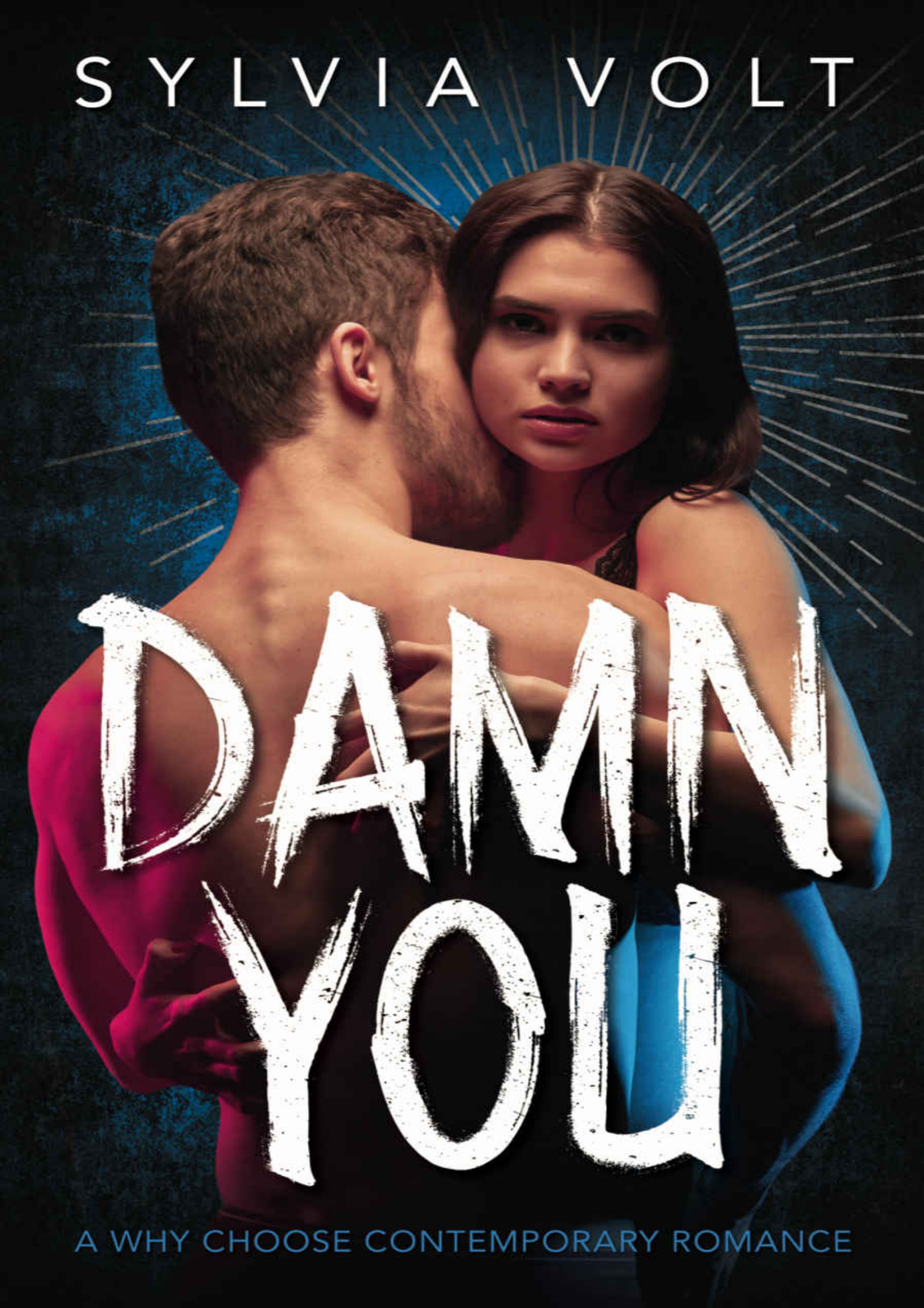


SYLVIA VOLT

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace. The man is on the left, seen from the back, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt. The woman is on the right, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark blue with white radiating lines emanating from behind the couple. The title 'DAMN YOU' is written in large, white, distressed, hand-painted letters across the center of the image, overlapping the couple's bodies.

DAMN  
YOU

A WHY CHOOSE CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

DAMN

YOU

Sylvia Volt

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*For you and me.*

# DAMN YOU

Sylvia Volt

When naïve college student Seraphina Sayre discovers that life after graduation won't be the chance at freedom she's been craving, the frustrated pastor's daughter concocts a brazen plan to escape her father's overzealous expectations, once and for all.

Desperate and determined, Seraphina approaches her worst enemy and his fiendish friends with a scandalous proposal. But once she's thrust into their world of wanton wickedness, will she emerge to find her own light, or succumb to the sinful darkness that surrounds her?

*Damn You is a contemporary, reverse harem/why choose romance novel. This book contains references to physical assault, drug overdose, and the death of a parent. It also features swearing (a lot of it), drinking, recreational drug use, and a variety of intimate situations described in vivid detail, including MF, MM, MFM, and group activities. All main characters are consenting adults who deserve their happy ending.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## Forbidden fruit

### SERAPHINA

“Do not succumb to the darkness. You must find the light.”

I glance over at my father, who’s apparently decided that now is the time to try out some new platitudes for his congregation on me. He spent most of the two-hour drive to Morgenstern College waxing poetic about various ideas of sin and salvation, before he started rambling about the recent improvements he’s made to his golf game.

Now that we’re approaching the college, he’s preaching again. I look out the window in an attempt to tune him out as we drive through the town’s main thoroughfare, a street packed with quaint little stores and restaurants. I’ve rarely been out of my hometown and I’m just dying to check everything out.

As we turn onto the campus, dad drones on, drowning out my own thoughts. He’s not really talking *to* me, but *at* me, and I’m finding it increasingly difficult to take anything he says seriously. His manicured hands grip the steering wheel as we curve around the winding drive toward the dormitories—my new home away from home.

He finds a parking spot in the crowded lot, and before he’s even shut off the engine, I’ve unbuckled my seatbelt, ready to leap out of the car and face the unknown. My heart is bursting, but I can barely dare to look forward to the freedom the next two years will permit me. It feels too good to be true.

“Are you sure about this?” Dad asks, as if he expects me to say no and beg to go back home. He’d be all too happy about that, so I choose my words carefully.

“If I can do good things for Glory Valley with my marketing degree, then being here is what’s best for me. Isn’t that what you said?”

He looks at me like he’s trying to remember if he actually said that. He didn’t, not in so many words. Two years ago, when he finally relented to the idea of me going to college, he decided I should major in marketing so I could at least contribute to his career with my “overpriced piece of paper.” Those were his words.

I have no particular interest in marketing, or religion, for that matter, but it was a big enough win to even go to college and I wasn’t about to push my luck. My first two years were spent at community college, at home under his thumb, and two years from now, when I’ve earned my overpriced piece of paper, under his thumb is right where I’ll be again. At least he’ll be giving me a job, though. Glory Valley Church is huge, so it’s a good opportunity.

Dad frowns at me. “I don’t know why you had to pick a school so far from home.”

“It made the most sense with the scholarships and all. Some kids go to an entirely different state. This isn’t so bad, right?” He doesn’t need to know why I really chose this school.

Finally, he nods and we both get out of the car. Thank god—I half expected him to refuse to drive me this morning. I haul my luggage out of the trunk and face the large brick dormitory. The building is nothing special, just a boring box with skinny windows that probably don’t open. It’s very institutional, and a far cry from the suburban mansion I grew up in, but to me, it’s everything. It’s my first real taste of independence.

“Daaaamn gorgeous! You got a boyfriend?”

My spine stiffens at the sound of a man's voice and I look around to find the source. I spot a group of guys walking past the dormitory and one of them is looking right at me, delighted to have gotten my attention.

“With a body like that, I bet you do! You want another one? I can be a team player!”

I take a quick moment to appreciate his athletic physique before shooting him an unimpressed look and shaking my head. Deep down, in the growing storm of restlessness inside me, I think someday I might be tempted to take a guy like him up on his offer. I wonder what would happen.

We're not going to find out today, though. His friends drag him away and I turn back to my belongings, hoping my father didn't catch any part of that interaction. From the look on his face, he did.

“Well, looks like you should have worn a longer skirt,” he says. “If you present yourself as easy prey, the predators will come out to play.” He picks up one of my suitcases and heads for the walkway, giving me no chance to defend myself.

“And if you give them your heart, they will tear you apart,” I mumble. I've heard him say it so many times, but it's meaningless, really. It's not that I don't believe him about the prey, predator thing, but if a guy is a predator, he's not going to give a damn how long your skirt is.

My father might be a bit old-fashioned, but he's only trying to protect me—I'm sure his heart is in the right place. He's always reminding me of the sacrifices he's made to give me the best possible life, and while I certainly appreciate everything I have, my life has started to feel like a cage. Now here I am, so thrilled to be on the outside that I'm practically drooling over guys who can't even behave properly in public.

“Seraphina!” Dad barks.

Snapping back to the moment, I grab my other suitcase and follow him like the obedient daughter he expects me to be. We

dodge clusters of students and parents all the way up to the third floor to my dorm room, the mayhem of move-in day in full swing. The school assigned me to a shared suite and I'm equal parts anxious and excited to meet my roommates.

When we finally reach my room, dad peers in first, his face scrunching in disapproval at all the clothes and personal belongings strewn around the room. My roommates seem to be in the process of unpacking, but there's no one in here at the moment.

"I'll bring up the rest of your things, if you want to figure out what's happening here," Dad mutters, setting my suitcase inside the entry and turning back down the hall.

I've been waiting for this day for years, and now that it's arrived, I don't know what to do with myself. I drop my luggage and look around the room, taking it all in. The suite is about the size of my bedroom at home, but I'll be sharing this space and the attached bathroom with three other girls. It's crowded with furniture for four: beds, desks, bookshelves—it doesn't look like home at all.

*I love it.*

Footsteps approach behind me and I turn around to face a tall girl with dark, wavy hair. She's dressed casually in jean shorts and a snug tank top that shows off her figure. I would love to dress like her, but my father would never approve. I feel a little self-conscious standing next to her in my knee-length skirt and buttoned-up blouse, but she pays no attention to my clothes, just smiles brightly, like we're old friends.

"Hey, I'm Jasmine! You're our roommate?" She shifts the box she's holding under her arm and extends her hand for me to shake.

"Yeah, I'm Seraphina."

"Nice to meet you! Oh shit, we left a mess! Please don't judge us by this disaster! It's just chaos today, everyone running around," she says, rushing into the room and clearing

off one of the beds. “We’ll get everything sorted out, and I promise there’ll be plenty of space for you! This one’s yours.” She motions to the now empty bed. “The one next to you is me, and Holly and Piper are over there.” Jasmine points to the two beds along the other wall.

“It’s no problem,” I assure her, moving my suitcases to the mattress.

We spend the next few minutes chatting and I learn that she’s an early education major and lives only a few towns away from me. I wonder if she’s heard of my father, but don’t dare ask. For once, I’d like to be known for who I am, not for who my father is.

Jasmine has such a warm, welcoming personality that by the time the other two roommates walk in, I feel like we’ve known each other for years. The other two girls are just as friendly, and although they seem quite different from each other, they’re clearly good friends.

Holly is soft-spoken and looks like a forest fairy, with abundant red curls and light brown eyes. She’s in the early education program with Jasmine and is definitely rocking mellow kindergarten teacher vibes. Her face lights up in delight at my waist-length hair and within two minutes of knowing her, I’ve agreed to let her experiment with it sometime.

Piper, in stark contrast, is practically buzzing with energy. She’s dressed in all black, has short, dark hair with blunt bangs, and has applied her eyeliner with marvelous creativity. She’s a fine arts major and if her makeup is any indication, I think I’m really going to like her work.

Dad comes back with the rest of my things, and after an awkward introduction, gives my new friends a critical scowl and motions for me to follow him out. I walk with him all the way downstairs, hoping he’ll leave without too much fuss.

“I’m trusting you won’t give in to any crazy temptations while you’re away from home,” he says, as we head back outside into the late summer heat. “You need to keep your head down and your grades up, otherwise, there’s no reason for you to be here, is there?”

“Of course.”

“If you remember how I’ve raised you, we can make this work.”

“I promise I’ll stay out of trouble and make you proud,” I tell him. Well, I can stay out of trouble, anyway. At this point, I have no idea what would make him proud. I’ve tried everything.

“I’ll call you every day at lunch, let’s say twelve-fifteen. I expect you to answer when I call. Just because you’re living on your own for a while does *not* mean this is a free-for-all. You still have to remain accountable. I’m sinking a lot of money into this endeavor of yours.”

Never mind the fact that most of my tuition is being paid with scholarships that I earned, even though he could afford to buy half the college if he wanted to. I’m not about to point that out to him, though. His presence is becoming suffocating, and I need some space to breathe. How do I get him to leave already?

“I know, Dad. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t.”

He gives me a stiff hug goodbye and I watch him walk down the path back to his car. What on earth would it take to convince him that I’m doing my best and a little support and encouragement would be nice? He saves that kind of praise for his congregation, but me? I might as well be an employee, subject to never-ending evaluations and harsh criticism.



I was looking forward to starting this new chapter of my life, but now, with my father's daily call schedule and constant reminders about my behavior, being away at college feels more like a job than a good time to explore some independence. With a heavy sigh, I walk back up to the dorm and join my new roommates to unpack.

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“So, what are we doing tonight?” Jasmine asks from underneath her desk. She's decided to turn it into a coffee station and is crawling around to look for an outlet.

“I assume staying in and reading isn't an option?” Holly says, sorting through a box of books.

“Is it ever?” Piper asks. “Forget that. There's a party on the row tonight and we're totally going. We have to start the year with a bang!”

Holly groans and playfully shoves Piper with her foot.

“What about you?” Piper asks me, while trying to grab Holly's leg.

“I can't say I'm much of a partier.” To my amusement, Piper starts an all out foot fight with the redhead. “I've never actually been to one that wasn't like a family-friendly birthday party.”

Piper faces me, her eyes wide. “Well then, this is perfect! It's not just any party—it's the back to school bacchanal. It's going to be incredible!”

She returns to her foot-sparring match with Holly, giving me a moment to consider my options. I've always wanted to go to an actual party, but Dad made a point to remind me not to give in to temptation. He's not here now though, so I should

exercise what freedom I have while I can, shouldn't I? Isn't this exactly what I was looking forward to?

Jasmine emerges from under her desk to sit on her bed. "We can introduce you around, see if we can find someone in your major. Do you know anyone here?"

"No." I shake my head. "But I think a guy I *used* to know might go here. Our parents dated for a while when we were kids."

Her face lights up. "What's his name?"

"Dominic Ash." It's weird to say his name aloud. I've kept him to myself for a decade as he slowly faded from flesh and blood to distant memories.

"Oh hey, we know that guy!" Piper says, backing away from Holly. "Truce?"

"Never!" Holly stops to catch her breath, then after a moment, "Okay, fine." She flops back down on her bed and resumes pulling out books.

"Yeah, he's here. He lives in the Lair," Jasmine says.

"The Lair?" I ask. "What is that?"

"The best house on the row," Piper says. "Dominic is like, the head of the demons or some shit. King of the creepy castle, y'know?"

They might as well be speaking a different language. Piper must see the lost look on my face, because she explains.

"Party row is where all the best houses are! It's mostly frats and sororities, but the Lair isn't really a frat. There are rumors that demon worshippers built it back when the town was founded. It's a huge, old house with demon faces carved everywhere—in the stone, the wood. It's so cool! You have to see it!"

"And Dominic lives there?" *Why would he live in a place like that?*

Piper nods. “Yeah, the owners rent it out to students, but it’s like, invitation only. I think one of the other guys there now is a descendant of the original demon-worshipers or something. He totally looks like a demon, too—or a rock star. Either way, he’s hot, but he might also be gay. We should try to find out!”

“Oh my god, do you ever shut up?” Holly groans, giving up on her books and hauling an armload of clothes to the closet. “Let’s grab some food and get this over with. I want to be home and in bed with Jane Eyre by midnight.”

“I didn’t know you were into girls. Is that a new thing?” Piper calls after her, quickly ducking the shoe Holly throws in her direction.



## CHAPTER 2

Eat, drink, and be merry

### SERAPHINA

The girls show me where the dining hall is, and after eating a quick dinner, the four of us walk over to party row. It's a long stretch of houses, just a few blocks north of quaint Main Street, but it might as well be an entire world away.

The spectacle before me is like some sort of free-form carnival spilled out into the streets. Everywhere I look there are people. There are games being played—frisbee and basketball and what I can only assume is beer pong. There's a large group dancing to music blaring from the back of an open van, and nearby a couple is making out against a beat-up car, tongues and hands everywhere. I avert my eyes, not wanting to be caught staring, only to realize there's a lot more than making out happening in other cars.

Across the street, a small crowd has gathered around a girl who's handing out little plastic cups filled with an assortment of bright colors.

“Oh, jello shots!” Piper says, taking off toward the girl with Holly in tow.

“We'll catch up with you later!” Jasmine shouts, watching them disappear into the crowd.

“This is anarchy,” I say. What would my father do if he knew where I was and the things I was seeing?

Jasmine nods in agreement. “If you want to head back to the dorm, we won't give you a hard time about it. I'll walk you back if you don't feel safe. Do you want to leave?”

A warm breeze touches my face, bringing with it the bewitching smell of food, smoke, and people. Streetlights flicker behind rustling trees, and there's a contagious energy in the air, an electricity that makes my heart skip and my skin tingle.

How will I know what I'm missing if I leave now?

This is how a moth must feel, fluttering around an open flame. I don't want to go back to the dorm and hide in the dark. I want to catch the light, see what happens next, to be part of a world that's always been slightly out of reach.

And I want to find Dominic.

I shake my head. "No, I'm in."

Jasmine pulls my hand with a smile. "Come on then!"

We spend the next hour roaming from house to house and Jasmine introduces me to tons of people whose names I'm sure I'll forget by tomorrow. At one house, she pours two cups of beer from a keg and hands one to me.

"I've never tried beer before," I tell her, sniffing at the red plastic cup.

She takes a drink of hers and nods. "You're gonna hate it."

I take a tentative sip and offer my honest review. "It's a little gross. But also, weirdly pleasant."

"Just like sex!" she exclaims with a laugh, and I take another drink to hide my blush, because I've never tried that either. We resume strolling through the festivities, and while I don't understand all the enthusiasm my peers seem to have for drinking beer, I keep sipping anyway, hoping to figure it out.

Eventually, Jasmine runs into one of her classmates, and when she becomes engrossed in a spirited argument about the best way to teach math to preschoolers, I take the opportunity to wander on my own. I would have been fine sticking by

Jasmine's side all night, but a house near the end of the block has caught my interest.

It's a towering stone mansion, with a massive porch and a tall wrought-iron fence. The open gate does nothing to make the imposing house seem more inviting, and I wouldn't be surprised to see members of the Addams family mingling with the raucous partiers in the yard.

This has to be the Lair.

I step around discarded beer cups on my way to the porch, abandoning my own on the railing. Soft light flickers through the windows and voices float from inside the house. Can I just go in? The door is wide open and people are walking in and out, so I guess it's okay. I debate it for a second before gathering my nerve, following a couple of girls inside.

The front door opens into a spacious foyer with an impressive curved staircase to one side. There are a few people standing around, drinking and hanging out, but none of them look even vaguely familiar. I hear more voices and music to my left, so I follow the sounds into what looks like the living room.

Music throbs low and steady and thin wisps of smoke hang in the air like lazy ghosts. The room is filled with art and nice furniture, although it's in disarray, as if the residents have been partying for days already. I take in the scene before me and my heart leaps in my chest at the debauchery taking place: Not ten feet from me, a man is relaxed on a wingback chair, getting head from another man who's kneeling between his legs, head bobbing over his lap.

The two of them are oblivious to the handful of other people in the room, but I'm the only one who's noticed what they're doing, anyway. This is nothing like the couple I saw making out earlier. I've never witnessed a display of intimacy like this and I'm becoming aroused despite myself.

The man sitting in the chair is surely the demon rock star guy Piper was talking about, because she was right, that's exactly what he looks like—a demon. He has long, dark hair and is dressed in head-to-toe black, with silver rings and black nail polish decorating his fingers. He's not just goth like Piper, but *sinister*; and getting head at a party? He's clearly depraved. His friend, despite participating in the depravity, appears curiously angelic somehow, his white-blond hair practically a halo in the low light.

Before I can tear my attention away from the confronting vision, the demon opens his eyes and looks right at me, his gaze pinning me in place. I'm rooted to the floor, paralyzed by his commanding intensity. My face grows hot at having been caught watching, but he seems completely unbothered by my presence, his eyes locking onto mine as he threads his fingers into the blond man's hair.

“Fuck you, Ezra!” a girl snaps, breaking me out of my stupor. I look away from the mesmerizing spectacle, my body buzzing from the sinful thrill.

“Go fuck someone else! It's what you're good at!” The angry girl hurries past me after flipping off a blue-haired guy that's sitting on the sofa. He hands a cigarette to the demon who is—wait—is he orgasming? The demon's gaze burns into me while he grasps the blond's head tight to his lap, thrusting into him with a low groan.

*Oh my god.*

The blue-haired guy stands up, his square jaw ticking. He starts to follow after the girl, but our eyes meet on his way toward the door and he approaches me instead. His shirt is unbuttoned, his pants slung low on his hips, and he casually backs me up against the wall with his body. He tucks his face into my neck and grinds against me, assuming familiarity we most certainly don't have.



I should push him away, but whatever he's doing has fanned the flames ignited by the sinister demon, and I'm too stunned by the realization to react. He smells fantastic, too, like shampoo and clean laundry, which I wasn't expecting. He looks as if he'd smell of sex and regret. Before I can get my bearings, someone shoves him off me and an annoyed voice cuts through my panic.

"That's the wrong girl, Ezra."

Ezra looks at me as if he's never seen me before, which is appropriate, because he hasn't. His brown eyes are glassy, like maybe he's on drugs or something.

"Fuck," he mutters, pulling his warm body away. He stalks out into the foyer and elbows through the front door, leaving me a tight mess of anxiety as I peel myself off the wall to face my savior.

A knot clogs my throat when I look up at him. The last time I saw Dominic was a decade ago. We were children, friends, and then suddenly he was gone.

Now, though—now I'm staring a beast of a man directly in his ice-blue eyes. He's not how I remember him at all. He has the same beautiful golden-brown hair, cut short and casually messy, but now there's facial hair to match. The lines of his muscles are apparent through his t-shirt and I spot a couple of tattoos on his arms and hands. His gaze flits over my face in curiosity, forehead creasing as he steps closer.

He looks me up and down, and I try not to do the same to him. No, I definitely shouldn't be thinking this man is hot. Our parents dated, and he was my friend, nothing more. I want to hug him, tell him I missed him, ask him why he left and never came back, but I don't get the chance. As soon as I reach out to him, darkness flickers over his face. In an instant, he's pushed me back up against the wall.

Not the way Ezra did, though. Dominic's hand circles my throat tightly, his strong arm holding me at length as if I'm a

deadly threat. He holds me there, shards of pain in his cold eyes cutting through me, his handsome face now steely and tight. This isn't the boy I used to know, the one that walked home from school with me and taught me how to play video games. That boy has turned into a monster.

*“Seraphina. Fucking. Sayre.”* His voice is an ominous hiss that washes hatred over me. I can't answer. I can't say anything. All I can do is claw at his grip, which he loosens only enough for me to breathe.

“Yo man, what the fuck are you doing?” a deep voice calls out to him. Dominic turns his head slightly and I see that it belongs to the sinister demon. He's sitting up, his blond friend sprawled on the couch now, both of them watching Dominic attack me, neither moving to intervene.

I silently beg them for help, tears threatening to fall as I try to pull Dominic's hand off me. He could easily crush my throat if he wanted to, and the fury that's taken over his face strongly suggests he's considering it.

“What the hell are you doing in my house?” Dominic grinds out, as if tracking down my dad's ex-girlfriend's son from ten years ago, applying to his college and getting accepted, and then showing up at his house during a random party is an odd thing to do. Okay, maybe it is, but I never expected him to react like this. We were friends, weren't we?

His hold on me loosens a little more so I can answer. I suck in as much air as I can and expel it all in a string of panicked explanation.

“I wanted to find you. You just disappeared one day. You never said goodbye. I didn't know where you were or if you were ever coming back.” My eyes water, remembering how soul-crushing it was to lose my only friend, but he's unmoved. “I thought you would come back.”

He laughs at that, but there's only cruelty in the sound, no humor. “Oh, little angel. Didn't Daddy Dearest tell you? He

shipped me off to my grandparents the second my mom got sick. He wanted nothing to do with us when she wasn't making him look good anymore.”

That can't be what happened. My dad wouldn't have just sent him away like that, would he?

The sinister demon appears beside me and calmly removes Dominic's hand from my throat, like this is something he does every day. Dominic lets him do it and then takes a step back, clenching his fists at his sides, still seething.

“I don't know what's going on here, but you better take off while you still can,” the demon says, his deep voice soothing me in a way it probably shouldn't. He turns me around and nudges me toward the door.

Relieved to be out of Dominic's punishing hold, I stumble blindly out of the house, my mind in chaos, my world no longer making any sense at all. I race down the walkway, my head spinning. *What happened?*

After all this time, I found him, and he was right there in front of me. But he's not the friend I used to know—not even close. And he's a liar. Dad wouldn't have done that. Wouldn't he have at least given me a chance to say goodbye? Dominic and his mom were practically family. It doesn't make sense.

I find Jasmine right where I left her. The classmate she'd been talking to is gone and now she's listening to the girl who ran out of the Lair. I approach them in a daze, trying to pull myself together.

“I have to look out for myself,” the girl says, slurring her words. “No one else will. I thought I could make him like me, like, really like me, but I can't. He's never gonna change, 'cause you can't change people. He's a stupid fucking fuckboy and he always will be.”

Her words echo in my head, but I can't agree with her. People change all the time. Dominic certainly has.

“It’s not your job to change him,” Jasmine says. “You know how he is. Someday, maybe he’ll be different, but until then, don’t make him your problem.”

The girl wipes a tear off her cheek.

“And it’s true, you know—you do have to look out for yourself, but I’m looking out for you, too. We all have to look out for each other, right?” Jasmine says. “You don’t need him. You don’t need him at all.”

“I don’t?”

“Hell, no. You’re going to be fine without him,” Jasmine says, squeezing her in a quick hug.

The girl sighs. “This sucks. Fuck him. You think the jello shot girl is still around?”

“She definitely is, but I’m pretty sure she’s out of shots.”

“Probably for the best. I think I’m fucking done.”

Finally, Jasmine notices I’ve returned.

“Shit, where did you go? I thought I lost you! I was about to send out a search party! Did you find Dominic?”

“I did, actually, but I might be ready to head back to the dorm now. It’s been a long day.” I can’t bring myself to explain what happened or why I need to get out of here. The frenzied atmosphere of the back-to-school bacchanal is no longer enticing, and all I want to do is curl up in a quiet place and sleep.

“I’ll walk with you,” the girl offers. “I’m Courtney, by the way. You guys are right across the hall from me.”

“I’m Seraphina.”

Courtney takes my arm to hold on to, for stability or camaraderie—I’m not sure which—as we say goodbye to Jasmine and wander back to campus together. We walk in silence, both of us lost in our own heads.



## CHAPTER 3

### A fly in the ointment

#### DOMINIC

Maynard is looking at me like I'm a fucking psychopath. That's not a good sign, since I always assumed he was the fucking psychopath.

“Care to share with the rest of the group?” he asks, moving Orion's legs out of his way and sinking onto the couch. The psycho wants to psychoanalyze me. Great.

“No.” I sit down in the chair after plucking the joint from Orion's lips. He doesn't complain since he's passed out now.

Of all the turns this night could have taken, I never expected that blast from my past. My blood boils in my veins the way it did back then, old memories of pain and loss rising to the surface like bile in my throat.

Fuck that bitch. And fuck her goddamn charlatan father.

She's almost the same as she was back then, all wide eyes and flushed cheeks, except now she's a woman, with full lips and round hips. Her hair and skirt are both too long, which means she's still up to her eyeballs in that fucking religious farce of his.

She represents everything that's wrong in my world—my world is what happens when the people who are supposed to love you destroy you instead. What I would give to rip away everything she holds dear, just so she can know my pain.

Maynard is watching me, waiting. I pass him the joint.

“Pastor Sayre’s daughter,” I say, exhaling the sweet smoke from my lungs. It’s all the explanation he needs.

“You’re holding her responsible for the sins of her father?”

“Shouldn’t I?”

He says nothing. *Goddamnit.*

“As long as she’s his daughter, she can go fuck herself. She’s his pawn, his acolyte. Fuck her.”

“Isn’t she just the product of her upbringing? She didn’t have to deal with the same shit you did. How can you blame her for that?”

“I can blame her for that just fucking fine.” I lean back in the chair and kick my feet up on the coffee table, closing my eyes. Her face appears in the darkness behind my lids, pink and scared, gasping for air—for answers. I open my eyes quickly. Nope. She does not get to live in my head. It took me years to forget about her, and she’s not welcome back.

“I’m not saying you need to be friends, but maybe try not to murder her in our living room, alright?” Maynard says.

“If she shows her face in this house again, I will end her life as she knows it.”

He shakes his head. “Go blow off some steam, man. You’re going to need a clear head when classes start, so make it count.”

“You’re only trying to get rid of me so you can fuck your little pet here.”

“I don’t need you gone to do that. I’ll do it right now in front of you.” He smirks, groping Orion through his jeans. We both know he’s not lying.

“He’s too good for you. You know that, right? He doesn’t need to be your fucking lapdog.”

Maynard looks down at Orion with a softness in his face I rarely see. He’s not really a psychopath, even though he does a

good job of imitating one most of the time. I know there's empathy ticking in there somewhere. He's always taking care of everyone, even if he's an asshole about it. Orion certainly trusts him.

“Of course I know that. Don't tell him, though.”

I shake my head. They're fucked up, those two. Not just currently, on all the fucking weed and beer, but their entire relationship. Maynard is basically the boss of Orion, and Orion genuinely seems okay with that. And that's what they allow us to see—who knows what they do in private? I don't get it, but it appears to be working really well for them.

“Yeah, yeah. Have you seen Nash?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Lying low, as usual.” Maynard motions toward the hallway, so I take that to mean Nash is in the billiard room and not upstairs. I push up from the chair, making a decision. I really should join the crowd and party for a while, especially now that I have to erase that goddamn little angel from my brain, but I decide it's more important to check up on my other fucked-up friend instead.

## SERAPHINA

I'm the first roommate to wake up on Monday morning, my watch alarm buzzing insistently on my wrist. I roll out of bed quickly, knowing if I don't get into the shower first, I might not have time to take one at all before my first class.

The jolt back to reality is welcome. Sleep was unsettling, to say the least, my dreams having been invaded by demons. But not just any demons: I dreamed of a fallen angel pleasuring a wicked, deep-voiced incubus. I dreamed of being trapped by a sweet-smelling devil with devious intentions. And I dreamed of the Prince of Darkness, with golden brown hair and cruel



blue eyes, slowly drawing the air from my lungs and hissing my worst nightmares into my ear.

My body practically vibrates as I gather my bathroom caddy and some fresh clothes. The first day of school is always nerve-racking, even without the worry that I might run into my dad's ex-girlfriend's son-turned-attempted-murderer, so I try to pretend I'm excited instead of anxious.

I pick a long grey skirt and a soft pink blouse to wear, hoping it looks more college casual than devout daddy's girl. I open my jewelry box and pull out a pair of little silver earrings in the shape of angel wings—my eleventh birthday present from Dominic.

*Little angel*, he always called me. He called me that with his hand squeezing my airway, too. He's in my head now and I can't stop replaying our interaction repeatedly, still trying to understand it. My unease grows and with shaky fingers, I put the jewelry away.

After my shower, I get the coffee maker going and start the arduous process of brushing out my wet hair. It's long and tangles easily, so I usually keep it in a ponytail. I'd love to cut it, but Dad insists its length is important to my image in the church. I feel a bit like an imposter, but I want to support him and his career.

My father was an accomplished triathlete in his twenties, then a motivational speaker in his thirties. He used to speak at huge corporations, inspiring mediocre office-workers to be more effective middle managers, without ever having worked in an office himself. Now, he's inspiring others to believe in God, without ever having believed in God himself. Somehow it became my responsibility to convince his followers that I'm the perfect pastor's daughter, pious and pure, but lately it feels like I need to convince him, too.

I give up trying to make my hair look anything remotely different from how it usually does and smooth it into a

ponytail. After chugging my coffee, I slip quietly out the door before my roommates even begin to stir.

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The first week of the semester isn't bad at all. Despite Dominic crushing my soul and my throat on Saturday night, I like it here. My roommates are wonderful and I can't wait to explore the little town. I've arranged my class schedule to be morning-heavy, which gives me most afternoons and evenings free. I've never had so much time to myself before and I'm looking forward to figuring out how to spend it.

My major is alright. The classes themselves are enjoyable enough, but if I could have picked something else, I would have gone with... well, I don't actually know, so, I guess it's good that Dad picked for me.

I've been keeping an eye out for Dominic, determined to avoid him at all costs. He doesn't appear all week, but I'm on edge, regardless. The way he reacted and the things he said still don't make sense to me. I want to ask Dad about it, but I have no idea how. He calls me every day at lunch, just like he said he would, and the conversation is always the same. I try to give him interesting information, but so far nothing remarkable has happened—except that one thing.

On Friday, I decide it's time to ask him about Dominic and his mom, Marie. Slipping outside after class, I find a shady willow tree to eat lunch under while waiting for his scheduled call. My phone rings at exactly 12:15, as always.

"How was your first week at Morgenstern?" he asks. I stifle an eye-roll, even though he can't see it. He knows exactly how it went.

"It was good. I think I'm settled in, mostly."

"Mostly?"

“Yeah, I have a pair of shoes I can’t seem to find a place for in my closet, but I’m confident I’ll figure it out.”

“Good,” he says. “I’m glad to hear that. You need to focus on your classes, Seraphina. I don’t want you to get distracted.”

My lame attempt at levity has gone straight over his head. So much for lightening the mood.

“I know, Dad. I won’t do anything to jeopardize my future.”

“How about your roommates? Are they leaving you to your studies?”

“Mmm hmm. I barely see them at all,” I fib. The truth is, we’ve hung out almost every night. I love my roommates and the way they’ve welcomed me into their little family. They’ve known each other for years but haven’t made me feel like an outsider at all.

I’ve even gotten used to Holly playing with my hair. She found a video tutorial for some kind of elaborate, twisted french braid and has been trying things out on me. She styled my hair like that this morning and I’ve been getting compliments from strangers for the first time in my life—besides the usual meaningless wolf whistles and cat-calls.

“Good,” he says again. “Very good. Keep it that way.”

I take a deep breath. “So, Dad, you remember Marie and Dominic?”

He’s silent, and I wait as the awkwardness spears my chest. It’s like I just asked him to dig up his ex-girlfriend from her grave and I suppose I did, figuratively.

Finally, he answers. “Of course I do. Why would you bring them up after all this time?”

“No reason, really. I saw a guy on campus that I thought looked sort of like Dominic and was kind of curious about whatever happened to him.”

“He went to live with his grandparents when his mother got sick, you know that.”

Dad has never said anything about grandparents before. I had to learn that with a tattooed hand cutting off my air supply. Since my father is letting some new details out, I push for more, against my better judgement.

“Why, though? Why wouldn’t he stay with us?”

“Well, he wasn’t *my* family, was he?”

This time I’m the silent one.

“Don’t be so sensitive, Seraphina. Some things don’t concern you.”

“I’m just trying to make sense of what happened.” I’m walking the fine line of his patience and I know it. He’s exasperated, which means he’s about to shut me out or fly into a rage. It could go either way.

“Nothing happened. Marie developed a drug problem that she couldn’t recover from, and Dominic went to live with his relatives. End of discussion.”

My jaw drops. Drug problem? This is news to me. I’d assumed she’d gotten cancer since that’s how my own mother died, and no one ever told me otherwise. My eleven-year-old brain hadn’t been worldly enough to guess *drug problem*.

I still have tons of questions, but I don’t dare press for more answers.



## CHAPTER 4

### Millstone around my neck

#### SERAPHINA

As the days pass, I settle into a good routine. My classes are interesting enough to be engaging and I have plenty of assignments to keep me busy and focused on schoolwork. But despite all that, I can't seem to shake off the growing dread my incident with Dominic has left behind.

I haven't seen him since that first night. He creeps into my thoughts every day, but I shove him out as quickly as I can. At night, though, he stays. He occupies my dreams like he lives there and I'm powerless to stop him. I don't want to stop him, because in my dreams, his hand around my throat *isn't trying to hurt me*. How does my subconscious come up with these twisted ideas? There must be something wrong with me.

Lost in my unseemly fantasies, I hurry to my next class, giving up on the notoriously slow elevator and taking the stairs instead. I've only made it up half a flight when I find myself in the path of my personal waking nightmare. It's as if he could sense I dropped my guard for a mere second and chose this moment to materialize. Ezra is at his side, looking like every girl's favorite bad decision.

Dominic slows as I'm about to pass, and I try my best to pretend I don't notice him—but I can't help glancing over as he tucks his phone into his pocket. The tattoos on his fingers spell PURE and I quickly look at his other hand. That one says EVIL.

*PURE EVIL.* I won't argue with that.

He catches me looking and in one swift motion, moves me to the handrail, towering over me like a goddamn giant. I cling to the railing as he crowds my space, but to his credit, and my relief, he's not trying to strangle me this time.

"Hey, I know you." Ezra stands a few steps away and studies me with bloodshot eyes, like he can't figure out what I'm made of, completely ignoring the fact that his friend is accosting me in the stairwell.

An unsettling grin cracks through the scowl on Dominic's face. He skims his knuckles across my jaw and down my neck, and I'm horrified to discover I've tilted my head to give him unfettered access to my sensitive skin. *There's definitely something wrong with me.*

"No you don't," he tells his friend. "A good girl like her wouldn't even know what do with guys like us."

"That's a shame." Ezra tucks his hands in his pockets and leans against the opposite railing, as if he has nothing else to do today.

"You should watch where you're going. A skittish thing like you is just asking to get hurt." Dominic's fingertips play along my pulse point as an eerie warmth curls around my spine.

Why is he doing this? It's clear he hates me, but the way he's touching my skin is sending conflicting signals. It's gentle, intimate, even. His scent encompasses me and I inhale deeply. Nope, bad idea. He smells good, like musk and earth and cloves, certainly not the sulfuric brimstone I was expecting.

"What do you want from me?" I ask. To my embarrassment, my voice does not come out confident and strong the way I need it to.

"Not much," Dominic says, entirely too casual for the circumstances. "Maybe I just wanted to watch you blush."

It works. Heat creeps up my neck and over my cheeks, and he scoffs in amusement at his success.

“We’ll see you around, angel.” He backs away from me and the two despicable demons continue down the stairs, leaving me to clutch the railing as my stomach twists in knots.

My dreams are going to be crazy tonight.

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“Wake up, bitches! We need to figure out our Halloween costumes!” Piper shouts, shaking each of us awake as if she’s on her fourth cup of coffee. She most likely is.

“It’s still September,” Holly groans, swatting Piper’s insistent hand away and curling back under her comforter.

“Halloween Hollow opens today and we gotta go before all the good stuff is gone!” Piper pulls Holly’s comforter off the bed and the redhead flails in protest.

“Fuck off, you wench. It’s Saturday,” Jasmine grumbles, flinging her pillow in Piper’s direction. “You’re just going to get a witch costume, anyway. You’re always a witch.”

Piper ignores her, moving into the closet to pull out clothes and shoes. “We have to go before everyone else gets the same idea!”

Her enthusiasm is infectious, and suddenly I’m in the mood to wrench back a smidgeon of my life from my father’s influence.

“Well, I’m in,” I say, sitting up and stretching. “I haven’t dressed up for Halloween since I was little.”

The girls all stare at me like I have two heads. Then Jasmine and Holly spring to life, climbing out of bed.



“So you’ve never done the inappropriately sexy costume? Like sexy pumpkin, or sexy dinosaur?” Holly asks.

I shake my head.

“Okay, yeah. We’re doing this. Let’s pop that cherry, baby,” Jasmine says, fist-bumping me on her way to the bathroom.

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The store is huge—one of those seasonal places that pops up in an empty building for a month or two. From the look of it, I think this one used to be a grocery store. A lurching zombie waves a grand opening sign at us as we pass through the doors.

Piper was right to get here early. The place is spacious, but swarming with other people who had the same idea. We make our way to the aisles, diving into racks of costumes.

“Seraphina! How about this one?” Jasmine asks, after a few minutes of browsing. She’s holding up a long-sleeved white bodysuit, but I can’t tell what it’s supposed to be.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s absolutely perfect for you, that’s what!”

She tosses it to me and I search for the tag, laughing when I find it. Naughty Angel, it says. The bodysuit comes with fluffy pink and white wings and a halo on a headband. It’s completely devoid of pant legs, but it’s also nowhere near the most revealing costume I’ve seen today. I could probably wear this, although, if there’s a chance of running into Dominic on Halloween, do I really want to be dressed as a pants-less angel?

How would he react if I dared such a thing? What would he do to me? Would he touch me like he did in the stairwell? Try to make me blush again? My whole body warms as I replay

the encounter in my head and I have to shut it down before I get too carried away. I can't keep thinking about him like that.

"It's cute," I say. "But let's keep looking."

"Are you sure? The white really brings out your girlish blush," Jasmine teases, catching the costume as I toss it back to her.

"I'm still holding out for a sexy dinosaur," I joke.

After another half hour of browsing, Jasmine decides on a body-con referee dress, extolling the virtues of bossing around the jocks for a night. Honestly, though, she could do that without the costume.

Holly appears with the tiniest Little Red Riding Hood getup I've ever seen, and, as Jasmine predicted, Piper has a basket full of witchy accessories.

"Nothing?" Piper asks me, noticing I'm empty handed.

I shake my head. "Can't decide. I'm still kind of new to this."

"I hope that's not fear talking," Holly says. "Halloween is the one night where you're allowed to grab your terrors by the balls, look them right in the eye, and say, 'fuck me, you're hot.'"

"You've been reading monster romances again, haven't you?" Piper says, without batting an eye.

Holly pauses. "Irrelevant. Seraphina, you need to live a little! You're not a boring bitch, so you better not dress like one on Halloween!"

"If I'm not actually a boring bitch, then wouldn't that be a good costume?" I ask. "I could dress up as a sexy, boring bitch."

Jasmine laughs and Piper groans in mock frustration as we move to get in the checkout line.

“I’m not even going to pretend to entertain that idea,” Piper says. “Let’s break for food and we can bully Seraphina with our love and support over waffles.”

---

Starlight Diner on Main Street serves chocolate waffles all day—which is fantastic for us, because after waiting for a booth in the bustling restaurant, it’s slightly past noon. I have barely enough time to place my order and threaten the girls with death if they steal my bacon, before heading outside to take Dad’s call. They all know by now to expect it every day at 12:15.

I sit on the bench outside of the restaurant’s big front window and wait for my phone to ring. My father doesn’t even greet me when I answer, just steamrolls into a frenzied monologue. I hate when he’s in one of his hyper moods.

“Seraphina, I have an excellent idea! You’re going to love this! After you graduate, I want you to get married to someone from the church. A real do-gooder type. Then once you’re married, have children. Three or four should do it. Enough to keep you busy, but not so many that you’ll be too overwhelmed to help me with the church. It will really solidify my place as a leader in the community. Just think of the good example you’ll be setting for all the young women!”

My mouth falls open, but I can’t manage to get any words out before he continues.

“You’re getting older and you’re going to have a real hard time finding a good man if you wait much longer. You know how people have ideas about educated women. We need to start planning so you can have a huge wedding at Glory Valley and go on to live your dreams! It’s perfect!”

My dreams of marrying a stranger and working for my father? What is he thinking?

“Dad, I’m not ready to get married, especially to some random man from church,” I blurt, instantly regretting my petulant tone.

“Now, Seraphina, calm down and be reasonable. You’re overreacting. You’ll marry a man of God, and that will support my influence on the church and my message. Nothing but great things will happen for us. You’ll thank me for this later. You’ll see!”

Dad continues rambling enthusiastically about his plan, and as desperate as I am to argue, I know better than to say anything else when he’s like this. Over the years, I’ve learned that any attempt to explain why I might have a different opinion just leads to lengthy lectures on my insubordination.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve found someone suitable. You’re going to do this and you’re going to love it! End of discussion.” With that, he hangs up the phone.

He can’t really expect me to marry someone he picks for me, can he? His expectations have always been overbearing, and it’s clear that he’s never going to understand me, or even try, but this? This is extreme. It’s so ridiculous, I’m tempted to think it’s some kind of joke, but Dad doesn’t joke.

There’s no way I can force myself to get married, but once he latches onto an idea, he won’t let it go. He’ll never leave me to make my own choices. Not only has he planned out my career, but now my marriage and motherhood, too. Do I even want kids?

My father’s words weigh heavily as I slip my phone into my pocket, my hands shaking. Standing up, I catch sight of my friends inside the diner, where I was only five minutes ago. They’re still laughing and having fun while I’m out here with my entire future ripped away from me. I’m on the outside again, right where my father wants me.

It was stupid to get comfortable here, to think my life was becoming my own. Sure, I can choose when to wake up or what to eat for lunch, but what matters—what truly matters—isn't in my hands. It never was, and apparently, it never will be.

I stay outside the restaurant for a few more minutes, breathing in the warm afternoon air. I haven't considered running away before, but it's a tempting idea at the moment. I could disappear, pack up and leave, hitchhike out to the coast and start over. But I know he would never let me escape. He'd stop at nothing to track me down and haul me back to pick up right where we left off. How many times would I have to run away and start over before one of us gave up?

My father is tenacious, stubborn even, and when he wants something, he won't stop until it's in his hands. And right now, my entire future is firmly in his grip.



# CHAPTER 5

Jezebel

## SERAPHINA

The autumn air is cooling, the last days of summer well behind us. My mood has shifted along with the weather, which has turned gloomy and bleak.

“You seem down, girl. What’s going on?” Jasmine finally asks. It’s a very grey Wednesday afternoon and we’re hurrying back to the dorm after class, hoping to avoid the rain that’s threatening to fall.

“Nothing. Just dad problems.” I’ve been thinking more about his plans for me, even though I try not to. Walking around all day, seeing people who are happy with their lives and making their own choices? What would it cost for me to have that, too?

My relationship with my father?

What is our relationship, anyway? He uses me as a prop. He’s commandeered my entire existence to support his own image. And arranging a marriage for me—where did he even get that idea?

“You want to talk about it?”

“There’s not much to say, really.” How can I explain this to Jasmine without her thinking I’m an absolute weirdo? “My dad has certain ideas about what I should do with my life and I used to be okay with that because I didn’t have anything else I wanted to do. But now I think that maybe I should get to decide for myself, even if I don’t have my own plan yet, you

know?” She takes my answer in stride and doesn’t press for details.

“I think a lot of people go through that kind of stuff with their parents at some point,” Jasmine says. “Do you suppose once you graduate, he might relax a little?”

“Probably not. After I get my degree, I’m supposed to work for him. He says I owe him for letting me go to college. I’m just so—” I sigh. I hate feeling like this and it’s tough to admit it aloud to someone else. My father does everything for me, even if his motivations are misguided. “I’m angry. He keeps trying to turn me into this perfect image he has of me, that I’m never going to live up to, that I don’t even *want* to live up to, and I just don’t think I can do it anymore.”

“Have you told him how you feel?”

Of course not, because I know exactly how that would end. “He would react badly. I’ve seen what happens when people disagree with him. There’s no changing his mind about anything. Either you’re useful to him, or he’s done with you.”

A connection suddenly clicks in my brain—what Dominic said about his mother makes sense now. A whole freaking lot of it. Why didn’t I see it before? I had it in my head that Dad was too good of a person to shut out someone he loved like that, but what if he’s not? What if no one is safe from his wrath: Dominic, Marie, even me?

When we get back to the dorm, I slip on some headphones and sit at my desk. I don’t really need to study; I just need to be alone with my thoughts for a while.

My conversation with Jasmine has me reconsidering a lot of things, like the fact that I’ve been supporting my dad’s ideas and career for so long that I never realized that maybe I don’t want to. I don’t want to lie to thousands of people about who I am.

But what can I do? My father always gets what he wants, and I’m worried he’ll find some way to control me even if I do



manage to fight my way out of his grip. My blood boils at the thought. Going away to college is the closest I've ever gotten to real independence, and now that I've had a taste of it, I don't think I could ever be happy giving it up.

How do I change things?

---

The dreary weather hasn't improved all week, so Jasmine decides on Friday that we're all staying in and having a girls' night.

We make a giant pit of pillows and blankets in the middle of the floor and settle in for an '80s movie marathon with pizza and ice cream for dinner. Holly sits behind me to practice some new braids she's learning, and it has that sleepy, head tingling effect that happens when someone plays with your hair. I'm relaxed for the first time in weeks, my mind finally putting Dominic and Dad on the back burner for a bit.

Piper's on her side next to us, eating cookie dough ice cream straight from the carton.

"Whatever happened with the pictures?" Holly asks her between movies. Piper groans.

"A whole lot of drama over nothing. That's why I was at my grandparents' this summer—Mom and Dad sent me to help them out for a couple of months, which, frankly, I think they were planning to do anyway, and I wasn't allowed to bring my laptop. They let me keep my phone though, which doesn't make sense *at all*, seeing as that's what I used to take the damn things."

Jasmine laughs, then explains it to me. "Piper posted her own nudes last spring as part of an art project. Her parents flipped out and threatened her with all kinds of crazy shit."

“They said I was bringing shame to the family name,” Piper adds. “Like, how? Heaven forbid I like my body enough to take pictures of it sometimes. I’m an adult. What’s the big deal?” She shrugs.

“I would love to have seen their faces when they saw the tattoo on your ass,” Holly says with a laugh.

“My ass is the least of their worries. They’re more concerned with how people will see them and their asses. They were so embarrassed they threatened to sell the house and move across the country because of how my ass made *them* look.”

She pauses for a second, her face lighting up with amusement. “Damn, my ass is pretty powerful!”

Later that night, as I’m getting ready for bed, I lock the bathroom door and stare at myself in the full-length mirror. I can’t imagine taking pictures of myself naked. It’s difficult enough for me to look at my body this way. I don’t hate it or anything, it’s just—boring. Average. Maybe I’m not seeing it in the right light, though.

I’ve always thought of it as a tool for getting things done, a mere vessel for moving my soul and brain through the world, but what if I could use it in other ways?

What if I used it to make my father ashamed to be associated with me, like Piper’s parents? If I took nude photos and people he knew saw them, what would happen?

I mull over the potential scenarios as I brush my teeth. All I can come up with is one answer: bad things. Bad things would happen. The real question is, would those things be better or worse than the future he’s already meticulously planning for me?

Dad stays pretty quiet about his marriage plan for me, but I'm not optimistic enough to think it's because he's forgotten about it. I know he's busy moving his chess pieces around the church, finding the right person to foist on me.

On the bright side, focusing on my studies is easy when everything else in my life hurts to think about, so I'm doing really well in all of my classes. My only other reprieve is hanging out with my roommates, so after class on Friday, I head back to the dorm to drop off my books before meeting them in the dining hall.

Courtney's voice echoes through the hallway as I reach the top of the stairs, and I'm nearly to my room when her door flies open. I freeze with my hand on my doorknob when Ezra walks out of her room.

"You can't hit me up whenever you want and then turn around and do the same to every girl in this building! I'm out! I'm done with you and your bullshit! I don't care who you fuck, as long as it isn't me! Have at it!" She gestures wildly to the entire building when both of them notice that I'm standing at my door, rooted in place.

Ezra doesn't appear to be bothered by Courtney's declaration in the slightest. In fact, he's not even looking at her anymore and my muscles stiffen when I realize that his focus is now on me. He's the picture of laid-back sex appeal and if he were ever in my room, I doubt I could muster the good sense to throw him out. *Good for Courtney.*

"How about her? You care if I fuck her?" Ezra leans on the wall next to me, invading my personal space—again. I can't find it in me to mind though. His smell is alluring and I have to resist the urge to bury my nose in his shirt and inhale him. He reaches for me and the world halts on its axis. I'm mesmerized by the feel of his hand as he flexes it around my hip, his fingers gripping me through my clothes. He lifts my chin up with his other hand and our eyes meet.

My frozen body relaxes against his because I'm only human, and I'm beginning to understand the appeal of an artfully muscled body, a square jaw, and a crooked grin. The tousled blue hair and unwavering confidence are icing on the cake.

His breath warms my skin as it moves over my face, and I squeeze my eyes closed as he leans in. His kiss is surprisingly gentle and sweet. I open my mouth for him and his tongue strokes mine, making my belly flip. He groans, his grip on my hip growing tighter, his movements hungrier. I'm lost in the moment, swept away by the intensity of his attention, a pleasant buzz settling into my limbs.

*This is nice.*

And then it's over as suddenly as it started. He pulls back, searching my face as if he's trying to make sense of a puzzle that's scattered over the floor.

"Maybe I will," he says.

It takes me a second to remember what he's talking about—oh right—*fucking me*, and my knees go weak. He turns to shrug at Courtney before letting go of me and striding down the hall, like he's done this a million times. Hell, he probably has. I stand there for a few seconds, reeling from what just happened and what he could do to me with only a kiss.

"I'm so sorry, Seraphina," Courtney says, taking in my stunned reaction.

"That was my first kiss," I blurt, the haze of reality coming back into view. I never imagined my first kiss would be shared with someone like Ezra—a colorful, sweet-smelling Lothario—or that it would be so mind-numbingly amazing.

Courtney's eyebrows shoot up. "Shit! Well, good to get it over with, I guess?" She shakes her head. "That probably doesn't help. At least he's good at it. And look, if you do eventually want to fuck him, I really don't care. I'm over it.

The whole chicks before dicks thing doesn't apply to him, anyway." She rolls her eyes. "He doesn't count."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say warily, knowing the shock on my face goes all the way down to my bones.

That night, I toss and turn in bed, waiting impatiently for the rush of emotions to fade. I can still feel Ezra's hand on my hip and his taste on my tongue. I know he was just messing around to make a stupid point and it meant nothing to him, but that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy it. And I *really* enjoyed it. Ezra is bad news though—he's the exact opposite of the kind of person I should be attracted to.

I'm supposed to be saving myself for whomever my dad wants me to marry after graduation, not fantasizing about kissing an unpredictable demon in the hallway. I groan and bury my head under my pillow, trying to suffocate the lustful thoughts that are keeping me awake.



## CHAPTER 6

Whom shall I fear?

### SERAPHINA

Why does my father insist on these calls every day? It's *Saturday*. I get that he's a concerned parent, but this is beyond tiresome.

The girls went out for lunch and I stayed behind, claiming the need to study for a test. I'm so tired of trying to hide the fact that I'm having fun from Dad that I just decided I wouldn't have any today. I'm annoyed and crabby, and when my phone buzzes at 12:15, I mull over the possibility of not answering it. But I'm me, so I do, making sure to get my heavy sigh out before I pick up.

"Hey, Dad. How are you?"

"Seraphina, you remember Noah Wright?"

Noah Wright, Glory Valley's esteemed youth pastor, and the epitome of wholesome charm. He's five years older than me and is a walking, talking poster child for humble, good-natured gentlemen everywhere.

"Sure, I know Noah."

"He's still single, and I think we should change that. I've passed along your number to his mother and told her you'd love to volunteer for her charity thing." I can practically see my father waving his hand dismissively when he says "charity thing."

Hang on. My mind replays what he just said. *He's still single and I think we should change that.*

“Dad, you want me to marry Noah?” No no no, not him. Not that I want to marry anyone, but please, please, especially not him! Noah Wright is the real deal, one hundred percent an authentic and genuine man of God.

His mother is an old-school community leader, full of warmth and empathy and good intentions that she actually follows through on. His dad is the sort of person who would help a stranded motorist change their tire and then give them twenty dollars from his wallet for the wait. And Noah is the best of both of them.

I used to have a crush on him, actually, back when I was thirteen and he was eighteen and he was everything I thought a perfect man should be. He still is, I guess, but I don't want to marry a perfect man. I don't want to marry anyone, especially not one whose expectations I could never live up to. I'm a fraud. I can't trap Noah like this.

“Of course I want you to marry Noah! That's what we're talking about,” Dad snaps.

“Why would he be interested in marrying me?”

Noah's first obligation is to God, then his family, and then the kids he ministers to at church. Where would he even fit a wife into his life? I can't compete with all that.

What the hell am I even thinking? I don't want to marry Noah!

“Well, because of who you are. Not everyone has a shot at becoming Glory Valley royalty. Plus, it's practically in his job description to get married and have kids.”

That's right. Not because I'm awesome or anything, but because I'm some kind of megachurch princess? Royalty? He can't be serious right now. It's a church, for Christ's sake.

“Is Noah aware he's being set up with me? I don't think he's ever looked at me twice in his life.”



“That’s because he’s a smart man who knows what’s good for him. You just need to show him you’re interested. I know you’ll come around to the idea.”

No, I won’t. But I can’t say that to Dad. His response would most likely be to unenroll me from college so that I have no other options but the path he’s laid out in front of me. Not a path, an aisle. With Mr. Wright at the other end.

*Mr. and Mrs. Wright.* Nope. No way.

“You’re meant for great things, Seraphina,” Dad continues. “Don’t waste your life being average. I let you do this college stuff so you could feel helpful, but planning for your future is more important. If you can’t handle both, then you certainly don’t need to be two hours away from home spending all my money on some useless status symbol.”

He *is* threatening to take college away from me and I haven’t even said no. I need to be here, if only so I have more time to figure out how I’m going to escape this wretched plan.

“I can handle it, Dad. I’ll make sure to let Noah know how I feel.” Trapped? Used? Sold out by the one person who’s supposed to love and support me? I shouldn’t tell Noah all that, but I sure as hell have no intention of lying to him and making him believe we have a future together.

He deserves better. He’s a good man, through and through—the kind of man that Dad *should* want for me and that I’d always hoped to end up with. When did that change? When did *I* change?

“Let’s try to make a wedding happen this summer instead of next. You’ll have no use for another year of college if you can seal the deal sooner. I’m sure what you’ve learned already will be sufficient. If not, I can hire an actual professional.”

I listen in stunned silence as Dad spews more affirmations that come out sounding more menacing than not.

When he ends the call, I'm left staring at the phone, my stomach churning. I hold my breath for a second before rushing into the bathroom to vomit.

It's not the prospect of spending the rest of my life with Noah that has my stomach emptying, but the fact that I have no choice in the matter. A future as Mrs. Wright would be quaint and idyllic, much like Noah himself. I would live in Townsend, Illinois for the rest of my life, attend church to worship a god I don't believe in, and have a litter of children I'm not sure I want. So, not idyllic, actually. The more I think about it, the sicker and emptier I feel.

Guilt washes over me—for not wanting safety and security and a doting husband who comes from a wonderful family and is a genuinely nice person. I could have a guaranteed happily ever after, complete with white picket fence and all that goes with it, if I wanted it.

But I don't. The most terrible part of all, of me, is that I don't know what I want instead. I haven't experienced enough of the world to know what my options even are. How can I relinquish the possibilities without even getting to explore them?

I throw up again, heaving until there's nothing left, and all I can do is mourn the loss of independence that was never mine to begin with. By the time I pull myself up off the floor and wash my face, I know only one thing: I can't go through with it. Nothing else matters except for escaping my dad's plan.

Maybe I can talk to Noah, explain what's going on, tell him how my dad is trying to marry me off for his own selfish reasons. But if it looks like Noah rejected me, then that might put his position at Glory Valley in jeopardy, and I couldn't do that to him.

I think the solution is to somehow drive a wedge between me and my father so he doesn't want to use me anymore. So he *can't*. For the rest of the afternoon, I pace the dorm,

thinking, trying to come up with an idea—something undeniably over-the-top that would piss off my dad way beyond pulling me out of college and making me come home. I need to do something so terrible that the only way he can save himself is to disown me.

I could follow Piper's example and post some nudes, but that might inspire prayer circles and people coming together to help save me from the wicked influences of social media and my own bad decisions. It would definitely be embarrassing, but I'd still be redeemable. *Not good enough.*

A sex tape, on the other hand—a sex tape is almost the definition of over-the-top. Maybe I could ask someone to make a video with me and then somehow get my dad to find out about it. That kind of thing would be an enormous leap for me, though. I have virtually no experience with guys beyond the unexpected kiss from Ezra in the hallway.

Would he help me? Ezra doesn't seem like the type of person who would be squeamish about making a sex tape, but perhaps not to intentionally ruin someone's life. What I need is someone who doesn't like me or care about what happens to me afterward, who has no problem tearing my life apart and isn't afraid of my dad.

With a sickening twist in my stomach, the solution to my problem is suddenly clear. I know what I need to do.

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“Do you think the naughty angel costume is still at Halloween Hollow?” I ask Jasmine the next afternoon. We're supposed to be studying, but I can't focus.

Her face lights up for a second, but then she shakes her head. “No, why? Did you change your mind? You want it?”

“Yeah. It’s okay, I’ll find something else.” I try to shake off the pang of disappointment. It would have been perfect for what I’m about to do.

“No you won’t.”

“No?” I raise my eyebrows at her, and she grins at me.

“Because I already bought it for you.” She hops up from her bed and opens the closet, pulling the costume from its bag.

“Why—?” My mouth drops open and I can’t manage to form sentences.

She tosses the costume to me with a satisfied smile on her face. “Because you’re cute as fuck, and it’s cute as fuck, but be warned, Piper said she’d hex you if you chickened out.” She sits on my bed and pulls something else out of the bag. “And Holly got you these so your legs don’t freeze off,” she adds, holding up a pair of pink and white striped thigh high socks.

My eyes are teary as I run the soft feathered wings through my fingers. “I can’t believe you guys did this for me. Thank you.”

“No sweat, girl. We had a feeling you’ve been hiding yourself away for too long and needed a little nudge to come out and play. Did we go too far?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s exactly what I needed. Thank you for being so nice to me.”

“Of course! We do the nice things for each other now, in case one of us needs bail money at three in the morning. It all evens out.”



# CHAPTER 7

## The writing on the wall

### SERAPHINA

Throngs of costumed students flood the sidewalks as we head over to party row. Everyone is looking forward to a night of drunken revelry, but I have something else in mind. Somewhere in this party lies my only hope for salvation—I just need to have faith in my idea.

The mist of light rain isn't dampening anyone's spirits, only adding to the eerie Halloween ambience. As do the zombies. I swear, half of these people are dressed like zombies. As we reach party row, the skies open up with a loud crash of thunder and students and zombies everywhere scatter, ducking into the refuge of houses.

"I'm going to the Delta House! You guys coming?" Courtney shouts, already half a block away.

"We should go to the Lair," Piper yells back. "It's Halloween!"

"You go, then! I'll catch up with you later!" Courtney disappears into the house next door to the Lair before anyone can argue.

"I guess she's avoiding Ezra," Holly says, pulling her Little Red Riding Hood cape around her as a bolt of lightning flashes overhead. Jasmine grabs my hand and pulls me to the safety of the Lair's porch, saving me from any hesitation I might have indulged in at the gate. Holly and Piper race up the stairs behind us.

“We’re probably going to get separated in there,” Jasmine warns. “But no one should leave without letting the others know, okay?”

“I don’t think any of us are going to be leaving any time soon,” Holly says, holding her hand out and watching the rain drip down her fingers.

“Good thing this is the best place to be for a Halloween party!” Piper steps through the open front door and immediately disappears into a crowd of zombies.

Holly pulls her hand out of the rain and dries it on her skirt. “They got her. She’s one of them now, isn’t she? We’re going to have to cut off her head.”

“From the looks of it, we’ll all be members of the living dead by morning,” Jasmine says. She nudges my shoulder with hers. “You should do a lap, say hi to people you recognize, then come dance the night away with us. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The Lair swallows us as we enter, a combination of excitement and anticipation luring me into its warmth. It’s still early, but because of the storm, costumed revelers have packed into the house. The air is thick with the pungent smell of alcohol and sweat, the musk filling my nostrils as I wander, searching.

I walk through the peculiar house, scanning parties for a familiar face, before finally stopping outside a room off the main hallway. The door is open, and when I step in, I see that it’s a large billiard room with an ornate pool table in the middle, a game in progress. There’s only a handful of people in here, all with creepy masks over their eyes. Each mask is slightly different, with twisted horns and grotesquely shaped facial features.

In the low light, with their faces half hidden, it’s difficult to identify any of the people at a glance, but I’m positive these are the residents of the Lair, dressed like demons for

Halloween. I don't know why I would have expected anything else.

One of them steps up to take his turn at the table, gripping the cue in his hand and sliding it between his fingers to line up the shot. My stomach wavers when I recognize the tattoos on his hand. *Found him.* I pause inside the doorway, gathering my resolve.

Before I can decide how to proceed, a demon on the other side of the room catches my attention. He's sitting back in a leather chair, one side of his mouth tilted up in a lascivious grin. It's Ezra, of course. That mouth is seared into my memory. He's different in this costume, and it's somehow more fitting, as if this demonic guise is his true image and he just walks around wearing the hot guy mask most of the time.

"Are you lost, little angel?" Dominic's gruff voice vibrates through me, even from across the room. He sneers and tilts his head, like an animal about to tear me apart.

*If you present yourself as easy prey...*

But this is my only chance. I can cower and run, resigning myself to the life my father is forcing me into, always wondering what could have been, what I could have done, or I can face this demon.

I straighten my shoulders and attempt to soak up some of the confidence and authority wafting off of these masked men. It works, just enough to force the next words from my throat.

"I need your help."

Dominic laughs at me, the sound made more unsettling because it's coming from a face partially hidden by a malevolent-looking mask with pointy horns.

"Why the fuck do you think I would help you with anything?" he says, abandoning his pool cue on the table and sauntering toward me. I sense the others in the room shifting, taking notice of our conversation. They're paying attention to



what's happening over here now, but I don't take my eyes off the cold blue ones in front of me, the ones cutting me apart, dismantling me slowly and torturously. It hurts to look at him, but I embrace the pain, knowing that if I can get him to agree to this, it will only be the beginning.

I practiced what I would say. I tried to come up with the best way to get him on board, knowing the few things I know about him, but no amount of planning could prepare me for the terror of confronting an actual wrathful demon. There's no turning back now, so I force myself to continue.

“Because you might get to destroy my father's career. His aspirations, his reputation, everything he's worked to build, gone. I have a plan.”

Dominic's wretched sneer falters for a brief moment, but I catch it. He looks at the other demons in the room, as if to say, “Are you hearing this shit?” He turns back to me, sizing me up once more.

“That's quite a tempting offer. If I get all that, what's in it for you?”

“Freedom.”

“Freedom? From what? Money? Nice cars? Your mansion?”

I nod slowly. This is not the time to mention that I don't get to spend the money, that I'm not allowed to drive the cars, or that, unlike the Lair, the mansion is cold and lifeless. “And all the strings attached.”

He shakes his head. “What strings? Attending church every week? Some people do that because they want to. And you get all that extra shit for being cooperative about it?”

How do I get him to understand? “Nothing in my life is mine. It never was and it never will be. My dad controls everything. I've always accepted that, but he's gone too far now. I need out. For good.”

“Well, shit,” someone says from across the room, clearly invested in the drama unfolding.

Dominic motions for me to continue. “Let’s hear it. What’s your plan?”

I don’t know if I can say this part in front of the others, but I also don’t know if it’s safe to ask him to speak privately. I wasn’t expecting an audience, but at least this way there are witnesses in case he throttles me again. Which is likely, considering the words that are about to come out of my mouth.

“I want to make a sex tape, and threaten to release it to the members of his church. All five thousand of them.”

The room goes still and Dominic stares at me.

Finally someone mutters, “What the fuck kind of church has five thousand members?”

Bracing myself for his reaction, I watch him closely, but his masked face gives nothing away.

“You’re actually prepared to publicly humiliate yourself because he won’t, what—*let* you move out? Why go through all that trouble? You’re an adult. Just leave and start over without him.”

“You know what he’s like, Dominic. He’ll find me. He’ll come after me, and I don’t want to be running away from him for the rest of my life. I need to give him a reason to be done with me completely. I need *him* to be the one running away from *me*.”

Dominic scoffs. “You really think you can scare him off?”

“I have to try.”

“Well then, good luck to you. I don’t understand what this has to do with me, though.”

“I need you—” *Oh god, how do I say this?* “I need you to be in the video with me.”

He freezes. “What the fuck did you just say?”

I take a deep breath and say it again. “I need you to be the one in the video with me.”

The others are watching with rapt attention and my face heats with embarrassment, probably the same pink as the stripes on my socks.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Am I? Maybe, but I shake my head no.

“You sure about that?”

I shake my head again. Definitely not sure.

The grotesque face leers at me as his horns tip forward. Maybe Halloween wasn't the best time to approach him with this idea, the dreadful masks lending an especially ominous atmosphere to the occasion. Dominic takes a step closer and I instinctively move sideways toward the door. My body does all kinds of things I don't ask it to whenever he gets close to me. He grabs my arm, pulling me back over to him.

“You're so jumpy,” he says, his voice low and resonant, sending a chill over my skin. The longer I stand here, the harder it is to stay still in the sharp claws of his presence, but I can't keep letting him chase me away. I need him.

“Are you scared of me?” he asks. “How do you expect me to fuck you if you act like this when I get near you?” I bristle at his words. He *is* scaring me, but I'm more overwhelmed by his closeness and my body's unwelcome reaction to it. I try to focus on his Adam's apple and not on whatever is happening between my legs. If this is a fear response, it's an incredibly unhelpful one.

He gives me a scathing look, tightening his hold on my arm.

“Are you a virgin?”

When I don't answer, he assumes the worst: the truth.

“Jesus fucking Christ. And you want to make a—” He cuts himself off. “Do you have any experience at all?”

I still don’t answer. Is my experience level that important? It doesn’t change the fact that I need to do this, so what difference does it make what I have or haven’t done already?

“Have you ever been kissed?”

I pause, then nod my head. This is all so exposing.

“Well, that’s a start. How many?”

“Guys or kisses?” I ask, confused by the question.

He looks at me like I’m the dumbest person on the planet, but then shakes his head and says, “Either.”

“One. Once.”

My gaze flicks past him to the demon who’s stopped drinking his beer mid-swig. It may have only been one kiss, but it was a good one. It was a *really* good one.

Dominic puts a finger on my chin to refocus me on his face.

“This is never going to fucking work. You’re too innocent, too inexperienced. If we make a video, it’s going to look staged as fuck, like I coerced you. I don’t need Daddy Dearest trying to have me arrested for raping his pretty little princess. You should accept your life for what it is and forget all this nonsense.”

He’s not going to help me. I should have known better, but all I had to lose was hope, anyway. The intensity of his glare burns into my skin as I desperately will the tears not to fall. Finally, I blink, and a fat one rolls down my cheek.

*Damnit.*

“Tell you what,” he says quietly, though that makes him sound more hostile, not less. “Let’s see if you can figure out how to have a good time at a party. Show me you can relax and let loose a little bit, and I’ll think about it.”

My heart jumps in my chest. I'll do whatever Dominic tells me to do if there's even the slightest chance of this working.

"Okay." I nod, doing my best to look confident.

"Go on then. Get the fuck out there."

I turn to leave the room and he lets me go this time.

*...The predators will come out to play.*



## CHAPTER 8

O ye, of little faith

### SERAPHINA

I don't know what to do with myself now. Apparently, I have to figure out how to have fun at a party. That shouldn't be too difficult—everyone else looks like they're having a great time. The hard part is over with, so I can breathe easy now. I can lighten up and relax.

Steeling my nerves with a deep breath, I slowly make my way down the crowded hallway and through the maze of rooms, keeping an eye out for my roommates. I stop now and then to chat with people I recognize from the dorm and classes, while strangers keep touching my wings. The girls are nice about it—they just want to feel the soft, feathery lady as she passes, but the guys grab me like I'm the answer to their sleazy prayers.

As I'm swatting the twentieth unwanted hand away, I catch sight of Jasmine and Holly dancing in one of the large front rooms. I don't know what they use the room for normally, but right now it's how I imagine a night club would look, with flashing lights and thumping bass and bodies everywhere. It's enchanting.

I escape from a cluster of groping drunks to watch the chaos of dancers, drawn to the excitement but feeling very out of place. Scanning the room, I spot the white-haired demon on the other side, watching me. I'm supposed to be having fun, so I guess I need to make an effort to look like I am.

Turning back to the crowd, Jasmine motions me over and I join my friends. I keep up with the mad crush of bodies for a

few songs, my inhibitions slowly melting away. Everyone is focused on having a great time—no one cares what anyone else is doing, and it makes it easy to let go of all the stress I've been holding onto.

“You're a sexy birdie!” a voice from behind me shouts over the din. A muscular arm bands around my waist and hauls me into his hard body, smashing my wings between us. He hands me a cup of beer, and I take it to keep him from sloshing it all over my breasts. I twist to get a look at the guy's face, but I don't recognize him. He's wearing a sheet as a toga and a crown of leaves. Frat boy?

There's no time to ponder if I want to keep his company or forcibly extract myself from him, because someone else decides for me. The white-haired demon appears in front of me, taking the cup and pulling me from Mr. Toga's hold. With his hand gently grasping the back of my neck, he leads me out of the room before I have a chance to argue.

It's weird, being walked through the house at the hand of one of these guys. The crowd parts for us and no one reaches out to pet or fondle my wings. The demon's thumb strokes my skin gently, making me feel safe in his possession. That's probably not a normal reaction to what's happening and I haven't even been drinking.

My guide takes me all the way to the kitchen, where he finally releases me and dumps the cup of beer into the sink. My face flushes at the memory of what I saw him do that first night, but I'm already hot and sweaty from dancing, so maybe he won't notice.

“Don't take cups from strangers,” he says, reaching into the fridge and handing me a cold bottle of water. “If you drink anything at a party, open it yourself and never leave it out of your fucking sight.”

“I wasn't going to drink it,” I say, feeling more than a little irresponsible for taking the cup in the first place.



He levels me with a stare from behind his mask, his grey eyes so sparkly they glint like silver in the kitchen light. “All I know is that you don’t know that guy enough to trust him with a drink.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” I ask, examining the bottle of water.

“You don’t. Do you even know my name, pretty girl?”

I can’t tell if he’s being condescending or not, so I narrow my eyes at him, just in case. “No. What’s your name?”

“Orion Eriksen.”

He holds out his hand for me to shake. There are no tattoos on it declaring his moral status, so I suppose it’s at least safe to assume he’s not pure evil, unlike someone else we know. On his wrist is a bracelet fastened with a tiny lock, but that doesn’t tell me anything useful.

“Seraphina Sayre.” I put my hand in his and we stare at each other, holding the other’s hand like we’ve both fallen into some kind of awkward trance. From afar, he’s beautiful, but up close like this, he’s downright ethereal—which occurs to me is a very odd thing to think about a man who’s wearing a demon mask.

Someone in the doorway catches his attention and when he turns his head, I see a small tattoo on his neck. Maybe that’s his mark of the devil. It’s an elaborate script and I don’t have time to make out what it says before he turns back to me and drops my hand.

“Seraphina Sayre, you were told to have a good time, not get into trouble with frat boys. Think you can keep yourself safe for a while?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I tell him. He shakes his head at me like I’m a lost cause as he turns for the doorway. The sinister goth demon is standing there watching us and I have a

moment of panic. Was I flirting with his boyfriend? That's not a guy I want to piss off, disturbing Halloween mask or not.

As they walk away, the demon slings his arm over Orion's shoulder and whispers something in his ear, at which I swear Orion blushes. Considering what I've seen him do in front of other people, what on earth could make a guy like him blush? I can't even imagine.

I chug my bottle of water and set out in search of some kind of fun I can have that won't end up with me passed out among strangers in this weird hell-house. I spot Piper in line for the bathroom, making out with a tall, pretty Wonder Woman, but keep moving. I don't want to interrupt that.

There's a lively discussion about the Morgenstern football team consuming everyone in the vicinity of the foyer, and I listen in for a bit. Unfortunately, it's not that interesting, so I leave them to it and continue to explore.

I find a small crowd in the living room and am relieved to see that no one has their dick out this time around. It's smoky and loud, but a lot calmer in here than the rest of the house. I contemplate texting Jasmine for help, but she probably wouldn't notice her phone going off in all this commotion, especially if she's still dancing.

Before I can come up with a plan B, a strong hand wraps around my arm and drags me into the room. It's one of the masked demons from the billiard room, but I don't think I've met this one yet. *How many are there?*

He motions toward the only empty piece of furniture in the room, a loveseat in the corner. After taking off my wings, I sit down and watch him pull a joint from his shirt pocket. He lights it and takes a drag, offering it to me as he sits. The loveseat is small and his leg presses against my mine.

I wave him off because I've never smoked up before. Some acquaintances at my community college would talk about it

sometimes, but they never invited me to join them or anything. No one would dare—they all knew whose daughter I was.

The demon tilts his head in challenge. He has the palest blue eyes I've ever seen. They're lighter than Dominic's, but just as penetrating, even from behind the menacing mask. Right, I'm supposed to be having fun, so now's my chance. I still don't know how to handle the joint, though. I've never even smoked a cigarette before.

He seems to pick up on that, because he shows me what to do. He holds one finger up while inhaling the smoke into his mouth, two fingers when he draws the mouthful down into his lungs, and a third when he exhales. Okay, easy enough. I take it from him and try to hold it the way he did and follow his instructions, but he's watching me so closely it feels like I'm putting on a performance.

I exhale with a cough, but he doesn't laugh at me or anything, just encourages me to take another hit before I pass it back to him. This guy is helpful and quiet, and that makes him my current favorite demon. I lean my head back on the loveseat to wait for whatever is going to happen, and he does the same next to me. We sit in silence for a few minutes, the sides of our legs still pressed together, when suddenly it's like a light switch gets turned on in my head. Or maybe it gets turned off? Either way, I feel calm and floaty, like I'm swimming without having to move a muscle.

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and I lean into him like we're magnetized. He's built like an athlete, but I can't get the thoughts to turn into the right words to ask him what sport he plays. I'm not exactly sure what words come out of my mouth before they evaporate into the air. *Well, that's neat.*

I like this, and I like this guy, creepy mask and all. He's not berating me, or glaring at me, or trying to choke me. He's just here, helping me relax and letting me settle against his solid body as we watch the party swirl around us. I don't think about anything but the soft fabric hugging my body, the strong

arm protecting me, and the demonic faces watching from the other side of the room.



## CHAPTER 9

Lead us not into temptation

### DOMINIC

When I told Seraphina I would think about it, I was lying. I decided pretty fucking fast that I wasn't going to have a damn thing to do with her plan. But, goddamnit, I *am* thinking about it now, and the longer I do, the more the idea of ripping away her innocence and sending her back to Daddy nice and ruined makes my dick hard.

Neither of them deserves anything less and I'm increasingly annoyed that I didn't think of it first. It's a good plan—for me anyway. Does she realize there will be absolutely nothing left of her perfect little life on the other side of this? Honestly, I don't fucking care. If she wants to throw away all the privileges the rest of us have to fight for, that's on her.

My brothers and I ended up finishing our game of 8-ball in silence, no one knowing what to say about her proposition, and no one daring to bring up Solomon Sayre to me. They've heard the stories. You want to talk about the Antichrist? That's the guy. As fucked up as I was about that asshat kicking me out when my mom went into the hospital, I still got lucky not having him as a father figure for any longer than I did. He gifted my mom with the coke addiction that killed her, after all.

I can't imagine what Seraphina's life has been like, with no mother and no one to look out for her.

*Shit.*

*Fuck.*

*Goddamnit.*

I will not feel sorry for her. No matter how fucking hot she looks in that ridiculous costume. No matter how big and wide her eyes get when she looks up at me, like I'm her goddamn savior. Like I'm the only other person in the world.

But I can't get her out of my head now, just like I can't stop thinking about her bad idea. Maybe if I give in and fuck that sweet little body of hers like she wants, she'll leave me alone and I can forget all about her. *Again.*

The guys and I have joined the rest of the party that's raging around us, and I watch through my mask as friends and strangers filter through the house. I don't know what's happening on the rest of party row, but I also don't care. The only shit anyone talks about happens here.

The best parties are pretty formulaic at this point: loud music you can dance to, good beer—not the watered-down crap the frats get for cheap—and all the people you can fit without the fire department showing up. Plus, a handful of demons to stir up trouble. But I've got my own trouble brewing tonight, a little angel floating around in my goddamn head.

A leggy blonde pirate tries to make herself at home on my lap. I know she's the ex-girlfriend of that zombie over there and normally I would have no problem giving her the attention she wants right in front of him, but my focus is elsewhere. Everywhere, actually.

This house is too big and crowded to follow the whereabouts of one wispy little angel, so I made sure the guys knew to keep watch and report back if anything interesting happens. I'm giving her a chance to prove herself, to prove that she's actually capable of getting out of her comfort zone, otherwise, there's no fucking hope for her and her plan, is there?

I haven't seen her since she left the billiard room, but Orion did come to tell me that he kept her from drinking a beer from a frat boy, even though it was probably safe. Girls throw themselves at those assholes, no drugs needed. Then she vanished again.

With an annoyed sigh, the pirate quits trying to get my attention, but perks up when she sees Ezra heading our way.

“Got something for you,” he says.

“For me?” the pirate asks. I'm tempted to forcefully remove her from my personal space, but Ezra focuses in on her the way that girls love.

“Hey there, Captain. Arrrr you gonna go dance soon? Been waiting all night to see you shake that little hip scarrf.”

I can practically see the cartoon hearts in her eyes as she climbs off me, delighted to have drawn the attention of the blue-haired hellion.

“Go get warmed up for me, baby. I'll be there in a minute,” he adds.

She scurries off to the other room as Ezra shakes his head. I follow him through the crowd of people to the living room, coming to a halt in the doorway.

“Jesus Christ, of course she zeroed in on the only person in this house who's as uptight as she is,” I tell Ezra when I spot her across the room.

“Neither of them look too uptight right now.”

It's true, they look fucking relaxed as hell. Nash's arm is curled around her shoulders and her head is leaned back on his chest. He's watching her in amusement while she mumbles something and if I didn't know him better, I'd swear they were having an actual conversation.

As if she can sense us observing her, she lifts her head up and stares right at me. I can tell instantly that she's high. So



high that even high-as-fuck Ezra sees it.

“She’s fucking baked, man. How’d he get her to do that?” he asks. “I thought your little angel was gonna crash and burn.”

“Some people might call this crashing and burning,” I say, imagining what her damned father would think of his saintly daughter getting high at a house party full of demons and zombies.

“Well, I call this a fucking win. I wonder what else we can get her to do.”

Ezra and I watch the unlikely pair for a few more minutes as the thunderstorm rages overhead. I can hear it even with the music blasting through the walls and I just know that this is going to be a long night.

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Our house is trashed, but it’s a small price to pay for living in the legendary Demon’s Lair. After a quick shower, I head downstairs, straightening one of Orion’s paintings on the wall, then slamming my fist against Ezra’s door a couple of times on the way past. I don’t even know if he’s in there. He never brings girls to his room, so if he hooked up with that pirate, he’ll be waking up in her crappy dorm bed.

When I get downstairs, Nash is already cleaning the living room. I’d feel bad, but I know this shit’s like therapy for him. I swear sometimes he only lives here so he has an excuse to clean up after parties. I grunt a greeting in his direction, pausing in the doorway to grab a full garbage bag on my way to the kitchen.

Maynard has already made coffee and is getting breakfast going on the stove, so I duck out to toss the trash and take a seat at the breakfast bar to keep him company.

“Any stragglers?” he asks through a yawn.

“Didn’t see any. Nash probably kicked them all out of the house by now.”

Maynard pauses to flip the bacon. “Is he alright? He was downstairs for most of the party. You know, with actual people.”

“Not people—Seraphina.”

“Think he likes her?”

I shrug. “What’s there to like?” Yeah, I’m sure all my brothers like her. They like her pretty mouth and perfect ass and the fact that she waltzed into our house and literally asked to make a sex tape.

Maynard gives me a stern look. “She seemed to enjoy the party after a while. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Sure she did, after she got high. But, no. I wanted her to go the fuck home.”

“So you’re not going to take her up on her offer?”

“Are you invested in this for some reason?”

“As your friend, I’m invested in you. And this is an excellent opportunity for you to clear some of those dark clouds over your head.”

“If you won’t do it, I fucking will,” Ezra says, trudging into the kitchen. He pulls out the stool next to me with a loud scrape, making himself wince. I guess he didn’t hook up with the pirate after all.

Maynard sets a glass of water in front of him. “Hydrate, you dumb motherfucker. That’s good advice. You’re welcome.”

Ezra sits down and narrows his eyes at the glass like it might be filled with poison.

“You don’t get bacon until it’s empty,” Maynard scolds. Ezra lays his head on the countertop, ignoring the glass until Maynard drops a couple of pain-relievers next to it. Ezra swallows the pills and makes quick work of the water.

“Bacon, you bastard,” he mutters, returning his forehead to the cool stone.

“I’m just saying, it would probably be more fun than not. Even if you do hate her for no reason,” Maynard says.

“Not for no reason. We’ve been over this.”

“We *have* been over this. And I still say your reason is crap. If you hate her so much for what Solomon did, then why not take this gift-wrapped opportunity to fuck his shit up?”

It’s a fair question, and one I’ve been asking myself all night. If I’m being honest, I like her plan. I like it a fucking lot. She’s asking me to do the one thing I’ve been dreaming of—personally delivering a shot of karma to that drug pushing motherfucker.

“Are you being weird about it because she was your sister?” Orion asks from behind me, making me jump.

“Whoinaa fuck is his sister?” Ezra says, not bothering to raise his head.

“She’s not my sister. She was *never* my sister. Our parents weren’t fucking married.” Despite that, our history is a bonus because it would add that extra insult to Solomon’s injury when he sees who’s responsible for the mess his daughter is determined to find herself in.

“She’s sexy as hell,” Maynard says. “Plus, she’s got that clueless, innocent virgin with hidden desires thing happening. I know you want to fuck her, and if it has to be a hate-fuck, she’s probably desperate enough to be okay with that.” He wraps his fingers around Ezra’s wrist to check his pulse. After a few seconds, he seems satisfied and slides a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him.

Ezra sits up and rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Jesus fucking Christ, just let me do it,” he groans. “Or him.” He gestures to Nash, who’s wandered in to put the broom away. “God knows he needs to get laid.”

Nash nods in agreement before heading through the back door to take another bag of garbage out.

“If anyone is going to make that video with her, it will be me,” I say.

Orion pulls out the stool on the other side of me and sits. “Too bad she’s so scared of you. It would be nice to show her how good of a time she could have if she relaxed a little. I mean, she did okay last night.”

“She has potential,” Maynard says. “If you could get her to open up and explore it.”

“You think she’d be into that? Exploring sex and getting comfortable with it before making her video?” Orion asks.

“It could work.” Maynard shrugs. “Sounds like fun.”

These guys have no idea how much work it would take to get Seraphina even close to ready. I shake my head. “She might be a lot more fun if Solomon hadn’t screwed her up so bad. She’s not exactly fuckable right now.”

Maynard smirks. “You can’t see past your own issues far enough to realize that probably makes her even *more* fuckable.”

“You want to exploit her daddy issues? That’s messed up,” I say.

Maynard’s not budging. “We’re all messed up, so at least she’s in good company. And this is the perfect chance to help her realize her own potential. It’s for your own benefit.”

The weirdness of Orion and Maynard’s relationship is making a hell of a lot more sense to me the longer this

conversation continues. Maynard is just in a completely different world. There's no other explanation.

"You want to break her in for me?" I ask. I don't know how I feel about leaving her alone with him, though. I'm not exactly sure of the kind of shit he gets up to.

"Why does he get to do it?" Ezra complains.

"If I do it, Orion will too," Maynard says. "Two for one, package deal. We'll have her begging for your cock in no time."

"This is so unfair." Ezra sighs. "I vote I get to exploit her daddy issues, too."

"This is not a fucking democracy," I say, running my hands through my hair. These fuckers are trying my patience today, and we haven't even finished breakfast yet.

"A fucking democracy," Ezra mutters. "A decockracy."

"Jesus Christ, are you still drunk?" Maynard snaps.

Ezra looks at his wrist like he's expecting to find a watch that will give him answers. I'm sure he doesn't even own a watch. "It's possible."

"For fuck's sake, how much did you drink last night?" Maynard asks.

"This much." Ezra holds his hands about two feet apart and groans. "Too much."

Maynard scowls at Ezra's mostly empty plate. "Finish that and go get some fresh air. You're going to wake up tomorrow wondering why nothing you said or did today makes any fucking sense."

Ezra shoves another piece of bacon into his mouth. "Yes, Daddy."

I turn my thoughts back to Seraphina as I get up to pour a cup of coffee. Honestly, these sick fucks are probably right. If we can introduce things to her slowly, get her comfortable

with the basics then ramp up from there, her video plan will be a lot easier to pull off.

And I'll get to make her bastard father pay for what he did to my mother.

I scrub my hands over my face. "Fuck. Fine. I'll do it. But every single one of you assholes is going to help me. I do not have the patience for this shit."

Maynard smiles and it's creepy as hell. I don't even want to think about what he and Orion have in store for her, so it's a good thing she probably already hates me for the way I've treated her, because she's definitely going to hate me for this. I don't care. After the video is done, we'll never have to see each other again.

I look at my friends, never more despicable demons than we are right now. "So, is everyone in?"

Maynard shrugs. "In."

"In," Orion says.

"Fuck yeah, I'm in. I'm gonna get so fucking in that girl," Ezra says.

The only one who doesn't say anything is Nash. He's leaning against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest, observing us while we demonstrate how morally questionable we are. I tilt my head and raise my eyebrows in question.

"You're fucking in, Nash," Ezra says. "Don't even pretend like you don't want to pound that sweet fucking step-sister pussy."

I half-heartedly punch Ezra in the shoulder for his stupid joke. Nash looks around, probably wondering how he ended up with a bunch of degenerate fuck-ups like us. Nah, we all know why. He's one of us, through and through. And because he is, his nod of acceptance doesn't surprise me one bit.

“Alright, then. I am, too,” I say, wishing I’d thought this through a little further.

Now I just have to figure out how to present my answer to Seraphina. All she asked me for was to make the video with her, but her complete inexperience threw a wrench into that plan real quick. Recruiting my brothers to break her in is a half-baked plan I’m sure as fuck will get out of hand if I don’t lay down some rules for every single one of them, including her.

I have to give her credit, though. This is such a perfect opportunity to stick it to her fucking father. He deserves to have someone use and fuck and destroy his daughter. He used my mom and threw us away like garbage, and now it’s my turn to use Seraphina. And I’m going to have a lot of fucking fun doing it.

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By the time Monday morning rolls around, I’m antsy as hell, because for the first time in a decade, I have something to look forward to.

I wait outside her dorm building and fall into step beside her as she walks out. She swings her backpack over her shoulders and startles when she notices me. She looks amazing in the morning sunlight and even though I’m still determined to hate her for whatever fucking reason, my dick twitches in approval and I know I’ve made the right choice. Why was I even considering not doing this? Regardless of what happens to her, it’s win/win for me.

“Good morning,” she says warily when I don’t say anything. She’s definitely still afraid of me. I’m eventually going to have to figure out how to be nicer to her, but right now, it’s not important. I’m giving her what she wants, and that’s good enough for now.

“Hand me your phone,” I say.

She hesitates before slipping it out of her pocket, unlocking it, and passing it over. *So trusting.*

I half expect her background photo to be a picture of her father or the church, but it’s a picture of her with her friends, looking all relaxed and happy and shit, like a normal college girl. Maybe it’s just me she’s uptight around.

After opening her contacts, I put in my number, then call myself so I have her info on my phone. I stop walking and face her, handing the phone back.

“I’ve decided to help you.” Not wanting to acknowledge what this means to her, I ignore the way her eyes light up. “I’ll be in touch, little angel.”

I don’t look back at her when I walk away, even though I want to. *Especially* because I want to.





# CHAPTER 10

## The covenant

### SERAPHINA

The relief I felt on Monday morning when Dominic agreed to my plan has slowly dwindled throughout the week. The longer I wait to hear from him, the more painful the twist in my gut gets. When Friday rolls around, I've almost convinced myself it was all a cruel joke, and that he has no intention of keeping his word. But, as usual, he surprises me.

Halfway across the quad to my first class, I get a text from him telling me to go to the Lair when I'm done for the day. He says nothing else and includes no other details. All day I'm unable to concentrate, feeling both excitement and dread at what's to come. Is he planning on making the video tonight?

The thought makes me want to throw up. I'm in over my head, but drowning in Dominic's lake of wickedness is preferable to sailing through a bland, loveless marriage for the rest of my life. I'm almost sure of it.

After my last class, I stop by the dorm to take another shower and put on prettier underwear—just in case. I touch up my makeup and head back out, my skin breaking out in goosebumps, even though it's not that cold with the late afternoon sun shining on my back.

No, it's because I imagined for a split second how it would be with someone like Dominic—if he were to tear my clothes off, pin me beneath his body, and take me with the force his vicious strength suggests he's capable of—and I don't exactly hate the idea as much as I think I should.

Tendrils of unease in my limbs propel me into town, past the fraternities and sororities, all the way to the end of the street where the Lair sits behind its iron fence, waiting. The old stone mansion is an entirely different entity in the daylight. It seems more like an actual house and less like a portent of doom, but I know the truth.

I let myself in the gate and head up the walkway, not noticing until I'm up the steps that the demon I've come to see is sitting on the porch. He's sprawled out in an old iron chair that looks like it might be original to the house. His eyes are closed and there's a book in his lap that he's obviously lost interest in.

Stopping to face him, I'm unable to make my feet move any closer. All the menace is gone from his features and he looks peaceful, more like the way I remember him before he grew into the monster he is now. As hellbent as he is to let me know how much he hates me, I'm finding it increasingly difficult to hold it against him the longer I stand here seeing him like this.

The breeze scuttles dry leaves over the sidewalk, pulling me out of my reverie.

"Sit the fuck down. We have things to discuss," he snaps, opening his eyes. I take a seat across from him and look up to see that his face has gone back to the one filled with disdain and contempt. I'm nervous sitting here in front of him, like I'm in the principal's office.

"When does this video need to happen? How long do we have?" he asks, setting the book aside.

"By the end of spring semester, I think."

He tilts his head at me. "You think?"

"I need to do something before this summer. So any time before then would be good."

He taps his fingers on the chair. “Okay. If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it my way.”

“What’s your way?”

He laughs, the sound humorless and taunting. “You have a lot to learn and a long way to go. Since we’ve got some time, I’m going to spend it breaking you in. I’m going to ruin you, nice and slow—destroy every last bit of your innocence and corrupt you until there’s nothing left to be saved. When I’m done with you, all the dirty, depraved things you do in that video will be genuine, and you will be begging for all of it. We’re not going to record a performance. We’re going to record your fall from heaven. That’s a fucking promise.”

His words tumble around in my head as I sit, watching him and unable to move. He levels me with those cold blue eyes.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? To be irredeemable?”

Hearing him state it so explicitly is jarring, but it’s exactly what I need for this to work. I nod.

“I have conditions, though, angel. And you need to agree, right here, right now, or this goes no further.”

“Okay.” I ignore the fear creeping up my spine.

“Before you came to Morgenstern, which days of the week did that fucking cokehead make you go to church?”

He thinks my dad is a cokehead? Is that the drug his mom died from? “Um, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays.”

“Those are my days now. Until we make that video, the Lair is your new church and I am your fucking God. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Over-the-top is what I wanted, and Dominic is certainly delivering.

“On Wednesdays and Fridays, as soon as you’re done with classes for the day, your ass is here. Sundays, you come first

thing in the morning. And when you're here, you're to follow all of my instructions. Can you do that?"

I nod again, hesitantly. "Will I have time to study? I have to keep my grades up. If they slip, my dad will pull me out of college."

"Then we'll make sure they don't slip. Are you on birth control?"

"No."

"Sometime this week, get a checkup at the clinic next to the student center. Arrange for birth control. They accept cash, so it doesn't have to go through your insurance." He pulls his wallet out and takes out some bills. "The first one's on me. When you're done at the clinic, I want you to go to the salon on the corner of Main and Second Street for a wax. And angel, have them wax *everything*. Get that pussy all nice and naked for me."

My breath catches. He's being crude. Is he trying to make me uncomfortable, to see if I'll back out? This is all suddenly very real, and fairly terrifying, but I refuse to let him get to me. He won't scare me off that easily.

"Okay," I say, taking the money from his tattooed hand. *EVIL*, of course.

"A week from Sunday, come here at ten a.m. We'll have a little private party—you can be the guest of honor."

"So we have a deal?"

He tips his chin at me. "Yes we do. Now get your fucking ass out of here before I come to my senses."

I stand up, not knowing how to acknowledge my gratitude. Should I thank him or shake his hand? This is exactly what I wanted—to sell my soul to the devil. Settling for a hasty nod, I turn my back on the Prince of Darkness and scamper down the porch steps to safety, excitement buzzing through me.

On my walk back to the dorm, I take out my phone to make appointments at both the clinic and salon. The clinic is easy, and when I call the salon, I let the receptionist talk me into a mani-pedi as well. At least part of my day should be fun.

Then, I start in on the internet searches about how to handle the pain of getting all the hair ripped out of one's privates: exfoliate, ibuprofen, relax. Got it. I swing by the grocery store on the way home to pick up the supplies and junk food I'll need to soothe my soul in preparation for my inevitable fall from grace.

When I get back to the dorm, my excitement has morphed into anxiety and I'm nearly crawling out of my skin. What have I done? What have I agreed to? I know the goal is freedom, and I'll do whatever it takes to get it, but the reminder does little to calm my nerves. By the time Jasmine returns from class, I'm bursting to tell her something.

How do I say that I've convinced my former friend, who now loathes me, to make a sex tape with me so I can be disowned by my controlling father? I don't, that's how. I'll have to figure that part out later. For now, I keep all the bits regarding Dominic out of it, but tell her I've made an appointment to get waxed tomorrow. As far as this conversation is concerned, I'm experimenting for no particular reason other than *college*.

She looks equal parts appalled and intrigued, then quickly calls the salon to make matching appointments, assigning herself my ride-or-die for my first waxing experience. She's had a bikini wax before, but never the whole thing.

Since my clinic appointment is first thing in the morning, Jasmine and I make plans to meet up outside the salon afterwards. I'm relieved to have her support and I go to bed feeling a lot better about tomorrow.

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The smell of disinfectant immediately smacks me in the face when I open the doors to the health clinic. I push down the butterflies in my stomach because this shouldn't be such a big deal. Everybody does this. Maybe not for the exact reasons I am, but similar.

I give the receptionist my name and she hands me a clipboard with forms to fill out. There are some other girls in the waiting room, one of whom is rocking a giant baby bump, and I have to give credit to Dominic where it's due. This was a good idea.

“Seraphina?” a nurse calls into the waiting room, just as I'm being lulled to sleep by the ticking of an overly large wall clock. I follow her down the hall and into a small exam room, the butterflies returning with a vengeance. She takes my pulse and blood pressure, then tells me to get undressed and put on a paper robe so the doctor can do a pelvic exam. Wait, what? Right into the deep end today, I guess.

Once she leaves the room, I follow her instructions, knowing that as awkward as this exam is about to be, it's probably nothing compared to what I'm going to experience later at the salon. The whole ordeal turns out to be surprisingly fast and easy, and when the doctor learns that this is my first pelvic exam, she takes her time explaining the process and everything she does.

When we're done, and I'm dressed and feeling human again, she walks me through some birth control options. I decide to go with the shot since it's only necessary once every few months, and I won't have to worry about hiding anything from my dad when I go home for the holidays.

On my way out the door, she hands me a bunch of brochures about safe sex practices, and as I shove them into my purse, I make a mental note to read them all this week. I'll need the crash course. When I finally walk back outside into

the midmorning sun, I feel like I've been put through the wringer—poked and prodded, squeezed and scraped—and my adventures today are just beginning.

It takes only a few minutes to walk from campus to the salon on Main Street, where Jasmine is waiting for me.

“This is for you,” she says, handing me a huge to-go cup from Grinder’s Cafe next door. I take a sip and my eyes roll back into my head.

“What is this nectar of the gods?” I ask, tempted to pop the lid off and shotgun its sugary goodness right into my stomach. Not that I’d know how to do that. Maybe I should put that on my bucket list.

“It’s a Hell-on-Wheels. It’s a caramel hazelnut mocha with an extra shot.”

“I want one every day for the rest of my life.”

She looks at me solemnly. “You’d die.”

“Special occasions, then?”

“Absolutely. Let’s have a special occasion once a week. That probably won’t kill us.”

I turn to face the salon. “This appointment is going to kill me first, anyway. Why am I doing this? Why does anyone do this?”

“Well, if you want to change your mind, we can cancel and go blow all our money at Book Cave and Nifty Thrifty instead. Whatever you want to do.”

“You’re supposed to be my ride or die! Are you suggesting we *die*?”

“You’re right. Death by Hell-on-Wheels only. Let’s ride.” With that, she drags me by the hand into the salon.

Luxe Salon is pretty swanky for being in a tiny college town, though no amount of cushy velvet chairs and damask wallpaper is going to make me feel less like I’ve just climbed



the steps to the guillotine. I instantly regret making the mani-pedi appointment because now I have to spend yet another hour dreading the most awkward and masochistic thing I'll probably ever do in my life, excluding whatever Dominic has in store for me.

My face burns at the thought of him. I shouldn't think about him here, seeing as how I can't trust my brain and body to agree on the right way to respond to those thoughts.

Under different circumstances, the mani-pedi would have been divine. As it is, my hands are shaking so much in anticipation of what's coming next that my nails have become moving targets. I'll be sure to leave the manicurist a big tip for the trouble. When she's done, the receptionist comes to collect me and Jasmine, and I'm fairly certain I cut off Jasmine's circulation from grasping her arm so tightly on the short walk to the waxing rooms.

Jasmine gives me a sassy double thumbs up and a nervous laugh before we each disappear into our own rooms.

Thirty astoundingly undignified minutes later, I perch myself delicately on the edge of one of those cushy velvet chairs and wait for Jasmine to emerge, my vulva somewhere between numb and in pain. Stunned is how I would describe it—I have stunned my vulva. As for the waxing process itself, it was the un-sexiest and most painful ordeal of my life thus far, and I'm really just grateful I'm on the other side of it. As soon as I recover from this emotionally, I hope to be invincible, because I think I've kind of earned it.

If Dominic's plan was to inflict pain and humiliation on me, then the Brazilian wax was a superb idea, and he's infinitely more diabolical than I gave him credit for. But, I survived, and I'll survive any other messed up obstacles he throws at me. This is merely my baptism by waxing. *Waxtism?* Wow, I'm going to get kicked out of my house *and* go to hell.

Jasmine comes out a moment later, looking scarcely better than I feel. She glances at the chair next to me like she's going to sit, then thinks better of it. She helps me up instead, and playfully starts in on me.

“Bitch, you know I love you, but your ideas are terrible. I better get laid every day until this grows back for what I just went through. Now can we get out of here and go buy some pretty underwear?”

“Would you like to make your next appointment while you're here?” the overly chipper receptionist asks while we're paying. “We recommend two weeks for the manicure and four for the wax.”

Jasmine shakes her head emphatically no. I smile and make the next appointment anyway while Jasmine laughs at me. She's right—this better be worth it.



# CHAPTER 11

Better to give than receive

## SERAPHINA

The Sunday morning that I'm supposed to return to the Lair, I wake up at eight o'clock with an anxious knot in my chest. There's no telling what Dominic has planned for the day, or if he's even planned anything. He seems more like a wing-it kind of guy.

The horrifying discomfort of last weekend's salon visit has waned, and I'm delighted with the sensation that's left. I'm oddly aware of certain body parts and take extra time to pick out panties that are soft against my newly bared skin. Before I can talk myself out of it, I decide to wear the angel wing earrings from Dominic.

Since my stomach is too uneasy for breakfast, I just grab some toast with my coffee before heading out, telling the girls I'm going to meet up with some people to study. It's not entirely a lie, but I still feel a little bad about it.

At 9:55, I open the black iron gate to the Lair—my new church, as Dominic called it. The heavy knocker on the front door resembles the demon masks the guys wore on Halloween, and I'm almost afraid to use it. The demon looks grumpy, like I'm insulting him just by being here. What is the story behind this place?

When Dominic opens the door, my thoughts grind to a halt. All he's wearing is a pair of jeans, his naked, muscular torso right in front of my face. His skin is smooth and there's a light trail of hair leading down into the waistband of his pants. He

notices me looking and narrows his icy blue eyes, which glint in the morning sun like a sharp knife.

He pulls a t-shirt on while I stand in front of him, and I'm disappointed to lose the view I was admiring. Why did the universe have to make a jerk like him so attractive? All I can hope for is that my old friend is still hiding somewhere behind that brutal, cutting stare.

"Last chance to back out," he says.

Warmth floods a path from my neck to my cheeks, but I'm determined to see this through.

"Why would I back out? It was my idea."

He eyes me for a moment, then motions for me to enter the house, neither of us saying anything more.

I haven't been inside the Lair when there wasn't a party going on, and I'm alarmed at how homey and clean it is. I figured it was always in a state of disaster with how many parties they must throw, but it actually looks really nice right now.

Dominic leads me down the hall, which is lined with paintings and sketches. Someone here must be an artist—a very talented one. I'm tempted to stop and admire it all, but now's not really the time. We continue through the kitchen into a more casual version of their living room and he slides a set of pocket doors closed behind us.

My first instinct is to back away from him, which, of course, he picks up on immediately.

"Come here." Annoyance is threaded in his words. He moves his hand to my waist and pulls me toward him, thwarting my escape. His body brushes against mine and while I don't think he's actively *trying* to intimidate me at the moment, he is naturally very menacing.

"You need to get used to me touching you," he scolds. "You're way too uptight. We're going to have some fun today,

so you've got to lighten the fuck up. You need a drink?" He motions to a shelf full of liquor bottles.

"It's ten o'clock in the morning," is my perfectly uptight reply, and it earns me a scathing smirk.

"Then we'll have to find some other way to loosen you up." He leans in and plants his lips on mine. Just like that, as if it's no big deal. Like we didn't used to be friends when we were kids, or like he didn't strangle me the first time I saw him in ten years, or like I haven't been having depraved dreams about him and his friends for weeks now.

I'm so taken aback that it doesn't even occur to me to resist him. My fingers curl reflexively into the fabric of his t-shirt, not pulling him close, but not pushing him away either. His lips are soft and warm, which is a shock since I was expecting him to be made entirely of razor blades strung together with bad intentions. I guess he really is human after all.

His kiss is demanding, and when his tongue slips into my mouth, I moan despite myself. He glides one hand up my back, over my neck, and threads his fingers into my hair, gripping my roots. I'm powerless to do anything but let him have his way, and I don't even mind. I'm more curious to see what's going to happen next.

In the back of my mind, though, I know it's important to keep my guard up. I shouldn't get lost in *him*, of all people, and I'm beginning to understand how easily that could happen: Kissing Dominic is intoxicating. The sensation reminds me of Halloween night when I smoked pot for the first time—one kiss and I'm high, everything around us drifting away. I'm so far gone that I'm now convinced this was the best idea I've ever had, or the worst. Quite realistically, it's both.

He pulls back all too soon, my hair still wrapped in his fingers. He studies me, probably thinking I'm going to try and get away from him again, but I don't. I want him to kiss me some more. Realizing that he's waiting for my response, I

stand on my tip-toes and press my lips to his. He lets me lead this time, and I get lost again, in his lips on mine and our tongues stroking together.

He tightens his fingers in my hair, pulling at my scalp while his other hand snakes under my shirt, sliding up my ribcage to massage my breast. No one has ever touched me like this before, under or over my clothes. It's soothing and invigorating at the same time and I don't know how to process it. He pulls back again, my heart thundering.

"That's more like it. You're so cute when you take charge," he says. Sure, the words are nice, but his tone is derisive.

I'm glad he speaks to me this way. It will keep me from liking him when I sure as hell know he doesn't like me back. He's doing this for his own revenge, his own pleasure, and I need to remember that—no matter what his lips do to me.

The doors slide open and in walks Ezra in all his half-dressed, Sunday morning glory. He's shirtless and his grey sweatpants are much lower than Dominic's jeans, showing off more naked male body than I've ever seen in my life.

"Is it party time yet?" he asks, sauntering over to the couch and flopping down, not bothering to wait for a reply.

Oh, right, Dominic mentioned a private party at which I'm the guest of honor, but that probably means something a heck of a lot different to these guys than it does to everyone else in the world. I glance back at Dominic who still has me in his hold, studying my face. I can't stop staring at his lips.

"Nearly time," he replies, without taking his eyes off of me. "If you don't quit looking at me like that, I'm going to blindfold you," he says to me. "Just warning you."

"Are you going to be mean to me this whole time?" I ask. He immediately punishes me for the irritation in my tone by clenching my hair tighter in his fist. It doesn't hurt, though his control over me is unquestionable.

“I won’t be mean to you, baby,” Ezra says. “You can come sit on my lap any time you get sick of his bad attitude.”

Dominic ignores his friend. “Am I being mean? It seems to me that you like what I’ve done so far. Should I check?” He works a taunting hand under the hem of my skirt and up the front of my thigh on a clear path to where I’m not ready to be touched by him. He anticipates me wrenching away and allows it, a victorious sneer on his face.

Yeah, he’s got me all figured out and I’m starting to hate him back for it. Whatever. As long as it doesn’t keep me from doing what I need to do, which, unfortunately, is the one thing I just stopped. I know I’m going to have to let him touch me eventually, because that’s the whole reason I’m here. This must be what it’s like to be in line for a roller coaster, all nerves and anticipation, knowing the ride is going to be terrifying but refusing to back out.

“So fucking frigid. How are we going to deal with you?” he says, shaking his head.

“I have an idea. I have a hundred ideas.” Ezra throws his arm over the back of the couch. “About fifty of them involve my cock. Twenty, my tongue. The rest, we’ll just have to get creative.”

“Good morning, pretty girl.” Orion appears behind Dominic and shoots me a wide toothy smile that’s more wolfish grin than friendly greeting. “Make room, asshole,” he says, edging Ezra over as he sits on the couch. I watch in mild amusement as the two get settled next to each other and then return my attention to Dominic.

“We need to start with something basic,” he says. “If you won’t let me touch you, then you’re going to touch me. All you need to do is follow my instructions.” He moves to stand in the middle of the room and points to the floor in front of him.

“On your knees. Right here.”



His commanding tone makes my legs weak, and I take a wobbly step forward to lower myself in front of him, my stomach flipping. I guess I'm already on the roller coaster.

"Good girl," he coos, and because I know he's being a condescending asshole, I try to ignore the way his words send a delicious warmth through my body.

"Now we're getting somewhere, angel. Open my pants."

I freeze and Dominic reaches out to hold my chin, forcing me to look up at him.

"Don't think. Don't question. I. Am. Your. *God*."

I reach up to do as he says with shaky hands. I'm so far out of my comfort zone already, but since my comfort zone is a gilded prison of my father's making, and getting out of it is the whole point of this, I keep going. The trail of hair is like directions on a treasure map, and I resist the urge to run my fingertips over it.

Popping open the button, I start to unzip his pants. The sound grates over my ears, unnaturally loud and foreboding. I've never touched an actual cock before and I'm about to have Dominic's inches from my face.

"Are you going to stop there?" he asks, noticing that I've paused mid-zip.

"No," I say, swallowing the nervous lump in my throat. "I'm not."

Pulling his zipper all the way down, I notice that he's not wearing anything underneath. I can just see the part where his thick cock meets his body, like a root in the ground.

"Take it out. It won't hurt you."

I glance over to where Ezra and Orion are relaxed and watching, like it's no big deal to hang out while your friend trains a girl to handle his cock. Their Halloween masks are

gone, but the faces I see still belong to demons, wicked and leering.

“Don’t look at them. Look at me,” Dominic says, gently turning my head back to face him. “You’re more than welcome to leave at any time. But when you’re here, you do what I say, when I say. That was our deal. Now, this is the last time I’m going to repeat myself. Take it out.”

I reach inside his pants and grasp his cock to pull it free of his clothing, taking care not to let it scrape the zipper. He pushes his jeans down his hips a little, giving me more room to work with. The hand wrapped around him doesn’t look like mine—my manicured nails belong to someone sophisticated, experienced, confident. I need to channel *that* woman, not the timid virgin I actually am.

I examine Dominic’s cock in my hand, enjoying the warmth and otherworldly softness of his skin stretched taut over the hard muscle. It’s just a body part, not nearly as frightening as I imagined, but it’s undeniably alluring.

“Now, stroke it a little. Make it your best fucking friend.”

I’m not sure how to make his cock like me when the owner so clearly detests me, but I’ll give it a shot. I need all the friends I can get in this house. I skate my fingertips up and down his shaft, noticing how sensitive the ridge underneath the head is. He likes when I touch there, if his shuddering exhale is any indication. I’ll have to remember that. I squeeze my fingers around his thickness, marveling at the way it reacts to my touch, twitching and swelling.

A drop of liquid appears at the tip, and I rub my finger over it. It’s slick and viscous, so I use it to help slide my finger back and forth along the sensitive ridge again. He *really* likes that.

“Fuck.” Dominic’s hand shoots out to grab the back of my neck. “Are you a liar? Have you done this before?”

I shake my head as much as his hold on me will allow.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? You’re going to be the most talented slut on campus, aren’t you?” he says, releasing my neck and throwing his head back.

“Goddamn, angel. I want your mouth. Let’s see what you can really do.”



# CHAPTER 12

## The extra mile

### SERAPHINA

Buoyed by his unexpected enthusiasm, I sit up a little straighter. It feels like the roller coaster is at the top of the hill, right about to drop, but just because it's a little scary doesn't mean I'm going to give up now. It's actually kind of fun, especially if I focus on what's in front of me and ignore the fact that we have an audience. I'm not even sure why they're here, but I'm in no position to ask. I'm in position to do only one thing.

“Open that pretty mouth and stick out your tongue.”

Ugh, why do his dirty words snake around in my belly and make me feel things? I suppose it's not the worst to feel good for once, but at the hands of someone so completely callous and uncaring, whose main goal is to get me to do things that make me uncomfortable? It should be wrong to react favorably to anything he says or does.

I know this, but I make no attempt to stop myself from obeying and open my mouth as instructed, sticking my tongue out and giving in to the overwhelming urge to close my eyes. He puts the head of his cock on my tongue and holds it in place. It's solid and warm, and I breathe in the clean, subtle smell of his skin. I'm not sure what to do with my hands now that I'm not using them, so I rest them on his partially uncovered hips, his muscles tightening under my palms.

“Close your mouth, but don't move anything.”

I close my lips around him and he strokes my hair, relaxing me and letting me get comfortable having him fill my mouth. His cock is firm and big and it twitches every so often, as though it has a life of its own. The longer we stay like this, the more I actually like having him in my mouth. I'm tempted to suck on him, but he's in control, so I hold very still and wait for his next instruction.

"Now, try moving your tongue."

I slide my tongue along the bottom of his shaft and he exhales, long and slow, almost like he's on the roller coaster with me. I circle the tip of it, over the silky skin of the head, working my tongue along the sensitive ridge. He sucks in a sharp breath.

"That's good, baby. Right there," he says, letting me play at the spot he likes so much.

He gently twists my hair in one hand and pulls it back, forcing me to look up at him with his dick in my mouth. The eye contact is unnerving, a quiet acknowledgment that we're connected in more ways than one.

"I want you to suck on it, but not hard. Be nice and gentle."

He pushes my head forward a little and I take him deeper this time, adding suction.

"That's it." He uses his fistful of my hair to guide me, pressing me onto his cock even more. When he hits the back of my tongue, my body revolts and I retreat instantly, letting his cock slip out of my mouth while I brace my forehead on his thigh. I do *not* want to throw up on him.

He laughs and makes a tsking sound. "Naughty girl. We're going to have to work on that gag reflex, aren't we?"

My cheeks burn with embarrassment and the sting of failure. I didn't consider the possibility that I would fail at any of this. *I can't*. Looking up at Dominic, I expect to see derision

or displeasure on his face, but he's just watching me, his blue eyes half-shuttered and relaxed.

"Take a breath," he says, and I do, a wave of calm washing over me. "Now, let's try again. I'm not done with you yet." He releases my hair and moves his hand to cup the back of my head instead, not controlling or even guiding, merely touching, as I take him back into my mouth. He's letting me have more control.

"Relax your throat and use your hand to hold however much you can't get into your mouth." He takes one of my hands from where it's fastened to his hip and moves it to his cock, curling my manicured fingers around it.

Despite already being on my knees with his cock in my mouth, the way he touches my hand is unsettlingly intimate, like it's somehow more real than the rest of this. I don't have time to ruminate on that for long because Ezra breaks the silence in the room.

"You're doing great, baby. I'm so fucking hard for you right now." His praise is crude, but at least it sounds more genuine than Dominic's.

Orion chimes in, "Come on, pretty girl. Show that cock who's boss." There's not even a bit of mocking in his voice, to my surprise. It's almost as if he's actually invested in this, like he's rooting for his team at a game.

I have to suppress a laugh at the fact that these guys are literally cheering me on right now. It's an excellent reminder that I shouldn't take this so seriously. We all know I have a lot to learn, so I try to let go of my inhibitions and insecurities, since neither will help me do what needs to be done.

With their ridiculous encouragement spurring me on, I tighten my fingers around the base of Dominic's cock, holding on to the part that won't fit in my mouth—yet. I manage to relax my throat a bit more with each bob of my head, and while I certainly won't be taking all of him today, it's a goal to

look forward to. Dominic and I eventually fall into a rhythm, his cock growing even harder, swelling on my tongue and in my hand. A rush of pride bursts through me and my confidence builds. My arousal does, too, but I ignore it as much as I can.

“Fuck. That’s it. So fucking good. Just like that.” Dominic groans and moves his hands to my face, caressing my cheeks with his thumbs. “You’re gonna be a fucking pro at this.” He gives me a few more thrusts and pulls out of my mouth, tipping my face up to look at him.

“Next time we’ll make this last longer, but I’ll go easy on you today, since it’s your first time on your knees. I *am* going to come in your mouth, though. Do not pull away until you’ve swallowed every bit of it. Do you understand?”

“For her first time, man?” Ezra says with a laugh.

Dominic shoots him an annoyed look. “She might as well learn to do it the way I like.”

Ezra shrugs. “You got this, baby.”

“You can do it, beautiful,” Orion says.

Dominic turns his attention back to me. “Tell me you want my cum.”

Jesus Christ, he’s going to make me say it aloud, and in front of people. The only reason I’m going to play along is because it might be true, and I’m dying to see their reactions if I can pull this off.

“I want your cum.”

“Tell me where you want it.”

“In my mouth.”

“And what are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to swallow it.”



Dual moans sound from my cheerleaders, all this dirty talk affecting them as much as it is me.

“That’s right. You’re going to take everything I give you.” He tips my head forward and slides his cock between my lips and we find our rhythm again. After another minute, he tenses and groans, his hips jerking and cock throbbing. Thick streams erupt into my mouth and pool on my tongue, but I can’t get it all down with him taking up so much space and some dribbles out.

I swallow what I can with his dick still pulsing in my mouth before he finally withdraws. He watches the lost drop roll down my lip, then swipes his thumb through it and feeds it back to me.

“Every bit of it,” he says, so I pull his thumb all the way into my mouth, sucking on it and working it with my tongue to show him how clean I can get it.

He covers the flash of euphoria on his face with a smirk. “I didn’t take you for a brat, angel.”

I didn’t take me for a brat either, and my offended reaction must show on my face when I quickly release him.

“Nah, you’re not trying to be a brat at all,” he says, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “You really are a fucking angel, aren’t you?” He brushes his thumb along my jaw, looking at me like maybe he doesn’t hate me as much as he did before.

He snaps his gaze away quickly and helps me to my feet. My knees sting and my jaw aches, but I feel stupidly accomplished. I *did* something—I made him come! It’s an oddly powerful and heady feeling, but of course Dominic can’t have that, which he reminds me of by swiftly turning me and pulling my back against his chest. His arm bands around me, forcing me to face Ezra and Orion on the couch.

“Now, let’s see how wet you got from sucking my dick and swallowing my cum,” he hisses into my ear, his breath warm on my cheek. I stiffen in his hold as he snakes a hand down

and hitches my skirt up, exposing me to our audience. He runs his fingertips over my belly toward my underwear and I push at his arm that's pinning me to his body.

I know I shouldn't push him away again. In order for this whole idea to work, *my* idea, I need to let him touch me and I have to stop being so scared of it. All I have to do is let him, but my reflexes keep kicking in without my permission.

Dominic's getting sick of my shit. We both are.

"Ezra, help me out here?" He looks to his friend who rises off the couch and comes to stand in front of me. He caresses my cheeks and tucks my hair behind my ears.

"This will be a lot more fun if you let him do what he wants," he says. I stop struggling against Dominic's arm, but I'm still so tense I'm shaking.

"Come on beautiful, you don't have to be shy with us." Ezra rubs my arms gently and I relax at his touch. Why can I relax for him and not Dominic? Ezra leans in and presses his lips to mine, gently coaxing them open. He doesn't seem at all bothered that Dominic just came in my mouth, stroking and exploring me with his tongue as hungrily as he did that unexpected day in the hallway. This kiss is no less toe-curling than the first one.

He grins at me when he pulls away. "Your lips are swollen and you taste like cum," he says, eliciting a laugh from Orion.

"Thanks. I worked hard for that," I joke dryly, still stiff in Dominic's arms. I regret my words instantly, thinking they're going to call me a brat again, but Ezra takes it in stride.

"Yeah, you did. Watching you do that got me so fucking turned on. Did it turn you on, too? Why won't you let him check? I promise he'll make it feel good."

I chew on my lip. Huh, it is a little swollen. But it's one thing to have Dominic's cock in my mouth and quite another to have his fingers in... me. I'm not sure I'm ready for that,

even though I paid a heck of a lot of money for the wax, and this morning I put on a pretty new set of underwear, just in case he might see it. I *know* I need to get over my hangups and let him touch me.

I nod at Ezra, barely moving my head. He looks at his friend behind me and they communicate my consent without speaking. Ezra looks pleased and Dominic adjusts to hold up my skirt with the arm that's around my middle. He's holding onto me so tightly it's difficult to get enough air into my lungs. He slips his other hand into the front of my panties, inching slowly downward.

Ezra descends on my neck, kissing and sucking at my sensitive skin. I don't care if he marks me—I have enough high-necked shirts in my wardrobe to last for weeks. And it feels so good. He entertains his other hand with my breast, not even bothering to go under my shirt, massaging my flesh through the fabric.

When Dominic did it, it was both soothing and invigorating, but with Ezra, it's all invigorating. His hands are bold and his lips are bolder. Ezra can do anything he wants to me and I think I'd let him, but I'm not really in a place where I can stop and think that through.

“Well?” Orion asks. He's decided to get comfortable and is now lying back on the couch with his arms behind his head. “How wet is she?”

Dominic's fingers brush over my clit and my whole body lights up with a shock of electricity. Holy hell, what just happened? It never feels like this when I touch myself. I try to pull away from his hand but end up pushing further back into his body, his cock now firmly pressed against my ass. He's already hard again, a feat I didn't know was even possible.

Dominic dips his fingers between my legs and he learns what I've known the whole time.

I'm wet as hell.



# CHAPTER 13

## An eye for an eye

### SERAPHINA

Dominic doesn't stop at merely checking, though. He slides a teasing finger through my arousal, stroking and caressing, before he pushes it inside me. My breath gets caught in my throat and my entire body locks up, one hand grasping his solid arm and the other clinging to Ezra's shoulder. Ezra pauses his ministrations to my neck and breast to lean back and look at me, his warm eyes searching my face.

"So fucking wet," Dominic growls out. "I think our little angel here is a secret deviant."

His words send more sparks through my body and I clench around him while using his arm for support, because my legs are no longer doing an adequate job. He twists in another finger and I let out a whimper, lost in a haze of Ezra's kisses and Dominic's fingers working slowly inside me. My eyes close and my head rolls back to rest on Dominic's chest. I want more of those unexpected flickers of electricity. I've never experienced anything like this before, and I'm not sure I ever will again.

"You like that, baby? You like the way his fingers feel inside you?" Ezra asks.

I do. I really do. I'm coming apart in their arms, in their hands. Without even noticing, I've given them complete control over me, to do with me whatever they please. It's freeing, somehow. Why was I so scared of this? It feels *so* good. And despite all of Dominic's annoyed growling and

condescending smirks, he's taking the opportunity to please me. That counts for something.

"Yes," I finally breathe out.

"Yes, what?" Dominic asks, his voice husky.

"Yes, I like the way you feel inside me," I admit, even though speaking is a bit of a challenge. I fail to hold back a moan when Dominic rubs his thumb over my clit.

"I think she wants more," he says.

"That's our girl. You're gonna be a fucking carnival ride, aren't you, baby?" Ezra mutters, tonguing a sensitive spot below my ear.

Oh, he's so wonderfully filthy-mouthed, and I can't believe that mouth is on me—the inexperienced pastor's daughter caught by the demons in their lair of sin. I don't even recognize myself right now.

"She's so far gone she can barely stand," Dominic murmurs. He eases his fingers out of me and I clench down, trying to keep him in. He drags his wet fingers up to stroke my clit, making me jolt like a live wire. Another moan escapes me, louder this time; there's no holding it back.

"That feel good?" he asks. I can't speak, so I just nod. I'm aching for him to finish it—for him to end me so I can collapse in a heap on the floor and contemplate how the hell I ended up at their nonexistent mercy so freaking fast.

He slides his fingers back into me and presses his thumb against my clit, strumming it softly like I'm an instrument he's playing. I don't want to like him, but I certainly like what he's doing to my body. He pumps his fingers in and out until my muscles start to tremble around him. My panties are soaked and his hand is soaked, but he doesn't stop.

"You want to come, angel?" Dominic's voice is breathless, low, and he sounds like he can't wait either, like he's spent the last hour thinking about this very thing happening.

“Please?” My grip tightens on his arm and Ezra’s shoulder. Everything I’ve felt under their touch has been a hundred times more glorious than any orgasm I’ve ever given myself. If he doesn’t make me come soon, I’ll probably die right here, sandwiched between my tormentors.

Dominic speeds up, the rhythm of his fingers and thumb bringing me closer to the heaven I’m seeking in his hands. Every muscle in my body tightens, and I know my orgasm is about to break the surface.

“You’re almost there.” His voice is calming, his lips brushing my ear. “Come for me,” he commands, pressing his thumb harder against my clit.

My orgasm rips through my body and I come apart on his hand with a shout, his fingers sliding in and out, thumb massaging and caressing me into oblivion. Ezra dives in, attacking my mouth with his, swallowing my noises. I shudder and shake in their arms as the most insane orgasm I’ve ever had tears through me. I can’t think, I can’t breathe. Everything fades away except for the pleasure coursing through my veins.

Ezra is still kissing me when I finally collapse against Dominic, completely and utterly spent, the rise and fall of Dominic’s chest at my back soothing me as he slides his fingers free.

“Good girl,” he whispers in my ear. He releases me from his arms as Ezra takes over holding me steady. I want to turn to Dominic, to say something, anything, but he’s already walking away, sliding the doors closed behind him as he leaves. For a moment, I’m confused, until I remember what a huge asshole he is. I guess what we just did isn’t enough to change that.

“I’m dying to know what a soaking wet angel tastes like,” Ezra says, slipping his fingers between my legs. I don’t even flinch at the intrusion. What a difference an orgasm makes. He strokes through my wetness—it’s everywhere—and pulls his

fingers up to his mouth, licking them clean as I watch. He smiles at me, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I should have known. You’re fucking divine.”

Even if I had the ability to talk right now, I don’t know the appropriate way to respond to that. All I can do is study him, his lips full and wet and so kissable, his face covered with stubble like he hasn’t bothered to shave all weekend. It feels nice here in his arms and I want him to keep holding me.

Apparently, that’s too much to ask for because he motions over to where Orion is laid back on the couch.

“Go cuddle teddy bear over there.” He pulls my underwear back into place and smoothes my skirt down, before nudging me away from him. “I’ll be right back.”

I look over to Orion, who opens his arms up to me, as if this is some everyday thing that we do. Am I just supposed to lay on him? Doesn’t he have a boyfriend? He beckons me with his fingers and I move to the couch on shaky legs, climbing over him as gracefully as I can, wedging myself between the sofa cushions and his body. He wraps his arm around me and this is way more cozy than it should be.

Orion isn’t soft looking in the least. He’s the smallest of the demons I’ve met so far, though still slightly taller and bigger than me. His muscles are lean and sinuous, cording over his slender frame, his prominent hip bones juxtaposing the smooth lines of his body.

However, he is ridiculously comfortable to cuddle, and we fit together surprisingly well. Once I’m settled, Ezra leaves through the same sliding pocket doors that Dominic did.

“Are you okay?” Orion asks.

“Sure.” My voice comes out a whisper. Physically, I’m exhausted, but sublime. Emotionally, I’m torn. I’ve been exiled from the nirvana of Dominic and Ezra’s attention and thrown back into reality—where Dominic hates me and I’m nothing special to Ezra.



Orion, as if sensing my lie, strokes his hand gently up and down my back. “Dominic’s a dick. Don’t let him get to you.”

“It’s hard not to. I remember what it was like when we were friends. I had no idea that all these years he hated me.”

“He doesn’t hate you. Not really. He’s just been through hell and has a lot of complicated shit to sort out. We all do.”

“At least I know I’m not alone, then.”

He’s quiet for a minute, leaving me to ponder what complicated shit he’s dealing with.

“For what it’s worth, I hope your plan works,” he says finally.

## DOMINIC

I have to get away from her. As soon as I know Ezra’s got her, I get the hell out of that room, away from her, her scent, her soft body in my hands. Ducking out to the back porch, I brace my arms on the thick stone railing. The November air has a biting chill and I welcome the ache of it into my lungs.

She actually got fucking waxed. I was expecting her to ignore that part, or fight me on it, but nope, she showed up today *all in*. I should have guessed it from the earrings. Yeah, I fucking noticed those, too.

Ezra steps out a minute later, concern etched on his face, but I have a bone to pick with him.

“Was all that really necessary?” I ask. “*He’ll make it feel good?* You’re a manipulative prick. She didn’t need me to get her off today. I was just messing around with her.”

“Yeah, she fucking did. She deserved that orgasm and you know it. We’re helping you for a goddamn reason, you stubborn asshole. You’re welcome, by the way. You never

would have gotten your hands on her if I didn't have my tongue down her throat.”

I shake my head. It burns me a little that she's so open to him and closed to me. I know why she hates me, but what I don't understand is, “Why does she like you so much?”

“Everybody likes me.”

“Why does everybody like you?”

“Because they don't know me.”

Shit. That one snuck up on me. Ezra's cuts are so deep it's a marvel how he even walks around some days, separated into a thousand jagged pieces, and my thoughtless words can either make him laugh or send him spiraling.

“Well, I know you and I like you, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let you put your tongue in my mouth.”

“I can find much prettier mouths to put my tongue in, man.”

I laugh. Ezra and I are brothers in the truest sense of the word. Forged together in the fires of our teen years, my grandparents were his foster parents, from his fifteenth birthday to the day he finally aged out of the system that failed him at every turn.

His fuckboy persona has been carefully crafted and honed over the years—a weapon he designed to protect himself. He's so convinced of his worthlessness that he keeps everyone focused on his dick, pushing away anyone who tries to get close to any other part of him.

He's gotten so good at it that hardly anyone knows what else he has to offer, like what a brilliant writer he is, how empathetic he can be, and how fucking loyal of a friend he is. He doesn't even see it himself, but the demons do, and I suspect Seraphina might, too. There's an unexpected connection between those two and I'm going to have to keep

an eye on it, otherwise, he'll destroy her before I get the chance to savor it.

“She did deserve it, though, Dom. I've never seen a girl take to a goddamn cock so fast. You can't always be an asshole to her. You gotta give back. Or let me give back. You know I'll be more than happy to get rid of that pesky virginity of hers.”

I don't understand why that thought makes my stomach roil. He'd be good to her—that's his whole schtick. She'd have fun, progress would be made, and quickly. I don't want him to be the one to do it, though, but I'm also not ready to examine why.

“You can touch her all you want,” I say. “Put your tongue fucking anywhere, I don't care. But she's going to stay a virgin until I fuck her. That pussy belongs to me.”

Ezra chokes on a protest, but I know he won't fight me on it. It's not like he's hurting for free pussy or anything.

“Whatever you say, man. But you better get the fuck in there before she picks Orion over both of us.”

It's a legitimate risk. Orion is more like her than any of us, though his softness is wrapped up in all kinds of sick and twisted shit. Ezra's right—I better get in there.

I sneak back into the family room and stop in my tracks. Seraphina's lying on the couch with Orion, more on top of him than not, her long hair fanned out over his arm that's tracing gentle lines up and down her back. It doesn't look sexual, just really freaking comfortable.

He's probably high as hell, and I'm not sure if he got her high too, or if she's still in the afterglow of that orgasm. I've never made a girl come that hard before, from just my hand, no less. I honestly thought it would take a lot longer to get her to that point, but I guess Ezra had the right idea. Not that I'm going to tell him that.

Seraphina cracks her eyelids open as I sit in the chair next to the couch, watching her.

“Do I have to go now?” she asks, as if she somehow expects her legs to work properly.

I could be a dick—say yes and kick her out. I could be the asshole Ezra says I am and run her out of here. Honestly, though, she looks like she belongs right where she is, so I’ll let her stay. For a little longer, anyway.

“No, angel, you can relax. You did well today.”



# CHAPTER 14

## Deeds of darkness

### SERAPHINA

I'm having mixed feelings about this arrangement with Dominic. So far it's been painful and humiliating, and that was just the wax. My nails look fabulous, though.

Sunday at the Lair was infinitely better. After Dominic and Ezra gave me the best orgasm of my life, I curled up with Orion and he rubbed my back and gave me tips on how to lessen my gag reflex. Eventually, I dozed off on him while he played games on his phone. I was too spent to do anything else, and he didn't seem to mind. Would his scary-as-hell boyfriend mind that I cuddled with him? If he does, I hope I never find out.

Wednesday morning, as I'm getting ready for class, my phone vibrates with a call from Dominic. He tells me I need to find a demon named Nash Laski and retrieve something from him. Evidently, Nash is annoyed at Dominic and took a book he needs. I can't figure out why they're being so immature, or why it's my job to get it, until Dominic says that I should do whatever Nash wants me to do in exchange for the book.

And that my new skills will be sure to come in handy.

And that Nash will most likely be in the college library after lunch.

Is he testing me to see if I'll follow his instructions outside of the Lair? *Okay, why not?*

Heading out the door for class, I run through the demons in my head. I still don't know how many there are, or which one

Nash is. Is he Orion's sinister demon boyfriend? The athletic one from the party? Someone else I haven't met yet? I guess I'll find out later.

During my daily check-in call with Dad, he's not particularly invested in preaching at me over the phone, a fact I'm beyond grateful for. I'll take the little blessings where I can get them. I give him my boring update and answer a few insipid questions about what I'm learning before he ends the call, taking the weight off my shoulders with him.

Well, some of the weight. I still have a task to do and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be looking forward to this or not. Is it bad that I kind of am? I'm also massively terrified, though, because I don't know what's in store for me or whom I'm meeting up with. On the bright side, I've been meaning to check out the college's library, so no matter what happens, I can at least do that.

After trekking across campus to the literary arts building, I'm surprised to discover that the library is small and dark, in complete contrast to the computer lab down the hall. Over there, monitors gleam off the white walls and the sounds of students chatting and typing fill the massive room. The library, on the other hand, is quiet, cozy, and somewhat overdue for a remodel.

There's no librarian at the desk and only one other student is in here—a brawny guy with neatly styled, dark blond hair who glances up at me as I pause in the doorway. Could he be the athletic one? My memories from Halloween are foggy and I can't be sure. The guy at the party was wearing a mask and had no distinctive tattoos or hair color, like the others. This could be him, or he might just be some random student and Nash isn't even here.

This guy looks too clean cut to live in that house. His face is stern and he's wearing a pair of stylish dark-rimmed glasses. He looks like he could have been nice once, but maybe the world beat him down too many times and it's not worth it to

appear friendly anymore. He hunches his muscular body back over the book he's reading and I spy a letterman jacket on the back of his chair.

I head toward an empty table, sneaking a peek at the jacket. There it is: LASKI, in big block letters. Sucking in a deep breath of library-scented air, I turn on my heel, mustering up my confidence. It's now or never.

"Excuse me, are you Nash?" I ask in a hushed tone, even though there is literally nobody else here to shush me.

He lifts his head up to look at me again, and there's a flicker of recognition between us. This is definitely the guy from the party who showed me how to smoke. *No wonder that night is hazy.* Same build, same impossibly pale blue eyes—eyes that are currently scrutinizing me like I'm about to sell him something. He nods almost imperceptibly, staring at me as my confidence drips down my spine and recedes into the worn out carpet.

"We met on Halloween. I'm Seraphina." I offer my hand to him, and after looking at it for a moment, he reaches out and shakes it slowly, the heat from his fingers contrasting the coolness of his gaze.

"Dominic told me you have a book that he needs, and he asked me to get it from you." A fraction of a smile pulls at his mouth, but it's so slight I might just be imagining it. "May I have it?"

He doesn't respond. We're paused in place, our eyes locked on each other in the silence and stillness of the library. Finally, and to my infinite relief, he reaches for a book on the table and picks it up. But then he doesn't hand it to me. I'm frozen in the awkwardness of our weird standoff. What do I say? Why isn't he saying anything?

Nash sets the book in his lap and taps his fingers on it, as if he's waiting for me to answer a question he never asked. He's clearly not about to give it to me. My head is swimming with



questions: Am I supposed to let him know that Dominic told me to do whatever he wants for it? Should I offer to do something? Do they do this kind of thing a lot—holding each other’s belongings hostage for favors? How am I supposed to do what he wants if he doesn’t *tell* me what he wants?

It’s then I realize that maybe he is, wordlessly, telling me what he wants. I glance down at his fingers tapping on the book, slowly, suggestively, right over his... *Yep*. Heat warms my cheeks as I look from his hand to his face. He’s watching me, waiting patiently for me to understand.

“Okay.” I swallow loudly, but I’m not entirely sure it’s from nervousness.

A small grin hints at his lips, giving me my answer. Dominic said my new skills would come in handy, and Nash is definitely inviting me to repeat what I did on Sunday. Is this terrible—using my mouth on a stranger for a book, even if he is kind of hot? Okay, extremely hot. Although not fiery, brooding, hell-spawn hot like Dominic, but more silent, nerdy, athletic hot, if that’s a thing. Nash is absolutely making it a thing.

I’m honestly surprised I don’t feel more shame about this. A little awkward embarrassment maybe, but I’m used to that. The longer I stand in front of him, energy building between us, the more I *want* to do what he’s asking. I want to prove to Dominic, and now Nash, that I’m not a lost cause. I can do anything I put my mind to.

I take a short step back as Nash stands up and looks down at me. He sets the book on the table and with a slight jerk of his chin, motions toward the far end of the library. I start off hesitantly in that direction and he follows, placing his hand on my shoulder to guide me.

When we reach the study rooms in the back, he ushers me into one, closing the door behind us. I drop my backpack on

the floor and face him, neither of us moving to turn on the light, content to conduct our clandestine meeting in the dark.

“So—” I start, my voice shaking. I wish it wouldn’t do that. I don’t want him to think that I don’t want to be here, because I do. I’m just... excited.

Nash crooks his finger at me, beckoning me closer. When I’m a foot away from him, he snatches me by the waist and pulls my body against his. He already feels familiar since I spent so much time at the party curled up against him. His scent is rich and warm, with a hint of chlorine. *Swimmer?*

At the party, he was nice to me and kept me safe, and now I can return the favor with one of my own. Desire streaks through me, and I lean into him, my heart pounding hard like it’s trying to escape my body. He brushes his thumb softly over my lips and then dips it into my mouth. I suck on it instinctively as he slides it over my tongue.

His other hand slips down from my waist and gives my ass a firm squeeze, before he reaches between us and unbuckles his belt one-handed. *Oh god, that’s hot.* I hear the slow zip of his pants opening and I’m so turned on now that my arousal is practically pooling between my legs. *Who am I?*

Nash withdraws his thumb from my mouth and gently pushes down on my shoulder. I sink to my knees, taking the opportunity to graze my hands over his taut muscles on the way. He’s built like a statue and my mind helpfully imagines what he looks like naked. Good. I bet he looks good.

He gathers my hair in his hand as I reach into his pants to pull his swollen cock out, my pulse quickening from the thrill of being on the roller coaster once again. There’s barely any light in here, but from what I can see, his cock is a gorgeous thing, like Dominic’s. A bit thicker, a little more curved.

I flick my tongue out against the bead of liquid at the tip and the taste of him ignites an urgency in me. Is it because Nash is so hot? Because we’re in the school library? Because

I'm following Dominic's instructions? All I know is that I want to show him what I learned, and I want to do it now.

Taking him into my mouth, I work my tongue over his length before settling him as far back in my throat as I can. I've been using the gag reflex tips Orion shared with me, and it appears that they've worked. It's astounding, actually. I can get a lot more of Nash in than I could with Dominic and I'm pretty sure Nash is longer.

I shouldn't be comparing their dicks, though. The differences aren't important, because they both react to being in my mouth the same way—appreciatively. Nash lets me take my time with him, exploring and licking and sucking until his thrusts grow ragged and his cum erupts onto my tongue. *I did it! Again!*

Giddy euphoria swirls in me as I swallow everything and milk out the last drops, not really wanting it to be over. I rest my forehead against his groin, gripping the backs of his legs as the sound of his deep breathing fills the room. I'm still expecting a wave of shame to overtake me, but it never comes. Is that weird?

Nash stirs me out of my brief introspection when he gently taps me on the chin and pulls his cock out of my mouth. He helps me to stand, his gaze boring into me as if he's trying to see my soul through my eyes. Maybe he can. Or maybe he's just trying not to be rude by shoving me out the door so soon after he came down my throat.

All my thoughts stop completely when he connects his mouth with mine, my body burning against his, fire racing through my veins. He devours my mouth in a lavish feast, deep and urgent, my head growing dizzy as heat washes over my skin, drawing me closer to him. The kiss turns soft and sweet before he pulls away and we both catch our breath in silence.

After reaching out to smooth my hair back into place, he wraps me up in his arms, resting his chin on the top of my head. It's more comfortable than it should be, like he could be my boyfriend and we've known each other for years. I sink into his warmth and decide that someday I'd like to get to know him better, have an actual conversation or something.

But all too soon, he releases me. He hands me my bag, opens the door, and nudges me back out into the library. He doesn't follow, so I scoop up Dominic's book from his desk on my way past, heading back out into the glaring light to deliver my reward for a job well done.

NASH

*Holy shit.*



## CHAPTER 15

Decently and in order

### SERAPHINA

From Dominic's reaction when I hand him his book, it's apparent that he didn't think I was actually going to do it. I relish the look on his face before he tucks the faint wash of surprise back underneath his usual moody scowl.

He tells me that Ezra is going to meet up with me on Friday and then adds Ezra's number to my phone. He says nothing else about what the plans are, so god only knows what they have in store for me this time.

Ezra sends a text Friday morning asking if he can pick me up at my dorm around seven and then take me out to dinner. I debate asking him where we're going so I can plan an appropriate outfit, but it's not like there's anywhere fancy to eat around campus, anyway. I settle on a pair of slacks and a long-sleeve blouse before throwing my coat on, since the weather has turned cold.

I'm glad I don't dress up much because we end up walking over to Starlight Diner, where it's practically a crime to order anything other than a cheeseburger and a milkshake for dinner.

Even though it's a casual place, Ezra still opens the door for me like we're on an actual date. I'm surprised, considering the circumstances. He could do almost anything he wants to me—and I assume Dominic has encouraged him to—without the extra effort of making it look like something it's not.

I can't help but feel special anyway, being in Ezra's presence and having all of his attention on me, like I'm the

only girl he's ever seen before. How does he do it? I know I'm just the latest of many, and not even that, really. He didn't pick me; Dominic offered me up on a platter. The way he looks at me, though? It's like I'm important to him. Precious, even.

Despite having his tongue in my mouth when Dominic got me off, and him even stealing a taste of the aftermath, I'm still anxious around him. He's bold and brave and takes whatever he wants, but I'm worried I won't wait for him, that I'll throw myself at him unquestioningly. I try to act like he doesn't affect me, but I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

After the waitress takes our order, I glance around the bustling diner. Women are checking him out, even the ones who appear to be on dates. How many of them has he already slept with? How many will he? For some reason, that thought is a punch to my stomach, even though we're not really together. Neither of us are here for a relationship—he's just doing his friend the strangest favor ever, that's all. I'm just some kind of weird sexual experiment.

Over dinner, I learn that he's a creative writing major, which I never would have guessed. He says he's working on a couple of novels, but isn't close to finishing anything yet. He asks me about my classes, too, but I don't know how to make them sound interesting. If he's bored, he doesn't let on, listening intently and asking thoughtful questions.

I try to be a good dinner companion, but it's hard to concentrate. I'm eyeing the flannel he's wearing over his t-shirt, wondering if he'd let me steal it because it probably smells like him, and I'm distracted by his mouth, too. I want it on mine, and I want his hands to touch me again. It's all too apparent why girls throw themselves at him, and I don't really blame him for taking advantage of it.

When we finish our meal, we head back outside into the frigid evening air. Winter is fast approaching and I can't wait to see what this little town looks like blanketed in snow. Ezra notices me pulling my coat tighter to fend off the chill and

tucks me up against the side of the building, blocking the wind with his body. His red coat contrasts his blue hair and he looks so colorful and alive against the backdrop of the dreary evening.

He hasn't said anything about what the rest of the plan is for tonight. Even if this date is just a short, meaningless part of some larger quest I'm on, it's still fun. I like him, and although whatever attraction I'm experiencing can only be temporary, it doesn't mean I'm ready for our evening to end. Not yet.

"So, what did Dominic tell you to do to me tonight?" I ask, no longer able to contain my curiosity.

He snuggles in close, wrapping his arms around me. "What makes you think he told me what to do?"

"Isn't that the arrangement? He told me what to do with Nash, but he didn't say anything about you, so I figure he told you something instead. Am I wrong?"

He grins. "He didn't tell me what to do. He told me what *not* to do."

"Well, that's interesting. What did he tell you not to do?"

Ezra doesn't answer the question, but leans down to kiss me, instead. I welcome it, indulging in the fantasy that he likes me too, that maybe I could be his girlfriend, that there's something more here than what actually is.

"Do you want to come hang out at the house for a bit?" he asks, threading his fingers through mine.

There's no telling what's going to happen to me back at the Lair. I don't know if the other demons will be there, if they'll join us in what he's going to do, or is *allowed* to do, but I'm game for anything he wants to try with me tonight. It's all part of the plan, and actually liking him is just a bonus.

"Sure." I catch a flicker of surprise on his face like he wasn't expecting me to agree, before his panty-dropping grin returns and we head down the sidewalk toward his house.



The Lair is quiet when he lets us in, which seems unusual to me. It's Friday night—aren't they supposed to be partying? There are barely any lights on and the darkness makes it extra creepy. I side-eye a lecherous demon face carved into the newel post as I take off my coat and shoes.

"Where is everyone?" I whisper, not daring to disturb the stillness of the house.

"Why? You want to make this a group thing?" he asks, taking my coat and hanging it up by the door. He's clearly not offended by the idea. If I said yes, there's no doubt in my mind he'd round up a couple of the others to join us, but I'm comfortable with it being the two of us.

"No, I'm just used to the house being a bit more lively."

"Well, Nash is around here somewhere, but you won't get much noise from him. The others are next door at the Delta house for poker night."

"You didn't want to go to poker night?"

"Nope. There was something else I wanted to do instead." His gaze flickers to my mouth.

"Oh, what's that?" The longer we stand here, the harder it is to keep my hands off of him.

"You'll see." His brown eyes glint in the low light, his lips turning up into a smile. He looks around the foyer, like he's trying to figure out where he wants to go. Finally, he glances up the stairs and raises his eyebrows in question. I can only assume that his bedroom is up there. *Yes, please.*

He takes me by the hand and leads me to the second floor, opening the first door in the hall.

"Dom's room is down that way," he points, "and Nash is across from him. Maynard and Orion are on the third floor."

"Is Maynard the scary one with the really deep voice?"

Ezra laughs. "That's him."

I'm excited to finally learn the name of Orion's sinister goth boyfriend. Somehow it really suits him and totally doesn't at the same time.

"How many people live here?" I ask, stepping into Ezra's room.

He follows me in and closes the door. "Just us. There's only five of us this year."

"There's usually more?"

"Sometimes more, sometimes less. The house has eight bedrooms, so I imagine at some point they've all been in use. They're all furnished."

"Why only five then? Isn't that a waste? Doesn't the owner want the rent money?"

He shakes his head. "The owner doesn't need the rent money. Maynard and Dom worked it out to be just us, since we're kind of a tight group. We've been best friends since high school."

I stop to ponder that and look around Ezra's room for the first time. It's spacious and clean, with navy blue walls, and hardwood floors. The furniture is old and solid, and I spy more demon faces carved into the woodwork, watching me.

A massive bed takes up the center of one wall, and it looks as though it was hastily made, but it's made, nonetheless. To one side of the bed is a desk, cluttered with notebooks and a laptop, which must be where he writes. On the other side is a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, the shelves filled so completely that there are also stacks of books on the floor in front of it and taking over a nearby dresser.

It's not at all what I was expecting. There's no dirty laundry on the floor, or posters of questionable taste. It doesn't look like a sex-crazed college boy lives here at all. Is this a façade to convince girls he isn't exactly that?

“Not much of a reader?” I joke, crossing the room to see what kinds of books he has. He laughs and the sound goes straight between my legs. *What is this man doing to me?*

“Not lately. What quiet time I get these days I have to spend on schoolwork. I don’t want to lose my scholarship.”

“Same here.”

His book collection spans a ridiculous amount of genres. It’s like a very disorganized used bookstore in here. I crouch down to check out the stacks on the floor before glancing over at him. He’s leaning back against the dresser with his hands tucked in his pockets, watching me with a smile.

“What’s your favorite book?” he asks.

“You’re going to laugh at me if I tell you.”

“Why would I laugh? If you tell me yours, I’ll tell you mine. You’ll definitely laugh at mine.”

When I stand up and walk over to him, he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me in. How does a person’s body feel this good? He’s a mere mortal, like everyone else, so what is it about him in particular that makes me feel so—I don’t even know what—melty, tingly. *Alive.*

I breathe in his scent. “Fine. *Pride and Prejudice.*”

“That’s a great book. Why would I laugh at that?”

“You’ve read *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“I’ve read lots of things.”

“Apparently. Now, what’s your favorite?” I catch that flicker of uncertainty again, like he regrets saying that he’d tell me. He tightens his arms around me and looks me in the eyes, anyway.

“*Anne of Green Gables.*”

I don’t laugh, but it does seem like an odd choice for him.

“That’s a good book, too, although I’m surprised it’s your favorite. You’ve practically got your own library in here to choose from.”

“It’s mostly sentimental at this point. It was the book I read when I was a kid that got me into reading. My life was kind of crap growing up, and so was Anne’s. She made the best of it, so I decided I could, too.”

“Well, whatever influence Anne had on you, I’m glad. I like you.”

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say because he instantly tenses up and looks uncomfortable, but he doesn’t push me away.

“We’re talking too much,” he says, relaxing his shoulders again. “I’ve got you all to myself and we’re talking about books. There are much better things we could be doing right now.”

His hands knead the soft flesh of my hips through my pants and I hook my arms over his shoulders. He doesn’t hesitate to kiss me, slipping his tongue into my mouth the way he does so well. I lean into him, seeking relief for the friction I’m craving, only to discover that his leg is already between my thighs, pressing against me. *Oh, he’s good.*

He knows exactly how to use his entire body. His leg between mine, his grip on my hips guiding me over him, his soft lips and skillful tongue working my mouth—it’s all-consuming. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I know that I want more, and here, now, with him? It works. I reach down to his belt, but he puts his hand on mine, stopping me.

“No.”

His expression is tense and fiery, and my heart pangs from his reproach. Did I do something wrong? Am I too inexperienced for him?



# CHAPTER 16

Lust and have not

## SERAPHINA

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but it doesn't budge.

"Remember when I said Dom told me what not to do?"  
Ezra asks.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not allowed to take my clothes off."

Is he serious? Is Dominic serious?

"What? Why not? He let me give Nash a blow job."

Ezra laughs, tightening his grip on me. "He's convinced that if I get my clothes off, I'm going to fuck you, and I'm not allowed to pop your cherry. He wants to be the one to do it."

I still at that, for a couple of reasons. One—

"That's such an awful phrase, Ezra! It's not a cherry, it's a hymen, and I might not even have one! But even if I *do* have one, they don't pop. They're actually kind of stretchy." Yes, I've been doing research because the idea of someone *popping my cherry* is downright horrifying. Turns out, the reality of it isn't so scary at all.

Ezra looks me over with an amused twinkle in his eyes. "What should I say instead? He wants to be the first one to stretch your hymen, if you have one?"

We both laugh.

"Yeah, that sounds much better."

Oh, and the second reason—the thought of losing my virginity to Dominic has my stomach instantly in knots. With Ezra, like everything else, it would be easy. A second ago, I was ready to do it tonight, right now. He’s fucked so many girls, I’m sure it wouldn’t even occur to me to be self-conscious in front of him. He probably wouldn’t even remember it months from now.

But Dominic. Dominic comes with tension and history. He comes with... feelings I’m not ready to examine.

“I may not be allowed to take *my* clothes off, but he didn’t say a damn thing about yours.” His hands move to the hem of my shirt and he waits for me to raise my arms in permission before gently lifting it over my head.

He drifts his palm over the swell of my breast and along the curve of my waist. I want to take his shirt off in response, but I can’t. It’s not fair, though it’s clear that Dominic had the right idea if he intends to be the one to have sex with me first.

“Why does Dominic want to be the one?” I ask. “He doesn’t even like me.”

Ezra undoes the button on my pants and lowers the zipper slowly. “He likes you just fine. He might not want to, but he does.”

“Why does he not want to like me?”

“I think this is a conversation you need to have with him.” He crouches down and slips my socks off my feet before hooking his fingers into the waistband of my pants, pausing to look up at me.

He’s right. This is hardly the time to be discussing how another guy feels about me, when I’ve got Ezra undressing me like he’s opening a present and doesn’t want to tear the paper. He continues talking anyway.

“Dom looks at you and relives what happened when he was a kid. He’s held on to that pain for so long, I don’t think he

knows what to do with it or how to let it go. Like he's afraid of failing himself or his mother by forgiving you."

"But I didn't do anything. I didn't even know."

He slides my pants down over my hips and I lift each foot so he can pull them off. "I know. And he knows. He just needs time to sort out his feelings, because they sure as fuck aren't what he thought they were when you showed up out of nowhere."

Ezra is full of surprises. I don't know who this man is. He's a cocky fuckboy, a player, but he's also insanely astute. Gentle. Intelligent. And obviously very close to Dominic.

"How do you know him so well?"

Ezra stands up and sets my pants on his dresser with my shirt. I'm suddenly very aware that I'm standing in front of him in only my bra and panties, a pretty blue set I picked for tonight specifically because it matches his hair. He runs his fingertips underneath the straps of my bra, the contact of his skin against mine drawing me in closer.

"We're like brothers. His grandparents were my foster parents."

Ezra was a foster kid? What happened to his parents? Were Dominic's grandparents good to him?

"I was a hell-raiser," he explains. "In trouble constantly, getting kicked out of home after home. Dom didn't care about that. He went to bat for me. Got his grandparents to take me in, even though they already didn't know what to do with him. They'd had a hard enough time raising their own daughter and weren't really expecting to have to do it all over again with a couple of ornery teenage boys."

He reaches behind me and unclasps my bra.

"And god knows we didn't make it easy. Eventually, I figured out how to keep myself out of trouble, though. I



learned it felt a hell of a lot better spending the night with a nice warm girl than in a cold fucking jail cell.”

There’s that stomach punch again, this time tinged with sadness. I don’t like thinking about him with other women, which is unreasonable because I heard all about his proclivities ten minutes after I first saw him. But learning why he is the way he is? Knowing that his life growing up wasn’t what he deserved at all?

Okay, so maybe I’m not as much of a sexual experiment as I am a therapeutic activity for him. I can live with that, especially when he continues to undress me, pushing the straps of my bra off my shoulders and letting it fall to the floor.

His warm hands cup my breasts and I lean into them, loving the way he touches me. Before I can speak, he dips his head down and takes my nipple in his mouth, kissing and nipping at it. My head falls back and I close my eyes, delving my hands into the soft strands of his colorful hair.

He works my breasts with his palm and his mouth until I’m convinced I could come just from this. I make the most of his thigh pressed against me, practically riding him, aching for more.

He groans and leans back, his gaze burning into mine. “You’re killing me, angel.”

Before I can respond, he drops to his knees and removes the last bit of clothing from me—my panties—kissing my belly and breasts on his way back to standing. He pushes me gently toward his bed and I go willingly. *Very willingly.*

The soft blanket beneath me is the perfect contrast to his firm body as he crawls over me and settles his hips between my legs. It may not be fair that I’m naked while he’s still fully dressed, but I’m captivated by the feel of his clothes brushing against my bare skin: the roughness of his jeans between my thighs, his t-shirt rubbing against my breasts, the soft sleeves of his flannel touching my arms. I wrap my legs around him as

he grinds against me, but realize that I'm getting my arousal all over his clothes.

"I'll get you messy," I say, unwrapping my legs from him. He catches one with his arm and puts it back.

"Then make a fucking mess. Ruin me." He smirks before kissing me, grinding against me even harder. I both love and hate that we're separated by his clothes. It would be so easy to free his cock and let him slide it into me, to take the step that's somehow monumental and yet so simple.

As if he can tell what I'm thinking, and still determined to follow Dominic's stupid rule, he lowers himself down my body, kissing my skin on the way.

I swallow hard when I understand what he's about to do. This is so far out of my realm of experience, and undeniably intimate. Maybe more than sex, but I wouldn't know. I'm nervous and not sure what to do with myself.

He lifts his chin up to look at me, and I prop one arm under my head so I can look down at him.

"I may not be allowed to fuck you, but I still want to make you come. Is that okay?"

The idea is equally terrifying and exciting. I nod.

"That's my girl. Tell me if I do anything you don't like."

"Okay." I can't imagine there's anything he could do to me down there that I wouldn't like.

He licks his lips and then goes back to kissing my belly, moving farther and farther down until his head is between my legs. He lifts my thigh up and out of the way, opening me up to him, his face mere inches from where only the clinic doctor and the wax technician have seen.

My body trembles with anticipation and when he kisses my clit, my hands clench fistfuls of his blanket. He grins and does

it again, this time using his tongue, much the same way he kisses my mouth. My hips buck in response.

He continues to use his mouth on me, his tongue sliding over my clit, slowly building the fire that's curling through my body. My hands move to grip his hair as I writhe beneath him, chasing the flames.

"That's it, angel." His voice has become gruff and I love it. "You taste so fucking good."

My breath comes in short gasps as he works me with his tongue. I'm getting closer and I clench my teeth to keep quiet, wanting to hold on a little longer. I've given all control to Ezra, though, and he brings me to the edge of my pleasure and keeps me there for agonizing minutes. Just when I'm sure I'll die from want, I feel it, so close.

"Ezra," I whisper, when the wave of my orgasm threatens. "I'm going to come."

"That's the idea." He gives one long, slow lick, then circles my clit with his tongue. "Let go."

My orgasm erupts in an inferno, ravaging every nerve in my body until I'm breathless and shaking, transformed into a boneless mass of satisfaction, naked and spent in Ezra's bed. I want to hold him, to feel his skin against mine, but as he crawls up to lie behind me, tucking me into the curve of his body, I'm reminded that he's still wearing all of his clothes.

*Damn you, Dominic.*

His jeans press up against the backs of my bare thighs and I trace my fingertips over the fabric of his shirt, letting the aftershocks of my orgasm subside.

"You look so fucking beautiful in my bed," he says.

I squeeze his arm tighter around me in response, unable to form words. Instead, I inhale the sweet smell of him surrounding me and relax into his body while consciousness slips away.

“Fuck that. You’re beautiful all the time.”

Ezra lets me drift to sleep, even as my brain tries hard to make excuses. *I’m just resting. It will only be for a few minutes until I catch my breath.* When I finally open my eyes, he’s still behind me, nudging me gently.

“You’re more than welcome to spend the night, angel, but I think that’s a decision you should make when you’re awake.”

Shit. How much of this will I have to explain to my roommates if I don’t come home? Too much, probably.

“I should go.” I sit up and rub my arms, a chill creeping in now that I don’t have Ezra’s warm body blanketed around me.

He rolls off the bed and pulls his flannel from over his t-shirt, then helps me into it. He buttons the oversized shirt for me, a playful smile on his lips.

“I can’t wait to be inside you,” he says. “I fucking dreamed about it.”

## EZRA

Yeah, I said that, and it was one hundred percent true. And what a dream it was. The blush creeps up her cheeks at my words, so I keep the rest of it to myself. What I’m not going to tell her is that I wasn’t the only one in the dream, taking her, sharing her, giving her more dick and orgasms than she could handle. Instead, I switch to more mundane topics.

“The bathroom is in the hall, two doors to the left. There are washcloths in the cabinet, if you want one.”

“Oooh, amenities! Do you provide this service to all your dates?”

I know she’s joking, but it kills me to imagine what she must think of someone like me. My reputation is well-

deserved, and it's never bothered me. Most of the time, I can even use it to my advantage.

If I let her believe that my room has a revolving door for hookups and one-night-stands, maybe that will help us both get through this. But I can't. After a moment of deliberation, I do the one thing I swore I wouldn't when I invited her here—tell her the truth.

“I've never brought a girl up here. No one has been in my room before.”

She looks shocked, probably trying to figure out the logistics of my lifestyle, fucking a new girl every week, sometimes every night. Anywhere and everywhere, basically, except in my private space. But I'll keep those sordid details to myself. She's the only girl in the world right now, and I won't have her thinking otherwise.

“Oh. I didn't mean to intrude.”

“You didn't. I invited you.”

“Why, though? Why me?”

I reach out to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. She looks up at me with those eyes, so big and questioning. Why *did* I invite her here? Because it felt like I would die if I didn't.

“This isn't the same kind of thing,” I tell her, and as her face falls, so does my stomach. It hurts me that I've hurt her feelings. Now I'm having feelings too and that shit is not okay. “I didn't mean that the way it sounded.”

“No? It sounded okay, I guess. I know I'm just a weird sex project.”

I laugh, I can't help it. I could tell her that no, she's not a weird sex project, but that's exactly the arrangement she made with Dom, and she just figured out how to explain it so succinctly.

“Maybe you are, but that’s not *all* you are. I invited you here because I wanted to. You’re nice to be around.”

I’m so used to being able to say the right things, reading women and telling them exactly what they want to hear, but this situation with Seraphina really isn’t the same. She’s bared her soft underbelly to a whole houseful of demons, and I don’t want to take advantage of her any more than she’s already asked us to.

But that leaves me just as vulnerable as her.



## CHAPTER 17

No rest for the wicked

### SERAPHINA

Another day, another “date” with a demon. The only reason I don’t mind Dominic farming me out to his friends for sex lessons is because it keeps me from having to deal directly with him. Aside from that first day, my interactions with him have been fairly minimal.

It’s the Sunday before Thanksgiving break, two days after my earth-shattering good time with Ezra. He walked me home that night and I kept his flannel—and I have no intention of giving it back any time soon. This way I can smell him whenever I want without having to seek him out just to press my nose into him. It’s better this way, for everyone.

I’d have no problem repeating what we did Friday, except that the longer I’m around him, the more I like him, and the more I like him, the more attached I find myself getting. I cannot afford to get attached to him, or anyone, so I suppose it’s a good thing that I’m headed to Maynard’s room today. That’s what I’m telling myself as I pass Ezra’s door on my way to the third floor.

I’m not sure what to expect from a day with Maynard. Nash was kind and accommodating. Ezra was sweet and enthusiastic. But Maynard? Maynard terrifies me. He’s cold and detached. His dark eyes are void of expression and his voice is stolid. I’m surprised he’s willing to have anything to do with me at all, especially if he already has a thing with Orion.



The third floor is dim, the only light coming from an arched, stained glass window at the end of the hallway. The last door on the right is his and there are two chairs, one on each side of the doorframe. The chair to the left has a folded shirt on it, with shoes tucked underneath. The chair to the right is empty.

I stand in front of the door and knock before my nerves can get the best of me. A bestial demon face carved into the wood is frozen in a wink, as if he knows exactly what sort of misdeeds happen in there. The old floorboards creak from inside, but no one answers.

“Maynard?” I call out. There’s no way I’m about to walk into his room without being invited. I’ve almost convinced myself that now’s a good time to turn and run, when the door opens.

Maynard stands in the doorway, the light at his back washing his face in shadow, making him appear even more menacing than normal. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of joggers that hug his hips, his muscular torso a canvas covered in intricate tattoos. He’s so tall and close I have to tilt my head back in order to not be eye-level with his naked chest. His nipples are pierced and I don’t want him to catch me staring. I want to stare.

“Would you like to come in?” he asks, his deep voice causing the little hairs on my arms to stand on end.

*Isn’t that why I’m here?* Dominic told him I was coming, right? That would be the perfect asshole move, to send me up to Maynard without telling him.

“Yes?”

He sighs in annoyance and my stomach turns. This is not a man I want to piss off.

“Let’s go over some rules first, Seraphina. When you speak to me, you do so respectfully. You are to say please, and thank you, and yes, *sir*. Is that clear?”

So this is how it is with him. Fine, I'll play along.

"Yes, sir."

"You may also call me Mr. Gregor, or, if you're in a particular mood, Daddy." His lips tip up in an unsettling grin at the word.

There's no way in hell I'm about to call this man, who is the same age as me, *Daddy*.

His creepy grin morphs into a smirk at my discomfort, which I imagine must be wafting off of me like a pungently scented candle.

"Guess you won't be calling me that, then."

"Anything but that. Please. Sir." Shoot. This is harder than I thought.

"Before you step into my room, you need to prepare yourself for me. How much of your clothing you take off lets me know what you need, and it's entirely up to you. Leave your things here." He motions to the empty chair. "How tidy you are lets me know how much respect to give you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." I glance at the other chair with the shirt on it. It's folded, but not very neatly. Someone else is already here in his room? It must be Orion. I didn't know that he was going to be here today and the realization has me instantly relaxing. Orion's presence is comforting, like a soothing balm, even if all he's going to do is sit back and watch like he and Ezra did that first time.

"Do you have any questions before we begin?"

Tons, but his rules are pretty simple. Rigid and weird as hell, but easy enough to follow. I'm sure with a little practice I'll get the hang of it.

"No, sir."

“Good. I’ll give you a moment.” He closes the door with a quiet click, leaving me alone in the hallway with my thoughts. Okay, wait. What am I supposed to do? I go over what Maynard said again in my head. Take my clothes off—how much lets him know what I need. What do I need? Well, what is he offering?

Dominic recruited his friends to help me with my plan... his plan... our plan? To help with the plan of corrupting me and ruining me, and so far they’ve been enthusiastically cooperative. I’m still a virgin, but Ezra said they weren’t allowed to do anything about that, yet, so should I keep my underwear on, then? Bra on? Skirt on? Ezra was able to follow the rules while I was completely naked, though, so I imagine someone like Maynard won’t have a problem with it.

Making up my mind to be brave, I remove everything. It’s the oddest sensation, different from when I was in the privacy of Ezra’s room, because now I’m naked in the hallway where anyone could come along. If one of the other guys saw me here like this, how would they react?

I fold my clothes as neatly as I can, trying not to take too much time, but wanting to show Maynard that I would very much like to be treated with respect. Humiliation or punishment from him is not a choice I’d like to order off the menu today. His demeanor demands compliance and I want to show him I’m worthy of his attention and respect.

How did I get here, and what is wrong with me? I could be blowing Nash in a library, or making out with Ezra, but this? This is some advanced level stuff. I take a deep breath. It’s all part of the process. *I can do this.*

After my clothing is neatly situated on the chair and my shoes lined up beneath it, I knock again. This time he opens the door immediately, but says nothing. He stands there with his hand curling around the edge of the door, observing my naked body with his stony eyes. Was I not supposed to get completely undressed? He glances at the stack of clothes I’ve

folded carefully, and just when I think I've massively messed up, he opens the door wider.

"I see you're ready to play." He steps aside and motions for me to enter. I do, trying to exhibit more confidence than I'm feeling. This process is terrifying.

Maynard's room is big like Ezra's, but much tidier. A bed with an enormous four-poster frame sits between tall windows and there's a sitting area off to one side. It feels bare and cold in here, though, but maybe that's just what I'm picking up from Maynard himself.

Orion is sitting on the small sofa looking every bit the fallen angel I'm convinced he is. He's all lean muscle, with smooth skin and beautiful contours, soft and pretty with a sharp deadly edge about him. His lack of shirt shows off his taut abs and insanely cut adonis belt. His nipples are pierced, too? Jesus, these guys. I am enthralled.

Maynard positions me in the middle of the room, facing Orion.

"Seraphina," he says, brushing my long hair off of my shoulders. He's scrutinizing, walking a slow path around me, tracing his fingertips over my bare skin. "You're exquisite, aren't you? So perfect. So pure." He looks at Orion who's now sitting up with his forearms braced on his thighs. "You'd be the perfect little toy for my pet."

*A toy for his pet?* The pieces start to click into place. So, Orion is Maynard's pet, and he wants me to be Orion's toy. What exactly will this entail? And what does that make Maynard to me? These two are complicated. It was much easier when I could just cuddle Orion on the couch downstairs. Maybe if I'm good, I can do that again when we're done with whatever Maynard is about to subject me to.

"What do you think, pet? Do you want her? Do you want a fun little toy to play with?" Maynard asks.

Orion is quiet and I begin to worry that he's going to say no. If he rejects me, will Maynard kick me out? I force myself to meet Orion's gaze, his sparkling grey eyes examining me from across the room. He's not saying no, but he's not saying yes, either. He's looking at me as if I'm a piece of art that he's considering buying.

Finally, he nods. "I'd love to have her."

My heart pounds so loud I'm afraid they'll be able to hear it. Maynard takes my chin firmly in his hand, tipping my head back to look up at him. He leans in, his voice dropping to a throaty whisper.

"He's going to have a lot of fun breaking you in, isn't he?" His words are laced with mischief. Did I judge them wrong? Is Orion the dangerous one? Are they both?

Orion stands, his body moving with grace and fluidity I could only ever wish to possess. He approaches me, each step closer an exquisite torture. His pants hang low on his narrow hips, exposing his lithe frame, and while he doesn't have the muscular build Maynard does, the strength radiating off of him is palpable. He's impossibly beautiful, but Maynard's words have left me wary of him.

A rush of panic tightens my chest and I shift my attention back to Maynard, needing some direction, a clue of what's to come. His expression bears a hint of amusement as he watches us. He's no help. He's the puppet master, and he's not about to show me the strings.

"I've never had a toy like her before." Orion looks down at me, his lips so close to mine that his breath brushes over my skin. "I'm not sure I know what to do with one."

He leans forward, our lips touching for a brief moment. It's more of a graze than a kiss, and I have to steel myself to keep from chasing him for more. Maybe he's still the sweet, comforting Orion I thought he was.

“We need to test her limits. See what she’s made of.” Maynard steps away to sit on the sofa.

Orion runs his hands up my arms to my shoulders, scratching his nails lightly over my skin as he traces a path to my breasts. His fingertips explore my nipples, squeezing them gently, and I bristle at the sensation.

“I think Maynard wants me to be firm with you,” he says. “Would you like that? Would you like me to give you orders? Punish the slightest infraction?” He pinches my nipples harder this time and I wince, but he quickly soothes away the pain with his hands.

“Or would you prefer I be soft and gentle? Treat you like my princess, tell you how hard you make me and worship you with my body? I want to take good care of you. Help me learn how.”

“What she prefers doesn’t matter,” Maynard interjects. “You can take what you want, give what you want—she’ll let you do anything. Look at her. Look at how her body is responding to you. She’s dying for you to touch her. You think she’s going to complain if you force her to her knees and fuck her mouth? You told me yourself how much she loved doing that for Dominic.”

I really hate Maynard right now, and not because he’s wrong, but because he’s *not* wrong. It’s like he took one look at me and saw into my darkest, most sinful thoughts that I didn’t even know I was having, and now he’s just *telling* Orion as if I can’t hear him. He’s exposing me on purpose and he keeps on going.

“You want her head down, ass up? Tell her. She’ll present for you. You want her to be a rag doll? Spank her? Leave marks?” His gaze shifts to me, but he still speaks to Orion like I’m not here.

“Do you want to tie her up and force her to watch while I fuck you, when she can do nothing but drip and clench and

ache for your attention?”

My belly flutters at the thought. How can I possibly be turned on by this? I’m a prop, an amusing conversation piece to them, but Maynard’s words are flooding me with warmth. I’m learning all kinds of new things about myself today that apparently he already knows. Maynard isn’t being mean. He’s being *observant*.

Orion’s hands travel down my sides and then back up again. The pattern repeats, a feather-light tease. He’s enjoying the patient exploration of my skin, my body, examining my reactions to his touch and to Maynard’s filthy suggestions.

“I think she likes that last one.” He slides his hands from my hips to my ass, catching my flesh in a tight squeeze. I whimper and lean into him, trying to get away from his grasp but only giving myself to him more. His lips touch mine again, and this time he doesn’t pull away. He kisses me softly, tongue slipping in and brushing against mine.

This is the real Orion. The one that wants to soothe and comfort with his touch, not tease and torment. But under Maynard’s influence, I think this is all of that Orion I’m going to get today.

“What a dirty little angel,” Maynard says. “Let’s give her what she wants.”





# CHAPTER 18

Do unto others

## ORION

I've been craving her ever since the day I got to hold her after Dom made her come. No, before that—the Halloween party when she walked into our house and laid her soul bare before a bunch of degenerate assholes. She put her vulnerability on full display in the face of fiends and it was at that moment I finally understood why Maynard made me his all those years ago. He was drawn to me the same way I'm drawn to her.

Maynard saw how I reacted to her, and he's been teasing the hell out of me for it every chance he gets. Something interesting happens when I'm near her—I don't want to submit the way I do with Maynard. Instead, I want to guide her, comfort her. I've never experienced the need to behave this way with anyone, man or woman. In fact, I've never done anything with a woman.

Unfortunately, that means I have no idea what the hell to do with her, so I'm grateful that Maynard is here, taking the lead. I'm sure she and I could fumble around for a while and figure it out, but with the situation she's in, it's best to hit the ground running. And Maynard doesn't hesitate. Ever.

“Get on the bed, Seraphina,” he commands.

His bed is an intimidating artifact with tons of hidden, built-in secrets. We're in his room because mine is a completely soft, subby space—good for aftercare, not so much for the shenanigans that *earn* you aftercare.

She's terrified of him, so she complies with his demands quickly. He's doing it on purpose, for me. The more she fears him, the more she'll seek comfort from me, and we already know I can give her that.

“On your back, like the good little whore you so desperately want to be.” How far can he push her before she fights him on something? She doesn't seem to mind his name-calling, though, so maybe he's right and she'll let us do whatever we want to her.

I felt the way she reacted to his words, all of his lurid scenarios trying to get a rise out of her. It worked, but I thought she'd be annoyed or offended, not aroused. She really does have some hidden desires lurking in that pure heart of hers.

Maynard retrieves the soft cording from his nightstand, and kneels on the bed next to where she's lying back against the pillows. He's not fucking around today. I don't even know if I'm ready for this, so I'm sure as hell she isn't.

He gives me a stern look and passes me some cord. “Tie her legs. Open.”

Definitely not fucking around today.

While I move to the foot of the bed to tie each of her legs to a post, Maynard binds her wrists together, fastening them over her head to a hook on the headboard. I take my time, running my fingers down the smooth skin of her legs, admiring her feet and her pretty polished toenails. Everything about her is feminine and soft, so different from Maynard's unforgiving austerity.

She lets me move one leg to the side to tie it, but resists when I try to open her up to get the other one in place. I could force her, but to contrast Maynard's harshness, I need to be gentle. He kills some time, explaining to her how to escape restraints in an emergency, letting me take a few moments more to touch and caress her skin.

I could do this for hours, but right now I just need her to relax enough that she willingly opens for me. When her muscles finally give, I take advantage of it and bind her to the other post. She's splayed on the bed before she even realizes what I've done.

Maynard checks the bindings on her ankles, making sure I haven't tied them too tightly.

"Seraphina, your safe words are 'no,' 'stop,' and 'let me go,'" he says. "Anything remotely close to that will work. We're not fucking around with your safety. If at any point you want to try something where those words won't work, we'll discuss it then. Understand?"

Her jaw clamps shut in surprise, but she nods dutifully.

Maynard joins me at the foot of the bed, looking over Seraphina's tied up body with approval. He didn't let it show before, but I see it now—lust. He wants her too, and I'm not sure what to make of that. I knew we were going to share her today, but it didn't occur to me that he actually likes her as much as I do. This is a game-changer and I have to pretend the giddiness creeping into my chest isn't there. This *is* going to be fun.

Seraphina pulls at the cords, testing what's left of her range of motion. There's a bit of give, but she's not able to squirm away from what we're about to do to her. And what we're about to do—is nothing.

She responded strongly to Maynard's suggestion of him fucking me in front of her, and as soon as I felt her reaction, I knew that's what he had planned all along. Maybe I should have realized it sooner since the bastard had a plug in me all fucking morning, only telling me to remove it right before our guest arrived. He knew exactly which direction this was heading today, and I make a mental note to ask him later how he knew what would turn her on.

He takes his place behind me, his attention still on her body tied open before us.

“What a beautiful angel. So fragile... and helpless.” He slips his hand into the front of my pants, wrapping his fingers lightly around my cock. I sigh and sink back into his chest. If he weren’t trying to tease our audience, he’d be handling me a lot differently. I prefer him to be rougher, skirting the edge of pain, but this show is for her benefit, not mine.

She focuses intently as he strokes up and down my shaft, although she can’t see anything but the slow motion through the fabric. I want to be rid of what little clothes I’m wearing so I can watch her face as she takes in the full sight of me, but when my pants come off is Maynard’s decision to make.

He continues to torment my aching cock with his maddening patience, and it doesn’t take long before Seraphina and I both start to falter. I watch the rise and fall of her breasts as her breathing becomes quick and shallow. Maynard kisses my neck on his favorite spot—the scripted tattoo of his initials that marks me as his.

“Take off your pants. Show her what she’s missing out on.”

I cannot get them off quick enough. I don’t want either of them to know how eager I am, so I do it as slowly as I can manage, as if I’m not anticipating the most torturous fucking of my life. *So needy*. For him, for her, for whatever the fuck this is.

My focus returns to her, and on the way she reacts to my now naked body. I don’t miss how her gaze roams over me, lingering on my hard cock, or the way her eyebrows raise when she spots the line of piercings through the skin of it. Maynard resumes touching me, mere feet from her, and she doesn’t look away.

Her legs move as much as they can while restrained, trying to close, to give herself some relief, but no matter how she pulls and strains, she can’t get it. I’m mesmerized by her pussy

as it glistens with arousal, her body's helpless cry for attention. I want to give it to her. I want to climb over her and give her everything she needs, but I can't touch her right now any more than she can touch herself.

"One knee on the bed," Maynard instructs, and I obey. I'm closer to her now, but all I can reach is her leg. I don't touch her, though. It's too agonizing, nowhere near enough.

It's then that I realize Maynard has laid her out in front of me like bait. He's restraining me from giving in to temptation, intentionally making me want her like I've never wanted anything before. When she and I are released, it won't matter that we don't know what we're doing. We'll be too hungry and desperate to do anything but figure it out.

"She's very responsive, isn't she?" Maynard says. "Dominic's little angel is so much fun to play with." He strokes his hand down my back and I flinch at the lightness of his touch. This is a side of him I rarely see, because neither of us ever craved anything gentle from the other. He owns me completely and he's not afraid to express the brunt of his passion. This is for her, to show her that regardless of what else she sees today, that he can be this—that he can be this *for her*.

He frees his cock from his pants and I hear the cap of the lube bottle in his hands. Her eyes, normally so big and innocent, are now half-shuttered. Her cheeks are flushed and she's clutching the cord that's holding her arms up like a lifeline. She's so fucking beautiful. How did she end up here with us? Does she have any idea what she's gotten herself into? Or how she's ever going to get herself out?

Maynard presses his cock against me, but I look at her. He pushes the tip in, opening me up, filling me bit by bit, but I keep looking at her. He thrusts the rest of the way in, balls deep, and I jolt and groan at the violation. Her eyes widen in surprise as if she felt it in her own body.

Maynard laughs, a deep, dark chuckle that makes my belly flip and my cock ache. This is more like the Maynard I know.

I give her a wink to let her know everything is fine and she visibly relaxes. I want to know what's going on in her head. She's showing no signs of discomfort or distress, aside from that bit of concern for me and her raging need for friction, but I see her doubt. She knows she's in over her head and she's probably a little afraid of what's happening.

Or maybe she's afraid of how much she's enjoying it.

Just like he planned, Maynard fucks me in front of her. She never looks away. She watches us, studies us, taking it all in, her own body never giving up. She drips, her pretty pussy growing desperate for the attention it's not getting. She writhes, still trying to find some kind of satisfaction for herself, but it's impossible.

Maynard's thrusts grow deep and furious, and by the time he fills me with his cum with a wicked growl, she's a fucking mess—wanton and hungry, mindless in her arousal, whimpering and close to tears. All decorum has left her, the agony of her needs not being met driving her to a miserable frenzy.

Inside, I'm a feral dog on a leash, frantic and straining to get to her. Maynard pulls out, keeping his hand on my cock. He continues to work it in that gentle hold that's so foreign.

“Is this how she'd touch you?” His voice rumbles in my ear and down my spine. He's drawing this out, teasing us both as his intentions become clear. He wants me to imagine it's her hand on me, her slender fingers and manicured nails playing with my piercings. She'd be afraid to hurt me. She'd be hesitant and gentle, the way Maynard is right now.

Her attention is glued to my cock, Maynard's grip on me becoming tighter and stronger, showing her that I can take more. The vision of her pleasuring me, angelic and pure, slips

away, replaced by the dark force that Maynard embodies, possessing and controlling me.

Just as I'm about to sacrifice myself to the pleasure building inside me, the monster backs off, and once again, I can imagine it's her. She's still watching, her bottom lip wet and swollen from being trapped in her teeth. I want to kiss her, suck that lip into my mouth, to lick and taste her—her mouth, her skin, her pussy. I want it all.

Maynard continues his excruciating ministrations, my body buzzing with the build-up of my release.

“She's going to be such a dirty little slut for your cock. Look how desperate she is for you,” he teases.

I can only dream. Dom won't let us fuck her. Not yet, anyway. Even if he did, I don't know if I'd be ready for that today. I don't know if she'd be ready. We've barely touched one another.

“What do you think her pretty tits would look like covered in your cum?” Her breath hitches in her throat at Maynard's words. “Let's find out.” He pushes me toward her and I climb the rest of the way onto the bed to straddle one of her legs, Maynard following to kneel behind me. She tries to get closer, to use my leg to satisfy her need, but Maynard gives her wet pussy a quick swat in warning.

She cries out and for a moment I think that contact alone has sent her over the edge, but the hungry fire in her eyes when she glares at him says otherwise. She wants more.

“So greedy,” he chastises. “You'll take what we give you and nothing else.”

I hope Maynard hasn't gone too far, spurning her, but when she focuses on me again, determination has taken over her face. She's trying to be good for him. She wants to please him and earn his praise. I know that feeling. She settles back into the pillows, her neglected body tense and trembling.

Maynard resumes jacking me off and it doesn't take long for the pleasure to overtake me. All of my muscles stiffen as I release my cum on her, streaking over her breasts and belly in a carnal painting. Maynard gives my cock a possessive squeeze before letting me collapse next to her. He draws a finger through the mess I've left, spreading it over her skin as if he's trying to blend the two of us together.

"She's been so patient." His path trails downward, but he still doesn't touch her where she's aching. He's saving it for me.

"Give our little cum slut what she wants." With that, he climbs off the bed, leaving me alone with the prettiest, horniest girl I've ever met in my life. A desperate sob escapes her when he leaves and I know what I need to do.

I unhook her wrists from the headboard but before I can unwrap the cording, her bound arms are circling my neck, pulling me close. She's not going to wait any longer—for release, for comfort, for me.

There's no time to untie her ankles, so I'm going to have to finish her off like this, spread wide open and covered in cum. I slip a hand between her legs and she writhes against me, finally getting what she needs. Her flesh is warm and slippery and I want nothing more than to satisfy her. I work her with my fingers, finding her swollen clit easily as she lets out a moan that has my cock springing back to life.

She does half the work for me, grinding on my hand and showing me how she needs to be pleased, her orgasm quickly building to a violent explosion that rocks her entire body against mine. She trembles and twitches before going completely slack with me still trapped in her embrace. She lets me kiss her, and I finally, *finally*, get to suck on that lip and her tongue. She tastes so heavenly and when I'm done with her mouth, I draw my fingers up, sucking her sweet release off of my own skin.



Tears stain her cheeks, but I know they're not from sadness. She snuggles into my neck, not even moving when Maynard comes back to free her from her bindings. Not even when he cleans her with a warm, wet cloth.

He moves her limbs around like she's a rag doll, and I wonder if that's something she'd enjoy during sex as well. I have to tamp down the thought to keep from getting worked up again at the idea of watching Maynard in complete control of her compliant body. The things he would do to her... especially if he likes her.

He's attentive and thorough with his cleaning and I hope she's present enough to enjoy the care that he's showing. It's one of my favorite parts about him and about what we do together—the reassurance that he's not truly a demon, especially after being brutalized by his desires.

“You did so well today,” he says. “Both of you.” My chest swells with pride, for her and for myself, and I tighten my arms around my tired little toy. He's pleased, and *we* did that. He leans over to kiss her forehead and then does the same to me, before turning to leave the room with some parting words.

“I'm really going to enjoy watching you two fuck the hell out of each other someday.”



## CHAPTER 19

By their fruits ye shall know them

### SERAPHINA

“Did you have fun?” Dominic’s voice echoes through the empty foyer as I slip my boots on. I’m headed back to the dorm for a shower, then meeting up with Jasmine at the library to help her cram for one last test before Thanksgiving break. I was tempted to call and cancel, to stay tangled up with Orion in Maynard’s bed, but I’d prefer not to overstay my welcome.

I purse my lips at Dominic’s question. Is that what it was? Fun? It’s like asking an astronaut if going to the moon was fun. I don’t want to get into the details of what it really was—eye-opening, life-changing, soul-awakening—mostly because I still don’t know how to put all of that into words, and if I could, would I really want to tell Dominic, of all people? So I just nod.

He steps closer, his heady scent working its way into my lungs and I breathe deep before I can stop myself. I probably smell like sex and sin and his deviant friends, but he’s not put off by it. He caresses my cheek while studying my face, then works his hand into my hair, gripping it at the roots and forcing me to tilt my face up to his.

I’m learning that while he can be gentle, he doesn’t stay that way for long. The truth is, though, I don’t even care. I don’t want to fight him anymore. I sigh in his hold, at the steely look on his face. This can’t possibly be healthy.

He presses his cheek to mine, his stubble digging into my skin, his lips at my ear. I lean into him, into the abrasiveness of his contact, of his whole damn personality, as his whispered

words float into my ear and destroy my last tenuous hold on what I thought I knew of myself.

*“Were you a good girl?”*

---

After knocking the strength out of my knees with his question, Dominic sets me free from our established schedule for the week, since Thanksgiving break starts Wednesday. He doesn't mention what his holiday plans are, and doesn't ask about mine.

Jasmine graciously volunteers to be my ride back to Townsend, and Dad is more than happy to not have to make the trip himself. I send up a silent prayer in thanks to whomever might be listening for that unexpected blessing.

Tuesday after classes, Jasmine and I pack our stuff in her car and head out. We crank up the music and eat as much junk food as we can stomach in two hours, and by the time we pull into my driveway, I'm actually in a good mood. She promises that if I need to bail at any point, she'll come rescue me and we can hide out at her house and eat pie until we die. Sounds like a good plan to me. We never have pie at my house, since Dad doesn't like it. What kind of person doesn't like pie? On Thanksgiving, no less?

“Dad?” I call, after letting myself into the quiet house. Dropping my bag at the foot of the stairs, I leave my keys in the empty crystal dish on the hall table, and walk through the rooms, calling for him. When he's nowhere to be found, I check the garage for his car. The Jag and the Escalade are here, but not his baby, the Mercedes. He's not even here!

Half-tempted to text him, I decide to call instead. He picks up on the fourth ring.

“Seraphina, did you make it home alright?”

“I did. I just got here, actually. Where are you? Wrapping up at church?”

“Oh, didn’t I leave a note? I thought I left a note.”

I look around. I haven’t seen any note. And why wouldn’t he just text me? “I haven’t found one yet. What did it say?”

“I left for my golf trip a little early this year. I prerecorded my sermons for the holiday and the tech team is uploading them to the website while I’m gone. Pastor Peck has all the in-person stuff covered.”

I’m a walking eye-roll emoji right now. I bet he’s going to urge the congregation to spend this important time with their families, while he’s off golfing god knows where, away from his only living relative, without leaving so much as a note. *Thanks, Dad.*

“You told me to come home for Thanksgiving. I thought you’d be here.” It’s not like I was looking forward to spending quality time with him or anything, and I was most likely going to avoid him all weekend anyway, but if I have to spend the holiday by myself, I could have at least done it at school where I already was.

“Don’t be upset. We don’t do much for Thanksgiving, anyway. I’ll be back for Sunday services.”

It’s true, Thanksgiving has never been a big celebration in our house, so I’m not sure why Dad was so adamant I come home for break. Usually he’ll make some kind of public appearance and then disappear to Florida or Arizona or wherever his friends are gathering for golf, but at least he spends *some* time with me.

“It’s fine, Dad. I’ll just make a frozen pizza or something. How was your flight? Are you having a good time?” It’s a challenge to talk with my jaw clenched, but I manage.

“I did. We were just about to head out to the course.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to it, then.”

“Okay, Seraphina. Thanks for calling.” He sounds distracted and hangs up without saying anything else, like I’m his damn secretary. I can’t blame him. He’s on a golf trip with his friends, living it up and having a great time.

The longer I think about it, the more relieved I am that he’s already gone. The less I have to pretend that nothing is wrong, the better off I’ll be. I’m perfectly content to hang around the house by myself, and hell, maybe I’ll take Jasmine up on her death by pie offer. That sounds like a good way to go.

I’m just about to call her to unload my drama when my phone vibrates in my hand with a message from Noah. He’s texting me to thank me for volunteering at the food pantry on Thursday, and he’ll be happy to pick me up at noon.

So that must be the real reason Dad wanted me to be here. There’s no way I can say no. I may be skirting wretched heathen territory, but I’m not a total asshole. And considering I was only going to eat pizza and watch nineties romcoms, or impose on someone else’s holiday gathering, it actually sounds like a less lonely alternative. Besides, there’s still plenty of time for frozen food and movies.

Which is exactly how I amuse myself until Thursday. To be honest, I also spend a fair bit of time replaying each of my encounters with Dominic and his friends, trying to make sense of it all, but at the moment, I’ve got nothing. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with the things I’ve learned—about degenerate sex acts or my willingness to engage in them—so I resolve to put it out of my mind for a while.

On Thanksgiving Day, Noah arrives promptly at noon in his beat-up old truck. He gets out to open the door for me and I try not to smile at him too much. I need to toe the line, not make him believe I’m about to run over it into his arms.

“Thanks for doing this,” he says, once he settles back into the driver’s seat, flashing a cheery smile. “A lot of the teens are helping out today. They’ll need a bit of direction, I think.”

“So that’s what we’ll be doing?”

“For the most part. Mom is coordinating donations, and we’ll be in charge of packing meals.”

Noah’s mom Cheryl has managed the food pantry for as long as I’ve known her, and I’ve actually volunteered there a few times before. She’s very good at what she does, and always has words of encouragement for everyone she sees.

My father, on the other hand, isn’t exactly the charitable type, even though he cultivates the illusion of it. Since he’s not one to let an opportunity for good publicity slip by, it’s no surprise he’s a big supporter of Cheryl’s. In theory, anyway. She doesn’t see a dime of his money or a minute of his time. That’s all me.

Trying not to let my father spoil my mood from afar, I spend my day in service to the community. I wrangle energetic teenagers, sort boxes, and hand out food. Nearly every person I interact with expresses gratitude for something—it’s the name of the day, after all—and it gets me thinking.

I really do appreciate the life I have. Watching Noah, I imagine what it would be like to marry into the Wright family. They’re thoughtful and compassionate, cheerful and kind—just the sort of family I always wanted to be a part of. Maybe choosing Noah wouldn’t be so bad after all.

## DOMINIC

Holidays are tough for the demons. They’re tough for a lot of people, but when you’ve got a group of guys like us, whose home lives are questionable at best, non-existent at worst, holidays are a hellscape. Except for Maynard, which is why for the past few years we’ve all been spending our free time at his house.

My grandparents are pretty great, but they're not the bake pies and watch football type. Ezra and I know they did their best for us, but they were definitely more focused on their careers by the time we came along. They've worked their asses off to build their business and get to where they are, so now they prefer to enjoy their hard-earned vacation time traveling the country.

Maynard, though, he's the only one of us who ever had anything resembling normal, which is why we all flock to his house for holidays. His dad is surprisingly down-to-earth for an old-money man from a long line of lawyers, and his mom is the polar opposite, a free-spirited tattoo artist from a hippy commune out in Arizona. She doesn't even know which of her many parents are her real ones, because as she says, "They all love me to the moon and back, so they're all my real parents."

Nash's folks are in Poland taking care of his aging grandparents, and there's no way he's equipped to navigate the minefield of flying out to be with them. Orion's parents are both remarried and spend more time fighting over scheduling conflicts than making sure their oldest son actually has somewhere to be. So, he just takes himself out of the equation most of the time. I'm pretty sure he's not bitter about it, seeing as how he's practically part of Maynard's family, anyway.

Thanks to Mrs. Gregor, we spend our holiday break keeping busy. She has something planned for every day we're here: game night, Thanksgiving feast, football, movie marathons. We participate without a single grumble. We might be a bunch of fucked-in-the-head punks, but even we can recognize how important this time spent together is.

Every so often I think about Seraphina, even though I try not to. What is her Thanksgiving like? Is she sitting down for a turkey dinner prepared by a personal chef? Catered from a restaurant? Glory Valley isn't the type of place to do a church potluck and Solomon isn't going to cook a goddamn thing. Does she cook?



There's so much I don't know about her. I kick myself. Why the fuck would I? It's not important. We have our own lives to live and the only reason we're interacting at all is to work on her imminent destruction. We're not friends and we never will be.

With that in mind, I plan a meeting to talk to the others. We need to check in with each other to see what kind of progress she's made and figure out what we still need to work on. I don't want to talk about it while we're in the Gregor family home, so on Sunday night, once we're settled back in at the Lair, we meet in the billiard room, where it all started.

"When can we fuck her?" Ezra asks, lining up his shot at the pool table. "She's ready. She was practically begging me for it."

I don't doubt that for a second. If Ezra's body count is any indication, he can certainly be persuasive. That's one of the many reasons I told him to keep his damn clothes on.

"You may or may not be surprised to know that she is one kinky little virgin," Maynard says from the sofa, where he and Orion are rolling joints. "And submissive as fuck."

Nash looks up from his book and Orion explains. "We tied her up, fucked in front of her, and covered her in cum. She was into it. Like, *really* fucking into it."

Ezra closes his eyes, no doubt picturing the scene in his head. He groans. "You better get over yourself and fuck her, man. My cock can't wait anymore."

"Soon." I know Ezra is impatient because he likes to fuck, and he likes her, so of course he'd like to fuck her. There's an entire college filled with women he can amuse himself with, no waiting required, but he hasn't spent one night somewhere else since she came to us. It's as though he's become fixated on her, and that's not like him at all.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were getting attached." I take my shot and miss. *Fuck*. He's got me rattled.

When he gets ahold of her, he's just going to tell her all the things she wants to hear to get his cock in her, and she'll believe that his words actually mean something. Then he's going to fuck her and put his walls back up before she's even gotten dressed again, just like he's done with every other girl he's ever fucked.

It's his own twisted form of self-preservation and I get it, I really do, but she doesn't know that about him. At least I'll have the balls to tell her to her face that taking her virginity means nothing, and that's why I need to be the one to do it. It's for her own good. And his.

"I'm not getting fucking attached," he snaps.

It seems I've hit a nerve. This is dangerous territory, but it has to be covered. "She only needs one thing from us. Don't fuck it up by letting her believe it's something it's not."

"I know what she needs, asshole—a cock in her fucking pussy. Make it happen, or I fucking will."



## CHAPTER 20

For everything there is a season

### EZRA

*Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!* The next few weeks are hell because Dom still doesn't do a goddamn thing. Every time Seraphina comes to the Lair it feels like my skin is on fire. What the fuck is happening to me?

The rest of us make sure she gets more time with Nash, since he sure as fuck isn't going to ask for it. Whatever they do, they do in private, because Nash isn't as much of an exhibitionist as the rest of us. I want to know what they get up to, but when they're together, she's nearly as quiet as he is and I can't hear anything through the walls in this goddamn house.

When it's my turn with her again, I try not to talk too much, but fail miserably. We talk about everything: books, music, classes, philosophy. In the end, I spread her legs and eat her out just to keep myself from oversharing. I don't want her to realize how undeserving I am of an angel like her. How many licks will it take to get to my worthless center?

I need to save myself before I'm in too deep. Dom was right—I *am* getting attached and nothing good can come from it. Even if I did let myself like her, there's no way she'd like me back, not when she has all the others to choose from. I have nothing to offer but my cock and my can-do attitude, and Dom won't even let me use my cock on her.

Maybe he has the right idea and it's for the best. If I fuck her, I might not let her go, and she doesn't deserve to get trapped with me. A girl like her wouldn't want me—not even

my own parents wanted me. She can do a lot better and I'm going to do a hell of a lot worse.

This weekend, it's fucking party time. The Christmas party at the Lair isn't much different from any of the others, there's just more stress leading up to finals which means more people looking to let loose. I plan to drink, smoke, and fuck all of this shit out of my system. It's been too long, and I need to feel more like myself. No more pining for a girl who could never love me anyway.

### SERAPHINA

Christmas is in the air, filling the world with promise and possibilities. Snow drapes over Morgenstern College, the normally dreary campus bathed in white as fluffy flakes float down like so many little angels.

I've been spending longer days at the Lair since getting back from Thanksgiving, so I finally had to give my roommates more details. I only said that I'd reconnected with Dominic and that the others were sort of friends, but that was enough to keep them from worrying every time I got home later than usual.

The reality, of course, isn't that. Dominic is just as distant as ever, even when he orders me to my knees to suck his cock, or pins me down on the couch in front of the others to make a show of tormenting me with his hands and fingers. As fun as all that is, it hasn't inspired him to open up to me about anything.

I'm closer to Ezra, who actually talks to me. He lets me have brief glimpses into his personal life and writing projects, and while it's clear he doesn't do that for just anyone, he still keeps his distance, always pulling away before I can get too close.

Nash doesn't talk to me at all. Ezra told me that he *can* talk, and does occasionally to them, but didn't give me any more details than that. Nash and I don't need to talk when we get together, though. Locked away in the quiet sanctum of his room, neat and tidy and lined with swimming trophies, he'll put on some music and we'll spend our time together making out and exploring each other's bodies. He's the one who showed me how to give a hand job, but he's also perfectly content to just hold me and touch me. I don't mind a bit, but he still hasn't said a single word to me.

I know nothing of Maynard and Orion, except what they choose to portray in our scenes together. And that's what they are: scenes, in which we play characters. A little different each time, but always the master, the pet, and the toy. I love every second of it, and I'm certainly learning a lot about myself, but *friends* we are not.

What they are, however, is helping me. Just like he said he would, Dominic and his band of demons are ruining me, one depraved orgasm at a time. What he doesn't realize, though, is that they're also ruining me for anyone but them. What am I supposed to do when all of this is over? Is there anyone else out there who can figure out what I need the way they do? And more importantly, the ability to actually deliver?

School has been keeping my mind fairly occupied, but with the winter break so close at hand, a creeping desperation has settled low in my stomach. The option of a serene life in the suburbs—marrying a clean-cut family man, working for my father—is no longer a possibility, even if I did want it. I'm in way too deep to climb out now.

The day of the demons' Christmas party, I meet up with my roommates for dinner before we head over to the Lair. I'm sure it will be the most hedonistic celebration I've ever attended, and by the time we arrive, the party is in full swing. Everyone is decked out in their gaudiest attire or ugliest sweaters, and there's mistletoe hanging in the weirdest places. Piper and

Holly quickly disappear into a crowd of rowdy dancers, and Jasmine is dragged away by Courtney, who's upset at her new boyfriend, leaving me to wander in search of the guys.

Dominic is in the living room refereeing some kind of drinking game for a bunch of frat boys. He catches sight of me and tips his chin hello. I don't want to interrupt what he's doing, though. Those frat guys are really into whatever game they're playing and definitely need a ref who's paying attention.

I check the kitchen next, finding Orion and Maynard in an animated discussion with a couple dressed as Christmas elves, along with Nash, who looks generally uncomfortable to be out amongst the crowd.

“So, what's with all the demon faces? I thought this house was built by the church,” the girl elf asks.

Maynard levels her with a look, and she takes a cautious step back. Even though he's kind of smiling, it doesn't make him look more approachable. The opposite, in fact. I get it, but it's also alluring, I've found, the way forbidden things can be tempting.

“It was, believe it or not. It was part of the order that founded Morgenstern. When the Lair was first built, it was the friary. Evidently, the friers were into some shit they shouldn't have been—money, kinky sex, other men's wives. The church found out and excommunicated the lot of them. The townspeople tried to get them to leave, but turns out the mayor was into some kinky shit, too, as was his wife. And they weren't going anywhere. They all carved the place up with demons so the church wouldn't take it back.”

*Kind of like me*—carving up my perfect life with demons so my dad won't take me back.

“You're full of shit,” the male elf says. “How do you know all that?”

“One of the friers was my great-great-great-grandfather. The mayor’s wife was my great-great-great-grandmother. Eventually, they turned the friary into a boarding house and had a lot of very satisfied residents. It’s been in my family ever since.”

“So the demons aren’t real? They don’t mean anything?” The girl elf has gathered enough nerve to ask Maynard another question.

“Oh, the demons are very real. Just ask Seraphina here.”

The elves stare at me with mouths agape and I laugh as Maynard easily changes the subject. Nash finally notices me and pulls me in for an unexpected kiss. I don’t think twice about it until he lets me go with a smile. He hasn’t so much as touched me in front of anyone else, not even the other demons. How would I explain that if one of my roommates saw? Could I say that Nash is my boyfriend? Would that bother him?

Nash would be a great boyfriend and I have to stop myself from getting carried away with the thought. I’ve been having more of them lately, intrusive little daydreams about what it would be like to be in a relationship with each of them.

“Do you guys know where Ezra is?” I ask. I haven’t seen him yet and since I know he has a tendency to overdo it at these parties, I want to make sure he’s okay.

Orion turns and plants his own kiss on my lips, smashing me into Nash, who doesn’t seem to mind in the slightest. I really hope this elf couple isn’t paying too close attention to what’s happening. The last thing I need is a reputation like Ezra’s. Or the friers’.

“Probably drunk under a table somewhere,” Maynard says. “If you find him, pour some water down his throat, will you?” He hands me a bottle of water, so I know he’s actually serious.

“Yes, sir.” I give him a solemn salute.



“And make sure you stay hydrated, too. The holidays are no excuse to treat that hot little body like crap.”

“Understood,” I say with a nod. His face breaks out into an actual smile, the likes of which could frighten small children.

I move toward the family room, working through a crowd of people to get there. The smell of weed and alcohol is heavy in the air. Spotting Ezra’s beacon of blue hair across the room, I slip between bodies to reach him. He’s sitting on the couch, his naturally beautiful eyes red and droopy, the telltale sign that he’s had too much to drink and smoke, as usual.

It takes me way too long to notice that the girl sitting next to him has her legs thrown over his lap, like she’s getting ready to climb on board. He’s mindlessly running his fingertips up and down her leg, edging underneath the hem of her short skirt.

My heart drops into my stomach, and the water bottle slips out of my fingers. I don’t know how to respond. I just stand where I stopped, staring, my mind racing in a thousand directions at once.

I’m upset—mad at him, the girl, myself—but how can I be mad at all? We’re not exclusive. We’re not anything. But the shock of seeing him with someone else ravages me all the same. *Why?* He’s not my boyfriend. He’s not anyone’s boyfriend, and it’s not like he’s even doing anything terribly scandalous. I could have walked in on any number of things. No body parts are out. No one is having sex. It’s not like I came home from work to find my husband screwing another woman in our bed.

This is nothing but drunk, single people relaxing and having fun at a party, which is the whole reason the demons throw these things in the first place. Hell, it’s the whole point of the Lair. It’s the whole point of Ezra.

Despite that, his rejection is right in front of me. He’s put someone else where I thought I belonged, and now I see that

whatever connection we shared was an illusion. I should never have thought I was different. I should never have fallen for his charm and thought I was special to him, no matter how sweet and romantic he acted. What we have is more like a business arrangement, not a relationship.

Taking deep breaths, I try to calm myself, but it's not working. Any sense of belonging I felt earlier this evening has been replaced with the fiery rage of betrayal and jealousy. Unnecessary, unwarranted, completely illogical jealousy. Before I can figure out what to do, he glances up at me, his eyes still unfocused, sucking me right back into his warmth like I'm the only girl in the world.

Oh, but I'm not. The *other* girl, the one who's making a play for him right here in the middle of a goddamn Christmas party, wraps her arm around the back of his neck, demanding the return of his attention. The world stops moving and I'm frozen to the floor, watching in slow motion as Ezra rips my heart out of my chest.

Suddenly, Nash appears, stepping in front of me like my own personal sentinel to block my view of the horror show. I try to move around him, to do something, anything, but he puts his hands on my waist and keeps me with him, effectively shutting out the rest of the room.

"Nash—" The world begins to spin again, *fast, too fast*, and I throw my arms around his neck to hang on. Before I can drop to the floor, he lifts me up by the backs of my thighs, wrapping my legs around him as he starts for the stairs.

NASH

*I'm going to kill that goddamn motherfucker.*

## ORION

I look at the girl in Ezra's lap: pretty, tipsy, and determined to make bad decisions tonight, just how he likes them. I tower over my friend and wait for the girl to catch up to what's happening. Not you, Tippy, you're not happening tonight.

Her eyes widen on me as if she can actually see the disapproval rolling off my body like waves of black fog.

"Go." I tell her, and to her credit, she doesn't argue. No questions, no indignation. She simply withdraws her limbs from my wayward friend and gets the hell out of Dodge.

Ezra watches me, a lazily curious expression on his face, but I don't give him time to figure out what the fuck I'm doing. I haul him to his feet and we square off. Before he has a chance to mouth off about me ruining his fun, I rear back and punch him in the face.

Physically, Ezra and I are not an even match. Despite the way he treats his body like a garbage can on party nights, he does manage to get to the gym most days. He's not ripped like Dom or cut like Maynard, but he has a good twenty pounds of muscle on me.

Right now, though, I've got straight up righteous wrath pumping through my veins and enough power in that swing to knock him off his balance. He's also really fucking wasted, so that helps, and certainly explains a lot about his behavior tonight—about his behavior most of the time.

He stumbles back into a group of startled partiers who work together to keep him from hitting the ground. He doesn't fight back, just takes the hit, and when his eyes meet mine, it's suddenly clear why: He knows he fucked up. He knew the whole time, because he was fucking up *on purpose*.

Ezra's dark demons have come out to play tonight, and that's way above my pay grade. We need Dominic. I look around the room, and because Maynard is too good for this earth, he's already found him and they're headed this way. My

standoff with Ezra continues until Maynard drags me away, wrapping me in the protective cage of his arm while Dom takes over Ezra duty.

I might be Maynard's submissive lapdog, but I'll punch my own fucking brothers in the face if they hurt *my* pretty little fuck toy.

### SERAPHINA

Nash carries me upstairs, the crowd quickly parting for him like he's the grim reaper. No one dares to get in his way. He continues to the end of the hall on the second floor, unlocking the last door at the end, still holding me while I cling to him like the savior he is. He lets me bury my face in his neck, wetting his collar with my tears. I'm not crying, I can't be, because I'm not allowed to cry over Ezra fucking Nesmith, Morgenstern College's most notorious fuckboy. I can't. *I'm not.*

The tears fall anyway. I thought I knew myself better when we were together, but now I'm filled with uncertainty and doubt. I made the fatal mistake of believing that what we had was special and important. It was, I suppose, but just to me, not him. I was foolish, and he broke me for it, like every other girl who thought they were different. I'm the latest in a long line of Courtneys, and that girl downstairs in his lap will most likely unseat me from my throne of regret by morning.

Nash sits in his cushy chair with me still wrapped tightly around him. He doesn't attempt to move me, just holds me in his arms and rubs my back, his heart beating against my chest. It's quiet in his room, the noise and chaos of the party in the distance. I'm safe here.

But I can't stop the raging storm of hurt, so I let the emotions crash over me. I cry because I'm sad, because I'm angry, because life isn't fair. I want to keep crying until I'm

incapable of feeling anything at all, until I'm numb and empty and I can go back to focusing on what I should have been focusing on this whole time, before I got carried away and let my stupid feelings get involved.

Until then, I have to let it hurt, and it hurts so fucking bad. I can't stop replaying the scene in my head, even though it feels like I'm being stabbed in the chest. *How do I make it stop?*

Nash keeps me tucked against him and I have no idea how long we sit like this. It could be minutes, or it could be hours. Eventually, my tears dry up and I welcome the numbness that spreads throughout my body. Nash kisses my shoulder and I lift my head and take in his features, his face filled with concern. Does he actually care, or am I wrong about him, too? How can I tell what's real and what matters?

There's a knock on the door and Dominic steps in, his cold blue eyes narrowing on mine. His face is *not* filled with concern.

"C'mon, angel. Come with me."

"I'm not going back to the party." I shake my head. "I can't. I'd rather go home." Nash's arms tighten as if he's trying to protect me from whatever Dominic wants. Does Dominic know what happened, what I saw, what I felt? What does he think of me now? Did he plan all this to hurt me, to expose how weak I really am?

"I'm not taking you back downstairs. Just come with me," he says, holding out his hand. It's the one that says EVIL, because to expect the hand that says PURE is just asking too much from the universe right now.

I look at Nash's warm, caring face, wishing I could stay here with him, wrapped in his arms while I forget everything, letting the numbness work its way through me.

"For fuck's sake, don't think, don't question. Who am I?" Dominic snaps.

“You are my God,” I whisper.

Nash wipes my tears away with his thumb. I know I don't have to apologize for my loss of composure, but he shouldn't have to clean me up after I made a mess of myself.

“I'm sorry.”

He shakes his head and tilts my face up, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. Dominic stalks over to the chair with a scowl and helps me up. I unwrap myself from Nash's big, warm body and let Dominic lead me away from the safety of his arms and back into the nightmare of the Lair.



# CHAPTER 21

## The root of the matter

### SERAPHINA

Dominic doesn't take me back downstairs, but ushers me into his own bedroom across the hall. Since he prefers to conduct his "lessons" out in the open where any of the other demons can find us and watch, which they frequently do, I've never actually been in here before. Does he have the same rule about not inviting girls into his room as Ezra?

*Ezra.*

All the numbness I waited for is instantly gone, the sharp return of jealousy clawing at my stomach. Tears well up, but I don't want to cry anymore. And I absolutely don't want to cry in front of Dominic.

"Sit," he commands, pointing to his bed. I climb to the middle to sit while he paces in front of me, agitated. The bed smells like him. The entire room does—a gentle sea of earthy musk and cloves. I'm perplexed how someone so mean and cold can smell this warm and comforting.

Similar to the other bedrooms in the house, Dominic's is spacious and clean, filled with heavy wood furniture. Any other time I'd be dying to walk around and explore, noting all the details that make each of these guys more human than they prefer to let on, but now is not the time for that.

Dominic stops pacing and stands in the middle of the room, his brows furrowed. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, angling his head to look at me.



“You really need to work on all this ridiculous bullshit you believe, angel. I know you were raised by a fucking drug addict, and I should be telling you all kinds of fairytales about the world to protect you and shit, but I can’t. You think that deep down, everyone is good and perfect because *you* are, but we’re not. We’re all broken here, and we don’t know how to save you, except by breaking you, too. You knew this going in. It was your fucking idea.”

I’m torn between wanting to curl up in a little ball at his rebuke or lashing out at him—to yell and defend my ignorance, but I know he would punish me for it somehow. So, I stay quiet and listen to him rant.

“You have to get it out of your head that sex is inherently meaningful and precious, because it’s not. Sometimes fucking is just fucking. You’re not going to get anything meaningful from this arrangement, so don’t start with this goddamn bullshit. You and I, and the rest of those assholes—we’re just using each other for our own sick, fucked-up purposes.” He shakes his head. “Never forget that.”

He’s right. It was a mistake to think it meant more than it did, expecting something that no one promised. I can’t let this slow me down, because my plan, my future, is hanging in the balance. I have to accept this for what it is and continue on like nothing happened. Like nothing hurts.

“I know,” I say, twisting my hands in my lap. “You told me what you were going to do that day, out on the porch. That you were going to ruin me. That’s the only thing I should expect, and that’s the only thing I can count on. I guess I just wasn’t expecting to feel anything.”

He looks over at me again, and I continue. “There was nothing in our agreement that said any of this was exclusive. I made assumptions and I shouldn’t have. It won’t happen again.” That might not be a promise I can keep, but if it means I don’t ever have to feel this way again, I’m going to try.

Dominic crosses his arms over his chest. If only I could guard my emotions the way he does. He never gets carried away. We stare at each other, both frozen in this moment while the Christmas party rages on downstairs, everyone oblivious to how my entire world has collapsed in on itself.

He's the first to break the silence. "What do you want? Right here, right now. What do you want?"

That's an excellent question.

I want to forget what I saw with Ezra and move past all the bullshit emotions that never should have surfaced to begin with. I want to separate my feelings from the plan and keep going. Stopping now is not an option. Any pain, any discomfort or trepidation—it's all nothing compared to the devastation I'll experience if I call the whole thing off and accept my life the way it is. I can't afford to slow down and wallow in an emotional setback. This is no time for weakness.

"I need to hear it," he says. "Tell me."

Looking up at him, I no longer see the demon who hates me. I don't see the angry asshole, or the long-lost friend. I see the man who's going to give me exactly what I need.

"Dominic—" My chest is hollow and empty, but there's a tiny seed of hope still there that never died. I need to focus my attention on it, on what's important. "I want you to fuck me."

My quiet words fill the room. Saying them aloud changes everything. The air is different now, like I've taken a step toward the edge of a cliff and the wind is whipping at my back.

"Are you sure you don't want Ezra to do it?" he asks, his voice a cruel force, like a slap across my cheek. I try to burn him with the fire in my eyes, as if it's possible to vanquish my enemy with a look, but I'm the one who agreed to be a casualty of this war—I practically begged him for it.

“Are you angry, angel? *Good*. Stay angry, but make sure it’s about the right fucking things. Don’t lose that fury, because you’re going to fucking need it someday.”

He moves to the bed, crawling over my body until I’m lying back, pinned beneath his mass. I bury my face in his shoulder, inhaling his scent from the source, attempting to center myself in this moment and block out everything else. Right now, I don’t even care that he refuses to be nice to me. I don’t care that he’s hanging onto a grudge I don’t deserve, that he hates me and wants to punish me for hurt I never caused him.

He’s the one who’s going to take away everything I’ve ever known. He’s the one who’s going to set me free.

Dominic presses into me until there’s no space left between our bodies. I suddenly need this like I need air. With him, here, I can feel something other than the stinging pain of loss—of Ezra, of my future, of my life as I know it. He’s giving me a fighting chance and I’m about to take it with everything I’ve got.

My hands skate up the taut muscles of his back and around his neck, not even hesitating to bring his mouth down to mine. Our kiss isn’t tender and soft. It never is, but right now we’re channeling our frustration into each other, and the result is a brutal connection of our lips and tongues.

It’s despair and it’s pain and it’s everything I need to remember what I’m fighting for and what I’m fighting against. *I need him*. As I grasp the hem of his shirt, he sits back on his heels to let me pull the fabric up and over his head. The muscles of his chest flex with the rise and fall of each breath, the movement mesmerizing. I run my hands across every ridge and valley I can reach, savoring the feel of his bare skin at my fingertips.

His face relaxes and his eyes close as he relents to letting me explore his body with my hands, but before long, his

impatience gets the better of him. He grabs my wrists in one hand and pins them above my head, returning his mouth to mine, firm and persistent. He's taking back control and I let him have it. If this is all that he has to give me, this furious attack on my innocence, then I'll take it. It's why I came to him, because I knew he wouldn't hold back or coddle me through this.

"Such an eager little thing, aren't you?" he taunts, releasing his hold on my wrists and trailing his mouth down to my neck. His teeth sink in and I wince, but he doesn't linger. He shoves my shirt up over my bra and tugs the cups down, exposing my flesh to his hungry mouth. His biting kisses are a sadistic act that confuse my senses.

Whatever we're doing right now, who we are with each other, is not playful or fun. He was right when he said we were just using each other, and it's never been more apparent than right now. This is not lovemaking, but a different beast entirely, one that's selfish and ruthless.

He rips my shirt off over my head before I even have a chance to cooperate and my bra disappears just as hastily. He hooks his fingers into my pants and yanks them off, taking my panties with them, then sits back, his gaze traveling over my body as if he's never seen me naked before. I get the sneaking suspicion he's plotting—how to approach, how to attack, how to conquer.

While he's taking me in from head to toe, he unbuckles his belt and pushes his own pants down. His hard cock springs up in release and for a second I waver. He's not going to be gentle with it.

*I don't want him to be gentle.*

He grips my thighs and kneels between my knees, his hands powerful and greedy as they slide under my ass, clutching me and pulling me toward him. He leans down, dragging his lips over my cheek.

“You sure you’re ready for this? I promised to destroy you, and that’s what I intend to do.”

Before I can react, he slips his fingers inside me, working me into a frenzy. I moan and strain against his control, desperate to tell him that I need his cock, that I’m ready for him to put me out of my misery.

“It has to be done, angel. Tell me you want it.”

“Please, Dominic. I want it.”

He pumps his fingers in and out, and when he presses down on my clit with his thumb, I’m shocked by the sound that comes out of me. It’s not a little whimper of pain or fear, or even discomfort. It’s a sound that’s full of pleasure and need.

Dominic pulls his hand away and braces his arm next to my head, using the other to position himself at my entrance. I can feel him against my sensitive skin, hard and hot. He looks at me like he’s about to say something, but doesn’t. Instead, I see the unspoken warning on his face, the one that tells me he’s not going to hold back.

I’m not scared. I’m ready. I take a deep breath and nod.

Dominic slides into me, claiming me in one swift, wet stroke, filling and stretching me in a way I haven’t felt before. I cry out and he stills.

“Are you okay?”

“Do you care?”

He pauses, searching my face. “No. But are you?”

“I’m okay. Don’t stop.”

He draws out and thrusts in again, setting a steady rhythm. I’ve never experienced anything like this and I want to savor the sensations while I can—the pressure of him on top of me, his warmth and strength, the fullness of his cock in my body.

When I look up at him, his expression is full of lust and desire, and it takes my breath away. I wasn’t expecting him to

be affected by this the same way I am. His anger at me, at my earlier reaction to Ezra, has been replaced with something no less intense, but it's a turmoil of a different sort.

Dominic is going to completely and utterly obliterate me, I can feel it. This is only the beginning. I'm at the very edge of the cliff, looking out at the most beautiful vista, but it's not enough. I want the danger. I want to be pushed over the edge to fall below.

"More," I demand.

He hesitates, so I wrap my legs around him and pull him in as close as I can, meeting him thrust for thrust. He picks up his pace and his breath grows ragged, squeezing my hip with his fingers. He doesn't stop. He doesn't stop fucking me or touching me. He doesn't stop unraveling me, or giving me exactly what I need to survive this moment. It's vicious and savage and I know this is how it has to be to remind me that sex with him doesn't mean anything, that this is not precious.

My climax builds and I fight against it. I want to keep going, to keep this deliciously depraved prince of darkness on me, *inside me*. He slams into me over and over again and I'm so close, but I can't bear to come yet. I want him to come, too, to feel his loss of control right along with mine.

Watching his face, I can tell when he's close. He's so beautiful like this, his skin practically glowing in the dim light as he holds himself above me, the sound of our bodies moving together. He shows no mercy, taking me harder and faster than is probably wise for my first time, but I don't care. I asked for it all, and I'm completely lost in this.

"Stop holding back, angel. Come for me," he says. "Come on my cock."

I have no words. I can't form a full thought, let alone a coherent response. When he gentles his brutal attack to grind against my clit, I know it's over for me. He catches my moans in a violent kiss and explodes inside me, thrusting so deeply

it's like he's trying to mold our bodies into one. His cock pulses and I let myself fall off the cliff, my own orgasm rushing over me like cool air against my flesh. My limbs lock around him as waves of pleasure course through me and I hold on tight, letting the demon soften my plunge into the deep, dark depths of hell he created just for me.

Not long after the last shudders of release leave my body, he pulls out and gently rolls me on my side. He settles behind me, wrapping me in his arms and pressing his face against my neck. I don't know why he's bothering to cuddle me—he's never done it before—but I curl up and enjoy the warm crush of his body since both of us are too wiped out to do anything but this.

The sounds of the party downstairs have faded, and the hurt from seeing Ezra with another girl is a mere ache in the background that I suspect will haunt me for some time. It was nice to feel something else for a while, though. It was an effective distraction, and a productive one at that. Dominic reminded me why I'm here and set me back on my path.

His breathing evens out and I concentrate on the slow movement of his chest against my back.

“Thank you,” I whisper, when I'm finally able to speak.

He doesn't say anything, but just as I'm drifting off to sleep, I hear his quiet reply.

“You're welcome, little angel.”





## CHAPTER 22

### Feet of clay

#### DOMINIC

*It doesn't fucking mean anything.*

I slept for hours, wrapped around Seraphina, even though I shouldn't have. At the time, when I was holding her in my arms, exhausted and satisfied, I couldn't remember why it was so important not to fall asleep next to her. The second I woke up, I remembered, but it honestly doesn't matter anymore.

She's not going to forget again that all of this means exactly nothing, but since she's giving us everything—her body, her trust—I figure the least we can do is not give her more reasons to feel like shit. Not about herself, anyway. She's free to feel that we're a bunch of assholes all she wants, because we fucking are. Especially Ezra.

And the worst part is, I know the way that whole thing played out is my fault. I could have let him have her weeks ago, but I was too afraid they'd destroy each other, that she would fall for him and he would stomp her little heart. Well, it looks like they figured out how to do that all by themselves, with the added bonus of Ezra stomping his own fucking heart in the process. Didn't see that coming.

I need to pull my fucked up family back together. No more hurting, no more jealousy. I've watched Ezra sabotage himself so many times and he always comes out worse. I don't know why he expects it to work any differently, ever, but it ends now. For everyone's sake.

He really would have been the best one to take her virginity, a fact I may or may not let myself regret later. He would have made it fun, eased her into it, had her coming all night long and begging for more. I was mean to her, rough and relentless. Hell, any of these guys would have been better than me. But for one night, she was all mine.

*It doesn't mean anything.*

I manage to escape the bed without stirring her too much, and pull the sheet over her sleeping body. If I keep looking at her lying there naked like that, I'm going to end up fucking her again and then neither of us will be leaving this room any time soon. After pulling on some clean pants, I slip out of the room like a thief, in search of answers and coffee.

Ezra's already in the kitchen and he looks like hell. There's no doubt in my mind that he was up all night regretting so many of his recent life choices. He's my brother and I love him, but he knows he fucked up, and I know he's hurting inside. He always is.

His eye doesn't look so good either. Orion, the most passive goddamn one of us, really took offense to his behavior and let his face fucking know it. Part of me wishes it had been Seraphina, but I know Nash got her out of there pretty quick. She may not realize it, but the power she has over all of us is nothing short of astounding. I'm not sure when it happened, or what to do about it.

"Good morning." I'm proud of myself when the words come out almost believably civil.

"Morning," he mumbles, looking even more ashamed than I expected.

"You look like shit," I say to him, pouring a cup of coffee.

"I feel like shit."

"Is that just the hangover, or because you've had time to think about what you did?"

He's silent while I lean back on the counter, waiting for him to get his thoughts together. If he's having any. He wasn't coherent enough at the party to really get into what the fuck he was thinking, so I sent him to his room and told him to stay there until he could use his fucking words.

"I didn't know it would hurt her feelings," he finally says. "She wasn't supposed to have feelings. *I* wasn't supposed to have feelings. I was trying to—I don't know—go back to the way things were, when everything made sense."

I take a drink of my coffee, thinking it over. "You *did* hurt her. So what the fuck are you going to do about it?"

"Since when do you give a shit what happens to her?"

"I don't. But if you keep pissing her off, she's going to fire us and recruit one of the Deltas next door for her video. And then what'll we do for the rest of the year? This is pretty fun, right?" His glare tells me he knows I'm full of shit.

"How the fuck was I supposed to know?"

I see the flicker in his eyes. He walls himself up because he can't bear to let anyone in, but fuck this. I'm not going to stand back and watch him do this to himself over and over. Not anymore.

"You have to stop living in fear of getting hurt. Shit happens and there's nothing you can do about it. But so many other things will happen, too, if you tear down your fucking walls, even a little bit. Seraphina *likes* you. Just let her, goddamnit! Don't you think she's worth the risk?"

His lips pull back in a sneer. "What the fuck happened to you last night? Who are you, and where is Dominic?"

I'm not about to tell him. I'm still trying to figure it out myself. My relationship with Seraphina is complicated, but it doesn't have to be that way for him, or for any of the others. We just need to do the best we can to not tear each other apart by repeating whatever bullshit happened last night.

“She doesn’t need me, anyway,” Ezra says. “How am I supposed to compete with you? You and your sister are like fucked up soulmates or some shit.”

I groan. He’s never going to get tired of the sister jokes. “She’s *not* my sister. Not anything close to being my sister. Ever. Or my soulmate.”

“Still, you’re not the only one. How can I measure up to Maynard and Orion? They literally have two cocks and god knows how many toys stashed away up there. Or Nash. That fucker didn’t even need to talk to get her to suck his dick.”

“You’re the one she cried over, you ass! And we’re not competing with each other, we’re on the same damn team! You’re just as important here as the rest of us.”

He shakes his head like he’s not buying it. How do I get him to see the truth?

“Ezra, she’s comfortable with you. You relax her. You make all this weird-ass bullshit easier for her. Fun, even. She likes you, and not because of this act you put on, but because she can see right the fuck through it. She sees *you*. If you like her, fucking let her know already.”

“She’s going to reject me.”

“Oh, you mean the way you rejected her? The best thing you can do now is stop trying to hide from her. She’s not fucking done with you.”

Ezra rakes his hands through his hair. “She’s never going to forgive me. I saw her face. I fucked it all up.”

“She will forgive you. She doesn’t have to, and right now, she probably doesn’t want to, but she will. She wants you to be a part of this as much as she wants any of us. I’m willing to bet *more* than any of us. Even me.”

And that’s the fucking truth. I watch Ezra’s face as he processes my words. If there’s anyone I can be sentimental with, it’s him. We’ve been through too much together to hide

this kind of truth behind some macho bullshit, something he makes clear when he shoves his chair away from the counter to give me a tight hug.

“I’m sorry.”

“Say that to her. If she forgives you, I forgive you. But you need to get your shit figured out, because next time won’t be so easy.”



## CHAPTER 23

Weighed in the balance

### SERAPHINA

I wake up in Dominic's bed where I must have slept the whole night. Morning light filters through the curtains, bathing his room in a warm glow. He's not here, of course, but I'm not about to cry over it. Last night brought a lot of things back into perspective for me. I'm here for one reason, and they agreed to be with me for only that one reason.

Scanning the room for my clothes, I spot them on a chair on the other side of the room. Too far. I sit up and scrub my hands over my face in an effort to wake myself up.

I had sex last night. *With Dominic*. He was rough because I needed him to be, and maybe because he needed it, too. Everything is sore and there's a lingering tingle throughout my whole body as I stretch the tension from my limbs. Satisfaction? Exhaustion? I would kill for a cup of coffee and something to eat right now.

Just as I'm contemplating whether I have the energy to get out of bed, there's a soft knock at the door and it opens before I can answer. Ezra peeks his head in. How different would my first time have been, if it have been with him?

He takes a step into the room and I fight the heavy ache in my chest, the one that's not supposed to be there. Did he have sex with that girl? It doesn't even matter. I'm such a hypocrite—I had sex with someone else last night, and he's allowed to live his life how he wants. I'm not here because I mean something to any of these guys, and I know that. So why is this so hard?

He walks over to me with his head down, and when he gets closer, I see that he's sporting a painful-looking black eye. I'm sure he doesn't want my concern, so I resist the urge to ask him if he's okay, to pull him close and never let go. But I also want to slap him and shove him away and as I'm paralyzed by my warring emotions, he takes in the sight of me, still naked from the night before, barely hidden by the sheet.

After a moment of silence, he holds out a coffee cup from Grinder's and a small brown paper bag.

"Dom asked me to bring you this."

So he's here as a delivery boy. I guess Dominic's not ready to face me. Does he regret last night? I take the bag from Ezra, unable to look at his face and the dark bruise that's spread across his skin. A Hell-on-Wheels and a frosted donut? How did Dominic know?

I scoot back to sit against the headboard and enjoy my, what is it, pity breakfast? My, 'Yeah, I took your virginity while telling you it means nothing and then left before you could wake up in the morning, but have a treat' breakfast? Whatever. If there's anything I need right now, it's caffeine and carbs. I'll take it.

"And he told me to fix what I fucked up last night," Ezra adds.

He hesitates at the side of the bed and I reluctantly move over so he can sit next to me. He does—so close it hurts. That's fine, but I'm not sharing my 'I don't care about you but I'm not kicking you out of my bed' donut from Dominic. I earned this.

We sit in silence while I inhale my consolation prize. Who needs deep, meaningful relationships anyway? I have to figure this Ezra thing out, though, because it doesn't seem fair to either of us to let it hang in the air. After finishing my donut, I lean my head back and stare at the ceiling, remembering all the stuff that Dominic said to me last night.



“Ezra, it’s okay that you don’t feel the same about me that I do you, and it was naïve of me to think you wouldn’t be with anyone else while we work on my plan. I get that now, and I’ll learn to be okay with it. There’s nothing for you to fix.”

The longer he’s silent, the more the air in the room seems to disappear, until it feels like I’m about to suffocate.

“And how is it that you feel about me?”

The ache in my chest radiates through my limbs. I might as well just get it all out there. “I like you. You’re amazing.”

He scoffs. “You really don’t know me, then.”

“Maybe I don’t, but I think you’re a lot different than how you see yourself.”

“I thought I had myself pretty figured out. Then you came in with your crazy fucking idea and made everything confusing. I don’t know anything anymore.”

I fold my knees up to my chest and rest my head on them. “I’m sorry for making things confusing. Dominic said I shouldn’t get attached to you guys and I’m not supposed to read more into all this than what it is. You don’t have to act like my boyfriend or anything. It’s just—this is all new to me. I was caught off guard last night and my feelings were hurt when they shouldn’t have been.”

“You’re allowed to have your feelings.”

“And so are you. Whatever they are. Whoever they’re for.”

“What do you want from me, Seraphina?” he asks, but it’s soft and curious, not accusatory.

My heart and mind are in disagreement. I want him to hold me so I can melt into his arms. I want his lips on my skin and I want to breathe his warmth into my lungs, but my brain keeps replaying the image of what I saw last night and it makes my stomach churn.

When I don't answer, he reaches out and threads his fingers through mine and I let him.

"I didn't fuck that girl, you know. She was nice and whatever, but she wasn't who I wanted to be with. I thought I could act like I always do and everything would be fine, but it wasn't working. Nothing is the way it used to be."

He's right, this is all very confusing. He kisses my hand before continuing.

"It never even occurred to me that I was important to you—that you might like me the way I like you. So I didn't think that me being with someone else would hurt you as much as it was hurting me. I regret it, and I'm sorry."

*What?* This changes everything. Just when I think I've got a handle on reality, he turns my world upside-down. Again.

"You like *me*?"

He laughs. "Yeah, I fucking like you. You're insane and you're really fucking shit up around here, but I am here for it. I'm here for you. I'm not going to repeat last night, I promise."

"This whole thing is so bizarre. Why should it be okay for me to be with other guys, but not for you to be with other girls? That's not fair."

"Fuck fair. If you go to the Delta house looking for a hookup, you bet your sweet little ass I'm going to bust the door down and drag you the fuck out of there like a goddamn caveman. But the guys in this house—the demons, my brothers? They can fuck you all day long and I'll be happy to watch. It's different."

That is different. But what do I know about normal, anyway?

"So, was the girl from last night pissed? She did that to your face?" I didn't get to see what happened after Nash carried me upstairs and it looks like I missed quite a bit.

“Wouldn’t blame her if she had, but no, this is from one of your boyfriends.”

It takes me a second to understand he’s referring to the other demons. One of them did that to him? For me?

“Who?”

He smirks. “If he wants you to know, you’ll know.”

Just like it never occurred to Ezra how I really felt, it hadn’t occurred to me that any of these guys would do something like that for me. Despite all of Dominic’s attempts to straighten me out last night, this morning everything is a mess again.

“So what happens now?” I ask.

Ezra stands up and puts my coffee cup on the nightstand, then helps me to the edge of the bed. I let the sheet fall away because my naked body is nothing he hasn’t already seen.

“Now, you get to relax for a bit. You’re not on our time right now, so Dom told me if you didn’t throw me down the stairs first, I’m supposed to make sure you get a nice hot bath.”

“He said that? That doesn’t sound like something he’d say. And you never told me throwing you down the stairs was an option.”

Ezra leads me to the bathroom and starts filling the claw-foot tub with water, before turning to me and gently folding me into his arms. Here we are again, I’m completely naked, wrapped up in his warm, fully clothed embrace.

“It really doesn’t sound like him, does it? He did say it, though. Right after he came back from picking up your favorite morning sugar fest.” He raises his eyebrows at me. “What happened with you two last night?”

“Hm, not much,” I say, letting him help me into the giant tub. He’s probably figured it out anyway, considering he found me naked in Dominic’s bed, but I don’t know how much I

should tell him, especially after the drama I caused. He'll find out eventually. They all will.

I settle in the hot water and my aching muscles rejoice. I let out a huge, satisfied sigh before continuing.

“He lectured me mostly, about sex not necessarily being meaningful or important. That I shouldn't get carried away with my emotions because ultimately what we're doing is for the video, and that anything else is going to distract from that.”

“That's it?”

“And then we had sex.”

Ezra freezes in place, staring at me. I can't read his face. Is he mad? Jealous?

“Fucking finally,” he mutters, sitting on the edge of the tub. He leans down to plant a soft kiss on my forehead. “You know what this means, don't you?”

“Not a clue.” That's a lie. I have a little clue, especially with how he's looking at me right now.

“I'll make sure you get a copy of everyone's test results today. We're all clean, I promise.” The longer he looks at me like that, the more I want to drag him into the tub with me.

“So, are we good?” I ask.

“I should be asking you that. Are we?”

I nod. We're fine, whatever we are, whatever this is. Who knows how long it will last, but I'm determined to enjoy it while it does.

“You know,” he says, standing up, “I don't know why the thought of my best friend fucking the girl I like is so hot, but it totally is.”

I splash him with water and he makes a lewd face in response, before turning off the faucet.

“You want to come in?” I ask.

“Fuck yeah, I do. But I’m being punished with party clean-up duty, so I gotta go let Nash boss me around for a while.”

“Some other time?”

“Looking forward to it.”

He comes back to hand me my coffee before retreating down the stairs.

Finishing my drink, I sit back and relax, waiting for the caffeine to do its thing. I must doze off because when I open my eyes again, Dominic is leaning back on the sink watching me. I didn’t even hear him come in. So I guess he’s not avoiding me?

I glance at his face, remembering how he looked the last time I saw him, when our bodies were tangled together and he was coming inside me. I want to reach out and touch him, to do it all over again, but instead, I ask him the question that’s been on my mind.

“How did you know what I like from Grinder’s?”

“What do you mean, how did I know? I pay attention.” He looks offended by my question, but it’s totally fake indignation. He cracks a rare grin that vanishes as quickly as it appeared. I knew he had something other than doom and gloom in there.

“Alright, fine. I asked Jasmine when I texted to let her know you crashed here last night.”

“You texted Jasmine? When? Why?”

“First thing this morning. She seems like the kind of person to worry if her friends don’t come home, and I didn’t want a bunch of cops tearing my house apart. She threatened to send Piper to cut off my dick if you didn’t check in with her, so if you could get to that soon, I would appreciate it.”

She did that for me? I may have slightly underestimated her mama-bear tendencies. “Fine, I’ll think about it. Are you going

to make me finish this bath in front of you?”

He looks at me like he’s considering it, then shakes his head. “Nah, it’s your day off. But don’t take too long. Maynard’s making you a real breakfast. And don’t forget to check in with Jasmine—I like my dick.” He pushes off the counter to leave, but I call out before he can get too far.

“Hey, Dominic?”

“Yeah, angel?” He stops and leans his head around the doorway to look at me, as if we’re two perfectly normal people interacting. Friends, even. It’s a lie, but maybe I can pretend for today.

“I like it, too.”

He runs his fingers through his golden brown hair, looking almost flustered as he turns to leave.

“I know you do, you little slut,” he says with a smile in his voice.



## CHAPTER 24

### A lamb to the slaughter

#### SERAPHINA

Later that night, when I'm back in the safety of my own dorm room, I text Dominic to ask if tomorrow's "church day" is flexible. He doesn't respond right away. Is he going to deny my request? I wouldn't mind all that much if he does—I just need to get Dad something for Christmas and haven't had a lot of time for shopping lately.

Dominic eventually replies, telling me to come at the usual time and we'll work something out. I shudder to think what working something out means to him, but thank him anyway. In the morning, I make it to the Lair in record time and Ezra opens the heavy front door to let me in. His eye doesn't look any better, but he's in a good mood.

"Good morning, angel." He watches me with a grin as I fight to remove my boots and coat. As soon as they're off, he wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me against his chest.

Do I get Ezra today? I really want Ezra today. We have unfinished business.

"Dom called a meeting. Everyone's waiting in the office." He takes my hand and leads me down the hall, offering no further explanation. Am I in trouble? The demons have an office?

We pass through the billiard room to a panel on the far wall, which Ezra casually opens like a door, as if having a secret room in your demon mansion is a perfectly normal



thing. It might be—this is the only demon mansion I've been in.

He turns to close the panel behind us while I take in my surroundings. It's exactly the type of office you'd expect to find hidden away in a house like this: dark, and decadently furnished. Dominic is leaning against an impressive desk at one end of the room, both him and the furniture looking imposing and authoritative. There are leather chairs, tables with dimly lit lamps, and bookshelves crowding the walls, but the most distinctive feature is a lack of windows. It truly is a secret room.

Nash is sitting in the corner reading, and Maynard and Orion are on a large leather sofa. What is going on?

Ezra motions for me to approach Dominic and the big desk. When I get close enough, Dominic reaches over to grab me by the shoulders, turning me around to face the rest of the room. Ezra takes a couple of steps back and crosses his arms, looking on.

"We've come to a decision, angel," Dominic says.

My heart jumps in my chest. Are they quitting on me? Because I accidentally caught feelings for the resident fuckboy? I thought we fixed that, sort of. I look at Dominic, but he doesn't appear bothered by my distress.

"You've made excellent progress and we're pleased by how accommodating you've been. You're a very good girl and you've done everything we've asked." He literally pets my hair as he speaks, and there's no condescension in his tone. I recognize that this is high praise coming from him.

"Thank you."

"In light of Friday's incident, we feel some changes to our arrangement are in everyone's best interest."

I'm not sure where he's going with this, and while his compliments are nice, his formal tone has me worried.

“What we’re proposing is a pact—from now until your video is done, none of us will fuck around outside of this group. That goes for everyone, including you, angel. Is that clear?”

I glance around the room at the guys who are all nodding. Even Ezra, who appears the most serious of them all. His face softens when he catches me looking. This is kind of huge. I turn back to Dominic to hear the rest.

“If you continue to give yourself to us, the way you’ve been doing so well, we vow to give ourselves to you, and only you. If you agree, we’ll seal the pact with a little ritual.”

My eyebrows shoot up, my head suddenly filled with images of ropes and knives and demon masks. I mean, maybe I could work with that, but it’s also some kind of super advanced kink scenario I’m surely not ready for. Dominic laughs, the sound sinister, yet utterly enthralling.

“Don’t look so scared. You’ll have fun, I promise.”

He leads me by the hand until I’m standing behind the massive desk, the utmost position of power in this dark, secret room, and it’s almost sweet, reverent. Then he kicks my feet apart and pushes me down so I’m bent over it. All the air escapes my lungs and I forget to take another breath.

“Breathe,” he orders, massaging his fingertips into my neck. With his other hand, he slowly brings the hem of my skirt up to my back. I see Ezra move toward the side of the room for a better view of what’s going on behind the desk.

“To seal the pact, we’re going to claim you. Each one of us is going to fuck you, right here, right now, and afterward, you’re free to spend the day however you wish—with our cum dripping out of your body, soaking your panties, reminding you that you belong to us now.”

*Holy shit.* My knees wobble. If I can’t hold myself up from his words alone, how am I going to last through all five of

them? It's like I learned to swim two days ago and now they're throwing me into the middle of the ocean.

Dominic skims his fingertips up the backs of my thighs and over my ass, toying with the waistband of my tights before he hooks his fingers into the elastic and drags them down. He crouches behind me to lift my foot so he can remove them, one leg at a time. Then he tugs my panties off as well, leaving me bent over the desk with my bare ass out, at the mercy of five insatiable, horny men.

"I'm tempted to stuff these in your mouth, but I want to make sure we can hear all the noises you're about to make," Dominic says as he stands up, rubbing the soft fabric of my underwear in his fingers. He cocks his head and tosses them to Ezra. "Some other time, then."

Ezra catches them in the air and casually tucks them into his back pocket, his confident swagger in full force.

"What do you have to say for yourself, little angel? Do you agree to the terms?"

I hear Dominic's pants unzip and a wave of serenity washes over me. Whatever they want to do to me, *for me*, they have my permission.

"I do."

Those are all the words I need to say. The mood in the room shifts from cautious and expectant, somber even, to one of primal hunger. I look at each of the men in front of me, Ezra, the blue-haired lover, Nash, the quiet mystery, Orion, the sweet fallen angel, and Maynard, the wicked puppet master. I can't see Dominic at my back, but his sinful force is unmistakable, ready to push me past my limits because he knows that's exactly what I need him to do.

He stretches my arms forward and guides my fingers to clench tightly around the front edge of the desk. I close my eyes and imagine the fearsome demon behind me, now squeezing the flesh of my hips. He presses the tip of his cock

to me and my first instinct is to tense up, but I'm here because I want him.

I want *them*.

Drawing in a breath, I release it slowly, letting every muscle in my body relax, one by one, from head to toe.

"There she is," Dominic murmurs, stroking his hand down my back. "That's what I've been waiting for."

He slides his cock through my arousal, then pushes into me, working in and out a little more each time. Once he's fully inside, he stills and leans forward.

"Are you ready to give yourself to us?" he asks. When I nod, he starts thrusting, hard and deep. There's no teasing, no foreplay, no slow buildup, just harsh, fast fucking, and I wonder if this is how it's always going to be with him. Not that I mind. I settle against the desk, letting him grab my hips and drive our bodies together. *Apart, together. Apart, together.* The soft slapping noise of our contact fills the room and I focus on the rhythm, his warmth inside me, his hands gripping me tightly.

The pressure to escape my future is the first to float away. Right here, right now, it doesn't matter. My grades, the video, Noah, none of it matters. The entire world fades, the room around me vanishes, and all that exists are the demons surrounding me and the cool wood of the desk holding me in place.

The longer he fucks me, the more I relax, letting him have his way with me as the others look on, watching, waiting. When Dominic's movements slow, I know he's close. The fronts of my thighs press into the edge of the desk as he comes inside me, filling me with his release. I savor the strength of his body behind mine, the quiet sound of his ragged breathing, the smell of sex and him.

He pulls out, running his hands over my hips, squeezing my waist and caressing my back. "That's my girl," he says, his

voice uncharacteristically reassuring. “Are you ready for more?”

“Yes.” It comes out so quiet I’m not even sure if he heard me until I hear him say Ezra’s name.

I glance up as Dominic moves away, tucking himself back in his pants but not zipping up. He takes a seat in one of the leather chairs, looking relaxed and satisfied, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

Ezra already has his pants open and his hand wrapped around his dick. He pumps it slowly, his gaze raking over my body.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous bent over that desk,” he says, as he approaches me. “You know I’ve been dreaming of your pussy on my cock for months. I never thought our first time together would be like this, though, did you?”

I shake my head with a small laugh. Certainly not.

“Nothing with you is how I imagined. You’re just so full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“When we’re done with her, it won’t be surprises dripping down her legs,” Dominic says, an evil grin splitting his face. I’m so happy he’s amused.

Ezra doesn’t waste any more time, settling into place behind me and sliding his cock into my waiting body. His grip on my hips is gentler than Dominic’s, and his thrusts are far less brutal. *God, he feels good.*

“Oh, fuck, angel, you’re better than I even dreamed. How did we get so lucky?” Ezra fucks me fervently, almost lovingly.

I feel safe in his hands, so I let the world drift away once more. I have no grasp of the passage of time. I’m sure the others are watching, but I can’t imagine what’s going through their minds. All I can think of is finally getting to have this moment with Ezra. He was worth the wait.

“Are we allowed to make her come?” he asks.

“I doubt she’s going to stop you,” Dominic replies.

Ezra snakes a hand under me and rubs my clit in gentle circles with the soft pads of his fingertips. The effect is immediate as tingling pleasure teases through me, amplified by his cock pumping into me.

“That’s it, baby. Give me that fucking orgasm. You can do it. Just let it go.”

My muscles tighten, the rush of pleasure building and radiating through my body. My legs shake as he lightens his touch, letting me ride out my release against his fingers.

“Shit, that’s so fucking hot. I’m gonna come.” He drives his cock in as far as he can, a string of obscenities escaping his lips as his thrusts grow erratic, his body tensing up. We’re locked together as his cock twitches inside me, filling me with cum and ecstasy. I hear a long, low moan and then realize it’s me.

“Goddamn,” someone mutters. Orion, I think.

Ezra slowly pulls his hand away and slides his cock out of me, his and Dominic’s combined release already trickling down my thighs. He swipes his finger through it and then touches it to my lips.

“You are such a mess, angel. You’re gonna be thinking about us all fucking day, aren’t you?”

I really am. I’m going to be thinking about them a hell of a lot longer than that.

“Maynard, you’re up,” Dominic says.



## CHAPTER 25

All things to all men

### SERAPHINA

Ezra steps away after grabbing a cheeky handful of my ass, and I look up to see Maynard. He plants a kiss on Orion's lips and turns to face me.

“Oh, Seraphina. Look at the trouble you've gotten yourself into now,” he says as he walks over, unzipping his pants and pulling out his already hard cock. He leans down to look me in the eye and adds, “I can't remember the last time I fucked a pussy. I've been on a bit of an ass kick lately.”

He skims his hand over my ass and I shiver at the contact. The promise of personal attention from him is a thrill that will never get old.

“We don't have time for anal,” Dominic warns. “It'll take too long to prep her, and I promised we wouldn't keep her here all day.”

Maynard takes his stance behind me and runs his cock through the mess the other two have left behind. He slides it up and over my back hole, making me question his intent in a panic. He must feel me stiffen up because he chuckles darkly.

“I heard the rules. Now, put your legs together and make it real fucking tight for me.” Maynard nudges his cock to my dripping pussy as I do what I'm told.

“How do you want me to play with you, angel? Should I be nice and gentle? Or do you want to be dominated?”



“I thought what I prefer doesn’t matter?” I can practically see his terrifying grin in response to my hint of sass. It feels like a dangerous game, but I trust him to not actually hurt me.

“It doesn’t, but I still need your permission.”

Since I’m here to learn all I can from these guys, I might as well let him do what he wants. “Play with me any way you like, sir.”

“Such a good little toy, aren’t you? Don’t move a muscle and don’t make a sound.”

That’s all the warning I get before he grabs my hips and plunges his cock into me, jolting me forward as I unleash a surprised yelp. *Domination it is, then.* He’s not any bigger than the rest of them, but the position he put me in makes it feel like he’s the size of all of them together. He wraps my hair into his fist and slowly pulls me upright, his lips at my ear.

“Let’s go over those instructions again. I said don’t move a muscle, and don’t make a sound.” He releases my hair and guides me back down to the desk, waiting for me to settle in place. He thrusts into me again and this time I manage to steel myself against him and keep quiet.

Maynard’s roughness is more measured than Dominic’s, but he’s nowhere near as gentle as Ezra. He’s also not going to get me off like Ezra did—this is all about him and how my body can service his. He grasps my waist tightly and drives his cock into me over and over in an unforgiving display of the dominance I’ve granted him.

“Has Dom fucked you in the ass yet?” he asks, breaking my spell.

“No,” I say, in between deep, bracing breaths. He pauses for a moment and then picks up his pace again.

“Good. I want to be the first one in that pretty little hole. You won’t let him get there before me, will you?”

I shake my head no. I'm not about to tell this man he can't have what he wants. If Dominic has a problem with my answer, the two of them can fight it out. Dominic doesn't say anything, though, so I guess he's okay with his friend claiming that part of me.

"Don't worry, I won't be rough with it," Maynard says, sliding his thumb across my back hole, the relentless pounding of his cock offering enough of a distraction that I don't tense up this time.

He keeps going, picking up cum with his thumb and rubbing it over me, pressing more firmly each time.

"If you want me to stop, just say so." He pushes the tip of his thumb in, and he *is* gentle, like he said—at least there. He's still brutally pounding me against the desk, the edges digging into my legs. How can he even focus on anything else? I can't. My eyes close as I give myself over to Maynard's control.

"Do you like it?" He leans his tall body over my back to whisper in my ear.

I nod.

"Mmm. I'm giving you permission to use your voice. Do you like having my thumb in your ass?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you would," he says, standing back up to his full height.

Pressing my forehead against the desk, I attempt to focus on the experience. I don't know how many girls go from virgin to whatever this is so quickly, but it needs to be done. Dominic's plan was to destroy me to make a convincing and authentic video, but what I hadn't considered before this moment was how much I was going to enjoy the process.

I lose track of how long Maynard fucks me, and honestly, I don't care. He sets a punishing pace, holding me steady with one hand while he slams into me, chasing his climax. I relax

around his cock and thumb, gripping the edge of the desk to keep still for him.

“That’s right, angel, hang on tight.” When his orgasm erupts, he growls with his release, pulsing inside me. He stays until the tremors subside, but no longer than that—sliding out and stepping back, leaving me breathless on the desk as he pulls his pants back into place.

“Orion? You ready?” Dominic asks. I look up at Orion and see that he’s staring straight at me with a grin on his face, perfectly delighted to have watched his boyfriend do what he just did.

“Oh, I’m fucking ready.” He crosses the room, his glittering eyes flicking back to Maynard. When he approaches me, he strokes my hair and touches my skin as he moves behind me, his hands soothing my frayed and overexcited nerves.

“Show her what you’ve got, pet,” Maynard says.

Orion unbuckles his belt, the clinking of metal the only sound in the room. My muscles are tired and I’m not sure how much longer I can stay like this, but I don’t dare move. I don’t want to disappoint any of them.

He carefully repositions me, moving my feet apart to open me up again as he stands between my legs, freeing his cock and nudging it against me. He takes his time, coating it in the wetness that’s dripping out of my body. I tighten up when his piercings rub over my flesh. Is this going to hurt?

I looked it up when I got home from that first day I spent with Maynard and Orion. The line of barbells in his dick? It’s called a Jacob’s ladder—the ladder to heaven, of all things. But I have a sneaking suspicion I’m on my way down, not going up. Maybe a ladder to hell would be more appropriate. Is there a piercing for that?

Orion pushes into me, gently slipping in the first barbell. I flinch in anticipation of it hurting, and he pauses.

“Relax for me.” He strokes my back with his calming touches, letting me adjust. When he sinks in further, I can feel another one go in. It’s not painful though, and he continues to slip into me slowly, one piercing at a time, and then he’s all the way in, filling me up. My muscles clench around him, and he lets out a shuddering moan, gripping my waist tightly in his hands while he grinds against me.

I want to see him, to know what he’s thinking right now, but I can’t in this position. So I do the next best thing. I tilt my face up to the room to see the others—four men, faces filled with lecherous lust, watching, enraptured.

Maynard is leaning against the door that we came in, his darkness seeping out into the room, tainting everything with his sinister sensuality. He said he was going to enjoy watching me and Orion fuck, and while I’m not sure if this is what he had in mind at the time, it’s clear that this meets his expectations.

Ezra’s reclining in his chair, spent and flushed. His lips are parted, his eyes half closed as he watches in his satisfied haze. Nash isn’t giving so much away, his stoic mask firmly in place, but the hunger in his pale eyes is unmistakable.

Dominic’s focus is intense. He’s watching each of his friends fuck me—claim me—and his expression is happy, almost. He looks pleased and approving, reminiscent of the person he used to be, instead of the gruff, angry monster all too eager to destroy my life. I have to look away before I forget why I’m here and lose myself in him.

Orion eases out of me, then back in again, the rhythm of his thrusts growing faster, but still careful. I can’t feel the individual piercings anymore, but they’re playing at my sensitive nerves in the most delicious way.

“You’re behaving so well for us.” His voice is practically a purr, warm and gentle. “You’re the perfect girl to be my first.”

He continues to pump into me as my brain freezes in confusion.

*His first?* Not his first, first, obviously. I did watch him get railed by Maynard, but his first woman? I've never been anyone's first anything. What if I mess it up? What if it's not good for him and he never wants to do it again?

He senses my instant distress. "Calm down, angel. You're amazing. I love having you wrapped around my cock. You're so brave to take us all on, aren't you?" He soothes me with his quiet words and reassuring touches until he, too, finds his release and pulls away.

The only one left is Nash. The enigma.

What do I really know about him? I look at him and feel a connection. I have ever since he took me under his wing on Halloween. It grew stronger that day in the library, when he communicated so clearly without saying a single word, and those afternoons spent in his room, in his bed, in his arms—I've never experienced anything more intimate in my entire life. And then he saved me from heartbreak, not hesitating to lick the wounds caused by someone else. I don't know anything about him, but still, I *know* him. How is that possible?

He approaches the desk, looking every bit the refined, intellectual athlete he is. Every dark blond hair is in place, every glorious muscle shaping his snug t-shirt to perfection. The only clue that he's as depraved as the rest of them is the hard bulge beneath his athletic pants, and his willingness to participate in Dominic's perverted ritual.

Nash caresses my cheek as he moves to stand behind me. He traces my lips with the tip of his finger, then pushes it into my mouth for me to suck on. A tortured groan sounds from one of the others, but I don't take my attention off of Nash. With his other hand, he removes his glasses, setting them on

the desk beside me, and pushes his pants down to stroke his cock. Only then does he release his finger from my mouth.

He holds my hip with one strong hand and guides his cock into me with the other, easing himself all the way in. He leans forward to plant his forearms on the desk, covering me with his solid body. Nash is all around me, pressing into me and holding me steady on both sides. I'm tired and my muscles burn, but he's supporting me and holding me in place while his cock grinds into me.

I whimper at having him so deep inside, and he slides his finger back into my mouth to pacify me. He rests his forehead on my back, continuing to rock in and out, the sounds of sex filling the room. He lowers his free arm to slip a hand underneath me, finding my swollen clit and quickly working my orgasm to the brink.

This one is different from the first. It's like a wave building up and crashing over me, leaving me floating and battered in the middle of a deep, dark ocean.

Nash's muscles tense and his rhythm falters as he plunges into me one final time. He unloads inside me, his own orgasm filling me with his warmth. We stay where we are, his heart pounding against my back and his body blanketing mine, while the others look on in silent approval.

He doesn't withdraw immediately, continuing to box me in while his heavy breath warms my skin through my shirt. I'm limp beneath him, his muscular body pinning me to the desk as I finally stop sucking on his finger and let him have his hand back. My arms tingle and my mind is a completely useless puddle.

After a quiet minute, he squeezes my hips and stands up straight, pulling out of me. He comes around to the side of the desk and unwraps my hands from where they've been gripping for so long my knuckles have gone white and stiff. Nash

moves my aching arms down to my sides, but I'm barely aware of what's happening.

With his softening cock in one hand, he gently slides my head toward it with the other. He nudges my lips open with the tip, and I understand. His cock is covered in the release of all six of us, and he wants me to clean it with my mouth.

And I do, consuming the result of my own claiming. I lick and suck him like it's the best thing I've ever tasted, loving the way he strokes my hair and my cheek, probably as shocked by my eagerness as I am. When he's satisfied, he pulls back with a gentle tap on my jaw and I reluctantly let him go. He tucks himself into his pants and puts his glasses back on.

Too exhausted to move, I let my thoughts drift away, focusing only on the tickling sensation of cum dripping down my thighs.

"Shit, she's out," someone says.

Nash gathers my limp body into his arms and carries me across the room, depositing me carefully onto Dominic's lap. Dominic checks me over, smoothing my hair off my face before brushing his lips against my ear.

"Welcome to the family, little demon. You're one of us now."





## CHAPTER 26

Straight and narrow

### SERAPHINA

I wish I had more time to spend with the guys before heading home for winter break, but there is none. Everyone is busy with studying and finals, so Dominic releases me from our “church” schedule until we return to Morgenstern in January. There’s too much going on for me to be sad about it, though—I *have* to do well on my finals.

On the bright side, my dreams are getting really, really good these days. It’s the only time I can allow myself to indulge in thoughts of the demons, because I need to make sure that I still know how to behave like the old me when I’m at home, the one place I absolutely do not want to be. Especially for Christmas.

You’d think with being a prominent religious figure in our town that Christmas would be important to my dad, but it never was, and it most certainly isn’t now. Only the illusion of it is. His hypocrisy is especially glaring to me as I spend Christmas Eve at Glory Valley, listening to him preach to the masses about the importance of this time of year and how it’s for family and reflection and charity. It’s a lovely sermon, but coming from him is total bullshit, proven by the fact that he spends Christmas morning locked away in his study doing god knows what.

I did get him a couple of presents, but I’m not really in the mood to search him out to ask him to open them. Instead, I raid the fridge for snacks and watch movies in the living room, under the twinkling lights of the giant Christmas tree that I’m

sure he hired a service to put up. There's no way he decorated that thing himself.

Tugging Ezra's flannel tighter around me, I inhale his lingering scent. I'd much rather be with him, with any of the demons, instead of here. What is the holiday like for them, anyway? They didn't divulge any details about their plans, so I guess those aren't the kinds of things they want to tell me. I'm supposed to be one of them now, but heaven forbid someone mention an actual, real-life family member. They certainly know all about mine.

Around dinner time, Dad wanders in and asks if I want to open my present. I'm surprised he got me something at all, but I did notice a large, flat box under the tree that I've been hanging out by all day. He hands it to me and sits down, watching.

"Well?" he says.

"Thank you." I gingerly tear off the paper. It's wrapped beautifully in silver, with a huge red ribbon, no doubt someone else's handiwork, just like the tree.

Opening the box, I'm greeted with a cloud of light blue netting. I pull it out and have to stand up to make sense of it all. It's a dress? Ignoring for a moment that it's blue, it looks like a damn wedding gown. If he bought me a wedding dress, would killing him be considered self-defense? Probably not.

The bodice is velvet with cap sleeves, and the bottom—well, it's like someone ran through a mosquito net factory covered in glue. It's made of layer upon layer of soft, swishy tulle. If my father was going to pick out a wedding dress for me, it would most assuredly be bright, virginal white, so what the hell is this?

"For the Townsend New Year's Eve charity gala," he explains, finally picking up on my confusion.

"It's very fancy. I don't normally dress up this much for the gala."

“You normally dress like a child. You’re a woman now and Noah needs to see that. Don’t you like it?”

“I do like it. Doesn’t it look a little like a wedding dress, though?”

“Now you’re catching on. I want Noah to take one look at you and see what a beautiful bride you’ll be. Make sure you stand next to him a lot. You’ll look like you’re supposed to be getting married. It will plant the idea in everyone’s minds.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that, so I just hand him the presents I bought him. He’s easy to shop for since he’s not one for sentimentality. I usually get him whatever is relevant to his current interests, so this year I got him a silk tie and pocket square set that will look great with any of his hundreds of suits, and a new pair of golf gloves.

He’s suitably appreciative and I briefly consider if maybe he’s not such a terrible father. But moments later he disappears again, leaving me to ponder the ramifications of my new puffy blue dress and the future I intend to violently upend.

The entire next week I spend mostly by myself, texting with Jasmine occasionally and reading all the books I borrowed from Ezra and Holly. I read everything from science fiction to monster romances, horror novels to regency classics, enjoying the brief reprieve from reality that comes crashing back all too soon on New Year’s Eve.

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“Seraphina, are you ready?” Dad calls up the stairs. I look at myself in the mirror. This dress is actually quite lovely, but I feel hideous in it because I know I’m staring at an imposter. This is not me. It would be nice if I could do something cool with my hair or add some edgy eyeliner, but I’m playing a

character tonight—the obedient, God-fearing pastor’s daughter.

“Seraphina!” Dad shouts again. I don’t want to do this. How am I supposed to pretend I’m the same person I was three months ago after everything that’s happened? It’s an entire lifetime of difference, but I need to keep the charade going a little longer if I’m going to escape.

“Almost ready! I’ll meet you in the car!” I shout back. *Just leave me alone, please.*

Being left alone is definitely not in the stars tonight. I’m going to be the trophy daughter, paraded around the charity gala. My job is to make him look wholesome and pure, like the holy religious leader he pretends to be. *Well, we’re both frauds now, aren’t we Dad?* I slip on a pair of demure kitten heels and head downstairs, preparing myself for a night of awkward conversation.

The city of Townsend hosts this gala every year. It’s a chance for charitable organizations to hobnob with the wealthy, or anyone looking for a tax write-off and good publicity. I’ve never minded going before. It’s a fun, safe way to ring in the new year and the food is always amazing, but I’m finding it difficult to enjoy myself tonight.

Wandering through the sparkling ballroom of the hotel and convention center, the dread I’ve been feeling settles like a lead weight in my stomach. I’m continually introduced to people who all ask the same questions: What am I studying? What are my plans after I graduate?

Dad keeps being coy about it, talking over my shoulder about a “certain special someone,” all wink wink nudge nudge, and frankly the longer it goes on the more tempted I am to come out and say that my father is forcing me into a loveless marriage with the youth pastor to shine the polish on his illusion of holy propriety. But the chairwoman of Townsend

Bank and Trust probably doesn't care about that. She's just here for the photo ops and canapés.

I finally spot a friendly face across the room and excuse myself from my father's grip to talk to Noah. Not necessarily because I want to, but because he's legitimately the nicest person here and also because Dad threatened me with eternal damnation if I didn't make a good show of my interest in public tonight.

Noah smiles when he sees me heading over and pulls me in for a side hug before I can stop him. I turn to face the person he's been talking to and my entire brain stops functioning as a pair of ice-blue eyes meet mine.

*Fuck.* He cleans up *nice*.

Of course, that first thought isn't at all helpful and neither are any that come after it. My mind is a tornado of confusion at seeing my two worlds collide and unmitigated lust at the sight of the demon, *my* demon, in a suit. It hugs his body, hinting at the hard muscles underneath. Where did he get a suit? How did he get here? See, not helpful thoughts.

"Mr. Ash, let me introduce you to Seraphina Sayre. Seraphina, this is Dominic Ash, from Fieldworth Financial Services."

I'm not even listening to Noah. I reach out to shake Dominic's hand like I've never seen him before, because my brain isn't working right now. Luckily, Dominic's is.

"We've met, actually," he responds coolly, with an easy smile. God, his mouth is beautiful.

"Oh?" Noah asks, with an appropriately interested and not at all suspicious eyebrow raise. If he only knew.

"We both attend Morgenstern College. And Seraphina and I went to the same elementary school for a while."

Both are absolutely true, but there's a lot to be said about what he so graciously left out. I guess there's no polite way to

say that my dad got his mom addicted to drugs and then abandoned them, and certainly no acceptable way to mention that we've mutually agreed to fuck each other's brains out in order to enact some kind of twisted revenge plan.

Why is he here? He didn't say anything to me about attending a New Year's charity ball in my hometown, but then again, neither did I.

The men chitchat for a few minutes, my brain in full-on meltdown, before Noah excuses himself. As soon as he's gone, I turn to Dominic with an incredulous look on my face.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss.

His expression is maddeningly impassive.

"Philanthropy." He shrugs.

"You are not."

"Are you questioning my intentions?" He steps closer to me and I'm tempted to run my hands up and down his formally attired chest. God, who has the right to look so good in a stuffy suit? The pair of us look like we should be miniaturized and standing atop a wedding cake.

*Shit.*

"You look beautiful," he says, his voice low. "The things I want to do to you right now." He shakes his head and takes a sip from the glass in his hand, confident and at ease, like he owns the place. I catch sight of the word PURE on his knuckles. EVIL is tucked casually in his pocket.

"Noah was telling me all about his church," he says, as if we're just two old friends meeting up coincidentally. *Seriously, why is he here?*

"Did you know that Glory Valley currently ministers to the tenth largest congregation in the state?"

I nod along, like this is the most interesting information that I've definitely never heard before.

“Noah is the youth pastor, you know. He really enjoys his work and sees nothing but blessings ahead.”

“I’m sure he deserves them all.”

“Amazing, a catch like him isn’t married yet, wouldn’t you say?”

My future, the one I don’t want, flashes through my mind. Does he know? About Noah?

Dominic’s watching me and I can’t keep myself from glancing up at him, at his strong jaw and perfect, kissable lips.

“Noah says there might be someone special on the horizon, though. He thinks he’d like to court her properly when she comes home from college this summer.”

He’s so close to me and there’s a pulling sensation in my chest drawing me toward him. I want to reach up and run my fingers over his jaw, to feel those lips on mine, those tattooed fingers gripping my flesh and tearing this agony out of me, but he just keeps talking.

“The lucky lady must be pretty special. Someone like him wouldn’t settle for any ordinary girl.”

He’s leaning in so close I can feel the heat coming off of his body—so close I can feel the air from the words when he whispers in my ear. “But he has no idea what an extraordinary little thing you are, does he?”

I have to breathe. This can’t happen. Not here, not tonight, not in front of all these people. I have to get away from him before I give in to my urges and do something I’ll regret.

Dominic steps away from me before I can destroy everything we’ve worked for. He sears me with a knowing look before disappearing into the crowd, leaving me staring after him.

*What the hell was that?*

## DOMINIC

I'm pissed. Not at her, though. She looks fucking fantastic, and I'm going to fantasize about extricating her from all that goddamn fabric for at least a week. That dress looks suspiciously *bridal*, and I have a split-second delusion of defiling her in it on her wedding night, before I get a hold of myself.

So I guess Solomon's plan is to marry her off to Noah when she comes home for the summer. Her desperation to escape her manipulative prick of a father makes a hell of a lot more sense now. Sure, Noah could be a great guy, but not for her. Definitely not for the insatiable little cum slut my brothers and I made when we pulled her out of her shell and pushed her headfirst into our dirtiest fucking fantasies. She could never be happy with a saint like him.

I spot Solomon finishing up a conversation and swoop in before he can escape me. It takes him a few seconds to realize who I am and the flash of fear on his face when it finally clicks is delicious. That's worth the price of admission, right there.

Up close, he looks like shit. It could just be the effects of the ten years it's been since I last saw him, but I'm confident it's ten years of cocaine abuse on top of that. It's aged him faster, made him look tired. He covers it well enough that these clueless people probably just think he works too hard, but I know better.

I watch him closely and notice the moment the switch flips in his mind, the one where he makes the decision to smile and act like he's happy to see me.

"Dominic, what a surprise! It certainly has been a long time." He has the nerve to shake my hand like he wasn't the cause of my mother's death, and I have the balls to shake it back, like I'm not about to destroy his daughter's life with my goddamn dick.



It's obvious he doesn't know what to make of my presence, and honestly, neither do I. I don't know why the hell I came here, other than needing to satisfy some morbid curiosity—about her, about this other side of her life and what she's going through. Solomon plasters on a friendly face, but I don't bother to mirror it. Fuck him.

“I wasn't expecting to run into you at an event like this,” he says.

“I'm sure you weren't,” I answer. “It was a bit of a last-minute thing, really.”

He looks at me like he doesn't know what to say, which is unusual, as he's always been a master of words. It's how he's exerted so much influence over that huge church, but it's all a charade. He's no closer to God than I am, but he excels at pretending. And my mother excelled at believing in his fucking bullshit.

For a brief moment, though, I can see the cracks in his veneer. I catch the wave of discomfort behind his eyes, that he thinks I'll make a scene, or that I'll let all these people know what a horrible man he really is. I won't; not right now. I may not be entirely sure why I volunteered to attend this thing in my grandparents' place, but it wasn't for that. I'm not about to spoil Seraphina's plan. I'm having too much fun with it.

Solomon smiles a fake, self-assured grin that crinkles his eyes at the corners and makes me want to punch him—more than usual, so that's saying something. He glances across the room at his daughter, and I do the same. She's standing next to Noah, trying to look as if she's interested in whatever conversation is happening near her, but she's scanning the room, looking for something. Someone, maybe.

I hold her in my gaze until she catches me, and I wink. Her eyes widen and she looks away as if she's embarrassed. I love that look on her. I'm going to miss it when she has nothing left to be embarrassed about, but it'll all be worth it.

“Seraphina’s grown up to be quite beautiful,” I say. “I had the pleasure of meeting Noah Wright earlier. He seems quite taken with her.”

“Oh yes, he is, he is! And she, him. I expect we’ll be looking at a summer wedding. They’re good together, don’t you think?”

Noah was appropriately vague about the whole thing and I was only able to put the pieces together because of how much I know about Seraphina, but Solomon actually acknowledging a wedding is a grim punch in the gut. I knew Seraphina wasn’t playing around, but Jesus Christ, this asshole really is planning to sell out his own fucking daughter.

“I used to think you and my mother were good together, so I’m probably the wrong person to ask,” I say.

“Your mother was a fine woman, Dominic. But she made her own choices. You know that.”

“Did she? It seems to me that you helped her make those choices. I can’t imagine anyone choosing to die the way she did. But then again,” I look at his nose, and the reddened state of it. “Maybe I’m wrong about that, too.”

I don’t stick around for his reply. If I don’t leave now, I’m going to put my fist right through his fucking head and then Seraphina and I will never get to make that video. Solomon’s downfall will be much more satisfying if I can resist the urge to violently murder him at a charity event.

I won’t be able to steal a kiss from Seraphina at midnight, but I’ll more than make up for it when we get back to school. After we have a conversation about her impending summer wedding, of course.



## CHAPTER 27

### The divine right of kings

#### SERAPHINA

I look for Dominic for the rest of the night, but my father isn't subtle about keeping an eye on me, so I'm forced to stick by Noah, acting as if this is where I belong. He's good company, but the longer I'm near him, the more confident I am that I'm making the right decision. He's not the one for me, and I am definitely not the one for him.

Dad and I leave the gala shortly after midnight and I'm so exhausted and ready to chuck this dress in the garbage. It may be pretty and fun to wear, but it represents everything I don't want in life. Dad is in a worse mood than me, complaining about everyone and everything he can think of on the ride home, but he hasn't gotten around to Dominic yet. As soon as we get into the house, I brace myself for the inevitable shitstorm.

"Did you know anything about that?" Dad snaps, practically ripping off his coat.

"About what?" I make an effort to look concerned.

"Dominic Ash, that's what."

"No." If I'm too calm, too nonchalant, will he accuse me of lying? "He said he was from a financial company. Fieldworth something?" I had no idea Dominic was going to show up, so I really am telling the truth.

Dad groans. "He must be working for his grandparents. Never thought a kid like him would end up going into finance. Still an insufferable little shit, though."

I don't reply to that, because I don't know how. Dad doesn't notice, anyway. "Regardless of whatever connections he has, you are not to talk to Dominic if you see him again."

"Oh. Is he a bad person?"

"He is for us, so stay away from him. We don't need him getting it into his head that we're still his family. A bad attitude and knuckle tattoos are not a good look for us. Do you understand?"

I nod like a good girl, but inside I'm fuming. Dominic might have a bad attitude, but he has every reason for one. And he has way more tattoos than the ones on his knuckles, including his deceased mother's name in a heart on his bicep.

"I'm pretty tired, so I'm going to head up to bed now," I say, trying to get the conversation to end before I explode. He nods, thankfully.

"Happy New Year, Dad," I add, but it's hard to even fake a smile at this point. He hasn't said one nice word to me this entire evening, even though I've done everything he's asked.

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Jasmine and I get back to school late Saturday, the weekend before classes start up again. Sunday is one of my usual days at the Lair, but Dominic has been radio silent since the gala.

My mind spins with uncertainty. Did he change his mind about me? Did he show up at the gala to say goodbye? What if they've decided they made a huge mistake and don't want to help me anymore? I don't dare text to ask, so on Sunday morning I bundle up and head over to the Lair to get some answers. If they're done with me, they can tell me to my damned face.

The sky is clear and bright, the ground covered in freshly fallen snow, but my mood is dark and somber. I don't want this to be over, not yet. Dominic and I still have a video to make. Plus, I'm pretty sure I genuinely like the demons.

They may be a bunch of degenerate assholes on the outside, and maybe a couple of them are on the inside too, but they're mine. Well, I'm theirs, anyway. Is it twisted and weird? Absolutely. But do I even care anymore? Not as much as I should.

I like their devious taunts and I want to play their sick little games. I love how deliciously fragile I am in their hands, at the mercy of their whims, and when they tell me what to do—it erases all of my doubts and anxiety.

When did they start to make me feel... *good*?

Nash is the one who opens the door when I knock and my heart skips a beat as he motions for me to come in. He looks so put together and classy in just a t-shirt and athletic pants. Is it the hair, the glasses? The way he carries himself? He takes my coat to hang up as I wrestle with my wet boots, adding them to the pile by the front door. I follow him to the kitchen where the rest of the guys are, and I try to feel out the mood of the room.

“Pancakes?” Maynard asks. He doesn't wait for my reply, just makes a plate for me and sets it on the breakfast bar. Orion stands up to give me his chair, but Dominic stops me before I can sit.

“Are you supposed to be here?” he asks, his tone setting my nerves on edge. He's not happy. “It doesn't matter. As long as you're here, we need to talk. Family meeting, now.”

Fuck. It's over. Maybe after the gala he decided I wasn't worth the trouble. He met Noah—is it possible he thinks I'm overreacting and I should marry him after all?

I follow Dominic to the family room and the rest of the guys join us, abandoning breakfast. As soon as everyone is

settled, Dominic crosses his arms and scowls at me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he asks.

“About what?”

“About your father’s plans for you to get married this summer.”

I can practically hear the air get sucked out of the room. He didn’t tell the others.

“What?” Ezra stands up, hands clenched at his sides.

“I did, sort of. I told you that I needed to do something before summer. I didn’t think you’d be interested in why.”

“Married? To fucking who?” Orion is just as agitated.

“You need to tell them what’s going on,” Dominic urges.

“What *is* going on? What the fuck is happening?” Even Maynard is upset.

“I met our little angel’s fiancé on New Year’s Eve,” Dominic says.

The outrage in the room is palpable, especially mine.

“Noah is not my fiancé!”

“Solomon thinks he is. And so do you—that’s why you said this needed to be done before summer, because you’re getting fucking married.”

“I’m not! That’s what this whole plan is for! At the beginning of the school year, Dad had this idea. He wanted me to marry someone from the church to make himself look good. When he first brought it up, I hated the idea, but figured I’d just have to live with it and maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“An arranged marriage isn’t so bad?” Ezra looks horrified. “How could you do that to yourself? Why would you even consider trying to be okay with that?”

“Well, I couldn’t. Right before Halloween, Dad said he found the perfect man for me—Noah. That’s when I knew I couldn’t do it. Noah is a decent person and I won’t force myself to ruin his life by marrying him. He deserves someone who loves him.”

“So do you.” Dominic glares at me, and I shrink under the severity of it. “That’s why you came to me at the Halloween party?”

I nod. “Does this mean you won’t help me anymore?”

He looks at me like I’m speaking a different language. “Why would we stop? We’re not giving up on you. If anything, we should make the video sooner.”

“Wait... so you’re not un-claiming me?”

Dominic drops to his knee in front of me so we’re eye-level. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re only going to be free of us once your video is done, and we should really get to that before your father tries to hold a shotgun wedding with *your* head at the end of the fucking barrel.”

Relief floods through me and I fight the urge to hug him. He’s really not a hugger.

“Am I ready?”

“I think you’re close. But it’s probably best if we speed up your progress. I’d like to establish a new condition to our arrangement.”

I glance around at the other guys, wondering what Dominic has up his sleeve. It’s clear from their expressions that they don’t know either. I look back to Dominic and he continues.

“Whenever you’re in the Lair, you’ll be free to use. Any of us can fuck you, anytime, anywhere, any way we want.”

A shot of fire spears through my body, and I’m right back on the edge of the cliff, curling my toes over the precipice with the wind at my back, aching to fall forward.



“Okay.”

“Okay? Jesus Christ, where did you come from?” Ezra mutters, as if being at the mercy of these guys is some kind of hardship. I swallow hard, just as he lunges across the room and tackles me on the couch, barely missing Dominic. He kisses me as if we’re the only two people in the room.

“You are such a crazy fucking hot bitch,” he says when he finally pulls back for air.

“No, you are,” I tease, right before he starts sucking on my neck.

“Why do I have a feeling I’m going to be seeing way more of Ezra’s naked ass than I ever wanted to?” Maynard asks, standing up.

“Because I just opened our little carnival ride for the season,” Dominic says. “You’re welcome.”

“Can we let her eat breakfast, at least?” Orion asks. “I think she’s about to work up an appetite.”

The guys file out of the room and back into the kitchen. When I glance over at the doors, Nash is pulling them closed, heat burning in his eyes and a smile at the edge of his lips. He likes this plan and all its possibilities just as much as I do. *Who have I become?*

Ezra eventually lets me up before his dick gets involved, and I have to say I’m somewhat disappointed—but the guys make up for it by feeding me a huge stack of blueberry pancakes and bacon.

I know I can’t allow myself to get used to this, but sometimes it’s fun to imagine.



# CHAPTER 28

## Grapes of thorns

### SERAPHINA

“How much do you have left to do?” Orion asks. It’s the second weekend of the new semester and we’re sitting in the family room while I work on a paper for class. He’s bored, but doesn’t seem to want to be anywhere else.

“I need to finish this last section and write the conclusion.” I adjust my laptop on the ottoman in front of me, doing my best to ignore him. If I turn around and look at him right now, there’s no way I’m going to get this thing done, because all I really want to do is climb on top of him.

“What’s going on in here?” Maynard comes in from the kitchen and my stomach flips. He has a way of making me nervous without even doing anything.

“Seraphina’s being boring. She has to finish her paper before we can play, but it’s taking forever.” I can hear the pout in his voice and it makes me want to attack his pretty face with my mouth. Doesn’t *he* have any school work to do? He’s an art major like Piper. Shouldn’t he be sketching or painting or something?

Maynard moves to the side of the ottoman and slides my laptop to the far edge. “Kneel here, and lean over so you can keep working,” he says. I follow his instructions and it takes me half a second to realize that I’m now bent over the ottoman with my ass on display, not unlike the day they claimed me over the desk in the office. Maynard lowers to his knees behind me, stroking my hips slowly, his hands slipping

underneath the hem of my skirt. His body grazes mine ever-so-slightly and I resist the urge to push back for more.

“So pretty, isn’t she?” he asks Orion. “I love this sweet little ass.”

“If you distract her, she’ll never be done and she can’t play with my cock until she’s done,” Orion says.

“But we can have fun with her body while she works. There are plenty of ways we can amuse ourselves without needing her attention,” Maynard says. I turn my head to give him a look and his dark eyes meet mine. “If you’re good and finish your work without getting distracted, Orion and I will give you a reward. How does that sound?”

I can’t even imagine what Maynard would consider a reward, but I’m sure I want it, regardless. He hasn’t been wrong about me, yet.

“Yes, sir. I promise I’ll be good.”

“Get back to work then. Don’t mind me.”

I turn back to my laptop as he resumes caressing my hips. He lifts my skirt up and hooks his fingertips into the elastic of my panties, pulling them down.

“Goddamn, she’s soaked already,” Orion says.

“That’s because she’s a dirty little slut who loves our cum so fucking much,” Maynard says.

He slides a finger through my arousal and Orion groans from behind me, turned on from watching this. Maynard is toying with both of us at the same time. He’s torturously gentle, inserting a single finger into my pussy, pumping it slowly in and out. I try to focus on my work and type out a few sentences.

When he adds another finger, I moan.

“She can’t concentrate when you do that,” Orion warns.

“I know,” Maynard says, a laugh at the edge of his deep voice. “I think she just needs to be fucked. She’s not getting anything done with me teasing her like this.”

“You’re right, she’s not,” I say.

“Keep working, angel. Don’t forget about that reward.”

“Yes, sir.” I stare at my laptop, willing the words to take shape on the screen.

He draws his arousal covered fingers to my back hole, rubbing his fingertips over it and getting it wet. I hear Orion’s shallow breathing as he watches Maynard play with his toy. I’m so worked up already I can barely think, but I need to finish this assignment.

“I want to fuck your ass today. We’ll have to stretch you first, won’t we? Get you all nice and ready for me?”

*Holy shit.* That’s not what I was expecting to do today. Considering how very into asses he is, I knew that Maynard would come for mine eventually. He said as much that morning in the office, but I figured I’d be more prepared for it, not bent over in the family room working on a paper for my Advertising Strategies class.

Well, I guess I’ll never be able to think of advertising again without associating it with Maynard sodomizing me.

“You remember how much you like this?” he asks, pressing his slick fingertip into my ass.

“Oh my god,” I moan. He stills, waiting for me to adjust around him before sliding it in further. I clench my teeth, knowing this isn’t even close to how he plans to fill me. Trying to ignore the way he’s igniting my nerves, I focus on my assignment while he patiently gives me time to work, his finger moving only slightly for the next few minutes.

“You’re going to get the fucking of your life today, aren’t you?” he says when he begins to move again. He slides his finger out, then adds a second one with the first, pushing

deeper than before. My breath catches and I let it out quickly. He's still being gentle, but the sensation is anything but that. I want to be good for him, so I keep typing, moving my hands as quickly as possible without messing up. I want my reward.

"That's right, I'm going to fill this beautiful hole with my cock," he says, continuing to stretch me while I work, my clit aching as my arousal builds. After a while, he adds a third finger. I try to focus, but with every little movement he makes, I forget all about my assignments, due dates, anything other than Maynard behind me, touching me, penetrating me.

"Fuck," I pant, gripping the edges of my laptop.

"Yeah, we know you need it, angel. We'll take good care of you," he says.

I try to picture the size of his cock and have to trust it will fit. He fucks Orion and it works fine, so I shouldn't be all that different. It helps that he's being so patient and careful, and the longer he works on me, the more I'm able to relax. I continue to type, not sure how long I can keep this up.

"Are you ready to let me take this sweet little ass for a ride?" he asks, just as I get another paragraph done.

I have no idea if I'm ready, but his dirty words make me hungry for it. I probably wasn't ready for anything the demons have done to me, but deep down it doesn't matter, because I need them to do what they're doing. Maybe it's not just for the video anymore. Maybe it's for me, too.

Orion walks back into the room, startling me. I was so preoccupied I didn't even notice he left. He tosses a bottle of lube to Maynard before crouching down next to me.

"I know Maynard's cock is intimidating, but you're going to love what he does with it. How much more do you have to write?"

"One more paragraph." Talking is difficult right now, as is writing. This paper isn't going to be my best work, but it will

be done, and soon.

“You’re doing great. My dick is so fucking hard for you.” With that, he stands, and I can see that he’s not lying. The bulge in his pants looks incredibly tempting. I want to reach over and touch it, but I’m afraid to do anything that might get me into trouble. I lick my lips and continue typing. Almost there.

“Do you enjoy watching me play with your toy?” Maynard asks Orion, stilling his fingers inside me.

“Fuck, yes,” Orion says, returning to his seat on the couch behind us.

Maynard opens his pants. “Then take your dick out. She’s going to need it in a few minutes.” He withdraws his fingers from me and my body clenches around nothing in anticipation of what’s next. I hear the bottle of lube opening, and then Maynard stroking his cock. I squirm, anxious for the return of his touch.

“You’ll get what you need, greedy girl. Be patient.” He nudges the tip of his cock to my ass and my entire body tenses. “Breathe. You need to relax.”

I quickly type out the last sentence of my conclusion and close the laptop lid with a slap. A shudder makes its way through my body as I’m finally able to focus fully on what’s happening to me—the men behind me, the hard cock in position.

“You’re doing great,” Orion says.

Maynard presses forward a little and I feel myself stretch around the slick tip of him.

“You’re in control right now. I want you to push against me. Can you do that?” he asks.

“Yes, sir.” I push back slowly and his cock slides into me a little more. It’s intense and strange and I don’t know how to react to it. Do I want to keep going?

“Beautiful,” Maynard says, his voice reassuring.

I push back more, letting him slide in deeper. Orion groans loudly and it sounds like he’s enjoying this as much as I am. I continue to push back onto Maynard’s cock, gradually relaxing with each passing minute.

“That’s it, angel. That’s what I want,” he says. He squeezes my hips, his fingers pressing into my flesh as I welcome his body into mine, until finally, he’s in my ass all the way. He stills, letting me adjust to the new sensations.

“She’s so tight, she’s strangling my dick,” he says to Orion. “You want to watch me fuck your pretty little slut in the ass?”

“Fuck, yes. I could come just from this.”

“Don’t you dare,” Maynard orders. “Save your cum for her. She’s going to be screaming for it by the time we’re done.”

Nothing has ever felt so exquisite, so exhilarating, as this man’s cock deep inside me, while he talks about me like I’m not here. I’m floating on a cloud of ecstasy, unable to do anything but surrender to him. All I want to do is please this demon and let him take me the way he wants, so I exhale deeply, releasing my final resistance.

“Are you ready to let me have control now?” he asks.

“Please, sir.”

He slides his thick cock in and out, getting even harder, growing impossibly bigger inside me. I moan and rock back against him.

“That’s our girl,” he says.

I’m getting more from this than I ever thought possible. This is exactly what I never knew I needed.

“You fucking love this, don’t you, angel?”

“Yes, sir.” I don’t have to lie. I do love it—everything about it.



“Tell me what you love,” he says.

“I love the feel of your cock in my ass. I love the way you’re holding my hips, like you own me. I love the noises Orion makes while he watches us.”

Maynard takes a deep breath. “You did such a good job finishing your work. Are you ready for your reward?”

“Please. I’ll take anything you give me.”

He laughs, the dark sound of it surrounding me. “Do you think you can take both of us at the same time?”



## CHAPTER 29

### Figs of thistles

#### SERAPHINA

That's one hell of a reward, and I should've expected nothing less from these two. I turn to look at Orion on the couch. His pants are open and he's stroking his cock, fingers playing over the metal piercings. He looks so beautiful and inviting, all flushed and lusty.

But both of them? At the same time?

"Do you think I can?" I ask Maynard.

"Oh, Seraphina. I *know* you can. And I know how much you want to try. Orion, are you ready for her?"

"So fucking ready. Get that pussy over here and ride me already."

Maynard withdraws his cock from my ass slowly, but doesn't leave me to contemplate the emptiness for long. He helps me up from the floor and over to Orion, who's watching us intently. Maynard lifts my shirt over my head as Orion leans forward to remove my skirt and panties. Maynard takes off my bra as well, leaving me completely naked—in the family room.

*This is actually happening.*

"Have a seat, pretty girl. We're about to have some real fun," Orion warns, pulling me onto his lap, positioning me right over his cock. "Fuck. She's so wet, she's dripping."

Maynard comes up behind me and with his hands steadying my hips, guides me down onto Orion's hard cock, letting each

barbell slip in gently. The sound that Orion makes when he's fully inside me sends a shock wave of pleasure through my body. It's almost feral, and I match it with my own moan, feeling myself stretch around him. His hands are a vise on my waist as he rolls his hips, burrowing into me.

"God, she feels amazing." He runs his tongue along my neck, then bites softly. He sucks and nips my skin, his torment destroying what's left of my control. I bend forward to kiss him, our tongues seeking each other out. He's an insane dichotomy—both a sweet angel and a filthy demon that battle constantly for dominance, a duality I'm becoming all too familiar with in myself.

He pumps into me and I take him as deep as I can before sliding up again. It's like a dance, the two of us moving together in the most vulgar, blissful rhythm. Maynard hangs back, watching Orion have his turn as our thrusts grow fierce, almost violent.

"I'm not gonna last long. You better get in here," Orion tells him.

Maynard brushes against my back, squeezing my hips to stop my movement. "You're not finished with me, are you, angel?"

"No, sir. Never." The anticipation of having them both inside me is almost more than I can bear.

"Lean forward on Orion. Let him hold you against his chest." I do as he says and Orion wraps his arms around my back, pulling me tight against him. Maynard settles behind me with one knee on the couch, his hands stroking and squeezing my ass. He's going to do it. They're actually going to be inside me at the same time. My pulse throbs throughout every part of my body.

"Relax, one more time. You can do it," Orion says as Maynard presses the tip of his cock to his favorite place.

“You’re such a good girl,” Maynard whispers in my ear, slipping back into me. He fills me slowly and my arms shake against Orion. I feel like I’m being worshipped by these two men—a goddess of hell, defiled and deified by demons. I savor this moment, the two of them sharing me with each other and taking all the pleasure they can get from my body.

Maynard remains still so that I can adjust to having both of them in me. The sensation is intense, but glorious, and I cry out, my voice echoing around the room. If the other guys are home, they’re definitely hearing this now.

Orion bands me to his chest, holding on tight as Maynard begins to thrust into me from behind. I’m sandwiched between them, my body filled. The pleasure, the ache, my desire for them—it’s all-consuming. The three of us are one being, moving together as though it’s the most natural thing to do.

Maynard reaches around me and touches his fingertips to my clit, stroking me in time with their movements. I can’t stop the sounds that slip from my throat.

“Oh, she really fucking loves this,” Orion whispers. He starts to move again, arms still wrapped around me as Maynard fucks me from behind. Stretching around both of them, our flesh coming together, the smell of sex filling the air—it’s all too much and my orgasm starts to build. I clench around Orion’s cock, and he growls in response.

“Oh fuck, I’m gonna come,” he moans.

His cock swells, and it pushes me over the edge. He tenses, unleashing his orgasm to fill me as he bucks and groans underneath me.

I shake in his arms, my muscles tightening. Maynard slows his movements, letting my climax build up, prolonging the intensity of the experience. It feels like I’m going to burst as pleasure burns through me.

“That’s it. Come for us,” Maynard demands. With those words, I fall into the abyss, letting them take me until there’s

nothing left. My orgasm devours me from the inside. All of my fear, my anger, everything I've been holding onto bleeds out of me, tangled and twisted in my orgasmic release.

Maynard doesn't stop and I'm entirely lost to his movements as he comes, my body on fire as his heat floods me. The world dissolves around us, fading into a sea of warm, soft nothingness. All that exists is me and them, and I'm completely at peace.

They hold me, even after our bodies have stopped moving and our frenzied breathing has slowed.

"Holy fuck," a voice says from the edge of the room. I crack open my eyes to see that we've acquired an audience. I don't know how long they've been there, but Ezra's hanging onto Dominic for support, Dominic smiling a wicked grin at me, like he just discovered I have a deep, dark secret that he fully intends to exploit.

Then there's Nash, leaning against the wall, his face blank and stoic as if he didn't just watch his friends have a threesome in the family room.

Maynard slides out of me, then stands to help me up off of Orion. When Orion's cock slips out, cum immediately trickles down my thighs, a detail that doesn't escape Maynard's notice.

"Nash, it seems we got Seraphina a little messy here. You want to clean her up?"

I look over at Nash, his expression softening. He doesn't break eye contact with me as he approaches, and as though he can't control himself any longer, he lunges forward and lifts me up, cradling me in his arms like I'm a goddamn naked, cum-covered princess.

"Nash is going to take good care of you. We'll clean up and get dinner started." Maynard pulls up his pants, then leans over to kiss my forehead. "You did so well. I'm proud of you." He turns to leave after stroking my cheek and then Orion is there, against my lips, sucking my tongue into his mouth in an

energetic display of carnal hunger that should be impossible after what we just did.

“You’re perfect,” he whispers when he pulls away, then follows Maynard out of the room.

Nash carries me through the house, past Ezra and Dominic with their devilish smiles, all the way to the second floor bathroom. I get lost in the depth of his stare when he gently lowers me to my shaky legs. He points to the toilet before stepping out of the room, closing the door behind him, and I sit down and immediately space out. My thoughts are floating around in a disorganized haze, completely unraveled by the force of that orgasm, from the whole experience.

There’s a soft tap at the door before it opens, and Nash comes in again. He takes care to not look directly at me, probably because I’m still sitting on the toilet, but I’m too tired to do anything about it. He sets a stack of clothes next to the sink before turning on the shower and holding out his hand to help me up.

He gives me a nudge in the direction of the shower and I step inside, the heat of the water soothing my aching muscles as I become very aware of what’s been done to my body. That was a workout and I am beyond exhausted. Unable to figure out what to do, I stand in the water, letting it rain over my head in sheets.

Nash understands fairly quickly that I need help and pulls his t-shirt off over his head after removing his glasses. I try not to ogle the muscles of his chest, but it’s impossible. He shrugs, a smile playing at the corner of his lips, and pushes off his pants. Even after what I just did, I still can’t help but blush when faced with his naked body. And his impressive dick.

But Nash isn’t interested in sex right now. He steps into the shower with me and spends the next fifteen minutes washing every bit of my body from head to toe, carefully and gently.

This man, this silent, solid man, is taking care of me after I had sex with his two friends, making me feel safe, and loved.

I come back to myself slowly, realization washing over me as he rinses away everything the others left behind. I can't misinterpret whatever affection they might be compelled to show me after using my body, no matter how good any of this feels.

*It's just sex.*

*It means nothing.*

## DOMINIC

“Can we do that, too? I want to do that.” Ezra is supposed to be helping with dinner, but he keeps getting distracted.

I don't blame him. Walking in on that threesome was hot as fuck. The look of immaculate bliss on Seraphina's face, her guard down, completely surrendered—it was nearly enough to make me blow my load. I can't get the image of it out of my head, and obviously, neither can Ezra.

“Shouldn't we be making sandwiches for dinner, since that's the theme of the day and all?” he jokes.

Yep. His thoughts are exactly where mine are.

I would have no problem with that girl being sandwiched between me and any of my brothers. Hell, we could all get in on it, passing her around, keeping her hands and that pretty little mouth busy, too. What a fucking sight that would be.

An idea starts to form in my head, and I have to adjust myself. Instead of only me making the video with her, we could all be in it—all five of us using her and taking turns, fucking the hell out of every hole in her body and then some. Oh, she'd love that. It would complete her transition for sure, from timid virgin to voracious cock slut.



I can just see the look on Solomon's face when he learns what she's done, what she has a video of—the demon child he abandoned and his four brothers fucking every last bit of innocence out of his precious little girl. That coked-up fuck-head would probably have a heart attack. The idea of all of us making the video together ticks so many boxes I didn't even know were on the fucking list. I'll have to talk to the others about it.

“I think you should stick to peeling potatoes for now,” I say to Ezra, knowing we need to get to work. We've got an angel to feed, a video to plan, and a life to ruin.



## CHAPTER 30

The night is far spent

### SERAPHINA

As winter wears on, I make a point to spend as much time as possible with my roommates, since I should probably know what ‘normal’ feels like before my life is irrevocably annihilated by the demons. I’ve been working hard in my classes, getting good grades, even enjoying the lectures and assignments more than I ever expected to.

Compartmentalizing has become a necessary skill, though. In class, I’m studious and focused. In the dorm with my friends, I’m relaxed and happy, and at the Lair... at the Lair I am defiled at every turn.

Sometimes it’s immediate—as soon as I walk in the door I’ll be ordered to my knees to suck off whomever is closest, or pushed to the stairs and fucked mercilessly before I can even take my shoes off. Other times, they’ll dote on me, feed me first, then take their fill while I help with dishes, not allowing me to participate beyond giving them permission to use my body while I continue to work.

And, occasionally, I’ll be treated to a long, slow night, carried away to someone’s bed like a coveted prize and worshiped until no more orgasms will come. Possessive arms will hold me hostage until morning, when I’ll be woken up to do it all over again with someone else.

I’m astonished at how well the demons work together. They never argue with each other. There’s no fighting over when or where, or who’s first or next. Everyone always seems to get exactly what they need.

*Especially me.*

---

Dominic picks the weekend of Valentine's Day to make the video, because he's twisted like that. Though, it's not like I had other plans or anything.

"It's beautiful," I say, looking around the room that he and I are standing in. It's one of the unused bedrooms on the third floor—the one we're going to shoot the video in tomorrow. The giant bed frame is a dark wooden antique, one of the Lair's distinctly carved originals, as is much of the other furniture. Everything else, like the curtains, the bedding, and the incredibly plush rug, is all new. And curiously to my taste.

Dominic put Orion in charge of the overall video production, which, with his creative sensibilities, I'm grateful for. The video will be more artful and slightly less pornographic that way—if a sex tape between one woman and five men could ever be anything but pornographic.

That's right, *all five of them*. A few weeks ago, shortly after walking in on the spectacle in the family room, Dominic proposed a new change to the plan: Instead of just the two of us in the video, how would I feel about all of them? I agreed, not only because I want as much fuel on this fire as possible, but because honestly, how could I pass up an offer like that?

I sit on the edge of the bed, which is the perfect height for getting bent over and railed from behind, and look for the spots that Orion and Nash marked for cameras. They spent hours up here yesterday, prepping the room and planning the recording logistics. I almost thought they'd hire a whole camera crew with how earnestly they want this video to look perfect, but to my relief, we'll be using our cell phone cameras instead.

Orion decided on four angles: a wide shot of the room, two medium shots of the bed, and then one camera for closeups that will be passed to whomever has a free hand and a good view. He's on his way up to take some test recordings, which is the only reason they finally let me in here.

"Everybody decent?" Ezra says, knocking, but coming into the room, anyway. "Aw, how disappointing." He wrinkles his nose when he sees that Dominic and I are, in fact, decent, and flops down on a chair in the corner.

Orion comes in with his laptop, and Maynard and Nash follow in shortly after. I don't think everyone needs to be here right now since we're not actually going to do anything until tomorrow, but for the first time, it occurs to me that I might not be the only one who's nervous. I have something driving me—the fate of my entire future is riding on this—but they really have nothing to gain, regardless of how it all turns out for me.

"I need your phones," Orion says, getting his laptop set up on the desk. "We'll use the four best ones."

We hand over our phones and he picks the ones he wants to use. Nash gets to work putting them in position, and Orion connects them to whatever software he's running. It's rather boring to watch, but damn if I don't enjoy seeing these guys work together.

When he's done with the phones, Nash leans on the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, and Dominic sits on the desk next to Orion's laptop. Maynard retrieves one of the chairs from the hallway and settles in next to Ezra. I can't take my eyes off of them; they're a vision, these guys, so much strength and beauty in all those dark, jagged edges.

"I'm going to start recording, okay?" Orion asks. I scoot to the middle of the bed and cross my legs.

"Okay." My heartbeat skips. I didn't think I'd be so uncomfortable with cameras recording me.

“I don’t need you to move around or anything, but Dom’s going to ask you some questions so we can test the audio.” I nod and he slips on a pair of headphones.

“Hi, little angel,” Dominic says with that sexy fucking smirk.

“Hi, Dominic.”

“How are you feeling? Be honest,” he adds, when I don’t answer right away.

“Nervous. My heart is beating really fast.”

“You have nothing to be nervous about. We’re all here with you. We’ve got you, Seraphina.”

Something shifts in me, hearing him say my actual name. I don’t think he’s said it since the first night I came to find him at the Lair, back when I was bright-eyed and innocent, and he ground my name in my face with his hand around my throat. It sounds much different on his lips now.

“You’re not going to try to talk me out of it, then?” I ask.

He laughs. “Do you want me to?”

I shake my head.

“You’ve come a long way for this, but you know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Do you still want to go through with it?”

“I do,” I say, my voice trembling. But that’s not from the nerves. All the demons are looking at me, and it makes my entire body tingle. A shiver runs through me at the sight of these five men, at the thought of what we’re going to do tomorrow. There’s no way I could return to my old life, even if I did regret what I started here—which I don’t. I may be on a runaway train, but I’m staying on until the end of this ride, even if I crash and burn. I close my eyes for a moment to gather myself.

Dominic's voice pulls me back. "What are you thinking about right now?"

"That I don't regret what I've done. What we've done. That even if this fails and my life becomes a huge mess, I can say that at least I tried to take control of it and change things. And I had a lot of fun doing it."

"So no regrets at all? Nothing you would have done differently? Or wish we had done differently?"

I look at each of the guys in turn. Yes, our start was rough. Especially mine with Dominic. I never suspected that he hated me all those years—the ones I spent remembering him and hoping he'd come back to me. Our first reunion at the beginning of the school year was a rude awakening. No, a downright violent awakening, like many of our interactions since.

But there's something else behind it now. Not hate, but some other force that drives him to be so intense. He has a lot of years of anger and bitterness to resolve and I can hardly blame him. Which is exactly why I needed him to do this with me. Because I knew he would push me, and push me *hard*.

I knew he wouldn't give up when I got scared, or worry about taking it too far. I needed him to do exactly what he did.

"I wouldn't change a thing."





# CHAPTER 31

## Ends of the earth

### DOMINIC

It's finally video day, the moment we've all been waiting for. This is more important than sex—it's more important than all of us. I take my time in the shower this morning, enjoying the merciless burn of the hot water. I want to savor this day, because when it's over, everything will change.

Once I'm done trying to wash away all the shit I don't want to think about, I throw on some pants and head downstairs for breakfast, banging on Ezra's door for good measure. He might be out at the gym, or he might be sleeping in because he stayed up too late writing or reading. You never can tell with him.

Nash is already sitting at the breakfast bar when I wander into the kitchen. I'm sure he's been up for hours already, gotten in a swim and cleaned something. Is his mind racing around in circles like mine? I grunt a good morning at him and pour my coffee, then join him at the bar.

Maynard appears from the pantry with an armload of stuff. "Anybody hungry?" he asks with a yawn. Nash and I both raise our hands like dutiful school boys in class. I guess neither of us are ready to talk today. Maynard gets to work mixing pancake batter and when Orion comes in, puts him to work scrambling eggs and frying bacon.

We chill in silence while breakfast cooks, all of us lost in our thoughts. It's like the morning before a big game or meet—we're going over our plays, psyching ourselves up or some shit.

“Smells fucking good in here,” Ezra says, coming in with a yawn. He pours himself a cup of coffee and hops up to sit on the counter. Maynard glares at him but doesn’t make him move. He’s getting soft.

“You sleep?” he asks him instead.

“Like a fucking baby.”

“Babies are notoriously bad sleepers,” Orion says, making Nash laugh beside me. I haven’t heard him laugh in ages. Or ever, maybe.

“Like a weird baby who sleeps really well, then.”

“Good. Take your fucking vitamins.” Maynard hands him the bottle from the cabinet and Ezra grudgingly takes one with a gulp of coffee.

He looks better today than he has in a while. It’s about time. I was beginning to think his eyes were permanently bloodshot. He actually resembles a functional human being for once.

“What time are we doing the thing today?” Orion asks, flipping a slice of bacon.

“The thing?” Ezra says. “How dare you! Her name is little angel.” He tries to grab the dishtowel that Orion swats him with, but gives up when he almost spills his coffee.

“Did you always call her that?” Maynard asks me. “When you were kids?”

I shrug. “Since the day I met her. She was too perfect, always following the rules, doing the right thing. So goddamn sweet and innocent.”

“Not anymore.” Nash’s voice surprises us all, but we know better than to make a big deal out of it.

“Nah, she’s still sweet as fuck. In more ways than one.” Ezra takes a drink of his coffee as our minds clearly drift to where he pointed them.

Fuck, this is going to be a long day. “She’ll be here at three,” I say, remembering Orion’s question.

“Were you close back then?” he asks.

“Sort of. We were at each other’s houses a lot. Our parents would fuck off for days at a time and leave us to fend for ourselves. My friends didn’t want her around, though. Solomon was pretty well known around town and they just thought she was this weird religious kid.”

That always made me sad, when I would hang out with other people and they wouldn’t let her join us. I get that she was sheltered and reserved, but I could have stood up for her more. She was a perfectly nice girl. Still is. I have no doubt she could’ve easily won them over if they’d given her a chance, like she’s done here at Morgenstern. Everybody at this school who knows her just fucking loves her.

I never should have blamed her for what her father did, wasting so many years hating her when she was a victim, too. She’s resilient as hell though, and that she had the nerve to approach me, even after the vile way I treated her, is proof. I one hundred percent believe that she’s going to come out of this just fine, because when she puts her mind to it, that little angel is a tenacious fucking demon on the inside.

Us, though? There’s no telling where we’re going to end up when she’s done here, but damn if we haven’t had a fuck load of fun with her while it lasted. She’s compelled the five of us to do some crazy shit, and she doesn’t even know that power is hers—I’m sure she thinks we’re the ones in control. We might have been when this started, but now it’s completely shifted in her favor. She really has come a long fucking way.

After the breakfast dishes are done, the guys and I go our separate ways for a while. There’s homework and chores to do, anything to keep us from going nuts until three o’clock. Why the hell didn’t I tell her to come first thing in the morning like every other fucking Sunday? Maybe I was trying to be nice.

This is her big day, like her graduation or wedding or some shit. Only, not. Very much not. Who fucks five men on their wedding day? I bet she would, if she found an amenable husband. I laugh to myself like a crazy asshole thinking about that.

When she gets what she's after—the freedom to do whatever she wants—what is she going to do with it? Take some boring marketing job in the city, working for soulless corporate clients? Date a possessive, bland asshole who wouldn't even think about sharing her with his friends? If he even had friends worth sharing her with.

I know it's unusual, the bond the demons and I have with each other. Years ago, we realized how well our fucked up, broken edges fit together and we've been like brothers ever since—and probably will be for the rest of our lives. I never imagined all the ways we'd end up working so well together, though.

Will we ever find another girl who completes us as well as Seraphina does?

*Shit.*

*Fuck.*

*Goddamnit.*

---

It's 3:15.

Seraphina has been upstairs in the room for about fifteen minutes. She asked for some time alone when she got here, her nerves clearly wreaking some internal havoc, as if we haven't all fucked her sideways in every single room of this house already.

I hope we don't have to start all over with her today, even though I would do it again in a heartbeat—provoke her, seduce her, violate her—but it's a lot more fun now that she has the confidence to beg for it. Where did that confidence go? She does have a lot riding on this, but all I can do is get her as close as I can to her goal. As close as she'll let me, anyway.

I start up the stairs, no longer content to pace the living room and wait. Ezra comes out of his room as I reach the second floor landing.

“Is it time?” he asks.

“Let's find out.” We head up to the third floor where Nash is standing outside the closed door, like he's appointed himself security guard. But one look at his face tells me it's only because he didn't last as long as the rest of us, killing time somewhere else in the house. He had to be right here, because it was physically impossible to be anywhere else. Maynard's door opens as we approach, and he and Orion come out to join us.

The five of us gather in the narrow space, colorful light streaming in from the stained-glass window at the end of the hallway, and the door to Seraphina's room opens.

It's time.

## SERAPHINA

*I can do this.*

The demons are the embodiment of calm, cocky confidence, and I've spent the last fifteen minutes trying to channel that from them, from the house, from the fiendish faces carved into every surface of this place.

I've suffered the slings and arrows to get here—of Dominic's hatred, of Maynard's teasing, of Ezra's rejection. Of

my own insecurities telling me I'm not allowed to be the woman I've become.

*I can do this.*

These men did everything they possibly could to bring out the side of me I need for this to work—Orion, sharing the love of his life with me, and Nash, baring his soul, despite his devastating desire to hide.

They're in the hallway now, quiet and waiting.

This is a momentous day, the outcome of my entire life determined by what happens next. I can live my life as it is, letting someone else dictate the direction and details of my future, or I can use this video to release myself from my father's wretched binds and never look back.

*I can do this.*

Reaching down deep for new determination, I open the bedroom door and look to my future. My heart pounds beneath my ribcage as I take in the sight before me: five devastatingly handsome men, dressed in black, eyes filled with infernal flames. The demons lie in wait, to desecrate my body, devour my soul, and destroy my life.

One by one, they enter the room, silently transforming back into the savage monsters I once thought they were. But now I know that these men are so much more than sin incarnate. They are my salvation.

*I can do this.*

And I will. *We* will.

For the next four hours, the demons descend on me in a decadent feast, dragging me under their control and into the wicked world of our depraved desires. They consume what little still remains of my innocence like scavengers, and when there's nothing left of the angel I once was, I'm thrown into the fire of their carnal perversions in their relentless pursuit of my destruction.

I am owned.

I am possessed.

Hands grab and grope, mouths bite and suck, cocks drive deep, ravaging, conquering. They torment and tease while I beg and plead for the brutal bliss of exaltation.

For rapture.

For freedom.

And in the end, spent and sleeping in the arms of beasts, I know that Dominic kept his promise to me. I am ruined—corrupted by the dark princes who worshipped my body, who took my hunger and fed me until I was sated.

I have fallen from heaven into the embrace of demons, and my only regret is that I cannot stay.





## CHAPTER 32

### A house divided

#### ORION

She's fucking beautiful. I've been holed up in my room for weeks, watching the footage we shot and editing it together. I could have done it a lot quicker, but I'm taking my time because the simple fact is, I don't want it to be over.

We may have claimed her, but as soon as I give her this video, she'll be out of our lives for good. She'll have gotten what she came for and she doesn't need us for anything else. We did what she wanted us to do, and the only reason she has left to come back to the Lair is for her video.

But what now? It's just the guys again? Back to numbing ourselves with drugs and drinking and mindless parties? Ezra playing pussy roulette every night, drinking himself to an early grave? Nash back in hiding? Dom grouchy and bitter as fuck?

I watch the screen as Maynard and I hold her between us, the look of absolute ecstasy on her face vividly clear, even from the far camera angle. She let us do things to her I never even considered. She welcomed it and loved every second.

What are the other guys feeling right now? Are they happy it's over, to have their lives back where they can do whatever, fuck whomever they want? Or are they like me, sad, and stuck on this pretty little goddess that was ours for too short a time?

I'm proud of her. I should be glad that she's doing exactly what she set out to do. And I am, but I'm also worried—for her future, for what's going to happen when she uses this

video the way she planned, when she finally gets the freedom she wants. Could we ever be a part of it?

Shifting in my chair, I'm suddenly overcome with emotion. I pull my phone out to text Maynard, needing him to tell me what to do, to center me, to make everything okay again. While I wait for his response, I look up at the monitor, watching all of us do unspeakable things to her body. I feel her breath on my skin, her fingers in my hair, her lips on mine. I feel her hands on my shoulders, tugging me down onto her and I feel her soft body beneath me. *I feel her*. Dominic's plan was to make it genuine, but I wasn't expecting how genuine it was going to be for me, too.

Speak of the devil—there's a knock on the door and the man himself comes in, sliding out the chair next to me and sitting down. Dominic looks at the screen while I study his face, trying to get a read on his thoughts, but he's a goddamn stone wall.

"How's it going?" he asks me, his voice nonchalant when I'd expect him to be more, I don't know, *something*. He's the closest to her, isn't he? He's the one who started it all, and he's the reason she hasn't been back to the lair since Valentine's Day. I guess I figured he'd be upset about it being over, like me, but maybe he's relieved.

"Fine. Almost done. What's up?"

"Just wanted to check in." He shrugs, looking me up and down, narrowing his eyes like he can see what I'm thinking. "Are you okay?"

My stomach clenches, but I try not to let anything show on my face. He's not really the guy I want to have a heart to heart with right now. Where the hell is Maynard? I quickly check my phone to see that he's responded to my text. He's on his way.

"You think she'll be okay?" I ask Dom, slipping my phone into my pocket.

He lets out a long sigh, and I go back to watching her on the screen, tears in her eyes as she begs us to keep going.

“She’s doing what she has to do. It’s not about us,” he says, his words hanging in the air. “It was never about us.”

He’s right, but somehow it turned into so much more.

## MAYNARD

Everyone at Morgenstern is restless. Midterms are over and spring break is starting. The guys and I are sticking around campus for Nash’s last swim meet before we head to my house for the week.

The Lair is in a bad mood, though. The anticipation of what lies ahead for Seraphina is souring the house and its inhabitants down to the foundation. I refuse to look at the carved demon faces, fearing what I’ll find in them. Disappointment, maybe? That despite all we did for her, it wasn’t enough, that we should be doing more.

Orion has slept in my bed every night this week, and this morning is no different. His head is tucked under my chin, and I contemplate the logistics of extricating myself to get breakfast started without waking him up. He doesn’t usually sleep in here, preferring the soft sanctuary of his own room to the harsh coldness of mine, but he’s gotten clingy, as if he thinks I’m going to leave, too.

I actually don’t know what he’s thinking and we’re well past due for a conversation about it. Not that I mind his coming to me in the middle of the night. He curls his body into mine and lets me do what I want, releasing him of his tension and letting me release mine.

We all need to accept that what we had with Seraphina is all we’ll ever have. I texted her yesterday to let her know that her flash drive with the video was ready to be picked up, and

then told Orion that it better be by the time she gets here. He's not doing himself any favors obsessing over it and drawing it out as long as possible. He's not doing the rest of us favors either, giving us more time in this limbo between the past and the future. It might take him a while to get over it, but I'm sure he'll manage. It was just a fun way to spend the year—getting our dicks wet, and helping her out in the process.

She really was sublime, though. Not was, *is*, and always will be, no matter what happens to her. I never had the urge to share Orion with anyone before, but they were perfect together. I couldn't deny him that connection, and I couldn't resist taking part of it for myself, either.

Rolling away from Orion's warmth, I slip quietly out of bed. He looks so peaceful lying there and he needs to get more sleep. I wonder if he's dreaming about her, like I did. Or maybe the three of us together. That's what I think about any chance I get. I grab my robe off the back of the door and sneak out of the room.

I know we need to let her go. She's moving forward—with her plan, her life, whatever's in store for her—and she doesn't need a bunch of emotional malcontents to deal with when she has her own shit going on. She has her friends for support. If she needs us for anything else, that's for her to decide.

I've just gotten coffee and oatmeal started when Nash wanders into the kitchen.

"Coffee?" I ask, intentionally turning my back to him so he can't nod his answer like he always does. I wait, pulling a couple of mugs from the cabinet, the silence stretching for an eternity. I know he'll speak when he has a wry observation or something important to say, but lately it's like he thinks *nothing* is important.

"Yeah." His neglected voice is thick and throaty, but music to my ears. I turn around as he takes a seat at the breakfast bar

and I pour him a cup, trying not to let my grin show. It creeps everyone out, anyway.

“Last meet of the season today?” I know it is. His swim team schedule is posted on the fridge. “What time do they open the stands?” I know this too, but I want to see if he’ll talk again. I miss talking to my friend. He was always a quiet kid, but his anxiety really spiraled out of control when his parents went back to Poland. Sometimes it feels like they took his voice with them.

“Two. You coming?”

“Fuck yeah, wouldn’t miss it. We’re all going.”

“Angel?”

I still, the coffee pot hovering over my mug. When I look at him, there’s sadness in his normally stoic features. Shit. I didn’t realize how deep he’d gotten into this whole thing, either.

It’s not like he’s been outwardly mopey and clingy, like Orion. Nash definitely doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve. Emotional distance is part of his whole defense mechanism, but maybe I should have seen it coming. Underneath his impenetrable exterior is the most sensitive, caring person I’ve ever met, so of course Seraphina would find her way in.

*Fucking hell.* “She’s coming to pick up her video today. I doubt she has plans to stick around.”

Nash chugs his coffee and stands up to put his mug in the sink. He heads for the doorway where Ezra’s standing, listening in.

“Why wouldn’t she stick around?” Ezra says, letting Nash slip past him.

“Once she gets her video, the deal is off. She doesn’t need us anymore,” I say. Why is this so hard for everyone to understand?

Ezra stares at me blankly, but his jaw clenches.

“You, too?” I ask.

“Me, too, what?” He ducks into the pantry and returns with a loaf of bread, slotting a couple of slices into the toaster.

“You like her.”

“You know I fucking like her. What’s not to like? Are you telling me you don’t? That you’re fine letting her walk out that door and never seeing her again?”

“Wasn’t that the arrangement? That she was only ours until the video was done?”

“Fuck the arrangement. So we can’t be with her at all anymore? Who made that rule? Did *she* make that rule?”

“We need to give her space. She has a lot of trouble heading her way and we don’t need to pile on more.”

“How is letting her know we’re here for her piling on more trouble? Isn’t aftercare your job, *sir*? Shouldn’t we be taking care of her and telling her what a good girl she is after all the fucked up shit we did to her? We told her she was one of us, but now that her entire life is about to be destroyed, you don’t want anything to do with her?”

The toaster pops and Ezra throws his breakfast onto a plate, slathering an excessive amount of butter on the slices. I resist the urge to scold him for it. He’s walking and talking and making his own, albeit questionable, breakfast, which is a massive improvement from his usual morning behavior.

“I don’t know the first thing about healthy relationships, but none of this makes any fucking sense,” he mutters, grabbing his plate and storming out of the room.

I finish cooking the pot of oatmeal, alone with my thoughts now that I have the kitchen to myself. Ezra did make a reasonable point about aftercare. We should be telling Seraphina what a good job she did and how proud we are of

her. She needs to know that she exceeded all of our expectations and that she's fucking amazing, and *then* we can go our separate ways.

The realization hits me in the stomach. *Hard*. I don't want to go our separate ways. I want to keep her.

So that makes four of us. Four of us who got a little more attached than we should have—too emotionally invested in a girl who only needed us for our dicks and our daring.

## DOMINIC

Maynard, of all people. *Fucking Maynard?*

I wrongly assumed that he would be the voice of reason here, the one I could count on to talk me *out* of tying Seraphina up and keeping her here with us forever. But no, looks like that bastard has got himself a little angel addiction, too.

Orion has it bad. That was clear the day I talked to him when he was editing the video. He's made zero effort to hide how this project being over has affected him, and now I know it's because Maynard hasn't even tried to smack some sense into him. Not that I have either. Honestly, there was some comfort in knowing I wasn't alone, but shit, I'm *really* not alone.

*Maynard?* Jesus Christ.

We're in the family room, the room where she got on her knees the first time and showed exactly how much she trusted me, even if I didn't deserve that trust. She was so perfect, eager to please me and do whatever I told her. I stare at my friend who's sitting on the couch across from me—the couch where he and Orion first fucked her at the same time. God, this whole house is filled with memories of her naked body.

What would she do if I told her we didn't want to let her go? There's no incentive for her to be with us now, no outside force driving her into our arms and onto our cocks. In a few minutes, she'll be here to collect what she came for and that will be the end of it. It's not like I have a sales pitch prepared. In fact, I've spent the entire year telling her *not* to expect anything more from us.

Maynard is still watching me.

"Why would she want to stay with us?" I ask.

He's got that unnervingly inscrutable expression and I can't decide if it would be great to read his mind or if that's the kind of genie wish I would regret immediately.

"Would you even want her to? We haven't talked about it."

"She's about to fuck up her whole life, specifically because someone is trying to dictate her decisions. Now's not the time to get all caveman possessive. We have to let her go."

He nods slowly, like that's exactly what he's been telling himself. As hard as I try, I can't mask my feelings like he can, and I suspect that he can see right through me. Thankfully, he's decent enough to not point out how my desperation for her is written all over my face.

"Just let her know that if she needs our help with anything else, we're here for her. Not just for sex." He stands to leave the room, squeezing my shoulder on his way past. "Eat some breakfast. Something healthy. You look like shit."

I sit back in the chair once he's gone. I should have made the terms crystal clear as soon as we were done with the video—let the guys know that we're to leave her the fuck alone so we can get on with our lives the way we're supposed to and not do all this self-indulgent, melancholy bullshit. Why didn't I? Oh, that's right. I didn't fucking want to.

Instead, I've been wallowing like a dumbass. We've all been, apparently, too busy imagining what life would be like if



nothing had to change around here. Sure, maybe normal girls don't have five boyfriends at once, at least not ones who know about each other and are okay with sharing, but if there's anything I've learned, it's that Seraphina yearns to live outside the lines that have been drawn around her, and that my brothers and I refuse to acknowledge that the lines exist in the first place.

I can't make her stay, though. She's earned her freedom—from her oppressive, manipulative prick of a father, and from the demons that set out to destroy her.

There's a quiet tapping at the front door and I know it's her. She always uses the demon knocker, but really lightly, like she's afraid to hurt its feelings. Before I can even stand up, someone lets her in, as if they've been waiting in the foyer for her. Orion, most likely, and sure enough, he leads her down the hall into the kitchen where I meet them.

She looks fresh-faced and beautiful, her long hair braided back, showing off those gorgeous eyes and plump lips. I avoid her gaze. If I keep looking, I'm going to bend her over the counter and either ruin her day or make her day. It's a tossup at this point.

Her attention is glued to Orion, anyway. Fucker has his shirt off and his nipples are pierced? How have I never noticed that before? Whatever, not important right now.

“Is this what you're looking for?” he asks, pulling something out of his pocket. He holds out a small object that looks like a miniature frosted donut and she takes it from him, examining it questioningly. He reaches out and removes a cap from it, revealing a flash drive. *Cute.*

“This is it?”

“That's it. There are two files on it. One is basically a preview, suitable for letting your dad know what you've done without him having to actually see everything. The other is the full edited video, if it comes to that.”

She turns the little donut over in her hands, as if it's going to turn into a bomb and explode.

"Everything you ever wanted. Right, angel?"

He and I both know there's more than one meaning to that question. Does she? She doesn't answer, just pauses for a moment, then recaps the drive and tucks it into her purse.

"Thank you, guys. For everything."

"When are you leaving for spring break?" I ask, before she can scamper out of here and never look back.

"As soon as I get back to the dorm. Jasmine is waiting for me."

"Does she know what you're about to do?"

Seraphina shakes her head. "No. She knows things aren't good at home, but not how bad they're about to get."

"You should tell her, in case you need an escape plan. Or you can always call us if you need to. For anything." I look her in the eye and hope she understands how much I mean it.

She nods. "I have to go."

I don't like those words. I want to grab her by the hair and bend her to my will. I want to tell her to stay here in the Lair with us, where she's safe, where she's...

*FUCK.*

## EZRA

I watch from the top of the stairs as Dom and Orion walk Seraphina to the door. Is this goodbye?

For the first time since she approached Dom on Halloween, I consider what might happen to her if her father doesn't take

the bait. Will she really call his bluff and release the video to his church?

Nash appears from the living room, stopping to lean on the doorway as Maynard comes down from the third floor. The gang's all here.

Maynard sits next to me on the top step, joining me in watching Seraphina rip my heart out as she slips her shoes back on to leave for the last time. I try to affect some of Maynard's stony calm, but I'm not feeling it. It's then that I realize his knee is bouncing. He's fidgeting with the rings on his fingers. His jaw is clenched. That duplicitous motherfucker! He's not calm at all.

Does Seraphina know what she's done to us? *All of us?* No matter what Dominic or Maynard or any of those assholes say, she's still ours and we all know it. We're nowhere near done with her.

NASH

*This is fucking bullshit.*



## CHAPTER 33

### The eleventh hour

#### SERAPHINA

I'm on my own. I know I can't lean on the guys any more than I already have—they've done so much for me, *risked* so much—it's only fair that I do the rest by myself. Dominic held up his end of our arrangement, and I can't ask for anything else. His suggestion to call them if I needed anything meant more than he'll ever know, but if I can't be independent now, there's not much hope for the rest of my life, is there?

My resolve lasts for about a half an hour before it completely crumbles when Jasmine asks me what's wrong. Guess I haven't been very good at pretending that this is a perfectly normal trip home. I tell her everything.

*Everything.*

The rest of the way to Townsend, she listens intently, letting me ramble on about my father and Noah and the guys and the video and what I'm about to do. When we finally pull into my driveway, I still have so much I want to tell her, but most urgently of all, how much I love and appreciate her. I'll never find another friend like Jasmine.

"I knew, from the very first time I saw you, that you were going to shake shit up," she says. "You looked like you were carrying a whole lot of weight on your shoulders and you were just looking for the right opportunity to chuck it all. I could tell you were about to bloom, but I had no idea how much you had to go through to make that happen. I'm sorry I didn't realize how bad things were."

“I should have told you more, sooner. I’m sorry, too.”

“It’s probably pointless to try to stop you or tell you how dangerous this is, so please, *please* promise you’ll call me, any time, for any reason? I will kidnap your ass. We can hide away at my house, or go find Piper and Holly in New York, or Courtney on that beach in Miami. Whatever you want.”

“I promise.”

She gives me a hug, and I reluctantly get out of the car and head into the house. I know I’m going to email the preview file to my father at some point, but I haven’t worked the details out yet. I’ll have to feel out his mood, which apparently, is bad right now. He doesn’t even say hello before starting in on me.

“You better go make yourself presentable. What are you wearing?” he asks, motioning to my jeans and borrowed shirt. “I know it’s just a lock-in, but you can’t show up to a church function looking like that.”

Lock-in?

“Get a move on. Noah is expecting you.”

Shit, right, the annual lock-in at Glory Valley for the kids on spring break. It will be an evening of junk food, games, and movies—not a bad way to spend the night, but of course Dad volunteered me for another event and didn’t tell me until the last minute.

On the other hand, this is my last chance to talk to Noah, and most likely my final visit to Glory Valley. My heart pounds at the thought, with dread, apprehension, *excitement*.

“Sure, Dad, I’ll just be a minute.” I race up the stairs to transition back into the old me, quickly shucking my jeans and Ezra’s flannel shirt in favor of a long skirt and blouse.

Dad drives me to the church, stopping in briefly to greet the parents as they drop off their own children for the night. I join up with the other volunteers and we lead the first group of kids

down to the recreation room. Eventually, we get them organized into something loosely resembling a basketball game, and I take a seat on the sidelines to chill out and watch for a while. After coaching the little ones for a bit, Noah approaches me with a friendly smile.

“Looks like you’ve got the best seat in the house. Mind if I join you?”

“Sure.” We share a slightly awkward silence while I watch the kids, trying to figure out what I need to say. He figures out what to say first.

“I’m not an idiot, you know.”

I look at him.

“I know your father is trying to get us together. When he mentioned it last fall, I thought it was your idea, but I’ve since realized that it wasn’t.”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I expect him to be hurt or offended, but he looks at me with kindness and understanding.

“You and I have been acquainted for years, Seraphina. You’re a really lovely person and I thought, why not? It would be great to get to know you better.”

My internal thirteen-year-old, the one who probably still has a crush on Noah, preens and blushes at his words. But I’m not her anymore. I’m not sure who I am, but not that girl.

“That’s the problem, Noah.” I sigh. “I don’t even know myself. I’ve never really had the chance to figure out who I am or what I want out of life. Part of me thinks I should be content with what I have, with the life that my father has made for me, but—” I don’t really want to voice the rest.

“It’s okay. I got that feeling, you know? That you’ve been going through the motions for years. And it’s a testament to what a good person and a good daughter you are, because you’d rather sacrifice your own happiness than let anyone

down. But God didn't put this great big world at our feet just to have us stay in one tiny little bubble. There are so many places to explore and things to discover, if that's what you've been called to do. God is everywhere, not just here in Townsend, or in this church."

I look at him with surprise. He's a lot more insightful than I gave him credit for.

"If you decide that this is the kind of life that's right for you, then we should try again when the time comes. But you don't need to trap yourself here. Not for me, or your father. Especially not for God."

And just like that, I can breathe again. I don't need Noah's blessing to forge my own path, but it's nice to have it all the same. There's a lot that I want to say to him, apologize for, but for now all I can say is, "Thank you, Noah."

"Any time. It's what I'm here for. Listen, Seraphina, I'm happy you came tonight and you're more than welcome to stay, but if you want to get out of here, I can take you home. We have more than enough volunteers, and it seems like you've got a lot on your mind. If you could use some time to yourself more than you need to watch a bunch of rowdy kids, I completely understand."

"That sounds great."

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It's 11:00 at night. I'm not a master of sneaking around or anything, so I don't bother trying. The sound of Noah's old truck pulling up in the driveway isn't exactly subtle, anyway. Even though the rest of the house is dark and quiet, I'm not surprised to find Dad in his study, going over paperwork at his desk. I sit down in the chair across from him, dropping my



overnight bag at my feet. He looks up at me with glassy eyes and a twitchy scowl.

He's not... he's not on cocaine *now*, is he?

"What are you doing here?" he asks. His voice sounds normal, at least. Annoyed, but that's also normal.

"I wasn't feeling well, so Noah drove me home."

Dad returns to glaring at his papers. "You couldn't call first? Ask permission? How does this make me look, my own daughter bailing on a church event? What is Noah going to think of you now?"

That's all he cares about, nothing about me not feeling well?

"It was his idea. He offered to bring me home because he's a nice person and he cares about me."

Dad is thoroughly unconvinced.

"If you keep this behavior up, he won't be willing to marry you, and then what will you do? I shudder to think what kind of life you would be living without me. Everything I've done is so you could have a life worth living. Your conduct is disgraceful."

I'm so shocked that I can't even muster a response. He's practically vibrating with disappointment. Over what? Me leaving a church event early?

"I really don't feel well. Can I go to bed now, Dad?" I stand to pick up my things. He's in a mood and I want no part of it.

"You can, but we're not finished with this. Don't think I'll have forgotten about it in the morning. Do you understand?"

Of course he won't. He would never let me forget about all the ways I disappoint him.

"I understand." He doesn't say anything further, so I take the opportunity to escape and head upstairs. I wouldn't know how to fight with him even if I did have the energy. But this is

the last time I have to pretend to be the dutiful daughter. Soon, I won't have to fight or pretend anything, because in the morning, I'm going to blow up my whole life with one email.

I close my bedroom door quietly behind me. He's going to stay up half the night, stewing about what a frustrating failure I am, about how I've never done anything to make him proud despite spending my entire life trying to live up to his expectations. Good. Let him experience that burning ache of unhappiness. I'll unload mine soon and he can have that, too.

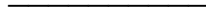
As I get ready for bed, I contemplate chopping my hair off right here and now, but decide my time is better spent packing up what I want to take with me tomorrow—because I will be leaving in the morning. Everything I've ever known is about to disappear and all that I'll have left is whatever I can walk out the door with. I do have a few things waiting for me on the other side, like my roommates, and the last couple months of this semester. Maybe I'll even see the demons again if I go to a party at the Lair.

I get to work, packing a couple of suitcases, but realize that for all the shit my father talks about being blessed with so much money and what a wonderful provider he is for me, none of the things in my room were actually purchased for *me*. It's like he has this imaginary perfect daughter that he's been trying to fool people into believing I am, and all this stuff belongs to *her*.

It's all fodder to project an image to make him look better. I don't want these clothes—the skirts and the blouses and that damned blue tulle gown. The only reason I would ever consider wearing it again is so Dominic could rip the thing off of me. I pause for a minute, stroking my fingers along the soft velvet bodice, remembering how tempting he looked that night.

If I could go back in time, maybe I could have left with him on New Year's instead of unleashing this bomb I'm about to drop. But it has to be done. If I ever want to be truly free, my

father needs to be the one to cut the ties. I close the last suitcase and slide it under my bed, out of sight.



Morning light streams through the cracks in my curtains, but I don't have time to bargain with the sun for extra sleep today. Anxiety shoots through my veins and crushes my chest as I sit up with a start. *Today's the day.* The day it all ends, and the day it all begins.

I turn on my computer and insert the flash drive. It's hard to believe something so small can hold so much power. I compose the world's briefest email and resist the overwhelming urge to watch the video.

And now, I wait. Have I done enough? Will he let me go for good? With shaky hands, I text Jasmine.



# CHAPTER 34

## Flesh and blood

### SERAPHINA

I try to lift my throbbing head, but my neck is stiff and it makes a loud cracking noise as I move, drawing me out of my stupor. The outside world creeps in—the bright light of the living room, the smell of coffee brewing, the sound of the neighbor’s lawn mower.

Wasn’t I in my bedroom? I open my eyes fully to see that my father is sitting on the couch across from me, his face morphed into something completely unrecognizable. He looks ghastly, his eyes practically glowing with anger.

*“What did you think was going to happen? That you could defy me? That you could destroy everything I’ve worked for?”*

A foggy memory of his furious words begins to take shape. My hands instinctively reach to protect my neck, but they don’t move. Why don’t they move? I keep trying until I realize they’re bound behind me. How long have I been tied up like this?

*“You’re trying to throw away everything I’ve given you! You’re worthless!”*

Everything comes flooding back in a shocking wave. My father attacked me. He wrapped his hands around my throat and squeezed, and I couldn’t do anything to stop him. Was he trying to kill me?

Dad’s body trembles as he stares, unable to contain his own energy. My mind won’t kick into gear and nothing makes sense. My eyes ache and my throat burns and pain radiates

through my body, like I've been dragged down the stairs. Is that how I got here?

"If you're awake now, I'll continue." He doesn't wait for a reply. He doesn't need one, since I am a literal captive audience.

"Your behavior goes against everything I've taught you and against the image we need to portray to our community. Our good standing at Glory Valley is vital, and you're jeopardizing it because you'd rather behave like a common whore!"

I don't recognize my father at all. He's never shown this level of anger or violence before. It's as if all his disappointment in me has finally boiled over. I shift my arms behind my back, trying to figure out what he's bound me with. It's not cutting into me like a plastic zip tie would, or sticking like tape. Rope? I can work with rope.

*Thank you, Maynard.*

I start twisting my wrists to make some slack, hoping it looks like I'm just struggling. He didn't tie my feet, but I doubt I could make it through the front door without the use of my hands.

"Why?" My voice sounds weak, like a wounded animal, and I hate him for it.

"Why what?" Dad asks, his head cocked to the side. His arms rest on his knees, his fingers intertwined, one leg bouncing like it's possessed. He looks annoyed that I've interrupted him, not the least bit concerned that he hurt me.

"Why did you do this to me?" I ask.

"Because I refuse to stand by while you ruin everything. Do you know how many people we'll lose in the congregation if word gets out about what an ungrateful heathen you are?"

I've managed to work a gap in the rope. It's not a lot, but enough that I can switch from twisting my wrists to wedging my hands against each other. The rope burns and tears at my

skin and I want to scream at him for hurting me. I want to tell him how much I hate him and this whole godforsaken life, but the words stick painfully in my throat.

Dad is still watching me, leg bouncing. “Men will use you for their own purposes, because you are just a temptation. You are nothing but flesh to them. And once they’re done with you, they’ll find someone else to meet their needs, because what else do you have to offer men like that? Men like Dominic?”

Maybe Dad’s words are true, maybe they’re not. It doesn’t matter. Dominic and I both went into this with our eyes open. The whole plan was designed around us using each other for our own purposes. We agreed that it was temporary, and we agreed that it meant nothing. It still hurts to hear an outsider drive that point home, though.

“I should never have let you go to college. It was a mistake and I see that now. You were not meant to be a part of that world.” Dad’s voice is cold, completely devoid of compassion. He pauses to let his words sink in and to watch me squirm before continuing.

“Out there, you are only good for one thing, and men can tell just by looking at you. They know you’re nothing without a man to lead you and without a man to tell you what to do. You may think you’re capable and independent, but you’re not. You’re a scared little girl seeking approval from anyone who will give it to you.”

Is he right? Is that all I am?

“It might not be too late to turn things around with Noah. And you better hope you can, because if you continue down this road you’re on, you will be doing it completely on your own. I cannot allow you to tarnish my name. I will have no choice but to cut you off and you will no longer be my daughter.”

And there it is.

It's funny, sitting here in the living room while my father preaches his disapproval at me, my hands still bound behind my back. Those are the words I was desperate to hear. Those are the words I had dreamed of and hoped for all this time. But it doesn't feel like I thought it would, and I realize, as I continue to work my wrists against the rope, it's because I'm not the same person I was when I came up with the idea. Back then, my choice was between life under my father's control, or the great, wide unknown.

But now I've had a taste of what else is out there, of *who* is out there. I may have developed feelings for the guys, and even though they don't feel the same, I still got to experience something worth fighting for. I had a lifetime's worth of self-discoveries in a few short months.

The longer I think about it, the more I know I'm not just flesh to be used, even if sometimes I like to pretend I am. And I know there's still so much more to learn about myself and the world he doesn't think I should be a part of.

"This is the last chance I'm giving you to act like the woman you're supposed to be. You can be my daughter, or you can be nothing. The choice is yours."

But there is no choice to make, only one clear path forward.

I watch him as he sits there. My father. The man I used to believe was infallible, as I imagine most little girls do. But I see him now, how he truly is. It's odd, that I fell into a group known as the demons, when the real demon was right in front of me all along.

What he did to Marie Ash. What he did to Dominic. What he did to me. This man, who presents himself as a messenger of God, has evil—true evil—in his heart, and my battered and bound body proves it.

"Do you want to be nothing? Alone, out there?" He points to the door, watching me, waiting for my answer.

I give the ropes one last agonizing tug. My hands are free.



*I am free.*

Rising to stand, I try not to let him see how much pain I'm in. My body hurts, but adrenaline is coursing through me, pushing me toward the finish line. "That's exactly what I want."

His face grows red with rage as he shoots to his feet, his hands clenched into fists. "You will regret this, Seraphina!"

Fighting the urge to run for my life, I turn and walk toward the door, not daring to look back. Knowing that he's watching, I hold myself as steady as I can and move with determined purpose.

"If you walk out of here, you can never come back, young lady!"

My pace doesn't falter. I step through the front door as he continues to yell, but I don't stop to listen. I don't even know where I'm going—I wasn't planning on leaving with absolutely nothing, and as my feet hit the sidewalk, I realize I'm not even wearing shoes. It doesn't matter right now. Nothing does, except putting space between me and the life I'm leaving behind.

Before I've even left the sidewalk, Jasmine's car screeches into the driveway. *My guardian angel got my text.* She takes one look at me and hurtles herself out of the car, rushing over to me.

"Seraphina? What did he do?" She looks me over from head to bare feet, smoothing my hair and wincing at my bloodied wrists. Her head snaps to the house where my father's shouts continue, now with the added sound effects of breaking glass. He's really losing his shit, and I'm fairly confident that his drug use is playing a big part in his behavior right now. How was I so blind to it before?

Jasmine takes my hand in hers and starts leading me to the car, when all the chaos coming from the house suddenly stops. The silence is eerie, and a sickening storm churns in my

stomach. I turn back as if the outside of the house is going to offer some sort of clue, but Jasmine doesn't let me go.

“Seraphina, we have to get out of here!”

“No,” I murmur, straining to hear some kind of sound, but there's nothing but a cold, crawling sense of dread. I break away from her to walk toward the door and she finally gives up trying to keep me from it, following close on my heels.

Peeking my head into the house, I take in the mess he's made in the two short minutes I was outside. Broken glass litters the entryway and I tuck my feet into a pair of shoes left by the door. I know without a doubt that he's not going to come raging around the corner. I know he's not going to attack me again, or scream and yell anymore. The air in the house has changed, and I can feel it, as solidly as Jasmine's hand on my back, keeping me close, ready to pull me out of harm's way in an instant.

But there's no harm left to be done here, and now I see why. My legs crumble underneath me, finally giving way to the gravity of the situation.

On the living room floor is Solomon Sayre's lifeless body.



# CHAPTER 35

## The wages of sin

### SERAPHINA

Lots of things beep in hospitals. The chirping of machinery mixes with the nurses' chatter drifting down the hall, just another day at work for them. I've lost track of how many hours I've been lying in this bed, but I'm too wiped out to care. It feels like I've been run over by a car, not dragged down a flight of stairs.

Cheryl Wright doesn't know that I was dragged down a flight of stairs. She wasn't here when the police questioned me, but she's been sitting by my side in quiet prayer ever since. She hasn't asked any questions and I'm grateful for that.

I told the police everything. Well, everything except the part about the sex tape. As far as they're concerned, Dad was upset with me for rejecting his marriage idea to Noah and just snapped, aided in large part by the drugs that eventually stopped his heart.

He's in the cardiac wing on life support. Jasmine called 911 and we gave him CPR until the paramedics arrived, but one look at me and they hauled me into an ambulance, too. Now I've been thoroughly checked out, scanned, and x-rayed. They bandaged my wrists, put an IV in my arm, and tested my blood for drugs. They'll be sending in a psychiatrist to evaluate me before they let me walk out of here.

I just want to go home, except I don't have a home anymore.

What do I tell Dominic? The plan worked, but at a much higher cost than any of us were expecting. Do I tell him anything? Will I ever actually talk to him again?

Jasmine has taken up residence on my other side, furiously texting away like her life depends on it. I hope she's filling the girls in on what happened, because I can't imagine how I would explain all this.

I have no concept of what time it is until someone brings in a dinner tray for me. Cheryl says she's going to step out for a bit to meet the other ladies in the cafeteria, and promises to bring back something for Jasmine. I haven't had a mother-figure in a very long time, and it's nice to have someone like Cheryl fussing over me and making sure my friends are taken care of.

When the door closes behind her, Jasmine carefully climbs into the hospital bed with me, and holds my hand in hers.

“Did I do that to my father?” I ask.

“He did it to himself.”

“But I helped.”

“No, Seraphina. It would have happened sooner or later, no matter what you did. Even if you stayed and married Noah. Your dad was on his own path, and none of it had anything to do with you.”

I suppose that could be true. And at least now I know what kind of person he really was, cocaine or not. In hindsight, I can see the shifts in his behavior. When he was likely using, he was excitable, like the day he first called to tell me about his marriage plan for me. And then other times, he was calm, cold, and even cruel. I guess that was the real him.

The drugs didn't make him a better or worse person than he already was, and as I pick at the gauze on my wrists, I start to realize how terrible he's been to me my whole life—how demanding and insulting he's always been. I gave him

everything I had, just trying to earn his love, and in return I got this.

The psychiatrist comes to visit early the next morning. She sits and listens patiently to everything I have to say and takes lots of notes. She writes a prescription for anti-anxiety meds and refers me to a therapist after making sure I have an emotional support system in place for the time being. And that's it—I'm cleared to go home, like everything can go back to normal now. But it never, ever will.

After another hour of nurses flitting about, removing my IV, and explaining the discharge papers, Jasmine and I make our way out of the hospital to her car. Cheryl is staying to pray at my father's bedside, but I don't have the heart to inform her that he's a lost cause.

"I'm sorry if I wrecked your spring break," I tell Jasmine as she pulls out of the parking lot. She raises her eyebrows at me.

"What did I say? I got you. Anytime, anywhere, for whatever reason. You'd do the same for me, right?"

"Hell yeah."

"So don't apologize, especially for this." She grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. "What do you say we grab your stuff from your house and spend the rest of the week at mine? We can binge terrible movies and gorge ourselves on junk food. If you want to come back to the hospital to see your dad, or go to your own house, all you have to do is let me know and we'll make it happen. Deal?"

Jasmine really is my emotional support system. I don't know what I did in this life to deserve a friend like her, but I'm not going to argue with the powers that be. If I only have one thing left in my life, I'm glad it's her.

"Deal." And for a few minutes everything is fine, until we pull into my driveway and I'm confronted with the sight of my house. No, Solomon's house, not mine.

Jasmine and I get to work sweeping up the broken glass in the entryway, but I can't bear to go into the living room to vacuum the carpet. It needs to be done, though. The glass was tracked everywhere when the paramedics were here. Jasmine understands and does it instead, shooing me upstairs to get my things.

I consider packing another bag, but I don't want anything else that's here. With nothing left to do, I sit on the floor in my closet, pulling my knees up to my chest. There's no going back now. I made sure of that, and so did Dad.

Dominic will probably be pleased to learn what happened to my father. It's why he agreed to help me in the first place. This was his best-case scenario, wasn't it? Solomon Sayre's shriveled, black heart succumbing to a cocaine rage. That's poetic justice.

I don't know if I should call the guys to let them know what happened or if they'll find out some other way. Do they want to know? Do they want anything from me? With a painful twist in my belly, I realize how lonely I've been without them. Our arrangement was a little bizarre, but it worked.

It would never work in the real world, though. Sure, five "boyfriends" are fine if you're fucking around and not emotionally invested, but in actuality, I'd have to choose just one, wouldn't I?

Or two. Maynard and Orion would come as a set. Orion would dote on me, and Maynard would boss us around. My heart tightens. I would like that. Or I could choose Ezra and spend all my days wrapped up in his arms and his amazing smell, letting him fuck me until I couldn't stand. But without Maynard or Dominic there to tell us to drink water and eat actual food, we'd never get out of bed.

Nash would make love to me *and* see that we ate regularly, and our lives would be quiet and drama free. Except without the chaos and the mess, he'd have nothing to fix, nothing to

clean. He needs some disorder in his life because it gives him a sense of purpose. Would I be too boring for him?

Would I be too boring for Dominic? No, he creates his own mayhem. Nothing will ever be mundane or ordinary in his life, because he isn't either of those things. He's ferocious and passionate and all-consuming. He's the flame and I'm the moth. We're all moths around Dominic. No one can stay away, not even dominant, controlling Maynard.

The truth is, I could never choose between them. I ate the forbidden fruit and this is my punishment—to have experienced love unrequited, times five, and now I must live the rest of my life knowing that nothing will ever come close to the heaven I felt in their arms. This is my damnation.

“Uh, babe?” Jasmine calls out to me.

“Yeah?”

“Is this the email?”

*Crap! Did I leave my computer on?* I scramble off the floor of my closet and race toward my desk. She should *not* look at that. It's just the preview, and I love Jasmine, but I really don't want her seeing the evidence of what I've done.

“I didn't mean to look. Your computer woke up when I bumped it.”

I try to close it down, but something doesn't look right. It hits me the same time Jasmine says it aloud.

“You didn't send it. He never got the video.”

How is that possible? I look at my email, with the little thumbnail attachment and everything. It's still in draft. I never clicked send. Jasmine and I stare at each other for a moment, my jaw open in shock.

“Then why did my dad—? He did all that, choking me and tying me up? For what? Why?”

“I think your dad was a lot more unwell than we thought.”



With a choked sigh, I delete the video file from my computer and tuck the flash drive into my pocket, where I aim to keep it from seeing the light of day ever again. At least, until I'm alone.

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Jasmine's house is amazing. It's a mid-century ranch, filled with the smells of cooking and the sounds of normal family life. Her dog Spock seems to realize that I need extra comfort right now and spends the next two days on my lap. Well, has tried to, anyway. Spock is a seventy-five pound German Shepherd, but we're doing the best we can.

After dinner on Wednesday, I get a call from Cheryl, telling me that the doctors don't think my dad is going to make it through the night. Jasmine offers to take me to the hospital, even if it's just so I can get some closure, and I reluctantly agree to go.

I don't know what good closure is going to do—the repercussions of my father's actions are surely going to stay with me until I invest in a lifetime supply of therapy. The bruises on my body haven't even begun to fade. Watching him die in a hospital bed isn't going to make it any easier, but I listen to Jasmine and get in the car when she tells me to.

A quiet crowd of praying church members has gathered in my father's room, and they graciously clear the space for me when I arrive. As soon as the door clicks closed and I'm alone with him, I lose it. He looks so normal. This is not the almighty Solomon Sayre that controlled every bit of my life since I was born. He can't yell at me, or scold me, or convince me I'm not good enough ever again. He's powerless.

“You fucked up, Dad,” I say, once I've gotten my tears under control. I realize I'm talking to myself, but I don't care.

“You could have loved me. You could have told me I was doing a good job when I tried so hard to make you proud.”

The monitors continue to beep, an eerie soundtrack to this surreal moment.

“You could have—” I stop.

Clearly, he couldn't have. All of this happened because he couldn't be what I needed, and I couldn't be what he needed. No amount of introspection or hindsight will fix any of this. He's going to die, and I'm going to have to live with that.

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“Call Dominic. I've been keeping him updated, but I think you need to talk to him.” Jasmine presses her phone into my hand, leaving me no room to argue. His contact is on the screen, waiting for me to dial. “He only knows the Cliff's Notes. I figured the rest of it is your story to tell.”

Once she's sure I'm not going to drop her phone, she leaves me alone in her bedroom to give me some privacy. My heart fluttering in anticipation of hearing his voice is the first pleasant thing I've felt for days. I tap his number and wait for him to pick up. He doesn't even answer like a normal person.

“It's about time. What's going on?” he says immediately after the call connects. It takes me a second to realize that he thinks I'm Jasmine, since this is her phone.

“Dominic, it's Seraphina.”

He lets out a slow breath. “It's good to hear your voice.”

I have to fight back tears because it's so good to hear his voice, too.

“My father is dead. He passed away last night.”

There's silence. What is he thinking? Is he celebrating? Is he going to gloat? Finally he speaks, his warm voice reaching my ears through the air.

“Are you alright?”

That's not any of the reactions I expected. He wants to know how I am? I don't even know how to answer that. I'm definitely not okay, for lots of reasons. But also, now that I'm talking to him, I'm more okay than I've ever been.

“Yes. And no. Noah's family is handling his funeral arrangements for me. I might need to get a lawyer because I don't know what I'm supposed to do with the house or his stuff or his money or anything.” I barely knew how I was going to handle my own stuff when I left, but now I've got all of his to deal with, too.

“Would you like the contact info for mine?”

His lawyer? Dominic has a lawyer?

“Um, please? That would be very helpful.”

“I'll send it over, and I'll let them know to expect a call from you. Is there anything else I can do? You don't need to face this alone.”

“I don't know. I'm at Jasmine's right now. Her family has kind of adopted me, so they're making sure I eat and sleep. I don't really know what to do with myself. I'll figure it out, won't I?”

Dominic is silent for so long that I start to think our call may have gotten cut off.

“We will, little angel.”



## CHAPTER 36

### Kingdom come

#### DOMINIC

Deep down, I suppose I knew that Solomon would eventually sabotage himself. I just wish he hadn't tried to take Seraphina down with him. What a goddamn fuckhead. I'm not sorry he's dead.

This funeral is too good for him. That pretty girl sitting in the front pew, her face a blank mask of numbness? She's too good for him. It's clear that no one in this stupidly enormous church has any idea what an absolute fucking fake he was. He said the right words and that's all that mattered.

Jasmine is at Seraphina's side and I'm glad she's here. Seraphina needs a friend like her right now. Noah is on Seraphina's other side, and although I know firsthand the extent she went through to not ever have to marry him, I still bristle at the sight. That should be me. But I hang back with my brothers and keep a respectful distance.

The guys and I are doing our best to blend in, which is proving tough to do in a place like this. I wasn't sure if they'd want to come to Solomon's funeral, but they didn't hesitate, so we're all here, for her. Even Maynard, who I'm pretty sure is expecting to go up in flames at any second.

The sermon lasts way too long, and the pastor says too many nice and untrue things about Solomon, but my focus is on Seraphina. What is she thinking? Is she sad? Relieved? Angry? Maybe I'll never know, but I do know that I want to get her out of here and away from all of this. This is not where she belongs, with or without her asshole father.

After the service, the guys and I are able to steal her attention, only for a moment, as everyone files past to pay their respects. She looks like she's been through hell. She's hiding it well, but there are bruises peeking out of her collar and broken blood vessels in her eyes. If Solomon weren't already dead, I would kill him myself, right here, right fucking now. It's all I can do to keep from scooping her up in my arms and carrying her out of this place, but I know I need to let her say goodbye to this chapter of her life.

And then I plan to make her mine. *Ours*.

The guys and I head back to Morgenstern, formulating a crazy plan of our own. It's our turn now.

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On Sunday afternoon, we've accomplished everything we possibly could in the last twenty-four hours. We might be massively under-slept, but it's a small price to pay if this works out the way we want it to. I had to let Jasmine know what we were doing and I hope she kept her word to not let anything slip to Seraphina. I wouldn't blame her if she did, but right now I need her to be *our* ally.

"She's home," Orion calls from the foyer, where he's been lingering for the past half-hour.

*Home.*

Orion opens the door to let her in and I head down the stairs. Her hair is pulled off her face and she looks beautiful, as always. She's wearing jeans shorts and a snug top, which I've never seen her wear, and... is that Ezra's flannel?

Nash takes her suitcase and sets it aside before hauling her into a bear hug. If I didn't know he was a gentle giant, I'd swear he was going to crush her ribcage. She wraps her arms around his neck and snuggles into him and I feel bad that the

rest of us are intruding on this moment. Only a little—certainly not enough to leave. We’re no strangers to sharing moments and we’re not about to stop now.

“Fuck. I love you, Seraphina.”

Nash’s voice is low and gravelly, but we all hear it. Of course all the demons have heard it before, but from her reaction, she has not. Or maybe it’s the words he said. *I love you*. That even makes my cold, dark heart skip a beat. We all agreed that we were all in on this, but until now, I wasn’t sure how “all in” some of these guys actually were. It’s certainly clear now.

She leans back to hold his face in her hands.

“Nash! The first word you said to me was ‘fuck.’ I mean, I like the other words you said, and oh my god, I love you, too, but the first word—”

“I’ll do it over.” He grins at her. “I love you.”

“No, no, no! You can’t take the fuck back! I’m keeping it. I want it. I want the fuck!”

“Oh, we know you do,” Ezra says, emerging from the living room doorway.

She looks at all of us, gathered around her in the foyer with little sparkling hearts in our goddamn eyes. Whatever, it’s too late to pretend now. She’s *our* little demon, and it’s about time she knew it.

“So, what’s up, guys?” she asks, shifting uncomfortably on her feet. “Why did you ask Jasmine to drop me here? Did I leave something behind?”

“Yeah, angel, you left something behind.”

She looks at me quizzically as I approach her.

“Us.”

She frowns at me and it’s the cutest fucking thing.

“Nash, can you take her stuff?” He nods and grabs her suitcase, heading upstairs with it.

“Lunch is almost ready. I hope you didn’t stuff yourself with junk food on the drive back,” Maynard says, before he and Orion disappear toward the kitchen.

Ezra smirks at me and I know he has no intention of letting me have a moment alone with her, but I shoot him a look anyway.

“Alright, alright. I’ll go set the fucking table or something.” He gives me a cheeky wink before crossing the foyer into the dining room.

“You guys are being weird. What’s going on?” she says when we’re finally alone.

“We’ve always been weird. I don’t know why that surprises you now.”

“Dominic, I can’t take any more surprises.”

I pull her into my arms, unable to keep my hands off her any longer.

“Then you’re really going to hate this. Come with me.” I lead her up the stairs to the third floor, past Nash coming back down, to the room where we made the video. *Her room.*

Opening the door, I let her go in first, to take in what we’ve been working so hard on. She steps in and turns around silently, checking it out. We had a bit of a head start since we spent all that time making it the perfect place for her video, but now it’s so much more personal because all of her stuff is here.

Nash organized her clothes in the closet and Ezra added some books to her small collection—ones that he knew she would love. Orion hung his artwork on the walls, and Maynard, well, I’m not sure what he did, but it involved power tools and her bed frame.



“I know you would’ve been perfectly fine staying in the dorms, but we got to talking on the way back to Morgenstern and decided that you’re a little too good at getting yourself into trouble.”

“You did this to keep me out of trouble?”

“Absolutely not. We did it because we’re a bunch of selfish bastards who want to be first in line for that trouble.”

She laughs and does another slow spin, taking everything in. She looks amazed, overwhelmed even, but I’ll take it, because the one thing she does not look, is mad.

“When did you do this?”

“Yesterday, today.”

Her mouth falls open. “How?”

“We may have had a bit of help from someone on the inside.”

She thinks about that for a minute.

“Jasmine knew? Oh, she’s not getting away with this.” She still doesn’t look mad as a smile cracks her face, the first one I’ve seen in a while, but I don’t want to be around when she has that conversation with her friend. I’ll let them work it out.

Jasmine was a bit of a hard sell, actually. We’ve known each other only in passing for the past couple of years, and I’m sure the things Seraphina told her about me these last few months weren’t entirely favorable. Jasmine is extremely protective and loyal, but eventually she saw that we’re more alike than not. Both of us would do anything for our girl, so, in the end, she finally relented and approved my crazy, last-minute plan, even recruiting Piper and Holly to help us since they got back earlier this morning.

She did threaten my cock again, though.

## SERAPHINA

I'm living a dream.

Not everyone's dream, but certainly mine. To have these men do what they did, for me? I've never felt so treasured or loved in my entire life. I tried to write them off, telling myself that everything we shared didn't actually mean anything, but it didn't work. Dominic spent so much time and energy convincing me that sex meant nothing, though, and maybe he was kind of right. It wasn't the sex that made me fall in love with them, after all.

It was Ezra inviting me into his private space and trusting me with his secrets. It was Nash, my vigilant guard, holding and protecting me. It was Orion, sharing his vulnerability, and embracing mine without judgement. It was Maynard, supporting me, guiding me, teaching me.

And it was Dominic—saving me from a miserable destiny he probably spent ten years wishing for. He promised to ruin and corrupt me, and he delivered on his word in more ways than I could have ever imagined. He dedicated himself to my cause, and somewhere along the way, maybe from the very beginning, I fell in love with him for it.

Now there's just one more thing to do.

---

I lean against the bathroom doorway as Dominic towels himself off. It's a heavenly sight. Realistically, I could watch this all day, but I'm here for a different reason right now.

"I was thinking," I start.

"Don't think. You get too many bad ideas when you think."

He comes in close to plant the most vulgar kiss on my lips and when he pulls away, I've nearly forgotten what I came in

here for. *Oh, right, my bad idea.*

“That’s fair. This one might also be bad, but I’ll let you decide.” I show him the scissors I’ve been holding behind my back. “I have one last tether to my old life. You want to be the one to sever it for me?”

He studies my face and I’m blown away by how he looks at me. Like he’d do anything for me. This beautifully handsome man with his piercing blue eyes and intimidating muscles—the man who cobbled together his own family, who would go to hell and back for those he loves—looking at *me* like I’m the special one.

He reaches around and gathers up my hair in his fist, giving it a good tug as he tilts my face up to his.

“Are you sure?” He presses a line of kisses from my shoulder up to my neck before taking the scissors from my hand.

My heart is beating fast. I’ve wanted to do this for so long and I might die if I don’t do it today, right now. I wasn’t kidding when I said it was a tether to my old life. It’s like an anchor keeping me from sailing off into the sunset.

“I’m sure. Please?”

His lips quirk up into a smile. I know he’s powerless against that word.

“Do you want it fast and rough, or slow and gentle?” he asks.

Has he completely forgotten what I’ve asked him to do? He turns me around to face the mirror, releasing my hair and smoothing it down my back.

“Is fast and gentle an option?”

“Anything for you, little angel. How short do you want it?”

“As short as you’re brave enough to cut it?” I laugh as his eyes widen, like he’s not quite ready for the challenge. “If it

makes you feel better, I have an appointment at the salon later, so they can make it pretty. I just want you to be the one to take the first step with me.”

He nods, and I think he understands why I need him to do this. Every time he looks at me, he will know that I put myself in his hands because I trust him, completely. We’ve earned this relationship with each other. We worked fucking hard for it.

Holding the scissors level with my shoulder, he pauses before cutting into my locks. Part of me wants to squeeze my eyes closed, but the rest of me can’t stop watching him.

His face stills in concentration as he cuts from one side to the other, stopping every so often to toss a handful of my old self into the garbage can. I’m lighter already, freer than I’ve ever been before. I’m no longer the girl I was when I first arrived at Morgenstern, because now I’m actually looking forward to what my future holds.

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The salon does a great job finishing what Dominic started, and I barely recognize myself when they’re done. It’s not just the hair—I feel as different as I look. Confident and unstoppable, free to do anything I want. But all I want to do right now is meet my friends for lunch and eat my weight in chocolate waffles.

“Holy shit, girl! You went from sexy bombshell, to *adorable*, sexy bombshell! I didn’t even know that was an option. How did you do that?” Jasmine asks, running her hands through my newly styled hair as I meet up with the girls outside the diner. I blush, and of course Piper has to give me shit about it.

“You get fucked down daily by the five hottest guys at Morgenstern, but you blush at being called adorable? It’s about

time you own up to your fabulousness. I mean, look at you! You hacked off like two feet of your own hair! That takes the fucking balls of Satan.”

“Technically, *I* didn’t do it. Dominic did it for me, and then Louise at the salon did the rest.”

“Dominic cut your hair? Why is that so hot?” Holly sighs.

“Hot man cutting hot girl’s hair? How could it be anything *but* hot?” Jasmine pulls open the door to the diner and holds it while we file in.

“It was kind of hot,” I say. “And he was really sweet about it.”

“I can’t see that man being sweet about anything,” Piper says. “You’ve really got all those guys wrapped around your finger, don’t you? Fingers? Are they wrapped around the same finger, or do they each get their own?” she jokes, sliding into the booth.

“It depends on what kind of mood I’m in,” I say, sending my friends into a fit of laughter.

“Well, if anyone has earned five adoring boyfriends, it’s Seraphina. Did you know she gets waxed regularly? That kind of sacrifice deserves five boyfriends plus a shiny gold medal,” Jasmine says.

“I shave sometimes. Can I have, like, two boyfriends?” Holly asks, just before the waitress comes to take our order.



# CHAPTER 37

## Land of milk and honey

### SERAPHINA

It's Friday night, finals are over, and the whole school is ready to party. The energy, the excitement, the rampantly uncontrolled hormones—the house is charged with it, and so am I. The last few weeks have been stressful for everyone, a blur of classes and studying and tests. We're all ready to blow off some steam and let loose, and what better way to start than with a huge party at the Lair?

There is no better way.

I'm nowhere near ready to say goodbye to my friends for the summer, but if I know the girls, we'll spend the next couple of months texting and calling each other before they come back to Morgenstern in the fall. Me, I'm not going back to Townsend for the summer break. Or ever.

Dominic's lawyer that he recommended is Maynard's father, of all people. Mr. Gregor and his team are handling the sale of my father's house and other assets, and my newfound finances are in the capable hands of Dominic's grandparents' firm, Fieldworth Financial Services.

I have more money than God now, so after paying for Dad's funeral, I donated to Cheryl Wright's charity, set myself up with a modest allowance, and will probably spend a decent chunk of it on all the therapy I'll need because of my father. So, thanks for everything, Dad.

Maynard has arranged for me and the guys to spend the summer in the Lair. I'm looking forward to enjoying the town

when it's not overrun with rowdy college students and spending time with my—*good lord*—five boyfriends. There's nothing else I'd rather do.

Under the watchful and mischievous eyes of the demons carved in the doorframe, I lock my bedroom behind me to head downstairs, stopping by Nash's room on the second floor. He has classical music playing today and it gives him an air of elegance that makes me weak in the knees. He looks handsome and sophisticated, his dark blond hair styled neatly, as always.

He's pulling on a shirt, the muscles in his back flexing as he tugs it down. He notices me standing there and I love the way his face lights up when he sees me.

"Hello, angel," he says, walking over and adjusting his glasses. The sound of his voice wraps around me as gently as his arms and I will never not cherish a single word that comes out of his mouth. He pulls me in for a scorching kiss that has me melting into him. Maybe we could skip the party and just stay in here all night.

"If you two are going to fuck, you might as well do it downstairs and get this party started right." Ezra's voice cuts through our moment and I glance over at him as he pulls out a joint and lights it. He watches me and Nash with a raised eyebrow and a grin that I know only leads to trouble.

Nash steals the joint from him and takes a slow drag, Ezra using the opportunity to back me up to the wall. His hands edge underneath my shirt as he presses up against me, grinding his body into mine like he did the very first time we met.

He gives me a kiss that's every bit as loving as Nash's, but a hell of a lot filthier, his tongue slipping into my mouth and his hands roaming over my body. For a second, I forget that anyone else is here until Nash brushes up against my shoulder.

Turning my head out of Ezra's kiss, I watch Nash take another drag of the joint. He leans in close to my face and I



understand, opening my mouth to inhale the smoke from him. He finishes with a soft peck on my lips, then gives me a moment to exhale.

“That’s so fucking hot,” Ezra murmurs against my ear. He picks up my leg and wraps it around his hip, grinding into me right where I need it. Nash’s hand circles the back of my neck and I seek him out for another kiss, letting him suck my tongue into his mouth as Ezra captures my breast in his firm hold. The warmth of their bodies fills me with fire, their attention engulfing me in my own desire for more.

The power these men have over me is staggering.

I would let them do anything to me—strip me naked and violate me right here in the doorway. Line up and order me to my knees while they take turns fucking my mouth. Tie me up, hold me down, tease me with their hands, their fingers, their cocks. They could take me in any way they wanted, as many times as they wanted, and I would never say no. They possess me, completely, and I know I can trust them to give me what I need.

Voices from downstairs waft through the hallway, piercing my haze and snapping me back to the moment. Okay, I would let them do *almost* anything. I would let them do all of that, but it’s not for anyone’s eyes but ours. No public displays, no more videos.

The three of us appear to come to that conclusion at the same time. Ezra groans, his hand sliding from my breast to my waist as Nash releases my neck. I meet his gaze, lust still blazing in his eyes, and I know it’s the same in mine. Ezra stops grinding against me, dropping his head and letting out a heavy sigh.

“We’re going to have to save this for later, angel. You belong to us, and only us. Forget what I said about fucking downstairs. Only the demons get to watch this beautiful body get fucked. We’re not sharing you with anyone else.”

His words fill me with a sense of relief, but I'm not ready to let go of him yet. My leg is still wrapped around his hip, his hard cock pressed against me.

"Are you okay with that?" he asks. "I never want to disappoint you."

"I'm more than okay with that. I don't want to share you either."

"Good." He lowers my leg slowly and pulls away, adjusting himself in his pants. "You better go downstairs without us. Nash and I are gonna need a minute to recover."

I laugh as Nash passes the joint back to Ezra. They're complete opposites, those two—Nash with his refined neatness and attention to detail, Ezra with his unruly blue hair and devil-may-care attitude. But if that impromptu encounter we just had means anything, they make a great team, one that I look forward to exploring the many possibilities of.

"You guys wanted me to be thinking about you all night, didn't you? Getting me worked up like this," I joke as I head down the stairs, leaving them to deal with their raging hard-ons.

I wander around the house as it fills up with students, loving the way it comes alive with music and voices and a fuck of a lot of people making out in hallways and corners. The Lair is good for that, as if its entire purpose is to bring people together and help them forget about their troubles and problems for a while. And to get college students laid. It's a weird house—no one will argue with that.

The old wooden floors vibrate with the thumping bass of the music, the beat pounding in my chest, working through my body like it's a part of me. Jasmine, Holly, and Piper are dancing and I join them for a while, working up a sweat and enjoying the chaos of enthusiastic dancers before I head to the kitchen in search of water.

Instead, I find Maynard and Orion. I pause in the doorway, watching how they interact in the midst of all these people. Just like the first time I saw them, they're completely in their own world with each other, as if no one else is here. Well, not exactly like the first time I saw them. Everyone's pants are zipped and the only indecorous thing happening is a bit of tongue on tongue action, but it sparks that fire in me all the same.

Maynard's deep voice breaks through the noise when I try to duck out of the kitchen to leave them to it.

"Where do you think you're going, little angel?"

I turn to face the duo, who are now eyeing me like I'm a delicious meal.

"I came to get some water. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Orion reaches for my hand, pulling me closer. His grey eyes sparkle as he fits me between them, pressing me firmly against Maynard as he leans down for a kiss.

My head drops back on Maynard's chest as Orion feasts on me. His tongue strokes mine—his tongue that was just in Maynard's mouth, making me long to taste both of them together. Is that kind of kiss possible? Maynard's hands grip Orion's hips and I can feel his hardness at my back and Orion's at my front. Anything is possible with these two.

"Dominic was looking for you," Maynard rumbles in my ear, before running his tongue over my neck and sucking on my skin. He's definitely marking me.

"You're salty," he says when he finally releases me. "You're not drinking enough water. Do I need to remind you of the rules?"

"That's what I came in here for. Orion distracted me." I know better than to blame Maynard, even if it was half his fault.

“Then I’ll see that he’s punished fairly for that. Here.” Maynard reaches over to the fridge and hands me a bottle of water. “You may not leave until it’s empty.” He pulls me back between them and they resume devouring my sensitive skin while I drink my water.

When I’m done, I have no intention of leaving this wonderful cocoon of hard bodies and filthy mouths, but Maynard insists that I go find Dominic.

“You’re all a bunch of goddamn teases today. Is this what I signed up for?” I ask, as soon as I’m sure I’m out of Maynard’s reach. But he doesn’t even need to grab me or swat me to change my attitude—one look from those dark eyes does it.

“Yes, sir. I’ll go find Dominic.”

Orion laughs as I head through the family room, making no attempt to hide the smile that’s splitting my face. I don’t even care if all they do is tease me today. I’m enjoying every second of it.

Dominic isn’t in the family room, or the dining room-turned-dance club. He’s not in the billiard room or the foyer or on the porch. I stop in the living room doorway, remembering the first time I came here—Maynard and Orion shocking me, Ezra confusing me for another girl, and the pain of learning exactly how much Dominic hated me.

As if I’ve somehow summoned him with my thoughts, he appears in front of me, much like he did that night. My heart pounds at the sight of him, at that flicker in his ice-blue eyes, but I’m not scared anymore. I know this beast now, and how much there is to love in his intensity, in his darkness.

Dominic runs his fingertips over my earlobe and the angel wing earring, then gently wraps his fingers around my throat. He pauses to gauge my response and I hold my breath as he waits for permission. I know he’s not going to hurt me like this, ever again. With my demons protecting me, no one will.

So much has changed since I first came here. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, or the door I was opening up. Despite everything that happened, I would do it again a million times, as long as I could always end up here.

I urge him to continue with a nod, taking back what my father tried so hard to keep from me—my control, my choice, my freedom. It's all mine now, and I will entrust it to Dominic because he's *earned* that privilege. His grip on my throat tightens, enough to let me know that he's got me, and that he's never going to let go.

My back hits the wall as he steps closer. I'm getting pushed up against walls an awful lot today, but I can't say I mind a bit. Dominic's other hand snakes through my hair, pulling my head back to whisper in my ear.

*"Seraphina. Fucking. Sayre."* His voice isn't laced with malice this time. It's amused and dripping with desire. He pushes his hips into me, letting me feel his arousal. I want him to kiss me so badly my knees buckle, and I whimper as he nips at my neck. He presses his teeth into my already marked skin and kisses my stinging flesh.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I trace the lines of his muscles with my fingertips. The closer I am to him, the more I want to touch him.

"Do you have any idea what you've done to me?" he asks. "What you've done to all of us?" He groans as he buries his face in my neck, the vibrations resonating through my skin and into my bones.

"I just showed up on your doorstep. You did the rest."

He pulls back and looks at me, his thumb tracing over the soft skin beneath my ear. "You let us use you how we wanted, how we needed. We went way too far and not only did you take everything we gave you, but you came back to us again and again and asked for more. I've never met anyone like you,

angel. You were created for us. You were made to be one of us.”

His fingers flex against my pulse, the sound of the blood in my head whooshing in my ears as his words cut off everything but me and my demons. Nothing else matters anymore. I have everything I’ve ever needed.



## CHAPTER 38

You reap what you sow

### SERAPHINA

Thanks to the extra water and ibuprofen Maynard gave me before bed, I wake up feeling perfectly fine. The few stragglers left in the house haven't fared so well, but I'm only half sympathetic as I open the heavy drapes in the living room to let light pour in over the sleeping partygoers. It reeks of smoke and beer in here and I can't wait to open some windows to air the place out.

The parties are fun, but I also love the time I get to spend here when it's quiet. I've explored the house from top to bottom and it's as fascinating as it is creepy. Knowing the history of the Lair makes it slightly less unsettling, but still, demon faces are carved everywhere. Though, I might actually miss some of my favorites when we leave next year.

"Good morning, Morgenstern!" Dominic shouts, making me jump in surprise. He comes up behind me with a cup of coffee in one hand and wraps the other around my waist. "Look at our little babies," he jokes, eyeing the groggy students sprawled out across the room. "Just think, angel. In a few years, one of these delinquents may be your friendly local librarian. Or your gynecologist." He glowers at a frat boy slumped in the armchair and I laugh.

"Nash is almost done in the family room. He'll come bounce these fuckers out in a few minutes. And this is for you," he adds, handing me the cup of coffee. "Don't let any of these assholes steal it."



“Ooh, thank you,” I say, taking a sip. “You’re the best boyfriend ever. Don’t tell the others.”

“You say that now, but Maynard’s in the kitchen making breakfast for you. But, I’ll enjoy my reign while I can.” He kisses my head and turns to leave, stopping in the doorway. “Orion wants to do family movie night tonight. You in?”

“Just us?”

“Fuck yeah. Just the six of us.”

“Yes, please.”

He leaves and I get to work, opening windows and collecting empty cups and bottles. Nash comes in and clears out the people for me and we work together to get the rest of the room in order. He’s very distracting, however, the way his fitted t-shirt hugs the taut muscles of his swimmer’s body as he sweeps the floor. Is this domestic bliss? I think so.

Orion startles me out of my lust-filled haze when he pops his head in to let us know that breakfast is ready. I have to stop to marvel at him, too, how he’s such a beautiful contrast between a light heart and dark thoughts.

I still can’t believe that these guys are mine, and not just because they agreed to help me with a life-ruining sex tape, but mine because they *want* to be.

---

In the evening, we gather in the family room for movie night. While we wait for the others to get settled, Dominic hauls me onto his lap, snaking his arms around me. He pulls my back tight to his solid chest and I can feel his hard cock through his jeans. Relaxing and watching a movie is the plan, but with temptation like this, maybe I’d rather do something else.

“What’re we watching?” Ezra asks, wandering in from the kitchen with Nash.

“Do you care? You’ll watch anything.” Orion is setting up his laptop, getting it connected to the TV.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m never going to get you alone again.” Dominic kisses the heated skin of my neck and shoulder as Ezra and Nash get comfortable next to us on the couch.

“Good thing we know how to share,” Maynard says, shooting me a look with those dark eyes of his. He’s sitting on the floor with his back against the chair, watching intently as Dominic skims his fingers down my arm. I shiver under Dominic’s touch combined with Maynard’s attention. The thought of my two most demanding, dominant demons working together sends a flash of electricity up my spine.

“You guys ready for this?” Orion says, getting comfortable between Maynard’s legs. “What am I saying? No one is ready for this.” He presses play and the movie starts.

I don’t know what any of us were expecting, but I should have known better. I recognize it instantly: the room upstairs, my room, before it was mine. The video shows me sitting on the bed, the day Orion tested the cameras and audio, when Dominic was asking me questions. It’s not a movie at all—it’s the video we made.

*“Hi, little angel.”*

*“Hi, Dominic.”*

*“How are you feeling? Be honest.”*

*“Nervous. My heart is beating really fast.”*

*“You have nothing to be nervous about. We’re all here with you. We’ve got you, Seraphina.”*

*“You’re not going to try to talk me out of it, then?”*

*“Do you want me to? You’ve come a long way for this, but you know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Do you still want to go through with it?”*

*“I do.”*

*“What are you thinking about right now?”*

*“That I don’t regret what I’ve done. What we’ve done. That even if this fails and my life becomes a huge mess, I can say that at least I tried to take control of it and change things. And I had a lot of fun doing it.”*

*“So no regrets at all? Nothing you would have done differently? Or wish we had done differently?”*

*“I wouldn’t change a thing.”*

Tears well in my eyes. It feels like such a long time ago, and so much has happened since then. Back then, it was just an idea. A plan. A project. Now, though. It’s my life. I don’t know if I ever actually expected it to work, but I knew I had to do something. What I didn’t understand at the time was how much it would change me, or how much *they* would change me.

The video cuts to the next scene and I squirm in Dominic’s lap, remembering the experience of what we did that day. I’m getting turned on watching it all over again. Are they, too? I look over and see that Maynard has his hand in Orion’s lap, groping him through his pants. Orion hasn’t looked away from the video, still watching as Dominic approaches me on the screen.

I glance at Ezra, who picks up my legs and swings them over his lap, drawing Dominic’s attention. At first I think he’s going to scowl at Ezra and move my legs back, but instead, he helps me adjust so I’m sitting comfortably sideways. When Ezra pulls off my socks and starts rubbing my feet, I don’t even try to stop the moan that comes out of me. Suddenly, I’m very aware that I have the attention of every man in the room.

I look at each of them and feel the overwhelming need to show them how much I love them and what they mean to me.

Dominic leans over and presses his mouth to mine, hotter and more insistent than usual. He kisses like he wants to consume me, like I'm the only thing that's keeping him alive. When he pulls away, I look to the others and see that they're still watching me.

"Fuck, Seraphina. What do you want? Who do you need?" Dominic asks, his hands trailing over my hips as he looks at his friends. He's offering me up to whomever I want, but I have one small problem with that.

"Can I have all of you?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. Ezra's hands pause on my feet as Dominic's eyes search my face.

"You do have all of us. And you can have any of us whenever you want. Are you asking for us to have all of you?"

I've had all of them in one day, each of them taking a turn with me the morning they claimed me over the desk in the office. I've had Orion and Maynard in me at the same time, here in this very room, on this couch. I had several variations of them working together when we shot the video. But they've never *all* had me, all five of them at the same time.

I have... three holes and two hands. It could totally work, if they can play nice and figure out where all their legs go. I let out a shuddering breath as Dominic's hand slips underneath my skirt to skim lightly, torturously, up my thigh.

I like that idea. I like it *a lot*.

"I'm yours. Do whatever you want with me. Take me, all of you. Please," I say, already wet at the thought. As they look at each other silently, my heart races. I know they can feel it, they can see it painted all over me—I'm as desperate for them as they are for me.

A smile plays at Dominic's lips. "Oh, that's a nice word, isn't it? *Please*. Are you begging us, angel? Are you begging all of us to fuck you? To use you? To fill every hole in this perfect body at the same time?" He caresses his fingertips up my leg until he's brushing against my panties.

I nod.

"Say it again. It makes my cock so fucking hard."

"Please. Please fuck me. I need you."

"Are you going to follow all of my instructions?"

I whimper as he slides his fingers underneath my panties and through my arousal.

"I'll do anything you tell me to."

He lets out a low chuckle. "I know you will." He looks to the others. "We turned her into such a hungry little cock slut, didn't we?"

"Very eager."

"Well behaved."

"So perfect for us."

The room is electrified, as if there's magic coursing through the air, against my skin, into my lungs.

*If you give them your heart...*

"She has too many clothes on," Maynard says. "Stand up, angel. Let's fix that." He helps me up from Dominic's lap and positions me in the middle of the room.

"How do you show us you're ready to play?" he asks.

I know what he wants me to do. How much of my clothing I remove will tell him how much I need to be used, but I've never done this in front of the others. Are they aware of Maynard's rules for me and Orion?

Grasping the hem of my shirt, I lift it off slowly, taking care to fold it, but not very neatly, before placing it on the end table. Next, I lower my skirt over my hips, only slightly distracted when Ezra mutters behind me.

“I want to eat that ass like a fucking apple.”

I look up at Maynard and focus on the sternness of his face, determined to not let the others distract me from my task. I drop my skirt on top of my shirt, not bothering to fold it at all, then reach behind me to unclasp my bra. I pull it off and set it on top of the pile and remove my panties as well. I’m here to play. I want it all.

When I return to the center of the room, now completely bare and exposed, Maynard wraps his strong arm around my waist and pulls me to him. I feel the cold of his belt buckle against my belly and the smooth fabric of his shirt at my fingertips. I resist the urge to bury myself in his warmth. He’s in charge here, not me.

He slides his other hand up my neck and through my hair, clenching it tightly in his fist, watching my face closely as if he can see exactly who I’ve become.

“You blush so beautifully,” he says, his deep voice like the growl of an animal. “Do you think when Ezra’s done with your ass he’ll lick that pink right off your skin?” He releases me from his hold and takes a step back. It’s then that I notice the others have stood and are surrounding me, as if they’re ready to attack.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps, either from the air or the anticipation of the five dark demons about to ravage my naked body. The predators have found their prey and they’re coming out to play. They have my heart. And now...

*I want them to tear me apart.*

## EPILOGUE: 2 YEARS LATER

The truth will set you free

### SERAPHINA

If you asked me two years ago where I thought I'd be right now, I never would have dreamed it would be here. Of course, I wanted to believe, but didn't dare.

That's right. We're still together.

After graduation last spring, we moved out of the Lair on party row, making room for the next class of Morgenstern demons. Maynard, whose family apparently has more money than me *and* God, bought a greystone in Chicago for us all to live in. We each have our own space, which is important for getting along as well as we do, but even so, I rarely sleep in my own bed. There's always a warm body and a devilish grin waiting around every corner.

I'm putting my marketing degree to use, but for clients whose talent and words I truly believe in—Orion, the artist, and Ezra, the novelist. The two keep me in awe of their creativity and heart, and I take every opportunity to show them mine.

One of the reasons we moved to the city was so Dominic could work in the loop at Fieldworth Financial. While he loves his job, I did initially have to show him the benefit of dressing

up in a suit every day—which is me, on my knees, as soon as he walks in that door after work. I can't help it. The man really does clean up nice.

Maynard is following in his father's footsteps and is working toward his law degree. Although his schedule keeps him very busy, he always makes sure that Orion and I are behaving properly, eating well, and spending plenty of time attending to his needs. He encourages us to take care of each other, too, while he watches, of course.

And Nash, my silent sentinel—after seeing how much therapy was helping me, Dominic, and Ezra, he decided to try it as well, to work through his anxiety and develop healthier coping mechanisms. While he's naturally a quiet soul, he now teaches swimming classes at the park district and coaches for the nearby high school. I couldn't be more proud, though I do still love spending wordless evenings in his room, where we communicate in so many other ways.

I'm still best friends with my college roommates. Jasmine and Holly live on the north side and teach at the same elementary school. Piper moved to New York to pursue her own career as an artist, so we're all going to fly out this summer for her first gallery opening.

As for Glory Valley, it continues on with Pastor Peck and Noah at the helm. The church doesn't know that Dad's death was caused by a cocaine overdose, or that he nearly killed his own daughter. As far as the public is concerned, he died of an unfortunate heart attack, and I have no desire to tell them otherwise. I'm determined to move forward, remembering that we all have our own cross to bear—even people like Dad.

Now, I'm free to live how I choose, surrounded by my demons who love me without limits. Every day is a new adventure, and every kiss the breath of life.

I may have succumbed to their darkness, but it's where I found my light.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Volt

Surely you have more exciting things to read than where this author went to college, where she lives, and how many kids she's raising in the suburbs, but for those of you who really want to know: She's an art school dropout, lives in the American Midwest, and has more children than she would've had if she'd been sensible about the whole thing, but has zero regrets.

For information on upcoming and new releases, visit her website or join her mailing list at [sylviavolt.com](http://sylviavolt.com).

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# SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE

## Revelations

### SERAPHINA

“Why’d you make her come again? She’s useless now.” Ezra’s words filter into my ear, the sound hollow and far away, like we’re in a tunnel.

“Not useless at all.” *Dominic.*

“Angel, open your eyes.” Someone tilts my chin up and I crack my eyelids open to see Nash’s pale blue gaze on mine.

Orion’s voice drifts from somewhere behind me. “Are you done with us, pretty girl? Because we’re not done with you.”

Everything feels warm and fuzzy, and I just want to curl up and sleep.

“Should we stop, or keep going? We need to hear you say the words.” *Maynard.*

“Keep going. Don’t you dare stop,” I mumble, closing my eyes as I float through clouds of bliss toward unconsciousness.

“You heard her, demons. Our little angel wants to be fucked to hell and back.”

THE END

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