



WULVEN KINGS MC SERIES

INSIDIOUS
HEART

BOOK FOUR

A.K. GRAVES

INSIDIOUS HEART

WULVEN KINGS MC BOOK FOUR

A. K. GRAVES



Copyright © 2022 by A. K. Graves

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a piece of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment.

This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return it to the seller and purchase your own individual copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

Edited by Rochelle J. Simas of Fluffy Fox Editing

Cover and Design by Stella Nova of Stellar Graphics

Published by A. K. Graves, 2022

To Alaina and Ash, to all the weirdos and anyone who has ever wished for a morally grey vigilante who could take justice into his own hands and make the monsters that never get caught face it head on—I give you, Victor Crow.

He might be a little twisted, and might blur the lines of good and evil until there's nothing left, but this charming bastard is the result of hundreds of hours of reading, watching, and listening to horrible stories that never get a HEA. The Harvester of Bones was born because sometimes, we need a villain to play the hero. And if you keep reading, weirdos, I hope you understand my love for this man and everything he stands for, even if he isn't real and takes things well beyond the extreme. Maybe just don't keep it as weird as I did...

CONTENTS

[Content Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by A. K. Graves](#)

[About the Author](#)



CONTENT WARNING

The Wulven Kings MC is a dark contemporary romance series about a non-traditional motorcycle club. This series contains dark themes including, but not limited to child abuse, domestic violence, extreme violence and murder, blood play and self harm within multiple character's past and present. If any of these themes, or any other dark themes bother you, then these books may not be for you. To see a full list of potential trigger warnings, please visit <https://www.akgraveswrites.com/wkmc-triggers> or you can scan the QR code on the next page.



As with all of my books, you can rest assured knowing that each couple will have their HEA, but the journey to get there may be a little harder than expected, and I hope you love the WKMC as much as I do.



WULVEN KINGS MC SERIES

**INSIDIOUS
HEART
BOOK FOUR**

A.K. GRAVES



PROLOGUE

VICTOR

17 years ago

“LIKE THIS, VICTOR?”

I smile a little as Toby presses his pencil harder against the piece of paper, dragging the dull lead toward the bottom line before lifting it to make another mark across the top.

I watch him move next to the *T*, writing an uneven *o* on the blue line. “Just like that.”

The eleven-year-old boy smiles wide as he finishes spelling his name, a sense of accomplishment and pride shining in his dark blue eyes as he looks up at me. A look I only recently came to understand.

Before I came to St. Pat’s Home for Wayward Boys, I had no idea what any emotion outside of anger or fear looked like.

I’d seen anger on my mother’s face, heard it in her voice, felt it every time she took my father’s belt to my backside. I saw it in him too; anger—so much rage it was blinding. Whenever he’d use his fists to *teach us a lesson*—one we never forgot but still had to learn on a daily basis, that’s when he showed us who he really was. Anger is something I’m all too familiar with, and it always followed a level of fear that no one should ever experience; fear that should never be caused by the two people who created you from an act they had complete control over.

And when that fear turned into pure, unfiltered terror, *that’s* when the anger I saw every single day from the time I was old enough to understand it became my own.

I became rage incarnate that day and I've never looked back since.

“Shoot,” Toby whispers at my side, my gaze shifting from his profile to the lined paper where he erases quickly. “I messed up the *r*.”

“That’s ok. That’s why they make erasers. Try it again.”

My little brother nods as he looks at the line two spaces above where he’s writing, studying his full name spelled out in my best attempt at making it clear enough for him to copy. And as I watch Toby struggle with such a simple task, watch him get frustrated over the difficulty he’s having with the lowercase letter in our last name, anger flares to life inside of me once again.

It shouldn't be like this.

Toby is eleven, he’s *eleven* goddamn years old, and he shouldn’t have any trouble with reading or writing at this age.

I didn’t.

I had no trouble at all when I was in fifth grade.

But it’s not fair to compare the two of us, not even a little, since what happened to my brother was something he didn’t ask for.

Neither of us asked for any of the treatment we received, and I never understood why it was only ever *ours*.

For some reason, one that is still unknown to me, our father never laid one finger on our mother. They’d fight, sure. Have screaming matches at all hours of the day and night that prevented us from sleeping and kept us walking on eggshells when we were awake, but he never so much as tapped our mom on the shoulder let alone beat her the way he did us.

And maybe that’s why.

Maybe our dad didn’t hit our mom because he was too busy beating the shit out of us.

Maybe Ezra Crow never hit his precious Judith because she gave him two sons he could abuse instead. Two sons she

beat just as ruthlessly, just as relentlessly, as he did.

But that's only half of why my brother is still learning to read and write when he should be getting ready to go into the sixth grade.

Our parents didn't send me to school until I was old enough to understand that I had to keep my mouth shut about what happened at home. I didn't get to go to school until I knew how to hide the bruises and welts; until I could lie well enough that no one ever asked about the truth. So at the ripe old age of six, I perfected the ability just so I could get out of that hell-hole for a few hours a day.

If I'd have known that leaving would lead to Judith Crow all but bashing my then two-year-old brother's head in, I never would have done it.

My eyes lift from Toby's hand to his profile and I can't help but smile a little wider.

He might have lived enough life for someone three times his age, but there's such a strong level of innocence—or even ignorance—that my brother has maintained, and part of me envies it while the rest of me admires it. Especially since Toby is so damn cute still, with his head full of chocolate brown curls streaked in blonde throughout the messy mop, his bed head still in full swing. And with his dark brows furrowed, his button nose scrunched in concentration, his cherub cheeks tinted pink with his frustration. Toby's tongue is between his teeth as he tries his hardest to scrawl his name on the paper in front of him and I can't help but smile because he really is such a cute kid.

Aside from our eyes and the four year age gap, we look nearly identical.

Where his eyes are a deep blue and full of sweet innocence, mine are almost indigo, a strange and unusual—an *unnatural*—color that has everyone convinced that the devil is living inside me.

After what I did, he just might be.

“Victor, Toby,” Sister Sylvia says as the old bat gimps over to our table. “Good day to you, boys.”

My smile falls immediately as my gaze swings toward the *right hand of God*, the angel of no mercy, the demon in nun’s habit. I scowl as she stops next to Toby, the bitch’s stare fixed on my little brother who has abandoned his hard work altogether in favor of bowing his head and cowering next to me.

“Sister,” I grit through clenched teeth as she looks over his work. “What can we do for you today?”

She ignores me and reaches out, sliding the paper toward her to get a better look at the writing on the page. “This is a serious improvement, Toby. I can clearly read your name this time.”

My brother chances a look at the nun and my heart breaks over the way he *still* seeks validation from anyone with tits and a twat, no matter how dusty and gross they may be.

He can’t help it though, not really.

The only thing Toby ever wanted was for our mother to love him, even after she caused a traumatic brain injury to his still developing brain, and it was like that near-fatal incident turned it into an obsession.

Always doing things to try to please her.

Toby did everything our mother demanded of him. He turned into her whipping boy in more ways than one, and instead of understanding that it was never going to change, that he was never going to get her approval or love, it almost seemed to make him try harder. Then he’d lose his temper and start trashing the house when it didn’t happen; something that almost felt like a form of self-punishment because of what our parents would do to him for it.

And since getting dumped here at St. Pat’s, Sister Sylvia had become the mother figure Toby is still yearning for. Regardless of how dangerous that can be.

“Th-thank you, Sister,” my brother whispers.

She nods. “The Monsignor will be so proud of you.”

Ice floods my veins as she says those words, my spine stiffening and hackles raising.

“The M-Monsignor?” Toby looks up at her with a confused expression. “The M-Monsignor is g-going to see my wr-writing?”

“I think it’s finally time we show him all of the hard work you’ve been doing.” Sister Sylvia forces a smile, her dry and cracked lips twisting in a way that makes her look crazier than they say I am. “Would you like that, Toby?”

He begins to nod but I shake my head and get to my feet. “Not today, Sister.”

Her eyes snap to mine and narrow. “Excuse me?”

“I said, not today. I’m sure you meant to come for me instead. Meant that I could show the Monsignor Toby’s work when I go to his office for our daily confession.”

A genuine smile touches the evil bitch’s mouth but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Your *confession* is at the normal time, Victor. Right after lunch like always, but Monsignor Wicker, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, thought it was time to start meeting with Toby in the same—“

“No!” I bark out. “No, that was not the deal. Monsignor promised me! He promised—”

“Hush, *my child*,” the nun hisses as she quickly glances around the common room. Sister Sylvia forces another smile and says a few “everything is fine here, go back to your activities” to the other boys now looking at us before narrowing her cold, dead eyes on me once again. “The Monsignor feels it is time to progress with Toby’s spiritual walk. It’s time for him to seek forgiveness for what the two of you did and—”

“Bullshit!” I kick my chair out of the way and round the table, putting myself between this rotten bitch and my little brother. “The Monsignor *promised* that as long as I came to him daily, as long as I kept on my own *spiritual journey*

toward atonement for my sins, he'd leave Toby alone because he is innocent.”

“Even the innocent can ask for absolution, Victor.” Sister Sylvia takes a step back as my hands ball into fists, a sliver of fear flickering in her eyes. “Something you should be all too familiar with since *the devil* made you do what you did to your poor, sweet father.”

Before I can lunge, before I can get close enough to this horrible bitch, two orderlies are on me, wrenching my arms behind my back to the point of pain while they start leading me out of the room.

“Mr. Crow needs some time in the *reflection room*,” Sister Sylvia says as she motions for Toby to stand. “Give him a robe as well. I want him to be as comfortable as possible while he thinks about his actions and waits for confession.”

“Bitch!” I spit as the sorry excuses for nurse’s aides drag me kicking and screaming away from my brother. My brother who’s staring at me with wide, *fearful*, blue eyes swimming in tears. “You fucking bitch! I’ll kill you. I’ll kill all of you! You hear me, *Sister*? You or that bastard Monsignor touch one hair on my brother’s head and you are fucking *dead!*”

MORE HOURS THAN I COULD KEEP TRACK OF AND SEVERAL beatings later, the same two orderlies are practically carrying me down the hall to Monsignor Wicker’s office.

One knocks and waits for a reply while the other takes on the brunt of my weight, my head still fuzzy and struggling to adjust to light and sounds after spending the day in solitary confinement.

I should be used to it by now, used to the endless days spent in that tiny room deprived of light and sound, forced to piss in a bucket in the corner after being given nothing at all to quiet the empty screeching in my stomach. I should be used to the torture, the so-called *professionals* inflict on me after three years of living here, but I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to it.

The minute I do, the second I accept any of it as the way things are meant to be, I'm as good as dead.

Instead, while I'm in the *reflection room* or in this office for *confession*, I check out.

I allow my mind to detach and go to a better place; one where Toby and I are far away and living a life we've never had. A small house deep in the woods, far away from everyone and everything that could ever try to hurt us. I imagine the life I so desperately want to give my brother, filled with all the things neither of us have ever had, and even though it helps get through whatever is happening to me at the time, I'll never get used to the abrupt way our reality comes crashing down on me when it's over.

"You may enter," the Monsignor calls out moments before the orderly opens the door and shoves me inside.

I stumble into the dimly lit room, unable to balance myself since the *robe* I'm wearing has my arms bound at my sides, my eyes squinting against the candlelight and abundance of religious relics scattering the walls.

It's a relatively empty space, not much other than two chairs on this side of the small wooden desk Wicker is now standing behind, and a medium-size cabinet to his right. But the walls are covered with paintings of Jesus Christ and his mortal mother, the saints and the Pope. There's even a big-ass crucifix hanging between two stained glass windows behind Wicker, and the way the moon shines through makes him look like the evil bastard he is.

"Oh, Victor." The Monsignor sighs as he looks me over. "What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

I clench my jaw as I force myself to stand straight, regardless of all the places where it hurts.

Wicker shakes his head as he tsks. "I see you've taken several steps back after the progress we made during your last confession."

Progress, my ass.

But instead of arguing, I calmly ask, “When can I see Toby?”

The Monsignor regards me for a minute, his eyes shrewd behind his glasses. Then he nods as he rounds the desk and stands a foot or two in front of me. “I suppose you’re rather eager to see your brother after twenty-four hours in reflection. That must be the longest you’ve been separated in almost a week now.”

Jesus.

I knew I was in solitary longer than I thought I’d be, but I didn’t realize it was that long.

“I’ll allow it, but only because I truly believe we’re finally getting somewhere with your spiritual journey.” Wicker nods to the orderlies, and the two leave quickly. “I was concerned when Sister Sylvia came to me, worried over your regression, but the fact that you were able to fight the demon’s hold and did not put hands on the lovely woman this time has me hopeful that exorcism is a path we won’t have to take.”

My jaw tightens as the Monsignor begins to slowly circle around me, his gaze burning every inch it rakes over. It makes me sick, the way he looks at me, the way this sick bastard looks at all the boys my age.

But enduring it, enduring *him*, kept Toby safe.

It kept all of them safe, really, and I’d put up with this disgusting fuck and his *methods* for another three years so long as it meant my brother and all of the other boys would avoid being subjected to them.

Wicker comes to stand in front of me again just as the office door opens and closes, and when it does, the look this man gives me sends chills down my spine.

“It seems that your poor brother was full of demons.” There’s a *thud* behind me, then the sound of the office door again. “Demons that had the sweet boy’s soul riddled with darkness and depravity.”

I turn slowly, my heart hammering in my chest, the sound of my blood rushing in my ears so loud it almost drowns out

the cry of agony that rips from my throat as I drop to my knees.

There on the floor, in a heap and still in his pajamas, lies Toby.

Motionless and quiet, his little body eerily still and *bloody* from the waist down.

I scoot on my knees as quickly as possible, falling forward when I finally reach my brother. I use my shoulder to roll him onto his back, and my eyes well and my anger begins to rise.

His dark blue eyes are wide and filmy, bloodshot and lifeless. The skin around his lips is tinted blue, his cherub cheeks stained with tears, a spot of dry blood underneath his button nose. And when my eyes move over his face, when they trace every horrible detail before landing on the clear bruises around Toby's throat, that anger turns into something else entirely.

Murderous rage.

"I failed with your brother, Victor." The Monsignor grabs my elbow firmly and pulls me to my feet. "I should have started seeing him sooner; should have turned to more extreme methods when I had the chance." He guides me to his desk again, positioning me with my back to the front of it while my eyes stay locked on Toby. "Unfortunately, those demons had their claws in him so deeply that Tobias didn't stand a chance, but I truly believe I can help you, Victor."

I clench my teeth so hard that my jaw throbs and my teeth ache as Wicker's hands move to the top of my pajama pants. I don't make a sound, don't make a move, because I know what's coming.

I know exactly what's going to happen and part of me welcomes it.

The pain, the agony. I welcome it all as I step out of the flannel and let this sick fuck widen my legs, kicking them apart before he walks to the cabinet.

I hear the doors open, can practically feel Wicker smile as he chooses a cane, and even when he comes back over to me

and tries to block my view, my eyes never leave Toby.

This is for you.

“I know in my heart I can help you, that God will use me as a vessel and allow me to help rid your soul of the demon that holds it hostage.” Wicker’s hand comes up to my cheek and gently brushes away the lone tear that falls, and I don’t have to look to know he’s licking it from his thumb. “I will rehabilitate you in the name of our Holy Father, Victor, and only then will you be free.”

The only warning I get before the cane cracks against the inside of my left thigh is the distance he puts between us in order to do it. The Monsignor hits me again and again over the welts that had barely begun to heal from before, and when he gets the desired response, when my body reacts to the pain in the way I wish it wouldn’t—the way the *demon* forces me to—I see a ghost of a smile play across the bastard’s face.

“I will expel the one that blackens your soul.” Wicker’s hand brushes against the front of my underwear before he hooks his grubby fingers into the top of them and pushes them to the floor. He sets the cane on the desk as he turns me to face it, bending me over the cold wood with one hand as the other tugs on the sleeves of my modified straight jacket—the *robe*—I’m wearing. “This won’t do, Victor. Not at all. I need you to be submissive to God’s will in order for my methods to work.”

I turn my eyes away from the crucifix as the Monsignor begins unstrapping me, my stare landing on the cane as he pushes my arms toward the back of the desk. And as he widens my legs again, as I hear the rustling of fabric and the sound of his zipper, I know without doubt what I need to do.

This is for you.

The second I feel his hand on my bare ass, I move.

I use my adrenaline, my anger and hate, I use everything coursing through my body and pour it into a blind rage as I reach out and grab the cane faster than the Monsignor can react. I spin on him just as quickly, catching the disgusting

pervert off guard milliseconds before I swing the bamboo stick at his head.

“You son of a bitch,” I growl as he stumbles back. “You sick fucking bastard!” I swing again and can’t help the ripple of satisfaction that wracks my body as blood sprays from his temple. “You disgusting”—*crack*—”despicable”—*crack*—”sadistic fucking monster!”

I hit Monsignor Wicker over and over, bringing the cane down on his head until it’s an unrecognizable mess on the floor. Even then I have to force myself to stop; have to channel all of my energy into dropping the bamboo stick and backing away toward the desk.

With my chest heaving, blood dripping from my face and hands, I lean against it and try to catch my breath.

Fuck.

Jesus, fuck, I did it.

After years of plotting, of envisioning the many ways I wanted to end this bastard’s life, I finally did it.

But I was too late.

My gaze flicks to Toby as I pull the straight jacket off and toss it on top of Wicker. “I’m sorry,” I whisper as tears spill from my eyes. “All I ever wanted was to protect you.”

That’s all I ever wanted.

My brother has been my entire world since the day he was born, the only good I ever had, and not only did I fail at protecting him from our parents, I failed at protecting Toby from the monster that walked among us here.

But that’s when a thought occurs to me.

A thought that has me smiling despite how fucked up it is.

I’m the monster now.

And that has me moving once again.

I quickly strip off the rest of my clothes, grab my pants and underwear and toss them at the Monsignor’s battered body

before throwing the cane on top of him. I rush to the cabinet and take out the extra set of clothes he keeps there, pulling on the t-shirt and sweats as fast as I can before dropping to crouch behind the desk.

Within seconds, I have the files on Toby and I in hand, taking what I want from mine and adding them to his before folding it up and tucking it in the back of my pants. I open the second drawer and pull out Wicker's *holy liquid*—the wine he used to loosen me up—two bottles since the asshole just refilled his stash. I uncork both quickly then start pouring the wine all over the Monsignor, all over his busted head and body, before I use what's left to drench as much of his office as I can.

I move back to the cabinet and grab a book of matches used to light his stupid fucking candles, his letter opener, then tiptoe toward the door.

There's no sound coming from the other side, no noise at all, and I can only hope that means the two dumbasses that brought me here are doing their rounds in the rest of the building while waiting for Wicker to call them back to get me. And since the only other rooms in this part of the facility are the private rooms of this sick fuck and the nuns, another idea starts to form.

I grab the keys from Wicker's hip then stand over the bastard, watching as I strike a match and drop it on his liquor-soaked body. The flames shoot toward the ceiling before they quickly start to spread, so I turn, scoop my brother into my arms, then duck into the hall.

Thank fuck, it's clear.

My bare feet move as fast as they can toward Sister Sylvia's room and I stop briefly to listen, hoisting Toby over my shoulder to free up one hand, and when I don't hear anything but the bitch snoring, I lock her door, strike a match, then tuck it into the book before shoving it under the ancient wood.

This is for you, Toby.

I keep saying it over and over as I start to run, carrying the body of my brother who never really had a chance, who I could never protect or care for the way I should have, through St. Pat's toward the underground tunnel.

It plays on a loop in my head as I race toward my escape, running toward freedom and a life I will dedicate to the memory of the sweet little cherub I couldn't save.

I run toward my fate, toward the true nature everyone has always claimed to be mine, toward the *demon* that does live inside me.

I run toward the monster I've become, embracing it fully as I leave the ghost of who I once was to burn inside that hell on earth.

I am a ghost because Victor Crow is dead.



CHAPTER ONE

STEVIE

“MY BABY! WHERE IS MY BABY?!”

I stop about halfway down the hall as *that* frantic question meets my ears, and I hold my breath.

A few seconds go by, agonizing seconds that tick by so slowly I can physically feel them drag on while I wait.

“My baby! I can’t find my baby!”

Glancing behind me, I search for any signs of life, any sign that someone else is hearing this broken plea, and will come out any minute ready to help this poor woman, but every door remains shut. I turn back to the hall in front of me, looking for the same but see nothing other than the flickering exit sign over the door a few feet ahead. The door I was supposed to walk through ten minutes ago.

A few beats of silence pass and just as I feel like maybe the crisis has too, an ear-piercing sob has me spinning on my heel.

“Oh my god, my baby is *gone!*”

“Mrs. Sanderson?” I whisper as I push open the door.
“Mrs. Sanderson? Margie?”

She comes rushing toward me before I’m even in the room. “Oh thank god! Stevie, my baby! My baby is missing!”

With a soft smile, I take her trembling hands in mine and sigh. “I’m sure she’s around here somewhere, Mrs. Sanderson. Jolene wouldn’t wander off like that.”

“Because someone took her!” Her glassy eyes search mine. “She was just here. I put her to bed, went to change, and when I came back she was gone!”

“Why don’t you sit for a spell and try to relax, and I’ll see if I can find Jolene, ok?” I nod slowly as I turn her toward the rocking chair in the corner, relieved when Mrs. Sanderson lets me.

“Would you?” She drops into the chair and starts wringing her hands. “Would you, please? I’ve searched everywhere and I can’t find her. If something happened to my baby...”

“I know. I’ll find her, ok?”

Margie just nods.

And with a sigh, I turn and begin my hunt.

Under the bed and in dresser drawers. I check the bathroom, under the sink, and in the shower, and when there’s still no sign of Jolene, I can feel myself start to get angry.

If she’s where I think she is...

Sure enough, I open the antique wardrobe, drop to my knees and lift the lid on the weathered toy box to find Jolene lying on top of the well-loved trinkets.

So frustrating.

With the utmost care, I scoop the baby up and cradle her to my chest, get to my feet, then make my way back to the corner of the room.

Margie’s eyes go wide as I stop in front of her, my hand gently patting the baby’s back. She opens her mouth to speak as she holds out her arms but I shake my head and whisper, “Fast asleep. We don’t want to wake her.”

Margie nods, the tears in her eyes glimmering in the pale moonlight streaming in through the window. She takes Jolene from me with a level of reverence and relief that makes her entire body sag and when Margie immediately hugs the baby tight and starts to rock, I can’t help but smile a little.

With her world finally right again, I watch Margie for a moment. I watch her rock and hum softly while her eyes drift closed, and see the tension drain from her body as she presses a kiss to her baby's head.

Such a good mother.

I move to let myself out, but just before I close the door behind me, I hear, "Thank you, Stevie. Thank you so much."

An exhausted sigh escapes my lips as I lean against the closed door, my energy totally depleted after such a minor thing. A regular occurrence, nothing out of the norm. It happens far more than it should, and despite the fact that this isn't my first time searching for Jolene and I know it won't be my last, it wears me out all the same.

"I thought you already left?"

I spin toward the voice behind me, my hand clutched over my heart as it begins to race. "Jesus, Linnie."

She gives me a half smile. "Sorry, thought you heard me walk up."

"No." I push off the door and start toward the exit.

"What happened?"

"Mrs. Sanderson thought Jolene was gone again."

Linnie glances over her shoulder with a cringe. "Sorry."

"Please, *please*, make sure you're telling the new girls *not* to put Margie's babydoll away at night."

"I did." She sighs. "I trained Sasha myself and made sure to hit on stuff like that."

"Yeah, well, you'll probably want to review it next time she's on shift because we were seconds from another meltdown. If I hadn't been walking by..."

Linnie nods. "I will. But upper management has been riding my ass over *talking* to any of the CNAs about anything. We're so short-staffed and the last girl quit because I politely reminded her *not* to use the emergency exit as her own personal smoking lounge."

“I remember. That’s when Mr. Riggs got out.”

We both giggle a little, even though it’s not really appropriate. But you have to look for the humor, the bright spots or happy moments, when you do the kind of work we do or else you’ll become so bitter and jaded you won’t be able to keep doing it. And when Mr. Riggs snuck out the deactivated emergency exit, stripped down to his briefs and started re-enacting King Lear on the front sidewalk outside the facility, it *was* pretty great.

Alzheimer’s or not, the man still has some serious talent and the crowd he drew absolutely agreed.

“Maybe I’ll just avoid assigning the new girls to Mrs. Sanderson,” Linnie says as she stops behind her cart with a huff, pushing her blonde bob behind her ears.

“I’m not sure that’s possible, though. Not when we’re this short-staffed.” Then I frown when I realize she isn’t logging out of her computer. “I thought you were getting out when I was?”

She smirks at me like *yeah, and we’re both still here*, then sighs again. “Chris called off. Some line about a *personal emergency*. No one else could cover it, so I’m staying.”

Not that I want my friend to pull an eighteen hour shift on the lockdown unit, but I won’t lie and say I’m not happy Chris isn’t coming in.

He’s one of four RNs that work this part of the facility and he typically only works overnight shifts, but even if it’s just the brief exchange at our half hour overlap, I can’t stand seeing him. Chris makes me uncomfortable in the worst kind of way, and most of our residents don’t like him either.

He isn’t necessarily bad at his job; Chris went to school, got the credentials and knows what he’s doing, but that doesn’t mean he’s a good guy.

I know first hand that he isn’t.

“I’m sorry you got stuck, Linnie.” I sigh as I reach under the nurse’s station and grab my bag. “They really need to try harder in their search for more people.”

She shrugs. "It is what it is. I don't have anyone to go home to except Harvey, and the overtime will go right into savings."

"But still... It's Friday night. I'm sure you would've rather gone out to a bar or maybe one of those speed dating things you're always talking about."

"No more speed dating until you come with me." Linnie winks and I have to force a smile.

She's always trying to get me to go out with her, trying to be a friend to me outside of the nursing home. I appreciate it so much, but there are about a million reasons I can't and she doesn't need to know any of them.

Thankfully, attempting to put myself through nursing school is enough of an excuse to stay in every night.

"I won't ever be able to give you a night off if I don't study. Can't get my degree without putting in the work." I throw my bag over my shoulder and start fishing for my keys. "Besides, those haven't really seemed to pan out for you, so I doubt I'll have any luck at speed dating either."

Linnie snorts. "One of these days I'm going to get you to let loose and go out on the town with me, Stevie. Just you wait. And when I do, you'll be fending off all the horny men with a stick."

I chuckle as I round the desk, but don't respond.

It's nice of her to say things like that but, once again, I have a million reasons why that won't happen either.

"Have a good night, Linnie. I'll see you Monday."

"Ugh, I forgot you were off this weekend." I stop just past the nurse's station with a frown as she shrugs. "Picked up a shift tomorrow too. Short-staffed, remember?"

All I do is nod, give my friend one more smile, then head toward the exit because I'm so far behind my schedule that I'm for sure going to be in trouble.

Something proven to be one hundred percent correct when I walk out of Rolling Meadows Nursing Home to see a big

body casually leaning up against my tiny Prius.

Great.

Cal, one of my father's closest friends and sergeant at arms of his club, doesn't turn, doesn't lift his head, doesn't even flinch as I close the door and slowly walk toward him.

If he's here—Cal, specifically—it's not a good sign.

My heart begins to race, my palms start to sweat, and I can physically feel my panic swirl in the pit of my stomach.

I'm almost forty minutes behind schedule at this point and I have no doubt that as soon as the clock changed to 11:46 p.m. and I didn't walk through the front door of our house, that's when Beauregard "*Beau the Butcher*" Williams dispatched his guard dog to come retrieve me. And as soon as I do walk through the front door of our house, I'll be given a *stern reminder* of the rules.

But I lift my chin and hold my head high, trying to convey the confidence I don't think I've ever had and continue my even pace through the back parking lot.

I don't need to feed into Cal's overinflated ego by showing fear. He lives for that shit. He feeds off of it like the rest of the men I'm surrounded by. And to be honest, I'm sure he already knows how terrified I am because this isn't the first time we've been in this situation. It does me no favors to act afraid, and even though I am, I know it'll only make things worse if I come across that way.

Unfortunately, that can't be helped when I'm about halfway to my car and something off to my right catches my eye.

My pulse careens to ridiculous levels when I turn and catch a glimpse of something shiny before I hear the faint crunching of gravel.

Rolling Meadows Nursing Home is in a rough part of town—hell, the town itself is rough all over—and the facility was built right on the outside of the industrial section, so there's nothing but flat land, vacant lots, and giant warehouses for

miles. Which definitely means that whatever is lurking in the shadows is not an animal or anything like it.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't see what the source of the noise is. I know I heard it, and know I saw something, but it's pitch black just beyond the edge of the parking lot and I see nothing now.

So I try to shake it off, only to get slammed with a new wave of fear when I turn back to my car to see Cal staring into the darkness too.

If he heard or saw what I did, that means it was real, and if it was real, then my gut is right in feeling like it was a threat.

I know that feeling all too well.

"Why are you so late?" Cal asks, his eyes still trained on the space beyond the parking lot before they swing toward me. "And why didn't you call?"

I clutch my bag a little tighter to my body as I approach him. "There was an emergency with one of the residents."

Not that a missing babydoll for an Alzheimer's patient suffering from PTSD caused by losing her *actual* baby when she was my age is an emergency per se, but none of the club members understand my job or what I do, and they definitely don't give a shit about it. So explaining is useless.

"Shoulda called." He narrows his eyes as I stop in front of him. "Prez is pissed."

I'm sure he's more than pissed.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as I drop my gaze. "I didn't have time and when I did, I was more concerned about leav—"

"Don't matter. You call with good reason, or you get lectured."

I flinch as he pushes off the driver's door.

That's what my father calls it: *lecturing*. It's not though. In no way are the punishments I get from stepping one millimeter out of line *lectures* unless you count the amount of yelling he does during them.

“Give me your keys.”

I flinch again then slowly lift my eyes from my purple Crocs. “My keys?”

Cal nods. “Driving privileges have been revoked.”

Immediately, I want to argue. I want to tell Cal to fuck off then call my father and tell him the same. How the hell am I supposed to get to work? Or go to school? I might be off the next two days, but I have classes from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon on Monday, then I go right to work at two-thirty. If I can’t drive myself, then...

“Yeah, princess. Got yourself a chauffeur for at least a week.”

My eyes dart around Cal as another body steps out of the darkness and that fear I’ve been feeling skyrockets.

Joker—Jax, according to his wrap sheet—my father’s top enforcer, grins at me before he licks his lips and allows his evil gaze to rake over my body from head to toe.

Which is a whole other level of scary.

At first glance, some might think I’m pretty.

Soft brown hair, bright blue eyes, delicate features, and a lean but slightly curvy figure. I’m what Cal’s old lady likes to call *classically beautiful*, like the starlets from days gone by, or at least I would be if I didn’t have one glaringly obvious flaw.

Scars.

A few large scars on the right side of my face and neck made by a horrible incident when I was three.

I have several more in places that can’t be seen, but that one *is* seen by everyone no matter how hard I try to hide it and the story behind how I got it is something I want to remain hidden as well. But between that and the fact that I’m Beau’s daughter typically means I’m off limits to club members, if they were inclined at all to look past my flaws. And for the most part, both keep them at bay.

But not Joker.

Joker has an almost insane and unhealthy obsession with me, one rooted in the fact that he also has scars on his face—scars that make it look like he’s always grinning, hence Joker. For some reason, the crazy son of a bitch *likes* my scars and the story behind them, and even though he’s gotten his ass kicked more times than I can count by my father for it, he keeps trying to lay claim to me. And Beau keeps making him my personal body guard when I *fuck up* in spite of it.

I’m just waiting for the day that Joker snaps and takes things too far.

Too many close calls already tell me that day is coming sooner than later.

I drop my keys into Cal’s hand, ready to accept my fate and ride home with Joker, but almost sag in relief when the sergeant issues his orders.

“Joker’s driving your car home. You’re riding with me. Prez wants you there when he gets back.”

With a nod, I lower my eyes and turn, then follow Cal a few feet to his truck I didn’t notice when I first came outside.

Saved by the lesser of two evils.

We get in and ride in silence most of the drive, but it’s only ten minutes and I’d prefer Cal not say anything anyway.

He terrifies me, but not in the same way Joker or my father do. Over the years, I’ve come to associate Cal with my *lectures* simply because he’s almost always the one to come get me for them.

Cal has never laid a hand on me, never even yelled at me when I was little, but I know what he’s capable of—what they’re all capable of—and between that and essentially being the constant *bearer of bad news*, he scares me just as much as Beau does.

Not to mention, while he’s never laid a hand on me—unlike a few other members of the executive committee—he’s never spoken up on my behalf either. Cal just sits back and

watches whatever my punishment is, never intervenes or tries to help. Which is silly to think any club member would because they are loyal to my father and never question him, but out of all of them, I feel like Cal is the only one with a conscience.

Do I have any concrete proof of that? No, and I've seen him kill without hesitation enough times to think otherwise, but there's always some little flicker of doubt or remorse in his eyes when he delivers my father's orders. And after Beau is through with me, Cal's old lady is usually the one to fix me up. Which leads me to believe he feels guilty or something, but the fact that he *chooses* to continue doing what he does in spite of it is exactly why I'm so afraid of him.

If you know what you're doing is wrong and horrible, then still decide to do it anyway, you're a monster regardless of the way it makes you feel.

"Church is still in service," Cal grunts as he pulls into my driveway. "Joker and me have to go back but there's prospects on the house."

At least four from the looks of it, but Beau took my freedom away so it's not like I was going to take off on him.

I nod as I push open the passenger door. "Got it."

"Stevie..."

I pause and look up to see that possible remorse glimmer in Cal's clear blue eyes for a second before he turns back to the windshield.

"You've got maybe an hour."

"Ok..."

As if I'm walking the Green Mile, I close the door to his truck and slowly make my way toward the porch, but I can still feel Cal's eyes on me. And when I glance over my shoulder to confirm, I swear I can see him white knuckling the steering wheel before he peels out and speeds down the road.

I'll never understand him, or anyone else God decided to curse me with, and it's exactly why I'd rather be alone than

surrounded by monsters.

Too bad I don't have a choice.

I really am the princess locked in a tower, but there is no knight to come save me.

This fairytale is doomed to have a very unhappy ending.



CHAPTER TWO

VICTOR

I TAKE a hit off my cigarette as I watch the front of the sleazy-as-fuck motel with narrowed eyes.

All ten rooms are booked, all of the curtains are drawn, and the doors are locked on each. Most of the occupants are in for the night and most definitely engaging in their *less than wholesome* activities.

Two crackheads are holed up in number one, probably blitzed out of their skulls already, and I'd put money on finding one of them dead in the morning based on the way they were fighting over their stash when they arrived.

Room numbers two through four are registered to a rather well-known pimp and his girls, the steady stream of *Johns* coming and going the last hour a dead giveaway to anyone who might question it. More proof was provided by the Lexus, Audi, and BMW that rolled up and produced three middle-aged men in suits that stick out like a sore thumb in this area of town. They each went into a room about twenty minutes ago. The pimp came out of one of them then went to the office and apparently checked himself into room eight. A clear indicator that those three fat fucks plan to pull all nighters with their *dates*.

There's a group of homeless elderly people staying in room number five. About seven or eight of them from what I saw, and I'm sure they pooled their money from panhandling just to pay for one night at this dump. But I'm sure it beats sleeping under a bridge with the way the temperatures have started dropping at night this time of year. And when the snow

starts to fall? Somewhere like this motel becomes a goddamn palace when you're on the streets.

Room number seven has been sealed up and quiet since I got here, but when I went in to inquire about a room—that I don't actually need—I looked over the registry and saw *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, which means it's probably some couple shacking up unbeknownst to one or both of their spouses.

A local heroin dealer is doing business out of room nine but he hasn't had any visitors for a while now, so I'm assuming he closed up shop for the night and will reopen when he drags himself out of bed sometime tomorrow afternoon.

I'm not worried about any of those rooms, not really worried about much at all to be honest, but room number ten is occupied by a single mother and two little kids. *That* room is one I need to be cautious of and it almost has me questioning my plan.

Almost.

Especially when the *guest* staying in room six finally fucking pulls up in his piece of shit Chevy and unknowingly puts my plan into action.

He's why I'm here.

Bruce Carpenter. Forty-two-years old. Unemployed. High school dropout. Ex-military collecting government benefits from an injury sustained in the line of duty. Twice divorced. Father of three children he doesn't have custody of and hasn't seen in at least five years. Proud owner of a rap sheet that consists of mostly DUIs and drunk and disorderly charges.

A never-been-caught serial rapist and sociopath.

And the bastard currently has his next victim riding shotgun, most likely drugged or at least immobilized enough not to fight him on the thirty minute drive out of town.

I found Bruce at a dive bar, a real hole in the wall kind of shitshack, and I watched him long enough to know he wasn't going to pull any shit while he was there before I took off to the motel.

He checked in yesterday morning and when I got a hit on his credit card—guy's a real moron—I came all the way out here and sat on his room for damn near thirty-six hours before he left. Once he did, I let myself in, took a look around to make sure he wasn't hiding someone inside, then followed after him to that shitty bar.

I watched and I waited.

I analyzed his mannerisms, learned his tells and ticks. Fucker is as obvious as they come, but even that wasn't enough of a red flag for the chick in her late twenties to stay away from Bruce, so when he really started chatting her up, I took my leave.

And now I'm stalking that sick bastard just like he did to seven women before this one.

With my eyes glued to Bruce as he fights to get the sandy-blonde-haired woman out of his truck, I start reviewing what I know of his *routine*.

Drugs them, then takes them back to some remote location. Strips them down, gags and blindfolds them, then ties them to the bed. Bruce leaves them like that for a bit while he takes a shower, eats or watches TV. Then he starts telling them what he's going to do to them, outlining his plan in explicit explanations before he executes it down to the most minor of details. And when he's done, he drugs them again and dumps them in some location far enough from where he picked them up to avoid getting noticed, but not far enough to prevent them from being found.

And I know *all* of this because Bruce finally pissed off the wrong people.

Person.

Bruce Carpenter finally pissed off the wrong *person*, which in turn pissed off the wrong people, and that's why I'm here.

I am death incarnate come to make him pay for his sins.

My gaze is fixed on the door as Bruce drags his victim inside, and I stab out my cigarette and pull on my gloves, flip

up my hood and slide my mask into place then wait about fifteen minutes in order to allow Bruce to get through the first part of his routine.

I'll stop him before it goes too far, but don't mistake that as some act of mercy or a form of heroism. I have no conscience, not one single ounce of remorse or regret over what I do, and that includes the fact that I won't be freeing that woman or getting her to safety. That's not my job, and if I hadn't caught Bruce before he made a bonafide victim out of her, it wouldn't have moved my meter either way.

Not anymore.

I'm callous to this shit and impatient as fuck, and this bastard has made me wait long enough.

On that note, I grab my bag from the passenger's seat, double check to make sure I have everything I need, then exit my current ride that I'll wipe clean and ditch later.

I never leave anything behind, nothing except my calling card and even that hasn't been enough for anyone to find me. Not that they'd find anything if they tried—which they don't seem to be actively doing considering the kind of scum my work generally leads them to. But I'm a ghost, just like the news outlets so stupidly refer to me as, and that's how I intend to keep it.

Stopping just outside of room six, I listen for a beat to make sure Bruce is moving things along as planned, and when I hear nothing but the low hum of the TV and the running shower, I start picking the lock.

Fucker didn't even have the chain latched.

I look around as I close the door; woman is on the bed, limbs sprawled and tied to all four corners. She's gagged with what appears to be a sock underneath some duct tape, blindfolded with a cheap necktie, and if she wasn't completely naked and covered in goosebumps, I wouldn't be able to tell if she was alive or dead. Bruce must have given her too much of the sleeping pills he likes to use on them because she's definitely not conscious right now.

Movement from behind the partially open bathroom door catches my eye and I can't help but grin. Brucey is making this far too easy on me, but I'll enjoy it nonetheless.

I lock up the room and hang the strap of my bag over the doorknob then lift the ice pick from the pocket of my suit. I never use the same weapon twice if I can help it, which is a personal preference that makes it harder for the cops to track me as well, and I usually use something that's generic and can be found almost anywhere but allows me to make this a more *intimate* experience.

Because I enjoy adding a little personal flair.

Crossing the room, a thrill races up my spine.

My adrenaline starts pumping through my veins, my heart rate increases, and the mix of endorphins and dopamine that start firing in my brain have me feeling high as a goddamn kite.

And I haven't even killed him yet.

I peer through the crack in the door and see Bruce's clothes in a pile, a stack of towels on the counter, and his shadow moving behind the curtain.

This is like shooting fish in a barrel, and while that cheapens the experience for me a little, I don't have enough time to enjoy this the way I generally like to.

Which is why I push the door open, take a few steps inside, and wait for Bruce to notice me.

But he doesn't.

No, the fucker starts *singing* in the shower instead.

Little John fucking owes me for this.

I cross my arms against my chest as I lean a hip against the counter, and when Bruce remains oblivious, I clear my throat.

"What the fuck?!" he yells as the shower curtain whips open, revealing way more of this asshole than I care to see flopping around. "Who the hell are you?"

I smirk. “You know you’re tone deaf?” Bruce gapes at me as I shake my head. “The acoustics are pretty good but you can’t sing for shit. I’d recommend not quitting your day job.” Then I glance out into the bedroom at the comatose woman on the bed. “Not bad, by the way. But since I found you because of your *day job*, maybe you *should* quit.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” He follows my line of sight, swallowing hard when he realizes how this looks. “My wife and I were—”

“Do you know what I hate almost as much as rapists, Bruce?”

All the color drains from his face as he blinks.

“Liars.” I push off the counter and stand right in front of him, the only thing separating us being the side of the tub. “I fucking *hate* liars almost as much as I hate rapists. Especially when they *lie* to seventeen-year-old girls before they drug them and *rape* them.”

Bruce backs into the tile wall behind him, his hands raised as he continues to lie. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about. My wife and I were just... a night away from the kids, you know? Letting loose and—”

“Bruce!” I bark, then grin when he jumps sky high. “That woman is not your wife, and you know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t, I swear. I have no idea—”

“You mean you’ve already forgotten poor little Maci? The underaged girl you met at a diner then chatted up for an hour about babysitting your kids you haven’t seen in years? The one you roofied, in her milkshake of all things, before you all but carried her out of that diner and brought her to a place just like this where you did things just like that”—I gesture toward the bed—to her?”

“I... I don’t...” Bruce swallows hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s really too bad, Brucey.” I shake my head and tsk. “I was hoping this would be a little more meaningful for you.”

Then I shrug. “Oh well. Doesn’t matter to me; I’ll enjoy this either way.”

“Enjoy what?”

What is no doubt an evil grin splits my face and I momentarily wish this sick fuck could see it through the mask. “Killing you. Keep up, Brucey boy.”

His eyes widen to the size of dinner plates and his jaw drops, but before he has the chance to move or make any sound at all, I strike. Quick as lightning, I lunge forward and drive the ice pick right into Bruce Carpenter’s carotid artery, the sharpened point sinking into his flesh like a hot knife through butter.

His blood sprays against the front of my suit, splattering against the tile wall and shower curtain. And that’s when the euphoria really kicks in; when that high starts to tingle in the back of my skull and work its way over every inch of my skin like warm honey. Every one of my senses come to life and has the scene before me playing out in vivid technicolor as I watch the blood sputter and spurt around the metal in his neck, quickly covering his chest and thinning as it flows in wide streams under the water pelting against Bruce’s now useless body.

I smile as the bastard blinks wide eyes at me, grasping and clawing at his throat, his mouth opening and closing like a gutted fish on the chopping block. “Little John says hello.”

With a harder than necessary yank, I pull the ice pick from his neck only to shove it right back in. I stab him over and over, even as his body crashes into the tile wall, and even as the final breath in his chest leaves his lungs. It isn’t until I’m satisfied that I stop, and when I do, I’m panting and struggling for control.

Control I’ve conditioned myself to exercise. Control I have to maintain in order to keep from turning one body into more.

It would be so easy to walk into the bedroom and do the same to that woman. Simple. Too simple, really, but it would keep my high going all the same.

I could walk in there and kill her in any number of ways, each one more satisfying than the next. Two in one night, doubling the high, sending my serotonin levels through the roof. No one would be the wiser either, merely chalking it up to one of the other motel guests in a neighboring room or something far more sinister if they were so inclined.

I could take her apart limb by limb until I was sated, until this aggressive craving inside me was nothing but a low buzzing in my veins.

I won't though.

I won't kill the woman—the victim—no matter how much that sick and fucked up side of me wants to.

I will not kill her.

I have to keep repeating it, keep saying the words on a loop in my head because the second I stop, the second I get too confident, my control will slip completely and I'll make a choice I can't take back.

Instead, I pretend like the woman isn't there and keep repeating those words as I get vertical and walk back into the room to get what I need from my bag.

This part of my process should help with those feelings, and when I'm done, I'll be feeling more like myself and no one will know I was here to begin with.

No one but Little John, because the rest of the world will chalk this up to another visit from *The Harvester of Bones*.



CHAPTER THREE

STEVIE

MY PULSE finally begins to regulate as I hear the front door open then slam closed. I sigh in relief as I slowly roll to my side and open my eyes.

He's gone.

I've been awake most of the night, save for the half hour where I'm pretty sure I blacked out, and now that my father has left for the day I can finally see what kind of damage he caused during his *lecture*.

Slowly, because everything hurts, I pull myself out of bed and make my way to the attached bathroom and begin to undress. Removing my clothes—the scrubs I wore to work yesterday—takes forever for the same reason, but I manage to get them off without too much trouble and when I do, I pitch them right in the trash.

There's another forty bucks wasted.

It can't be helped, though, because Beau really did a number on me, and I can't wear a stained and ripped uniform to work. Which is kind of a silly thought to have because I probably won't be going to work for a few days if I still look like this on Monday.

A fat lip; one that's cracked down the middle and still bloody.

My left eye is black, blue, and nearly swollen shut. What I can see of the eyeball is bloodshot to hell.

There's a split in my eyebrow too, most likely where my father's stupid ring caught when he hit me, and I'm probably

going to need butterfly bandages or superglue to close it up if Beau forbids Rochelle—Cal's old lady—from coming over here again.

Thankfully, I have all of that on hand anyway, as well as what I'll need for my bruised ribs, sore stomach and back, but I'm no doctor and I could really use one.

Rochelle isn't a doctor either, though, she's just been around long enough to start acting like one. With the way the members of Demon Seeds MC get knocked around, she's earned her degree at least twice over by now.

Last night was different though, and Rochelle would be a godsend if Beau allows her to come by, solely because of my face.

My father *never* goes after my face.

Sure, Beau was angrier than he usually is when he lectures me, but even when I was sixteen and tried to run away—the *only* time I tried to run away—he never went after my face.

Everything else was normal; dragging me out of my bedroom by the back of my neck, punching me in the stomach, kicking me once I fell, and making me hang onto the coffee table while he whipped me with his belt. After twenty-three years, that's all par for the course, but what wasn't the same as always was the way he pulled me up by my hair and proceeded to hit me in the face until I passed out.

That was new.

New and even more terrifying than my punishments usually are.

I thought for sure last night was going to be my *actual* last night. I thought for sure Beau was going to kill me this time before he finally stopped—which is another thing that was strange about that whole ordeal.

I remember my vision blurring, then seeing spots. At that point I was pretty numb so nothing really hurt anymore, but I saw my father cock his arm back one more time and get ready to deliver what could have quite possibly been a fatal blow, but just before I passed out, he stopped.

Beau glanced over my shoulder, finished yelling at me, then let go of my hair and I crumpled to the floor like a wet blanket.

No parting kick. No spitting on me. At least I don't think so. Everything is pretty much blank after that, and while I'm just as puzzled over why he hit me in the face and why he stopped so abruptly, I also have no idea how I got to my bedroom.

My father has never shown remorse after lecturing me and he sure as hell has never taken care of me after the fact, but when I came to, I knew I was lying on my bed and I could smell rubbing alcohol on my face.

Last night is a total mystery for multiple reasons, and there's a good chance I won't ever get the clues back to solve it.

With a sigh and a wince, I feel around my ribs and stomach area to make sure nothing's broken and I'm not bleeding out—hopefully—then turn a little to see how bad the welts are on my back.

They're not so bad...

I roll my eyes, which hurts, then lean toward my reflection and attempt to see how rough my face really is.

Definitely going to need stitches.

And judging by the way I feel, I won't be showering until later, but that'll probably end up being a bath anyway because I'm getting dizzy just standing here.

I haven't eaten since before work yesterday so I'm pretty sure that's all it is, but I'm going to have to try to keep myself awake today in case it's from a concussion. Or I could just pray for a brain bleed and hope that if I do fall asleep I never wake up.

That thought makes me pause.

I've been having them more frequently: thoughts of not being here anymore. Hoping Beau goes too far and kills me.

Wishing that when I cut, I go too deep and no one finds me in time.

All in all, the only person that might miss me is Linnie. I have no friends other than her. No boyfriend, and no family outside of my father. Rochelle would probably be a little sad but she'd get over it because I wouldn't be the first woman to commit suicide on club property, and she sees enough death—we all do—that it barely fazes her anymore.

But I'm too much of a chickenshit to end it.

I'm too weak, too cowardly, too afraid of damn near everything, and any time my thoughts have pushed me to seriously consider it, I chicken out.

This is all circumstantial, to be honest.

I'm not sure if I'd have suicidal thoughts or tendencies, or if I'd be into self-harm as a source of release if I wasn't locked away and abused by Beau. I'm miserable and terrified most days, to be honest, and regardless of how I could have been if things were different, self-harm and suicidal thoughts are a regular occurrence for me. Even if I'm too much of a coward to act on the latter.

But I have reasons for that.

I can't help but worry about all the *what ifs*.

What if I do it wrong and don't die? What if Beau catches me in the act and loses his shit? What if I decide at the last minute that my life is actually worth living but it's too late and I die anyway? What. If.

Those are the thoughts that make my decisions for me and it's why, on really bad nights, I secretly pray my father puts me out of my misery so I don't have to make the decision to do it on my own.

With a cringe, I carefully pull my hair up and get to work on my face.

I wash the blood off the best I can, then patch up my eyebrow good enough to hold until Rochelle can take a look at it. By the time I'm dressed in an oversized hoodie, flannel

pajama pants, and fuzzy socks, I'm feeling a little more like myself, which is exactly when my guilt for entertaining suicidal thoughts sets in.

She wouldn't want you to be like her.

No, my mother wouldn't want me to do what she did, and she'd be extremely disappointed to know I was even thinking about it. I barely remember her, but I know somewhere deep in my gut that Celeste Williams wouldn't want me to go out like that, and I sure as hell doubt she'd want me to make suicide the only option to get away from my father.

Something she did because she felt like it was her only option.

Celeste Williams didn't have any other options. She didn't feel like she had a choice, and my mother didn't think she could get out without taking matters into her own hands.

She couldn't, but I have to. I have to find a way out of this house, and I have to do it in a way that honors her memory instead of turning both of us into statistics.

Just as I'm about to check my bedroom door to see if my father unlocked it or not, my phone starts ringing from the nightstand.

Definitely don't remember plugging that in last night.

"Hey, Linnie." I sigh as I gingerly sit on the edge of my bed. "I hope you're not trying—"

"Thank god!" she all but screams. "Oh my god, Stevie, I was so worried about you!"

I frown. "Why?"

"Why? *Why?* Girl, have you been living under a rock?!"

"No..." *I've just been getting my ass kicked by dear old dad.* "What happened?"

Linnie makes some sort of exasperated noise before she continues. "They found another body!"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific than that, Linnie." Unfortunately, our town, as well as the surrounding

ones, have had their fair share of psychopaths lately.

“In a shitty motel off the highway! The body of a man, all cut up and left posed in the bathroom.”

My frown deepens. “And you somehow thought this man was me?”

“No!” she shrieks. “But there was a girl there. S *fair-skinned, dark blonde or light brunette haired* girl. She was tied to the bed, gagged, and blindfolded—”

“Like Maci Martin?”

“Yes, but she was *dead!*”

“As sad as that is, you can rest assured knowing it wasn’t me. I’m alive and well.” *Mostly.*

Linnie sighs. “I’m relieved to hear that, but I was terrified for a while there. Apparently, they were seen leaving some dive bar shortly after you left work, and not that I think you’re about that scene, but I thought maybe...”

I can’t help but smile a little. *I guess Linnie would miss me after all.* “It wasn’t me, Linnie. I went straight home after I got out. No stops or anything.”

“Thank god. They haven’t released any names or a lot of details yet, but this is a big deal. The police are asking for anyone with potential information about either of the described victims to come forward.”

“But they haven’t released names yet?”

“Rumor has it, there wasn’t anything left in the room to identify them except their fingerprints and dental records.”

With another sigh, I give my only friend, and queen of the gossip mill, my undivided attention. “What else are the rumors saying?”

“That the crime scene was a mess! Blood everywhere. Real Jack the Ripper kind of stuff. They even think there’s a possibility the woman was a sex worker.”

I listen to Linnie go on and on about all of the gory details for another twenty minutes before she gets another call and

has to let me go. Something I'm both grateful for because I need to eat, and disappointed over because I'm going to be trapped and alone here all day, so that was most likely my only human interaction for hours.

Not that that's anything new, but still. Talking to Linnie on the phone would have at least made me forget about how much I'm starting to hurt for a while.

But I instantly take that thought back.

I shouldn't want to replace my pain with someone else's, and those poor people that were slaughtered last night deserve more respect than that.

It doesn't stop me from pulling up *The Rolling Gazette* on my phone, though.

Our little town—Rolling Meadows—is a tiny little thing about forty minutes from Sabine Woods. It's a *blink and you'll miss it* sort of town where everyone knows everything about everyone, or at least they think they do, anyway. But in the last few years, this area has become sort of a hotbed for the dark and twisted.

Scratch that.

Rolling Meadows has *always* been a hotbed for the dark and twisted, but the last few years it's upped its game and jumped directly into downright insane.

The name itself is deceiving because I've lived here my whole life and I can't remember a time when it resembled anything close to *rolling meadows*, or when crime wasn't on the front page of every newspaper or blasted in breaking news on TV. But a few years ago, maybe only one or two now that I'm thinking about it, things started to get really intense.

For example, a woman from Sabine Woods was kidnapped by two prospects in a neighboring MC. She was apparently the old lady of a member in another club—the club from what I gathered—and while that could have started a full blown war that spilled into Demon Seed country, it seemingly diffused itself and fell off the front page. All considering that El Paso County is motorcycle gang territory, it was scary and sad but

not surprising, right up until those prospects wound up murdered in their clubhouse.

They were dismembered and posed—their arms and legs were positioned into a rectangle framing their torsos, hands and feet stacked over the stomach with their decapitated heads resting on top—and at first glance everyone was horrified. Then they became even more horrified when the public learned that the killer had severed their penises and shoved them in their mouths, and apparently the left femur of both men were missing.

It was crazy and scary, and definitely made the news for a long time, but as connections were drawn and identities were discovered, things became even crazier.

Turns out, the MC they were apart of was *huge* into sex trafficking, with a specialty for underaged girls and boys alike, and this led to a federal investigation that got most members of the Cobra Cons locked up for life.

So, between that and the woman they kidnapped, people felt a little less bad about their deaths.

Then, a little while later—months, but I can't remember how many—three more bodies showed up in an abandoned church right here in Rolling Meadows.

One was some mafia king, a guy from New York that I'd never heard of, but he had a bullet between his eyes and that was it, so nothing really to write home about. The other two bodies, who were a couple of his goons I guess, were found the same way as the prospects, peens in mouth and all.

And even though we learned that these men were just as horrible as the Cobras, similarities started to be drawn between those four murders—the fifth wasn't connected until his body disappeared from the morgue and turned up a few weeks later in pieces in New York—and a string of other ones that had popped up over the last ten to twelve years throughout the U.S.

Rapists. Pedophiles. Wife-beaters. Child killers, kidnappers, and serial murders.

All of the so-called victims proved to be horrible, terrible people; the worst of the worst who actually deserved what they got and then some. And each one was a man, found with his penis in his mouth and his left femur missing.

Just like the man that was found last night.

It seems as though The Harvester of Bones has struck again.

The Rolling Gazette might be a rumor mill, but there's usually some truth to what they say, and if the speculation is true, the vigilante ghost has officially come to El Paso County, and he possibly killed two people last night.

Except, something isn't adding up.

According to the article, the unidentified man was the same as the others, pose and all, and apparently the room he was found in—the bathroom, so it says—had every telltale sign of The Harvester having done it. No forensic or physical evidence, the crime scene was sterile, bleached, and void of any blood. Everything about the man's murder points to it being him, but the woman... that's another story.

The bedroom portion of the motel room was trashed, completely trashed, and bloody. By all accounts, she was unrecognizable, and several officers were even caught on camera running outside so they could puke. And there's speculation that she was sexually assaulted, which is more than enough proof for me that it wasn't him.

Not only does The Harvester of Bones *not* assault or kill women, he only seems to kill men that do things like that to other people.

Sure, yeah, I guess things could escalate or motives could change. For all we know that woman could have been just as horrible as the man no doubt must have been, but something feels off about it.

Both bodies show signs of overkill and The Harvester of Bones definitely has a flair for the dramatic, but it's never quite like that with his victims, and he definitely doesn't leave messes.

And yeah, I know all of this because as soon as I read about the Cobra Con prospects that were murdered, my interest was piqued.

The Rolling Gazette threw the idea out there, made a half-assed connection to the serial killer terrorizing the U.S, but it was a longshot at best because he very literally had struck in another state the day before. At least that's what the paper said, but that's when I dove head first into The Harvester.

I started reading everything I could find about The Harvester of Bones, every article or mention of him in the news. I listened to podcasts, watched interviews with police and prosecutors from across the U.S., and the further down the rabbit hole I went, the more interested I became.

You could almost call it an obsession, the way I researched El Paso County's newest resident and very own serial killer, and that's why nothing about the woman's murder is adding up to me. I'm 99.9% positive it was not The Harvester of Bones because I *might* be obsessed with him enough to have convinced myself that the ruthless killer isn't everything he seems to be.

But I guess we won't know until more information is released. And in my personal opinion, the determining factor should be whether she's missing her left femur or not. That seems to be his signature, and until they can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the vigilante ghost, I'm choosing to believe it wasn't him.

Call me stupid or naive, ignorant or screwed up, but I like the idea of someone like him being out there. Someone that fights the monsters in the dark and makes them pay for what they've done, and gets away scot-free so he can do it all over again.

Someone like him gives someone like *me* hope.

Hope that even monsters have something to be afraid of.



CHAPTER FOUR

VICTOR

I SPIN myself around and around in the computer chair behind Little John's desk at MACs as the bear of a man himself comes lumbering through the door, his permanent scowl something I can still make out even as it whips by in a blur multiple times.

“Red Room.”

I slam my feet on the ground and come to a screeching halt. “I do believe it's red *rum*.”

He just glares and nods over my shoulder.

No sense of humor, this one.

Not that this is a laughing matter.

I'm downright pissed, to be honest, but that's the entire reason I'm here—out of hiding and in the daylight of Sabine Woods—and obviously Little John wants to get down to business.

So, I give myself a minute to let the dizziness pass, stick a cigarette between my teeth, then get to my feet and follow this grizzly into the *Red Room*.

Not one damn thing about the room is red, by the way.

There's barely any furniture, just a long ass conference table, a podium, and another small desk. There are, however, lots of fun gadgets and weapons, as well as an entire wall of video monitors linked to all of Little John's businesses, and several huge maps of the county, state, and country pinned up on the walls where there's space.

Back in the day, when Mac and his brother opened the bar, they had this room installed for super secret club meetings and interrogations, for all the things that could get messy and draw attention, and now... well, it's still used for the same shit. The only differences are the added security and sound proofing. And Little John had the hidden doorwall in his office redone so the entrance is even harder to locate if you find yourself sitting in there for some terrifying reason.

“What is this shit?” Little John tosses a stack of newspapers on the table as I plop down into the seat at the end.

THE HARVESTER OF BONES STRIKES TWICE!

Double Homicide: Is The Ghost changing his game?

A Break from His MO, Has Rolling's own vigilante gone rogue?!

“THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT IT IS,” I GRUNT AS I SNATCH THE paper on top and start leafing through it until I get to the article. “It’s complete bullshit.”

John sighs. “Figured as much.”

“You shouldn’t have questioned it.”

“Really?”

My eyes lift to meet his before they roll. “I gave you the photos—that included the bedroom and a still-alive girl, by the way. I did exactly what you wanted and got justice for your niece. *This garbage*”—I toss the newspaper in his direction with a huff—“is amateur at best.”

Little John frowns.

“It screams inexperience. Too much rage, too messy. Maybe not his first kill, but it’s the first one like this, and I’d put money on it being such a shitshow because his plan was ruined.”

“How do you figure?”

I lean back in the chair and kick my feet up on the table as I light my smoke. “His obvious target was the woman. My guess is as good as any, but it feels sexually driven, and since she was picked up at a bar by a *rapist*, our little rookie got angry.”

“Explain.”

“I *am*,” I drawl. “He had probably been watching her for a while, settled on her as his plaything for the night. Then she leaves, albeit unwillingly, with Brucey, and he loses his shit. At this point, he’s even more out for blood than before, follows that shitty Chevy to the motel and either loses them, which would account for the time between my visit and his, or he saw me go in and waited.”

He nods. “Concerned about that?”

“Not even a little. I know you haven’t seen me in action in a long time, but my methods are fine-tuned, and if this *serial killer in training* decided to go to the cops, he’d sound like an idiot for multiple reasons.”

He’d sound like a raving lunatic, to be honest.

I dress in an all black hazmat suit and completely cover my face when I work so I’d love to hear this piece of shit tell the police all about the six-foot-four alien that cock-blocked him from his own murderous agenda.

“You see anything?”

Another roll of my eyes. “No. When I left, Brucey was in a heap on the floor and his companion was alive and well.”

John frowns.

“Ok, maybe not *well*, but she was alive and breathing. And that room was as clean as a whistle.”

Little John smirks. “I have no doubt.”

Asshole.

I can’t help that I’m a neat freak, and killing people is no exception.

“So, if this wasn’t you...”

“I have some very unorganized, and most likely escalating, competition.”

“Escalating?”

“This guy is going to be pissed for a long time. He’ll simmer and stew on how I stopped him from getting the son of a bitch that took his new girlfriend, be pouty over not getting to off Brucey boy himself, and he’ll probably up his game to draw me out.” I drag the nicotine into my lungs and speak on the exhale. “I won’t be shocked if he starts taking the left femur just to get under my skin.”

“Why, exactly, do you do that?”

“I’ve told you.”

Little John grins. “Yeah, but I still like hearing it.”

“We can stroll down memory lane some other time. Did you call me here to hurt my feelings by accusing me of fucking up a hit, or was there more to this impromptu day trip than that?”

“Since when do you have feelings?”

I shrug. “Thought I’d try them out. So far I like *angry* and *horny* the best.”

Completely ignoring how hilarious I am, John moves to the desk and lifts a folder. “I knew it wasn’t you; your work is better than that. You aren’t sloppy and there’s a damn good reason no one has caught your crazy ass for over a decade.”

“Aw.” I clasp my hands together under my chin and bat my eyelashes. “You remembered our anniversary.” I grin as he drops the file in front of me. “And you even got me a present!”

John pinches the bridge of his nose as he grumbles, “Why do I put up with you again?”

“Because you’re too old to do this shit anymore and I’m way better at it anyway.”

“Fair enough.” He sighs, totally exasperated. “Big difference between us, though.”

I tilt my head from side to side as I think over his words, then flip open the folder as I hit my cigarette.

He's right, I know that.

The differences between John and I are huge and rather endless, actually.

We're both freelance hitmen, but the similarities stop there.

He has connections and loyalties to several MCs like the Pythons and Wulven Kings, aligning himself with people like Link and Mac in order to build several rather lucrative ventures and essentially run the business district in El Paso County. Everyone in the underground circuit knew Little John by name and face, but feared him because of his reputation and he didn't care that it was out there for most of Colorado to see. John was the best for damn near forty years before he *retired*, and I use that term loosely because he still coordinates for me. Which is the only reason I can consider myself a *hitman* at all.

But the biggest, most glaring difference between us?

I'm a bonafide psychopath and established serial killer.

John is not.

Sure, most of my kills have been nasty little gremlins like good old Brucey, especially since I hooked up with Little John when I was a rookie, but for a brief few years before that, I was on a path that would have turned out very differently from this one.

And having civilian kills under my belt, no matter how long ago it was or how valid they may have been, doesn't change that they're there, and the urge to add more is ever present.

Thankfully, Little John tries to keep me swimming in blood and that helps quite a bit.

Best killer dad ever.

My eyes ping around the wrap sheet in front of me, scanning the twenty plus years of garbage before I close the

file, fold it into a square, and tuck it inside the pocket of my leather jacket. “Who’s the mark?”

John rolls his eyes and grunts, “It’s in the file, Tor.”

“And I’ll read it later after I jerk-off to the opening scene of Halloween.” I wag my brows as a look of disgust tries to mask his grin. “Sister Strode has a great rack. Bounces around a lot while Mikey gets her.”

“You’re sick.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

His lip twitches as he shakes his head. “That, and I just can’t seem to get rid of your twisted ass.”

“You could bounce quarters off my ass.”

“Victor.”

“*Johnathon.*”

“Look.” He slumps into the chair next to me, looking a little more like the sixty-three-year-old man he is. “This one... it’s a little different and a lot complicated.”

Interesting.

Not only is it complicated, but I’m guessing it’s also slightly personal—again—judging by the exhaustion that is now evident on my mentor’s face.

The ones that hit home are the hardest, or so I’m told.

“I’m listening...” My brow lifts as I stab out my smoke on the table then light another.

“A friend of mine, an old friend that I cut ties with a long time ago, came to me recently and shared some heavy shit. Serious concerns he’s having.”

“A problem he needs solved?”

John nods. “Once you read things over you’ll see why it’s going to be tricky, and why it’s important that you figure out this rookie killer and get him handled first. If he really is going to egg you on and follow you around...”

“I’ll take care of junior.” And I will. That fuckstick is trying to sully my pristine reputation by adding a messy disaster of a kill to it. I take pride in my work and I would rather have someone kill *me* the way I kill other people than have a monstrosity like that added to my portfolio. “Tell your *old friend* I’ll do what he needs as soon as I handle my *new friend*.”

“Same fee?”

I shrug as I lean back in my chair, lift my hands and link my fingers behind my head while puffing on my cigarette. “To be determined. All the work you keep throwing me has me rolling in the dough. Maybe I’ll do this one on the house, too.”

I didn’t charge Little John for killing Brucey boy.

Personal hits for the only human that has ever looked at me hard enough to figure me out, then still give me a chance in spite of it? Yeah, I’ll wipe out all of Rolling Meadows, the entirety of El Paso County if he needs me to, and I won’t ask for a dime.

Huh...

I wonder if that’s another of those pesky *feelings* I’ve never had toward another adult human being rearing its head again.

I must be going soft with age.

Not that thirty-two is *old*, but when you live a life like mine, it’s bound to catch up to you in one way or another. Apparently for me, age comes with the *warm fuzzies*.

“You sure?” John lifts a brow before he nods toward me. “That file might change your mind.”

Another drag of my smoke. “I like a challenge, always have, and if this hit is as complicated as you seem to think it is then I’ll be giddy as fuck the entire time, so money won’t be a concern.”

“Could lead to more than one body.”

I shoot him the *and your point is* look, then shrug. “Again, I’m always up for a challenge. I’ll do my homework like a

good little student, keep my eye out for any douche canoes that want to steal my thunder, and in the meantime, I'll do what I always do."

"Which is what, exactly?" John asks as I get to my feet.

"Masturbate to slasher movies while I keep a low profile. Keep up, *Johnathon*."

This time, Little John barks out a laugh and I grin in satisfaction as I head for the door.

All it took was twelve years with the grizzly bastard for me to realize that maybe I'm a little less psychopathic than I was originally told.

Who woulda thought?



CHAPTER FIVE

STEVIE

“I REALLY WISH you would have told me you fell down the stairs when we talked Saturday.” Linnie frowns seconds before she rips the butterfly bandages from my eyebrow with a huff. “This needs stitches badly. And it’s infected.”

“It’s not *that* infected.” I cringe as she flushes out the wound and starts patting it dry.

So maybe the gash in my head is pretty infected, but I did what I could, and since Beau ended up forbidding Rochelle from coming over to fix me up like I thought he would, it’s a miracle I’m not septic.

It also probably didn’t help that the wound reopened when my father decided to lecture me again after he got home from church Saturday night.

He was drunk, possibly high, and he was as angry as he’s ever been. Beau ranted incoherently about my mother the entire time he beat me, raved in gibberish about Celeste and how weak she was, how beautiful she was, how she betrayed him and made him hurt her. He went on and on about all kinds of things. Things that apparently seeing me brought out of him, and he unintentionally answered the questions I had regarding why he hit me in the face to begin with without me ever asking.

I look too much like my mom.

He said that repeatedly as well.

I look too much like Celeste, and more so now that I’m the same age she was when she died.

Some people would probably find comfort in that. Find comfort in a little piece of a departed loved one still being around for them to see on a regular basis, to continue sharing the love and life that was lost.

I would.

If I had anything other than the few disappearing memories of my mother to hold onto, if I had a grandparent or maybe one of her siblings or even her best friend that I could reminisce with, I'd be thrilled. I should have that with my father, but not only does he refuse to even mention her name most of the time, he apparently can't stand to look at me because it brings on thoughts and feelings he can't handle.

If he were anyone else I'd call it grief or pain, but he's a mean, hateful son of a bitch, so I know that's not it. It's just anger and rage over her leaving him to raise a daughter on his own that he never wanted to begin with.

I'm the perpetual thorn in his side, so Beau has made it his mission to hurt me too—any and every chance he gets.

“Brace yourself,” Linnie says as she lifts the suture in front of my face. “You're looking at about three or four stitches, Stevie, and with the swelling and irritation, it is not going to feel good while I do it.”

I've had worse, I think, because it's true.

But I just nod, pinch my eyes shut, and tightly grip the edge of the counter I'm sitting on.

Linnie doesn't know about all the other times I've had to be stitched up like this. Or the reasons for it.

This is the first time I've had to use *I fell down the stairs* as an excuse too, but that's only because I've never had anyone other than Rochelle or the club doc fix me up before.

I'm not allowed to go to the hospital or to a real doctor. Not allowed to go anywhere at all really, but those two are off limits for sure. Beau doesn't want anyone outside the club getting involved in our business, and considering the way my injuries look and the frequency in which they happen, it would

be obvious to someone out there in a professional role what was going on at home.

When Beau gets me good enough, I have to skip school and call into work. Not for anything other than pain so great it couldn't be hidden, and I got tired of Linnie asking if I was ok. So, I'd either work through busted ribs and bruised organs while pretending like my insides weren't on fire, or I'd call off if I didn't think I could handle it. To be honest, I'm not sure why I still decided to go to class this morning, or come in for my shift tonight with my face such a mess, but here I am, and at least I'll get sewn up because of it.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Linnie asks as she finishes up. "Maybe you should take a sick day."

"I'm fine." I'm also not really looking to come up with some sort of believable explanation to give Beau for staying home, nor do I want to spend the day with Joker.

My father left on a run yesterday afternoon, something about meeting with Jesus—another MC president I guess, not the messiah—so Joker was given free reign and allowed into our house to *babysit me* until he gets back tonight.

For a long time, Joker just made me uncomfortable. He'd stare at me way too long, shoot me weird looks or obscene gestures. Joker made it obvious that he had his eye on me, and whenever I was within earshot, he'd tell whoever was around how much he wanted to fuck me, and exactly how he was going to have me one day. He never really did anything more than that until about two years ago when he cornered me at Beau's birthday party and took things to a new and unwelcome level.

Joker pinned me to the wall, clamped a hand over my mouth and started groping me. My breasts, my ass, and he even tried to get his hand down the front of my jeans but he didn't get that far because Cal and Rochelle turned the corner just as he got my belt undone and they stopped him.

Which is putting it lightly because I honestly thought Cal was going to kill him.

He went into a blind rage, ripped Joker off of me, and proceeded to beat the shit out of him until they drew a crowd, and then Beau took over.

Joker wound up in the hospital for three days because the Demon Seeds' back alley doctor couldn't fix all the damage those two had done.

Did this stop Joker from trying to get his hands on me after that? No. It seemingly didn't faze him at all.

Since then, we've been in that exact situation more than a handful of times, and last night I woke up to Joker looming over me while I was lying in bed. And the minute my eyes opened, he grinned down at me, started unbuckling his belt, and got the fly down before he climbed on top of me.

I fought him, though.

I fought him hard: kicked and flailed. I even left scratch marks on his face and arms but Joker is so much bigger than me that it was useless. And when I thought for sure he was about to do something more horrible than Beau has ever done, his phone started ringing and Joker stopped.

Cal called him, and because Joker knows you don't ignore anyone in the EC, he answered, fixed his jeans, and left without a word. He left my house completely too, because after I cried myself to sleep, I woke up around one in the morning, checked to see if he was back, and was met by two new patches sitting outside my bedroom door. And they're the ones who told me Joker was gone and wouldn't be back until he picked me up for class in the morning.

Let me tell you what. Riding around today, with the asshole who tried to rape me, was even more terrifying than expecting a lecture from my father, and there was no way I was going to call off of work and get stuck with him all day.

It's bad enough he's picking me up from work tonight.

"Hey." Linnie grins as she cleans up her tools and starts washing her hands. "So I'm having a party on Friday..."

I smirk as I hop down from the counter and start fixing my scrubs. "Yeah?"

“Yep. A *special* kind of party.”

“Ok...”

My friend wags her eyebrows then gives me a look like I’m supposed to know what she’s talking about, but I have no clue.

“Like a themed party or...”

Linnie giggles. “Stevie, come on!” Then she leans toward me and whispers, “A *sex toy* party.”

“*Oh*,” I whisper back as my face heats.

I’m no virgin—shockingly, all considering—and I do own a vibrator, but I don’t have very much experience in this sort of thing, and what I do have isn’t great.

Losing my v-card as a senior in high school to my secret boyfriend in the janitor’s closet wasn’t exactly memorable for the right reasons. Just like only having sex with two guys over the almost six years since then in relatively similar ways doesn’t count for a lot of good experience either.

I like sex, or I’m sure I would if I could have more of it, and I have needs just like anyone else, but my life doesn’t allow for relationships, let alone a healthy or active sex life, and all of my encounters have basically been like the first time.

And Linnie is how I got my vibrator.

Through another party like the one she’s telling me about, as a matter of fact, but I didn’t go to it. I don’t get to go to parties. But when she showed me the catalog in order to try to convince me that I should come, I ordered a vibrator out of guilt and she brought it to me at work the next shift we had together.

Looks like I’ll be getting a fancy new dildo to go with my vibrator.

“I was thinking, since we both get out early Friday, you could follow me to my place and we could...”

But I'm already shaking my head. "I'm sorry, Linnie, but I can't go."

"Why?"

"Well, my car is"—*booted in the garage at my father's clubhouse*—"in the shop, so that won't work."

"I could drive you."

"Won't you be drinking?" I ask with a frown.

"Then we'll get a DD."

I give her a soft smile. "I appreciate it, but I have plans."

Linnie's brow lifts skeptically.

"Ok, so I have to study, but..." *Jeez, I hate lying to her.* "A friend from class is coming over to study with me."

"A friend from class?"

"Yeah, uhm, his name—"

"*His name? Oh my god, Stevie.*" She smirks at me. "Are you trying to tell me you have a study date?"

"Yes?" *God, I suck at this.* "I mean, it might not be a date, so it's not a big deal, but my friend is coming over so I won't be able to go to your party."

"Promise me you'll try to have fun with..."

"Leon," I blurt like an idiot.

Something Linnie must agree with because she frowns for a beat. "Well, promise me you'll try to have fun with Leon, and I'll forgive you."

I nod as I blow out a relieved breath. "I'll try."

"*And,* you have to at least look over the catalog so I can earn more free shit at my party."

AFTER TWENTY MINUTES OF LOOKING AT *SECRET PASSIONS* newest line of sex toys, blindly ordering a dildo Linnie is

going to pick out for me—which is terrifying since I’m sure she’ll pick one from their new *supernatural* collection just to get a rise out of me—then making up all kinds of details about my imaginary study partner, Leon, I officially started my shift.

My shift that is finally an hour away from over.

I made my rounds, helped with mid-afternoon meds, and got through my scheduled showers without too much hassle. Dinner went pretty smoothly, except for having Mr. Morelli spit puréed peas at me several times, and we were able to get most of the residents to participate in their activities before bedtime routines.

Rolling Meadows may be a shitty town, a rundown and scary place to live, and no, the only nursing home in it isn’t much better, but those of us who have been around a long time genuinely care about our residents, and that’s why we implemented a pretty neat activity plan for them.

Since we’re on the lockdown unit with nothing but Alzheimer’s or dementia residents that are flight risks, we see a lot of sundowning.

Typically around the time school lets out, everyone gets restless and behavioral. It’s something about a subconscious recognition of what they used to do at that time of day, whether it was waiting for their kids or spouses to come home from school or work, leaving work themselves or starting their own evening routines.

So, a few of us got together and decided that maybe a way to avoid anything major—like having a ninety-four-year-old woman wrestle me to the ground of her bedroom before trying to rip all my hair out—we made a plan. It’s nothing crazy or revolutionary, lots of nursing homes do it, but we started giving everyone tasks that cater to what they struggle with most.

A few of the ladies that are more maternal and had kids like Mrs. Sanderson are in charge of rounding everyone up for med times, meal times, and any other group activity. A few ladies that were housewives their entire lives gather and fold

laundry, set or clear the tables, and even do light housework that their physical abilities allow.

We have a few men that worked in a trade skill or hard labor at times, so they get little projects to work on like tightening table legs or replacing light bulbs, all with a nurse or CNA close by to supervise. Gentlemen like Mr. Riggs help organize and run things like bingo or movie nights, and sometimes he even throws together what turns into quite an interesting play or musical.

For the most part it works, even if we have a few residents that are deep into their diagnosis, some bordering on catatonic, but they're included however we can include them. And even with all of our efforts—short staffed or not—it isn't always successful.

Like right now.

“Stevie! Stevie, I'm telling you. A man came in and stole my baby!”

“I'm sure Jolene is around here somewhere...” I grunt from under the bed.

Once again, Mrs. Sanderson's babydoll has gone missing, and—*once again*—I've been put in charge of finding it.

Well, no one *actually* put me in charge of finding Jolene, but I have a soft spot for Margie. And yes, maybe the soft spot is because even though she has Alzheimer's, Mrs. Sanderson remembers who I am, at least by name and face. But it's also because of her story.

Each of our residents has a story, a life that they once lived just like anyone else. We usually learn about them from family members when they admit their loved one, but more often than not it's from photos and personal belongings that accompany them to their current reality. And for Margie, her story is heartbreaking.

Her sister was the one who brought her here, a younger sister that was too elderly herself to keep chasing Margie around, but before Jolene—yes, her babydoll is named after

her sister—passed away, I was able to learn all about Mrs. Sanderson.

She was a housewife married to her high school sweetheart all of her life, right up until he died nine years ago. They lived in Denver, had a little ranch house with a white picket fence, and were rather comfortable on what her husband made as an accountant. And while all of that seems pretty perfect, it wasn't always like that for Margie.

Before she married Arthur, she lived at home with her parents and baby sister, and from what Jolene told me, their home life was awful. Their father was an alcoholic and extremely abusive, and he went after his daughters on a regular basis. Margie always tried to protect Jolene though, always took the brunt of the beatings in order to keep her safe, and when Margie and Arthur got married, she took her baby sister with them and kept Jolene there until she was old enough to move out on her own.

And while that's all horrible—and relatable—what really tugs at my heartstrings is what happened to Margie's only child.

At two years old, baby Louise was kidnapped from their backyard. She was missing for three days before they found her body, and when they did, well, it makes my stomach roll to think about what that sweet little angel went through.

It wrecked Margie, completely ruined her, and she blamed herself for the rest of her life. Which is why it makes so much sense that when she started to slip into advanced stage Alzheimer's, her mind tried to take her to a place that was a little safer but still scary at times.

So yeah, my heart hurts for Mrs. Sanderson, and that is exactly why I'm always the one to help her, even if it means I could get lectured for doing so.

"I'm going to see if she's playing with the neighbor kids," I say as I close the toy box her babydoll *should* be in but isn't. "I'll be right back, ok?"

Margie nods absently as she sinks into the rocking chair, the fragile eighty-six-year-old woman wringing her hands and staring out the window.

Poor thing.

Stepping into the hall, I pull the door closed quietly, then immediately start my search for the new girl that can't seem to follow simple instructions.

It is so irritating, so frustrating, that she can't just do what Linnie told her to do, and it upsets Mrs. Sanderson on a level that can reach catastrophic proportions if Jolene goes missing for too long. I swear to god, when I find this halfwit CNA I'm going to light into her for doing this again, especially since I know my friend talked to her Saturday when they worked together.

There's no reason to take the doll away in the first place, but knowing that it could easily send Margie spiraling as well, that's borderline abuse in my opinion and I'm inclined to go to upper management myself, staffing issues be damned.

With a huff, I start toward the rooms in Sasha's set. "I swear to god, this place is—"

"Stevie, hi."

I stop dead in my tracks as my stomach drops and my shoulders bunch to my ears.

Chris.

"I was hoping to see you tonight."

Slowly, mainly because I don't want to talk to him but know I have to, I turn to face the night shift RN that makes my skin crawl. "Hey."

Chris gives me a smile, one that probably works on a lot of women, before his eyes land on the stitches in my head. "What happened?"

"Fell down the stairs at home."

"Ouch."

“Yeah...” I wrap my arms around my waist protectively. “Did you need something or...”

The smile returns, and for a split second, I can see why he’s so full of himself.

Dirty blonde hair cut short and neat. Chocolate brown eyes. A dimple in his chin. Chris is lean and on the shorter side for a man, but he’s fit and I can see the appeal physically. But even a nice looking face and body isn’t enough to stop my creep radar from going off, and considering the fact that I’ve been alone with him too many times to ignore it, his looks can’t save him.

Has he ever done anything inappropriate with me? Other than getting too close to my personal bubble to be comfortable? No. But he throws off bad vibes. Vibes like Beau and Joker and some of the other guys I’m used to, and those vibes have always been spot on.

“Walk with me.” Chris nods down the hall with a grin. “I need to log into my computer and get a rundown from Linnie.”

His cart is by the nurse’s station, which is in the opposite direction I’m going, but my shift is almost over and I’m sure Chris knows my set is in the front of the hall anyway. Can’t even use last rounds as an excuse to get away from this guy.

So I nod, put a few feet of space between us and start walking.

“I was wondering...” he says as he clasps his hands behind his back. “There’s this new coffee house opening up on the other side of town. Supposed to be pretty hip, trying to help encourage more upstanding businesses to start up in Rolling Meadows, and I thought since you get out early Friday, we could go and grab a coffee before my shift.”

Nope.

“I...” Thank god I already lied to Linnie about my Friday night plans. “I appreciate it, but I-I can’t.”

Chris stops next to his cart and looks at me with a rather boyish smile. “I don’t bite, Stevie.”

Somehow, I doubt that. “It’s not that. I just—I have to study and—”

“Bring your stuff with you. We can turn it into a study session.” Then he ups his smile game and hits me with a toothy one. “I *am* an RN after all. I’d probably be the best study buddy for someone going to nursing school.”

I push my hair behind my ears—the nursing home is literally the only place other than my house I allow my scars to be seen—and sigh. “I already have someone helping me study.”

“Well, bring her too. No pressure or anything, just a coffee between coworkers, maybe some studying, maybe working our way toward becoming friends.”

“*Him.*”

Chris’s smile falters. “Him?”

“Leon.” I nod. “He’s coming over to help me study and—”

“What the hell kind of name is *Leon*?” His tone makes me flinch, something Chris clearly notices because he smoothes down the front of his scrubs and ditches the angry expression. “So, it’s a study date?”

I am officially creeped out and very nervous, but at this point, I’m not looking to add to my list of scary men, so I need to keep the peace so I can leave. “No. He’s just a classmate. He’s having a hard time with the specifics of the cardiovascular system and—”

“It’s one of your easiest subjects.” Chris nods, his tension and anger easing just a bit.

How the hell did he know that?

Maybe he’s overheard me talking to Linnie about school or something.

“Well, I’m disappointed, but I get it. I would have loved to have a study buddy with your work ethic and grades to cram with on a Friday night when I was in nursing school. Rain check?”

“Yeah, sure... rain check.” *A rain check for never.* “I should get going though. It’s time to punch out and my ride is probably waiting.”

Anger briefly flares again in Chris’s eyes, but he quickly covers it with a smile. “Sure thing. Have a good night, Stevie. I’ll see you Wednesday.” I nod as I quickly move to grab my bag from the nurse’s station, but when I’m a mere few feet from my version of freedom, he calls from behind me, “And be careful out there. I heard they found another body.”

Ice floods my veins as I glance back at him, even more so when I see him pull Jolene out from under his cart.

Why the hell does he have Margie’s babydoll?

“Heard it on my way in. Another brunette, just like the one from Friday. Pretty scary.”

With a forced smile and nod, I barely refrain from running out of the lockdown unit.

Everything about that exchange put me on high alert, so much so that I’d rather take my chances with the psycho I know rather than the one I just talked to. I know what to expect from Joker, and again, I’ll take the lesser of two evils.

But when I get out to the parking lot, he isn’t there.

Linnie’s already gone because her Corolla is absent—something else that makes my creep radar scream because Chris said he needed to get the rundown from her. His SUV and a couple other cars are there, but I don’t see Joker or my father’s Suburban he’s been driving.

Great.

I pull my phone from my pocket as I lean against the wall under the only source of light out here, which happens to be a rather dim and flickering flood light. No texts telling me the plan changed, or any missed calls. I know he didn’t forget about me, I’m not that lucky, but it isn’t like Joker to not be waiting for me.

Oh well.

Maybe he got caught up with one of the hangarounds at the clubhouse or something. I'm sure he's on his way and will be here soon enough.

With a sigh, I close out of my text messages and go to pull up Solitaire—I'm not allowed to have social media, so no mindless scrolling for this girl—but I decide to do something else instead.

I switch to my browser and pull up *The Rolling Gazette* and barely get it loaded before the headline fills my screen.

THE HARVESTER OF BONES STRIKES TWICE IN FOUR DAYS!

But as I start reading, I frown.

It was another woman, a brunette like Chris said, who was in her mid-twenties and left brutalized like the last one. She was a waitress at a diner, no criminal history, found in the back of a gas station, and according to early speculation, both of her femurs were accounted for.

This isn't him.

There is no way this was The Harvester. I didn't believe the first woman was, but I *know* this one wasn't. It's a complete 180 from his MO; clean, efficient, albeit over-the-top kills, and the postmortem positioning and signature are missing. He usually kills his victims in a house or apartment or something. He never leaves them outside. And he has never killed a woman, or anyone who wasn't complete and total garbage as a human.

This doesn't fit at all, and I can't believe the media and police are stupid enough to just assume this was our vigilante ghost.

“That's some pretty heavy reading material.”

I jump at the voice behind me, dropping my phone as I spin to see a man that was apparently peeking over my shoulder.

“Sorry.” He smiles, and *wow*. If he didn't startle the complete shit out of me, I'd find that smile beautiful. “Didn't mean to scare you, baby doll.”

I frown at that. *Baby doll*? That seems a little forward. And probably inappropriate since it's almost midnight and we're standing in a dark parking lot in a super shitty part of town.

"Doll face?" He leans against the building and gives me a thoughtful look. "Sweetheart, maybe? Honey could work. What about angel?" He shakes his head. "Nah. Too cliché."

My frown deepens.

Is this guy, this *stranger*, really trying to give me a nickname?

"Aha, I've got it." He snaps his fingers and points at me. "Princess."

My spine stiffens immediately and my hackles raise. "I don't like being called princess. Or anything else really, not by someone I don't know."

"Fair enough. So, no-go on princess."

"What are you—"

"I'll just stick with baby doll until something better comes to me. I tend to go with my gut on these things."

"What are you doing here? Where did you—"

"What's with the heavy reading material?" He bends to pick up my phone and that's when I realize this man is very big.

Big and tall—maybe six foot two or three—in a tight end or wide receiver sort of way, and he even looks like a little bit of a golden boy.

His hair is short but long enough to see its natural curl and bury your fingers in if you were in a position to do so, a dark brown color with a hint of blonde when the streetlight hits just right. His features are almost perfect; thick brows, a Romanesque nose with a hoop in the right side, high cheekbones, strong jaw covered in a light scruff that does nothing to hide matching dimples on either side of a heart-shaped mouth. And they really pop when he smiles, a blinding smile full of perfectly straight white teeth.

This man is incredibly good looking, so much so it's almost like he stepped off the cover of a magazine or romance novel, but everything about how he's dressed contradicts that.

A beat up leather jacket over a solid white hoodie, dark wash jeans with rips at the knees and fraying around the pockets and cuffs. He's wearing heavy biker boots, the steel-toed kind, and I can see the handle of a knife sticking up out of one of his boots thanks to the way his pants are partially tucked into them.

Which should probably make me run back inside the nursing home to wait for Joker there, but for some reason, it doesn't scare me.

Yeah, probably because most of the men I'm around are typically packing more than a hunting knife, and it's not uncommon for most people in Rolling Meadows to carry some sort of protection either, but that's not it.

For whatever reason, this stranger who should definitely scare me, especially in our current situation, just... doesn't.

He doesn't scare me at all really, and I'm not sure if it means I've finally hardened to the point of expecting and embracing the worst from most people without giving a shit, or Chris just broke my creep radar.

"What a load of bullshit," he grunts as he taps the screen of my phone. "Total garbage."

I nod and hold out my hand. "It doesn't fit."

He looks up at me with an arched brow, and my god, how did I miss his eyes before?

They're slightly almond shaped and surrounded by long, thick lashes, but it's the color that has me just blinking at him.

A pale gray. Gray like the color of the sky after a storm passes, and around the pupil and iris is the most striking shade of what can only be described as indigo. I have never seen eyes like his before.

They're stunning, piercing and intense, but also alarming and unnatural.

“What doesn’t fit?” he asks as I slowly take the ancient Apple product from him.

I clear my throat. “The murder. It doesn’t fit The Harvester’s MO.”

“You a fan of the ghost, baby doll?”

“Well, I don’t know if *fan* is the right way to describe it.” *But kind of, since I read all about him and think he’s doing good things.* “But this one and the one from Friday don’t exactly fit what he does.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well...” I glance around to make sure Joker hasn’t pulled up, then fight the urge to push my hair out of my eyes. “The Harvester typically kills horrible people. Men specifically, and neither of these women had any sort of criminal history.”

He nods and leans into the wall again, a grin tugging at his full lips. “Go on.”

“They were too messy. He never leaves a mess, even drains all the blood to make sure of it, and the postmortem pose and signature were missing.” I clear my throat nervously. “Not to mention, The Harvester has never left a victim out in the open like the last one.”

“You really know your stuff.” Now the man smiles at me warmly, like he’s impressed or something, and it makes my belly flip. “Even sound a little defensive of the ghost.”

I shrug. “I don’t think it’s right to put two murders he didn’t commit on him.”

“So, you don’t believe it was him at all? Don’t think he went off script like the media says?”

“No. He’s been doing this too long to suddenly change things so drastically.”

“Serial killers can evolve, though. They can escalate.” He arches a brow in challenge.

“Sure...” I nod. “But not this drastically. Typically there’s a pattern, something to show the change is coming, and The

Harvester of Bones hasn't veered from what he does once over the years. It just feels too different, and I wish the media would pay attention to that."

"You think there's another serial killer out there then?"

"It's Rolling Meadows, isn't it? Murderers and psychopaths are a dime a dozen."

He chuckles. "You got that right, baby doll." Then he looks thoughtful again, those severe eyes searching my face. "What do you think happened Friday?"

My creep radar *definitely* has to be broken. Having a conversation about serial killers with a total stranger who is armed in a dark parking lot should be sending up all kinds of warning signs, but it's not. If anything, I'm almost excited to be talking to him about this, about anything, and I can't help the way I'm a little drawn to how charming and gorgeous he is.

Maybe I finally cracked.

Another shrug. "The Ripper probably stumbled across The Harvester doing his thing, either got mad or jealous or something, then waited until he left and went into the motel room."

"The Ripper?"

My face heats. "Yeah... that's what I've been calling him since Friday. That poor woman was left like Mary Kelly."

"You know your true crime." He grins in approval. "Color me impressed."

"I watch a lot of documentaries."

"So do I, and I tend to agree with your theory."

"You do?"

The man nods as he pushes off the wall. "The women don't belong to him and the cops are ignoring the mountain of evidence that backs that up. I'd even go as far as to say the ghost is being targeted to some degree, toyed with, or—"

“Goaded by The Ripper.” I nod. “I was thinking the same thing. Now that everyone believes the first woman was his, any that follow will get chalked up to him too. And since even serial killers get competitive and protective of their reputations —”

“He’ll keep trying to pin his murders on the ghost to get under his skin.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re a rather brilliant little thing, aren’t you, baby doll?” His smile grows as he steps toward me, but just when he opens his mouth to speak, a truck comes tearing into the parking lot and I turn.

A truck I’m all too familiar with.

“That’s my...” I look back to where the man was, only to find he’s gone. Gone without a trace. Which has me wondering if he was ever here to begin with.

Definitely had to have finally lost my mind.

“Let’s go, princess,” Cal barks from the driver’s side window.

Reluctantly, I stop searching for the charming stranger then hurry over to the black on black Ram idling in front of me.

“I thought Joker was picking me up,” I barely squeak out as I buckle up.

Cal shakes his head. “Got tied up doing something for Prez.”

I just nod.

Small miracles, I suppose.

“Won’t be back for a couple days.”

“Ok.”

“More prospects and patches on the house for now.”

Another absentminded nod as we pull out of the parking lot and my gaze lands on a small flash of orange light.

There, standing in the shadows on the other side of the street, is the charming stranger, lighting a cigarette and grinning at me. And the way those intense eyes gleam in the soft glow of the flame, it makes my belly flip again and sends a little thrill up my spine.

So much for trusting my gut, because something is telling me that man might not be too far off from the rest of the company I keep.

I just can't find it in me to care.



CHAPTER SIX

VICTOR

BEAUREGARD “BEAU THE BUTCHER” *Williams*.

Originally from Alabama. Forty-seven years old. Moved to Colorado after dropping out of high school. Mechanic by trade, and owner of an auto repair shop and junkyard. Widower with one daughter.

My gaze lifts from the documents on my phone to *Beau’s Garage*, and I watch for a minute as a few young guys come stumbling out of the biggest building on the property.

They laugh a bit, push each other around, and when no one else leaves the chop shop masquerading as a legit business, I go back to my phone.

President of the Demon Seeds MC since his hostile takeover about twenty-five-years ago. Multiple arrests for public intoxication, grand theft auto, drugs, guns, pimping, statutory rape, and lewd sexual acts with a minor. Assault and battery, assault with a deadly weapon, aggravated assault, domestic violence. There’s even a couple attempted murder charges on the bastard, but they didn’t seem to stick, just like the more severe charges didn’t earn him the prison time most people would get charged with.

Must have some public servants on the take.

Which isn’t a shocker when it comes to most clubs.

Good old Beau apparently has his hands in multiple cookie jars too, because he has a money laundering business—off the books of course—running out of his office here.

How do I know this?

Little John makes sure I have all the facts, every single detail I need in order to get the job done, and what he doesn't know firsthand or have access to, he calls our mutual friend, Spider, to dig up.

And this file screams of the Goliath Birdeater's handiwork.

There's no other way John would know without a doubt that Beauregard Williams is *taxing* so many businesses in Rolling Meadows, just like he wouldn't be able to confirm one hundred percent that his garage is a chop shop that also cleans stolen guns and cooks meth.

My mentor is good but he's not a young buck anymore, and Beau may be a mean and nasty idiot, but he seems to have a mind for protecting his businesses.

Even though he's clearly holding a church service out of his biggest business right now.

He's been gone most of the week and when he's in town, Beau has been staying at their clubhouse save for quick trips to his house on the other side of town, so to be holding church here is a little strange. But what do I know? It just seems odd since the clubhouse is closer to his house, and he pops in and out of there a lot.

His daughter being the reason for that, I'm sure.

I can't help but grin as I swipe my screen and pull up that part of the file.

Stevie Williams, the Demon Seeds' princess.

When I first started looking through the file Little John gave me, I went right to Beau's list of haunts.

His house, the clubhouse. Work, bars, strip clubs. Where he grocery shops, where he gets gas. Every place Beauregard frequents was listed, and when I saw Rolling Meadows Nursing Home cited with an asterisk, I wasn't sure why.

So, I went to investigate, and damn if I wasn't pleasantly surprised.

Did I know at the time the willowy little slice of heaven standing out back all alone was his daughter? No, and that's

exactly why I decided to approach.

I had seen that sick fucker Jax—Joker, apparently—leave the facility, but I hadn't seen any club affiliation other than that, and I assumed he must have been dropping off his president for some strange fucking reason. Then I sat on that rundown piece of shit building for nearly nine hours with no sign of the bastard and was ready to call it a night when Stevie walked out.

Hair the color of cinnamon and honey caught my eye first, the loose waves hitting just below her shoulders and hanging in her face. She was wearing standard scrubs under a simple light gray zip up hoodie, purple Crocs on her feet, and she had a gigantic hobo bag slung over her shoulder.

All in all, Stevie wasn't anything to write home about at first glance, but once I was directly behind her I knew I was one hundred percent wrong about that.

Subtle curves on a delicate body. A body that was taller than I realized, probably five-six or five-seven, and every inch was soft and lean under sun-kissed skin.

And if that wasn't enough to entice me, once Stevie spun around to face me, god I was so fucked.

First of all, she smelled like Christmas.

Peppermint, cookies, and something a touch citrusy.

In my twisted mind, since I've never celebrated it before, that equates to Christmas; and once she turned around and I was hit with that scent, Stevie became a Christmas present I'd love to unwrap.

But then she looked at me.

Really fucking looked at me, and I was taken aback for a second.

Her eyes are so blue, blue like... almost like an aquamarine color, and they fucking sparkled from underneath light brows and thick lashes. And the fairer tone to her skin, the pretty pink of her Cupid's bow lips, the slight flush to her cheeks, all of it made that blue even more intense.

I was instantly obsessed with this girl and she hadn't even said a word to me yet.

And when she did? Jesus, I got so fucking hard I thought I was going to sprain my dick from the way it was pushing against my fly.

She wasn't scared of me—surprisingly, even though I made her jump—and the fact that Stevie had a little attitude about my pet names for her sent a shot of dopamine straight to my brain.

I don't spend much time with women, not unless I really need to get laid and feel like risking all kinds of shit by doing so, and even then it's quick, to the point, and consists of very few words.

Which is miraculous because I'm a talker, but sex and violence go hand in hand for me, so I have to keep my trap shut or else things get weird and messy, and I don't fucking like messy.

But I do like my women feisty and Stevie's minor snark catered to that.

Then she had to go and impress the fuck out of me, had to *flatter* me with everything she knows about The Harvester of Bones, and I was toast.

She knows how I do things, probably right down to the most minor detail, even seems to have an inkling as to why, and she didn't even hesitate to come to my defense over these last two murders they're trying to pin on me. All with supporting evidence that proves they weren't my kills.

That made my dick even harder and I'm kind of shocked Stevie didn't notice.

I imagine that can be attributed to the way her hair was hanging in her face, or maybe the fact that she had a hard time maintaining eye contact for too long, but either way, Stevie had no clue how turned on I was the entire time we talked. Just like she has no idea she's now mine because of it.

Aside from Little John, I have never met another person that didn't fear me, at least a little bit. I set off alarm bells for

most people, rightfully so, because that sixth sense seemingly everyone but me was born with tells them I'm not quite right.

Sure, I can acknowledge the fact I'm devastatingly handsome and extremely charismatic, but that isn't enough to balance out the crazy hiding underneath no matter how carefully I've crafted the proverbial mask I wear. And most people stay away because they pick up on that crazy almost immediately in spite of it.

Even when I met Spider and his crew face to face for the first time, a group of men that can be called killers in their own right, they were leery, and I know their old ladies thought John was nuts for hanging around someone like me.

They didn't know for sure Little John was affiliated with the ghost at first, didn't have concrete proof or anything before Spider went digging, but they suspected it after a few bodies that were linked to the WKMC turned up with my signature—they just couldn't pinpoint the *why*. Then, because his brain is just as gigantic as the rest of him, Fin MacAllister connected the dots and I was so damn impressed—not surprised, but impressed—that I couldn't keep my trap shut when he came looking for me after shit hit the fan with his son.

So, I spilled the beans about everything except my real name, told those hardened barbarians I am The Harvester of Bones and have been doing freelance work for John for the better part of twelve years, and that I absolutely went after those prospects and Rosco Shapiro out of respect for their club and my loyalty to our grizzly bear in common.

Saying no one knows about me and what I do isn't exactly true anymore, but telling the Kings, whether they like me or not, is basically the same thing as keeping it a secret. They'll never say anything about me or my line of work, they'll call on me when they need to, and I can keep doing what I do for Little John when he asks without worrying about most of the clubs or authorities getting in my way.

But learning the things they did, coupled with the alarm bells I triggered, kept everyone on the defensive for quite a while despite why they called me in the first place.

Which was totally warranted, but after I happily helped Spider and his brothers handle the shit with his girl and their son—including a clean up ala the ghost—I seemingly earned their trust and a place in their club, if I ever want it.

So to have someone as beautiful and sweet as Stevie look at me without an ounce of fear—after I startled her, anyway—and almost get rather protective of my alter ego, yeah, the little dove is *mine*.

Hence the new nickname that is definitely going to stick.

I'm sure she's just so used to being surrounded by murderers, though, that it doesn't move her meter anymore, but I'm taking it as a compliment. It makes me feel all kinds of weird things, but I'm not mad at it.

It does complicate things a bit, however.

For starters, she's the daughter of my recently acquired mark.

And while it's allowed me to indulge my obsession by keeping tabs on her while tracking Beau, it's also presented questions I usually don't give a shit about asking.

Ones like: *how would she feel if she knew I was hired to kill her father? Or, would she think I was using her for information if she knew I was sent to track him?* I never give a shit about things like that but considering how close to home this will hit for her, it's had me thinking.

Especially since I don't know *why* Little John's mysterious old friend wants the fucker dead.

He's a bad guy for sure. I mean, his nickname sounds worse than mine, and ultimately it doesn't really matter much to me, but I've found myself taking Stevie's potential feelings on the subject into account and that's going to make me sloppy.

Sloppy for me, anyway.

Then there's the little matter of *The Ripper*, as she so adorably put it.

I have to figure out who this person is that's trying to ruin my reputation, figure out how to avoid having them discover who I really am, and ultimately blow apart the good thing I have going for me, all before I can go after Beau the way I need to. And I'd really hate to have Stevie get caught up in all of that and possibly wind up dead because of it.

There are those damn emotions again.

But they're true, nonetheless.

I don't want to see anything bad happen to Stevie by inserting myself into her world, but the problem with that is, I can't stay away now either. And not just because Little John asked me to dive into this shit with her dad.

I've been watching her all week. Literally, all week. I ran into her Monday and it's now Friday, and I've learned her routine because I've been tracking her just as closely as I've been tracking her asshat sperm donor.

Which is *another* complication in all of this.

Sitting outside her house before she goes to class, waiting outside said class and following her to work, then standing around watching from across the street until Stevie gets off shift has definitely thrown a wrench in things.

It did, anyway, but now I'm managing my time a little better.

OCD doesn't just mean I'm a neat freak. Nor does it only mean that I hyperfixate on something—or someone—until I can't focus on anything else before spiraling into the pits of paranoia and every possible scenario conceivable.

Having that diagnosis, the only *correct* diagnosis I received while living at St. Pat's, means I'm also good at sticking to a routine in order to balance my various obsessions.

And that's how I gradually created a routine that has allowed me to successfully stalk Stevie *and* her shitbag father over the last few days.

While she's at school or once she gets settled at work, and I know she'll be in one place for an extended period of time, I

leave Stevie and take off to follow good old Beauregard around so I'm still doing what needs to be done regarding the two of them, but I've been slacking in my serial killer search.

Not that I can do a whole hell of a lot until another body turns up, but The Ripper hasn't struck again since Monday, and while I'm probably the most qualified to profile the asshole, I can't do that until I get to a crime scene before the cops do.

Which sounds tricky, I know, but I have a theory about my friendly competition and I'll have a better idea if I'm right depending on how tonight goes.

Sick minds think alike.

I close out my files and check the time.

11:19 p.m.

Time to head out to see my little dove.

Or it would be, anyway, but that drunk bastard she calls *dad* just came stomping out of the garage, and he looks like he's on a mission.

So, I start my car, but switch to the listening device app—courtesy of a Goliath Birdeater and his bugs—on my phone and make sure it starts transcribing as I listen to Beau flap his big fat gums.

“Gotta head to Sabine Woods tonight. Jesus needs to see me.”

I frown.

He's been visiting the newly crowned president of Cobra Cons a lot this week, but I haven't been able to figure out why. Or why they're meeting in Sabine Woods knowing damn well that it's the Kings' home base when I'm sure it would be easier to do everything here in Rolling Meadows.

Both clubs are from here originally and still seem to call this shithole home, even though the newer one had all but dissolved after I handled those two prospects that took Cy's girl, blowing the Cobras wide open and creating a need to scatter. Birch Creek is Python territory so no one fucks around

there, and typically Sabine Woods is off the table for the same sort of reasons, save for everyone hitting up MACs from time to time. So the fact that Beau is making it a regular stop to meet Jesus is just stupid.

Feather Lake seems more like a neutral area, if you ask me. It's outside of all three cities by at least a half hour, no other club has claimed it as far as I know, and it's even smaller than Birch Creek. *That* seems like a much better meeting place for two moronic MC presidents to get their rocks off on the regular.

But what do I know?

There's probably some fucked up reason for the two presidents to meet right under the WKMC's noses, and until I stop him, I'll leave Beau to be stupid over there.

Sometimes he goes solo, other times he takes his sergeant at arms—Cal Moreland, forty-six years old, Colorado native, and convicted killer—or a few enforcers, specifically that completely insane fuckstick, Jax, and each time I've listened to him coordinate, it sounds like he both hates it and needs to do it.

I'll never understand club politics, and that's exactly why I probably won't be joining one at any point.

“No. No, I need you to stay this time. She doesn't work this weekend and I don't want the bitch trying to run off or some shit.”

My hackles raise as I lift my eyes and narrow them on the fat fuck pacing by his bike.

Considering the fact that his wife has been dead for twenty years, it's probably safe to assume Beau is talking about Stevie. And while I know he keeps her on a pretty short leash—president's daughter and all—I've yet to hear him talk about her like that.

And I don't fucking like it.

“In the house, yeah. No fucking around though. You make sure she doesn't leave all weekend, then get your ass to the

clubhouse after you drop her off at that fucking school on Monday.”

Oh, I am going to enjoy killing him when I finally get my chance.

Especially since I know he’s talking to his dim-witted guard dog.

Joker—Jax Park—is an evaluated and diagnosed criminally insane bastard that raped and killed his own mother when he was seventeen, the same night he sodomized and beat his father to death with a broomstick. I’d put money on him having more numbers under his belt, though, and since he was a minor when he was charged and served his time in the juvenile detention center, he was let out at twenty-one only to fall right in with the Demon Seeds. He’s forty-one now, and you can’t convince me that the shit with his parents over two decades ago was a one-off.

I know his type all too well. The parents are usually where guys like us start.

And I can’t for the fucking life of me understand why Beau keeps putting Joker in charge of his daughter.

Then again, it’s not like Beauregard Williams is exactly a standup guy gunning for father of the year.

Which is why I barely sit there long enough to finish listening to his conversation, wait to make sure he’s headed toward Sabine Woods, then take off in the opposite direction to make sure Stevie leaves the nursing home ok.

But when I get there, I’m too late.

It’s damn near midnight and I don’t see her or that fucking Suburban anywhere.

I swear to god, if that twisted lip motherfucker lays one finger on Stevie, if he even breathes in her direction, I will fucking kill Joker before he knows what hit him.

If that fuckstick thinks for one second he has any right to touch what’s mine in any capacity, he is *fucking dead*.



CHAPTER SEVEN

VICTOR

I PARKED my car a few blocks over in a vacant lot again, and it's a damn good thing I did because as I walk through the side yard of an empty house across the street from Stevie's place, I can see it's crawling with prospects.

Wannabe club members are sitting on the steps, leaning against the front of the house, horsing around on the porch and being annoying as fuck in the yard.

There's usually two to four on the house when Joker is here, and as soon as he is they tend to take off, but since that bastard's borrowed wheels are sitting in the driveway, I'm not sure why they haven't split.

And that leads me to believe not only is Beau Williams overprotective of his princess, but there's a good chance this business with Jesus is stirring up some concerns.

Big ones judging by these numbers.

I won't know what those concerns are until I stop obsessing over his daughter, though, because doing that has prevented me from following him when he goes out of town.

Stevie is definitely complicating things, but I can't seem to give a shit about anything but her.

Her dad will get what's coming to him and I'll find The Ripper, and Stevie will be mine when it's all said and done. Win-win for me, no shits need to be given.

I crouch down behind a bush, light a cigarette, and watch the dumbasses continue acting like dumbasses while I figure out how to get to my girl.

Her bedroom is upstairs in the back of the house, farthest away from where I'm currently sitting. I can't go around the abandoned house because the one next to it has a family of four inside currently watching tv in the living room and they'd definitely see me walking through the yard. If I walk across the street I'm basically a sitting duck because every last one of those prospect idiots would see me, and they'd definitely shoot my ass once I started walking to the back of their president's house.

Straight ahead of me is the garage, and if I wait until they leave or are relatively distracted, I should be able to cross undetected—just like the other times I decided to act on this need to peep Stevie close range—and move around to the back of the house with ease.

Problem is, there haven't been this many prospects lingering around before and most of the time they're gone or inside by now.

Dragging my smoke deep into my lungs on a sigh, I start searching for another point of entry when the front door swings open and Joker comes walking out.

“Alright, bootlickers! Playtime is over!”

Bootlickers?

What a moron.

Joker plants his hands on his hips as he looks around at the prospects all scurrying to attention. He squints as he surveys them, then after a few minutes he starts barking orders again.

“You two, head back to the clubhouse. Prez is planning a party next week and we need to start getting inventory on shit.” Joker nods toward another wannabe. “You, check in with Cal and see if there's anything that needs dealing with tonight. If not, you're good and can take the night off, and you four.” He points to the guys on the porch. “You're taking shifts here. Two inside downstairs, two out here. You need anything, now is the time to get it, cause once you're watching the house, you don't leave til I say.”

“Can we make a food run?”

Joker nods. “But no fucking around. Grab your grub then come right back. If I find out you stopped for pussy or beer, you’re in the shit, got it?”

The prospects all give a firm *yes, sir* before they scatter, and Joker stands on the porch for a few seconds before he spins on his heel and heads back inside.

Perfect.

Looks like the universe is on my side tonight.

If he’s the only one I have to worry about being upstairs, then I won’t have any issue checking on my girl before I take off to try to catch Beau. Not that I want to leave Stevie alone with that sick fuck of an enforcer, but he’ll probably just do what he’s been doing all week; falling asleep in the bedroom across the hall after he jerks off for almost an hour.

Dude is such a bastard he can’t even get himself off.

I wait about fifteen minutes for everyone to do what they were told before I smash out my cigarette and start creeping toward Stevie’s house, my heart rate kicking up a notch as I do.

As a matter of fact, the closer I get to the two story farmhouse, the faster my heart beats.

My stomach churns, my palms begin to sweat, and some voice in the back of my head is telling me something is wrong.

Really fucking wrong since I don’t think I’ve ever felt like this before in my life.

As casually as possible, I walk up the driveway, my heart in my throat the entire time, and just when I’m about to clear the front porch, movement has me darting forward.

I flatten myself against the side of the house and wait, listening intently as the front door opens and one of the numbskulls on watch steps out onto the porch. I hear the click of a lighter, followed by another set of footsteps, then the front door closes.

“You think we should say something to Cal?” one dipshit asks.

Then the other replies. “No way. I’m not looking to have Joker come after my ass cause we narc on him.”

“Yeah, me either, but don’t you think—”

“Just drop it, man. It ain’t any of our business what he does up there, and I don’t want to blow my shot at joining the club if I open my mouth.”

“But you heard what Prez said. The princess is off limits, even to someone like Joker. He shouldn’t be alone—”

“Quit your bitching and enjoy the fact that this is earning our patches. He wants to risk his own shit by banging that freak, fine, but I’m keeping my trap shut.”

I don’t bother to keep listening.

No, instead I take off like a bat out of hell to the back of the house, do a quick scan to make sure no one else is around, then race toward Stevie’s window.

It’s open, thank fuck, but getting to it is going to be tricky. Unfortunately, the tree I’ve been climbing to look in on her at night isn’t close enough to get me to her window, and the only other option is a beat to hell trellis that most likely can’t support someone my size.

But the second I hear what sounds like furniture crashing and a muffled scream from that open window, I lunge at it.

Fuck it.

If the trellis breaks, so be it. I’ll just climb the fucking rain gutter if I have to.

I move quickly and efficiently, shimmying up the goddamn trellis as fast as I can. It starts to creak about halfway, but the sound means jackshit when I can clearly hear Stevie crying and begging for help.

And my god, the level of rage I feel when I finally grab the window sill and hoist myself up... it’s nothing short of volcanic.

The room is trashed; the mattress is cockeyed and hanging off the frame, the sheets twisted and ripped off in places.

Stevie's lounge and ottoman are flipped over, the chair most likely broken, and her dresser is completely disheveled, her jewelry box and everything else from the top of it strewn all over the floor. And Joker... Joker has my girl on her back stretched out over her desk.

He's got her wrists pinned up over her head in one hand, her legs trapped between his and there's some sort of makeshift gag in her mouth, which is definitely what's muffling her cries.

The deadman's free hand points in her face as he pants, "Fighting makes it better, princess. I like it when they fight. Makes things more fun for me."

He slaps her as I climb through the window and I swear to Christ I see fucking red. Especially when Stevie's crystal blue eyes find mine and go wide.

But I shake my head and lift a finger to my lips.

Quiet, little dove. I got you.

She doesn't nod, doesn't even move, but I know she understands. Stevie knows I'm here to help and the questions dancing in her eyes—*why? and how?* being the most obvious—will wait until this is handled.

I reach down and pull the knife from my boot as I quietly inch toward them, Joker deciding now is a great time to talk.

"I told you I'd make you mine, Stevie. Told you time and time again. But you didn't fucking listen and now you have to pay." He slaps her again, then drags his hand over her throat, down toward her breasts, one of which is exposed through a large rip in her shirt, and when that fucker moves to touch more of what is mine, I snap. "You are so—"

I drive my knife into Joker's side as I wrap my right arm around his neck and yank him away from Stevie. I squeeze his throat as I pull the blade out, only to stab him again right in the kidney. I stab him a third, then fourth time while Joker claws at my arm, but when he should be ready to pass the fuck out from my choke hold, he cranks his arm forward then sends it back, fucking elbowing me in the face instead.

“Fuck!” I bark as my vision dances.

Joker spins away from me, clutching his side while he gasps for air, an angry look on his scarred face. “Who the fuck are you?”

I blink several times before my eyes land on a terrified Stevie, my little dove still against the desk and in too much shock to move. She’s relatively unharmed, and though I’m relieved, it doesn’t do Joker any favors that I can see his handprint on her flawless cheek.

And that’s why I don’t respond with words.

No, I just lunge at the fucker and send my knife right into the soft flesh of his beer gut.

Joker’s blood bubbles out of his mouth as he meets my eyes, but instead of fear or any other emotion I expect to see, I’m met with a blind rage that almost matches mine.

This bastard is determined, I’ll give him that.

Which is why I’m not surprised at all when I push the blade in all the way to the hilt and Joker still manages to get his hands around my throat and starts to squeeze.

Motherfucker is trying to strangle me with an eight inch blade sticking out of his gut.

And it’s working because I’m starting to see spots. Even as I start pushing back against Joker, using my strength and my body to get him toward the wall. If I can, then... then I...

A crash and a grunt has the grip on my throat loosening and as soon as I’m able, I stagger back a few steps and start gasping for air.

Motherfucker is a deadman.

Especially when my vision clears in time to see Joker turn on Stevie, who’s standing there holding pieces of her jewelry box in her shaking hands.

Did she just...

My eyes barely come into focus as several things click.

Stevie's jewelry is scattered all over the floor and she's hanging onto the broken pieces with trembling fists. The jewelry box is all but destroyed and her knuckles are white from how tight they're clenched on the remnants of wood.

Joker is still somehow on his feet but he's dazed, and even though he's trying to hold his guts in at his side, he's still going after her because *Stevie hit him over the head with an heirloom in order to help me.*

This girl swallowed her fear, fought through her shock, grabbed the nearest object she could find, and used it to fucking *save me.*

And that is the exact moment my adrenaline surges for all of the wrong—and a few of the right—reasons.

I push off of her dresser, lift my knife and in one swift move, I stab Joker right through his spinal column at the base of his neck.

With a subtle twist of my wrist, I wiggle my knife to make sure it's in far enough, the bone and cartilage separating from the nerves with a satisfying scrape. So satisfying in fact, that when I yank my knife free and Joker falls to the ground like a sack of potatoes, I chuckle down at him.

“Dumbass,” I grunt as my chest heaves.

I've never had someone fight me like that before, and I can honestly say I didn't fucking like it. It proves how sloppy I could get with a distraction like Stevie around and... *Stevie.*

My eyes dart from the pile of shit on her floor to my girl, and what I see? The gorgeous carnage, the morbidly sexy little creature before me? Goddamn, it turns my cock to stone.

Her cinnamon and honey hair is a mess, her bright blue eyes are wild. Stevie's cheeks are stained with tears and blood, the spray that shot out of Joker's mouth a gruesome constellation on her sun-kissed skin and dotting the scar on the right side of her face I hadn't noticed before. The front of her t-shirt is ripped open to the hem, her left breast exposed, her pretty pink nipple peaked and smeared in blood. Stevie's chest is pumping as hard as mine is, and even though her stare is

locked on the lifeless bastard that attacked her, her hands have stopped trembling.

And all of that makes me want to fuck her right here and now.

But, boner be damned, I have to make sure she's ok. "Are you..." I clear my throat, pissed that I sound hoarse because it fucking hurts. "Little dove, are you—"

"You killed him," she whispers.

I glance back down at Joker and tilt my head. "He has maybe another minute of his mouth opening and closing like that, but he's mostly dead."

"You... you killed Joker..."

"Stevie." I sigh as I lift my gaze. God, I really hope she doesn't go into shock over this. "Little dove, I had—"

"No one has ever..." She swallows hard and pins me with the brightest blue eyes. "You killed him because he was hurting me. No one has ever done anything like that for me before."

If I didn't see her blown out pupils dilate further, I would never have thought for one second that watching me kill someone could be arousing, but I fucking saw that shit and it has my dick throbbing in my jeans.

I stare into those fucking gorgeous eyes a little longer before my gaze travels over Stevie again. The bloodstains, the ruined shirt, the beautiful body hiding underneath. And fuck, I didn't realize it before, but Stevie is only wearing that oversized t-shirt and a pair of cotton panties, nothing but miles of silky skin and a few more scars on display.

She truly is a morbidly sexy little creature and I don't think I have ever wanted anything more than I want her.

I drag my eyes back up her body, lingering a little over the thin fabric covering her pussy, and when the unmistakable sign of her arousal becomes clear, they snap to hers. "Are you wet?"

A flush races up her neck and chest but Stevie doesn't respond.

I grin. "Are you wet for me right now, little dove?"

She just nods as she blushes.

Fucking beautiful.

"Watching me fight that piece of shit, kill that motherfucker, turned you on, Stevie?" I ask as I step over his body and move toward her. "You liked the way I worked so much it made your pussy all achy and dripping for me?"

Another nod as she backs toward the wall.

"Tell me how wet you are, Stevie. Tell me how empty you feel, how needy your cunt is. Tell me how bad your pussy aches, how the only thing that will make it better is me." I cover her body with mine as she bumps into the wall with a soft gasp I'd love to swallow up. Pressing my hips to hers, I brace myself with one hand then lift the other to her cheek. "Tell me how bad you want me to fuck your sweet little pussy right now, dead body, blood and all."

"So bad," Stevie gasps again as I roll my hips against hers. "Please."

I trail a finger down her scarred cheek, dragging the drops of blood across the beautifully marbled flesh to her lips. I smudge it over the lower one before moving further to her chin, then her throat, lower still to that teardrop-shaped breast where I circle her puckered nipple slowly.

"Tell me, little dove."

Stevie inhales sharply as the pad of my thumb barely grazes the pert tip. "Please. Please, fuck me."

With a grin, I dip my chin and bring my lips closer to hers as I pinch her nipple. "You want me to fuck you, baby? Want me to make the ache go away by fucking your tight little pussy while we're covered in blood?"

She nods and stares into my eyes, tilting her head just enough for our lips to touch.

“Say the words, Stevie. You want me to make the ache go away and fill you so fucking full I’ll be imbedded in your soul; want me to fuck you hard and deep until every inch of you is mine, you say the goddamn words.”

“Please.” Her hands move to my sides before they slide to the front of my jeans. “Please. Fuck me. Make the ache go away. Take away my pain and make me yours.”

God help me, I fucking will.

I crush my mouth to Stevie’s the second her last word is out, my hands immediately dropping to her hips where I dig my fingers into the softest flesh. And when my girl moans into my mouth, her kiss just as brutal as mine, I snap.

I hoist Stevie up against the wall while I own her fucking mouth, pressing her back flat against the drywall. We nip and lick, bite and suck. Our kisses turn fierce, possessive, *branding*, and within minutes I feel my girl unbuckling my belt and making quick work of my fly.

“Shit,” she hisses as one hand wraps around my shaft, the other shoving my jeans down down over my ass. “Holy shit you’re—oh!” Stevie gasps when I bite her jaw.

I’m pierced.

Pierced in a few places, so I’m assuming it was that or my size that surprised her, but regardless of what it was specifically, Stevie seems to like my cock.

And that makes me grin. “I’m going to fill you up, stretch your pussy wide and make you fucking mine, Stevie. That’s what I’m going to do, and that’s the only thing you need to worry about.”

A throaty moan leaves her swollen lips as Stevie wraps her arms around my neck, my hand moving between us to push that drenched cotton to the side, her core practically gushing down her thighs.

Fuck.

Fuck, this can’t be real.

I must finally be delusional because I have never been with a woman that was this turned on before and it is doing all kinds of things to me.

Knowing that Stevie, the woman I claimed as mine before she knew it was going to happen, is this aroused, this fucking wet and ready for me, there aren't even words for what it's doing to me.

Stevie *wants* me, and she wants me in a way that no one else ever has because no one knows what she does now. No one *really* knows what I do, and if they did they sure as hell wouldn't want to fuck me for it.

But Stevie does.

Fuck.

Without warning, my hips snap forward and I'm buried to hilt inside the tightest pussy I've ever felt.

"Oh!" She cries out. "Oh my god!"

"Not god," I groan as I pull my hips back before slamming into her again. "*Ghost.*"

"Yes." Stevie's fingers tangle in my hair tightly then pull when I angle her hips and bottom out on my thrust.

My pace is even; hard and deep, but slow and steady, and I already don't want this to end. I don't want to finish and have to leave, don't want to stop fucking her or having Stevie kiss me the way she is. I don't want to come inside this gorgeous woman only to have her immediately regret fucking me after she fully grasps what I've done. What we've both done.

But it can't be helped because with each pump of my hips, my climax becomes more urgent.

In and out, forceful and deep.

I lift Stevie higher against the wall and kiss her harder, nipping at her jaw before sinking my teeth into the side of her neck. I bite my girl hard enough to leave a mark and Stevie just moans low, the sound both sweet and feral.

My cock hardens to steel when I suck on her skin, thickening inside her perfect pussy as I bite down again and her walls spasm. Stevie's cunt flutters, spasms and contracts as it gushes around my cock, and it drives me fucking mad. It is driving me wild that my girl is coming, coming hard with a shout as I leave my mark on her skin.

I lose my rhythm at that, faltering a bit as I *feel* Stevie orgasm around me, and my thrusts become jerky and punishing over the fact that Stevie *wants me* to mark her. The blood, the violence, the possession. The fact that all of it does it for my girl and has her coming all over my cock, it fucking slays me.

My balls draw up tight as I pound into Stevie. Heat races down my spine, my vision goes white and every inch of my body hums with power. A power I have never known before, one that will easily become a new obsession I can't get enough of.

"Oh my... shit! Oh, I'm coming again!" Stevie gasps against my temple.

I don't think she actually stopped coming because I can *feel* my girl's honey coating my cock and dripping down *my* thighs.

Which is precisely when I detonate.

Stevie's cum rushing around my cock, running down my thighs, her lips swollen from my kisses as they find mine once again. She all but screams into my mouth as she comes, as our tongues dance and teeth clash, and when Stevie's arms tighten around my neck to pull me as close as possible, I fucking explode.

I slam into her once, twice, three times as rope after rope of my cum fires into her core, her pussy that is choking the life out of me, practically begging for my climax as she pulls it from me.

My pace finally evening out again, I pump my hips slowly and wring out every last drop of pleasure, every last ounce of bliss before the shit hits the fan.

“Wow...” Stevie sighs as I press my forehead to her throat.

I’m sure that’s going to be followed by *what the fuck did I just do? Please remove your dick from my pussy and get out so I can call the cops.* I don’t expect this to go any other way really. Who in their right mind would knowingly have sex with a murderer? I’m sure this was just some quickie driven by adrenaline or fear. Stevie is too smart, too—

“You’re not going to rush out of here now, are you?”

Slowly, I lift my head and meet her glassy, lust-filled eyes with a frown.

She bites her lip. “I mean, if you have to go... I get that, but, I...”

“You what?”

“I don’t really want you to.”

My brows shoot up my forehead as I blink. “You don’t want me to go?”

Stevie shakes her head.

“Because I have to clean all this up or...”

Christ, I didn’t realize I hadn’t seen her truly smile until right now because the one she’s giving me, though small, is fucking stunning.

“No, not really. I don’t know how I’m going to do that, but it’s not why I want you to stay.”

“Then why?”

Her smile grows and her arms tighten around my neck as Stevie leans toward me and brushes her lips against mine. “I just do.”

I may be grinning when I kiss my girl back, but she just sealed my fate. I am totally fucked over Stevie Williams, but I’ll be damned if I’m at all upset about it. I just know nothing good will come of it for either of us.

STEVIE FELL ASLEEP ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER I FIXED HER bed.

I righted the mattress, anyway, and that's more than I planned on doing to it after we fucked.

Well, let me rephrase.

It wasn't what I *expected* to be doing after we fucked.

She's mine now, mine for always whether she realizes it or not, and the way Stevie looked at me while she asked me to stay after the hottest, most depraved sex of my life—that she was totally into—only solidified that.

So, naturally I expected to give her a minute before we fucked again.

I was ready. Fuck, I was so ready, and even though my cock had softened, looking at the mess I made of Stevie, the mess I made of her room, it had my dick stirring to life once again pretty quickly. But then my girl yawned and something else took over.

Protectiveness, I guess?

It's not something I'm familiar with anymore but it's the only way to describe the *something else* that put my instincts on autopilot.

I fixed her mattress and stripped the sheets because that piece of shit Joker touched them, then turned to find clean ones. But by the time I needed to ask her where they were, Stevie was curled up and passed out on her bed.

It took a minute for me to grasp why she was so tired, I won't lie about that.

The sex was phenomenal and addictive, and I couldn't understand why she wasn't buzzing with energy like me.

Then my knowledge of the human body kicked in.

Stevie had been attacked. She was literally fighting for her life when I climbed through that window, and between that and watching me kill Joker before banging our brains out, she most likely had an extremely epic adrenaline crash.

The fear, the shock. The pain. The orgasms. All of it made for a lethal cocktail, and once she felt safe enough, my girl drifted to sleep.

And no, I won't address the shit that happened in my chest over knowing some psychotic killer like me made Stevie feel safe.

Nope, I will not.

But once I realized my chances of banging my girl again were put on hold, I started cleaning up the mess.

Thankfully—and weirdly enough—Stevie keeps a box of tall kitchen trash bags under her bathroom sink, and I used those to start handling what couldn't be salvaged.

The jewelry box, a few other trinkets, her bedding. All of that, along with my jacket and hoodie went right into trash bags. Then I broke down her chair and ottoman and bagged them up too. The garbage will need to go back with me to be disposed of properly but I have to find the right time to do that, so for now it's sitting in a pile in Stevie's closet.

From there, I started really cleaning.

Hopefully her house will be empty tomorrow at some point, because I got real sloppy tonight.

Everything that could be saved but needs my *special touch* that comes in the form of the tools I have at my place was put into a separate bag and set aside by the window so I remember to take it when I leave. I straightened out the furniture the best I could, made sure to scour every accessible inch of the room for anything out of place, and when I was satisfied, I checked on my girl.

Stevie is still fast asleep, which is for the best because what I have to do next isn't pretty.

And it's exactly why I'm standing in the middle of her room, totally naked, hands on my hips staring down at Joker the Jackass.

I have to get him out of here somehow. I definitely can't leave his nasty corpse for Stevie to wake up to. The carpet is already going to be a nightmare to figure out, but again, I need the house to be empty before I can really scrub the room the way I do with the rest of my kill scenes.

I don't want to cause any problems for Stevie.

With a sigh, I bend over and grab Joker's ankles, then start whistling as I drag him into the bathroom.

I'll get all of the big shit out of the way tonight, then I'll kiss my little dove goodbye and wait impatiently as fuck until I can see her again, since the next time I'll be here this house has to be a ghost town so I can work.

Only after that will I reiterate to Stevie that she's mine now, and when I do, I can safely say I won't need to kill anyone in order to justify having sex with her.

They're both wants, *needs* really, and they're separate, but it'll be explosive when they combine. I want to kill, need to do it, but I want Stevie more; and just thinking about that makes me want to bury myself inside her all over again right this second.

But she's resting, and I have work to do.

The body isn't going to dispose of itself, after all.



CHAPTER EIGHT

STEVIE

“GOTTA MAKE A STOP.”

I jump as Cal’s voice fills the cab of his truck but I try to hide it as I nod. “Sure.”

He pulls into the hardware store parking lot, but doesn’t turn off the truck or get out. Cal just sits there, white-knuckling the steering wheel and staring straight ahead.

Sometimes, in rare moments like these, I truly do believe Cal isn’t everything I think he is.

A cold blooded killer still? Yes. Calvin Moreland was convicted of second degree murder for beating Rochelle’s ex-husband to death with his bare hands. Don’t ask me how that qualifies as second degree, or how he only served two years of his sentence, but that’s what happened and I know it to be fact.

The reason he killed her ex? Because that guy tried to kill Rochelle first.

He was another club member, another horrible man with no moral compass, and when the then twenty-eight-year-old Cal saw him choke Rochelle until she turned blue, he lost his shit.

Cal killed that man in a blind rage but I can’t really hold it against him. Not when the reason for it was justified in my opinion.

And yeah, he’s killed more men since then, lots of them, but I stay out of that.

Sometimes, though, when it’s just me and Cal in a situation like this, I can’t help but think maybe he isn’t like

Beau. Sometimes I feel like Cal is just as much a victim of circumstance as I am, and even a hardened criminal—a killer—like him is trapped in a lifestyle he never asked for either.

“I can—”

“Me and Rochelle...” His eyes flick to mine briefly before he stares out the windshield again. “We’re leaving for a run tomorrow.”

I nod slowly and try to hide my frown.

Tomorrow is Monday, and while club runs can typically bleed into the week, they usually start on a weekend so that’s a little strange, but now I’m pretty sure I know where this is going.

“Should only be a couple days tops, and we were hoping...”

“Of course.” I smile a little. “I’ll be more than happy to keep Prince.”

He nods. “Already ran it past Beau. He’s fine with it, but you gotta stay home. No school or work til we’re back.”

Which is fine.

There isn’t class on Monday or Wednesday this week because my professor is on vacation. Tuesday I can just email that professor and work from home, and I can probably use a couple of vacation days at work if I need to.

Honestly, I’d still take the time off even if I couldn’t because hanging out with Prince is one of the very few bright spots in my otherwise bleak existence.

“We’ll drop him off tomorrow morning.”

“I can make him breakfast before school. As long as...”

Cal nods. “Beau is heading the run himself. Be gone just as long as we are.”

Another bright spot.

My father has been gone a lot lately, dealing with other clubs on new business and stuff but even if he was home, Beau

wouldn't beat me in front of Prince. And considering I was a little older than him when my father started doing that, I'm inclined to believe five-years-old is probably the cutoff before Beau stops caring.

He doesn't think twice about beating me in front of King anymore, so it's only a matter of time.

Which makes me wonder... "What about—"

"King will come over when he gets out of school."

I nod. "Great. I'll make sure he gets his homework done. Is there anything you need me to do with the boys while you're gone?"

"Just make sure they get their schoolwork done and keep them safe. Same as always."

I've been babysitting for Cal and Rochelle ever since I was old enough to do it.

It was forced on me at first, a situation my father demanded when I was only ten-years-old, but I didn't care at all because King was the first kid I was ever allowed to spend time with outside of school, and the five year age gap was never an issue.

In the DSMC, all kids are homeschooled until high school. Beau's paranoia knows no bounds, and when I was old enough to start preschool, he said the only way it could happen was if I was homeschooled then made that a requirement for everyone with kids. It started as a way to keep us protected, and by the time I was almost six it was a form of control, but when my mom died, it became a way to get me out of his hair without stepping outside the MC.

And it's how I wound up so close to Rochelle before she was fixing me up on a regular basis.

She wanted to be a teacher but she married her ex when she was seventeen and he was just as bad as my father, so he didn't allow it. But when Beau implemented the homeschooling thing, Rochelle jumped at the chance to help my mother teach the kids at the clubhouse and she's been doing it ever since.

Once my mom died, Rochelle became more than my teacher, though.

She's the one who taught me how to try to conduct myself as the daughter of the Demon Seeds' president; the one who tried to help me avoid getting *lectured* by explaining how I should act in order to do it. And Rochelle was the one who took me shopping for bras when I started to need them; the one who helped me through my first period at eleven, and she's the one who explained all the things about boys and sex and life that my mother would have told me if she were still around.

Rochelle Moreland took on a role with me I don't think she ever intended to take and that's exactly why when she got pregnant with King not long after her and Cal got married, I was excited for her.

Sometimes, when I missed my mom so much or when Beau would beat me delirious, I'd pretend she and Cal were my parents. Don't get me wrong, Cal has always scared me, but I saw how he was with King, how he was throughout the pregnancy, and how he actively participates in his son's life. He dotes on Rochelle and their boys, treats them like gold and never ever lays a hand on them. Scary or not, the way Cal is with his family is everything I've always wanted from my father, and Rochelle is everything I briefly had with my mother.

They are what I secretly prayed for, and even though I never got it, I lived vicariously through them anyway.

I still do, even at twenty-three-years old, and I love their sons like brothers.

"I will. King and Prince are always great for me."

A muscle in Cal's jaw ticks and I swear he's biting his tongue but it passes quickly before his blue eyes swing my way again. "Gonna have new patches and prospects on the house this week."

My stomach drops at his words, but not because of my new security detail.

No, it's the reason *why* I have to have a new security detail that makes me panic.

Joker is dead and I fucked the guy who killed him.

Thankfully—or not, depending on how you look at it—my bedroom is still a crime scene that rivals most I've seen in my true crime documentaries, but Beau is still gone so no one has been in there but me.

My mysterious one-night stand cleaned up quite a bit before he left, even took care of my busted armchair and ottoman, but the carpet is ruined and stained by what would clearly be seen as blood to even the untrained eye. Not to mention, there is spray on the wall and drops in other various locations, all of which were scrubbed but not enough to be able to ignore what they are.

I wasn't expecting my very own ghost to do what he did after he killed for me, but I was wrong about that and not just in terms of fucking me up against the wall and successfully delivering my first purely sex-induced orgasms post murder.

My cheeks flame at the memory.

The way my ghost claimed me in a filthy and depraved, almost primal, act after he saved my life and ended another. How he came to my rescue when no one else has ever given me a second thought. Everything he said, the way he both brutalized and cherished my body, how he left a mark on my neck that I have to use makeup to cover. All of it was so morbidly romantic I couldn't help but become completely infatuated with the man I briefly interacted with in a dark parking lot. But I also wasn't stupid enough to think it was anything more than some one-off because of the adrenaline or something.

Which is why it surprised me when he put me to bed and let me sleep while he took care of some of the mess, even more so when I woke up in the middle of the night to find him totally naked in my bathroom *taking care of* what was left of Joker while quietly singing to himself.

Yeah, he was *singing* “Hand Clap” by Fitz and the Tantrums—rather impressively—while he dismembered Joker’s body, using the severed hands to clap when appropriate. And while that probably should have scared the shit out of me, or at least made me regret what we’d done, it didn’t. It didn’t scare me, I don’t regret one single thing about what happened, and if anything, I’m itching to see him again.

But my ghost hasn’t come back.

He left sometime before I woke up for the day yesterday, and he didn’t leave any way to contact him, or anything else for that matter. If I wasn’t still deliciously sore from having sex up against the wall, and if my pussy wasn’t still achy from having a dick—a *pierced* dick—that size slammed inside of me repeatedly before I came so hard it almost hurt, I wouldn’t even know he was ever there to begin with. He was, though, and between the way my body feels, the way my carpet looks, and the mark on my neck, I couldn’t deny it even if I wanted to.

And I don’t.

I just wish I knew his name or had some way to reach him so I can really thank him for what he did, and maybe a way to invite him back because I haven’t been able to get him out of my head.

But no one knows any of that but me, even after nearly two days of hiding it.

Which is why I glance at Cal briefly and ask, “Still nothing from Joker?”

He shakes his head. “Bastard has been awol since he sent the prospects home.”

“Huh.” I lied and told my father when he called yesterday that I hadn’t seen Joker since after he picked me up from work, casually mentioned he said something about getting beer then said I was locked in my room all night and went to sleep. I’m not a very good liar, but that seemed to suffice him enough to get off the phone.

“Beau is pissed, but he’s too busy to look for him. Told me to just increase security until the bastard turns up again.”

“Which is why you took me to work this morning.”

Cal nods.

“When is Dad supposed to be back?”

“Not til after the run. We’re meeting him in Sabine Woods to take off from there,” he grunts with an annoyed look on his face.

That’s a relief.

If Beau came home tonight after dealing with that other club, he’d definitely be in some sort of altered state, and having Joker still MIA would royally piss him off. And that would mean he wouldn’t think twice about barging into my bedroom to drag me out of it in order to take his anger out on me.

Crisis temporarily averted, but that means I have between now and tomorrow morning when Cal drops off Prince to figure out how the hell to clean up my room since the boys usually bunk in there with me so I can still get locked in at night.

Ugh.

“You, uh...” Cal clears his throat and grips the steering wheel tight. “I’m gonna be a minute in the hardware store...”

I nod. “I won’t go anywhere.”

He shakes his head. “No, I mean I know that, but I was gonna say... maybe you want to grab one of those frilly coffees, the ones Rochelle likes or something while I’m in there? That new coffee shop is next door and...”

My brows lift in surprise as I face him completely.

Never, and I do mean never, has Cal left me alone for any amount of time at all when he’s been assigned guard duty.

Seriously. He’s even followed me into bathrooms before because my father made him do it.

So to not only have him go against what I know to be my father's orders by making an unplanned stop on my way home from work, but suggesting I go anywhere alone on top of it? It's completely insane and unheard of.

"If you don't want to that's fine, I just thought, since we were here for me—"

"Yes," I almost yell after I finally get over my shock. "Yeah, that would be great."

"Ok. Good. Yeah, ok." Cal's tension eases a bit. "Still gotta stay there though. I'll come in and get you after I'm done."

"No problem."

"No talking to anyone about shit with the club."

The only reason I don't roll my eyes is the crazy smile on my face. "Of course."

"Get your coffee, find a table, and just wait."

"I will. I promise."

"Good," Cal grunts as he goes to get out of his truck, but he stops, reaches into his pocket and produces a crumpled twenty dollar bill. "That enough?"

Tears immediately spring to my eyes as I nod.

He's paying for my coffee.

Cal is risking a hell of a lot by defying my father's orders and allowing me to go somewhere alone, and he's offering to pay for my coffee on top of it.

No one has ever done anything like this for me before and I might just cry because of it.

"That's plenty," I all but choke out as I take the cash with a trembling hand, and as soon as I have it, Cal throws open his door. "Cal..." He pauses but doesn't look at me. "Thank you. So much, just, thank you."

Cal says nothing but he nods, and fifteen minutes later, I'm settled into a little two-seat booth in the front corner of the

coffee shop I'd only get to treat myself to if I stopped on my way to school. Which I've never even considered before now.

I people watch as I sip my *frilly* drink, pretending for a few minutes that I could be just like any one of them.

A couple across from me holding hands over their table, the two leaning forward so they can whisper and giggle quietly.

There's an older man on his laptop behind them, tapping away on the keys and frowning at the screen.

Several college kids, probably a little younger than me, seem to be having a study session in the far corner, and aside from them and the small line, the shop is pretty quiet.

I still like watching though.

Part of who I am means I don't have moments like this, so I intend to get the most out of it while I can.

Who knows if it'll ever happen again.

"Excuse me."

I shift my stare from the couple and turn to see an absolutely beautiful woman with periwinkle hair standing next to my booth.

She smiles warmly at me. "Hi. I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I just had to tell you that I love your scrub top."

I blink at her, her bright green eyes shining and expectant, then look down at my top because I don't actually know what she's talking about. It clicks then, though.

"Thanks." I give her a shy smile. "Kermit is my favorite."

"I love The Muppets. Everything Treasure Island and older, anyway."

My smile grows. "Me too. The show was the best."

"Right?" She beams as she slides into the booth across from me. "My girlfriends and I binge the hell out of it at Sofie's house almost monthly. Those guest stars were so

awesome. Vincent Price was my favorite, but there were so many amazing people on that show.”

I nod slowly as I take another drink in order to try to hide how creepy it is for me to stare at her. I can’t help it though, not really. Aside from Linnie, people don’t just start conversations with me. That’s probably more my fault than theirs, but even with my hair covering most of my scar, I’m not super approachable and I know that. I’m too quiet and shy, too scared or paranoid most of the time to even attempt conversation on my own, and I ultimately know making a friend outside of the MC—where I have zero friends anyway—is pointless. The only reason I’m friends with Linnie is because we’ve worked together for years and anyone else that might want to take a stab at it typically doesn’t because of the vibes I throw.

Vibes I’ve probably acquired by association considering the company I’m forced to keep.

Or maybe the vibes I’ve always had since I’m fucked up enough to have sex with a super hot murderer while the body of the guy he murdered was still in the room. And developing a serious crush on that murderer probably doesn’t help my case either.

Oh well.

“I like the one with Peter Sellers. And Alice Cooper.”

The purple-haired girl smiles even brighter, the piercings in her cheeks creating dimples there. “Alice Cooper... so good.”

This chick is super pretty. Funky hair, green eyes, curvy as hell figure decked out in some edgy, fun, and very loud outfit. Her t-shirt has a logo on it: *The Dollhouse*. And while I doubt it is a toy store, I could see her working in one. She throws good vibes and I really like it.

“I’m Ember, by the way.”

I set my coffee down and try to return her smile. “Stevie.”

Ember’s eyes light up. “Stevie?”

I nod with a frown.

“Oh my gosh, this is crazy!”

“What is?”

“I’m *Ember*, Ember Rollins!”

“Ok...”

She points to her shirt then leans toward me. “Ember Rollins, strip club floor manager by night and Secret Passions consultant... also by night I guess,” she says as she giggles. “Linnie books parties with me.”

“Oh!” I giggle a little too. “Sorry. I guess Linnie hasn’t ever really said your name before.”

“That sounds about right.” Ember sighs. “But she’s said yours enough, and since I haven’t met another Stevie, I had to assume you’re *the* Stevie.”

That makes me blush. And strikes me a little odd. I know Linnie is my work friend and she’s always trying to get me to go out with her, but I didn’t think we were close enough for her to tell her other friends about me. I guess that’s kind of flattering, in a creepy sort of way.

And the fact that I’m creeped out definitely supports the fact that I truly have no friends or any idea how to make them.

“I guess I am then.”

Ember nods. “I was bummed that she canceled her party Friday, I was really looking forward to meeting you.”

Now I’m frowning again.

I had no idea Linnie canceled her party. Or why Ember would still think I was going after I told Linnie I had fake plans.

“She canceled?”

“Yeah. Said she was too freaked out over all the bodies and didn’t want anyone she invited to turn up as The Harvester of Bones next victim.”

Considering they found another body yesterday—one that doesn't belong to the ghost—it was probably a good call.

“Oh!” Ember squeals. “She still placed an order for everyone though and I have that dragon dildo you wanted. Great choice, by the way.”

Dragon dildo?

Well, I definitely called that shit. It doesn't surprise me at all that Linnie decided to order me a dildo replica of a dragon peen.

“The new supernatural line isn't doing as well as I'd hoped but I'm going to keep pushing it because I own all of them and the dragon is one of my favorites, coming in at a close second to the wolf dick. But the dragon is a solid choice. I mean, who wouldn't want to ride something as long as your forearm that's thick and girthy? Not to mention it was designed so the aesthetically pleasing scales act as an extra stimulant. *So good.*” Ember smiles at me with a wink as my cheeks heat. “I can go grab it if you're not in a hurry.”

I am going to kill Linnie.

Just as she stands to seemingly retrieve my dragon peen, Cal comes strolling through the door and I don't think I've ever been happier to see him than I am right now. Hell, I've never really been happy to see him, per se, but right now I could hug him for ending this conversation.

“No, that's ok. I have to get going.” I stand with a small smile. “If you get it to Linnie, she can bring it to me at work.”

“Sure, no problem. And here.” Ember reaches into her pocket and pulls out a card. “It's for my business, but that's my personal cell. If you ever need anything else, like lube or whatever, or if you want to hang out with some awesome ladies who love Kermit, feel free to give me a call.”

I nod my thanks and quickly hide the card as Cal stops next to me then watch as Ember shoots him a huge grin before she heads out the door.

“School friend?” He grunts as we follow.

“Yeah.” Because *sex toy seller* or *strip club manager* probably wouldn’t go over too well.

“Cool hair.”

I arch a brow as I look up at Cal but he just shrugs, leads me to his truck, and starts driving as soon as I’m in.

What a weird fucking day.

AND MY DAY JUST GOT EVEN WEIRDER.

I turn in a circle slowly, my eyes wide and my heart racing as I take in my bedroom.

The blood is gone.

The carpet is new but very similar to what I had before. I can smell chemicals and paint, my walls are the same color but void of any bleached out blood spots, and my furniture is where it’s supposed to be. There’s even a new armchair and ottoman in the corner that is a nearly perfect match to what was originally there.

Aside from my jewelry box, everything is almost exactly as it was.

And the blood is completely gone.

My palms start to sweat as my stomach swirls, my heart beating faster over what this could all mean.

I left the house at 6:30 a.m. and everything was still a bloody mess. Cal picked me up and took me straight to work. All of the prospects left when we did, and no one else was at my house.

My father is still away and will be until sometime during the week, as far as I know, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t come back.

Sabine Woods isn’t that far of a drive, less than an hour, so it’s not a stretch to think that maybe... maybe Beau came home. He knows Joker is missing and he’s not happy about

that, so he could have stopped in briefly to look for him, or to question me. It's possible my father came home, went to my room and saw the mess, then made the prospects fix it. With the right number of men it could have easily happened and if that's the case, then Beau knows something horrible took place here and he... he...

My stomach twists as I circle the room again and just before I spiral into a full blown panic over that entire scenario and what it means, something on the bed catches my eye.

There, on the foot of my bed sitting in the middle of the purple throw blanket, is a bracelet.

With cautious steps I make my way over, then carefully—reverently—pick up the thick chain and immediately feel my face split into a smile.

On the beautiful silver links in white gold with silver trim, is a charm. A little ghost with black diamond eyes and mouth.

I guess that answers several of my questions.

It is beautiful though. Beautiful and simple, thoughtful even. And just when I'm about to put on the only piece of jewelry I've ever been given, a light scratching sound comes from my left and makes me jump sky high.

Scratch. Tap. Tap. Tap. Scratch.



CHAPTER NINE

VICTOR

HANDS on my hips and a cigarette between my teeth, I look over the photos spread out on my table.

The alley behind the grocery store was dark but the lights from the parking lot were enough to illuminate the scene, and I'm grateful for it because using the flash on my camera would have been even more obvious than what I already was.

A dude my size dressed in an all-black hazmat suit with a mask and ski goggles could have been quite the spectacle at five in the morning. Especially considering what I was photographing.

Thankfully, the store doesn't open until eight and, like most places in Rolling Meadows between three and seven in the morning, the area was a dead zone.

No drug dealers or sex workers, and no bums camped out or searching through the dumpsters. All was perfectly quiet and it allowed for me to work without interruption or concern for getting caught.

After I handled Joker and did what I could for Stevie's bedroom, I watched her for a few minutes before I let myself out of her house. My little dove is a beautiful sleeper and since I couldn't stay for multiple reasons, I settled for watching her for a few beats before I started dropping trash bags out her window, then praying that fucking trellis didn't break when I climbed back down it. And as soon as my feet hit the ground, my phone went off.

Little John called me just before five to let me know there was another body.

Pope, the only other member of the Wulven Kings MC that has mostly fully embraced me, and a few of his brothers do nightly sweeps for El Paso County as a part of their efforts to protect their territory after the shit Spider and I handled, and Friday night he happened to be in Rolling Meadows. And while I know my friend and mentor didn't necessarily explain *why*, he did contact their president to ask that if any more bodies turned up, they let him know right away. And since John scares pretty much everyone shitless, even if they're considered friends, Snipe agreed.

Honestly, I'm sure the WKMC have doubled their patrol efforts for multiple reasons—a few of them are married with kids and they've had multiple close calls in the last few years—the restructuring of their club is a main one.

Do they still dabble in the illegal side of things? Yes, absolutely. Playing middleman for various transactions can be very lucrative even when you've gone mostly straight, and I know they won't think twice to snuff out any threat that's presented to their families, the club, or the county that has been Wulven Kings' territory since it was founded. And with the Cobra Cons appointing a new president and getting all cozy with the Demon Seeds, the new serial killer that is specifically targeting women and pinning that on the vigilante ghost—*me*—when I know for a fact that club supports what I do, I'm sure Snipe and company are on high alert.

Which is why Little John asking them to keep their eyes peeled for any bodies that turn up, ones that fit either killer's MO—just in case my competition decides to start copy catting—might have made them curious, but they didn't bat an eye and agreed. And it's why Pope called John himself when he found the girl.

The police hadn't been alerted yet, and according to my mentor, no one else had found her either, but our methods are working thanks to his connections and it proved my theory in terms of a pattern as well.

Another brunette, mid-twenties from what I could tell, and she had been killed sometime Friday night while I was occupied elsewhere. The girl was left out in the open again,

completely naked and mutilated, save for the socks on her feet and her beaten but not unrecognizable face. She'd definitely been killed in the alley and I'd put money on her possibly being homeless or transient based on the condition of her socks, and the one hand I could clearly see had the leftovers of a french manicure, the tips grown out quite a bit and chipped in places. I'd also bet my entire savings on that girl having zero criminal record despite the hard times she may have fallen on—she was dumpster diving when she could have tried robbing the closed store or some shit—and there's a good chance she was from somewhere other than Colorado originally because of what I thought was possibly a tattoo of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I light my smoke then scrub a hand through my hair as my eyes bounce around the photos.

I walked the scene a couple of times, started as close to the body as I could without stepping in anything, then circled out toward the brick walls on either side.

The Ripper took the murder weapon with him and did a pretty decent job of cleaning up any evidence he was here, but I saw a few things that might red flag for police, or would anyway if they weren't so fucking convinced this was me.

For starters, there were small signs of a struggle.

The dumpster had clearly been shoved from its original position because it was cockeyed and about a foot away judging by the marks left when it slid. There were two fresh blood stains on the front of it along with a couple of stab marks where The Ripper either missed his target or accidentally caught the dumpster when the girl struggled. There was also a clump of bloody hair on the corner of the dumpster, hair that matches the victim, and the obvious drag marks from there to where the girl was butchered support that as well.

From there, I was able to piece things together as I photographed, and since printing the pictures, my guess at what took place is pretty spot on I think.

Based on what I saw, the girl was probably already in the alley when The Ripper showed up, which not only supports my claim that she was possibly transient because the dumpster was open and there were a few newly expired packs of deli meat on the ground, but it puts time of death somewhere between when the store closed at nine and three in the morning, when most of Rolling Meadows shuts down for a few hours. The Ripper probably snuck into the alley and startled her, which is when she dropped her next meal, and I'm assuming they had a conversation for a few minutes prior to the attack because these kills are absolutely sexually driven and full of rage that requires a trigger. My competition probably propositioned the girl, offered the money I found by the trash in exchange for some kind of favor, the girl declined, and that's when The Ripper attacked.

He most likely lunged at her, pinning her body to the dumpster so hard it slid, and tried to incapacitate her then but wasn't successful on his first attempt. The struggle continued until The Ripper slammed the girl's head against the edge of the dumpster, probably knocking her out immediately, then she was dragged into the center of the most well-lit part of the alley and hacked to pieces, but not until after she was stripped and assaulted first.

Her clothes were missing, all but her socks, and the murder weapon—some sort of serrated blade based on the crude and jagged marks—was nowhere in sight, and The Ripper didn't leave any physical evidence behind. Which ultimately isn't my problem because I couldn't run it if I found any, but I've got a better idea of what my *new friend* might be built like based on my theory of how events played out, too.

I'd bet he's on the shorter side, probably somewhere between five-foot-six and five-foot-ten, athletic but not super built or strong, and both of those things play into everything else I'm no doubt spot on about. Like the fact The Ripper is most likely insecure about their physical appearance or sexuality, possibly both in some way, which is why he either uses the element of surprise or finds an easy way of getting his victim alone.

Like crashing my kill scene.

Or something a little like Bundy did, maybe even Kemperesque because I have a feeling our man is not as stupid as I think he is. He's probably unassuming and polite, someone these women were at ease with or felt bad for. He uses those traits then loses his shit when they do what *the one that got away* did to him, so to speak. Sexually driven feels right to me and I think that means The Ripper is a very angry little man.

He's probably impotent or very familiar with rejection, both of which could be accounted for in the level of rage in his kills, and I'm fairly confident he has a type or is going after women that fit the description of the one woman he can't have but wants all the same. Brunettes with lighter eyes and fairer skin, ranging from five-three to five-seven, one-hundred-and-ten to one-hundred-and-forty pounds, between early to late twenties, not particularly curvy or fit, almost willowy and... my eyes dart to the media photos of his first two victims and scan their similarities before they cut to the closeup I took of the most recent victim's face.

Jesus.

How did I not see it before?

They all look like Stevie.

There isn't some striking or uncanny resemblance, but the similarities are there, and that means my little dove fits this asshole's type perfectly. And *that* means I'm going to have to watch her even closer than I already planned to.

I quickly gather up the photos and articles, cram them back into the folders, dump those in my filing cabinet with the rest of my work, and rush to get dressed.

Stevie went into work early this morning, I know that for a fact since I spent all night sitting on her house waiting for Beau to show up—he broke routine and didn't come home though, so the bastard is probably still in Sabine Woods with Jesus. And I saw Cal pull up seconds before my sweet little dove ran outside. The prospects all scattered after that, and once I was sure the house was empty, I went back and got my

borrowed van full of the shit I'd need to scrub Stevie's bedroom then I got to work, which is how I know she was gone all day.

The problem is, this wasn't a regular scheduled shift for my girl so I don't actually know when she is getting off work, and being that I needed to haul ass and take care of her room as fast as possible, I didn't bother sticking around or swinging by the nursing home to find out. And now it's early evening and I need to make sure she gets home ok.

I step into my boots and shove my knife in the left one just as I throw open the door of my fifth wheel, barely remembering to lock it before I take off through the maze of broken down semis, trailers, and RVs toward the cars.

Yeah, I live in a junkyard.

Little John's junkyard, to be exact.

One of his many businesses over the years was a very successful garage and scrapyard here in Birch Creek, one he ran for the Pythons and was sort of partnered with the Wulven Kings garage. Tank and Gunner—Tavish and Angus MacAllister—originally ran both businesses, then inherited the garage from their father when he died, but already had the bar on top of that, so they gave both to the then-president of the Pythons, who left it to Little John when he died since Link was his brother. And my mentor has been nice enough to let me squat here for the last twelve years.

In the beginning, I traveled a lot.

I'm not originally from Colorado and after shit hit the fan at home in Massachusetts, I took off on my own, and yes, I left a few bodies in my wake until I met John while he was on a hit in Illinois. He followed his mark, a piece of shit patch that was terrorizing the old ladies of the Pythons executive committee, across a few states because the fucker got wind of the hit placed on him and ran, but I got to the asshole first.

Little John walked in on me cleaning up my mess, that patch already positioned and missing his femur in the bedroom of the drug den we were both staying in, and instead of doing

anything I expected him to do, John just nodded his approval and grunted out a threat to go with him or wind up as dead as my most recent victim.

Serial killer or not, that bastard is terrifying, and that's how I wound up with John.

He put me up in a trailer at his junkyard, taught me everything I still needed to learn, then *retired* a few years later and started giving me assignments in order to keep my urges under control. *Justified kills* is what he calls them, and my numbers have increased for the sake of the greater good ever since.

Over the years, as more vehicles were brought to the yard, I bounced around to better or at least less-shitty housing options, but I don't mind living here, especially since the twenty-seven foot fifth wheel showed up a few years ago. Not half bad digs, if you ask me.

We always make sure my place is buried and far away from prying eyes, and surrounded by bigger semis and trailers if possible; it allows me to use, clean, and easily dump various rides or bring certain aspects of my work home when needed. Like what's left of Joker and our night of fun, his parts currently dissolving in oil drums full of lye, the rest of the stuff taken from Stevie's in vats of bleach, all sitting in a neighboring semi until I dispose of that too.

Living in the junkyard is perfect for me really, but at times it can be inconvenient as fuck.

Like right now.

I zigzag through the tractors and farm equipment, dart past school buses and utility vehicles, and when I finally start seeing vans and pickups, I push myself harder.

There are multiple, hundreds really, of cars that still run that got sent to John, the owners looking for fast cash or didn't want to put the work into getting shit fixed, and again, that's ideal for someone like me. Calling me a *ghost* isn't that far off the mark so I can't have anything in my name.

I don't exist anywhere but the junkyard and that's how it has to stay.

Stopping at the first functioning vehicle I come to—a grayish Sable—I crank open the door, reach across the console and go under the passenger seat. I pull out the plate registered to John, then rush to get it on the back of the car as fast as I can. Once it's secure, I hop into the driver's seat, pull down the visor and catch the keys as they fall, then I'm flying through the narrow paths of the yard like a bat out of hell in order to get to my girl.

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE WHEN I TURN DOWN STEVIE'S street is that it isn't lined with motorcycles.

That means the new batch of idiots sent to watch her haven't arrived yet and if that's the case... yep.

Cal's truck is in the driveway.

He's still at my little dove's house, which is both a good and a bad thing.

It's good because she clearly got home safely and I don't need to worry about that anymore, and it also means Cal is the only bouncer I have to consider when I sneak in.

Which is why it's a bad thing as well.

The prospects that have been on her house are morons and the only reason they create a cause for concern is the fact that there are more than a couple of them. Too many morons lingering around could present as problematic, even though they haven't yet for me. Cal riding solo on the other hand... that could definitely be risky.

There's a reason he's sergeant at arms, a reason why Beau trusts him with his daughter as well as all the other shit he does for the club, and that reason could definitely get me busted and most likely killed, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. I haven't been able to see Stevie since Friday, not in the way I want to, and the newly realized fact she could become

one of The Ripper's targets has sent my need to do so into a dangerous territory.

Which is why I drive past the house, turn down the next block, and park my ride in the vacant lot again. I give it a minute before I get out, making sure no one is around to watch me cross over to the empty house, and when I'm sure it's clear, I do just that.

I crouch behind the bushes again and watch the front door; watch Cal's truck and the entire street for any signs of life. There's nothing though, so I'm assuming this deceptively quiet neighborhood is actually quiet for once, Sunday calling for everyone to stay inside and indulge in the day of rest.

With calculated movements, I dart across the street then duck down on the driver's side of the Ram, waiting a few beats to make sure I wasn't noticed. I don't hear anything though, definitely don't hear the front door of Stevie's house open, so I stay crouched and move to the front of Cal's truck then run along the side of the house until I'm between that and the garage. I stop and listen again, the backyard totally silent, so I turn the corner and jog to the stupid fucking trellis that I'm going to have to replace if I keep using it as a means of getting inside.

I scale it quickly then curse my dumbass for locking Stevie's window when I left earlier, but I wanted her to be safe; and since I had to use the back door to get everything in and out of her house, I didn't leave through the window when I was done.

So, I hang onto the bowing wood with one hand, reach down to my boot with the other, and pull my knife out to use in order to get her attention, only to pause briefly when I peer in through the window.

She found my gift.

And judging by the stunning smile on her face, Stevie likes my ironically adorable little present a hell of a lot.



CHAPTER TEN

STEVIE

I SWALLOW hard as the *scratch tap tap tap scratch* happens again, then slowly turn toward my window.

I hold my breath and wait for it a third time, but instead of that sound, I hear something similar to a twig snapping followed by a soft thud. The scratching and tapping becomes a little more urgent as I walk toward the window, but as soon as thick dark brown curls and piercing gray and indigo eyes come into view, I sigh in relief.

My ghost is back.

Quickly reaching the sill, I pop the lock and slide the pane open. “What are you doing here?” Not that I want him to leave, but still. It’s barely seven o’clock and this is dangerous as hell. “What are... you...”

One big hand—a hand holding a knife—lands on the sill before the other joins it and the majority of the mysterious man’s torso is in my bedroom. He swings his right leg through the opening with a grunt, his booted foot now planted firmly on the ground in front of me.

I back up a little to make room for him. “What are you doing—”

Before I’m too far away or able to ask anymore questions, my own personal ghost is cupping my cheeks, knife and all, and crushing his mouth to mine.

And all I can do is kiss him back.

His lips are so soft, a stark contrast to everything else about him, from the hard lines and edges of his body that I

only saw from the back Friday night to the hardass way he dresses. The calluses on his hands are rough against my skin, rough but warm, and for a split second I think about how they felt on my naked thighs.

Heat floods my veins as his tongue traces the seam of my lips, a sweet demand for entrance that I gladly give into.

He tastes like mint and something sweet, a little beer with just a hint of the cigarette he must have recently smoked, and for some reason that combination has my panties wet.

Ha, for some reason.

I grip the collar of his jacket and pull him closer, tugging this mystery man to me while I deepen the kiss even further. His fingers slide up into my hair and he groans as I match his urgency with my own. I kiss this man so hard, so intensely that our teeth clash, but I don't stop or slow down. If anything it drives me to keep doing it, but when I suck on his tongue then nip at his lower lip, he abruptly stops.

Neither of us let go of each other but I search his eyes when they bore into mine. "Why... why did you—"

"You amaze me."

I just blink.

I don't know what the hell that means, and not just because I'm stupid with lust and excitement. Or because his voice is orgasm-inducing all on its own.

That deep, husky rumble is sexy as fuck.

His mouth lifts into a soft smile as his hands slide back down to my cheeks, his thumbs smoothing under my eyes. "You could've pushed me out that window instead of letting me in. You could have done it again when I kissed you instead of responding to your questions. There are a lot of things you could have done differently since our paths crossed, Stevie, but you didn't and that amazes me."

The blush that creeps up my neck is fierce, but I don't break eye contact, not even as he leans in and kisses me again.

But when he pulls my lower lip between his teeth, I can't help the way my eyes flutter closed.

“Stevie...” he sighs between kisses.

“Hmm?”

He smiles into our next one as he pulls himself completely through the window. “Stevie...” My ghost starts backing me toward my bed. “Stevie, I need to eat your pussy.”

My eyes pop open at that, my blush racing up to my cheeks and spreading out over my entire body. “Wh-what?”

“I need to eat your pussy.” He grins when the back of my knees hit the mattress, still grinning as he nips at my mouth. “I need to eat your pussy. I need to fuck your pussy. I need to feel your body alive and writhing against mine.”

“You... you... you want—”

“No, I *need* those things. I need you naked, I need you sweaty and moaning my name. I need your cum on my tongue, on my fingers, and my cock. I *need* all of it from you, Stevie, and I want it offered up with your heart and soul because I have every intention of taking those too.”

Jesus Christ, the man can dirty talk like a champ.

“I... I don't... I don't know your name.”

He grins as he leans into me, forcing me to sit on the edge of the bed. Those stormy eyes find mine after they bounce around my face, his mind seemingly made up. “Victor.” He kisses me again, then backs toward the window. “Victor Crowley. Now that you know, I expect you to use it as often as possible, specifically when my face is buried between your thighs.”

I nod and swallow hard as I watch Victor slide my window shut then lock it, and keep watching as he shucks his jacket and tosses it on the chair. He comes to stand in front of me again, then lifts one hand behind his head and pulls his hoodie off, the black cotton fleece quickly joining the leather in the corner. Victor's hand moves back into position and the second

he pulls the gray t-shirt from his body, I'm struck totally stupid.

This man's body is total perfection.

I'll have to ask him if he played football at some point because holy shit, he absolutely could pass as a tight end. Aside from nipple rings and a dark happy trail, there is nothing but tan skin and a million lean, defined muscles on display.

I'm fucking speechless.

Which makes Victor chuckle. "I'll take your awed silence as agreement to use my name."

All I can do right now is nod. The other men I've been with were attractive, not bad looking at all, but they were not like this. They were nothing like Victor, and I was completely accurate when I thought he could be a cover model of sorts. My panties were wet before he started to undress and now that he has, they're basically a slip and slide.

With a very satisfied grin, Victor sinks to his knees in front of me and I watch him with rapt attention. He lifts my right foot and carefully removes my purple Croc then tugs my sock off before repeating the action on my left. His hands are warm on my cold feet but they don't stay there long because they slide up under the fabric of my scrub bottoms until Victor's fingers are caressing my calves.

"I won't ever take what you don't want to give, Stevie."

My gaze drags up his body, his fucking gorgeous body, and connects with his. "I know."

"Do you?" he asks, his fingers moving in slow, languid circles over my skin. "Do you really believe that?"

I nod.

"Even after what you saw Friday night?"

"Especially after what I saw Friday night."

A devious smile tugs at his lips, but I don't miss the question—the doubt—in his eyes.

Which is understandable, but I don't feel the need to explain myself, not yet anyway.

Instead, I just offer the facts. "You've had multiple opportunities to take from me, to do things without my willing participation and consent, but you haven't. You've come to my rescue, you cleaned up a mess and kept me out of trouble. Your methods may have been unorthodox, but your intentions were good. That's all that matters to me, Victor, and it's why I haven't thought for one second you'd take what I wasn't willing to give, and it's also why I never hesitated to give it."

"Fucking amazing." He shakes his head with a stunning smile. "That's what you are, and it means you're fucking mine now. So lift your hips and let me eat that pussy."

Holy shit.

I had no idea I would like dirty talk this much, but I really do. I like it a lot coming from Victor, the man that killed in order to protect me then left me a charm bracelet afterward.

Planting my hands on my bed, I lean back on trembling arms and lift my hips then I watch as Victor's fingers ghost up my legs before they curl over the top of both my scrubs and panties. He slides them down agonizingly slow, but the minute they're gone, he pushes my thighs apart and Victor's stare lands on my indecently wet core.

"Fuck," he hisses as he opens me up to his heated gaze. "Already so fucking wet for me."

Victor slides my butt to the edge of the bed then drapes my knees over his shoulders as he crouches, his warm breath fanning my slick skin. His eyes lift to mine, the question and opportunity to back out clear, but I just nod my head with a breathy *yes* seconds before Victor's tongue snakes out and licks me from bottom to top in one firm, languid drag.

My back immediately arches and I ball the comforter up in my fists, but I don't break his stare. No, I keep my eyes locked on Victor's hooded ones and when he licks me again, following it up with a groan and a quick flick of my clit, I know without a doubt I'm going to come in record time.

I watch Victor eat my pussy like it's his last meal, watching him watch me while he does; alternating between flattening his tongue in languid strokes, then circling and flicking my clit with firm ones before he pulls it between his lips and sucks. It's almost too much, almost maddening the way Victor seems to know my body already, how he already knows exactly what I like and how to bring me to the edge with ease. And the fact that he's watching me, those hooded, lust-filled eyes completely fixed on my face, it has warmth pooling low in my belly and spreading through every inch of my body like lava.

Especially when Victor lowers my right leg but doesn't stop devouring my pussy, he just pushes my legs further apart as he licks and sucks, as he nips and flicks my clit and repositions himself so he can slip two fingers inside of me.

My pussy clamps down on them immediately, clenches around them hard, Victor curling those fingers on every forceful pump, and just when I can feel my orgasm creeping down my spine, there's a fucking knock at my bedroom door.

"Stevie?"

Oh fuck.

How the hell did I forget Cal was still here?

My eyes snap to Victor, but he just grins at me from between my thighs. "Better answer him, little dove," he whispers in between flicking my clit and fucking me with his fingers. "Don't want him to get suspicious."

I try to scowl, but it doesn't work at all because my eyes damn near roll back into my head as Victor pumps his fingers faster and grazes my swollen bundle of nerves with his teeth.

Jerk.

"Stevie?" Cal knocks again. "I'm getting ready to take off, wanted you to know the prospects and patches are here."

"O-okay."

"You alright in there?"

I throw my head back and practically rip my comforter to pieces as my orgasm coils in my belly. “I-I’m fine!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I barely avoid screaming my response as I come, my hips rolling against Victor’s fingers and mouth. “I’m-I’m sure!”

“Maybe I should come in and—”

“I’m about to shower, I’m ok. I swear!” I lurch forward as Victor replaces his fingers with his tongue and fucks me like that, in and out, curling and spearing my pussy, and I keep coming as he pinches my clit and sends my orgasm to a new high. “I’m good, Cal, thank you!”

“Ok... I’ll see you in the morning then. You call if you need anything.”

“O-ok.” My hips are bucking wildly and my fingers are buried in Victor’s hair, pulling him closer with each tug. I’m riding his face like a fucking cowgirl and what has me writhing is the fact that I can feel him smiling as I come so hard I actually gush.

And he allows no time to recover as soon as it happens.

No, Victor jumps to his feet, drops his jeans, doesn’t give me any time to admire him at all or regain the ability to function, he just grabs my hips and slams into me hard enough to scoot the bed.

“What was that?” Cal barks from the other side of the door. “Stevie, I’m coming in, I—”

“No!” I yell as Victor hooks my knees over his elbows and pounds into me. “I just—” *Oh my god, this is so fucking good.* “I just stubbed my toe! I’m getting in the shower now though.”

Victor grins down at me and whispers, “We’ll do that next.”

I try to scowl again as Cal calls, “I’m locking your door and taking the key.”

Good.

It's probably the only time I'll feel that way, but being locked in my room with a man who'd kill for me *and* give me orgasms is hardly a punishment.

"See you tomorrow, princess."

"See you!" I choke out seconds before a second orgasm tears through my body.

I can feel every one of Victor's piercings, can feel every ridge and vein from root to engorged tip as he bottoms out. My pussy contracts around his cock in the most delicious sensation and when I am seconds away from screaming his name, Cal be damned, my ghost leans down, crushes his mouth to mine and smothers it with a positively searing kiss. And my god, tasting myself on him as he owns my body, licking my release from his lips and tongue as I feel Victor's cock swell and explode inside of me? It drags my orgasm out in an almost painfully beautiful way.

"So fucking sweet, baby," he whispers against my lips as his thrusts slow. "So sweet, so wet, so fucking perfect."

"Victor..." I pant as I hear Cal clomp down the stairs. "Oh my god..."

He grins as he looks me in the eye. "Not god, little dove. *Ghost.*"

And that right there, *that* was the only confirmation I needed.

The vigilante ghost, The Harvester of Bones; he killed a man that was trying to hurt me and I've slept with him twice. The Harvester of Bones ate me out, came inside me, and is kissing me with a level of reverence I don't understand. And I'm just twisted enough to think that it's because I truly am his, that we are meant to be together, so everything I feel for him is perfectly natural.

Victor really is my ghost and being with him is just... *it's meant to be.*

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” I ASK WITH A LAZY SMILE AS I watch Victor pull his jeans up from around his ankles, dig through a pocket, then drop them again before shuffling over to the chair.

“Looking for my phone.”

My gaze rakes over his body, drinking in the muscles that flex and roll in his back, his firm bubble butt, and the definition in his corded thighs. I lay down on the edge of the bed and continue to stare as he toes off his boots then his socks before discarding his jeans completely. And when he turns to me with a frown, I inhale sharply when I’m faced with Victor’s smooth pecs and many abs, the dark strip of hair between them that leads to the biggest dick I’ve ever been privileged enough to see, let alone say has been inside of me. Twice, at that.

“Baby dove?”

“Hmm?” I can now see those piercings in that big dick, too, as well as one just above it in the front. That’s the one that kept hitting my clit.

“Stevie?”

Slowly, my eyes find his and I’m met with another of his gorgeous smiles. “Yes?”

“Not that I want to interrupt your gawking.” Victor chuckles as I blush. “But I asked if you’ve seen my phone.”

“I haven’t.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “I barely got to see any of you before you started kissing me, even less when you... did everything else.”

“Are you complaining?” He grins.

“Not at all. I’m just appreciating the view now that I can and can’t help that I haven’t seen anything else because of it.”

“Fair enough.” Victor walks over to me in all of his naked glory, his cock a few inches above face level. “You’ll have all night for that though, baby.”

I frown as he drops to his knees and gets on all fours then starts searching under the bed.

“All night?”

He grunts a few times then responds. “Well, the rest of this evening and then all night. Probably first thing in the morning too before Calvin comes back. Gonna have to split before that.”

“So, you’re staying?”

“Only if you want me to.”

God, yes. “I think I’d like that.”

“Good. I didn’t really plan on giving you a choice.”

“Are you sure though? Do you think it’s a good idea? There are a lot of people hanging around downstairs.”

Victor pops up down by my knees and grins. “People have been here every other time I have, all except when I cleaned your room, and if I’m not mistaken, I just brought you to orgasm twice with a *people* right on the other side of that door and it wasn’t a problem.”

I giggle as he dips his head and runs his tongue up the side of my thigh, licking my skin and scars without anything but devious intent in his gaze. Victor uses his nose to push my scrub top up, kissing my hip and my side until his hand replaces his mouth. He leans toward me as his fingers ghost along my ribs toward my breast, and just as I prepare myself for another of his brutal kisses and what it means, he frowns.

“Did Cal say he was locking your room from the outside?”

Shit.

There goes the happy little bubble I was excited to spend the next twelve hours in.

“Yeah... it’s for my... *safety.*”

Victor looks up at the door, his frown deepening as his eyes bounce from the deadbolt to knob lock, then back to me with lots of questions.

And I just sigh because I really don't want to get into this right now. "There are two padlocks on the other side of my door."

"Two padlocks..." His frown somehow intensifies. "In addition to the deadbolt and knob?"

I nod.

"And Cal is taking the key for the padlocks with him, which means—"

"I can't get out and no one else can get in."

"What about..."

He's definitely referring to Joker. "Whoever is keeping watch has the keys while they're here but my father doesn't trust the prospects or new patches enough to let them have it. Joker kept it and now that he's gone, Cal will."

Victor shakes his head as he sits back on his haunches. "I don't understand. Why are they locking you in like that? And what happens if there's some kind of fucking emergency?"

"President's daughter and all that." I shrug, hoping like hell my answer will be enough. "I need to be protected at all times. Beau hardly trusts anyone with anything, let alone my safety, and he figures if there's an emergency one of his men will just shoot the locks off in order to get me out."

Judging by the way he's scowling at the door, Victor is not satisfied with my explanation. We barely know each other, and are still practically strangers, but I can tell by the look on his face that things aren't adding up for him.

If he keeps coming around, I'll tell him everything. Hell, he'll probably end up seeing me after a lecture if that's the case, but I don't want to get into all that now. I want to continue living in blissful ignorance, pretending that Victor is mine and we're spending the night together like any other couple would, just being together in my bedroom after sex, maybe talking or watching tv the way normal people do.

Then again, nothing about this is *normal*.

Normal couples probably don't meet in dark parking lots and discuss serial killers, nor do they experience murder together and have sex for the first time without knowing each other's names right after said murder. Most people's boyfriends probably don't go around making murder or crime scene cleanup a hobby, and I highly doubt it would turn anyone on the way it did me.

Even so, those aren't the things I want to pretend didn't happen or don't exist. Being the daughter of a horrible MC president that beats me, living like a prisoner in my childhood home, fearing everything that happens outside these four walls as well as most of the men lurking around inside them. *That's* what I want to pretend doesn't happen or exist.

It's extremely silly to compare myself or Victor to normal people, though. Outside of going to school and working, there is very little about my life that could be considered such, and obviously my ghost—the ghost—is extraordinary at best, abnormal at worst, and Victor has added another layer of strange and unusual to my days that I would never change.

But I'm jumping the gun to compare what we're doing to any kind of relationship with a label. Sleeping with him twice hardly warrants thinking of Victor as my potential boyfriend, and I'm sure the fact that the thought is even crossing my mind means there is something seriously wrong with me.

Maybe we really are perfect for each other.

"You can tell me the truth later." Victor stares at the door for a few seconds before those unique eyes find mine again. "We have all the time in the world to reveal our secrets, but there are two very pressing matters I have to attend to before I fuck you again."

I grin as he dips his head and plants a hard kiss on my lips. Even though he has his secrets too, I have a feeling Victor is the most honest man I know and he won't ever sugarcoat anything with me.

"And what are these two very pressing matters?"

He gets to his feet and gives his recovered phone a shake. “Gotta make a call real quick. Checking in at home base so my handler doesn’t think I’ve gone off the rails.”

Yeah, there’s a lot to unpack there but it was honest, and I really like that.

“The other matter?” I sigh as I stretch out my legs before curling back up into a ball.

“Food.”

“Food?”

Victor nods as he looks down at his phone. “Dude my size needs a lot of fuel, little dove. Especially since I plan to keep you very busy tonight.”

My gaze immediately drops to his dick, already half hard and just as beautiful as the rest of him. I can see three piercings right now, but I felt more the other night when I was brave enough to put my hand on it, and it’s kind of amazing how they almost make it look pretty. I won’t tell him that though; I doubt anyone would want to hear that I think his cock is *pretty*, but Victor’s is the only pierced one I’ve had or seen, and it’s also the first dick I’ve been able to really look at for any length of time outside of a blowjob or something. And I find that his dick is my favorite, therefore I’m allowed to think it’s pretty.

“I’m glad you agree.”

I blush as I look up at Victor, but smile because he is.

“And while I definitely enjoy the way you’re looking at me and my cock, it’s important that I make sure you’re fed something other than him tonight.”

“I have food.”

Victor frowns again. “But we’re locked in.”

Instead of responding, I reluctantly push myself off my bed and walk my bare butt over to the wardrobe that’s actually a pantry with a mini fridge in the bottom.

It's a necessity for me, just like the ridiculous first aid kit and amount of cleaning supplies I have in the bathroom because I'm locked in here more often than not and regardless of what he thinks of me, my father would rather I not starve to death.

Most of the time.

I open the doors to reveal a few shelves stocked with the staple snacks and canned goods, another two with a small coffee maker, microwave, and an electric cooktop as well as some plates, bowls, and glasses.

"It's nothing five star, but I have plenty to eat and I'm pretty good at whipping up something out of nothing when I need to."

"Why do you have all of this?"

"It makes things easier."

"Easier?"

I nod as my gaze bounces around at the food on the shelves. "Like I said, Beau doesn't trust anyone, and the idea of me walking downstairs and wading through the sea of meatheads isn't one he's a fan of."

"Neither am I, but I'm not sure I care for this fucking prison he keeps you in either."

"It is what it is." I shrug and reach out to grab the loaf of bread before opening the fridge to take out the butter and cheese. "It isn't ideal and seems pretty strange, but this has kept me safe from the guys in the club for a long time." From everyone but my father anyway. And Joker, but he was the exception for some insane reason, and he's not a problem anymore. "Call it overprotective, overbearing even, but worse things could happen than hanging out in my bedroom watching true crime documentaries and eating junk food."

Victor huffs but doesn't say anything else, the conversation about my *prison* seemingly over for now, and as I get to fixing us some grilled cheese and tomato soup, I listen intently to his phone call without an ounce of shame.

“I’m good... no, nothing like that.” I hear Victor start to pace. “Taps were working fine and they should keep transcribing. Everything will sync with my laptop and I’ll update you when I get home.” Then he chuckles before what I can only guess is him flopping down on my bed. “No, *Johnathon*, I’m not taking on any extra *work*. I’ve found a rather beautiful little distraction and I’ll be indulging in *her* tonight. No need to get your tighty whities into a wad.”

With a small smile and blush, I flip the sandwiches in the pan then put the soup in the microwave.

I don’t think I’ve ever had a man call me beautiful before. Or a distraction, for that matter, and while that could probably be taken as an insult, I know Victor didn’t mean it as one. It’s a compliment just like calling me beautiful, and since I’m only ever complimented by Rochelle or Linnie, I’ll happily accept both from my very own ghost.

“*Oh*, you were watching that new doc on Gacy.”

With a scrunch of my nose, I plate the two grilled cheese before putting two more in the pan then glance over my shoulder. “Yeah. I haven’t gotten very far yet because he makes me mad.”

“Don’t they all make you mad?” Victor smirks as he starts scrolling through Netflix. “Serial killers, I mean. I’d imagine most people get pretty pissed over what they do. Especially the ones who go after boys who can’t defend themselves.”

I don’t miss the flicker of anger that passes through Victor’s eyes, but it’s gone just as fast and replaced by a gorgeous smile when his stare swings to me.

“That’s why he makes me so mad.” I turn back to our dinner, flipping the sandwiches again before taking the soup out. “I mean sure, they all frustrate me. I’ll never understand how someone feels like they have the right to end the life of another human being, but it’s even worse when they’re innocent kids.”

“That is something we can agree on, little dove. Child killers deserve to rot in hell.”

I chew my lip as I pour the tomato soup into mugs, then add them to the plates with our grilled cheese.

This is kind of the perfect transition into the many questions I want to ask him, the need for one hundred percent validation even though I'm already 99.9% sure. So, I muster up all the courage I can as I turn to the gorgeous, very naked man on my bed then walk toward him.

"I... " I'm more nervous to ask than I thought I'd be. Which is a little silly considering the things that have happened between us already. "You're... "

"I'm what, baby?" Victor arches a brow as I hand him his food.

"You're him, aren't you?"

He grins as he repositions himself on my bed, setting his plate in front of him and pushing up on an elbow nonchalantly. Victor doesn't say anything though, not yet, just searches my eyes for a few beats before lifting a grilled cheese and tearing it in half.

"I won't say anything." I slowly sit on the edge of the bed facing him, my heart hammering away against my ribs. "I won't. I just, well, I just thought, after the few comments you've made that you could be him."

"Who, Stevie? *Who* could I possibly be?"

"The... The Harvester of... of Bones?"

Victor's eyes don't leave my face as he dips his sandwich in the soup before bringing it to his lips. He takes a bite and chews slowly then one dark brown brow lifts. "Hypothetically, if I were this serial killer the news is all in a tizzy over, would that change how you look at me? Considering The Harvester of Bones obviously feels like he has the right to take lives without a second thought?"

"No," I blurt. "Not one bit. I've always thought The Harvester was different. Different because he went after the scum of the earth and stopped them from hurting other people. He's nothing like Gacy or Bundy, nothing like The Ripper or anyone else."

“I’m a little like Bundy,” Victor says with a small smile as he answers my question in a roundabout way. “You have to admit, I’m charming as fuck.”

I giggle and nod. “You are. You’re very charming... and you’re him.”

“I am, but you already knew that.”

“I did.” I smirk as I scoot around and cross my naked legs. “Not that you were trying to hide it from me. All the little ghost references made it obvious.”

“Only to someone like you, baby dove. And while I’m extremely proud you’ve figured me out, as well as flattered that you seem to think of me as some kind of hero, that’s not entirely the case.”

“No? You aren’t some vigilante wiping out the horrible monsters that terrorize society?”

Victor shakes his head. “Afraid it’s not that simple. On paper that’s what I do, how the news portrays me, but that hasn’t always been my way.”

“Which is why you have a handler.” I nod as I start picking at my food.

I don’t expect Victor to tell me everything, not now or ever really, but I’m not naive enough to think he woke up one day and decided to take justice into his own hands. Especially when you look at the amount of overkill, skill, and dramatics he puts into his victims. No, I’m sure there’s a lot more to his story, and regardless of what it is or the reasoning he has for what he does, I still very much want Victor around.

“Even knowing who I am, you’re still not afraid of me.”

I just shake my head as I look into his pale-grey and purple eyes because I’m not. I haven’t been from the moment we met.

“And you won’t put an end to me coming around because of it? Won’t stop me from ravaging your body and fucking you into oblivion?” Victor sets down his sandwich and stares back at me. “You won’t prevent me from getting to know you or

spending time with you; won't let the truth of who I am interfere or change one thing about what we're doing?"

Another shake of my head.

I honestly don't think there's anything that could make me change one thing about this, about what we're doing, and I'm not really sure what that says about me. But Victor has proven that not only does he do the right thing when he needs to, but he won't ever hurt me. If anything, this man will do whatever it takes to protect me and that's enough to make me want him around all the time.

"You really do amaze me, Stevie," Victor says with a grin. "And if you're not careful, I might just find myself taking this infatuation and turning it into a full-blown craving. An obsession with you that you won't be able to get away from."

With a blush, I shrug. "Seems a little like we're both already halfway there, if you ask me."

"Is that so?"

"It is and you can't really deny it."

He chuckles a bit before picking up his sandwich. "I wouldn't dream of it." Then Victor gives me a devilish grin as he takes a bite. "Eat up, little dove. The need to fuck you again is becoming too strong to ignore, but I want you fed and energized before I do. Can't have my newest *obsession* worn out when we're only getting started."

So with a shy smile, I listen to my own personal ghost and eat my dinner, my curiosity piqued further over the man the papers call The Harvester of Bones.

But my curiosity is outweighed by this infatuation, this growing obsession, with the man behind the killer. And while it should probably worry me that I've fallen under his spell so quickly, it doesn't. Nothing about this worries me at all and I'm silly enough to think that maybe... maybe this is the start of something I've always wanted.

Funny how it took a serial killer to show me I might actually be able to have it.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

VICTOR

“OH FOR FUCK’S SAKE, would you knock that shit off.”

I slam my feet on the ground and abruptly stop spinning around in John’s computer chair as the man himself enters his office with a huff, a few more blurry figures following behind him before the door closes.

It takes a few seconds for everything to stop tilting but when it does, I grin wide at what I see.

Little John looks like he’s going to blow a gasket.

“You break my fucking chair, I’m making you buy me a new one.”

I shrug. “No problem. Maybe I’ll buy you one anyway so I can have this one. It gets great speed.”

“I like that chair,” he grumbles as he comes around the desk and pops open the hidden door. “Don’t need a new one.”

I roll my eyes at my mentor as he disappears behind it but don a grin and nod to his company that follows.

Marbles and Spider, Pope and Pork Chop.

Four of the nine members of the Wulven Kings MC executive committee are joining us today per my request, and judging by the looks they give me as they walk by, they’re just as annoyed as John already is.

Well, everyone except Marbles.

He looks crazy as usual, and like he’d probably agree to dragging one of the other chairs out of the Red Room for a

little competition to see which one of us would fall on our asses first after spinning around as long as I was.

Maybe later.

No time for childish bullshit right now, not when I have information to share that's pertinent to them.

So, I get to my feet, sway a little as the dizziness passes, then join the five of them at the conference table.

“Whatchu got for us, Vic?” Marbles grunts with a twisted grin. “Must be good if we're meeting here.”

I nod as I pull out a smoke and shove it between my teeth. “John seems to think so.”

“But you don't?” Spider asks as he crosses his arms against his chest and leans back in his chair.

“Not necessarily. I just thought it would be better to clue you in when we had more of the facts straight.”

He narrows his harsh blue eyes on my face but doesn't say what I'm sure he's thinking.

Even though I could consider him and Pope *friends* of some sort, I know the gigantic arachnid can only tolerate so much of my bullshit before he loses his patience. Understandably so.

“As you know, our friend here”—I nod toward Little John as he starts sliding files toward each of the Kings—“has been my handler for years, keeping me bathed in the blood of total garbage humans in order to do so, which means I've essentially picked up where he left off.”

“If you want to call it that,” Pork Chop scoffs as he starts pulling his shoulder length blonde hair up into a bun. “Theatrics are all you.”

I tilt my head from side to side as I light my cigarette. “True, but even still, retirement hasn't exactly been what it should be since John tried to step back from a role he eagerly played for years.” That earns me a scowl from my mentor but I ignore it and keep going. “Over the last twelve years, he's given me the hits that still come to him from those that don't

know where to turn otherwise. And while most of those hits are requested by civilians that have been wronged who are familiar with the legend of Little John Andrews, a few have come in the form of old friends in motorcycle club places.”

“Idiot,” Pork Chop grunts as Spider says, “Get to the point, Victor.”

I hold up my hands in defense as I take a drag from my smoke. “I am, you Goliath Birdeater.”

He rolls his eyes as Marbles chuckles. “I fucking love that.”

“Thank you.” I bow my head, hit my cigarette, then keep going before Spider decides to crush my skull in his mammoth hands. “Recently, an old friend of John’s—”

“Someone I cut ties with years ago,” he huffs. “I’m in the fucking room, Tor.”

“We are all aware of your magnetic presence, *Johnathon*.” I grin like an asshole. “But I thought I was running this shindig? Trying to show the Kings I’m more friend than foe? Trying to prove to them I can be trusted?”

John huffs again but motions for me to continue.

“Anyway, this old friend—”

“He got a name?” Marbles asks as he arches a brow. “Seems like that’d be relevant.”

I smash my cigarette out and shake my head. “It isn’t to me and John won’t share, so don’t bother trying. Either way, this guy came to him with a rather tall order and I’ve been working on it ever since.” I pause for dramatic effect. “My current mark is Beau the Butcher.”

“No shit!” Marbles blurts, his mismatched eyes gleaming with malice as he claps his hands and rubs them together. “And you’re asking us to help, right?”

“Hardly.” Because this kill is *mine*, but I don’t say that. These men don’t need to know how deep I’ve gotten into the world of Beauregard Williams; how deep I’ve gotten into his daughter and how killing that fucker will be more satisfying

than most because of it. “But, since he’s become my target, I’ve been tailing him the way I do all of my marks.”

Spider nods. “And you’ve found something interesting that you need to share.”

I point to him and nod.

After spending a glorious thirteen hours doing nothing but fucking Stevie in between chatting and watching documentaries with her, I reluctantly snuck out of her house shortly before Cal returned with his son.

Stevie had warned me that I wouldn’t be able to visit her while the offspring of the Demon Seeds’s sergeant at arms were staying with her, and even though I didn’t like it, I understood it.

I understood that showing up to her house and trying to steal time with her was off the table while Stevie cared for the five and nearly eighteen-year-old boys. Boys she clearly cares for deeply considering she lit up while talking about them.

I don’t like the idea of staying away from her, the idea of keeping distance and barely getting visual confirmation that Stevie is ok. And I definitely don’t like the idea of not being able to climb that fucking trellis, sneak in through her window, then ravage Stevie’s body multiple times before falling asleep holding her tit while I spoon her in her bed. I don’t like going without any of that at all, but I get why it has to happen.

It’d be a real mind fuck for Prince or King to wake up in the middle of the night to find some stranger railing their babysitter in the bed next to their cots.

Not to mention it’d probably cause enough of a stir that they’d alert the patches downstairs and put a stop to my visits completely.

So, I’ve taken to driving by her house regularly or watching it from the bushes across the street; watching in secret as Stevie plays with Prince in the front yard, when she sends them to the clubhouse or Rolling Meadows high for school in the morning, or when she waits on the porch for them to get home in the afternoon.

Having no contact with her the last three days has been fucking torture but it's been easier knowing Stevie is safe, she isn't out and about in town, and won't turn up at a scene left by the amateur murderer running around.

The one who's left two more bodies for me to profile in that same amount of time.

Which is a little bit of silver lining in this forced separation, I suppose.

I've been able to get to the scenes before the cops—thanks to my current company—and really take a look at how The Ripper operates. I haven't been able to come up with any sort of pattern unfortunately, nothing that indicates a hunting ground or any particular events leading up to when he strikes.

It's incredibly frustrating because this idiot is unorganized as fuck and seems to kill when the mood hits versus any sort of planning, and though it's confirmed my initial profile about him ten times over, it hasn't led to any way of predicting when he'll strike again. And that means I'm no closer to figuring out who it is and putting a stop to it than I was when he crashed my fucking crime scene.

And again, I can find a glimmer of positive in all of that because it's allowed me to tail Beau the Butcher closer than I was before I became addicted to his daughter.

Which is exactly why we're here right now because I forfeited the opportunity to kill Beau last night in favor of keeping him alive a little longer to get more information from him. Unknowingly, of course.

“Assuming you're aware that the Cobra Cons appointed a new president, not all of this will be news to you.”

“*Jesus.*” Marbles rolls his eyes. “*Twat waffle* is more like it. Dude can't tell his dick from a hole in the ground.”

My brow furrows at that backwards turn of phrase but agree no matter how poorly executed it was. “He seems to be a dumbass for sure, but the would-be messiah has made one relatively smart move recently.”

“He got into bed with The Butcher,” Spider says with a sigh.

“He did, and those two idiots have been meeting right under your noses.”

At this, all four of the Kings scowl in my direction. Marbles’ expression turns from regular crazy to a rage-filled crazy even I haven’t seen before as Pork Chop angrily pushes up from the table and begins to pace. Spider silently seethes, the big-ass Viking looking more like he’s about to set out to pillage the city than he normally does, but Pope just leans forward and levels me with those gun metal grey eyes.

“What do you know, Tor?”

Aw, he’s using my nickname. We really are friends. “I followed them to the remnants of your former clubhouse, tapped into the listening device, and watched as the two talked. It seems Jesus is looking to move a rather large shipment, one that includes lots of warm bodies and a fuck ton of drugs, but since the Cobras were all but snuffed out—”

“Thanks to you,” Pope grunts.

“Thanks to *all* of us,” I correct, even though I know the club was busted after I left those two prospects for everyone to find. “But he’s looking to cut Beau in on this deal. Jesus will have the manpower to move his product and The Butcher will get a fat payout.”

Pork Chop stops pacing and looks at me. “Ultimately this doesn’t have anything to do with us. They might be meeting in a fucked up location on our turf and we need to handle that, but preventing a human trafficking deal seems a little more up your alley, doesn’t it?”

“Yes and no.” I sigh and slump in my chair. “I could kill Jesus and Beau, stop the deal from happening, but there was more to it than that.”

“More to the two of them becoming business partners?” Spider scoffs. “Seems like that’s enough for me.”

“You, my Goliath Birdeater, present a good point, but something is telling me this situation is going to involve more

than just the Cobra Cons and the Demon Seeds.”

“You think... “ He drops back back in his seat. “Fuck, you think they’re going to try to pin this on us, don’t you?”

I nod as I pull a cigarette from my pack and light it. “It’s not for sure, neither of them said as much, but after they hashed out some of the details of the deal, Beau went right into talking about some birthday party he’s planning.”

Spider rolls his eyes. “His *own* birthday party. Fucker has done it up huge to celebrate himself for years.”

“Even though no one else wants to celebrate that douche canoe,” Marbles grunts.

“And you, my lucky, lucky friends, are getting invited this year.” I smirk as all four of them throw out a few *fuck no*’s or *yeah fucking right*’s, but I shake my head. “Don’t be so quick to turn it down.”

“Why the fuck would he invite us in the first place?” Pork Chop asks with a confused look on his face.

“To make nice. Offer the olive branch, if you will.”

He blinks. “And why the hell would he do that?”

I roll my eyes. “Why would any evil bastard do something like that?”

“Total takeover,” Spider grunts. “Beau is going to try to get us to let our guard down, pretend like he wants peace between clubs, then he’s going to frame us for this bullshit deal he and Jesus are cooking up so they can have free reign of El Paso County.”

I point to the genius across from me as I drag my cigarette. “Exactly. He didn’t say as much, but I’m inclined to think that’s exactly what the Butcher’s plan is. And inviting you to his party is step one.”

Marbles blinks at me. “And you think we should actually go?”

I nod but Little John finally speaks up. “You go to that bastard’s party and you’re bound to get a read on the Cons’

new president, the club's numbers, and what they're like. Probably get a feel for who the important players are and who you'll want to keep tabs on. It'll be good intel."

"And a solid start to framing us." Marbles shakes his head. "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"It'll be fine," I say as I hit my smoke then smash it out. "I have the recordings from their talk, the ones that outline parts of this as their plan, and even though Withers and Abernathy are close to retirement, you still have them in your pocket, too."

"I don't know..." The VP frowns. "This seems like we'll be walking right into a trap."

I tilt my head from side to side before I shake it. "You have audio evidence, you have the authorities on your side, and you have me as an extra measure to ensure it never gets that far."

"How so?"

"I'll kill Beau before the deal ever happens. Simple."

"You say that..." Pope narrows his eyes inquisitively and I swear to god the holy man can see right into my soot-black soul. Spider might be able to crush me with his bare hands but Pope has a darkness in him that scares the shit out of my own. "But what about this other serial killer? Haven't taken care of him yet, assuming it isn't you, so how can you say you'll get The Butcher."

"It's not," I growl because I don't care if he's scary, this asshole isn't going to pin those kills on me either. "That bullshit excuse of a murderer is *not* me and fuck anyone who thinks he is. He's sloppy and unorganized, his work is amateur and frenzied, and he's preying on the innocent."

"Something you've never done?" Pope arches a brow and I feel my blood pressure spike.

"Do I have civilian kills under my belt? Yes, I do. Before John found me I was on a one way ticket to hell without any kind of redemption in sight but it has been *years* since I've gone off script and killed anyone who didn't deserve it, and those women, they didn't deserve what happened to them and

they sure as fuck weren't mine." I get up from the table and make it a point to look each of them in the eye before my stare returns to the holy man clearly trying to get a rise out of me.

"Tor," John grunts. "Victor, I don't think—"

"I'm fucked up, I won't argue that, and I won't even try to deny the fact that I *need* to do what I do in order to stay as close to fucking sane as I can get. It makes me a monster, a bastard, for taking justice or whatever you want to call it and twisting it to fit my needs, to sate my cravings, but I'm nothing like that piece of shit parading around and killing innocent women. I fight every fucking day to keep myself in check; fight for control so I don't go back to doing what I did before John found me, and since then I've used this fucked up part of who I am in the best way I know how. I'm *nothing* like that shitstain amateur, who I *will* find and deal with, by the way, and you fucking know it based on what I've done for your club already. I'll handle the rookie, I'll handle Beau, and I'll fucking take care of anyone else who pops up along the way, so rest fucking easy, you self-righteous, blasphemous piece of body of Christ shit."

The room is fucking silent for a few beats, Pope and I staring holes into each other's faces until a throat clears and draws my attention elsewhere.

"Jesus," Marbles says. "That was a fucking intense info dump, dude."

"Yeah, well..." I tug the front of my jacket then smooth out my hoodie. "Don't question my craft or my loyalty and it won't happen again."

He raises his hands in surrender as he starts to laugh. "Don't think that's what Pope was doing, Vic. We wouldn't be sitting here right now if any of us thought you were the one responsible for those girls."

"He was just digging, dumbass." Spider sighs as he scrubs a hand over his beard. "It's hard to know if someone like you is really in or not."

I just frown.

Living the way I do, being the barely human creature I am, I don't really have much experience with potential friendships and how to maintain them.

When I was growing up, when I was finally allowed to go to school, I very quickly realized two things. One, I was nothing like the other kids. I liked to read, and I liked to write. I was perfectly content living in some other reality completely conjured in my mind but not in the same way they did. Those words were my escape, my refuge from everything going on at home and that carried over, bleeding into my time at school and interactions with kids my age, and it's why as I got older, I would get lost watching movies until my eyes bled.

I also set things on fire, looked at hardcore bondage porno mags, and quietly tortured my asshole teachers who were convinced I was stupid because I barely spoke. So, there was that too.

But it led me to my second realization.

I was different and fitting in wasn't going to be easy, so I became the class clown.

I cracked jokes and got sarcastic. Played pranks and did anything I could think of to get a laugh or a little attention. And while the other kids seemed to eat it up, it didn't gain me any friends. I was still the weird kid. I just started making a scene instead of sitting quietly and avoiding them. So, over time, I worked hard at balancing that with forcing myself to be more normal. I perfected the art of faking the same interests and reactions, the same emotions and behaviors my classmates had and it started to work. All I had to do was hide everything about who I was and I was *in*.

For a little while, anyway, and by the time I started middle school I was a little more accepted by my peers.

Right up until Toby and I were sent to St. Pat's.

After that, I gave up trying to fit in or be normal; stopped pretending that I didn't dabble in arson or get off in some way to the idea of inflicting pain. I focused on one thing and one thing alone for the few years we were there, and when Toby

was taken from me, I embraced everything I am and hid myself away because of it.

Because I *had to* do it.

Then one day I met Little John Andrews.

He saw me for what I was, what I still am, and instead of treating me like shit or shunning me for it, John accepted it—tolerated it—and helped me control it. And he allowed me to be my authentic self, regardless of what it meant to do so.

His is the only true friendship I've had, the only person outside of my brother who seems to genuinely give a shit about me, and while I will always be grateful for it, it didn't help me figure out how the hell I'm supposed to interact with other people.

Stevie being the perfect example of that.

Nothing about what I'm doing with my baby dove is *normal* by anyone's standards.

Not that either of us are complaining, but still.

“You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?” Spider asks, drawing my attention back to him.

And when I don't see judgment or irritation, rejection or annoyance, no sarcasm or condescending look—which I am *very* familiar with—just the matter of fact realization that I don't get what he's saying, I nod.

“For some fucking reason, I like you.” Spider sighs, almost like he's admitting it's exhausting to possibly like me. “Pope and I both did, almost from the jump, and at this point, most of the EC likes you, too. If not, they definitely respect you. But the thing is, you aren't in the club and haven't shown any interest in joining. Little John is really the only reason we entertain you at all, but for the years of affiliation, he isn't a King either, so we can't really be sure whether you're in or not.”

I nod again slowly. “So, accusing me of these sloppy as fuck kills to gauge my reaction was a way of trying to test that.”

All four of the Kings nod.

“Just like egging me about getting Beau.”

Another simultaneous nod.

“Well, now you know, I guess.” I shrug because I don’t *really* understand how my reaction tells them anything. Maybe a smidge, but mostly not.

Must be a club thing.

And regardless of that, if me losing my shit and dropping some personal info did it for them, so be it.

Still don’t plan on joining their little *gang* anytime soon.

But it does lead me to a point I wanted to make before Pope lit a fuse. “Now that all of that is out of the way, maybe we should get back to business.” I sigh as I pull a cigarette from my pack. “Not only was I going to encourage you to go to The Butcher’s stupid fucking celebration, I was going to suggest you *host it*.”

“Say what the fuck?” Marbles scowls. “Why the fuck would we do that?”

I open my mouth to respond but Pork Chop points at me as he starts nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m picking up what you’re laying down.” My brow lifts as he starts pacing again. “Control, man. We’d have control of the environment, eyes everywhere. We have them on our turf as a sign of accepting this bullshit treaty he’s proposing, then we can keep the ball in our court the entire time.”

The VP’s scowl deepens. “And where the hell are we supposed to have a party for the asshole who killed Tank and Gunner, then tried to kill me and Snipe?”

I cringe a little at that because I knew it would come up.

Intense history and sensitive topics.

But I still feel like it makes the most sense . Which is why I say that. “Tenderloin is right.” Pork Chop glares at me but I wave him off. “If you host this shindig on Kings’ soil it gives

you ultimate control over the situation. And I believe the eight-legged one just acquired a strip club...”

“Fuck,” Spider grunts. “You’re right. I can’t argue with any of this. Keeping this fucking party in check would mean neutral ground at the very least, but our territory? That’s even better. And The Dollhouse is ideal. The space, the bar. Entertainment.”

“Plus the staff are all trained in various forms of combat.” Pope leans back in his chair and crosses his arms against his chest. “Tate won’t like it though.”

“Oh, she’ll fucking hate it.” Spider nods as he scrubs a hand over his hair. “She’ll hate putting the girls at risk in any way, but if we just enforce the policies already in place, make sure everyone is working and call in all the patches, it should be fine. Plus, most of us will be there.”

Marbles scratches his chin with a nod. “Cause Snipe ain’t gonna go. Neither will Cy. They ain’t gonna want to leave the babies unprotected.” Then his gaze flicks to Spider and he gives him a twisted grin. “Not saying you want to leave Jimmy boy unprotected but he’d jump at hanging with his cousins for a night.”

“I know,” Spider grunts. “He’ll just figure it’s another night Tate and I have to work.”

“And he’ll get to play with all of his *aunts and uncles* assuming you’re going to consolidate because of this little party?” When I’m met with nothing but agreement, I nod. “Good. Because I think the four of you should be the only ones in attendance. Beau will expect Prez but won’t argue since he has a wife and baby at home. Outside of that, he won’t give too much of a shit I don’t think. Keep the other five on your compound’s land, put it in lockdown, then the five of us—”

“Five?” Pope lifts one blonde brow at me.

And I give him my most charming grin. “Yes, altar boy. *Five*. You four numbskulls and yours truly. Did you really think I was going to sit back and let you have all the fun?”

He rolls his dark eyes but shakes his head. “No, I guess we couldn’t get that lucky.”

“Right!” I clap my hands together, accidentally break my cigarette, then stuff it in my pocket because fuck it. “I even have *the best* club name for myself.”

“Even though you aren’t joining... this should be good.” Pork Chop chuckles.

I wait a few seconds to make sure they’re all waiting on bated breath, tug the front of my leather jacket then smile. “*Bones.*”

This causes the Kings, as well as John, to all scoff in annoyance, but no one argues.

Not until Spider frowns. “And you’re not worried about being around so many people? Not concerned someone will get suspicious?”

“Of what? A new member of your club? A devilishly handsome and ridiculously charismatic Greek god hanging with you gorillas?” I shake my head. “Hardly. It’s not like I’m going to be walking around telling people about my *hobbies*. If someone figures it out just by looking at me, well, I’ll deal with it, but I highly doubt that’ll happen in the sea of meatheads we’ll be swimming in all night.”

I watch the four Kings seemingly have some sort of silent debate with themselves before looking at Little John, who nods because he agreed with me well before they got here, then turn back to them.

“Well,” Marbles grunts with a devious smile. “Looks like you’re in, bone daddy. Hope you got your g-string ready.”

“I’m always prepared.” I throw the VP a wink as I pull a pair of Stevie’s panties—the ones she wore last time I saw her and have been carrying around ever since—from my pocket and spin it on my finger. “*Always.*”



CHAPTER TWELVE

STEVIE

“WHY DO I have to wear this again?”

I smile as I smooth my dress over my backside and crouch down to Prince’s level. “Because it’s for the party.”

“It’s itchy.” He frowns and tugs at the collar of his button-down shirt. “And hot.”

“I’m sure King doesn’t think his shirt is itchy or hot.” My eyes flick to his big brother—that he absolutely adores—leaning in the doorway of my bedroom. I reach out to stop Prince’s fiddling and fix the top buttons. “Do you think he likes wearing shirts like this?”

His nose scrunches before he turns to look over his shoulder. “Do you like it, Kingy?”

“Not really, little dude. I’d rather be in a t-shirt and sweats any day. But this is a party...” King smiles as I silently thank him for playing along but scowl when he adds, “Even if we don’t really want to celebrate who it’s for.”

“We don’t?” Prince turns back to me with a confused expression. “I thought we liked parties.”

I ignore the fact that I agree one hundred percent with his brother and force a smile. “We do. We love parties and we like the people we have them for.” King scoffs again but I keep talking as I get to my feet. “Your brother is just a little disappointed because he couldn’t bring a date to Beau’s party tonight.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” The angsty teen snorts.

I shoot King a *please don't make this harder* look, but can't help but smile at him, even when he rolls his eyes.

I'm not sure when it happened, but my very first friend, my only friend and the little boy I viewed as a brother ever since the first time I was allowed to hold him, has really started to look like a man.

It was obvious from a young age that King would be tall. Cal is just over six foot and Rochelle is nearly five nine so it wasn't surprising when their first son had growth spurt after growth spurt until he was as tall as his dad by the time he started high school. And now that he's almost eighteen, King might even have an inch or two on Cal, and he's favoring his build too.

King filled out a lot over the summer; the once lanky and a bit gangly boy losing a lot of the lingering boyish qualities in favor of the more manly traits of his father. He's still lean, and definitely isn't as rough around the edges as Cal, but he's more of a spitting image than he was before. Save for his black hair and touch of green in his blue eyes—that's all Rochelle.

But looking at him right now, dressed in a black button-down shirt, dark jeans, and his boots... that little boy who followed me around like I hung the moon has grown into a young man without me fully realizing it.

And thankfully, the teenage angst and attitude that he gives his parents—and most of the adults in the club—is something King rarely turns on me.

I'd like to think it's because we're only five years apart in age, that maybe he sees me more as an equal than an authority, but hardly anyone has been exempt from his mildly rebellious stunts and overall *life sucks* attitude the last couple years so I'm sure there's more to it than that.

And by *more to it*, I absolutely mean the reason King is so good for me, *to me*, any time we're together is because he's bore witness to so many of my lectures over the years that he feels bad about even attempting to give me hell.

I'll take it though.

The relationship I have with King, with him and his baby brother, both mean so much to me that I'd hate to spend our time together fighting or in silence. King is helpful and kind; he's funny and intuitive. We enjoy a lot of the same things, and watching movies with him after Prince falls asleep is something I cherish. So, I'm grateful he isn't a brat for me no matter what the reasoning behind it is.

Just like I'm grateful for every second I get with the five-year-old tugging on his dress shirt.

My gaze shifts to Prince as he turns to face his brother, showing off the *itchy and hot* button-down that looks the same as his, the dark jeans, and little combat boots that are nearly identical to the ones King is wearing.

Prince could be King's clone.

His hair is a little more brown than black, and his eyes lack any green at all, but if they were the same age, I know everyone that sees them would think they were twins. Prince even has Rochelle cut his hair in the same shaggy style King wears his.

It's adorable really, the way the little boy dotes so hard on his big brother. He wants to be just like him when he grows up, and Prince even managed to talk his parents into getting Beau to approve him joining an out of club soccer team, exactly like they did for King around the same age.

These boys, my relationships with them, I can easily credit them as one of the main reasons why I'm still here at all. Cal and Rochelle treat them like gold but the idea of leaving them behind, of hurting them by doing something stupid after being some sort of fixture in their lives since they were born... that idea guts me.

"Do I got something on my face?"

I blink and shake my head, only now realizing I've been staring at Prince, most likely weirding out the little boy. "Nope. You're as handsome as ever."

He gives me a big smile—a smile that's missing two front teeth—before tugging at the collar of his shirt again.

“You don’t have to wear this for very long.” I sigh as I walk over to my dresser and start packing his bag. “Beau doesn’t want the kids there too late.” *Because he sends the women and children home after an hour or two so the men can get up to god knows what.* “So, you’ll go and wish him a happy birthday, eat a slice of cake, then maybe have a chance to play with the other kids for a bit before your mom takes you home.”

“Are you coming with us?” Prince asks expectantly.

“Yeah, Stevie. Do you get to leave when we do?” his brother chimes in.

But I shake my head. “Unfortunately, no. Beau is my dad so it’s only right”—*and required*—“that I stay for the whole party.”

Prince frowns in disappointment as I turn, but when I look to King for a little help in making this sound like it’s not a big deal, the seventeen-year-old is scowling at me.

Weird.

Again, King has seen Beau beat me more times than I’d like, which was never, and it’s not like my father is particularly good with children. All of the kids in the club are afraid of him and steer clear whenever they can, but King hasn’t seemed to care much either way since he developed the attitude that came with age. But the look on his face now says otherwise.

“It’ll be fine,” I say as my eyes bounce between their handsome faces. “I always stay until the end, you know that, and I promise—”

“Boys!” All three of us look to the hall as Rochelle’s voice bellows through the house. “King! Prince! You better not be hiding Stevie in a closet again!”

Prince and I giggle at that because she will never let me live that down.

During their summer break, I had the boys all the time. They stayed almost every other week because of various things Beau had Cal doing, and since I have a reputation as the

most funnest babysitter ever to live up to, we played all kinds of games to pass the time.

Well, Prince and I did. King only joined in after we begged.

But one night, I thought it'd be a good idea to play hide and seek, and managed to get both Moreland brothers on board. Of course, Prince wanted to seek first, so King and I took off in different directions to hide, my ideal spot being the utility closet by the back door. Problem was, that closet was hardly ever used and I'm almost positive the door was original to when the house was built in the sixties, so once I went in, the janky old knob got stuck.

Of course, none of us knew that until Prince gave up searching for me.

When he and his brother started calling my name and I tried to come out but instead found myself trapped in the utility closet until Rochelle came to pick them up, well, that was not only scary for a few good reasons, it became something she hasn't missed the chance to razz me over.

"Oh good," Rochelle says with a smile as she appears in the doorway of my bedroom next to King. "I was worried I was going to have to find a screwdriver and start removing door knobs again."

"Not this time, Mama." Prince giggles before itching around his collar for the hundredth time.

She walks toward her youngest son, the smile on Rochelle's face growing as she pops the top button and tries to get him to stop fidgeting. "That's a relief."

"You look real fancy, Mama." He looks up at her with a toothless grin and I have to agree.

Rochelle is so pretty.

Soft black hair and kind green eyes. Flawless olive toned skin, high cheekbones, and a stunning smile. She always tells me I'm a classic kind of pretty, like the Hollywood starlets of days gone by, but Rochelle is a real beauty. She actually reminds me quite a bit of Ava Gardner, just taller and a little

edgier, given the lifestyle she's been leading for the last twenty years.

Right now though, standing there in a black cocktail dress and heels, Rochelle looks every bit like she walked off of the silver screen.

"And you, my little Prince." She bops her son on the nose before smoothing back his shaggy locks. "Look very handsome."

"My shirt is itchy." Prince huffs, causing all three of us to sigh. "But Stevie says I don't hafta wear it real long."

Rochelle finishes fussing over her baby then nods. "Not long at all, sweetheart." Her gaze shifts to me and I give her a small smile. "You look beautiful, by the way. That dress is gorgeous on you." Then she winks. "Just like I knew it'd be."

I nervously smooth my hands over the front of my own cocktail dress—another requirement from Beau, the women and children wearing a *more casual black tie attire*—then push my hair behind my left ear and take a deep breath.

Dresses are not something I usually wear.

At work, it's scrubs.

School? Scrubs on certain days, mostly jeans and hoodies the rest of the time. Even when it's blistering hot outside. Other than that, I don't go anywhere, so I pretty much wear whatever I want in the privacy of my own bedroom, but dresses are never on the table for me. Not until Beau forces me to attend an event like this one, and I'm pretty damn convinced he sets a dress code just to spite me.

Dresses like this show off most of my scars.

Thankfully, I've grown into most of them.

Not completely, not even close, but the scars on my legs and right side of my body have smoothed out some as I aged. The skin is tight and marbly, but the large areas of burnt flesh that once took up most of my right calf and thigh as well as the top of my left thigh, my hip and parts of my right arm look

more like birthmarks at this point thanks to a lot of skin grafts and reconstruction surgeries.

Comparing them to birthmarks is probably more wishful thinking than anything else because it's pretty obvious that's not what they are, but no one sees most of those and anyone who has recently hasn't seemed to notice.

Victor didn't.

At least, he didn't say anything if he did, and that man has thoroughly inspected every inch of my body over a very short period of time so I'm going with they aren't as noticeable as I think.

Even still, wearing a cute little cocktail dress shows off way more mangled skin than I'm used to, and I swear my father makes me do it as another form of punishment. I just have to be grateful he allows me to leave my hair down, which is probably more for him than me since the side of my face wasn't as lucky in terms of *growing into my scars*. Between how dark that patch of skin is, as well as the recently discovered realization that I look too much like my mother, it's a wonder Beau hasn't attempted to beat the hideous out of me.

“Stevie?” My gaze lifts to Rochelle as I furrow my brow. “I asked how the boys were.”

“Perfect as usual,” I say with an embarrassed laugh since I was totally not paying attention. “Except this one here”—I nod toward Prince—“was farting up a storm while he wiggled into those dress pants.”

The five-year-old tries to scowl at me while he giggles. “You were pulling my belt too tight, Stevie.”

“Yeah, ok. That's what had you tooting your tush off.” I roll my eyes with a grin.

“I need bigger pants.”

“Yeah, sure. Bigger pants cuz those ones—”

“Stevie!”

I stiffen immediately at the sound of my father barking my name down the hall, quickly covering my face with my hair,

clasping my hands behind my back then dropping my eyes to the floor.

Time for a final inspection.

“Stevie, you better be fucking ready to go or else...” Beau Williams stops in the doorway as I hold my breath, his beat-to-hell boots all I can see out of my peripherals. “Everyone get the fuck out.”

“We were just leaving,” Rochelle huffs as she protectively steps in front of Prince and ushers him toward the door.

“Then get gone, you nosy bitch. No reason for you or these crotch goblins to be in my *daughter’s* bedroom.”

The second I’m alone with Beau, my heart starts to race.

Please make this quick.

He walks toward me slowly, the smell of liquor growing stronger with each step he takes. Beau stops about two feet in front of me before circling my position, and averting my eyes the way I am means I’m getting a good look at his crappy boots and dirty jeans. Both of which are covered in mud, what could be whiskey, and vomit. And that definitely means my father was already celebrating his birthday, probably the entire drive back from wherever the hell he was, and that is definitely not going to bode well for me.

Something proven one hundred percent when Beau finishes his inspection and abruptly grabs my face, forcing me to look at him while he sneers. “Trying to get fucked tonight, *princess?*”

Tears immediately well in my eyes as he squeezes my cheeks and chin but I manage to shake my head.

“No?” His murky brown eyes narrow, the yellow-tinged whites disappearing completely. “Not planning to spread your legs for some dumbass new patch, huh? Your dress says otherwise. Says you’re looking to get fucked by anyone you see so you can get the hell out of this house. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Why your ass is practically hanging out the back, and the front is so low you’re basically asking for someone to grab your tits.”

My stomach rolls as bile creeps up my throat.

I hate when he says things like that.

Every word Beau spits at me is full of venom but he's forever accusing me of things like that because he thinks all women use their bodies to get what they want; thinks we all do what the women he uses and abuses do, and it's why he blames me for the way Joker acted. It was always my fault for *teasing* him.

Which is fucking delusional, if you ask me; especially since my father had beat the shit out of Joker on more than one occasion for acting on his warped fantasies, but that doesn't matter to Beau Williams.

He has somehow convinced himself that I'm trying to bang my way out of this house and into another that's equally as horrible, and that boils down to one thing for Beau.

Control.

If I date, if I have sex, if I go to school on my own dime, or work somewhere other than the nursing home—since I don't interact with the general public there—it all leads to my father losing the stranglehold he has on me, and even though I'm pretty sure he hates me, the idea of that sends him into a rage.

“What's this shit on your face?” Beau's fingers dig into my skin as he jerks my head side to side, leaning in close enough for me to smell how correct I was about the crap on his boots.

But I still don't speak.

No, I just pray the tears don't fall while I look into the face of the man I have only ever wanted to love me the way Cal loves his sons, because if I cry, well, there's a very good chance I won't be going anywhere except the bathroom to clean up whatever mess Beau makes of me.

My father scowls, his leathery face twisting into a look of disgust. “What *is this shit*, Stevie?”

“M-makeup,” I whisper.

“Makeup?”

I give him a slight nod.

“You look like a whore.” Beau finally lets go of my cheeks and shoves me hard enough that I stumble back a little. “A fucking mangled whore, but one that’ll drop for the first dick that pays her any attention.”

I will not cry. “Rochelle... Rochelle said you wanted me to —”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what that rotten cunt said because *I* never said you could leave this house looking like a goddamn cheap prostitute.”

“But—she—this... this is for the party and—” Beau’s hand flies out in front of him, connecting with my scarred cheek so hard my vision goes white but before the pain even registers. Then my father is gripping my forearm, dragging me out the door, and rushing me down the hall.

His nails bite into my flesh as he leans toward me again. “You can bet your ass when I get home tomorrow morning you will be in for one hell of a lecture, *princess.*”

I roll my lips between my teeth, my cheek burning while I try to maintain my composure.

Nothing like a little psychological torture to go with that physical abuse.

“But until then”—Beau stops us at the top of the stairs and for a moment I wonder if he’ll just shove me down them —“get that worthless bitch Cal made his old lady to fix up your face. Can’t have you walking into that strip club bruised and bleeding on my fucking birthday.”

Right. *Can’t have that.*

His hold loosens briefly as I go to step down and when I think my father might let go of me so we can walk down the stairs without either of us falling, his fist is buried in my hair and he’s yanking me back toward him.

“I fucking mean it, Stevie. Have Rochelle fix that ground beef you call a face, but that don’t mean I want you talking to anyone at this party. If I find out you snuck off somewhere

with some dumbass in leather so you can ride his disease-infested dick off into the sunset”—his fingers dig in, nails scraping against my scalp—“I will fucking make you sorry you were ever born. You hear me?” He jerks my head back hard enough that a few strands of hair pop at the roots and I quickly blink away the sting as my father looks me dead in the eye. “I will make you regret the day you dropped out of your mother’s snatch just as much as I do.”

And with that, Beau lets go of me with another shove that causes me to grab onto the banister so I don’t fall, leaving me gaping after him.

If I ever questioned whether or not my father has ever loved me, I do believe I have my answer.

Beau Williams never wanted me, let alone loved me, and hearing him not only talk about my mother that way but threaten me while doing so absolutely confirms it.

If I’m not careful, it will only be a matter of time before his hate and regret lead to more than a brutal lecture.

They’re going to kill me, too.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STEVIE

WHEN BEAU SAID his party was going to be at a strip club, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

The outside isn't much to look at, and it has me questioning things further than I already was, but as soon as we get through the ridiculously intimidating security at the door and follow the bouncer past the coat check down a short hallway, I'm even more surprised.

Not that I've been to many strip clubs, just the ones my father is affiliated with in some way, and those are hardly anything more than modern day brothels, but The Dollhouse is beautiful. With its Victorian steampunk vibes and rich dark colors it's actually kind of inviting, and I really like the overall aesthetic and the way it makes you feel like you've been transported back to another time.

Is it still surprising that Beau agreed to have his birthday party here, especially since he is literally the least classy human on the planet, an overall asshole, and absolutely disgusting? Definitely. And the fact I just learned from Ember—since *this* is the club she manages—that this business belongs to the Wulven Kings who happen to be my father's mortal enemies and biggest competition, is the icing on the weirdest cake in the history of pastries.

"I had no idea you were connected to an MC," Ember says as she slides a glass of cucumber water my way. "Linnie hasn't ever mentioned it."

I take a deep breath and try not to push my hair out of my eyes. "She... Linnie doesn't know."

“I thought the two of you have been besties for years? How doesn’t she know?”

“We, well, it just hasn’t come up.”

Ember frowns. “It hasn’t come up...” Then one brow lifts and she gives me a knowing look. “Which actually means you haven’t told her.”

I nod as my cheeks heat.

The only people I talk to outside of the club are at the nursing home, and I keep everyone there at arms length, but Linnie has been the closest thing to a best friend that I’ve ever had so, if I were to tell anyone that I’m the daughter of the president of the Demon Seeds MC, it would be her. I just haven’t because I’m not really supposed to talk about it, and it’s both embarrassing—only because Beau has a less than stellar reputation in Rolling Meadows—and frustrating.

Frustrating and exhausting, to be honest.

When I first started at the nursing home there was a guy there, a cute guy named Mike that seemed to be a little bit interested in me despite how standoffish I am and the fact that half of my face is always covered. After a few months, he started flirting with me, and eventually I got comfortable enough to try to do it back. This led to the two of us actually talking about ourselves a bit, and for some reason, I decided to tell him about the Demon Seeds.

I didn’t outright say Beau was my dad, and I definitely avoided any conversation about what went on at my house, but as soon as the information was out, Mike hit me with a slew of questions that made me extremely paranoid. Sort of, anyway. He asked about club politics, the illegal side of things, stuff I refused to tell him and mostly danced around but then he started asking about the way club members treat their women. Things like: *Do they beat them? Do they consider them property? Is it true they share women and don’t practice monogamy? And my personal favorite: A biker’s old lady doesn’t have any say in anything, right? So they’re basically sex slaves who take care of the clubhouse?*

Talk about a red flag.

Needless to say, any and all flirtation ended there, and not just because Beau would have lost his shit if he knew I said anything at all about the Seeds at work.

Mike was only around for another two very awkward months after that, and he is absolutely why I haven't even told Linnie about my affiliation.

I don't really think she would act like that guy did, especially when it came to the specifics on how women are treated in the club, but I decided to avoid it altogether by keeping my mouth shut; and as time went on, as Linnie showed she was as true a friend as I would allow, not telling her became more for her safety than anything else.

"I get it." Ember leans her hip against the bar as she pushes a hand back through her periwinkle hair. "Tate was pretty quiet about things when we first met." Then she giggles a little. "I mean, literally the first time we met and maybe the next one or two after, but eventually the club life makes itself known in one way or another because it doesn't stay hidden forever."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience..." I look up at her through a few strands of hair that have fallen over the untainted side of my face before pushing it over my shoulder, even more curious about the very friendly woman I first met at a coffee shop and her own ties to an MC.

Ember shrugs. "Not directly. Not really, anyway. It wasn't long before Tate's situation ended up outing her connection to the Kings and when it did, well, that's when everything changed."

I blink at her before furrowing my brow.

"Lost you, didn't I?" With a nod, I take a sip of my water and smile as Ember starts to laugh. "Ok, let me give you a little bit of a rundown. I'm not going to tell you all about Tate and her baggage, I'm sure she'll gladly share when you come to a girls' night with us but I can give you a little info." She turns to face me, reaches across the bar then gently spins my

stool toward the stage. “You see that group of dudes over there? The ones flying Wulven Kings’ colors?”

I roll my eyes and nod. “They’re hard to miss.”

Ember snorts. “Yeah, I guess they are, but you see the biggest one? The real tall guy that won’t let that dark-haired babe out of his reach?”

Another nod.

“That’s Spider. He’s the Kings’ secretary, but his dad was the former president so what he says carries a lot of weight. Spider owns this club, that biker bar in Sabine Woods, MACs, and helps oversee a handful of other small businesses in El Paso County.”

“Ok... “ I’m glad Ember is taking the time to explain all of this, and I’m thrilled she’s here so I don’t have to sit alone and watch the Demon Seeds do what they do in these scenarios, but I don’t really know *why* she’s schooling me on the WKMC.

“Bear with me,” Ember says, leaning closer to me like she’s telling me all the secrets. “That dark-haired babe is Tate, she’s Spider’s old lady, and she helps him run The Dollhouse. Tate basically runs it, to be honest, because she worked here before they owned it but my point is I had no idea she had anything to do with an MC for about a week of knowing her, and now Tate and her man own the club, the Kings are in here constantly, and Elias and I are all but members even though we aren’t.”

I glance at Ember briefly because I don’t completely understand what she’s trying to tell me, then turn back to the group we’re both blatantly staring at.

Tate is a babe for sure, my new friend is right about that. Tall and curvy, a perfect body and face, with hair I am absolutely jealous of, and she seems to be humoring her *man* by staying close because even from across the room I can tell Tate probably doesn’t hesitate to speak her mind when she needs to. When you don’t talk to people, you get pretty good at reading body language and Tate’s says she is staying close

to Spider by choice even though she's chatting with another very attractive woman about a foot away from him.

"That's Harlow," Ember says as she reads my mind. "She's married to Marbles, the Kings'—"

"Vice President." I get another lifted brow from my new friend and sigh. "I know that name. He has a history with my father."

"Ah. Not a good one, I take it?"

I shake my head. "Not at all."

"Doesn't surprise me. Marbles is pretty nuts and I imagine he's pissed off a lot of people over the years." Ember chuckles. "He drives Elias crazy."

With a small smile, I let my gaze wander over Harlow before shifting to the man that could easily turn into one hell of a conversation if I really wanted to gossip with Ember.

Beau hates Marbles with a passion.

He hates the Kings in general but that's mostly because they run the county and my father wants to be the only one in charge, but Marbles seems to be the bane of Beau Williams' existence. Second only to me, of course, but the two have an interesting history and I know my dad has almost killed him at least once, right along with nearly killing their current president and successfully doing so to the previous one as well as the VP. And that alone makes me wonder why the hell we're having Beau's birthday party on WKMC territory.

But figuring that out will have to wait because Ember starts talking again.

"Snipe, or Prez as most of the guys call him, was here earlier. He made a quick appearance to say *well wishes* for the birthday boy but he didn't stay because he has a baby at home."

"I'm sure Beau loved that..." I mumble as I take another sip of water.

"They were at the bar when it happened and things seemed kosher. For the most part, anyway, and when Marbles told

Beau he was staying along with a few of the other guys it was fine.”

I highly doubt that.

My father probably took it as a huge slap in the face that Snipe didn't stay, which has me wondering... “Is the entire EC here?”

Ember shakes her head. “Spider and Marbles”—she nods toward them then scans the crowd—“Jackal, who's Spider's cousin and sergeant at arms, his two girls...” She pushes up on her toes then points as she starts to laugh.

Following her direction, I look to see a vibrant redhead dancing in one of the cages with a brunette, neither of them wearing much in the way of clothing, and the dirtiest, hairiest blonde man I have ever seen throwing bills at them while howling like a wolf.

“Summer and Jolie.”

“So that guy is...”

“Jackal.” Ember nods. “They're a thuple. And Jackal and Summer give Marbles a run for his money. Jolie is the rational one, loads of fun but she keeps the other two in line.”

“Really? Do they work here?” I cringe and turn to face my friend, I guess, with a look of embarrassment. “Not that working here is a bad thing, I mean. I'm sure not all of the girls in the WKMC are strippers. I just meant, I—well, she seems like she's a little wild and... ugh, never mind.”

Thankfully, Ember just giggles. “I know what you mean, hon, and I didn't take offense. Neither would they. The Dollhouse is different from most strip clubs, which you'll see when the girls start coming out to perform, and all of the Kings' old ladies actually help out around the club. Theo, Tate's sister and Cy's wife—they aren't here because they also have a baby at home—but she does all of the online marketing and promo for the club. She even updated our logo and helped give the inside a little bit of a facelift after ownership changed hands.” She gives me a warm smile as I blink wide eyes at her. “Summer is an accountant and does all of the bookkeeping for

The Dollhouse so things stay in order for Crunchy, the WKMC treasurer, and keeps the business legit. Jolie helps with the hiring and running background checks of everyone who works here, keeps the building up to code, and renews policies when needed so everyone stays safe. She's a lawyer and that has been super helpful."

I nod slowly. "I can imagine. And Harlow?"

"She's a nurse so she runs quarterly physicals on the girls and makes sure everyone is healthy, that no one is using drugs or anything else like that. Sofie, Snipe's wife, helps when she can but she does other things for the Kings so she isn't here very much. She is looking into childcare for the dancers and stuff though, toying with the idea of starting a daycare with some of the other gals in the MC for the girls who don't have any kind of outside support. Sof calls it her *mama mission*."

Ember laughs but I don't join in.

No, I'm too busy staring at her slack-jawed and in shock.

The Wulven Kings are *nothing* like the Demon Seeds.

Sure, the kids are all homeschooled, and Beau essentially forces the women to raise them all together, but not like this. They teach or they go on runs. They can't have real jobs, and don't get to pursue any kind of education outside of graduating high school. The only reason I was allowed to go to nursing school was because my father wants me to be able to fix up the members when they need it since the club doctor is getting a little too old to keep doing it. The women of the DSMC are the definition of the stereotype to be perfectly honest—property and just as ruthless as the men that claimed them—and the worst part about that is they also fight amongst themselves and are constantly in competition with each other in a no holds barred kind of way. My mother and Rochelle were probably the only exceptions to that sort of behavior, but even then they were so terrified of my father that they never spoke up or tried to rally the way these women have.

It blows my mind that not only are the Kings's women involved in the business, they're running certain aspects of it right alongside various members of the EC.

Which makes me ridiculously judgmental and naive because I always assumed all clubs were like the Seeds.

Shows what I know.

Not that I would know any different, but still.

“What?” Ember frowns as she tilts her head then smirks. “Don’t they involve their wives in Seeds’ business?”

A very out of place giggle bubbles up my throat as I shake my head. “No way, not like this.”

“Like how, then?”

“Think 1970’s Hell’s Angels.” I laugh a little harder as my new friend raises both eyebrows in surprise. “Oh yeah, it’s like being transported back to the Stone Age.”

“So this is a real culture shock for you then, huh, Stevie?” Ember starts giggling too. “I can’t wait to tell the girls. They’ll be super disgusted.”

This has me sitting up straight and leaning toward her, my laughter coming to an abrupt halt as fear lances through my chest. “Don’t, please.” She frowns at me but I reach out and grip her forearm as I shake my head. “Please don’t tell them any of that. I’m not supposed to talk about the club or anything that goes on in it. I shouldn’t even be talking to you about it. I... I—”

“Hey,” Ember says softly as she frees her arm and takes my hand in hers. “I didn’t mean anything by that. And I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to.”

I search her grass-green eyes for a minute then let go of her hand and start to relax. “I’m sorry, I just... my father, he gets really paranoid about the club and, yeah...”

“I understand, hon. My lips are zipped, ok?”

I nod and blow out a breath but I know Ember doesn’t *fully* understand. No one does and if I wanted to give her a clearer picture I’d end up digging myself a hole that Beau would gladly bury me in.

“So...” I turn back to the main floor and search the crowd again. “You said the Kings’ president is gone and the only guys here are Spider, Marbles, and Jackal?”

“Yeah, and a few others but I don’t see them. They’re around here somewhere for sure though. Snipe likes to have more numbers present than that whenever he can.”

Just as I’m about to continue with polite conversation by asking who else is here, my spine stiffens as the unmistakable feel of a fingertip glides down my exposed skin at the back of my dress and my space is crowded by a couple of unknown men.

“Marbles said to let the girls know they’re ready.” A tall blonde with a man bun and light beard says as he leans across the bar next to me. He reaches behind it, flashing Ember a smile as he grabs a glass and bottle. “Apparently the Seeds are getting antsy now that their women have left.”

“I’ll text Elias. He’s on dressing room duty.” My friend smirks while she watches him fill the glass with the clear liquor before grabbing a bottle of cranberry juice and adding a splash. “But first, since you so rudely interrupted my conversation, how about an introduction?”

My heart starts to race as he faces me because I do not do well with this sort of thing, but the crooked smile he gives me, the warmth in his dark brown eyes, they put me at ease. “Sorry, sweetheart.” He holds out his free hand and waits for me to take it. “I’m Pork Chop, but you can call me Chop.”

“Stevie.” I barely squeak out as I shake his hand.

Chop grins. “As in Stevie Nicks?”

I nod and slowly pull my hand back into my lap.

“Cool. I like that. The White Witch is a legend.”

“Chop is an enforcer for the Kings,” Ember says as she goes to refill my glass. “And this ray of sunshine here”—she nods to the guy looming next to him with a scowl—“is Pope. He’s their Chaplain, and probably the friendliest caveman you’ll ever meet.”

Pope scowls harder but gives me a nod as he grunts, “Stevie.”

Wow, he’s intimidating.

He’s not as tall as Spider, I don’t think anyone is, but he’s probably around six foot two or three, but that’s not why he’s scary. Neither is his short, almost white-blond hair, clean shaven handsome face, or his muscular build. Nope, it’s his eyes.

The light blonde lashes are surrounding the cloudiest gray eyes I have ever seen, so dark they remind me of my father’s handgun, and it feels as though they’re looking straight through me.

Right up until Ember pulls his attention back to her as she says, “See? Sunshine and rainbows with this one. It’s blinding, practically shooting out of his ass everywhere he goes.”

Pork Chop barks out a laugh as Pope narrows those unsettling eyes on my friend, then another voice comes from my right and has my stomach filling with butterflies.

“The walking blasphemy does have a certain level of *charm*.” I turn slowly as I hold my breath, certain of who I’m about to see when I do, and when my gaze clashes with that beautiful shade of indigo, Victor grins wide. “But Pope isn’t nearly as charming as some of us.”

For the second time in less than twenty minutes, my jaw drops and I find myself at a loss for words.

Ember slides a beer toward Victor. “Stevie, this is—”

“*Bones*,” he says with a wink.

And I have to bite my lip to hide my smile. “Bones?”

Victor nods proudly. “Bones, but you can call me whatever you like.” Then he arches a brow and watches me take a drink. “Bones. Bone Daddy. *Ghost*.”

As soon as Victor finishes speaking, Pork Chop goes into a coughing fit, Pope grunts a few curse words, and Ember slams another beer on the counter in front of him, but I just smile. I

don't know what the hell is wrong with everyone but I know *that* was just for me.

"Bones is a—" Ember tries to compose herself but Victor interrupts her. Again.

"A consultant. Brought in from out of town." He takes a drink of his beer, his eyes never leaving mine. "Prez needs my expertise on some things, so he patched me in and here I am."

Even though I am ridiculously excited to see Victor again, and in a public place looking all sexy in the low light of the bar, what he just said has several questions forming that I don't think I'm going to like the answers to.

Which is why I lose my smile and ask, "*Expertise*, huh?"

Victor nods but I see the doubt flash in those dark purple eyes.

"And what, exactly, is it that you're an *expert* in, *Bones*?"

His brow furrows and I can practically see the *what the hell are you doing* on his face, but I'm starting to put things together and I don't like where this is going. Not one bit.

But I don't have time to convey that because as soon as Victor sets down his beer and opens his mouth, Pork Chop walks around me, claps a hand on his shoulder and gives it a hard squeeze. "It was really nice to meet you, Stevie." I watch as he starts backing them away. "I'm sure we'll run into you again before the party's over. Make sure to grab another drink or two, open bar and all. And let us know if you need a DD. See you around."

Pork Chop turns and practically drags Victor with him, Pope now on the other side of my *ghost* as if to keep him from wandering off, but he's still looking at me over his shoulder.

Victor is looking at me like a confused little puppy, and regardless of how adorable it is, I'm scowling at the man I'm secretly seeing because he's a member of the WKMC and never thought to mention that during any of the conversations we've had between the many times we've slept together.

And the possible reason for it makes me feel like complete shit.

Wonderful.

“WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?” MY FATHER GRITS through clenched teeth as he grabs my wrist and pulls me down into the seat next to him. “I thought I told you to stay in sight.”

I nod as I let my hair fall in front of my face. “I was at the bar.”

“Drinking?”

“No.” It takes everything I have to keep from snapping at him. “Just water.”

“You talk to anyone?”

I look at Beau from the corner of my eye, my father’s stare fixed on the girl dancing on the pole in front of him, my stomach churning from how into this he is.

That’s nothing new. I know Beau loves strip clubs and anything like them, but I’ve never had to sit next to him while he was watching.

I’ve picked him up from both clubs in Rolling Meadows, even had to make a few runs outside of town when he decided to venture into new ones, but that was always a quick trip while my father was so shitfaced he had no idea he even called me instead of someone else in the Seeds. And at that point he was so far gone you wouldn’t know he was coherent while he watched the dancers let alone enjoyed it, but right now? Unfortunately, Beau Williams isn’t quite there yet, and the fact he keeps grabbing his crotch and leaning toward the catwalk while scolding me is making me sick to my stomach.

“You gonna answer me, or do I need to make you?” My father spares me a glance, one that has fear racing down my

spine, then turns back to the blonde ballerina in front of us. “Don’t think I won’t just ‘cause we’re on enemy turf.”

“I...” I swallow thickly and pray the bile stays in my stomach while I debate on how much truth to share. “I talked to the bartender.”

“The fat punk bitch?”

I wince at that, even though I’d love to argue with Beau and call him an asshole for insulting one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. Ember is curvy and beautiful, she’s edgy and fun. And she is definitely not a bitch but I’m sure she can get pretty scary when she needs to. Either way, Ember does not deserve to be talked about like that and it just makes my stomach hurt even more because I’m too spineless to stand up for her.

“She was the only one I talked to.” *For a while.*

My father adjusts himself in his seat, leaning even closer to the stage as the girl loses her g-string and pops her butt at him. “You sure ‘bout that? Cal said something ‘bout you talking to a few guys from the Kings.”

I turn my head as the girl crouches into a rather impressive bridge, her naked vag directly pointed at us.

The dancer is really pretty and she’s very talented, probably even classically trained in ballet, and while I won’t ever judge anyone for their preferences or anything else, vagina in the face right now just isn’t for me. Especially in the middle of a strip club packed full of dangerous men while sitting right next to my father who can’t be bothered to hide how much vag in the face *is* for him.

Ember was right, though.

The Dollhouse is nothing like any of the clubs I’ve had to drag my dad out of, and the girls here look so different from the ones I’ve seen there. And they really are talented.

Before the ballerina there was a dancer who came out like a hardcore dominatrix. I’m talking spiked boots, whips, and chains. She even had a mask on and walked out with another dancer who was wearing a latex suit and leash. While I wasn’t

entirely sure what to expect from that performance, I found myself really paying attention to it. And as it continued, I realized they were telling a story, one I thought I somehow recognized to be honest, so I asked Ember and she confirmed. They were acting out their take on *The Wizard of Oz*. I have no idea how I made the connection, but after a few minutes and some questions I felt stupid for asking, I got my confirmation.

Ember and I chatted a little after that, my new friend explaining how the girls come up with their own gimmick and performance; how they like to make it theatrical instead of just dancing to the music, and she also said that's a big part of why there is absolutely no touching the talent at the club. It's not a *butcher shop where they can grope the meat* as Ember put it, this is performance art with real entertainers and just because they get completely naked—mostly, but not all the girls do anymore, I guess—doesn't mean they should be treated otherwise.

I really liked that.

I like that these girls are valued and appreciated, *protected*.

They aren't treated like property just because they chose a different lifestyle, and it has me thinking that if the Kings go to this much trouble for their employees, I bet their old ladies and families are treated like gold and then some.

“Stevie!” My father snapping in my ear has me jumping in my seat and facing him again. “I asked you a fucking question, *again*, and your dumbass is either having a hard time comprehending it, or you're a fucking lesbian piece of shit and this little ballet bimbo is doing it for ya.”

I shake my head and bite my tongue because oh my god this man is seriously the worst.

Not that I didn't already know that. His treatment of women, or people in general, isn't some mystery to me, but to see him in action like this is a real eye opener. I can now add *homophobe* and *body shamer* to the already extensive list of things that make Beau Williams a bastard. And let me tell you, *drove my mother to commit suicide* and *beats me unconscious*

were enough on their own but somehow *dear old dad* never ceases to amaze.

But he's staring daggers at me, those sickly brown and yellow eyes narrowed on half of my face, waiting for a response.

So, I give him one. "I... I talked to a couple of guys that had Kings colors on their cuts." Beau's jaw clenches and I can see him grinding his teeth through his scraggly beard. "We didn't exactly talk, not really, but Ember introduced them to me when they came up to tell her to send the dancers out."

My father stares at me for a beat, a look of rage passing over his features that guarantees that lecture he mentioned earlier will definitely happen, and it will most likely be worse than the one he originally planned, and just when he opens his mouth to speak, Cal stops next to Beau and leans to whisper something in his ear.

Crisis momentarily averted.

I discreetly blow out a breath and turn back to the stage in time to see another dancer come out, one dressed in a full steampunk costume, and as her entrance music starts pumping through the speakers, something else off the edge of the stage catches my eye.

There, in the shadows, relatively hidden, is my ghost.

And Victor is *twerking* and shaking his ass against Pope while he has what seems to be a serious conversation with another man I haven't seen before. A man that looks a lot like an older, kind of attractive grizzly bear.

I wonder who that is.

Then I scowl as Victor turns around and starts dry humping Pope's ass, raising his arms in the air and pumping his fists to the beat of the song.

I'm not scowling because I'm jealous or something, Victor is clearly doing that to get a rise out of his brother, but *that's* exactly what has me scowling.

The man—the *murderer* I've been sleeping with for the last couple weeks is a member of the Wulven Kings, *brother* to the patches in a rival club, and he never even hinted at it during any of our conversations. And maybe I'm reading too much into the situation, but I'd like to think all of the proclamations of ownership while he was balls deep inside me meant there was a little more to what we've been doing than just having sex, which means mentioning his affiliation with the Kings should have absolutely come up at some point.

But maybe... maybe that's all it is between us?

Maybe this thing we share is just about the sex. Banging the daughter of the president of another MC, the enemy's little girl, the Demon Seeds' princess. Maybe I was stupid to think what Victor and I are doing is anything more than a taste of forbidden fruit, walking a dangerous line to get his rocks off.

He's a serial killer, for Pete's sake.

Victor is probably a bit of an adrenaline junkie; someone who thrives on chaos and breaking rules. How could he not be? He's been avoiding the police and death penalties for years, and while he's admitted he enjoys what he does to a degree, I have a hard time believing Victor would keep doing it if he didn't find it exciting in some way.

Jesus, he all but admitted to me that sex and violence go hand in hand for him, so why would this situation be any different? MCs are full of violence, we're affiliated with two separate clubs, and we have sex every time we're together. Throw in the secrecy and risk of our relationship and it's a cocktail someone like Victor couldn't turn down if he wanted to. And that's not even including all the other shit I've had running through my head since I saw him at the bar.

God, how could I be so stupid?

How didn't I see it before?

I should have known it was too good to be true. Too fucked up, but too good. A man like Victor isn't one I should entertain the crazy ideas about like I have been—ideas of the *real thing* and a *maybe future*. It's naive—naive and stupid—

and definitely unhealthy to go down the road I was when it came to my ghost, and maybe it's for the best that I found out this way so I can end things before I go off the deep end completely.

But the idea of ending things with Victor makes me feel sick.

Hell, it physically hurts if I'm being honest with myself, and that's probably all the confirmation I need to end things. I'm already in way over my head with the charming man who kills people for fun, and I need to stop this before I'm driving his murder van and helping him dump bodies on our honeymoon.

I turn away from Victor just as he starts trying to take Pope's shirt off, my gaze clashing with the bright blue one belonging to Cal Moreland. "You gotta use the bathroom, princess."

It's not a question but a directive, and judging by the way my father is nearly purple from how pissed off he suddenly is, using the bathroom is something I need to do or else I'll find myself getting that lecture tonight.

So, I give them a curt nod, avoid looking directly at my father, then get to my feet and round their seats in search of the bathroom.

Probably should have asked that before I got up.

Ha, fat chance.

Asking Beau or Cal anything when they are clearly discussing bad news is not a good plan, and I'm not looking to get punched in front of all these people.

I could ask Ember.

But that probably isn't a really great idea either after the chat I just had with my father. He wasn't really a fan of her, or of the fact that I talked to humans with penises and WKMC patches while chatting with her, so I doubt going all the way across the room back to the bar just to ask about a bathroom I don't actually need to use is a very good idea either.

Looks like I'll be finding the little girls room on my own.

As if this night couldn't get any better.

Quickly, I push my way through the throngs of idiot DSMC members cat calling the dancers, barely avoiding getting sandwiched between two of them that lunge toward the stage as the current girl takes her top off before darting in and out of the crowd that rushes behind them.

It's like these guys have never seen a naked girl before.

Hell, I've seen more than my share of naked girls thanks to being homeschooled at the clubhouse, so I know these morons have seen at least double those numbers easily.

Then again, The Dollhouse really is different and these women don't give the same vibes as any of the hangarounds at the Seeds' headquarters.

Probably because these women seem smart, healthy, and not at all like they're going to shank you the second your back is turned.

I smile to myself as I walk along the wall with dark-red fainting couches and thick tapestries, almost giggling over my ridiculous thoughts. In any other scenario I'd say I was being judgmental again, that I was feeding the stereotype and reputation that women affiliated with motorcycle clubs get; but unfortunately, in this case, it's one hundred percent true and completely verified by my own first hand accounts.

It's sad, but very true.

With a sigh, I stop just off to the side of the stage and stare in front of me at my only options for the location of a bathroom on this side of the building.

To the left is the beginning of a spiral staircase, one that definitely goes upstairs to the VIP rooms, but it's roped off and guarded by a rather intimidating looking man that I could ask to point me in the right direction but won't because *intimidating*.

Straight in front of me is the opening of a hallway, one that is dimly lit and rather ominous looking, but my only other

choice is a door to my right and since that has a sign on it that says *Staff Only* I'm assuming it's off limits to someone like me—who is definitely not staff.

Ominous dark hallway it is.

Mentally preparing myself to be murdered inside the dark corner of a classy strip club, I take a deep breath, steel my spine, then walk through the archway like I'm not freaking out like a wuss.

Only to make it an entire foot before I feel like I'm being followed.

But I don't look back. I don't run or scream.

Nope, I just keep walking nonchalantly down the hallway of terror and pretend like I know where I'm going.

Unfortunately, I do not, and since the hall is lit by what appear to be oil lamps circa 1888, I have no idea if I'm heading in the right direction because I can't find signs on any of the doors I'm passing.

Funny how I'm slowly becoming a character in the reenactments from the true crime shows I love so much.

It's after midnight.

I'm alone in an unfamiliar place.

Unarmed and unprepared for the worst.

Wandering a dimly lit path and feeling like I'm being followed.

All this scene needs is a—

I jump about thirty feet in the air as one of the lamps behind me goes out, visibility decreasing immediately from the loss of what little light there was to begin with. My heart starts to pound as I pick up my pace, turning the corner to my right I hit a dead end, and it's all I can do not to scream when another lamp goes out.

I'm being ridiculous.

This is silly.

The Dollhouse is a legit business, and right now it's packed with too many people for someone to think it's the ideal place to kidnap, let alone murder, someone. This is simply the result of one too many documentaries and movies based on true events. No one is following me and I'm sure the lights are just burning out in a really strange and coincidental pattern. I'm fine.

Everything is fine.

I'm paranoid, that's all.

Nothing is going to happen to me, not when...

The hair on the back of my neck raises and my entire body breaks out into chills as the unmistakable sound of a lighter clicks behind me but before I can react, before I can start running or turn and confront whoever it is messing with me, a hand comes out of nowhere and clamps over my mouth tightly as an arm wraps around my waist from behind, pinning my arms to my body as I'm dragged backward into the shadows.

Dragged backward to an end I really didn't think would be mine.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

VICTOR

WITH A STUNNINGLY DEVIOUS GRIN—BECAUSE how could it not be—I pull Stevie tight to my body, backing us up at the end of the hall until we’re almost completely hidden in the darkest corner I could find.

Technically, the hall behind the stage is the darkest, but it’s also the loudest, and after our little run in at the bar, I’m sure my sweet little dove and I will need to be able to hear each other while we enjoy these few delightful minutes alone together.

Minutes I’ve been fucking *dying* to have ever since I saw her walk in with her bastard father.

My god, Stevie looks incredible.

She always does, my baby dove so pure and perfect every second of the day, but that dress? The makeup? The fucking purple heels on her adorable little feet? I didn’t even bother hiding the boner I got when she came through those over the top double doors, and I even poked Pope a few times with it when I noticed how grossed out he was.

He wrongfully assumed I was turned on because we’d just come from the dressing room. The walking blasphemy, myself, and our favorite Goliath Birdeater were prepping the dancers for tonight’s company, but Pope couldn’t have been more incorrect if he started thinking I wanted to bang *him*. And while the stoic son of a bitch is pretty, he’s not really my type, which is why I settled for making him uncomfortable as hell by poking him with my dick whenever he was close enough to do it until the thing finally deflated.

And that took longer than it should have, all considering, since Stevie looks good enough to eat tonight.

God, I want to eat her pussy.

It has been way too long since I've feasted on my favorite meal, far too long since I've seen her naked body or felt it against my own as I sunk myself deep inside her warmth.

She's had Cal Moreland's boys all week, taking care of them as if they shared blood, and aside from a very risky visit two nights ago where we shared a quick kiss while I grabbed her tit via the death trap trellis outside her window as the royal punks slept, I've had absolutely no contact with Stevie and it's eating me alive.

Have I still been watching her? Hell yes I have, but knowing she had King and Prince at the house, along with an army's worth of morons guarding her, meant I could focus more on her ass than father and the serial killer moving in on my turf.

So, I've given my sweet little dove some space by traipsing around El Paso County after Beau the Butcher while he met with Jesus multiple times, looked at a few shipping containers at a construction site, made a couple rather large drug deals with some Sons of Odin fucker—apparently that's an MC out of L.A. and Little John is making a few calls for me because he knows *everyone* to ever ride a crotch rocket—then took off out of Colorado all together with Cal and his crew. Where they went is still a little unclear, but I know it was California and I can only assume it had something to do with SoOMC.

For the most part, I don't need to follow Beau Williams all over creation.

El Paso County shit? Sure, yeah, I need to keep tabs close to home so I can figure out when to kill him. And I have to admit—even though I hate it—it's been harder to plan that with how often Beauregard is gone and the seemingly sporadic lack of routine he's had.

But that's nothing to worry about.

If I feel like making things as boring as they can possibly be, I could sneak into Stevie's room when her shitbag father is home, fuck her once or twice then tiptoe down the hall and slit his throat while he sleeps. That literally sucks all the fun out of it for me but my job would be done and I'd have my little dove all to myself.

Damn, she smells good tonight.

I bury my nose in Stevie's hair as I breathe the scent of Christmas, my eyes closing briefly while my grip on her tightens. I let the peppermint and cookie smells fill my lungs and just when my cock remembers who this woman is and how happy she makes him, that's when my girl reminds *me* who I'm dealing with.

Stevie squirms in my arms for a second before she stomps on my foot, the heel of her shoe catching just right between the laces of my boot to stab the spike into the top of my foot. I grit my teeth as she twists a few times for good measure, successfully loosening my hold, and the moment she realizes it, Stevie pulls her arm free and delivers an elbow to the gut that actually has me doubling over a bit.

There's that feisty side I knew she was hiding.

"Jesus," I grunt, holding my stomach with a half-grimace, half-smirk on my face. One that turns into a full blown grin when I look up in time to see Stevie spin away from me, her bright blue eyes wild as they blink frantically against the darkness.

"Victor?" She huffs, standing in some weird kung fu position like she's about to karate chop my ass into next week. "Oh my god."

I chuckle as I straighten up. "Who were you expecting, Mrs. Miyagi? The boogeyman maybe?" The fight drains from my little dove, her shoulders drooping, and her body going lax. "If that were the case, I think you found who you were looking for."

Instead of the usual smile I get, or any other expression I was hoping to see, Stevie scowls at me and crosses her arms

against her chest. “I wasn’t looking for anyone.”

“No? Not even little old me?”

“No.”

“You sure about that, baby dove? I was watching you, and you definitely seemed like you were searching for someone.” I lean against the wall and look her up and down, my gaze drinking in those purple pumps I’m going to have fantasies about for the rest of my life, Stevie’s long slender legs, and the knee-length dress that hugs her body in all the right places. My eyes lift to her face and I find myself wishing she’d push her hair back so I could see everything. Especially those aquamarine eyes and her dusky pink lips but they aren’t hidden enough for me to miss the scowl she’s still sporting.

Which makes me frown.

Stevie gave me the same look while we were at the bar.

She smiled first, giving me a glimpse of the smile I always get, but it quickly morphed into whatever this is before I was rudely pulled away from her.

I thought maybe it was because Pope and Ham Hock were taking me away but looking at the same expression now, I can’t imagine that was it. And unfortunately for me, I’m shit when it comes to reading people’s emotions and the reasons for them.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve mastered the art of understanding body language and figuring out someone’s tells. Stalking my prey the way I do means learning everything I can about them from sight alone but that’s not the same. Knowing some serial rapist is getting nervous by the number of times he clears his throat isn’t the same as figuring out why the woman I’ve been obsessing over is looking at me like she wants to kick me in the balls—it’s not even close.

But I only have so much time with Stevie before someone starts looking for one of us, and that means I need to figure this shit out real quick or else my efforts to be alone with her will be in vain.

Stevie huffs again. “I can assure you, I was only trying to find the bathroom.”

“Well, that’s disappointing then.”

“Sucks to be you, doesn’t it?”

I frown as I tilt my head to the side. “You’re mad.”

“Aren’t you a genius.” My little dove rolls her eyes before glancing toward the end of the hall. “What gave it away?”

“The look on your face that says you would have kicked me in the nuts if you had the chance.”

Stevie turns back to me, her brows furrowing before one raises in confusion. “You’re serious?”

I just nod.

No use in lying, not about this.

Hell, I haven’t lied about anything to my sweet baby dove, I just haven’t told her the specifics of everything either. And while I know that can be considered deceitful, there’s a damn good reason I haven’t blurted out that I’ve been contracted to kill her father. Aside from that, though, I’ve been completely truthful with Stevie and it really is because I fucking hate liars. That and I don’t see any reason to lie to her. It doesn’t do either of us any favors.

She stares at me for a few beats, those bright eyes searching my face through the shadows dancing in the hall around us. Stevie’s expression doesn’t soften at all but I can see it change minutely, the touch of what almost looks like pity taking a slight edge off the anger. It isn’t pity though, not really, I just can’t put my finger on what it is because my brain doesn’t process this shit the way everyone else’s seems to.

“Yes, Victor, I’m mad at you.” My little dove sighs as she hugs herself a little tighter, her gaze dropping to her dark purple pumps. “Very mad actually, and I’m also a little hurt and embarrassed.”

“Why?” Because that complicates things further for me and I need the clarification. But judging by how quickly

Stevie's eyes snap to mine, she wasn't expecting me to ask that.

"Because," she snaps. "Because I had no idea you'd be here tonight—"

"We haven't seen each other in a few days, it's not like I could text you."

"I know." Another annoyed huff. *I'm very familiar with annoyance, so I know that when I see it.* "But I wasn't expecting to see you, and at first I was excited."

My frown deepens as I fold my arms against my chest. "And now you're not?"

A faint blush starts to paint Stevie's cheeks as she shakes her head. "I'm not."

"But why?"

"So help me god, Victor, if you ask me that one more time I might just scream."

Yeah, my sweet little dove is definitely annoyed with me and I'm too fucked up to have any clue as to why.

Which she must pick up on because her shoulders drop and she lets her arms fall to her sides. "Because you lied to me."

"Bullshit, I lied." My posture stiffens immediately, my back straightening as I push off the wall. "I've never lied to you."

Stevie lets out an exasperated laugh. "Oh my god, really? I understand maybe you're a little naive when it comes to feelings and stuff, but you aren't stupid, Victor."

"Pretend I am then," I bite out through clenched teeth. This is really starting to piss me off but this woman doesn't deserve my anger so I'm going to school it as long as I can. I just don't know how long that'll be if she keeps implying that I lied to her.

"Fine." Stevie bites back. "I'll *pretend* you're an idiot who doesn't understand the difference between the truth and lies, ok, *Bones*?"

The sarcastic tone has me thinking maybe she doesn't like my fake club name but it seems pretty silly to be pissed off about that so I'm sure there's more to it.

Something she confirms as my little dove narrows her stare and says, "Couldn't be bothered to tell me you're a Wulven King? Too busy sleeping with the daughter of a rival club's president to clarify?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I might be naive too, might not have fully understood what was going on between us, but seeing you here tonight made things crystal clear."

I shake my head, confused as fuck now. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Oh cut the bullshit," Stevie snaps, her voice raising before she quickly tones it down and takes another step toward me before whisper-yelling, "You're a member of the club that happens to be the Demon Seeds' biggest enemy. Their rivalry goes back decades, Victor, which is something you should know since you're so wrapped up in it. The history between the Seeds and the Kings is pretty bloody too, since *my father* personally led the charge on their clubhouse that resulted in the deaths of a huge number of their members, including the former president and VP. He almost killed Snipe, the one who *patched you in* as a *consultant* for the club."

"I appreciate the history lesson, baby dove, but I still don't follow."

"Oh my god!" Stevie nearly shouts before darting a glance to the end of the hall then moving close enough for me to become momentarily distracted by her scent again. "You can't seriously stand here and expect me to believe you didn't know any of that the night you creeped up on me at the nursing home."

My eyes connect with hers and I shrug. "I knew."

Because I did. But that's because I did my homework on the WKMC as soon as I decided to get involved with them. Well, Little John *helped* me decide to get involved with them

once I killed those two dirtbag prospects, purely by coincidence.

“Exactly.”

I blink down at this woman, a war starting to rage as my anger grows, as it mixes with the irritation and confusion all of this shit is creating.

Why can't we just fuck in the hallway like I planned?

That's why I followed Stevie down here in the first place, because I wanted to see her, to touch her, to fuck her hard and fast up against a wall all the while knowing we could get caught at any second. That's not too much to ask, is it? A little quality time with my girl because I actually missed her this week?

There are those pesky little feelings again.

But it's true.

I missed Stevie, not just her pussy but *her*, and I was really hoping to spend a few minutes with her before we went our separate ways. And now we're fighting—I think we're fighting—for a reason she won't even clarify, and I'm having a seriously fucked up response to it because yes, my dick has been hard ever since I buried my nose in Stevie's hair and every time she snaps at me the thing jumps in my jeans.

Par for the course, I guess.

“You are impossible.”

“And you're not making any goddamn sense.”

“You're so full of shit,” Stevie hisses. “You know exactly what I'm talking about so drop the act.”

I lean down toward her, putting us almost nose to nose. “Spell it out for me, little dove, because I guess I'm stupider than you thought.”

She doesn't break my stare, even going as far as to finally push her hair back from her face completely, then Stevie proceeds to drive the dagger into my gut. “You're using me.”

My head jerks back as if she'd slapped me. “What?”

“You’re using me.” Stevie nods firmly. “Using me for information on the Seeds, sleeping with me so I let my guard down and start telling you about the club and my father.”

“Oh that’s fucking rich.” I let out a hollow chuckle. “I’m using you. Right.”

“Of course you are. Why else would you conveniently *forget* to tell me you’re a member of the Wulven Kings? Why else would someone like you want anything to do with someone like me?”

I don’t know what the fuck that’s supposed to mean, but I sure as hell don’t like what she’s implying. She doesn’t let me say that though because my sweet little dove keeps talking.

“I’m not that stupid, Victor. Look at me. This”—Stevie points to the scar on her face—“isn’t pretty, *I’m* not pretty, and for someone as attractive as you, I’m sure having sex with me is scraping the bottom of the barrel. Why else would you do it? Why would you keep your involvement with the Kings a secret? So you can get on to enemy territory and gather information on their movements, that’s why. You’re using me to get to Beau and that makes you a fucking liar.”

Before I can think better of it, I have Stevie’s wrists in my hands and I’m spinning her, pinning her to the wall with a thud, her back flush against the black painted brick, her arms stretched above her head. I lower my face to hers, anger and a foreign sense of hurt pumping through my veins as my little dove twists the blade her words created in my gut.

“I am *not* a liar,” I practically growl. “I have *never* lied to you.”

“Bullshit,” Stevie pants in my face, her teal blue eyes blazing.

I have to give her credit, my girl has spunk.

She’s wrong, very wrong, but I can’t say I don’t like the fight she’s giving me.

Still. “It’s true. I’ve never fucking lied to you because I *don’t fucking lie.*”

“No, you just bang MC *princesses* and kill people for fun.”

“Exactly.” Stevie scowls at me but she’s right. “I do kill people for fun, murder them and leave their bodies in gruesome displays for the general public to find. And I do it because I like it, because I *need* it to feel fucking sane, and even though you could’ve gone to the police or told your dad or Cal or even that fuckstick Joker, I never lied to you about it. For all of the things I will do without batting an eye, I will not fucking lie. Especially to you.”

My girl relaxes a little as she searches my eyes but I don’t let go of her, not quite yet. “And as for *banging MC princesses*, you, my sweet little dove, are the only motorcycle gang royalty I have ever or will ever *bang*. You’re fucking beautiful, every single inch of you, inside and out, and *that* is why I’m banging you. Not because I’m using you or any other fucking reason you could come up with.”

“Then... “ Stevie tries to hide her smile but with the way it reaches her eyes and makes them dance it’s impossible, even with the doubt still lingering in them. “Then why didn’t you tell me about the Kings?”

I let go of her wrists and brush her hair back behind her ear. “It didn’t seem important to tell you I knew them.” She frowns and I shrug. “I didn’t know you had anything to do with the Seeds that first night we talked at the nursing home, and by the time I figured it out I was already obsessed with you. The clubs, your father, none of it mattered to me because I knew you were mine and that’s the only thing I cared about.” Which is a truth even I wasn’t prepared to hear out loud.

I care about Stevie, genuinely care about her and what happens to her, and while I’ve had those thoughts from the very beginning, saying them is very different from thinking them. So much so that the possessiveness she stirs inside my chest starts to rear its head, bringing with it a primal sort of reaction that I can’t help but act on.

With my trademark grin firmly in place, I dip my chin and brush my lips against Stevie’s, a featherlight caress that she immediately leans into.

“You are mine, aren’t you, little dove?” I do it again then pull back slightly, smiling at the way my girl sways toward me. “Mine in every way? Mine forever because I can’t let you go?”

Stevie nods as I nip at her lower lip, my left hand ghosting over the erratic pulse thrumming in her neck before I slip my fingers into her hair. My right hand moves up Stevie’s side, skimming over her hip then her ribs, tracing the curve of her breast through the soft fabric, cupping it with a groan as I press my lips to hers.

My little dove doesn’t hesitate to kiss me back, her mouth moving against mine with the same hunger I’ve felt ever since she walked into the strip club. I cover her body with my own as we kiss, my hips pinning hers in place, my cock throbbing as I thrust against her.

Stevie whimpers when I do it again, when I pinch her nipple through the slinky material of her dress, and when her hands come up to my sides underneath my jacket, her blunt nails biting into my flesh through my shirt, I can’t help but grunt.

“You are mine, Stevie.” I run my tongue along the seam of her lips, grinning when she effortlessly opens for me. *Goddamn, I fucking love kissing her.* So sweet, so hungry. My little dove meets my every move with a ferocity that has me ready to come out of my skin. “*Mine,*” I growl.

She nods emphatically as she pulls my hips closer, as she grinds against me, seeking any kind of friction she can get while her tongue invades my mouth and tangles with mine.

So fucking sweet.

I pinch her nipple again before squeezing her breast, that beautiful fleshy mound fitting perfectly in my hand. My hand that begins to wander back down Stevie’s gorgeous body.

When I get to her hip I flex my fingers and break our kiss, my little dove letting out an adorable grunt of frustration as I do. “Say it, baby. Say the words I want to hear.”

Stevie huffs then inhales sharply as I roll my hips against hers again, my cock giving her a small taste of the relief I'm about to provide. "I'm... I'm yours, Victor."

"For always."

"Forever," she gasps as I thrust hard, eliciting a moan from low in her throat. "For always."

I growl and kiss her again, then put just a little space between us, my girl seconds from stopping me before she feels my fingers on her thigh through her dress slowly start to pull the fabric up her leg.

Stevie's eyes dart toward the end of the hall behind me briefly and when they reconnect with mine I just smile. "I know, baby." Her left hand comes up to my shoulder, gripping it tightly as I trace the front of her panties and push her legs apart with my boot. "We don't have much time but you've activated gremlin mode and there's no going back."

"*Gremlin mode?*" Stevie giggles as I smirk. "What the hell is that?"

I lean in, my mouth close to her ear as I whisper, "I turn into a monster when I get wet." My little dove gasps as I shove my hand down her panties, my fingers tracing her dripping slit before I abruptly push one inside. "And fuck, you are so wet."

Stevie's hold on my shoulder and side tighten as I press my thumb to her clit, that delicious bundle of nerves already slick from how soaked she is. I pump my finger in and out of her pussy, curling it as I circle her clit, and when Stevie bucks against me, I grip her hair tightly in my left hand, bury my face in her neck, and shove a second finger deep inside her cunt.

"Oh," she moans softly, Stevie's hips bearing down in my hand while I fuck her with my fingers, my thumb working faster over her clit. "Oh my god."

"You're so needy, aren't you, little dove? A morbidly sexy little creature just *aching* for me." Her walls flutter and squeeze around me, a sign my girl is already close to the edge, so I still my hand under the cotton of her panties and smile

against her skin as Stevie whimpers in protest. “But you’ll come on my fingers when I say you can. You’ll come when I’m ready to let you.”

She tries to wiggle her hips but this position gives me all the control so it’s useless. But we really don’t have much time and I’m not in the business of depriving my girl of what she needs. Which is why I lift my head and meet her aquamarine eyes that are swimming with desire, my smile growing as I push a third finger inside her absolutely drenched pussy and whisper, “Come for me, little dove.”

And she does.

Stevie starts to come the second I pump and curl my fingers, her entire body jerking and tensing as I circle her clit with firm strokes of my thumb. My baby dove drops her head to my shoulder and bites down on my jacket as a muffled cry tears from her throat, her hips matching my movements perfectly while she rides my hand, her orgasm soaking me all the way to my palm until she finally sags against me.

Slowly, I withdraw my fingers, making sure to swipe her clit one more time as I do, and when my sweet little dove twitches in response I can’t help but chuckle.

“I wasn’t expecting that.” Stevie sighs as she turns her head and looks up at me.

“No?”

“Not even a little.”

I smirk. “I was.” Stevie rolls her eyes but then they widen as I lift my fingers to my lips and suck them into my mouth, licking her cum from them until I’m satisfied. “I was expecting that and more to be honest, but I’ll take any piece of you I can get.”

“But what about...” She looks down at my fully erect, painfully hard cock straining against my fly as she pushes herself off of me. “You can’t go back out there like that.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say—even though I won’t—then move to fix Stevie’s dress. “We don’t have time for anything else, I’m sure people are already looking for us.” A dickhead looking

for her, a walking blasphemy looking for me. “Gremlin mode is officially deactivated until the next time I get you alone. That’s when I’ll fuck you six ways from Sunday and make sure you’re walking funny the rest of the week.”

Stevie blushes but gives me a beautiful smile as she pushes up on her toes and kisses me more sweetly than I deserve. “Can’t wait.”

“Me either.” I give her another hard kiss then grin. “My balls are going to be so blue they could pass as Scrotum Smurf.”

My sweet little dove laughs as she finishes righting her clothes, the sound making my heart flip in my chest.

Which is weird, but whatever.

It’s probably just the lack of blood and oxygen going to my head since it’s all currently in my cock.

Might even mean I’m going to go into cardiac arrest and die by blue balls.

It’s worth it though.

Fingering her pussy until she comes, seeing her smile and hearing her laugh, all because Stevie really is mine? I’d die a thousand blue ball deaths just to experience those things whenever I can.

And *that* is more fucked up than any other thought that’s crossed my mind in over thirty years on the planet.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VICTOR

Sack-linski.

I chuckle to myself as I watch Anthony *Salinski* struggle to unlock his front door from my vantage point, which is currently up the tree in his neighbors side yard.

They're on vacation, so it's fine.

Salinski sorts through the keys on his ring before settling on one, forcibly rams it into the deadbolt, curses under his breath as he jiggles it in the lock then yanks it free and starts all over again.

He's been trying to get into his goddamn house for the last fifteen minutes and I'm *this* fucking close to hopping down, breaking in through the side—again—and letting him in myself. But patience is a virtue, and I really need this kill.

I'm still all keyed up after finger-fucking Stevie because my plan to jerk off in the bathroom before rejoining the walking blasphemy by the dressing rooms at The Dollhouse took a sharp turn mere seconds after my little dove walked away.

First, Elias came flying past me with his Glock drawn while he barked orders into his ear piece.

Naturally drawn to chaos, I took off after him to find Marbles and Beau in the middle of a knock-down-drag-out in the center of the main floor, the Kings' VP screaming all kinds of creative obscenities as he attempted to bash The Butcher's head in with a broken table leg. Beauregard wasn't out of the fight by any means, though, because the greasy bastard had a

knife in one hand and a gun in the other while he spit his own colorful words.

After watching them for a couple seconds, my thoughts immediately turned to Stevie and I started searching for her, only to find Cal Moreland and about four other Demon Seeds boxing her and Ember in behind the bar.

The level of relief I felt when I saw her, the way my breath whooshed out of me at the sight of her safe and unharmed—and looking rather annoyed, honestly—I don't even want to acknowledge those potential *feelings* or why I was experiencing them. I did have them, though, and there's no changing it.

So I shot her a wink, got a barely hidden smile in return, then went back to watching the shitshow play out in front of me.

Up until Spider got involved, anyway.

He's a docile human, nearly as stoic as Pope and far less confrontational, but if you piss off that Goliath Birdeater, all bets are off.

Less than five minutes and he had Marbles and Beau separated, shut down the bar, sent the dancers back to the dressing room, and was kicking out the Seeds.

It was magical.

Once the dust settled and the regular patches of the WKMC were making sure all stragglers were gone, I got the rundown.

Apparently one of the Demon Seeds prospects cornered a dancer and propositioned her in the hallway opposite where Stevie and I were. She turned him down, reminded him of the no touching policy, and tried to go about her business. *Tried* being the key word there because he didn't take no for answer and roughed her up pretty bad before Pope and Elias found them.

I guess the ex-marine lost his shit on the guy, beat him within seconds of death before Pope pulled him off the piece of shit and told him to take care of the girl. And when the

walking blasphemy came out to let Marbles know what was going on, that's when all hell broke loose.

Assuming my night was coming to an end and I'd be able to happily jerk off to images of Stevie's face while she rode my hand, I found Little John—yes, he was definitely attending because of me—to let him know I was rolling out. But again, my plans were foiled.

While Beau the Butcher and Marbles the Insane had their forty-seventh rematch, John got a hit on another of my targets.

Just because I'm sitting on Beauregard like a hen with an egg does not mean I'm not still working. Idle hands and all that bullshit, after all, and this week's mark pinged our radar while leaving a known pedophile's house with a rather large duffel bag in tow.

Which brings me back to Anthony Sack-linski.

Officer Anthony Sack-linski.

Rookie for Birch Creek PD. Twenty-four. Raised in a devout Lutheran household with his three sisters by two loving parents. Mom was a homemaker and church secretary. Dad is a retired homicide detective, that left the force early due to an injury, and a former Air Force pilot. Recently divorced after a five year marriage to his high school sweetheart. Father to a five-year-old girl.

Dirty cop.

Wife beater.

Pedophile, and abuser of his own child.

And a huge fucking moron because this shit stain uses his ties to the BCPD to find *like-minded* scumbags. He even managed to snag a gig doing the regular home checks on the registered sex offenders in the area, using his day job to get all the info on websites, magazines, and sex trafficking rings that cater to his preferences.

While digging up dirt on him, I found that most of Anthony's coworkers are creeped out by him and go as far as to call him *Chester the Molester* behind his back. Add that to

the fact that I was able to hack his computer and find all of his digital porn within minutes. I found exactly where the piece of human waste kept his reading materials and souvenirs, and profiled him to be a total egomaniac with a God complex without ever speaking one word to the fucker, which shows he doesn't cover his tracks very well. Hell, I'd put money on Anthony almost *wanting* people to know what he gets up to behind closed doors because he's confident he'll never get caught.

Surprise, motherfucker.

Caught you red fucking handed.

After another three minutes of fighting with his front door, Anthony finally gets it open and goes inside, the light in his living room coming on first.

I jump down from the tree and start toward the house, my mask and goggles already in place as I watch this bag of rotten flaccid dicks lock up and begin sorting through his mail. He tosses it on the coffee table before turning on the TV, then gapes at the screen like an idiot for a few seconds. Anthony starts to laugh at whatever he put on, my adrenaline kicking in and mixing with my anger while I walk along the side of his house.

Normal.

By all appearances, what Anthony Salinski is doing is *normal*.

Long day at work, hit the gym after. Stop by a friend's house for a drink. Fill up the gas tank and grab a burger in a drive thru, eat it on the way home before checking the mail and looking it over once inside.

All of that shit is the mundane, boring, take-for-granted crap that most middle class blue collar working people do. It's average.

Every day.

Normal.

And it pisses me off because a son of a bitch like Anthony Salinski doesn't deserve it.

He had every opportunity given to him.

His parents are still together, seemingly having raised him the best they could; always providing for their kids and never laying a hand on them.

Coasted through school on a 3.7 GPA, played hockey, and earned himself a four year scholarship to CSU. Graduated with a bachelor in business management while going to the academy.

Married a pretty girl right out of high school, one who earned herself a college degree while pregnant and raising a baby girl but chose to stay home with her full time shortly after.

Got a job in the same police force his dad retired from thanks to the *good word* he put in, and he's slowly moving up the ranks despite being a dumpster fire of a human.

Anthony Salinski has no idea what it's like to fight and claw your way through the shit just so you can survive long enough to do it all over again the next day.

He has no clue what it's like to not know when your next meal will be, whether only your mother will beat you or if your father will join too. He doesn't know what it's like to get bullied then shunned, what it's like to want to make your life to be so much more than it is so you can get the hell out of town, only to realize there is something so goddamn wrong with you that it'll never happen.

Anthony Salinski has no fucking idea what it's like to finally stand up for yourself, and finally try to protect the one person you give a shit about, then turn around and have your life explode into a heaping pile of shit because of it.

No, this fuckstick has no clue what any of that is like, and instead of taking the silver spoon he was born with and using it to dig through all the bullshit in the world, Anthony uses it to break defenseless children until they turn out like *me*.

But you know what else Sack-linski doesn't know?

He has *no* idea who's coming for him, and *that* is exactly what this piece of shit deserves.

I crouch down and follow Anthony toward the kitchen, losing my visual briefly when I round the back of his house. The light comes on just as I grab my bag from the bushes and squat behind them for a beat while I watch his shadow move across the sliding glass doors in the dining room.

Before Sack-linski got home, I broke in through the side door that leads to the detached garage.

The only blueprints I could find on the little one-level ranch were from about ten years ago, and since Anthony likes to keep up with the Jones's, I needed to be sure he hadn't remodeled the fuck out of the inside before I went in. And I'm glad I did because he'd knocked down a few walls, moved into his daughter's room—sick fuck—and turned the master bedroom into an extension of the third bedroom, but he must have given up halfway because it's full of paint cans, drywall, and tarps.

I wait for the kitchen light to go out before I dart across the deck, rounding the opposite side of the house then pausing at the side door. I hold my breath while I listen to make sure Anthony is headed toward his bedroom then quickly pick the knob lock.

Letting myself in quietly, I look around and see nothing but the blue glow coming from the now dark living room and a light on in the hall.

Perfect.

Anthony has no idea I'm here, and he's about to find the little present I left him.

I sling my bag over my shoulder as I nonchalantly walk through the kitchen, my adrenaline spiking, my endorphins already responding to the thrill of the kill, my high kicking in and reaching a peak that will make this even more satisfying.

With a smile no one can see, I turn the corner and start down the hall, fighting the urge to whistle a happy little tune.

It's disturbing how much I love this shit, even to someone as fucked up as me, but I can't argue with the way it makes me feel. My blood rushing through my veins, my heart pumping wildly in my chest. Thankfully, actually killing people doesn't give me a boner but the anticipation leading up to it easily could if I let it.

I don't, though.

That's not really my thing.

But the way my entire body reacts to the idea of watching the life leave someone's eyes at my hand? That shit is addictive as hell and can be considered some hardcore fucking foreplay.

Maybe I'll swing by and see if Stevie is still up when I'm done.

My smile grows at the thought, along with others of fucking her while Joker lay in a pool of blood on the floor less than a foot away flash through my mind. I don't have time for that kind of distraction right now, though, so I need to shelf it for the time being.

Especially when I peer in the open bedroom door and see that Anthony found my gift.

"What the hell is going on..." he mumbles as he snatches one of the dozens of photos I printed off his computer from his desk. Sack-linski looks it over for a second before turning slightly and reaching out to grab a pair of stained underwear, little girl's underwear, from the foot of his bed.

Sick fucking bastard, I think as I shake my head and lean against the door frame.

During my walk-through I managed to find all of Anthony's hiding places.

He had quite the disgusting stash under his floorboards, so much so that I left a decent amount underneath and only set out the *trophies* his coworkers should see right away.

The ones with blood and other stains on them.

I left the hole in the floor exposed, though.

Along with all kinds of pamphlets and magazines, and a slew of photos—some Salinski himself are in—taped to the wall and neatly spread across his desk. I also made sure to pull up one of his videos on the desktop and pause it at the beginning, just in case his fellow officers want to get a good look at the way he drops in on those sex offenders he was tasked to check up on.

“What the fuck—”

“You have quite the collection, Officer Sack-linski.” Anthony drops his duffel as he spins toward me, his hand instinctively going to his hip, but he’s unarmed. *Can’t satisfy those sick cravings with a big shiny gun getting in the way.* “Probably should have hidden it better, though. Any old burglar could’ve broken in here and found it.”

He starts to lower his hands in front of him slowly, swallowing hard as his training kicks in. “Is that what you are? A burglar here to rob me?”

I tsk. “No, *Anthony*. Robbers rob, burglars burgle. You should know that.”

“Right, yeah. Sorry. So you’re a robber?”

I shake my head.

“A burglar?” The dipshit tries to clarify because clearly he still doesn’t get it.

Another shake.

“Then, what are you doing in my house?”

I stay quiet as his eyes move over me; the solid black, industrial-grade hazmat suit, the tinted goggles over the hood, the multiple pairs of gloves on my hands, and shoe protectors on my feet. Anthony’s calm expression falters a little when his stare comes back to my face, and god, I wish he could see my evil grin. But the mask will suffice.

It definitely ties the entire ensemble together.

The mask I wear is in two parts.

The first layer is a simpler, more plain sort of KN95 with a breathing valve because it suctions to my skin and is worn under the hood while a more elaborate one attaches to it over the hood, keeping every inch of my skin one hundred percent covered and hidden.

And it looks like the nose and mouth of a demonic skeleton.

The Harvester of Bones was a more accurate nickname than the papers realized when they gave it to me. It's almost too bad no one has lived to share that with them.

Oh well.

"Who are you?" Sack-linski asks as terror starts creeping into his features. "What do you want from me?"

I sigh as I push off the doorframe and step into the room, dropping my bag with a thud at my feet. "If you're really too stupid to figure it out... " I wait for a response but get nothing, so I continue. "I'm The Harvester of Bones, Officer, and I've come to collect."

Anthony stares at me a little longer, his jaw slack while he just blinks.

That wasn't the reaction I was hoping for.

Not that I was hoping the twatwaffle would ask for my autograph or something, but almost anything would be better than that.

Almost, because as soon as it sinks in, Sack-linski lunges at me—another reaction I didn't want—and tries to gore me like a drunk, mute minotaur charging through a maze.

He makes contact, but not until after he trips over his bag, bounces off the end of his bed, nearly crashes into a dresser, then rebounds at the last second.

Idiot.

Anthony's momentum suffers because of the pinball effect, but he plows into me anyway, sending me backward a couple of steps before I grab the door and muscle him back into the room.

He leaps like a fucking gazelle over his bed and dives for the nightstand, the squirrely little fucker faster on his feet than anticipated, and when he spins toward me he's aiming a .45 at my face.

"Stop," Salinski barks, his hands trembling. "Don't move or I'll shoot."

I grin to myself as I raise my hands and take a step forward. "Oh, *Anthony*, you can't be serious right now."

He nods firmly and flexes his finger against the trigger. "I mean it. You come any closer and I'll shoot."

"Now why would you do that? Go and kill The Harvester of Bones, the *vigilante ghost*, when you could make the call and bring in the notorious serial killer alive and well." Am I stroking my own ego right now? Yes, but I'm also playing to his because if Sack-linski is as vain and arrogant and pompous as I think he is, he'll want all the attention and accolades catching me alive would award him. So I take another step. "Think about it, Anthony. Interviews on the local news, *national* news. It'd be every headline, every banner on the internet." Another few inches closer. "*Local hero saves El Paso County, single-handedly brings in The Harvester of Bones.*"

Salinski lowers the gun just a little as he mulls over my words, but when I hit the corner of his bed, this fucker fires a round directly into my right bicep.

"Fuck!" I bark as he takes aim again, briefly looking at the hole in my suit. "You fucking *shot* me, you little shit!"

"Don't come any closer! I swear, I'll do it again!"

We stare at each other for a few seconds, my arm throbbing, Anthony shifting nervously on the balls of his feet.

I'm not sure if it's the magnitude of who he's facing or if Salinski is just trigger happy, but the fact that he shot me while acting like he's tweaked out on some upper is annoying as hell. I don't know what standard protocol is for these types of situations but I can imagine most cops avoid firing guns in

residential areas at two in the morning regardless of who they're shooting at.

Something to look into later, I guess.

Especially when this douche canoe inches to his right then glances out of his peripheral vision at the open window behind his desk.

Oh, hell no.

No fucking way I'm letting that happen. I wasn't going to from the start, but now that he *shot me in the fucking arm* I'll be making damn sure this shitbag doesn't leave his house until his neighbors report the awful stench coming from it.

And that is exactly why I don't think; I just act.

I shoot forward, catching Salinski off guard as I throw myself at him, grabbing his wrist and throat as we crash into the nightstand. Using my left hand—my dominant hand, thank fuck—I squeeze his windpipe and bash his wrist into the wood repeatedly with the other until I hear the satisfying crunch of it breaking before the gun falls to the floor.

But it's not enough to take down the piece of trash police officer.

Even with a broken wrist and me slowly squeezing the life out of him, Salinski claws at my forearm and takes a cheap shot, attempting to knee me in the balls but I've been at this too long.

Not only am I wearing a bullet proof vest and multiple layers of clothing under my suit, I've also got on a jockstrap and cup.

Been there, done that.

And while it still makes me cough, the impact to my nuts doesn't give Anthony the result he was hoping for judging by the way his eyes widen.

"I'm no rookie, *officer*," I huff as I give him a hard push back into the table, both hands tightening their grip. "And I'll be walking out of here with your femur to prove it."

With one final push, I slam Salinski's head back into the wall above the nightstand and let out a grunt of relief as his body goes limp.

"Finally." I squeeze a little tighter before letting go and when Anthony slumps to the side before toppling to the floor, I take a minute to collect myself.

The hole in my arm is on fire and pulsing with pain, my balls are hiding up in my stomach in fear of getting kneed again, and I'm fucking sweating my ass off in this goddamn suit while hoping I don't bleed the fuck out under all these layers.

I knew going after a cop had the potential to be a little riskier but fuck, I'm really tired of fighting my kills.

I usually sneak up on them in a way that catches them so off guard they don't have time to do anything but panic. And yeah, Joker wasn't a planned thing. He was totally spur of the moment because of what he was doing to Stevie and he was accustomed to choosing fight over flight, whereas this asshole has academy training that says fight always wins, but still. Having my last two victims fight back wasn't really on my bucket list.

And clearly I've gotten too comfortable in my routine because I had no idea I was that out of shape.

Wait, no, not out of shape.

Rusty.

I'm just rusty, that's all. Like I said, my targets don't usually have the chance to fight back, and Little John stopped sparring with me after his knee surgeries.

Maybe I'll talk to Pope or Spider about hitting the gym. I do a lot of work for John around the junkyard that keeps me in shape, but it's not the same as good old fashion cardio caused by a little hand to hand combat. And I'm sure those two would thoroughly enjoy the possibility of beating the crap out of me in the boxing ring. Annoying or not, they'd probably both jump at the chance to hang out if it meant punching me at least

once in any number of places. My face being their goal, no doubt.

I frown at the thought as I park my hands on my hips and stare down at Sack-linski.

Oh my god, I'm trying to be bros with the Wulven Kings.

At the very least that's the kind of thing someone would think about doing with their friends. Their acquaintances, or coworkers even. And here I am, the charming fucker who's been rogue his entire life, staring at the unconscious body of a dirty, perverted cop while planning a *day date* with two of the biggest, most stoic bastards I've ever met, who probably hate me. I'm even hopeful they'll agree.

What in the good goddamn is wrong with me?

Feelings.

More of those irritating little emotions bubbling up in my chest and spilling over into my thoughts.

First Little John, then Stevie, now those two.

I knew I was cracked before, fucked up in ways most people can't even comprehend, but this? This is even worse than I thought.

Because you're not what everyone has always said you are, and you know it.

I shake John's voice from my head before taking a deep cleansing breath.

I can analyze the break in psyche later over a cigarette and a beer while I watch *Silence of the Lambs* for the hundredth time.

Right now, I need to get down to business.

With a sigh and a wince, I ignore the pain in my bicep, bend over, and unfold this twatwaffle from his current position. I grab Anthony's ankles and start dragging him along the side of the bed, the dipshit mumbling in his mini-coma about chicken wings while I do, and just when I'm about to

clear the end of the bed, I fucking trip over Salinski's goddamn duffel bag.

I stumble backward and drop his ankles, flailing my arms like an idiot as I hear a loud thud followed by a groan.

Regaining my balance—and what little pride I have left—I scowl down at Anthony then raise a brow in amusement.

The fucker is head and shoulders deep in the floor.

Yes, *in* the floor.

The hole in the floor I made when I uncovered his stash.

Anthony Salinski is nearly chest deep in his very own *hidey hole*, as the shitbag Dennis Rader would say, and it almost makes me laugh.

Right up until I bend over again to pull him out and Sacklinski surprises me with a New Balance to the face.

I land on my ass with a grunt as my vision blurs, my mask shoved into my grill so hard it makes my nose sting, and before I can gather myself—*again*—Anthony is on top of me trying like hell to punch me in the head.

“Thought I was... toast, did ya?” he slurs as he swings at me. “Thought... thought I was—”

I move as quickly as I can, grabbing the heavy glass paperweight from his desk and slamming it into the side of his head on reflex. Anthony instantly goes limp in my lap and I shove him off me, glaring through my goggles as I hit him a second then third time for good measure, the right side of his skull caving in from how fucking angry I am.

And somehow, this sack of soggy dicks is *still fucking breathing*.

He's like the goddamn energizer bunny or some shit. And he's *really* testing my patience because almost everything with this asshole has gone off script. Which, coupled with the mess we've made because of it, makes me very unhappy.

And *that* means I'm about to get all kinds of creative.

Getting to my feet, I don't waste any more time. I grab Anthony under the armpits, hoist him up, then walk us backward to his attached bathroom before tossing him in the tub. I go retrieve my bag from by the door, dig through it for a few seconds before settling on an old reliable—my hunting knife with the eight inch blade.

Salinski really pissed me off and now I'm going to make him pay double for it.

I remove a trash bag and set it up, opening it wide before yanking off his shoes and socks and dropping them inside. Moving to his track pants next, I hook the blade in the waistband and go to cut them off but smirk when I realize they're the kind with the snaps down each side.

Idiot.

After a few tugs, the black and white material joins his sneakers, then I cut through his briefs and start laughing. A teeny tiny dick for a gigantic douchebag. Maybe I'll stuff it in his ear instead of his mouth like usual.

With a little more pep in my step, I make quick work of his t-shirt before taking just a second to think about how I want to do things.

Sack-linski is still breathing, which doesn't faze me, but that means he'll feel everything I do to him, even if it's on some baser level. Which is why I decide to make this somewhat fun for me since shooting me and kicking me in the mask killed some of my high.

I lean down, and with the precision and skill all of my *practice* has given me, I start cutting along Anthony's hairline, down over the sides of his face to his jawline until I can peel back his flesh.

With a chuckle, I start singing The Weekend's *Can't Feel My Face* as I hold up Salinski's face, shaking it to the beat before dropping it into the tub at his feet. Then I slit his throat with a *woo* even MJ or The Weekend himself would be proud of.

Anthony's bathroom has pretty solid acoustics.

Which is why, once his blood stops sputtering from his throat, I grab my bone saw and start taking him apart piece by piece, starting with his hands—like always.

Normally I drain a body completely before I start dismembering because it's far less messy but the fuckwit really got to me and I don't give a shit right now, hence *face removal*.

Which isn't really part of my MO.

I'm almost positive I haven't done that before but again, rage makes people do crazy things, and breaking my routine by shooting me definitely gets me a little *ragey* because I don't like it when my routine is fucked with.

Consistency is key, after all.

But I'm sure the news outlets will love the new twist in The Harvester of Bones's process.

I scowl as I pop Anthony's left hand off at the joint.

They already do.

Chalking those amateur kills up to me, giving me credit for those women who were hacked to pieces, shows they're hungry for entertainment, for anything out of the norm, even when it comes to serial killers.

Stupid.

It's so stupid, to be honest, because the media morons, as well as the general public, should know I'd never leave a scene like that, nor would I go after innocent women. I'd never hurt someone who didn't deserve it, and whether those women were nice or even good people is irrelevant because they've never hurt anyone else. A couple of them didn't have so much as a speeding ticket on their records. So why everyone was so quick to blame me for their deaths is perplexing.

Well, kind of. Using the same scene I had already killed at was pretty smart on The Ripper's part, whether I believe it was intentional or not.

Because I don't. I don't think I was a blip on his radar until that night, and now that he's clearly escalating and seemingly

trying to keep everyone's attention on me by staying busy, the importance in finding and stopping this asshole has increased for sure.

I might even have to take a break for a while.

My frown deepening, I lean my elbows on the edge of the tub and look down at Anthony.

That sucks.

I've never taken a break from working—*murdering people*. Not in any real sense except for when I helped Little John after his surgery. There's been a constant stream of dirt sacks to kill ever since that big old bear found me, and before that I did fine finding what I needed when I needed it.

Granted that's where my civilian kills come from, and they were messier and more sporadic, but still. There's never been a lack of targets, or a reason to take a break, and the fact that this rookie piece of shit has me considering it is borderline infuriating. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like something I can avoid because if the cops, with a little help from yours truly, don't catch The Ripper anytime soon, I'll have to take a step back until they do so I don't keep getting blamed for such sloppy work.

With a sigh, I drop the saw and pick up one of Salinski's hands in each of mine, looking over his obvious manicure and regularly moisturized skin.

Oh well. It is what it is, I suppose. I have a reputation to protect and I don't need that asswipe sullyng it. And if I make Beauregard my last target for a while, maybe I'll find other ways to fill my time.

Filling my time with *filling* Stevie *all* the time.

And *that* makes me smile.

I would happily take a leave of absence after I kill Beau if it meant spending my temporary retirement with my sweet little dove. Especially if she's naked more often than not. That would easily make up for my forced break, and the uninterrupted hours we could share have my smile growing.

Ignoring the questions my persistently weird line of thinking has been creating, I give Anthony's hands a clap. "Enough of this sentimental bullshit." Then I point his right hand at his nose. "You have made my night taxing enough, don't need to go getting lost in my head over all the unusual shit rolling around up there too, right? Right."

I give him a salute with his severed appendage then put the acoustics to use again by singing a little Fitz and the Tantrums, clapping Salinski's hands a few more times before dropping them at his feet.

"Now then..." I look his lifeless body up and down before picking up the bone saw again. "*The tiny man feet bones are connected to the short shin bones.*" A few minutes of sawing and I pull those off too, singing my own made up lyrics to *Dem Bones* while I work. "*The short shin bones are connected to the ball crusher bone*"—pop, pop—"the ball crusher bone's connected to my favorite bone..." Once both of those are cleanly removed from his pelvis, I set down the saw in favor of my knife, flaying the skin and muscle of Anthony's left thigh to carefully remove his femur. I set that in the trash bag with the other items that will be returning home with me, then keep going until I get to the jackass's head. "This should be easy enough since it's empty."

I sing and chuckle to myself as I saw along the slit in his throat, my movements relaxed and precise even when I hit Salinski's spine, and just when I grab the sides of his head to make sure it comes off clean, my AirPods start ringing while Siri tells me Pope is calling.

"Mouth or ear?" I ask a beat after I tell her to answer.

"What?" Pope grunts, already very annoyed.

I grin as I lift Anthony's head and look into his lidless eyes. "*Mouth or ear*, you walking blasphemy. It's a pressing question that I need answered."

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Getting ready for the next time I see you and I want to know which you'd prefer to have my dick inserted in first."

Pope huffs out a few choice words before asking, “Where are you right now?”

“Birch Creek.” I hold Sack-linski’s head with one hand then make his mouth move with the other. “Had I known you’d be hitting me up for a late night booty call, I would have stayed in Sabine Woods until—”

“We got a body so cut the shit.”

With a wet thud, I drop the severed head and straighten up, my senses back on high alert. “Where?”

“Behind the laundromat in Rolling Meadows. Edge of the tree line by—”

“The streetlight.” I nod to myself as I get to my feet, pulling the industrial bleach from my bag as I go. “Obvious but discreet.”

“Yeah.” Pope grunts again. “New patches got it protected for now but the sun is coming up soon. How fast can you get there?”

“You aren’t there yet?” Because it just occurred to me there’s only one laundromat in Rolling Meadows and it’s not actually meant for laundering clothes. It’s Demon Seeds’ territory and it’s used to clean dirty money, which also means it’s a hell of a lot closer to Stevie’s place than I’d like for it to be, and I’d feel much better if the unholy fucker was already on scene. Not that he or anyone else knows what I’m doing with my sweet little dove, but if that back lot was secured, I could rest easy knowing that at least. “Where are you?”

His eye roll is audible. “On the way. Chop, too. Call just came in and we’re moving as fast as we can.”

“Good.” Another nod as I start dousing Anthony in bleach. “I’m gonna be maybe a...” I glance around the bathroom then out into the bedroom. *Fucking Sack-linski*. “Maybe a half hour. I’m in the middle of something I have to finish but it shouldn’t take me too long to wrap it up.”

Hopefully. Because not only do I need to do what I usually do in here, I now have to search for bullet casings, clean and replace the gun, clean the floor where I bashed this chump’s

head in, and make sure to get rid of any evidence of a struggle out there.

“Well hurry the fuck up. We aren’t that far out from sunrise and if you want to walk the scene before the cops find out there’s a body back there, I’d suggest you *finish up* as fast as possible.”

Pope hangs up before I can respond and I glare down at my latest mark.

Fucking *Anthony*.

If he weren’t already dead, I’d kill him just for complicating the fuck out of my night.

I WHIP MY CAR INTO THE PARKING LOT A FEW BUILDINGS AWAY from the laundromat, all but fall out the door and barely remember to lock it because *human femur in my duffel bag* as I start running toward The Ripper’s latest victim.

It wasn’t until I cleaned Salinski’s entire bedroom and bathroom, then positioned him accordingly amidst all of his bullshit in record time that the slim possibility this body could be my sweet little dove crossed my mind, and the absolute panic that created took hold.

Establishing that Stevie fits the victim profile was unsettling at best, but the more I thought about it, the more I dug into each of the women and their histories. I found more similarities between them and my baby dove, and it actually made me grateful she’s on such a short leash.

She wasn’t tonight, though.

Not completely.

Beau got so shitfaced at The Dollhouse that by the time he fought Marbles and had to leave I doubt the bastard had any idea his daughter was with him. And clearly she wasn’t being watched as closely as she usually is; otherwise, I wouldn’t

have had the chance to be scolded by her before making her come all over my fingers.

If I'm lucky, Calvin took her home and put more morons on the house while he went to clean up the DSMC president, but I can't be sure of that.

I can't be sure of any-fucking-thing at this moment because I have no way of contacting Stevie and my only proof that she's unharmed will come in the form of making a positive ID or not when I get to this damn body.

Despite my urge to do that, I slow my pace to a jog because it's four in the morning and some big fuck dressed in a hazmat suit with various blood stains on it is enough of a red flag, but throw in my frantic speed, the goggles on my head, and mask around my neck, and I'll definitely be turning heads if anyone is around.

I have to keep my wits about me.

While Stevie is mine, and it's apparently my new mission to protect her, she's already made me sloppy in all aspects of my life. Not enough for me to stop seeing her, stop fucking her, or obsessing over her, but enough to force myself to remember I can't let my sweet little dove be the reason I fuck up and get caught. It's bad enough I didn't change before I took off out of Birch Creek, only shedding one layer of gloves and booties to avoid transference, so I can't do anything else to draw attention to myself.

Slowing down to what hopefully looks like a nonchalant stroll, I wander down the alley between the laundromat and empty bar before turning the corner and sprinting toward Pope.

"Half hour, my ass," he mumbles as I come to a screeching halt next to him. "Forty-one minutes, *Bones*."

I flash him a grin before my gaze lands on the completely shredded body before us. "I told you I was busy." My eyes immediately start scanning the scene but before I can ask any questions, Pope huffs next to me.

"What the fuck were you doing dressed like that?"

Oh right.

None of the Kings, no one that lived to tell save for Little John, has seen me like this, and Pope along with his brothers have seen me in my birthday suit more than anything else. So I guess it's to be expected that he's curious.

"Working." I ignore the way I can feel him staring holes in my head and take a step forward.

"*Working?*" Pope asks again, his tone incredulous if not a tad curious. "You look like a fucking spaceman."

I pause and turn to face him. "A *spaceman?*"

He looks me up and down, lingering a bit at my mask before meeting my eyes with a shrug.

"Why, Pope Crenshaw, is that your personality coming through? *Finally?*" The walking blasphemy gives me a scowl as I cackle my ass off, grateful for the way our familiar banter grounds me some.

Refocusing my much calmer energy, I turn back to the scene and walk forward until I'm right on the edge of the blood spray.

My nose scrunches in disgust as I start to circle the woman, taking in the completely mutilated torso, the nearly decapitated head, and the limb severed by default. To anyone else it might look like the killer purposely cut off the right leg but I can tell it wasn't intentional, simply a result of an ungodly number of stab wounds to the torso, pelvis, and genitals.

So messy.

So angry.

The Ripper is *so* incredibly angry, *hateful*, and trying to send a message. A message to someone he feels rejected by, that he wants in a more than platonic way, that he possibly could have made advances toward which resulted in actual rejection, but I can't be certain of that.

What I do know is this asshole is acting out the rage and aggression he feels toward this person, and these kills are most

definitely sexually motivated.

Which confirms what I thought before.

He's most likely finding these women in a neutral setting, somewhere that his average look and unassuming vibe gets them to let down their guard in some way, and since he's going for women who resemble the one he can't have, he probably hits on them or outright propositions them, and when they say no he loses his shit.

And while all of his kills have been chaotic and messy as hell, they are progressively getting worse.

"What a mess." I crouch on my haunches next to the largest pool of blood. With the level of mutilation it'll be hard for the medical examiner to know if there was sexual assault, but I'd put money on it. Especially when something swimming in the puddle catches my eye. "Such a careless mess."

"What? This too much, even for someone like you?"

I glance up with a smirk as Pope comes to stand across from me. "No, I'm just incredibly disappointed in how sloppy this is. I mean, look"—I sweep my hand through the air at the entire scene—"nothing is contained, there is blood and bits everywhere, and this..." I point to what is clearly a hair that doesn't belong to the victim, based on length since color is hard to determine, that is sitting next to what might be spit. "Shows a level of carelessness that makes me cringe." Then I frown. "What do you mean, *someone like me*?"

Probably that I'm so fucked up there isn't a category for *someone like me*.

The stoic holy man rolls his eyes before looking at what I'm pointing to. "You left one crime scene for another, showed up covered in someone else's blood as well as your own." Pope gives me a pointed look, one that says *I saw the bullet hole, dumbass*. "All I'm saying is you're a different breed with a stomach of steel, Tor, and I'd be surprised if you were fazed by all this."

"Which I'm not." Not in any way other than worrying about Stevie, but he doesn't need to know that. Especially

since I don't want to acknowledge it.

“Exactly.” He reaches into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulls out... a *Tootsie Pop*, unwraps it, then shoves it into his mouth. “For the record, it doesn't faze me either. I might not do what you do in my spare time but there's a reason Prez has me on this specific kind of job, and it's not a bad thing. Just different.”

I just blink up at this enigma of a man, his gun-metal grey eyes hiding more darkness than I thought, and when it clicks that not only was he trying to relate to me, but also used John's nickname for me, my jaw drops a little.

Which causes Pope to roll his eyes again. “Jesus, I was just saying. You're annoying as fuck, don't get me wrong, but you're not stupid and I don't think you're quite the sociopath everyone seems to think you are. And this”—he takes the sucker from his mouth and holds it up—“is because I'm trying to quit smoking, so don't go getting any ideas about making it a big deal.”

With a devious grin, I get to my feet, thrilled and slightly in awe over the amount of words the walking blasphemy just used to compliment me in a weird way, and decide to ruin the moment we might have just shared over a shredded murder victim. “Well that's disappointing.”

Pope frowns but doesn't speak.

“I thought you finally made a decision. About my dick, that is.” He scowls as my grin morphs into a full blown smile. “Mouth, obviously, since I thought you were practicing on the cherry flavored candy to give me a blow job.”

My unholy companion gives me an exasperated huff as he turns to join the patches guarding the scene.

“You'll need something bigger, though. Which you should know, my boner puts that sucker to shame.” I chuckle as Pope mumbles a string of obscenities under his breath, a strange sense of warmth swirling in my chest.

I won't put a name to it, not when I know I drive almost everyone I meet crazy, but if I had to, I'd call what I just

experienced something comparable to real friendship. Which is fitting that it happened here, in the midst of all this chaos and carnage, with a man I believe has more secrets than I do.

And it has me wondering if John *has* been right about me after all these years.

Maybe I'm *not* exactly what everyone has always said I am; what I've always *thought* I am.

Fucked up? Totally.

A murderer who thoroughly enjoys what I do? Definitely.

Annoying as hell and hard to be around? Yep, no doubt about that, and I absolutely don't know how to relate to other people or build relationships, but I might not be quite as fucked as I originally thought.

And for the record, I stuffed Anthony Salinski's tiny penis into his ear because *theatrical* is something else I most definitely am.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

STEVIE

I SMOOTH my hand over Mrs. Sanderson's hair, pushing the damp strands from her forehead in an effort to keep them from sticking to her face.

She's had a fever for the last two days but no one made any *real* note of it until I came in this afternoon and started doing rounds with the CNA I'm relieving.

It was a normal shift change rundown, getting the scoop on how Mr. Riggs did another naked Shakespeare performance, and how there was a fight during lunch that included two residents locking walkers then getting stuck together while throwing punches. Nothing felt out of place until Sasha told me that Margie had been *acting weird* the last few days, and when I asked her to elaborate, she just shrugged and walked away.

So, I took it upon myself to go in and check on her and when I did, I almost lost it.

Apparently Sasha and I have very different definitions of *acting weird* because all I had to do was take one look at Margie to know she was sick.

Her skin was ashy, she could barely keep her eyes open, her sweet face was sunken and covered in a cold sweat. Mrs. Sanderson was very lethargic, hardly responding when I asked her about Jolene, and when I checked her for a fever I could tell her temp was through the roof before I used the thermometer. Which is when I went to report it to the nurse, who then proceeded to tell me Margie hadn't had anything to

eat or drink in about eighteen hours and was *most likely just dehydrated*.

And that was the exact moment I *did* lose my shit.

I marched my ass right down to the nurse supervisor and reported everyone who'd been on shift since Linnie left here Thursday afternoon, including Sasha and Chris, because I *know* my friend never would have let this happen to Mrs. Sanderson if it was going on during her shift. And I don't give a shit about what happens to them, or who gets mad at me over it because this isn't right, something needs to be done, and I'm tired of sitting back and letting bad things happen.

Unfortunately, I was too late.

By the time Linnie came on shift and gave Margie a proper exam, the bronchitis had already turned into pneumonia—she immediately called the facility doctor to come down and he made the diagnosis—and her frail little body was working overtime to fight the infections.

Between her age and poor health, Mrs. Sanderson doesn't stand a chance.

She has *mere hours* according to the doctor, and that is devastating.

With a sigh, I remove the rag from her forehead and dip it in the cool water then wring it out before patting her chest and neck.

She's overcome so much: an abusive home growing up, the loss of a child, outliving her husband, Alzheimer's, and forgetting her sister. Margie outlived her too, and while I'm sure she doesn't know it, it was almost like she sensed it because the day Jolene died—not that I knew it at the time but I found out later—she was inconsolable. Mrs. Sanderson was a mess that day and nothing would calm her down, not even her babydoll, so when Linnie told me she was now a ward of the state, I knew. I knew that the dear old lady just *felt* the break in their bond, and honestly, Margie hasn't been the same since.

Even still, to think she survived so much in over eighty years of life only to end up in a shithole like Rolling Meadows

Nursing Home then literally catch her death due to neglect is infuriating.

Margie Sanderson deserves better than this, and the least I can do is spend her final hours with her in hopes they mean something to both of us when they're over.

They'll mean something to me, anyway.

I never knew my grandparents.

Beau dropped out and left home when he was young, and he cut ties with his mom and dad well before he met my mother. And by the time I was old enough to do a little investigating into my paternal grandparents, they were already gone.

On my mom's side?

I have no idea.

I don't even know her maiden name let alone where Celeste Williams was originally from or if she had any family at all. I know next to nothing about my mother and all I have to hold onto is a photo Rochelle gave me and my very few rapidly fading memories.

I've never even seen my birth certificate.

Which makes sense when I think about my father as a whole.

He cut himself off from his own family because he didn't think he needed them, then Beau turned around and isolated my mom from hers so she couldn't leave him. And now he's doing it to me too. Which is evident in the way I'm literally locked up and only allowed to go two places, and can't speak to anyone outside the club. My father is the master of keeping his property under lock and key, and far away from prying eyes, so it's no surprise those actions were extended to his family as well.

I think part of that is why Mrs. Sanderson is so important to me.

Sure, our stories are relatable and my heart is literally broken for her and all she's been through, but the glimpse of

clarity I'd see, the more lucid moments I shared with Margie, were when my attachment grew and I started to view her as the grandmother I never had, Alzheimer's or not.

And that's exactly why I told Linnie I'd do my regular checks on the other residents when I'm supposed to, and help with dinner and wrangling for meds, but unless she needs me, my ass will be planted right here next to Margie Sanderson until she's reunited with her husband and baby girl. And I've stayed true to my word for the last seven and a half hours of my shift.

I sigh as I set the rag in the bowl, my gaze wandering over the almost serene look on Mrs. Sanderson's face before I close my eyes and lay my head down on the edge of her bed.

She's ready.

I absolutely believe without a doubt that Margie is ready to give up the fight and just let go, to finish out her time in this world before finally moving to the next. It's been a long battle and I don't blame her one bit for surrendering now.

But selfishly, I don't want her to go.

I'm not ready.

There are so few people I care about, so few people I have in my life to look forward to seeing, and if Margie isn't here to be my bright spot at work regardless of how much time I spend searching for Jolene, what's the point in coming here at all?

"Stevie?"

I open my eyes and connect with a pair of pale, glassy, red-rimmed ones staring back at me. Quickly lifting my head, I scoot closer to Margie and use the back of my hand to check her temp. "I'm here. What can I do for you, Mrs. Sanderson?"

"Nothing." She sighs, turning into my touch as I place my palm against her cheek. "You've already done enough."

My eyes well with tears but I try to keep them at bay. "Are you sure? Would you like a drink? I have a little broth here, maybe you should try to..."

Margie shakes her head slowly. “Just...” She takes a few shallow breaths. “Just promise me... you’ll look after Jolene.”

“I always do.” My heart breaks wide open as this strong and resilient woman finally stops fighting. *I’m not ready.* “I always find her when she runs off, and I’ll make sure to take extra care while you get better—”

“No.” Mrs. Sanderson shakes her head more firmly. “I mean... I want you to... take her home, Stevie. She needs a good... a good home.”

“But-but what about you? What about...”

“Thank you for looking after her, Stevie. For looking after both of us.”

A tear slips down my cheek as I search her eyes, the clearest they’ve been in all my time working with her, the hard truth something I can’t keep trying to deny. So I just nod my head in response.

Margie stares at me for a few beats, almost as if she’s trying to hang on to these fleeting seconds as they tick by far too quickly before giving me a tired smile. “Have you... have you ever been in love, Stevie?”

“What?” I snort through my tears, completely caught off guard by her question.

“Love, dear.”

“I know, but I wasn’t expecting you to ask me that.”

Mrs. Sanderson’s smile widens as she closes her eyes and turns her face toward the moonlight streaming in through her foggy window. “It’s wonderful... finding that one person you can’t... can’t bear to live without.”

Victor flashes through my mind and my cheeks heat.

Don’t even go there; you’ll only be disappointed in the end.

Because *love* isn’t something I’ve truly experienced, and it’s not something I’m allowed to have in any capacity of the word. Especially with someone like Victor.

I don't get to love or be loved in return, serial killer or not, and that's my hard truth.

"I wanted that for Louise." My heart skips a beat as Margie says her daughter's name for the first time since living here, so I stay quiet. "Wanted it for... for Jolene, too. I had it with... with Arthur. The truest love... one that is so... so big it almost... hurts."

She takes a deep, painful breath as I lean toward her, my hand returning to her hair, gently brushing it back with my fingers. "Why don't you rest, Mrs. Sanderson? Just rest and try to save your—"

"I want that for you, Stevie."

And now I'm openly crying, on the verge of sobbing really, and while her words are like salt on an open wound, I know this is Margie's goodbye.

"Take care of Jolene for me." She takes a few shallow breaths before exhaling slowly. "And fall in love... with someone who makes your heart ache in a... a good way. Someone it hurts... to live without."

I slip my free hand into hers, the tears silently rolling down my cheeks as I look over the peaceful expression on Margie's face. I watch her chest barely rise and fall, the movement less and less with each passing moment. I watch the fight slowly leave Mrs. Sanderson for thirty-one minutes and seventeen seconds before she takes her final breath, surrendering in a battle none of us can ever win.

But that doesn't mean she's not victorious, because Margie is finally with the ones she loved so big that it did in fact hurt.

With a shaky sigh, I get to my feet and wipe my eyes, trying to pull myself together enough to go notify Linnie. She needs to know so she can do the final assessment and file the report, but she'd want to know because my friend also had a soft spot for Margie.

With a trembling hand, I reach for Jolene, gently removing the well-loved cloth babydoll from under Margie's arm then clutch it to my chest. I need to keep it together, and I need to

be professional once I walk out that door because as heartbroken as I am, I still have a job to do.

One I owe Mrs. Sanderson to do to the best of my ability.

I can fall apart later with Jolene when Beau locks me in my room for the night.

So, I take a deep breath, hold Jolene tight, then make my way out into the hall where I immediately hear, “Who the hell do you think you are?”

I pull the door closed behind me and turn to see Chris storming down the hall, his face twisted into an expression so full of anger that it makes him look like a completely different person.

Or maybe he finally let his mask slip and *this* is the person Chris really is.

“How dare you,” he hisses as he stops inches in front of me. “How fucking dare you report me, you little cunt.”

“I-I had no choice. Mrs. Sanderson—”

“Is just another vegetable waiting to die like the rest of them!” Chris barks in my face as he slams his hand against the wall next to my head. Instinctively, I shrink away from him, trying out of reflex to prepare myself for whatever he’s going to do while he continues yelling. “She is *nothing* who had *nobody*, and her days were numbered the second she got dumped in this shithole to rot. But you went and reported me anyway, ran to the nurse supervisor to *tattle*, spinning lies about my job performance just because you blew your chance to go out with me, didn’t you, bitch?”

As if his words set off some bomb that’s been quietly ticking away, just waiting to go off at any second, a wildly inappropriate laugh bubbles up my throat as I straighten my spine and blink in Chris’s face. “What?”

His scowl falters for a second before he nods. “Came back from your *vacation* and found out I was seeing someone, so you came up with the first thing you could think of to get back at me for it.”

“Seriously?” *Wow, this guy is crazier than I thought.* “You’re really standing here accusing me of coming back to work after a week off, giving enough of a shit about you to pump Linnie for information then getting so mad over finding out you’re *seeing someone* that I decided to fabricate a patient illness, and what? Killed Mrs. Sanderson myself?”

All the color drains from Chris’s face as he straightens up and glances at the door behind me. “She’s dead?”

I nod as I hold Jolene a little tighter. “Yes, *Margie* is dead, asshole, and if you’d have done your goddamn job she might not be.”

Chris’s eyes snap to mine as he gets in my face again. “What did you just say to me?”

“I said, *your negligence killed one of the residents, asshole.*”

Before I can even process what’s happening, his hand is on my throat and Chris has me pinned to Mrs. Sanderson’s door.

“I almost lost my job because of you,” he growls, his grip tightening a bit. “I got put on probation because of your lies, and mark my words, *Stevie*, I will make you pay for it—”

“Hey! Get away from her, dickhead!”

Chris immediately lets go of me, taking a step back as we both turn to see Linnie booking it toward us with the nurse supervisor right on her heels.

Thank god.

I don’t think he would have done much more than try to scare me, but I’ve never seen Chris act like that before so I can’t be sure. I *am* sure that my gut feeling about him has always been right, though, because he went from zero to psycho in no time flat.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Linnie says as she muscles her way between Chris and I, putting herself in front of me as she faces him. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you fuck right out of the building, too.”

Chris glares at her and opens his mouth but he doesn't get to speak. No, the nurse supervisor cuts off any bullshit that he might have spit at my friend by demanding Chris join her in her office. *Again.*

I watch him walk away, rage emphasizing every slap of his sneakers on the linoleum, and just before he disappears, Chris turns and mouths, "You will pay for this, Stevie."

And I just flip him the bird and smirk my best *today was not the day and I was not the one* back at him.

Asshole.

"Are you ok?" Linnie spins to face me as soon as they're out of sight. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine." I lift my hand to my throat where I will most definitely have a bruise. One I'll have to explain to at least one person because I'm sure Victor will notice. My father won't, and anyone else that does won't say anything, so that just leaves my ghost. Can't really hide this as easily as the rest of my *accidental injuries.*

"You're not fine, Stevie. That asshole was screaming in your face and had his hand around your neck."

"It's fine."

"It's already bruising." Linnie frowns before turning me toward the nurse's station. "And we heard Chris as soon as we came on the floor. He wasn't exactly being quiet while he threatened you."

I shrug as we start walking. "Yeah, well, neither was I."

My friend giggles. "Girl, I *know.* Gone was the timid little Stevie who doesn't ever speak up, and in her place was a hardass ready to defend her favorite..." Linnie's voice trails off as she glances behind us toward Margie's room. She faces me again, placing both hands on my shoulders and giving me a sad smile. "I'm sorry about Mrs. Sanderson."

Tears spring to my eyes again as I nod but I deflect so I don't start bawling by asking, "Why was Chris here so early?"

"Early?"

“Yeah, he wasn’t supposed to be here until 11:30 p.m., right? Called and said he’d be late but obviously wasn’t?”

Linnie raises a brow as she gently pushes me down on the desk, her hands moving to my chin to tilt my head for a better look at my throat. “It’s after midnight, Stevie. You literally spent ninety percent of your shift with Margie.”

I blink up at her then do it again. “*After midnight?*”

“Closer to 12:30 actually.”

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

I am going to be in *so* much trouble.

I’m actually shocked that I’m not already. My shift ended at eleven and since I wasn’t outside waiting for Cal it’s amazing no one has come in here searching for me. Which is why I swat at Linnie’s hands then lean to pull my phone from my pocket.

No missed calls or texts either.

Weird.

“He’s at the front desk.” Linnie crosses her arms against her chest and looks away. “Your *boyfriend*, or whatever he is.”

For a split second my heart starts racing over the thought of Victor waiting in the lobby for me, but that’s silly. He’s watched me enough to know Cal is usually my ride since Joker can no longer chauffeur me around, and that would be ridiculously dangerous for him—and me—to risk picking me up from work.

And *that’s* why my heart starts racing for another reason, forcing me to ask, “My *boyfriend?*”

“Big guy with long hair and tattoos,” my friend huffs. “You know, the secret boyfriend you didn’t even tell your bestie about.” I just frown as Linnie looks at me with a smirk. “A little older than I would have expected but those blue eyes were hard to ignore so I get it.”

“*Cal?*” I laugh nervously. “No, Linnie, that’s my... uncle.” That sounded more like a question but the relief on her face leads me to believe she bought it.

“Thank god. He’s not bad looking at all but you could do better, and I was going to be so pissed at you if you were finally dating someone without telling me.”

“Well you can rest assured that I am *not* dating my uncle.” *I’m just totally infatuated and sleeping with a serial killer.*

“What a relief.” Linnie chuckles before pinning me with another sad smile. “I really am sorry about Margie, Stevie. I know how much she meant to you.”

I nod and hug Jolene. “She was pretty special.” Then I swallow hard. “I should probably go. I need to get started on my report and—”

“Don’t worry about it. I talked to Chelsea and she said I could do it.”

“What about...” But my friend is shaking her head.

“I’m sure if they need anything from you, they’ll call, but Chels was already going to send you home because of Margie, so, do that. Go home and relax. And she very quickly threw in a couple paid days off after we walked in on you and Chris.” Linnie smirks. “Trying to avoid a lawsuit and all that.”

“Right.” I sigh, the magnitude of everything that just transpired starting to sink in as I get to my feet. “I should probably go then.”

“You gonna be ok?”

“Eventually.” I reach under the desk and grab my purse, frowning when Linnie moves to the computer and starts logging in. “You aren’t leaving?”

She shakes her head. “Covering for Chris. Probably on a permanent basis after tonight.”

“Sorry.” But I’m not really. I suddenly don’t care at all. Not right now when I know I’ll never look at Rolling Meadows Nursing Home the same way again.

No more Margie, and her room will probably trigger PTSD from now on. Plus I'm sure I'm in for the lecture to rival all lectures when I get home tonight so caring about this place or anything that goes on in it seems pretty pointless. I may not even bother coming back here once I leave.

After saying goodbye to Linnie and meeting an angry yet calm Cal at the front desk, the ride home was completely silent.

Not that Cal ever yells at me or anything, he just gives me some sort of warning along with whatever directives my father issued to him before dropping me off.

Tonight is different though.

Most likely because I finally went numb.

Numb to losing Margie and getting assaulted at work, to whatever Cal might have said in the lobby or thought to say during the drive. Numb to what's going to happen when I get home.

Every inch of me, inside and out, is just *numb*.

"Stevie." Cal clears his throat as we pull into my driveway. "I, uh... that one nurse, Linnie something..."

I nod absentmindedly as I continue staring out the window.

"She... she told me you lost one of your residents tonight. One you were particularly close to."

Another nod.

Cal clears his throat again and I bet if I cared enough to look he'd be white-knuckling the steering wheel. "I'm—I was sorry to hear that."

"Thanks," I whisper as I grab the door handle, throwing it open without acknowledging—to Cal or myself—how weird his words are, or how much they'll mean to me later, but just as I'm about to get out and face my fate, I stop at what he says next.

"I'm real sorry, Stevie, and I just wanted you to know that."

An involuntary wave of tears stings behind my eyes, tears I have no intention of shedding until I'm alone, but I do glance back and give him a subtle nod.

I slide out of the truck, slinging my purse over my shoulder before tucking Jolene inside. "Thanks."

Cal nods. "Tell Beau I'm waiting. We got a late church meeting. Might not be back until tomorrow."

"Ok." Normally that would fill me with relief, knowing my father has to leave and won't be back for a while, but it does nothing for me tonight.

Especially as I leave the safety of Cal's truck and head to my house only to have someone grab me by the hair as soon as I'm inside.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Beau growls in my ear as he drags me into the living room, my bag falling to the floor at the bottom of the stairs. "You was supposed to be home over an hour ago, you worthless piece of shit, and I want to know where the fuck you been!"

"W-w-work! I was a-at work." My hands fly to my hair as Beau grips so tight I can feel the strands start to pop at the roots. "I-I-I just left!"

"Yeah," my father scoffs as he tugs me against him, his other hand moving to my throat and squeezing where it's already tender. "Yeah, Cal said he made you wait. Said he got caught up with them brats of his and couldn't get there on time, but I call bullshit, *Stevie*."

Spots dance across my vision as I gasp for air, my hands dropping to Beau's, my fingers clawing at his skin to try to loosen his grip.

"What you got on him, huh?" He lets go of my hair and whips me around to face him, still squeezing my throat as his yellow-tinged eyes dance with fury. "Got some juicy piece of info? Some deep, dark secret you holding over Cal's head so he does whatever the fuck you want him to?"

I try to shake my head, try to keep my eyes on his, but everything is getting fuzzy and I can't.

“No?” Beau winds up and slaps me across the face. “Bullshit! That’s bullshit, you stupid, useless cunt, and you damn well know it.”

Just when my vision goes completely black and I’m convinced my father is about to finally kill me, someone pounds on the front door in rapid succession and Beau finally lets go, my body collapsing to the floor with a hard thud.

“Lucky little bitch,” he spits—literally spits on me—before kicking me in the ribs with his steel-toed boot. “I ain’t done with you yet, girl. Soon as church gets out I’m coming for you.” Another kick to the ribs before Beau rolls me on my back and steps on my chest, leaning down close enough I can practically taste the booze on his breath. “And when I do, you’ll be praying for the chance to end up like your bitch mother.”

Which is the last thing I hear before I pass out.

MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN SLOWLY AS MY SIDE BEGINS TO THROB, my entire body sore and stiff from dropping to the floor.

Remembering what my father did to me isn’t as hard to do this time. Not when I can tell that I’ve only been passed out for a little while compared to when he punches me until he knocks me out.

He didn’t hit me enough for that.

No, the slap to my face wasn’t as hard as Beau usually hits me, and it isn’t why I passed out. Having two different people try to choke me within less than two hours of each other is what did that, and the kicks to the ribs were just enough to send me over.

And wake me up, apparently.

Rolling to my side, I wait a few seconds before I attempt to get up, but I hurt too much to stand so I settle for crawling toward the stairs.

I grab my purse and carefully loop it over my arm before climbing the steps on all fours, every inch of my body screaming with each movement, begging for some kind of relief while I drag myself down the hall to my room.

The patches on guard duty do nothing, don't even spare me a glance as I stumble to my feet and fight to get the door open. They don't so much as blink in my direction the entire time, and once I'm finally inside, the deadbolts locking behind me, that's when I decide it was better when I was numb.

And I know exactly how I'm going to feel that way again.

I set my purse on the dresser and carefully kick off my Crocs then make my way to the bathroom.

With a painful sigh, I shuffle to the tub and start drawing a bath, not bothering to close the door before standing in front of the mirror to undress.

It doesn't matter anyway.

Nothing does anymore.

I had next to nothing to live for before, and while I refuse to taint the memory of my mother by doing what she did, the thought is more tempting than ever because there is *nothing* to live for now.

Holding my breath, I drop my sweater then peel my scrub top over my head, the thin tank top and my bra following as quickly as my midsection will allow. I grab onto the counter and pull off my socks, still hanging on as I push my bottoms and panties to the floor, and when I finally meet my reflection, the crack in my chest created by the loss of Mrs. Sanderson becomes a bottomless chasm.

Bruises on my ribs, chest, and throat.

A small split in my upper lip next to a still red handprint.

My eyes are puffy, red, and still crying; my cheeks are tear-stained and blotchy, and my hair is a tangled mess from my father's fist.

And scars.

Scars that run from the inside of my right thigh around to my hip, small patches on my side and the inside of my bicep. The ugly marbled slash that creeps up the side of my neck to my jaw, breaking briefly before it continues on my right cheek and temple.

I look like a zombie, a total shell of myself, and the longer I stare the more *worthless* I feel.

A waste of space.

My tears roll down my cheeks as I reach for the second drawer under the sink, searching for the one thing—the only thing—that will numb me out *and* remind me I'm still alive.

I pull the razor blade free from its hiding spot, removing the cover before holding out my right arm. My hand shakes but only a little as I move the blade to my scars before changing my mind. Instead of cutting into already ruined flesh, I turn my arm so it's facing up, hold the edge to my forearm, and ball my hand into a fist.

On a stuttering breath that I hold, I drag the razor horizontally against my skin, watching the bright red liquid bubble along the cut in my forearm before spilling over the sides in thin streams, my blood dropping against the porcelain countertop with barely audible drips.

So, I do it again.

I cut into my arm a second time as the emotional pain subsides, as the physical pain dulls to a low thump in the back of my mind.

A third slice to my skin has everything falling away, has me closing my eyes and taking a deep breath for the first time in hours, and when I go to make a fourth cut before getting into the tub to continue on my thigh, I freeze at what I hear.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

VICTOR

I PULL my shirt on with a wince then frown at my bicep, the muscle burning thanks to Pope's hack job on my arm.

After we left the scene last night, the walking blasphemy shoved me into his truck and proceeded to dig the bullet out of its nearly bone-deep location with nothing but a pocket knife and his fingers.

Why he insisted on doing that instead of waiting until we got to Marbles' house to meet with the rest of the EC in one of his million pole barns I will never know, but he did, and then Pope stitched me up—rather sloppily, I might add—right there in the parking lot.

Does the club have a doctor *and* a medical examiner on tap thanks to Snipe and the family he married into? Yes, yes they do.

Is Marbles' wife a nurse? Also, yes. Harlow is an RN and even if she wasn't, they have a vet on speed dial that specializes in exotic animals from their time owning a *cheetah*—one that kicked the bucket only a few years ago, from what I understand—and *he* would have been a better option than Pope when it came to bullet removal.

Frankly, I would have settled for almost anyone other than him digging around in my arm to get the lead out, but I'm pretty sure the unholy bastard got a sick level of enjoyment from doing it himself.

At least his stitches are pretty.

Sloppy, but pretty.

I push up my sleeve and look at the angry red four inch line that will definitely leave a scar and can't help but smile.

A little love mark from the walking blasphemy.

I'll make sure to bring it up next time I'm throwing my dick in his face.

With a satisfied chuckle, I pull up my jeans, stuffing said dick into the front and doing up the fly before I finish getting dressed.

I got a late start to my day.

I'm not an early riser necessarily, my line of work means long late nights and odd hours throughout the day, but I try to wake up before noon whenever I can in order to get shit done.

Today was not one of those days, though.

Between Beauregard's party, Sack-linski, The Ripper, and a meeting that almost made me feel like a bonafide member of the Wulven Kings, I didn't get home until well after 8 a.m., and by then I was too tired to do anything but faceplant in the middle of my bed and sleep for nearly twelve hours.

I didn't even get to jerk off.

Not until I got up this evening, anyway, because that was the first thing I did after I woke up with images in my mind of Stevie riding my fingers, her tight little body writhing against me in that dark hallway, my baby dove smiling up at me after she came. They were so vivid, in fact, that I had to stroke my dick a second time in the shower a little while later, but that was after I'd gotten my day started.

I threw on some shorts and sneakers, went out into the yard and moved tires, organized scrap, and hauled chains for Little John—my makeshift workout something I do daily. Then I ran the couple miles to his house to give him everything he needed on Anthony Salinski as proof of a job well done. Which is when he told me who took out the hit on the pencil dick motherfucker that liked to hurt children.

His ex-wife.

I was flabbergasted.

The dipshit's former high school sweetheart got in touch with John in order to have her ex *murdered by a hit man*.

Talk about a woman scorned.

But my mentor elaborated, explaining that even though they split, Anthony was still harassing her; sending her threatening letters, keying her car, and showing up at her work to stare from across the street. He even went as far as to send some of his buddies on the force to perform *wellness checks* after getting *reports* of unfit conditions for their daughter. So, since she knew she'd get no help from anyone at the local police department and was terrified word would get back to him from an outside one, Tiffany Salinski turned to the only option she thought she had.

And she was probably right.

Anthony was a total douche canoe, and he was escalating in his other ventures—hence the duffel bag *full* of child porn, underwear, and a fucking receipt for a nine-year-old girl he'd apparently purchased—there's no doubt Salinski would have flipped his shit and done something drastic to hurt her or her daughter.

John and I talked shop for a bit after he blew my mind with that info, disappointing shop because outside of Beau he's got nothing for me at the moment so, I split to check up on the bastard.

I stripped down, showered, then chain smoked while listening to *hours* of Beau the Butcher's tapped phone calls and bugged conversations. And let me tell you, that fat bastard is *pissed* at the dumbass Demon Seed who fucked up his party the other night.

So pissed that Beau had him beat again after Elias had already done a number on him.

Ultimately, it makes no difference to me how the Demon Seeds' president handles his members, but what I did find interesting was the fact he's using that shithead as a peace offering to the Kings.

Which is why I'm currently getting dressed and ready to head out the door.

Beau has been sitting at a diner just north of Sabine Woods, one that's closer to Birch Creek than he usually ventures, for the better part of an hour now and he just got a call that explains why. The disgusting bastard is waiting for Jesus to show up, and apparently, the messiah has been taking his sweet time.

Knowing he's in transit, I decided to put the fact that I'll be up all night to good use and make my way to the diner in order to see what, if anything, I can get from this impromptu dinner date because I'm sure after how busy the party turned out to be, Beau has some shit to talk about.

I stick a cigarette between my teeth as I tug down my hoodie and slide my jacket on, lighting it before I tuck my hunting knife into my boot, then hiding a SIG inside my sweatshirt for good measure.

My plan is to stay in the shadows, to go unseen as usual, but after my last two kills, I have no intention of being forced to fuck around again. And if that means shit goes down and I end up shooting Beau Williams, so be it.

Checking myself over one more time, I grab a burner phone from my stash, power it on, then walk out of my RV. I do a quick check at one of the neighboring semi-truck trailers and make sure Anthony's belongings—namely his clothes and left femur—are cooking in the vats of chemicals the way they need to before closing them up and walking through the yard to pick my ride for the night.

Only to find Little John parking a shiny new piece of shit Ford Fiesta a few feet away.

“Oh, this is fancy.” I smirk as I open the driver side door for the bear of a man. “And you look adorable behind the wheel.”

John frowns at me as he unfolds himself from the seat. “Can't hire anyone to do this shit for me 'cause of your crazy ass.”

“I see *someone* is in a mood tonight.”

He grunts a few times as he stretches but doesn't bother responding, and I don't like the way it makes me feel. I don't like that it makes me *feel* at all.

While Little John Andrews is the only person I would have ever thought twice about over the last twelve or so years, I never put much stock into that until recently. And by *recently*, I mean a few weeks ago.

The first couple years of our *relationship* were very teacher and student, John trying to hone my skills and use them for good while I fought the urge to go off the rails completely. Like I said, he was probably the only person I've ever met who knew what I was and looked past it, almost refusing to believe that's all there was to me because he could see *more* than the monster, and for just as long I argued that theory.

But as time went on, as John started to do more than teach me to kill with efficiency and secrecy, that's when things slowly began to shift for me.

I still fought against it, still tried like hell to hang onto the misdiagnosed mental illnesses I was slapped with as a teenager, then somewhere along the way, I realized Little John was the exception. In my own fucked up way, I actually gave a shit about him and what he thought of me, even found myself *wanting* to make him proud and do right by him. For a long time, I chalked it up to how incredibly messed up my own parents were, and how even the worst of serial killers had mommy and daddy issues that manifested themselves in sick and bizarre ways, so giving my version of a shit about Little John was like that and nothing more.

Then he had his knees replaced.

I didn't know it at the time, but seeing my mentor laid out and struggling through his post-op recovery screwed with me on some level, putting the terrifying man's age and mortality more in my face than before, because even though things went as they should, I didn't *like* Little John being out of

commission. And that's why I took care of him the best I knew how during the entire time he was.

Did I think twice about *any* of this between meeting John and a few weeks ago? Hell no, mainly because outside of him I literally felt nothing aside from murderous rage and a sick euphoria for anyone else, and that was when I was killing people.

Until I stumbled across a sweet little dove.

Hyper fixating to the point of obsession and stalking Stevie was one thing, a very expected thing to be honest, but everything else that's come up since first seeing her in that dark parking lot was not. And the amount of reflecting I've been doing over the last few weeks wasn't either.

At some point, I jumped head first into my very own existential crisis that includes wanting to claim an absolutely delicious little woman as my own in a permanent kind of way, and make friends with broody assholes, as well as experiencing *guilt* when it comes to the one and only person I was ok with developing a connection to.

How the fuck do normal people navigate all of this shit?

I would very literally rather have someone rip out my arm hair, one strand at a time, than struggle with trying to understand how other people feel and how I'm supposed to react to it in return.

But... "Well, since I make it so difficult to get anyone to help out around here, why not hire me?"

John's brow furrows as he lowers his arms. "What?"

"I mean, you wouldn't have to pay me so hiring me isn't really the way to phrase it, but I could work for you."

My mentor just blinks at me.

And I immediately regret opening my mouth.

Which has apparently developed a mind of its own as I shrug and say, "I already do a decent amount of shit around here. Not directly business-related shit, but I could take in the new vehicles and scrap, bring it all back and organize the yard

more than I do now. I could run the machines and shit. And I could take the tow truck out and pick up calls when they come in so you don't have to anymore. I know that stuff is... Ah, fuck it. Forget I said anything."

"Hold on." Little John blinks wide brown eyes at me before he shakes his head in disbelief. "You're saying you want to help out more than you already do? Same way an employee would if I could hire someone?"

I nod with a shrug and feign indifference as my stomach twists in knots.

This feels too much like it did when I was a kid, like before I knew any better and would try to get on my father's good side only to have the shit kicked out of me instead. John won't do that but for some reason I'm already anticipating the let down and I *really* wish I'd have kept my trap shut.

"I..." Little John looks at the ground as he rubs the back of his neck. "The junkyard is legit, Tor."

I roll my eyes and cross my arms against my chest. "I know that, *Johnathon*."

"Which means if I hire anyone, you included, I need shit like a social security card and ID. Not to mention, I—well, I'd never call you selfish because that would mean you cared about yourself more than other people and you genuinely don't care about anyone, but that said, I don't understand what's in it for you to help me out."

What I can only describe as disappointment lances through my chest before it mixes with the anger I'm all too familiar with. "Forget it, then. It was just a stupid, impulsive thought brought on by watching your big ass pop out of that clown car like a busted can of biscuits." I turn and start walking away, pissed more at myself than my mentor. "Shouldn't have said any—"

"That's not what I meant." I can hear John try to catch up with me, his work boots eating up the gravel path as fast as his legs can work. "Tor. Hey, listen for a second."

The only reason I stop is because it's Little John, and regardless of the foreign sense of embarrassment, he's still the only person to give any semblance of a shit about me since I was fifteen.

He huffs and puffs as he comes up next to me. "It just surprised me, that's all. You've never shown interest in helping beyond the hits, and honestly, I never asked cause I'm in denial about how hard this shit is getting for me as I get older. I didn't mean nothing by it, Tor."

I just shrug again because I have no idea how to respond to that.

"I didn't mean to imply you're completely heartless, Victor." John smirks as I slowly meet his eyes. "I'm probably the only one who knows you're not, and I shouldn't have made it sound otherwise. You don't care, but not for any reasons other than the fact that you had to protect yourself from getting invested in other people, and you really don't understand a lot of things when it comes to them. Which aren't bad things, by the way, it just caught me off guard is all."

The tension releases from my body as I relax a little. "So, you'll let me help?"

Little John shakes his head but quickly continues. "I meant the shit about papers. Technically, Victor Crow no longer exists, and I can't have a ghost working for me, not if I want to keep this business on the up and up to keep you safe."

"Yeah, sure." I clear my throat and ignore how it tightens over his words. I know I'm not the only reason John keeps the junkyard legit, but hearing I'm one of them is enough to have me experiencing something else I don't like feeling. "If I got papers... if I got shit to keep things on the level?"

My mentor's eyes go wide again. "You'd do that? You'd get documents just so you can help me out?"

"Why not?"

"Because you're a contracted hit man and serial killer reliant on protecting your identity. Because you're supposed to be fucking dead."

Now *that* makes me grin. “I am dead, Johnny boy. Dead as a fucking doornail, come back as a ghost to haunt your grizzly ass. Which gives me the freedom to become whoever the hell I want.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” John mumbles as we start walking again.

“Don’t worry your bald little head over it. I’ll handle the paperwork, you start planning how you’re going to spend all your free time. I hear they just opened a new day spa in Sabine Woods that’s all the rage.”

He rolls his eyes and tries to scowl but I can see him fighting a smile.

“I know!” I gasp as I move to the station wagon in front of us. “You could take up golf! Old guys do that when they retire, right? Hit the green and knock around some *balls*.”

I show the bear of a man my best imaginary golf swing as he rolls his dark brown eyes. “I’m not retiring, Tor. And I ain’t playing fucking *golf*.”

With my best grin, I open the driver door, grab the keys then head to the trunk to grab a license plate. “Such a shame. You’d look so cute in those little pantaloons and cleats.”

John barks out a laugh as he walks away, shaking his head and calling me a dumbass under his breath as he does, and I pause for a second to appreciate it.

I might not understand how to handle feelings and people and shit, but I *know* Little John Andrews. And knowing him has done both of us some good whether we want to admit it or not.

“TOOK YOUR SWEET FUCKING TIME,” BEAU GRUNTS AS JESUS slides into the booth across from him. “I said this shit was urgent, and I meant it.”

I roll my eyes as I watch the footage that's being live streamed from the drone—courtesy of Spider and his massive brain—perched on the streetlight outside the diner.

Turns out a sober Finlay is even smarter than a high one; not that I know firsthand, but he's shared as much, and something he used to do in his free time was *tinker* with electronics. And this tiny little flying robot he created from scratch was pretty damn impressive when he showed it to me, but now, seeing it in action and doing what Spider made it for, is even more so. It's beneficial as fuck to, be perfectly honest, and I've rather enjoyed testing out all of the equipment the Goliath Birdeater sends my way.

He's streamlining my process and I am definitely enjoying it.

Too bad he hasn't created something that'll get Beauregard to spill his guts and tell us everything he plans to do in order to pin this sex trafficking bullshit on us.

On the Kings, I mean.

How he's going to pin this shit on the *Wulven Kings*.

I roll my eyes at myself this time and refocus on the phone in front of me.

Most of his plan is clear. We know what Beau's doing for the most part: hiding a bunch of women in some shipping container until he moves them and looking to pin it on the Kings, but the questions of *how* and *when* are still unanswered. And they're the only things keeping him alive at this point.

I'm assuming Beauregard will organize an auction some time in the near future since he's working with Jesus and that seems to be the Cobra Cons thing.

Lucifer was known for throwing *parties* in order to hide the dog fights as well as the girls he pimped out of the clubhouse, and he'd have real *bangers* when he was selling women and children to the highest bidders. So, I don't see that changing now just because they're under different management.

For a newer club, the Cons did a lot in a short period of time, and even with their former president sitting in prison for it, I'm sure their messiah will follow in Lucifer's stupid ass footsteps.

Oh, the joys of researching morons.

But that means Beau has to stay alive until I get a location on the girls, the auction, and anything else pertinent to shutting this shit down before it happens.

Unfortunately for me, it also means listening to the misogynistic, bigoted shitstain of a human for hours of my life that I will never get back until he gives me something to go on.

"Cool it, man," Jesus says as he kicks back against the vinyl like he doesn't have a care in the world. "I got here when I got here, and it don't change anything you gotta tell me."

Even through the black and white footage I can tell how red Beau's face is as he leans in. "Listen up, you black bastard," he hisses. *Guess I can add racist to misogynist and bigot. How the hell did that guy produce someone as pure as my little dove?* "Your dumbass prospect got his ass handed to him by a bouncer at the Kings' strip club because he couldn't follow orders. I said to play fucking nice and listen to their rules, and he didn't. If things went any further, he woulda started a war before we could stick them with anything."

Bingo.

I lean toward the screen and turn up the volume in my earpiece as Beau *finally* gives me a little concrete evidence. It's not the information I'm looking for but it's a blunt admission of intent and that means I'm that much closer to getting what I need from him.

"It was fine." Jesus waves his hand through the air dismissively before cocking his head to the side. "They don't know it was one of my guys."

"No, but that's not the goddamn point. He went after one of the sluts pretending to be a dancer, and if that asshole Snipe had wanted to, he coulda come after me for it. Didn't need to

know he wasn't a Seed to do it neither, and now I'm gonna leave his body on Kings' turf to make nice."

"So?" The wannabe messiah shrugs. "Don't matter to me who lives or dies, the only thing I care about is getting half of El Paso County when this is all said and done."

"A third," Beau grunts. "You get one fucking third, you dumb fuck. I been here longer and deserve all of it but decided to extend my *gratitude* by giving you a third."

Jesus leans in, his dreadlocks falling over his shoulders as he does. "And I'm the one sticking my neck out, you fat fuck. Those shipping containers are my burden until you finally get comfortable sucking Snipe's dick, so I'll be taking half the county for my troubles."

"Like hell you will!"

"Damn right, I will." Jesus's hand darts out and grabs the front of Beau's jacket, pulling him closer as he growls. "I keep those bitches in the boxes on my land until you're ready to move? I get half. I help you pin this on the Kings to make that happen? I get half." He leans in closer until they're almost nose to nose. "Or do I need to remind you who's running this show, *butcher*? Who knows *all* and has no problem sharing if need be?"

Beau shakes his head and swallows hard. "Half is fine."

Pussy, I think as I roll my eyes.

"Pussy bitch." Jesus echoes my sentiment as he shoves Beau back into the booth. "Now, when are we throwing this next party?"

With a grin, I settle in and listen to these asshats for another half hour, my IQ dropping as I do, but by the time they leave to head to their respective corners, I'm on the phone with Spider and tearing up pavement to follow Beauregard home.

One of my questions was answered tonight, and I know exactly how I'm going to celebrate.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VICTOR

WITH A VERY SATISFIED SMILE, I turn down Stevie's street and slow to just under the speed limit so I don't go flying through her neighborhood like the positively thrilled asshole I am right now. But as I get closer to my little dove's house, I see not only the normal lineup of motorcycles that belong to her armed guard, I also see Cal Moreland's big ass Dodge idling in the driveway.

Shit.

After his date with Jesus, Beau said he was going home before meeting with his executive committee, I just wasn't expecting the horrible bastard to still be here.

It seemed pretty urgent, meeting with his board of idiots to begin figuring out the details of when and how they were going to throw a party the Kings would come to after the fiasco at The Dollhouse. A *party* where they'd essentially hold the WKMC hostage, parade out the girls he's been hiding to start the auction, then somehow tip off the authorities outside the Kings's payroll so they get busted.

Personally, I don't think Beau the Butcher is smart enough to get things sorted out in a seamless way, but Jesus seemed comfortable enough with the idea that he let him take the reins for now. And I don't know if that makes the current Cobra Con president a moron or really fucking smart, because if Beau fucks this up it could be really bad for both of them.

Something is telling me they're heading toward a double cross of epic proportions, though, simply based on what I just listened to, and I have a feeling Jesus might be hoping the

Demon Seeds' president *does* fuck up just so he can gain control of El Paso County in its entirety.

Either way, Beauregard split to meet with Cal and the other assholes in his club so they could plan the auction as well as *off* the apparent Cobra prospect who made a scene at his birthday party, and went to offer him up to the Kings. Which is an interesting plan in and of itself.

I turn down the block toward the vacant lot, pulling into my usual spot slowly, then putt the station wagon in park before turning off my ride and smoking a cigarette to kill a little time.

When I called Spider to give him the information I got via his drone—and compliment the fuck out of the tiny robot—he brought up a good point about Beau's peace offering specifically.

The Wulven Kings don't dabble in senseless murder, not anymore.

And while punishment for an asshole who attacked and almost raped a dancer on their territory, after explicit rules about not even talking to them were issued, is warranted, murdering him really isn't, not to Snipe and his way of doing things.

Granted, I doubt they would have cared if Elias got too carried away and crushed the fucker's skull, but they wouldn't sanction bumping someone off after the fact for doing what the Con did. Most likely, anyway. I guess it all depends if things had played out differently. Even so, Spider had a good point and I know it irritated him when I argued against it.

In order to keep the charade going, to keep Beau and his crew of brain dead barbarians in the dark, the Wulven Kings need to accept the half-assed peace offering so they stay that way.

If the Seeds or the Cons catch wind of the WKMC's knowledge of what they're trying to do, it could easily unravel everything and lead to a club war where we'd be greatly outnumbered.

They.

Where *they* would be greatly outnumbered.

Shit.

Why do I keep fucking doing that?

I drag my smoke and shake my head, titling it a little as I analyze another thought that keeps popping into my head.

It's probably nothing, just leftover from pretending to be a King at the party last night.

Yeah, that's probably it.

And I'm basically working for them; collecting intel for the Wulven Kings and reporting back to them regularly because it just so happened my current target is conspiring against them, and we've made nice since I helped Spider with his family issues.

It wasn't even that long ago that I did it—a couple months at most—so it's perfectly natural to start using things like *we* and *us* when referring to that group of moody assholes since I've been wrapped up with them consistently since then.

That's definitely it.

Not that I've found myself actually giving a shit about a bunch of guys I enjoy annoying.

Not because I might want to be *friends* with a couple of them.

Not because the entire Wulven Kings executive committee has accepted me as-is without trying to change it or letting it affect what they think of me overall.

Not even because hearing Spider say I *did a good job* tonight before thanking me for doing it at all made me almost blush.

Hell no. The way those words made my chest all warm and fuzzy has absolutely nothing to do with why I'm having insane thoughts about lumping myself in with them.

Insane being the keyword because I am and they know it, so even if I wanted to join the Kings—which I don't—they wouldn't let me in based on that alone.

I scowl as I smash out my cigarette, dropping it in the ashtray before hopping out and locking the wagon.

There's no way Snipe would patch me in for real.

I'm a textbook serial killer, for one, because regardless of who I kill now I do have civilian kills under my belt. That's probably not in the *qualities we look for* section of the Wulven Kings application.

Throw in the way I annoy all of them, the uncertainty my personality presents, and the extremely questionable threadbare morals I have, and I'm sure there'd be a record set by how quickly they vote *no*.

But why does that piss me off?

Still scowling, I stuff my hands into the pockets of my jacket as I start stomping through the vacant lot toward the abandoned house across from my girl, but the expression falls as I keep weighing the possibility.

They have a *Marbles*.

And that guy is just as crazy, if not more so, than I am. No, he doesn't creep around at night stalking his victims, nor does he have victims for that matter, but he had a goddamn cheetah as a house pet and that has to count for something. He drives everyone nuts too. Even Snipe, who has been his best friend since they were kids, and I heard the story about how Marbles and Harlow got together.

Nothing like a blowjob in an autopsy-slash-embalming room immediately after having your face stitched up from fighting a bastard you ultimately killed for beating your sister.

A smile touches my lips as I jog to the back of the house, crouching down as I start along the side toward the street.

All in all, Marbles and I aren't *that* different, I just so happen to be a *ghost* forced to use my power for good instead of evil most of the time. If they can make him the VP of the

Kings without batting an eye, I'm sure they'd patch in an irritating murderer like me.

I come to an abrupt halt in the bushes by the front of the empty house, frowning before I shake my head again.

Why the fuck do I even care?

With a sigh, I note Cal's truck still sitting in Stevie's driveway as I mumble, "This is just like middle school all over again."

Always wanting to fit in, hiding who I am because I just wanted to be normal like everyone else. I wanted to pretend there wasn't something so wrong with me, and that there were parts of my brain that didn't work the way they were supposed to. If I could do that then I could pretend the things that went on at home weren't so fucked up and I had a real shot at getting out.

It didn't work back then and I'm sure it won't now, so there's no real use in thinking otherwise.

Too bad I can't seem to stop thinking otherwise.

Annoying the hell out of *myself* now, I shake out my arms and try to shift gears.

No matter what happens with the Kings, I did have a good night—a successful night that I intend to celebrate—and since I was able to plant another bug on Beau's cut while we were at the party, one that will pick up everything he's about to discuss, I see absolutely no reason to let my ridiculous line of thought ruin that.

So, I watch for a few more minutes before that dumb son of a bitch comes stumbling out his front door, a liquor bottle gripped tightly in his hand as he staggers toward the waiting Dodge.

Looks like someone is trying to handle his to-do list efficiently.

Whatever, though.

It's not really like it matters to me, it just means I'll have a bunch of incoherent babble to sort through when I listen to the

audio later.

And it means Beau will be gone until sometime late tomorrow, giving me hours alone to celebrate my success with my baby dove tonight.

That makes me smile. A big goofy one graces my handsome face over thoughts of *finally* getting my girl all to myself after so long.

Which is why I wait another twenty minutes after Cal backs out to make sure they're not coming back before I quickly dart across the street. I barely run past the porch as the light flips on and the front door opens. Sidling up next to Stevie's house and flattening my body against it, wanting to make sure I wasn't seen.

After a few beats of nothing but beer bottles opening and lighters clicking to life, I crab walk to the backyard and grin when I see how dark my sweet little dove's bedroom is.

Call me a dick, but I liked scaring Stevie last night.

Grabbing her in the dark hallway got my blood pumping—hers too, for that matter—and if I can do it again, there's nothing stopping me from taking her now the way I wanted to then. And it'll be mind-blowing for both of us.

I secure the yard as I turn the corner, ready to take out anyone who might try to stand between me and my girl, then scale the trellis as fast as I can since the damn thing is still an accident waiting to happen, praying Stevie left the window unlocked.

And thankfully, she did.

I slide it open just enough to get through, closing and locking it behind me as I turn toward the bed.

The *empty* bed that's only visible thanks to a beam of light streaming in from the bathroom. The bathroom where my baby dove is running a bath, judging by the steam and sound coming from it, and that has my plans of scaring her flying right out the window I just came through because bathtub sex is now my goal.

And I'll probably still scare the crap out of Stevie when I walk in unannounced, undressed, and fully erect.

I quickly shuck my jacket and hoodie, tossing both on the chair before I remember I have a gun in there. So I dig through my pockets, retrieve the weapon, and put on the safety before kicking off my boots, toeing off my socks, and pulling my t-shirt over my head.

My belt comes off next: unbuckling and pulling it through the loops as I turn toward the door. It hits the floor as I grin, the smell of Christmas growing stronger with each step that brings me closer to my *prey*. I unbutton my fly and slide the zipper down as I stop just shy of the door, biting back a groan when I see Stevie standing in front of the mirror completely naked, her perky little ass making my dick jump before he's even free.

I bite my lip with a smirk as I admire my girl, that lithe, sexy body bare and ripe for my taking, but as she moves, as Stevie's reflection becomes clearer through the steam and gives me my first real peek at everything I've missed this last week, my stomach drops to my goddamn balls.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?”

My little dove doesn't jump, she doesn't even flinch, just glances at me over her shoulder before looking down in front of her.

“Stevie,” I bark as I push the door open and barrel into the bathroom, throwing caution to the wind because I don't give a shit about anything but her right now. “Stevie, what the hell —”

“I just wanted to remember...” she whispers as she holds out her right arm. Stevie looks up at me as my stare bounces between her tear-stained face and the multiple lines carved into her skin. “And I wanted to forget.”

Fuck.

Fuck, that's a lot of blood.

Quickly, I grab the hand towel and cover the cuts, applying pressure as I lift her arm above her heart. I search her eyes,

those normally vibrant aquamarine orbs dim and bloodshot. “What the hell are you talking about? What the fuck were you...” And that’s when I notice her fat lip and the bruises around her throat. “Did someone hurt you?”

Stevie breaks my stare and looks over my shoulder.

“Tell me,” I growl, my grip on her arm tightening as my anger grows. “Tell me who the hell put their hands on you.”

“No one,” she says quietly, her voice almost robotic.

And I’m not fucking buying it.

“No one? *No one* split your lip? *No one* squeezed your throat hard enough to leave marks?” Stevie nods like a zombie as I look her over head to toe, my anger turning to rage when I see obvious bruises on her chest and ribs. “I guess *no one* left those either, huh?”

Stevie nods again, and I fucking lose it.

“Don’t lie to me.” My hold on her arm turns vice-like as I back her toward the wall. I bring my face level with hers, forcing Stevie to look at me whether she wants to or not. “Do not fucking lie to me, little dove. I want to know who the fuck touched you and I want the truth.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She doesn’t blink as a tear rolls down her cheek. “Nothing matters.”

Stevie bumps into the wall and I roughly pin her there. “That’s bullshit. That’s fucking bullshit because if it didn’t fucking matter then you wouldn’t need this.” I grab her left wrist and bring her hand holding the razor blade between us. “If it didn’t fucking matter you wouldn’t be standing here trying to open a goddamn vein.”

Another tear slips down her face, sliding past her swollen lip to drop off her chin, and something inside me starts to claw its way to the surface.

Images I buried long ago, images of my brother laying dead on the floor of the Monsignor’s office slam to the front of my mind, and with them comes a level of fear I haven’t felt since then.

“You don’t get to do that.” My voice cracks as it raises, as the anger turns to panic. “You don’t get to fucking do that, you hear me? Are you listening, Stevie? You don’t get to *die*, you don’t get to fucking leave me. You are *never* fucking leaving me, Stevie.” She finally fucking blinks up at me, her eyes widening a little as I shake her. “Say it.”

“I... Victor, I—”

“Fucking say it, Stevie.” Frantic. I am fucking frantic right now, horrified of what I just walked in on, terrified over the real possibility of losing my sweet little dove and what it all means. “Fucking tell me you are never leaving me.”

“Victor—”

“You want to remember? Want to forget? Want to hurt yourself because it’s the only way you know how?”

Stevie nods.

“I can make you remember, can make you forget, but I will *not* let you hurt yourself.” I swallow hard but it does nothing to keep me from yelling at her. I’m too far gone for that. “I will *not* let you leave me, Stevie, I *can’t*. You do not get to leave me, so if you want pain to make you feel something other than how you’re feeling, this”—I move quickly, lifting her hand and the razor blade to my chest before slicing the flesh over my heart—“will have to do. You want relief, you want to numb out or feel something, then you use me. *Hurt me*.” I force her to cut my chest two more times; three scars to match hers. “You hurt *me* all you want, Stevie, because I refuse to let you hurt yourself. I *refuse* to let you leave *me*. You are *mine* and you cannot leave me.”

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity, our chests rising and falling rapidly, my heart thundering against my ribs. Stevie’s gaze drops to the cuts on my skin, the blood running over it in thin streams, but when she lifts her eyes, I don’t see what I did before staring back at me.

What I see, what it does to me... through all of my anger, all of my panic and fear, my cock still hardened when the

blade met my skin and the look Stevie is giving me has it throbbing in my jeans.

Lust.

Gone is the hollow, empty expression, and my little dove is looking at me with so much lust in those teal-blue eyes that I have no choice but to act.

Dropping my hold in favor of gripping Stevie's neck, I tilt her head seconds before I crush my lips to hers. She opens for me immediately, my girl kissing me back just as hard, just as needy, her tongue dancing with mine in a frenzy of movements. My hands slide down her body, cupping her breasts and pinching her nipples before traveling to her ass where I squeeze as Stevie loops her arms around my neck, pulling us flush against each other as we continue to kiss.

I suck on her tongue, nip at her lower lip on the side that isn't swollen, but when I try to move to the side of her neck, Stevie doesn't let me. She bites my bottom lip hard then kisses away the sting before doing it again.

Fuck.

Fuck, I like that. Even more so when Stevie's fingers tangle in my hair, pulling and tugging in time with my hips as they thrust against hers.

I can feel her blood on the back of my neck, can feel mine smearing across her breasts as they press against my nipple rings, and the sensation of that warm liquid, of *our* blood painting our skin while we kiss is almost too much.

Which is exactly why I shove my jeans down my thighs as fast as possible, palm Stevie's ass and lift her against me before turning us around so my back is to the wall. My little dove breaks the kiss then, her brow furrowing in confusion briefly but when I back into the slick drywall and slide us down to the floor, Stevie's pussy settling over my painfully hard dick, I see understanding flash in her eyes.

Without any words, Stevie reaches between us, fisting the base of my shaft before going up on her knees, running the tip through her slit twice before she slides down on my cock. My

head hits the wall with a thud once I'm seated completely inside her, her pussy so goddamn hot and wet, so ready to take me from our kisses alone. And Christ, when Stevie starts to move, when my little dove starts to ride me, it's everything I can do not to come from the sight.

Her head thrown back, her cinnamon and honey hair a little wild, Stevie's hands on my stomach, her blood-covered breasts swaying as she bounces on my cock. I reach out, pushing my fingers through my blood on her skin, smearing it over her chest and up her throat, covering those ugly bruises before sliding my hand along her jaw.

Stevie's pussy clenches around me, squeezes my length tight as she lifts her head and meets my eyes, her cunt moving up and down on my cock a little faster. She tilts her chin slightly, turning her face toward my palm, and as I watch my little dove suck the blood from my thumb, I grip her hip with my free hand and growl like a fucking animal, and start thrusting up into her. *Hard.*

I fucking like that too.

"Cut me," I grunt as I bury my hand in her hair, pulling Stevie closer as I push her hips down each time I pump mine up. "Cut me, little dove."

Stevie's lips crash into mine, my girl kissing me fiercely as her pussy spasms around my dick. She keeps kissing me as she lightly drags the razor blade up my abs, between my pecs, then around my nipple before Stevie flicks the ring. Her cunt becomes wetter as she sits up and grips the side of my neck, her eyes meeting mine briefly while she meets me thrust for thrust.

"Cut me, Stevie. Do it."

Her entire body jerks as she switches the razor from her left hand to her right, my balls tightening while we both watch as she presses the blade to my skin until she draws blood, and without breaking our pace, Stevie starts to carve her mark on my flesh while she fucks me fast and hard.

My girl moans again before biting her lip, her nails tearing into my neck, her pussy clamping down on my cock as she pushes harder on the metal. The pain of it has heat racing down my spine, sending warmth through my belly before landing right in my balls, Stevie's pussy strangling me as she moans out my name, as she keeps dragging the razor over my skin. And when my dove finishes, when she drops the blade so she can throw her head back again to cry out my name, I pound up into her cunt, pushing her hips down with one hand while the other moves to her clit. I pinch and rub that sweet bundle of nerves until Stevie is screaming, until her pussy is so goddamn tight around my cock I have no choice but to come, firing rope after rope into my girl's core before she collapses against me.

My dick twitches out the last of my release as Stevie relaxes, her pussy fluttering with aftershocks and drawing out some of my own. My breathing is heavy and labored as I look down, my little dove wrapping her arms around me while I admire the way her willowy body is a perfect fit against mine before my gaze shifts to my chest, her mark.

V+S.

In the center of a heart.

Right over *my* heart.

My heart that might not be as useless or inept as I always believed it was.

My heart that forces me to repeat the words I demanded to hear from her before all of this happened. "You don't get to leave me, Stevie. You can't. Promise me."

"I promise," she whispers against my skin, against my heart that is hammering away in my chest as it swells with something I won't put an emotion to.

Even as it begins to beat her name.

“YOU GONNA TELL ME WHO HURT YOU?” I ASK WITH AN arched brow as I lift the spoon to Stevie’s lips.

She hits me with her own arched brow and pointed look. “Are you going to tell me what happened to your arm?”

“I got shot.” I nod toward the soup I’m basically force-feeding her. “Eat.”

Stevie takes a bite—purely to humor me, I’m sure—and the tightness in my chest loosens a fraction more.

After having the kind of sex I’ve only ever dreamed about having, with the kind of girl I’d definitely dream about if I did that sort of thing, I picked my girl up off the the floor and got in the tub. The water was less than lukewarm by the time we got in since it had been running the entire time, but Stevie and I were an absolutely delicious mess of fluids and we needed to clean up, so after I soaked up the water that overflowed, we did.

I washed my little dove’s hair and body, let her do the same for me complete with a deep condition to my *gorgeous curls*, and Stevie surprised me by asking me to bend her over the edge of the tub and take her from behind before we got out. I wasn’t sure I had that in me since I was boner free until she wrapped her hand around my dick and started talking about my piercings, but that was enough to get him going again and I happily obliged.

When we did get out, however, things went from heavy-but-fun to heavy, confusing, and terrifying, real fast.

Stevie set one foot on the bath mat and collapsed.

At first I thought she slipped because the floor was so wet and we only added to it by fucking again, but she didn’t. When I jumped out and scooped her up, Stevie had lost consciousness for a few seconds and when she came to, she immediately threw up.

She explained that she had a rough day at work, she forgot her lunch, and didn’t have time to go get anything. Stevie told me she didn’t eat before she went in either and while that, coupled with the blood loss, could most definitely make her

pass out, it shouldn't make her vomit. And instead of drilling her for answers to the questions I've had since I walked in, I went into protective mode as I so often do with my little dove.

I cleaned her up, dried her off, then carried Stevie to bed where I dressed her in my t-shirt and made her get under the blankets before fixing her some chicken soup.

My girl fought me, kept telling me to stop fussing over her and that she was fine, but my argument about how Stevie was *not* fine because no matter how good I am at making her come, orgasms shouldn't make her pass out or vomit either, was something she couldn't refute.

Momentarily black out? Yes, but not pass out and collapse on the bathroom floor.

Which brings us up to speed because Stevie has been pestering me about my black eye and bullet hole courtesy Sack-linski ever since I started force-feeding her soup.

"Will you tell me who shot you?" Stevie asks before taking another bite. "And maybe cover your thing while we talk about our days?"

I frown and look down at my *thing*. "What's wrong with my dick?"

"Nothing." Stevie giggles. "I'm rather fond of him, but he's a little bit of a distraction."

"He isn't hard." Then I look up at her, my frown deepening. "And he isn't *little*."

"Oh my god. I know your thing isn't *little*, Victor, I wasn't calling him little. It's just difficult to sit here and talk to you while it's all hanging out."

"Suit yourself, but I'm not putting clothes on." I lean toward Stevie and grab a pillow from next to her, cover my lap, then offer her another bite.

"You don't have to keep feeding me," she says with a small smile. "I'm capable of feeding myself."

"I know." I shrug. "But I want to make sure you eat. If I let you do it yourself, you'll *distract me* with all the talking and

never take a bite. And I'll be too busy planning who I'm going to murder next when you tell me who hurt you."

"Victor, please. It's not that big of a deal, ok?"

I shake my head as I set down the bowl and pick up the mug of tea, handing it to my little dove with a grunt. "I'm not going to let this go, Stevie. Someone put their goddamn hands on you and I'm going to find out who it was one way or another so I can make it right."

"By slitting their throat and dismembering them?"

I give her a firm nod as I take the tea and resume spoon feeding her.

Stevie sighs again but she's smiling a little, so she can't be sick of my shit just yet. "I got attacked at work, ok?" My jaw clenches before I open my mouth to get a name, but she quickly adds, "A resident. I work on the lockdown unit, you know that. Those people are harder to handle and can get violent if they're having a bad day. I just happened to catch one of them on a bad day."

"Really?" I give her an incredulous look. "An old man with Alzheimer's hit you in the face, choked you, then threw you on the ground so he could kick you repeatedly?"

"He caught me off guard. I had just..." She looks over my shoulder briefly before meeting my eyes again. "I had just lost my favorite resident. I was upset and not paying attention. He got me right outside her room and everything."

For the first time in my entire life, I can't tell if someone is lying.

I've done enough looking into Rolling Meadows Nursing Home to know it houses some rather difficult residents, and I know that advanced stage Alzheimer's and dementia can create behaviors as well as aggression. But I didn't think some old dude could deliver such a beating to someone trained to handle him.

What do I know, though?

Research and reading outdated files isn't the same as working directly with individuals suffering from those conditions. For all I know there could be a ninety-seven-year-old former ninja on the lockdown unit perfectly capable of taking out the entire nursing staff with one move. As long as they remember the move anyway.

Even though I find it hard to believe, it is possible when I rationally look at what my girl does for a living, which is why I let it go for now and ask, "You lost someone?"

Stevie nods as she swallows the bite I just gave her. "Mrs. Sanderson. Margie. She was, well, she was my favorite, even though we aren't supposed to have favorites. We aren't supposed to develop attachments at all but that's hard to do when you're taking care of them day in and day out."

"And you developed an attachment to Margie?"

"She was like the grandmother I never had." My little dove sighs and refuses the next spoonful of soup I offer, and I don't push right now. "I've never known any of my grandparents, any family outside of my father, so I sort of latched onto Margie."

I set the bowl on the nightstand and scoot closer to Stevie until our knees touch, suddenly compelled to find out more about my girl, and share parts of my story with her too. "Me either. My grandparents were all dead by the time I was born."

"Which was when?"

"Are you trying to find out my birthday, baby dove?"

Stevie giggles and nods.

I smile as I shake my head because she's fucking adorable, but I'm not ready to share *that* much. "I'll be thirty-two in a few weeks. And I'm a Scorpio."

"I'm a Taurus."

"I know." I give her wink then motion for Stevie to continue. "Tell me about Margie."

"She had a rough life." Stevie chews the inside on her cheek as she looks down and starts picking at the fringe on the

blanket. “And she made it into something beautiful even though she still had horrible things happen to her.”

I might be shit when it comes to reading emotions but I can tell this woman meant something to my little dove. Which is why I reach out and place a hand on her knee, giving it a squeeze in hopes I’m reading *her* right and responding appropriately.

My girl looks up and gives me a watery smile as she covers my hand with hers. “Margie was advanced in her disease, stuck in another life she created for herself, but she always knew who I was. She knew my name and face, and she trusted me. I worked with her the entire time I’ve been there, and regardless of everything that came with her diagnosis, Margie Sanderson was exactly who I wished my grandmother would have been.”

“She was lucky to have you, baby dove.” People say that in these kinds of scenarios, right? That’s a thing? Either way I mean it, and judging by her smile Stevie appreciates it.

“Why do you call me that? Little dove or baby dove?”

“Your name.”

She furrows her brow in confusion. “My name?”

“Stevie.”

“Yes...”

I grin and shake my head. “Stevie Nicks. The White Witch. The white winged dove.”

Immediately, I’m hit with a megawatt smile, one that goes straight to the middle of my chest—and my dick—because *her*. “My mom loved Stevie Nicks.”

“I wondered if you were named for her.”

“I am!” My girl nods and scoots a little closer. “She loved Fleetwood Mac, all of Stevie’s solo stuff. Rochelle told me that, and that she knew if she ever had a daughter she’d name her after Stevie Nicks.”

The excitement she feels is clear, more than obvious really, but I can't help but notice something else swimming in those bright blue eyes as Stevie talks about her mother. "Do you remember her?"

Probably not the best question to ask right now, but I never claimed to have any tact. And I'm genuinely curious because I found very little about Celeste Williams during my recon.

"A little." My little dove sighs and starts tracing the veins on the back of my hand. "I remember how she smelled." My nose instantly scrunches at that but Stevie just laughs. "You don't get that, do you?"

"I do, actually, and it makes me think of how awful my father smelled."

"What did he smell like?"

"Sweat and booze." Now her nose is scrunched and I'm chuckling. "What did your mother smell like?"

"Christmas." She sighs. "My mom smelled like cookies and peppermint, and a hint of fresh snow. Even though that doesn't really have a smell but—"

"That's exactly how you smell, baby dove." My girl blinks at me before her eyes well with tears, leading me to believe I fucked up in saying that. "I... I'm not really cut out for conversations like this." I lift my free hand and rub the back of my neck. "Maybe..."

"No, Victor, it's ok." Stevie squeezes my hand again. "It made me happy to hear that. I use certain lotions and wear certain perfumes to try to recreate the scent. Maybe it's weird, but it makes me feel closer to her, so hearing you say that makes me happy."

"But you're going to cry..."

"Happy tears."

"Happy tears?" *What the fuck are those?* "You know what, explain later. Tell me more about what you remember."

Baby dove giggles and snuffles as she nods her head. "She wore flip flops everywhere until it snowed and she was forced

to wear boots because she hated anything on her feet. I remember her clomping around in them when we were together. My mom loved to sing but she was tone deaf and it was awful, but I still loved listening to her. And she..." A tear slips down Stevie's cheek as she pushes her hair behind her ears. "She gave the best hugs. I felt happy and safe when my mother hugged me, and she'd always say, '*Princess Stevie, you will rule the world with your smile one day.*'"

While I can tell this moves my little dove deeply and seems to be both hard for her and something that brings her joy, my lack of finesse and tact strike again when I all but blurt, "How did she die?"

And this amazing creature who seems to understand me better than anyone else doesn't skip a beat. "She killed herself." But then Stevie arches a brow in question.

Thankfully, I *know* what that look means so I sigh and nod. "I knew that."

"Because you make it your business to look into everyone you interact with."

"I do, which you knew because you're almost as good at profiling as I am."

Stevie smiles and shrugs one shoulder. "It just makes sense. Harvester of Bones stuff and all. I figured you looked into me and my family at some point after the parking lot, and since you're affiliated with the Kings, it made even more sense. You knew too much about me to not have."

"And it doesn't bother you? Me digging around in your history... your father's history?" Because maybe that means it won't bother Stevie when she inevitably finds out I was hired to do that as well as off her old man.

There's that optimistic hope again.

Stevie shakes her head. "It doesn't. Especially knowing what you do... for a living, I guess?"

"You could call it that." I chuckle then look down at her hand still covering mine. "You will never cease to amaze me, baby dove."

“I think it’s safe to say that’s mutual.” I lift my gaze, and when it connects with vibrant teal eyes, I can’t help but return the smile dancing in them. Even as Stevie continues. “But what you’re really asking me is, *how* did my mother kill herself?”

I nod. “It isn’t listed anywhere, only that her death was ruled a suicide.”

My little dove turns to look out the window, her stare searching the night sky, dark as pitch save for a sliver of moon. “This isn’t the house I’ve always lived in. We had a different one when I was born, one my father took when he pushed out the previous president of the Demon Seeds.” By *pushed out* she means murdered, but we both know that so there’s no reason to correct her. “It was just behind the clubhouse, another farm house almost as old as Rolling Meadows itself, but it sat far enough away from everything that it was almost secluded.”

Stevie reaches toward the nightstand and grabs the mug of tea, sipping the warm liquid slowly before she continues. “My mother and I were home alone, as usual. Beau didn’t used to have so much security on our house back then because of how far away it was.” She sighs and begins drumming her nails against the ceramic. “I don’t remember much from that night because I was only three at the time, but I do remember my parents fought before my father left to go to a church meeting. Beau stormed out of the house and my mom was crying. After that I have no firsthand account of what happened, just what Rochelle has told me over the years.”

“Which was, what, Stevie?” Call it morbid curiosity or a lack of empathy, but my need to know the specifics of Celeste Williams’s death is growing by the second.

“My mom gave me a bath after dinner, put me to bed, then she lit the house on fire before hanging herself from the banister in the hall.” Baby dove turns to look at me, her expression sad despite the ghost of a smile on her lips. “Apparently, she thought that was the only way she could get away from my father.”

“And that’s...”

Stevie nods. “Where my scars are from. I guess I woke up at some point and went downstairs. Everyone thought I was trying to get to my mom, that I saw her hanging there and waited underneath her until the fire spread, causing the banister to break. She fell to the ground, and based on the placement of my burns, they thought she fell on me, most likely knocking me out before more pieces of railing did too, and since they were on fire, I ended up with these.” She motions to her scars that are visible. “That wasn’t the first time I cut myself, Victor.”

I nod because that was obvious even to someone as inept as me. “But you usually do it on your scars so no one notices.”

“Sometimes I have nightmares about the fire. I don’t remember anything after my father left that night but I dream about it. It never sticks and I’m sure it’s a form of PTSD, but whenever I have those dreams, those nightmares—”

“You cut. But today was an exception.”

We sit quietly for a few moments, my girl staring out the window again as she walks down a very short memory lane while my mind races with this new information.

Information that seems rather fabricated, solely based on Stevie’s account of her interactions with her mother immediately before her death, if you ask me, but what do I know? My own mother was a rotten garbage human and she didn’t kill herself, so maybe a good mom who loved her child would still take care of them before she did.

Too bad my gut says otherwise.

I’ll leave it be for now, though.

Stevie just shared some very heavy information with me and for some fucked up reason, I’m inclined to do the same so she doesn’t feel so alone.

“My parents were incredibly abusive.” Baby dove’s gaze swings toward me at that, and I clear my throat. The only other person I’ve shared any of this with is Little John, and he doesn’t even know all of what I’m about to tell Stevie. “Both

alcoholics, both sadists, both terrible humans who should never have had children to begin with.”

Stevie looks at me with so many questions written all over her face, prominently the fact that she caught *children* and wants me to elaborate on that, but I won't. Not tonight. I'll save that story for another time.

“The ways my childhood was fucked up are endless but I can understand your need for relief in the form of pain to a degree, and it might just give you a little more insight into what kind of factors contribute to turning a devastatingly handsome man like me into the thing that goes bump in the night.” My girl giggles as I wink, then continue. “When I was around eight-years-old, I was cleaning the house as my mother so often made me, top to bottom, every inch with a fine tooth comb including their bedroom, but this particular time was different. While sweeping under their bed I came across a few magazines, reading material no child should get their hands on because of the nature of the content.”

“Porn?” Stevie asks.

“*Hardcore* porn.” I nod then smirk. “I should preface this by saying there was always something off about me, something wrong that no one took the time to diagnose and treat. I hit two out of the three in the serial killer qualifications trifecta before I could talk, and my upbringing was rather textbook in terms of what the great John E. Douglas profiled for my kind, so in no way am I blaming porn of any kind for what I became. It did, however, spark some things that might have stayed dormant had I not found my father's stash.”

My girl swallows hard, not from fear or anything else except genuine intrigue. “The cutting?”

I lift my finger and tap the side of my nose. “The magazines were full of extreme BDSM; men and women bound and gagged, men flogging them, women dressed as dominatrixes whipping their submissives. There was even a section on pet play that included people locked in cages, but what caught my eye was the bit about knife play.” I readjust myself, laying down and stretching out next to Stevie, my

head propped in my hand. “I took one of the magazines, just one, put the rest back and finished cleaning before my mother realized I’d stopped. This by itself wasn’t quite enough to spark an immediate walk down that path, but it was exactly what I needed to hyperfixate and try to understand what it all meant. I was only eight, though, so it wasn’t like I hauled ass to try out what I saw on those crumpled pages.”

God, I hope I don’t totally fuck things up by sharing this shit.

I doubt anyone wants to hear about how screwed up their... fuck buddy? Lover? Stalker? Hell, I don’t what to call this thing between Stevie and I, but I’m sure my story could bring it to an abrupt end if she’s completely repulsed by me afterward.

Oh well.

“Needless to say, my curiosity was piqued, and one day it crossed over into territory I never intended to venture in.”

My girl looks at me with rapt attention, hanging onto my every word ,and for a brief second I hesitate to continue.

I’ve never had anything like what I do with Stevie, nothing that comes remotely close, and telling her all of this definitely brings rather large risks. I’m risking losing what we have, losing her completely, and worse yet, I’m risking myself by giving her just enough firsthand information on what makes a serial killer that I could become a project instead of whatever she currently sees me as. Her fascination with true crime is second to none, and learning all of this while knowing there’s more could change Stevie’s view of me, turning me into an experiment or test subject, and I’ll never admit how much I don’t want that.

Snapping in the bathroom and begging her to never leave me during a borderline panic attack was plenty in terms of vulnerability, thanks.

Unfortunately, I still feel the need to share about my past in order to give her what Stevie first gave me: pieces of a shattered life held together by razor-thin strands of thread.

“I walked in on my parents.” I don’t break her stare as I begin to tell her about how fucked up I really am. “I woke up early on a Saturday morning and knew I needed to start my chores as soon as I did in order to avoid a beating, and I started on the bedrooms. When I got to their room, I opened the door to find my mother dressed in a full body black latex suit, paddling my father—who was gagged and hogtied—with a wooden plank full of thumbtacks.”

“Oh, Victor.” Stevie gasps. “Oh, that had to be awful.”

I shrug. “It was definitely a surprise, and very weird, but I couldn’t stop watching. I watched until my mother noticed me in the doorway, and when she did, she stopped what they were doing, screamed at me, then shortly after I ran back to my room, she came in and beat me anyway. Then I almost made it a point to try to catch them again.”

“Did you?”

“Only once more. Late one night a few months later. My father was tied to the posts at the end of their bed, his ankles shackled to the coordinating legs and bent at the waist facing the mattress. He was giving a man head, one who was gagged, bound to the bed spread eagle—I later realized he was my father’s boss from work—while my mother pegged him and whipped them both with something resembling a mace.”

Feeling something I’d call *shame*, if I was really capable of such a thing, I drop my eyes to the comforter between us. “Funny enough, it didn’t faze me, not in the way it would most people, I think. Sure, finding my parents like that was gross, especially since I already hated them for the constant abuse, but I was able to compartmentalize what I saw. I almost removed my parents from the equation completely and focused on the technical aspect of what was happening. It only made me more curious and intrigued by the world where pleasure and pain collided, and by the time I hit puberty I was so hyper fixated on it that I started incorporating it into my—”

“When you would masturbate.”

My head snaps up to look at Stevie, surprised by her use of the word, and expecting to find her looking at me the same

way the so-called *counselors* at the home for boys did, but she isn't. No, Stevie is looking at me without an ounce of judgment or disgust, and I believe she's even trying to understand me in the least clinical way possible.

She's trying to understand because she cares.

"Yeah, when I *masturbated*." I shake my head and chuckle, constantly amazed by this morbid little dove. "Not every time or anything, but it enhanced my climax if I did something to inflict pain, and I started to become aroused whenever it happened in more normal circumstances."

"Did you ever..." Stevie chews the inside of her cheek a little as her eyes bounce between mine. "Did you ever *do that* to anyone else while... having sex or whatever?"

"Are you afraid I'll hurt you, little dove?"

She shakes her head emphatically. "I know you won't. I just—well, I..."

I grin wide as Stevie's words trail off. "Are you *asking* me to hurt you while we fuck? Are you curious about what it would be like to have my cock buried in your pussy while I carve my name on your silky skin?"

My girl's entire face reddens but she just shrugs.

"While I'm more than happy to explore your new kink with you, maybe you should let me answer your question before you decide you want *that* sort of experience with *me*."

"I don't think there's anything you could tell me that would change how I feel about you, Victor. Not after everything you've done for me."

We'll see about that. "Since becoming The Harvester of Bones and *saving the world* one douche canoe at a time, I've harnessed the urges I always had, putting my compulsions and energy to use for good instead of evil, but it wasn't always like that. Before Little John found me—"

"The man I saw you with last night? The older man?" Stevie asks as she shifts around to face me. "Is he your handler? I think you called him, anyway."

“Yes, that bear of a man is the one who keeps me on enough of a leash so I don’t go off the rails completely, but before that I was much looser with my methods, no real rhyme or reason, and I didn’t do things by the book.”

My little dove nods. “Your civilian kills.”

I can’t help but smile at that. “I’m impressed with how much you pay attention, Stevie, and I can’t say I don’t like it, but you’re right. Between ages fifteen and nearly twenty, I racked up fourteen civilian kills, and to make an excruciatingly long story a smidge shorter, two of those were sex workers that I did in fact hurt during sex.”

With an arched brow, I pause to give her time to process what I just said but instead of kicking me out or screaming for help, Stevie doesn’t even bat an eye. “You didn’t mean to though, did you?”

I slowly shake my head.

“Accidental because you were, what? Trying to see how far you could push things? Or maybe what exactly got you off?”

Nodding, I can feel my brows raise because goddamn, Stevie is *good*.

“They don’t fit your MO, do they?”

“No...” I say hesitantly because I’m absolutely waiting for the other shoe to fucking drop. “They’re the only two strangulations I have on my track record.”

Stevie nods as she begins scooting down the bed. “I figured as much. It makes a lot of sense, really.”

“Say what now?”

“It does.” She giggles before burrowing under the blankets on a yawn. “You hadn’t honed your skills or perfected your craft yet, and you didn’t mean to kill them.”

I blink, then do it again. “There are twelve others, Stevie.”

“Yeah, and I bet they were all shitty people who deserved what they got. You just consider them civilian kills because

you either knew them personally, they didn't fit your MO, or you think they were sloppy because it was pre-Harvester of Bones era."

Try all three, but I don't say that because I'm fucking floored.

"*Pre-Harvester of Bones era?* Who even are you right now?" And how the fuck does she have me so goddamn figured out? Maybe I need to start taking Stevie to The Ripper's crime scenes so she can profile that asshat and help me catch him. I thought I was good but clearly my girl is better.

With a soft smile and shrug, Stevie looks up at me with tired aquamarine eyes. "I don't know but you just make sense to me, Victor. The *how* or *why* don't really matter because I get you, the same way you get me."

"How do you figure?" Because I don't actually get *anyone* and am now totally lost.

"The bathroom is a perfect example. You knew what I needed, knew how to make me feel better, and I never had to say anything." Stevie reaches up and gently taps the gauze over the mark she made on my chest. "We might both have baggage, have been through hell and back, because there's more to both of our stories, and maybe our connection is toxic or fucked up because it's essentially rooted in murder, but it's there. The connection we have, the way we understand each other. It's there no matter what and it supersedes my naivety and your emotional stuntedness." She yawns again as her eyes drift closed. "No offense."

"None taken."

I look down at Stevie, awed once again by this woman, and more resolute in keeping her as mine than I was before. Especially when she makes me laugh with what she says next.

"Turn out the light, give me a kiss, then spoon me for a few hours before I wake up to your dick between my butt cheeks."

“One fight at work, a little blood play, and you’re all bossy and direct now, huh?”

Stevie doesn’t open her eyes, just nods her head with a sleepy smile before puckering her perfect lips.

And I’d be a fool to do anything other than what my sweet little dove demands of me, because no matter how *emotionally stunted* I am, I know without a shadow of a doubt that Stevie Williams is a once in a lifetime kind of girl.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

STEVIE

A SMILE SPREADS across my face as I feel a warm hand slip under my shirt and start toward my breast, tracing the curve with a featherlight touch before skimming across my peaked nipple. I arch my spine as it happens again, pressing my bare butt against the very big erection I knew I'd be waking up to when I fell asleep last night.

Victor grunts in my ear as I wiggle my hips, his hand suddenly covering my breast completely and squeezing when I do it again. "Good morning, baby dove."

"Good morning, *ghost*," I nearly moan as he pinches my nipple, rolling it between his finger and thumb before Victor's hand begins to travel down my body. "What time is it?"

"Just after five."

Thank god.

I'm always worried that one of these days when Victor comes to see me and stays, when we fall asleep in my bed after a perfect night together, Beau is going to come barging in here and find us.

It's happened more than once in the past, my father all but breaking down my door in a drunken rage so he can pull me out of bed and work out his anger. Never since my ghost has been visiting me, but it has happened, and considering the frequency in which he drinks, I wouldn't be shocked if things went down that way at some point.

Knowing it was after midnight when he went to church helps, though, because there is no way my father is home right

now, and I'm sure he won't come back before Victor sneaks away. He's most likely passed out and still stinking drunk at the clubhouse, and if I had my car back, he'd probably call me to pick him up later this morning. But since I don't need to worry about Beau and all his shit, I'm going to enjoy this very pleasant wakeup call thanks to the man who did in fact spoon me all night.

"You made sure my father isn't home?" I sigh as Victor flattens his hand against my lower belly and pulls me against him tighter, rolling his hips just enough for me to feel the glide of his Jacob's ladder against my ass. *I really love those piercings.*

His arm that was most likely folded under his head shifts, sliding under my neck and tilting my head before I feel my ghost's breath on my cheek. "No sign of him. Or Calvin. Just two patches sleeping downstairs and a few more lingering out front."

Perfect. "You have to go soon, though, don't you?"

"I do, little dove." Victor nips at the shell of my ear then kisses just below it. "Can't risk getting caught, and I have to meet with a Goliath Birdeater about some paperwork."

I don't know what the hell *that* means but I don't really care either, not when this wonderful man is kissing my neck and moving his hand closer and closer to where I want it—where I need it most.

"Stevie..." he whispers against my skin. "Open for me, baby."

My entire body heats up over his words and I do as Victor asks without question. I widen my legs, opening for him as he grips my thigh and brings it back to rest on top of his leg. My ghost's fingers are on my core before I even relax into this position, tracing each side, barely caressing my clit. His middle finger touches my entrance slowly, almost gently, then Victor dips it inside me, pumping a few times to gather my arousal before dragging it up to my clit and circling with calculated, painstaking swipes.

He alternates between slowly fingering me, curling his finger to hit my g-spot then rubbing the swollen and needy bundle of nerves, and when I moan low in my throat, I feel my ghost pull his hips back just enough to slide his cock between my thighs.

On another gasp, I spread my legs wider and push my head back against his chest. “Victor... oh my gosh,” I hiss as he applies a little pressure to my clit, circling with firmer, faster strokes while he slides his erection along my core. “I’m not going to... not going to last very long if you—oh!”

With one quick thrust, Victor slams into me from behind, that big beautiful cock buried to the root inside my pussy that instantly contracts around it. “Better, little dove?”

I bite my lip and nod, my eyes practically rolling up into my head as he starts pumping his hips while rubbing my clit at the same pace. *My god, this is so good.* “So good,” I moan. “So fucking good, Tor.”

“Yes,” he growls as he slams into me on a brutal thrust. “So goddamn good, baby, and I fucking like hearing you call me that.”

“Tor...” It was supposed to be a question but it’s really hard to use the proper inflection when my ghost is increasing his speed both inside me and on my clit, bringing me to the edge so much faster than I want because I want to enjoy the sensation of Victor filling me so full for as long as I can. “Tor, oh. Oh! Oh my gosh.” I reach behind me and push my fingers into his hair, gripping the strands tightly, and just when my ghost uses his leg, bending it at the knee and lifting it to open me up even wider for him, my stupid cell phone starts to ring. “Shit,” I groan as my eyes pop open, landing directly on the electronic vibrating across my nightstand.

“Better answer, Stevie.” Victor’s smile is audible as he slows his rhythm but accentuates everything he says with a hard thrust. “Don’t want anyone to get suspicious if you don’t.”

With a scowl that turns into a grunt as he slams into me again, I stretch away from Victor—Tor now, I guess, thanks to

my sex induced nickname—and snatch the old as hell iPhone from the tabletop and answer without looking. “Hello?”

“Hey, girl!” Linnie chirps in my ear. “Sorry for calling so early, I’m sure I woke you up, but I just got off a twenty hour shift and wanted to check on you before I went home and passed out.”

“I’m fi-fine!” I squeal as my ghost rolls us, flattening me on my stomach and straddling my legs before shifting his body, instantly bottoming out when he pumps his hips. “I’m fine. I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Are you sure you’re ok? You sound kinda funny.”

With a glare, I look over my shoulder at the man who is now on top of me, smiling in my face as he wraps his arm around me to palm my breast. The man I didn’t mean to fall for and did, even if he is shaking his head, and refusing to stop having sex with me while I’m on the phone. “I sound funny?”

“Yeah. Like, I don’t know, like you’re in the middle of something.”

“I’m... oh god,” I whisper as Victor bites my shoulder. “I’m...” *going to come*. “No, not, I’m not—god.”

A dark chuckle comes from behind me and before I know it, I’m up on my knees. “How many times do I have to tell you, baby dove,” Victor whisper-grunts as he leans forward and plants my free hand on the headboard. “Not *god*. *Ghost*.”

“See!” Linnie yells. “That! That’s what I’m talking about. You sounded all out of breath and like you couldn’t figure out what you wanted to say, then there was a muffled voice or noise or something.”

“TV,” I moan into the phone before biting my lip and squeezing my eyes shut tight, my ghost digging his fingers into my hips before he smacks my ass and fucks me so hard the headboard starts bumping into the wall. “It’s just... the TV...” My pussy spasms with each thrust, my climax building from the pit of my stomach, rolling through my veins like a delicious poison burning me from the inside out. *Oh my god, I’m going to come while talking on the phone.*

Linnie pauses, probably trying to hear whatever she can, before she asks, “What’s that banging sound?”

Fuck. “Con-con-construction!” The word barely leaves my lips before my body jerks forward. I adjust my grip so I’m white knuckling the wood, and when Victor slaps my ass again it’s all I can do to not scream in Linnie’s ear. “It’s really chaotic right now. I’m ok though, thanks for checking on me. I’ll call you later.” I hang up on my only friend, cutting off her very thoughtful phone call mid sentence as my ghost drills into me fast and hard, the ribbing his piercings create almost a sensory overload, the barbell at the base of the underside of his shaft just right to hit my clit with each ridiculously deep thrust.

“You’re such a good fucking girl, Stevie,” Victor grits out. “Such a sweet little dove, taking your ghost’s cock while you were on the phone.” He smacks my ass one more time, and it’s my undoing.

“Oh, fuck!” I yell as my orgasm rips through me, crashing into me so fast I can’t catch my breath. My vision goes white as I keep coming, as my pussy clamps down around Victor’s length so tightly, so damn hard I can literally feel every single inch of him as he struggles to move.

And my orgasm only peaks a second time when my ghost loses his rhythm, his movements jerky as he grunts, “Fuck. Fuck, Stevie, I’m coming. I’m coming and I’m gonna fill your pussy so full you’ll never be able to get me out of your system.” The blunt nails on his fingers dig into my skin as he thrusts one last time. “Goddamn, baby dove.”

I look back at him as I go up on shaky knees. “Was that necessary?”

“Oh, fuck yes it was.” Victor leans forward, holding my hips so I don’t collapse as he kisses me. “It was crucial even, maybe vital.”

“Somehow I think you would have survived if you had to stop long enough for me to talk on the phone.”

“Doubtful.”

With a small laugh, I roll my eyes then flop forward onto the bed, flipping over after Victor removes himself from my body. “I think you’ve had far worse than ten minutes without sex.” I nod to his bicep as he plants his hands on his hips, momentarily distracted by how incredibly beautiful this man is.

The curly, sun-kissed hair, the piercing—and unsettling—gray and indigo eyes that sometimes look lavender. Every defined line and chiseled feature; the jaw, the cheekbones, the muscles that cover every inch, and his sexy bubble butt. Everything about Victor is sexy, right down to the dark happy trail that leads to the prettiest dick I’ve ever seen, and it’s really not surprising that I fell for him, especially after what he told me last night.

And despite the fact that he’s a serial killer.

“Baby dove?”

“Hmm?” My eyes move back up his body slowly before they land on that smirk that I’m beginning to crave on a daily basis. “What did you say?”

My ghost chuckles and shakes his head. “I just told you who shot me, name and everything, but you were so busy ogling me in all my naked glory you didn’t hear one word.”

“I told you that your thing was a distraction.”

“Are you trying to offend him by calling him that? I thought you’d be more comfortable with using the proper terminology after the last few weeks. Last night being the real turning point.”

I watch my ghost climb off the bed and start gathering his clothes, and while he manages to make putting clothes on somehow just as enticing as when he takes them off, I can’t help the disappointment I feel over the fact that he’s leaving. I don’t say it, though.

Neither of us enjoy this part very much, at least I’d like to think so, and it’s even harder when we have no way of communicating once he’s gone, or knowing for sure when he’ll be back.

“Tonight,” Victor says as he buckles his belt, smirking when I give him a surprised look. “I’m shit at reading people outside of a few, more obvious emotions, but I’ve gotten pretty familiar with that look on your face, little dove. I’ll be back tonight because we have an entire week to make up for.” Then he holds out his hand for his t-shirt I’m wearing and gifts me with a gorgeous smile as he sniffs it before pulling it on. “Three times in less than forty-eight hours isn’t nearly enough to sate me.”

Biting my lip to keep my smile from looking as crazy as it feels, I go to crawl under the blankets. “Beau could be back by then.”

Victor shrugs as he walks over the lounge and collects his hoodie and jacket, as well as his socks and boots. “Wouldn’t be the first time I defiled you with your old man sleeping under the same roof.”

He has a point.

A good point, actually, because my father has been here a few times when my ghost came to see me, but after last night and this morning, I’m not so sure it’ll be as easy to hide his presence.

Something inside me changed last night.

My sexual experiences before Victor was limited and pretty much boring, totally because they had to be, but what we did in the bathroom? What we did just now? Those are experiences I want to have as often as possible.

He wasn’t wrong when he referred to cutting him during sex a new kink, my *only* kink, because the level of control it gave me along with the overwhelming sense of being safe and cared for, being trusted completely, that was just as addictive as the form of borderline exhibitionism he’s created for us multiple times now. Not to mention Victor is this extremely seductive combination of rough and gentle when we sleep together, almost hyper focused on my body and what I need, while still taking what he wants exactly how he wants it.

I'm not sure how long I'll be able to continue hiding my ghost from Beau, and it has everything to do with the way we have sex.

Hell, I'm already starting to panic a little over waking up the patches downstairs. My headboard hitting the wall wasn't exactly quiet, and neither was I, to be honest. Unfortunately, meeting here in secret is really the only way to spend time with Victor and I don't want that to stop at all.

"I'll be back tonight, baby dove." My ghost hands me his hoodie, nodding for me to put it on before he sits on the edge of my bed. "And I promise to be quiet as a mouse."

I giggle as I tug his sweatshirt down over my naked body, bringing the collar to my nose and breathing deep. "I wish I could say the same."

He arches a brow then grins, pulling on his socks and stepping into his boots. "Have I ruined you, Stevie?"

"Yes." I laugh as a look of pride crosses Victor's handsome face. "You were well on your way before last week and after last night..." My cheeks heat but I don't look away. "And this morning, I just, I—"

"Don't think you can come without screaming my name at the top of your lungs?"

"Basically."

My ghost laughs and it makes my heart squeeze. "That might just be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"It's true, though. Your *thing* and your name will forever be synonymous with orgasming." Then I frown. "Except..."

"Except, what?" Victor stands as he gingerly slips into his jacket, turning to face me with an adorably concerned look. "What's on your mind, little dove?"

"You told me your last name was Crowley."

"I did."

"And you still want me to believe that you coincidentally share the same name as a fictional serial killer?"

“I’m sure it’s happened before.” He shrugs like it isn’t a load of shit but I can see the mischief dancing in his indigo eyes. “There are probably hundreds of Michael Meyers out there somewhere.”

I roll my eyes. “And they probably live next door to Jason Voorhees.”

“On Elm Street. Across from Fred Kruger.”

“You’re impossible, you know that?” I huff. “I get that you have to protect your identity but I know who your alter ego is, and we just shared some really important things with each other. I don’t think it’s unreasonable for you to tell me your real name, especially since you know so much about me and did before we ever slept together.” Why this is bothering me, I’m not sure, but it is and I can’t help but feel like it’s because there’s still a sliver of doubt in the back of my mind that my ghost is using me. I don’t really believe that, but it’s there. Or he’ll get tired of me and stop coming around. And I’ll have absolutely no way of finding him again if he does. “Is Victor even your real first name?”

With a smile that does not match my level of annoyance, the most charming man I have ever met walks over to me, reaches out and takes my chin between his thumb and index finger, titling my head so I’m looking him in the eye. “Yes, Stevie. Victor is my real first name.” My ghost leans down, brushing his grinning lips against mine. “Victor Tobias Crow. Born November 17th almost thirty-two years ago in a small, shitty town in Massachusetts.” Then he gives me a hard kiss followed by a much gentler one. “Happy now?”

“Yes.” I nod, smiling like an idiot as Victor kisses me one more time. “Very happy. I didn’t want that nickname I used to go to waste, especially since I have yet to come up with another one.”

My ghost chuckles as he straightens up. “It won’t, and I expect you to use it often. And very loudly, preferably when I’m balls deep inside that delicious little pussy of yours.” I blush right down to my toes as Victor wags his eyebrows. “I really liked that, a whole hell of a lot.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I have no doubt.” Victor looks at me for a few seconds, his gaze moving over my face carefully before it slides over his sweatshirt covering the rest of me, and when those intense eyes connect with mine again, what I see causes my breath to hitch. “I’m finding it harder to leave the more time we spend together.”

“Me too,” I squeak out quickly because I was not expecting him to say that.

“I don’t want to go.”

Or that. “I don’t want you to.”

“But I can’t stay.” He sighs as he scrubs a hand over his hair.

“I know.”

“I’ll be back, though.”

I nod my head, my heart racing over the truth in his words. “I’ll be here waiting.”

“Naked?”

Victor grins and I can’t help but laugh. “Probably not, considering the amount of men traipsing around my house, but I’ll compromise by not wearing any panties.”

“I’ll take it,” he growls before moving toward me again, cupping my cheeks and kissing me so hard it steals my breath. “Until tonight, little dove.”

And then he’s gone.

With a disappointed sigh, I slide down my bed, pulling the blankets up to my shoulders as I roll toward the window. After a while, rays of the morning sun start to stream through the glass, staggered and dancing between the branches of the tree outside. Victor left my window cracked—he knows I keep my bedroom cool so I can pile on the blankets—and the sounds of birds chirping, the world slowly waking up to the crisp autumn morning begin to lull me to sleep.

Only to be woken up a while later by pounding on my bedroom door.

“Stevie!” An unfamiliar voice yells through the wood before I hear the deadbolts start to click. “Stevie! Hey, you there?”

I scramble out of bed, my heart hammering in my chest, fear fluttering in my stomach as I dart to the dresser. “Hold on please!” Frantically, I rummage through the drawer and pull out the first pair of sweats I can find, sliding them up under my ghost’s hoodie quickly before running to the door. “I’m getting dressed!”

My eyes bounce around my bedroom in search of any sign of my overnight guest, then I run to the bathroom, make sure it’s clean—thank you, Victor—grab a hair tie and toss my hair into a messy bun.

“I’ll be right there!” I shout as I shove my feet into my moccasins before quickly making my bed. If this patch is making sure I’m up so Beau can come in here, then *I* need to make sure it doesn’t look like I slept until... I check my phone as I plug it in. “Holy shit,” I whisper.

It’s almost *six-thirty*.

Which means I just slept for nearly twelve hours.

I know yesterday was rough, in more than one way for sure, but I haven’t slept that hard in god knows how long.

Must have been the sex.

I almost laugh at that but don’t because the knob on my door shakes a couple times before whoever is on the other side bangs on it again. “Stevie, get out here!”

“Sorry,” I pant as I throw open the battered wood, only now realizing I never locked it from the inside last night when I came up here so it must have been my ghost who did it. “Sorry, I was in the bathroom.”

The Demon Seed standing in the hallway frowns as he glances at my clothes, his sort of hazel eyes going wide when gets to my face. “You, ah...” He clears his throat and looks

away. *No one must have told him about my scar.* “You have a—there’s someone here to see you.”

“What?” I blurt, my own eyeballs going wide.

But he nods. “You got a visitor downstairs.”

“A *visitor?*” That’s not supposed to happen. I’m not allowed to talk to anyone outside the club, let alone invite them over or something. *Beau is going to lose his shit if he finds out.* “I have a visitor?”

The patch sighs, long and annoyed. “Yeah. You got a visitor.” He turns to start toward the stairs but I don’t miss the mumbled, “Lefty said she was weird but damn, I didn’t think she was stupid too.”

I scowl at the back of his head because I’m *not* stupid and he’d know that if he bothered talking to me at all. Not that I really want to engage with the members of my father’s club, but still. None of them have ever tried talking to me, just like they’ve never bothered standing up for me or helping me after a lecture. Which means it shouldn’t really faze me that the entirety of the Demon Seeds thinks I’m *weird* or *stupid*.

It’s probably for the best anyway.

Not just because Beau would flip his lid, but also because not talking to them helps me avoid any unwanted attention. Like the kind Joker used to give me without ever willingly talking to him. They can keep on thinking I’m a weird stupid girl and we’ll all be better for it.

I hurry down the stairs after my less-than-pleasant messenger, his irritation with me obvious in each clomp of his boots, but when we get to the bottom and he nods toward the living room, I come to a screeching halt.

“Linnie?”

She spins away from the dingy wallpaper by the empty bookshelf and smiles. “Girl, what is up with all the man meat crawling around your house?”

“Uhm... “ My gaze bounces from the patch sitting in the recliner watching what is clearly porn on the TV to the one

leaning in the doorway of the dining room drinking a beer and staring at us. Between those two, the one that came to get me, and at least one or two more, my friend is probably confused as hell right now. And I am a *terrible* liar. “Well... uh...”

“Is it always like this here?”

“Kind of.” I shrug then try not to seem awkward or terrified as I walk forward and gently grab her elbow. “Why don’t we go out on the porch.”

“Whatever you say, girlie.” Linnie brushes her blonde bob out of her eyes and glances back at the guy watching the vintage *movie*. “But I didn’t mind looking while I waited for you.”

Gross.

I close the door behind us, my heart racing as I search the street for any sign of my father then move to the swing hanging on by a thread. “What are you doing here, Linnie?”

“That’s a really nice way to welcome a friend.” I cringe as she frowns. “I just wanted to check on you. Yesterday was really rough, and after our brief talk this morning I was worried.”

I blow out a breath and nod as my shoulders sag. “I’m sorry. Really, I didn’t mean to be so rude, I just... I never have anyone over because my father doesn’t really like it.” Her brows arch, so I quickly add, “He does a lot of work out of the house. Meetings and stuff. I never really know when he’ll have people around, or if he’ll be busy when he gets home so I just avoid it.”

“Okay...” Linnie drawls, clearly not buying my attempt to bullshit her. “What does your dad do for a living?”

“Construction,” I blurt like a moron.

She glances at the front of my house before taking in the line of motorcycles in my driveway. “Construction?”

I nod.

“And he has meetings here?”

“Yeah.” I start chewing the inside of my cheek. *This is going to be a disaster.*

“Uh huh...” Linnie looks around again as my heart rate spikes to triple the norm, then she shrugs. “Must be nice to have all these sexy construction workers hanging around all the time then.”

Again, gross. But I nod and force a smile anyway because I need her to believe that. “Could be worse.” *And it definitely has been.*

“I know I wouldn’t mind so much man candy to look at when I took my study breaks.” Her hazel eyes connect with mine as she smiles. “How is school, by the way? I feel like we haven’t talked about that in a while.”

“It’s...” I sigh and drop down onto the swing, hoping the thing doesn’t break. “Not so great, actually.”

“No?”

Linnie sits down next to me as I shake my head. “I’m actually thinking I may have to drop out.”

“*Why?* You were doing so well, I thought?”

“I was, but... well, I’ve been missing a lot.” I have, and since Beau has been ramping up his lectures, the thought of dropping out has crossed my mind more times than I’d like to admit. I don’t want to, not when I do really enjoy school and it’s one of the only places I’m allowed to go, but I haven’t been to class in weeks and the time off to heal or watch the boys has really taken its toll lately. I can’t tell my friend any of that though. “It’s getting harder to keep up with all the extra work, or find time to make up the labs.”

“I get that.” Linnie nods with a sigh. “Nursing school is so hard, but you’ve got the chops for it.”

“Now just might not be the time.”

“Maybe you should just take the rest of the semester off.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess I could.”

“I know that fall down the stairs laid you out for a while, then the family stuff you had going on.” She reaches over and gives my knee a squeeze. “Plus everything that happened yesterday. I get why you feel like dropping out is the answer, but maybe just take the semester off and see where you’re at when school starts again next year.”

I’ll probably be dead.

My nose scrunches at the extremely morbid thought.

The thought that was one hundred percent fueled by the escalation of my father’s behavior and nothing more, surprisingly.

Usually there’s at least a hint of dark intent behind thoughts like those, but ever since a certain ghost has been visiting me, my desire to live has become a lot stronger than it was before. So much so that I’ve found myself wondering how I can get out of Beau’s house before he has the chance to kill me, but I’m not quite ready for that yet.

Even if it means I could be dead a few months from now.

“I’ll think about it.” I pat my friend’s hand then carefully lean back in the swing. “So, what’s new with you? Like you said, we haven’t really had much of a chance to catch up at work lately.”

Linnie huffs and mirrors my position. “Not much, since I’m working a million hours a week.”

“Gotta keep Harvey rolling in the cat treats.”

“Oh he’s spoiled and happy.” She giggles. “His mama is not, though.”

“Not much time for speed dating?” I give her a small smile as she nods.

“Or any kind of dating. I’ve been so busy lately that Harvey is the only pussy in my apartment getting any kind of attention.” I crack up at that and Linnie does too. “I’m serious! It’s been so long since I’ve gotten any action and it’s making me crazy.”

“I bet.”

“Hey, whatever happened with Leon?”

I frown. “Leon?”

“Yeah! The study buddy that *wasn't* a date.”

Oh. “We, uh... it was... we're—”

“Oh my god, Stevie, you're *dating* him, aren't you?”

“No?” My cheeks heat as I blink wide eyes at her. “I'm not dating anyone right now.”

Linnie turns her body toward me, the smile on her face gossip hungry. “But you slept together, didn't you? Your study session totally turned into a one night stand, didn't it?”

If I blush any harder I'm going to catch fire.

Ha.

I never expected my fake study partner to come up again, to be totally honest, and even though I don't know anyone with that name and never have, I can't help but think about Victor and how he'd *hate* this conversation.

He doesn't need to directly say it for me to know that we're exclusive in whatever it is we're doing, that I'm sure of, and while he's been adamant on the way we belong to each other, that isn't really the same but I still know. Victor Tobias Crow would absolutely *hate* the idea of me even pretending to see someone else in any capacity, and I'm sure I wouldn't be able to talk him down from a very literal murderous rage as easily as I did last night.

Which is why my loyalty to a serial killer that's affiliated with my father's biggest enemy wins out and I nod, pretending Victor is Leon because why the hell not. “Sort of.”

“Oh my god!” Linnie gasps. “You're still hooking up with him, aren't you?”

Another nod.

“Girl, yes!” She holds her hand up for a high five and giggles when I return it. “The entire time I've known you, you have *never* had any kind of male companion. I was starting to think you were a lesbian, which would be totally fine because

I'm all about you being you, but even then you've never talked about anyone."

I chuckle a bit as my friend does a little bit of a victory dance on my behalf. "It just sorta happened when I wasn't expecting it." *Now, that is super true.* Victor was a huge surprise I didn't see coming.

Linnie scoots around and smiles so big. "You have to give me all the details. Leave nothing out. This bitch's cooch is collecting dust and I need to vicariously live through you for a few minutes."

"Details?" I swallow hard because I can't really give her any of those, and even if I could I've never had a friend that wanted them, so I don't know where to begin.

"Yes! Hair color, eye color, smile. Tall or short. Athletic or husky. Dick size. Tell me everything."

I can't help but giggle over her excitement for me as I start describing Victor in the most roundabout way possible, sharing what I can without giving anything away. Linnie even manages to get me to share a little about our sex life, and was satisfied when I told her it was very active and beyond fulfilling.

"He probably has an adorable nickname for you, doesn't he?" My friend sighs as she props her arm on the back of the swing and drops her chin on her hand. "Something sweet that means he wants to be more than friends with benefits but doesn't know how to ask."

"He does, actually." My brow lifts. *How did she know that?* "It's really sweet."

"Bitch," Linnie says with a smile. "And to answer the question I can see on your face, the way you described your relationship with Leon is why I assumed that."

Now I'm frowning because I don't understand that either.

"Come on, Stevie. He's too good to you for him to not want more, and you're head over heels for him, too. Probably even have your own cute nickname for him and everything."

I blink at the eager look on Linnie's face. Obviously she wants me to tell her what I call him, but Tor is out because it wouldn't make sense if his name is Leon, and telling her I refer to him as *my ghost* would be super weird. Which is why I blurt the first and only thing that comes to mind. "Gizmo."

"*Gizmo?*" Her brow furrows as she lifts her head. "You call your FWB, Gizmo?"

"Yeah..." *Oh my god, I'm such an idiot.* "He's a big movie buff and makes a lot of references and one time..." Well, shit's about to get real awkward or real funny depending on her reaction. "One time, when we were, *you know*, he made a joke about going into gremlin mode because—"

"Oh my god." Linnie starts laughing. "Because of the whole thing that happens when they get wet, right?"

I nod and start laughing too. "Yeah. He caught me off guard with it and it just kind of stuck after that." Or it will anyway, because I am *definitely* calling Victor Gizmo next time I see him.

My friend sighs as she looks at me with almost a sad expression. "I'm really happy for you, Stevie. It's nice to see you laugh and talk about someone you obviously care about. I'm not sure that's really ever happened since we've been friends."

"Thanks." I search her face, wishing she had someone to talk about too. "You'll find him, Linnie. I know you will."

She shrugs as she fiddles with her hoodie pocket. "I love you for that, but I can't say I share the optimism."

"Linnie—"

"It's ok. I've tried, and I'll keep trying, but I feel like I missed my chance already, you know? The stars didn't align when they should have or something, so now I'm just drifting until someone comes along and settles for the nursing home RN in her mid-thirties that spoils her cat."

Without thinking, I reach out and hug my friend, my only friend who cared enough about me to see how I was doing after losing my favorite resident and getting assaulted by a

coworker, and silently pray that she finds someone who makes her as happy as Victor makes me. Linnie is a good person and she deserves to be happy, to find love, and have the life she keeps looking for whenever she goes out. I want that for her, and I don't believe that the universe would be so cruel as to keep her from getting it.

"I meant to tell you." Linnie lets go of me and gives me a watery smile. "They fired Sasha and Chris, and another girl that was on when Margie got sick. And they filed charges. Got them both on neglect, and got that asshole for what he did to you."

My eyes go wide as we get to our feet. "Really?"

She nods. "Yeah, so you might get a phone call. They think the security camera footage will be enough that you won't have to testify or anything. It's all under the facility's name and stuff because they didn't want to bring you into it but that doesn't mean RMPD won't call you."

"Wow." I sigh and wrap my arms around my waist. "That's crazy."

Linnie starts down the stairs and I follow, but she stops and looks at me with a serious expression. "Chris had your address, Stevie. I wasn't going to say anything because he's sitting in a jail cell and can't use it, but they found your address in his locker when they cleaned it out. Chelsea gave it to me because she knows we're friends." She pulls a little scrap of paper out of her pocket and hands it over. "You don't have to worry, though; he's in jail and won't be getting out any time soon. It just didn't feel right not telling you."

I nod and open my mouth to thank her just as *my father* rolls up on his motorcycle with no less than ten other club members.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit. I am in *so* much trouble.

Especially as Linnie says goodbye to me, cat calls, and winks at the entire executive committee as she walks by them to her car, then seals my fate by hollering out her window,

“Glad you’re doing ok, Stevie! See you in a couple days!” As she drives off.

Yep, I am totally fucked.

“Who in the hell was that bitch, and why the fuck was she here?” Beau growls as he throws his bike on the ground and starts lumbering toward me.

“She... she, uh, I w-work with her and, and she—”

My father grabs a fistful of my hair as soon as he’s within range and begins dragging me by it toward the house, then kicks in the front door when we’re on the porch. “Why was she *here*, you worthless piece of shit?”

I raise my hands to my head, desperately trying to loosen his grip but it won’t budge. “Sh-she came by t-to check on me!”

Beau throws me at the bottom of the staircase, my body landing on the wood with a thud and sharp pain to my lower back. “Everyone out!” He waits long enough for the patches to scatter before picking me up by the front of Victor’s hoodie and shoving me up the steps. “What’d she mean, she’s *glad you’re ok*? You call her about last night? Tell her your *daddy was beating you*?”

I turn around and try to crawl away quickly but my father kicks me in the back, my face hitting one of the steps, my nose gushing instantly.

“No,” I gasp through the blood as he kicks me again. “No! I didn’t call her!”

“So if I get into your phone I won’t see no calls, in or out, right, *Stevie*? No chatting with anyone between last night and today?”

I pull myself up on shaky arms, finally reaching the top and leaning against the wall. “I didn’t tell... I didn’t say anything.”

“Bullshit!” Beau barks before grabbing my hair again, and tugging me to my feet just so he can hit me in the stomach. “You’re a goddamn liar, just like your bitch mother!” He slaps

me in the face then kicks open my bedroom door, slamming it behind him before dropping me on the floor. “She was a liar, too, *princess*. A fucking *liar*, always trying to get me in trouble so she could leave.”

My body folds in half as my father kicks me in the ribs, in the stomach, alternating between the two as he rants about my mom. A mouthful of blood spurts between my lips as he rolls me over, connecting so hard I can feel my rib crack and hit my lung.

“You won’t be going nowhere, Stevie.” Beau nails me in the kidney while I gasp for air, and when he kicks me in the side of my head, my vision bursts into a sea of white. “You ain’t going nowhere, bitch, not if I—”

Then I hear a voice that can’t be real.

“Oh, you are *dead*, you filthy, fat, fucking pig.”

Victor, my ghost.

My ghost came to save me.

I just hope he isn’t too late.



CHAPTER TWENTY

STEVIE

MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN SLOWLY, squinting against the dim light filling the room.

The strange room that is definitely not mine.

I can feel my brow furrow as I look around, taking in the stainless steel cabinets and counters, and the marker board above a sink that has my name scrawled in pretty handwriting with a date and times underneath. My blurry gaze moves to a bedside table next to me, one that I've seen before when we did clinicals at school, a blood pressure cuff and stethoscope sitting neatly on top just waiting to be used.

Investigating further, I shift my eyes to an IV stand, two bags of fluids hanging from it while one steadily drips down the line. My heart starts to beat a little faster when I see the monitor behind it, the pulse increasing as the blood pressure starts to rise because I now realize it's attached to *me*—they both are—and if that's the case then I must be in the hospital. And if I'm in the hospital my father is going to lose his—

“Hey, Stevie.”

I jump and quickly flip over in the bed, my panic spiking just as I meet tired, grass-green eyes. “Ember?”

“The one and only.” She smiles softly as she closes the book in her hands. “At least I'm pretty sure, anyway. I've been in El Paso County my whole life and I haven't come across another Ember yet.”

“Where am I?” I sigh nervously, my anxiety dropping a bit but not enough for the monitor to quiet down.

Seeing a familiar face is a huge relief, but the reason I'm here along with the repercussions for it are keeping my very valid paranoia alive and well. And reflected in the way the heart rate monitor is steadily beeping away.

"On Kings' property," Ember says so matter of fact it makes my jaw painfully drop. "The VP's property, to be more specific."

I swallow hard, a combination of fear and a severely dry throat making it feel like sandpaper. "The... the VP of the Kings?"

She nods.

"I'm on Wulven Kings' property?"

Another nod.

"In a building on land owned by Marbles?"

One more nod and a lift of Ember's periwinkle eyebrow—which is new since they were brown last time I saw her—as she goes to stand. "Are you feeling ok? Do I need to go get Harlow?"

"Harlow?" I squeak out. "Why would you need to get Harlow?"

"Because I'm worried you have a concussion."

Nervously, I chew the inside of my cheek. "Why would I have a concussion?" This probably isn't the best way to carry on a conversation considering I'm in some sort of makeshift clinic, but I'm very worried about *why* I'm here to begin with, and since I'm a shitty liar, playing dumb is my only option. Even if it means this kind woman thinks I have a concussion.

"Stevie, honey, do you remember what happened before you woke up here?" Ember sits on the edge of the bed facing me, concern written all over her pretty face.

I nod slowly. "Yes..."

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"Not really." *So much for lying or playing dumb.*

Ember sighs. “Look, girly, I told you before, everyone affiliated with an MC has secrets in some way or another, things they don’t want other people finding out, but you’ve been out cold the better part of two days and—”

“*Two days?*” I gasp and quickly try to sit up, only to immediately regret it because my head starts to spin and everything from the waist up begins to throb in pain. “I’ve been here for two days?”

“More like two and a half, but you were in and out of consciousness when you first got here.”

“Shit.” I slump back against the pillows, defeated and having to accept the fact that my father is going to kill me for multiple reasons when I finally go home.

Ember reaches out and pats my knee as she pulls her leg under her, seemingly settling in until she gets some answers. “So, tell me why *shit*.”

“Why shit?” I frown.

“Yeah, why did you say shit like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*,” she says in the same tone I used. “That’s not exactly the response I was expecting.”

I grimace a little because I’m sure it wasn’t, but I go back to playing stupid anyway. “What were you expecting, exactly?”

“You are something else.” Ember shakes her head with a chuckle. “There’s no use in lying, Stevie. You came in here beat to hell; bruises all over your stomach and ribs, gnarly ones around your throat and on your chest. Your lip was fat in two places and there’s a bit of a ring around your left eye. You have a couple broken ribs, one of which punctured your lung, and your head was cracked open. There’s even a cute little row of stitches holding your brain in place.”

My nose scrunches as she laughs a bit. “Ok, your brain wasn’t hanging out, it’s more of a lump that split open, and Harlow only put in three stitches, but still. All of that, plus the

cuts on your arm? You were in really bad shape when you got here and you've been out ever since." Then Ember gives me a pointed look. "Unfortunately for a shitty liar like you, more than half of the people here *know* what causes things like that, and since Victor was a frantic, screaming mess when he pulled up, we've been able to put the pieces together."

My stomach flips at the mention of his name, and regardless of the way my body hurts, I can't help the butterflies flapping in my tummy or the heat that stains my cheeks because of it.

"Ah hah," Ember says with a grin. "I knew there was something going on between the two of you."

"I... I don't know what..." I sigh as she shakes her head. "What gave it away?"

"Aside from him flying in here like a bat out of hell?"

I nod, assuming she's referring to the night of Beau's party.

"Your reaction to him." Ember shrugs. "It was different from when you saw Chop and Pope. Familiar. His shit-eating grin didn't help, but the way you and Victor interacted in those brief few minutes led me to believe you'd already met. Especially when Victor was getting a little loose with his tongue."

"It was that obvious, huh?"

"Only to me. The boys had no idea, not until you showed up here."

I look down at the IV sticking out of my hand. "I didn't know he was going to be there. Or that he had anything to do with the Kings. I was..." Then what she said finally clicks. "Loose with his tongue?"

Ember smiles and looks at me like I'm still trying to pull the wool. "*Bones* and *ghost*. For someone who relies so heavily on keeping who he is a secret, Vic got pretty loose-lipped in front of you."

"So... so everyone... *knows*?"

“Just the executive committee and those of us closest to it.”

Wow. I definitely wasn't expecting *that*. But I guess it makes sense. Victor is all about keeping his secret and he isn't really one to brag or anything, but if he's running with the likes of the WKMC then I'm sure they found out because they had to know for one reason or another. It's probably better for everyone if the Kings do know. They can put Tor's *talents* to use, and it probably helps keep all parties involved safe.

“While I have *all* the questions about how a sweet young girl like you got wrapped up with a vigilante serial killer, I think it's more important for me to find out what you remember from before waking up.”

I blow out a breath and nod, thankful I don't have to get into all that right now. “You're probably right.”

Ember smiles brightly. “I'm always right, babes, and the more we hang out, the more you'll see it.”

I'm not sure I'd call this *hanging out*, seems a little more like an inquisition or something, but whatever. I like Ember; she's been nice to me from the first time we met, and I'm already fucked since I've been here for two days. Telling anyone how I got my injuries seems like small potatoes after going awol on Beau and winding up in his mortal enemy's territory.

“First, I feel like I need to clarify that the cuts on my arm aren't from anyone but me.” She nods as I hold my breath, waiting for a scolding that never comes. Not that Ember has any reason to give me shit over it, but I'm sure most people frown on self-harm as a way to cope. But she says nothing so I continue. “The bruises on my throat aren't all from the same incident, either. I was attacked at work a few nights ago, I guess. I called a rather angry coworker out on his negligence after a resident died and he didn't like it very much. Thankfully Linnie and her boss stopped him before he could do anymore damage.”

“Does this *angry coworker* have a name?” Ember scowls. “I know some people that might want to meet him.”

I shake my head with a small smile. “Victor already tried getting a name and I wound up lying to him about what really happened because he also wanted to *meet* him. The guy is a dickhead but he doesn’t deserve to die for it.” I don’t think so, anyway. It’s hard to say for sure when it comes to Chris but I doubt he needs to be punished in the form of The Harvester of Bones or motorcycle club justice. *Probably*. “Everything else though...” I take a deep breath and close my eyes, terrified and slightly unsure about saying the words out loud for the first time in my entire life. “Everything else is from my father.”

Ember is silent for what feels like hours, nothing but the sound of the monitor beeping louder with each second that passes, and when I take a peek, cracking one eye open to make sure she’s still there, I’m surprised at what I see.

This woman, this kind *stranger*, is pacing the floor with her fist clenched at her side, her cellphone in her other hand and up to her ear. And Ember is evidently *pissed*.

“He was right,” she hisses into the iPhone. “No, not really, he kills people for fun but I didn’t think Victor was lying. It just makes *me* want to kill something... No, E, I’m not going to go on a spree or anything, but after what he said, the way Stevie looks... I know, I know that, but... Exactly! It’s total bullshit.” Ember nods her head repeatedly while she continues to pace. “Yeah, yeah exactly. So make sure you tell Spider. Tell him everything Vic said is true and... No, Stevie doesn’t want that. I don’t know why but she doesn’t so make sure they don’t go off half-cocked... Right. Just give them the info and go from there.”

She turns to me as she hangs up, looking through me for a few beats before she sighs and shakes out her shoulders. “Sorry. I had explicit orders to confirm what happened.”

“I don’t want anyone doing anything, though.” I push myself up in the bed with a wince. “He may be a bastard who beats me, but Beau is still my father and—”

“Think about what you just said, Stevie.”

I frown. “Beau is still my father.”

Ember shakes her head. “Honey, any time you have to say *bastard who beats me but*, is a problem. And you called him *Beau*. Do you even love him?”

My brow furrows further as I look down at my IV again.

Funny enough, I’ve never *really* thought about that.

I’ve always felt this weird sense of loyalty toward my father, what I thought was love from a child to parent, but... but it’s not really true, is it? The loyalty I have is purely based out of fear, because given the chance, I’d run out of Beau’s house like my ass was on fire and never look back. Which means I can’t really love him then, can I? He’s never shown me anything but hate or anger, and if he isn’t yelling at me or beating me, my father ignores me and that’s how it’s been for as far back as I can remember.

Now that I’m really thinking about it, I don’t think there has been one second of one day since I was born where Beau acted like a father to me, and I’ve always been very aware of how much he can’t stand the sight of me.

“I never fucking wanted you, Stevie, but I didn’t drown your ass in order to keep your bitch mother happy. Be grateful I didn’t, and pray to god I don’t change my mind now that she’s fucking gone.”

He’s said those words to me more times than I can count and that should be more than enough reason for me to ask Ember to sic the Kings on him.

But for some fucked up reason, I can’t. “No, I guess I don’t,” I whisper, shaking my head as my eyes well with tears. “I think I did at one point, when I was too little to know better, when it’s ingrained in you to love and respect your parents just because they’re your parents. But anything I’ve ever felt toward Beau was rooted in fear and I’m ashamed to admit that, to be honest. I’m almost embarrassed, really, staying devoted to a man I’m not sure I could ever love the way a child loves their parents when I know how much he hates me. I’ve covered for him my entire life, done everything he said and never questioned any of it.”

Then I lift my gaze as a tear slips down my cheek. “I didn’t have anyone else, I didn’t know any better, and by the time I did I was just so used to the way things were that I figured that’s how they’d stay. And what’s really sad is, I know I have to go back.”

“Hell no. Stevie, honey, you can’t—”

“I have to. I don’t have anywhere else to go, and if I were to stay here or with anyone that has ties to the Wulven Kings, I’d only be putting them in danger. Beau won’t stop looking for me until I’m back under his roof, and he won’t care what happens to anyone that gets in his way. I have to go back.”

Ember shakes her head so hard it might fall off as she comes back over to the bed. “No. Stevie, you can’t go back there, babe. You can’t. We can figure something else out. Snipe can have him taken care of or... He almost killed you.”

I shrug. “And he might try harder next time, but I’d rather that than put anyone else at risk. You said some of the guys have wives, babies, families. Beau won’t care about any of that. He won’t give a shit about anything except getting me back, and if avoiding a shitshow means going back to that house of horrors in hopes of living to see another day, so be it.” Then I chuckle a little, a morbid chuckle that makes me think of my ghost. “My mother is dead, my father hates me. The woman I thought of as a grandmother passed away a few days ago. I’m dropping out of school, probably quitting my job, and I don’t have any friends because it’s not allowed. There’s not much for me to stick around for anyway.”

Ember sinks to the edge of the bed, her green eyes swimming with tears. “I’m your friend, Stevie. And Linnie. She cares a lot about you.”

“I know, and I appreciate it, but I haven’t been a very good friend in return. She’ll get over it.”

“What about Victor?”

“He won’t miss me, not really. Is he capable of it? Absolutely. Tor isn’t as fucked up as he thinks he is.” Ember rolls her now crying eyes and I chuckle. “Well, I mean, ok

yeah. He's messed up, but he's not incapable of feeling things. I don't think he understands everything he feels, and I know Victor doesn't know what to do about it, but he's not a sociopath or something. Which is why, even if he does miss me when I'm gone, it won't stick."

She looks at me skeptically. "You do realize you're completely contradicting yourself by saying that, don't you?"

"Maybe." Another shrug as I pick at the blanket. "But Victor will be fine without me." Then I give her a sad smile. "Roles reversed, though? I wouldn't last very long if something happened to Tor. Which is why I have to go home. I can't risk any of you, and I won't risk the man I love."

And just like that, all the air is sucked from my lungs over one little epiphany.

I blink at Ember multiple times as her eyes go wide, my own shock mirrored on her pretty, pierced face.

"You're in love with Victor?" she whispers.

And I nod. "I guess so."

"You *guess so*? Oh girlie, if you just blurted it out without even thinking twice, you are *definitely* in love with that serial killer."

I stare at her in surprise before I burst into a combination of laughter and tears, pain lancing through my chest right along with the rest of me. "I'm in love with a serial killer."

Ember nods slowly. "I mean, he is pretty hot."

And *that* makes me laugh and cry even harder. "Right? He's so handsome, and his body is amazing. Victor has nipple rings too. And his dick is pierced."

"Oh my god!" She snorts and starts to laugh with me. "None of that is surprising."

"Nothing other than I'm in love with him."

"Right!"

We both giggle and laugh through our tears as I spill my guts and tell Ember everything I love about Victor Crow,

realizing with every fact shared that I fell for him a long time ago and he's possibly the most perfect man I've ever met, even if he does kill people for fun.

I understand him, though. I just get Victor and the way he works. He made sense to me when he was nothing more than an article in the news, and my ghost makes even more sense to me now that I've gotten to know him.

It shouldn't surprise me at all that I'm in love with him because falling in love with Victor was as easy and natural as breathing. I never had to think about it, never had to try. It just happened on its own, and I know the only way for me to stop would be the same as any other natural instinct or action.

Just like breathing, the only thing that'll make me stop loving Victor is death.

And I can't help but find the morbid beauty in that.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE**

VICTOR

“I HAVE to give it to you, *Beauregard*.” I wave the needle-nose pliers through the air before pointing them in his face. “I thought you’d be a screamer. A squealer at the very least, but you’ve just grunted and groaned the entire time you’ve been here and that’s better than most men I meet.”

With a smug grin, I spin from the pig bastard currently superglued and chained to a chair, then drop his fingernail into the small metal basin on the autopsy table that was *gifted* to me by Snipe. One he gave me to *help* as soon as I rolled up to Marbles’ places with Stevie passed out in the front seat of the station wagon, and Beau hogtied and knocked the fuck out in the trunk.

“Do you know *why* I thought you’d be a screamer? How I could ever fathom the idea of *Beau the Butcher* crying like a little bitch while his fingernails were being pulled out with pliers?” I turn to face him again just as the piece of shit has the balls to mumble a threat in my direction. “I’m sorry, what was that? I didn’t quite catch the last bit?”

Beau tugs at the restraints, a little more of his skin tearing off and sticking to the vinyl-covered gynecological exam chair, a throwback from Little John’s reign back in the day. Beau scowls at me through the copious amount of dried blood and matted hair on his head and face, those shit-brown eyes tinged so yellow they look like they’re swimming in cirrhosis. Beau bites down on the ball gag in his mouth, attempting to bare his teeth or threaten me again and it makes me laugh.

“Here, let me help you out. I’m sure you have a lot to say after the last fifty-one hours of sitting like that.” I stick the

pliers in the tool belt wrapped around my waist—over the leather *butcher's* apron because I'm hilarious—then lift my gloved hands to the gag, leaning toward him and tightening it with a shove before I straighten back up. “Just kidding. I don't give a fuck about the unintelligent bullshit you want to spew right now. If you're good, maybe I'll let you have a few final words before I cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat.”

The piece of human waste jerks in the chair again as I laugh, circling him slowly and admiring my work.

We haven't been together very long, and good old Beauregard is popping my torture cherry, but I think I've done a pretty impressive job so far.

When we first got here, I made sure to strip him down to his shit-stained skivvies before painting the chair with superglue and depositing his dumbass in it, skin to glue. I debated on just leaving him like that to see how long it would take before Beau stripped the flesh from his disgusting body in order to get free, but I thought better of it.

I cut strips of duct tape, covered his wrists, ankles, and throat in the glue, then secured him to the chair that way as well before sticking the ball gag in his rotten mouth. And that's when the real fun began.

I'm not a cigar smoker, never have been, but having that soggy bag of dicks at my disposal called for a celebration. Three stogies and a pack of smokes later, Beau was wide awake and covered in burns, ready to listen to anything I had to say.

Or, that *was* the plan.

I started explaining what led us to an empty semi-truck trailer in an undisclosed location, tried to drill the point home that we were here as a direct result of his actions, emphasizing my words by hitting him with my bare fists, but Beau wouldn't hear it.

He grunted and groaned, tried to threaten and cuss at me. Frankly, the bastard wouldn't shut the fuck up, and since I'm a

talker who hasn't truly been given the chance to have a full blown *villain speech*, I wasn't going to waste the opportunity with him griping at me the entire time.

So, I went Van Gogh on his ass, and cut off his left ear and *made* him listen.

It didn't last long, though.

Beau lost consciousness for damn near twenty-four hours. I even had to patch up the side of his head and have Harlow talk me through a transfusion to keep the asshole alive, which meant I had to impatiently wait for him to wake up again, and when he did he was even more annoying than before.

Until I started his mani-pedi.

Eight out of ten fingernails and all ten toenails are gone, and I made sure to drive safety pins underneath each and wiggle them around before ripping them off as slowly as possible with my trusty needle-nose tool.

And through it all, he hasn't screamed once.

Watching the bastard president of the Demon Seeds black out and try not to vomit from pain was something, though.

"Now, as I was saying." I crouch in front of Beau and grin through my face shield. "We are here because *you*"—I clamp down on the nail of his right ring finger—"don't know how to treat women." With far too much enthusiasm, I begin moving it back and forth, lifting a little more each time until the thick, calcium-deficient keratin starts to pop free. "Women in general, but the one I'm most concerned about is your daughter."

My eyes flick to Beau's as I yank the nail off, but along with the pain that's making him wretch, I see a new level of rage spark in those sickly eyes.

And that makes me laugh. "Surprised? Even more pissed? I would be too, I guess, if I found out my daughter was fucking a serial killer right under my nose."

Through a muffled scream, The Butcher jerks his body, attempting to come at me in all his angry glory, but only rips

his entire right arm off the chair, blood spurting behind it from where the thin layer of flesh tore off before the limb just dangles at his side.

“Don’t worry, Beauregard.” I pat his cheek with my free hand as I get to my feet, turning to drop this nail with the others. “I’m taking *very* good care of your *little girl*. Her body sings for me whenever we’re together. We’ve even talked for hours about all the things that make her the fascinating creature she is, and if I’m not mistaken, my sweet little dove genuinely cares for me as well.”

“Oo sa oh a bish!” It’s jumbled and blocked by the ball in his mouth, but the overall message Beau is trying to send is clear.

“My mother was rather awful, I’ll give you that too.” Slowly, and with as much malice as I can convey, I turn to face him once more. “And that’s why I killed the bitch myself. One shot, right between the eyes while she slept.” Motioning to my forehead and pulling an imaginary trigger, I resume position to finish up with his pinky. “It always starts with the parents though, doesn’t it, Beauregard?” *Tug, lift, tug, lift.* “It did for me, and I’m not just talking about offing the diseased cunt that brought me into the world.” *Twist, rip.* “I killed my old man, too. Beat him to death with my Louisville Slugger when I was a mere lad of twelve, but let’s focus on my mother for a minute.”

Adding lucky number twenty to the little basin, I retire the pliers and contemplate what to use next. “You see, she was a woman, and since I killed her you could argue the point that I’m being hypocritical, but there is a very serious difference between your sweet, kind, selfless offspring and the horrible hag born of satan’s asshole that claimed to raise me.”

Beau tracks my every move, his head bobbing as he fights blacking out again, his eyes practically crossing from the pain. He watches me while I drag my hand over my tool belt, debating on how I want to finish making my point, and when I suddenly turn and grab the cattle prod from the table, those shit-brown eyeballs nearly bug out of his empty head.

“Stevie is incredible.” I fire it up. “She’s pure.” I zap my rubber and lead-lined glove. “Stevie is everything good and right in this fucked up world and you were trying to take her away from me!”

The sizzle of flesh and muscle when I drive the prod into his chest isn’t nearly as satisfying as the way his entire body seizes, or the way he finally succumbs and starts to vomit.

And because I’m not ready for him to die just yet, especially from choking on his own puke, I roughly remove the gag from Beau’s mouth and jump out of the way as he lets it rip.

“Gross.”

“Ba-bastard,” he grunts through another heave. “Crazy... son of a... bitch.”

I wag my finger back and forth through the air as I tsk. “That isn’t very nice, *Beaugard*. Repeatedly calling my mother a bitch is one thing, but saying I’m crazy is just plain ignorant. My *counselors* never even said I was crazy. A psychopath?” The smelly sack of shit looks up at me, his eyes watering and snot running from his nose. “A sociopath? Sure, both have been used during therapy sessions at various points in my life but I tend to disagree. I may get a little thrill from killing people, might find it exhilarating or even a touch seductive, but I’m neither of those things simply based on the fact that I *can* and *do* feel things whether I understand them or not.”

Beau shakes his head. “You’re fucking crazy.”

“And you’re not listening!” I hit him with the cattle prod again, this time in the thigh, and I grin when it involuntarily spasms so hard it tears from the chair. “I’m a lot of things, morally grey at best being most obvious, but I am *not* crazy.”

“Who... who are you? W-why am I here?”

“My god, you’re even stupider than I thought.” Which was pretty fucking stupid since I’ve listened to hundreds of hours of this moron’s conversations.

Putting my flair for the dramatic to use, I center myself in front of the bastard and give him my best smile as I bow. “I’m The Harvester of Bones, Beau. *Keep up.*”

He frowns as he looks over my face behind the shield, my body—my *naked* body—and the chest to shin length apron I’m wearing, the gloves on my hands, and tool belt around my waist. Beau’s stare moves back up to my grin for a beat, the dumbass finally putting the pieces together something I can actually *see* happening, then his eyes dart around the inside of the trailer.

Tarps all over the walls and floor.

Shitty lighting rigged from the ceiling.

The autopsy table behind me, covered in some of my most favorite tools, the bigger ones that are too awkward to hang in my belt, like the ice pick and bone saw.

All in all, considering I whipped this up on the fly with The Butcher hogtied in my trunk, I’d say my setup would make Dexter Morgan proud. And it’d probably make several non-fiction serial killers jealous as fuck.

“The... The Harvester?” Beau stares at me, unblinking and breathing heavily. “You don’t... don’t look like no killer.”

With an exasperated sigh, I roll my eyes and let my arms dangle at my sides. “And you don’t look like the kind of asshat that would have been able to perform long enough to keep someone interested or knock up a woman, and frankly I’m shocked you aren’t firing blanks with all the damage you’ve done to your disgusting, lumpy body, but here we are.”

“You ain’t him. No way.”

“And how do you know that?” I ask as I lean against the table. “What makes you an *expert* on how murderers, serial or otherwise, should look?” He opens his mouth but before any kind of sound leaves those dry, split lips, I slam my hand down on the stainless steel and grin when Beau jumps. “Wrong!”

Smug and absolutely full of myself, I walk toward him again, swinging the cattle prod back and forth as I do. “You aren’t the expert here, Beau. Just because you’re a lying,

abusive, dare I say *sadistic* bastard with more mental health problems than I can probably fathom, doesn't mean you know what a killer looks like." I zap his kneecap out of nowhere, lighter this time so I keep his attention. "You see one staring back at you in the mirror everyday and don't think anything of it. You surround yourself with them, men who've killed without hesitation and because they derive some sick level of power from it like that asswipe, Joker."

His brow furrows in confusion. "What you know about me or my club?"

"Plenty. Definitely enough to have happily taken care of your *actually* psychotic *funny man* when I walked in on him attempting to rape your daughter."

"Bullshit!" Beau spits the word like it tastes like shit. "Joker's been MIA for weeks, he knew better than to fuck with me and—"

"Jesus," I say with a laugh as I prod his other knee. "You have to be either the dumbest or the most ignorant man I've ever met. I'll go with both since you knew for a fact that scarred fuck had it bad for your little girl and somehow still put him in charge of her more often than not." My brow lifts. "What was up with that anyway? A scare tactic maybe? Something to keep Stevie in line by putting your most terrifying man on as her guard? Or were you just hoping he'd slip up and get rid of the thorn in your side for you?"

Realization hits as my words sink in and The Butcher blinks up at me. "You killed him. That's why he's been missing."

"Very good." Grinning my ass off, I grip the arms of the chair and lean down until Beau's breath is fogging up my face shield. "I killed him, got my first taste of your daughter with his dead body laying a couple feet away, then cut him up right there in her bathroom. And I did it without thinking twice because Joker was trying to take Stevie away from me, too." With an animalistic growl, I ram the prod into his groin. "But she's *mine* and no one is *ever* going to take her away from me!"

Beau starts to vomit again, mostly bile since I haven't been feeding him since he's been here, but when I step out of the way so he doesn't hurl on my bare feet, the bastard starts to chuckle.

"Maybe... maybe you're The Harvester. And maybe you're gonna kill me, too."

"I am."

He nods his head, his shoulders shaking as his laugh becomes a little hysterical. "But you ain't gonna have Stevie. She don't even belong to me anymore."

The prod is at his temple faster than either of us can take our next breaths. "You have one second to elaborate on that or else I'm sending your unused brain cells a long overdue wake up call."

"Jesus." The bastard has enough smarts to look scared and start flapping his gums. "From the Cobra Cons. I sold her to him so he can put her up for auction. She ain't much to look at, ugly as sin really, with those scars, but buyers won't care. They only want a submissive bitch with a warm hole to stick their dicks in."

Beauregard's back arches and rips free from the chair as I use a little electroshock therapy on his grey matter, his shit-brown eyes rolling up into his head as he bites down on his lip hard enough to draw blood. His fingers stretch then claw at nothing, Beau's body seizing and convulsing all while I watch the muscles in his face tense to the point of locking, but I don't stop.

I don't stop for another few seconds, not until this sick bastard pisses himself and starts to foam at the mouth.

"Motherfucker!" I yell as I spin away from him, launching the cattle prod across the trailer. "You piece of shit!" My hands land on the autopsy table and I flip it, my tools scattering across the floor, the stainless steel echoing off the wall as they collide. "Selling your own fucking daughter into sex trafficking?"

My god, I thought my parents were fucked up. They were, but they never *knowingly* sent us away to be used and abused. My mother didn't care enough to find out anything about where we were going so even she wasn't as bad as this bastard.

And to do that to *Stevie*, my baby dove? The sweetest, most compassionate and incredible woman on the planet? The idea of her being treated like property, of being bought and sold like some mass market product, on top of the reason behind it, makes my goddamn blood boil.

Stevie is mine, my fucking girl, but I don't own her and there is no fucking way I'll ever let anything like that happen. As long as I am fucking breathing, no one will ever hurt my sweet little dove.

And *no one* will ever try to take her away from me again.

With anger and rage coursing through my veins like poison, I snatch the ice pick off the floor and turn back to Beau, ready to end this fucker once and for all, but when I raise my arm over my head to do just that, someone bangs on the goddamn trailer door.

"What!" I bark as I throw it open, scowling in Little John's face as he looks up at me.

"Jesus Christ, Tor." His nose scrunches and he takes a step back. "What the fuck is that smell?"

"Burnt flesh and vomit. What do you want?"

John shakes his head with a sigh. "You haven't killed him yet?"

"No," I say, annoyance lacing my tone. "I was about to, though, so if you would kindly get to the fucking point of—"

"She's awake."

The ice pick falls from my hand as my posture straightens. "Stevie's awake?"

"Couple hours ago. Ember was there, got the full story from her, then Harlow did an exam." He nods, watching me

closely as I start disrobing. “On the mend, things are healing up good, but she’s real sore.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” I quickly step out and pull the door shut, locking up the trailer before almost running down the steps. “You were supposed to tell me right away, I specifically remember saying *immediately*.”

John keeps my pace, weaving in and out of giant vehicles as he follows me to my RV. “Pope just called, said Harlow didn’t want you showing up until she gave the all clear. Thought you might *overwhelm* Stevie after everything that’s happened.”

“Bah.” I wave my hand through the air dismissively and tsk as I unlock my home, rushing inside and right to the bathroom. “I’m not overwhelming. Not to Stevie.”

“Tor, you still overwhelm *me* and I’ve been putting up with your looney ass for over a decade.”

“Because you’re old, *Johnathon*. My little dove is young and feisty.” I turn on the shower and don’t bother waiting for it to warm up before I get in and pull the clear curtain shut. “And Stevie loves my ass.”

John leans in the doorway, the shadow he casts nearly as scary as the man himself. “And you love her.”

“Baby dove does have a perky little rear end. She’s willowy and sexy everywhere, but her butt cheeks are pretty fabulous, so, I guess you’re right. I do love her ass.”

“Not her *ass*, idiot. *Her*. You’re in love with Stevie,” my mentor mumbles.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I scrub shampoo in my hair and wash my face. “Speak up, old man! It sounded like you said I’m in love with Stevie, and since we both know that’s not possible, it must mean I can’t hear your muttering through the curtain!”

“Listen up, Tor,” John says with a growl as he whips open the curtain. “I mean it. You listen to me for a minute.”

I nod slowly and squint one eye as soap runs down my face. *What the fuck has gotten into him?*

The bear of a man takes a deep breath and looks me in the eye. “You’re the only person on the planet that knows what really happened with Jacqueline.”

Another nod because, yes, I *am* the only person who knows what happened with Little John Andrews and the only woman he’s ever loved, just like he’s the only one that knows what happened to Toby.

When he started teaching me, John drilled home the point that what separates him—us—from your run of the mill murderer is the motive behind it. *You need a reason, Tor. A reason to do what you do so you never fuck it up.* He said that to me every day for years and still occasionally says it to me now, but those first few weeks it drove me nuts because I thought my *reason* was how much I liked killing people, and one day I lost my shit and asked John what his *noble motive* was.

And that’s when he told me about Jackie.

Despite popular belief, he wasn’t born a hitman, and tried like hell to get away from the MC lifestyle his siblings were drawn to, so John saved his pennies and enrolled in college. He was into the second year of his business degree when he met Jackie while she was home for Christmas break with the family. She was friends with his sister, Shannon, who was a couple years younger, and according to John, he knew the second he laid eyes on Jackie that she was meant to be his. Problem was, Jacqueline was heavy into the motorcycle club life because her father was the president of the Pythons at the time, and he’d already *promised her* to the VP of a different club in order to unify them.

So, they started seeing each other in secret.

Letters sent while he was away, and sneaking off to spend time together when John was home. It was the kind of shit you see in movies and my mentor thought it would end that way too, but it didn’t.

John wanted to marry her, but Jackie knew her father would never approve so the two eloped, deciding to tell him *after* the fact in hopes it would go over better. They waited a few months, carried on in secret despite being man and wife, and when Jackie found out she was pregnant—almost six months along with a son—it was time to put it all out there.

Jackie didn't wait for John, though.

She told her father before he got to their house, and in a fit of rage the bastard threw her down the stairs, breaking her neck and killing both her and the baby instantly. And John walked in to find her.

The president of the Pythons became John's first kill, then his brother Luis—or Link, as he was widely known—stepped in to run things, and Jaqueline and their baby boy became the reason Little John Andrews, hitman extraordinaire, was born.

“Jackie, our son, they were my reason behind every life I took, every piece of scum I wiped out. If I could rid the world of one more sick bastard that rained down hell and hurt innocent people then I sure as fuck was going to do it, and I did it to honor their memory.”

With what is probably a blank look on my face, I slowly begin rinsing my hair. “Like Toby.”

John gives me a curt nod. “Like Toby. He's been your reason for twelve years, longer even though you didn't realize it, and that's what separates us.”

“A noble cause, yeah, I know, but—”

“No buts, Tor. Just listen because you need to hear this shit and finally accept it.” He watches me condition my hair and maintains eye contact as I start on my body. “You loved your brother, and you still love him. You can't argue that's what you feel when you think about him because if you didn't then you wouldn't get so heated over the bastards that hurt children. You wouldn't have helped Spider get James back.”

My brow furrows. “Ok, sure, I can roll with that, but—”

All he does is hold up his hand and John has me swallowing my tongue like a little bitch. “Whether you realize

it or not, you go after assholes that remind you of your father, of the Monsignor. Monsters that prey on the weak and defenseless. You go after people that cause harm to others, not just because Toby was hurt, but because you were too, and somewhere in that twisted skull of yours it's why you don't want anyone else to hurt like either of you did. And now..." He sighs and scrubs a hand over his beard. "Now it's because of Stevie."

"I don't follow..." Not completely, anyway. Stevie definitely falls under the blanket of what John just referenced, but if that's the case, then he means that Anthony Sack-linski's ex wife as well as countless other people are now my reason for killing too. And even my dumbass doesn't think that's right.

"Jesus, Victor, you're smarter than this."

"Pretend I'm not..."

John rolls his eyes. "You're currently torturing a man you were hired to kill."

"Yes."

"One you've had countless opportunities to kill prior to having him locked in a semi-truck trailer."

"Correct, but I couldn't kill him until we had all the info on his plans to frame the Kings."

"Yeah, yeah." He backs up as I finish showering, grabs me a towel and hands it over. "Information you got most of and..." John shakes his head at my frown. "You know what, you figure it out for yourself, but I'll leave you with this: you've never tortured anyone before, and you've never had a girl you've obsessed over or *cared* about enough to see more than once, let alone rescue multiple times. Chew on that for a while. You know where to find me when you want to tell me I'm right."

Then the big bear lumbers off, slamming the screen door on my RV as he does.

"*Chew on that for a while,*" I snark to myself as I walk back to my bedroom and start getting dressed. "Thinks he

knows everything just because he taught me..." And that is the exact moment it clicks.

I'm torturing Beau after passing up countless chances to kill him.

I passed on those opportunities for the Kings, yeah, but also because I was worried about what Stevie would do, how she would feel if she knew I was hired to kill her father.

And the bastard *is* locked in a truck trailer because I lost my ever loving mind when I peeked through the open window and saw him beating her. Just like I did when I thought Stevie was trying to kill herself, and when Joker was hurting her.

Frowning, I pull a t-shirt over my head then pause with it halfway on, my mind racing as every second shared with Stevie since seeing her in that parking lot plays through my brain like film on a reel.

Stevie has become my motive, another reason behind what I do, and every foreign emotion or feeling she's brought out of me suddenly has a name, a label slapped on it like neon fucking lights.

But since I have no idea what the entire fuck to do with that label, or how to put it into words, I do the only thing that makes sense to me.

And my sweet little dove will have *two* Johns to thank for it.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO**

STEVIE

“ARE you sure you want to go home?” Harlow asks for the hundredth time as she helps me put on one of Theo’s sweaters.

Apparently her clothes were the only reasonable ones that would fit me—Harlow and Ember are too *thick*, Tate is *Amazon warrior* size, Sofie offered but my nurse said no because *girl doesn’t need to wear coroner chic*, and everyone shut down Summer and Jolie because apparently they dress like *hooker barbie* and I’ll *freeze my tits off*. And since all of these kind women have been taking care of me and hanging out in my room since I woke up, I’m just going along with things.

When Theo waddled in nine months pregnant and looking like she was going to pop at any second, though, I will admit I was a little confused. But baby belly aside, Theo is definitely the closest to my build so it makes sense.

I give Harlow a small smile. “I really think it’s for the best.”

“In what galaxy?” Summer snorts. “Your *dad’s house* seems like the last place you should be.”

“Stop.” Theo backhands her friend in the gut as she drops down into a chair with a grunt. “If Stevie wants to go home, we’ll let her.” Then she pushes her glasses up her nose with a grin. “And I’ll make sure Zak puts at least two men on her house while she’s there.”

I tug the enormous sweater down over the tank top and sigh. “That’s not really necessary. There’s always someone on the house when I’m there.”

“Someone who won’t protect you from what goes on inside,” Summer mumbles, earning her another smack from Theo as Tate rounds the bed.

“Stevie, no one is going to judge you for the choices you make. You have to do what you think is right for you and your situation, but...” She watches Harlow fuss over my stitches before those dark eyes find mine. “Don’t do this for us. I get it, I really do, but at some point you have to take a risk regardless of the possible consequences because getting out of a shitty situation is worth more than that.”

We might have just met, literally, but the way these women—and their men, since I’m *here* and know a couple of them are pacing outside the door as we speak—have effortlessly rallied around me, fixed me up and done everything they could to convince me to stay, amazes me.

I have never had so many people care about me before.

Until now, I haven’t really had *anyone* care about me before, and it blows my mind that this group of women just accepted me so easily, and keep expressing their concern for me no matter how much I fight it.

And I am definitely fighting it.

“Look, I can’t even begin to tell you how much all of this means to me.” With a bit of a forced smile, I look at the group I desperately wish I could be a part of because *I want that*. “You’ve all been so kind, so amazing, and I appreciate everything so very much, but I’ll be ok. This isn’t anything new for me, unfortunately, so...” The sound outside the window has me losing focus, and for a split second I worry that Beau found out where I am and is bringing hell to the Kings’ front door.

“Stevie?” Tate touches my arm but I keep staring at the open window. “Honey, what is it?”

The noise grows louder and I frown. “Do you hear—”

“Music,” Ember says as she gets up from the end of the bed and walks over. “I definitely hear music.” The other girls start to agree and just as everyone heads to the window, Ember

slides the pane open and begins to laugh. “Oh girl, you have *got* to get over here.”

Since most people wouldn't be laughing if my father were standing outside trying to shoot up the carriage house clinic, I join them and let my new and temporary friends move me up front where I can see what they're looking at.

And what I see? It makes me smile bigger than I ever have.

There's a station wagon in the yard, an old one covered in rust and dents, and while that's a little strange, it isn't why I'm so happy.

Nope, I'm grinning like the lovesick fool I now know I am because Victor, my ghost, is standing on the hood fiddling with the knobs on a boombox older than I am.

“Piece of shit,” he grunts before smacking the front of it, Peter Gabriel now blasting from the speakers, and with a satisfied smile, he turns to face us then triumphantly raises the stereo above his head.

We talked about *Say Anything* one time, only once while I was explaining happy tears to my ghost, and the fact that he not only remembered that but the fact that this specific scene always makes me cry, has a few tears slipping down my cheeks around my smile.

I really am in love with him.

“Baby dove!” Victor yells, shaking the boombox and swaying it to the song. “Those better be happy tears!”

I giggle and snuffle as I nod.

“Good! This song is fucking gold!”

“Say Anything, right?” Ember nudges me. “Great movie.”

“Great guy, too,” Tate whispers, a little surprise in her tone. “Who would have thought Victor had it in him?”

With my giggles growing by the second, I watch as my ghost starts to belt out the lyrics while he dances on the hood of the car. “I did. I knew he had it in him.”

“Well then, go get your man, girlie.” Ember gives my arm a squeeze and I look at her. “If you can get a crazy dude who has morally grey hobbies to do this”—she gestures out the window—“for you, you need to get down there and lay a smooch on him immediately. Guys like that don’t do this sort of thing for just anyone.”

I can only hope.

I nod and move away from the window, ready to run downstairs to do exactly what Ember said I should when I hear, “Stevie!”

“I’m coming down!” Poking my head out, I laugh at the worried look on Tor’s face. “I’ll be right there!”

It takes me longer than it should to get down the steps and out of the carriage house, but as soon as I do, Victor tosses the boombox on the ground, jumps off the hood, and comes barreling toward me.

“Hi.” I smile up at him as he stops directly in front of me.

Victor cups my cheeks gently, looking over the healing cuts and bruises, and the stitches that disappear into my hair. Those normally grey and indigo eyes are more lavender today and as they search mine I can see the worry swimming in them.

“Little dove.”

“Gizmo.”

“I thought I was going to lose you,” Tor whispers as he carefully presses his forehead to mine. “I thought you were going to leave me.”

I shake my head as my ghost kisses me softly, smiling wider as he does it again and again. “Never.”

“Almost.” Victor sighs, wrapping me in his arms and pulling me flush against him. “Too close.”

“But not close enough.” My eyes slide shut as I burrow into his chest, the scent of leather and tobacco and all things *him* surrounding me once again.

We stand there for a few more seconds, Victor relaxing more with each one that ticks by before I hear, “Did you call me *Gizmo*?”

With a snort, I nod. “Yes.”

He places his hands on my shoulders and puts enough space between us to look down at me. “*Why?*”

“You really don’t know?”

And the man now forever known to me as Gizmo just frowns and shakes his head.

“*Gremlin mode*. Ring any bells?”

Then, the most amazing thing happens.

For the first time since I’ve known him, Victor barks out a laugh before losing it, cracking right up as he pulls me in for another hug.

So in love with this man.

“Let’s get out of here, baby dove. I might not be able to fuck your brains out yet, but I’m sure it isn’t against doctor’s orders to eat your pussy.”

“Oh my god,” I half groan, half laugh. “Now I know why you rushed over here and lured me down with a little Lloyd Dobler charm.”

Victor takes my hand and walks me around to the passenger’s side of his very questionable ride. “I’m charming enough on my own. I was just trying to show you that I pay attention to more than your tits when we talk.”

“Barely.”

“I should be offended by that.” He leans into the open door after I sit, plants a hard kiss on my lips then smirks. “Good thing nothing offends me, and I have a serious appreciation for your delicious little C cups.”

“I’m aware, considering you almost always have one in your hand while we sleep.”

“They’re like a security blanket. A secure-titty blanket.”

Victor cackles his way around the car as I roll my eyes. “Clever.”

“I know.” He slams the door and turns over the engine, firing it up after three tries. “Where to, little dove? Preferably some secluded, remote location where I can reacquaint my tongue with your clit.”

Heat stains my cheeks, the flush creeping down my chest and neck quickly, but it isn’t purely from the visual his words create.

No, that blush is also very much a sign of the way my blood pressure is rising due to the anxiety I feel over telling Victor *where* exactly I need to go.

He’s going to be so mad.

“Are you hungry?” he asks as he pulls out of what I now see to be a compound of sorts and heads toward the highway. “You should eat since you’ve been out for the last few days. Nothing but an IV.” Victor tsks. “My baby dove needs more than that. Food first, then I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

There’s no way I could eat right now.

I know I need to, he’s right about that, and before now I had a bit of an appetite but the more I think about telling my ghost to take me home, the more anxious it’s making me.

He’s never going to agree.

There’s no way Victor is going to willingly take me back to my house after what he walked in on, and I’m sure the thought hasn’t even crossed his mind since we’re out and about in public together. No one in their right mind would want to go back to that house of horrors and just because Tor isn’t always in his right mind doesn’t mean he wouldn’t agree.

Oh, this is going to be so bad.

And because I’m panicking and that makes me get a little crazy with my words, I blurt the first thing that I could use as a distraction when it pops into my head. “Do you want a blowjob?”

Which of course, I regret saying the second it's out because Victor is merging into traffic and swerves, barely missing the guardrail before he straightens back out.

"Pardon?" He chuckles as he wiggles around in his seat, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. "Could you repeat that?"

"I, uh... well, I asked if you..." I chew the inside of my cheek, totally embarrassed and on the verge of a panic attack. "If you wanted a blowjob."

"That's what I thought."

"So..."

"For the record." Victor checks his blind spot as he switches lanes. "The answer to that question will otherwise always be yes. But not today."

Now I can't even look at him. "Ok," I whisper. "I just—"

"While I appreciate the thought, and really like this new brazen side of you, little dove, I'm only shutting you down because today is about *you*. I want to make sure you're ok, that your needs are satisfied, and that you're comfortable and resting by the time I need to leave you." He reaches out and stills my hand as I start picking at my sweater, giving it a squeeze that has me turning to face him despite not wanting to. "Road head, car sex, it's all on the table *after* you're better. Until then I'll have to settle for eating your pussy and jerking off."

I giggle as my brow lifts. "That was oddly sweet."

Victor lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles before settling both on his thigh. "I know. I don't think I can be *sweet* any other way, so oddly it is." Then he smirks. "Care to tell me why you were trying to distract me with fellatio on the highway?"

Damn him for knowing me so well.

He does though, and since we're about to exit into Rolling Meadows, I need to tell him so he doesn't drive past my house.

So, I decide to rip off the bandaid.

“Because... because I was going to ask you to drive me home.”

“Ok.”

I blink. “What?”

“Ok.” Victor shrugs as he laces our fingers. “I figured you’d want to go home. You haven’t showered and you’re wearing borrowed clothes. I know the beds in Harlow’s clinic are decent but they aren’t the same as yours. I just figured you might want to eat first before you get settled in.”

Well, that’s weird.

More than weird, honestly, because I was sure Tor would lose his shit over me asking.

And the fact that he doesn’t feels like a red flag.

“Seriously?”

Another shrug.

“You’re ok with me going home? Back to the place where you found my father beating me up, just like that?” I turn my entire body to face him, and even though Victor’s face is relatively impassive, I don’t miss the slight twitch of his nose ring or the tightening of his fist on the steering wheel. “You’re good with it?”

“I told you, I figured that’s where you’d want to go.”

“Right...” We get off the exit by my house and the closer we get, the more off things feel. “Even after what happened.”

“Yep.” My ghost slows down and turns toward my neighborhood. “I cleaned your room up so it’s fine.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, baby dove.”

I narrow my eyes, searching his profile before my panic turns into full blown suspicion and I call him out. “Ok, what’s going on?”

Victor glances at me briefly. “I’m taking you home.”

“But *why*?”

“You asked me to?” His brow furrows. “I don’t see a problem here.”

“What aren’t you telling me? Why are you so ok with me going home?”

Victor lets go of my hand, placing his on the steering wheel where he grips tightly but he doesn’t respond.

And as we turn down my street, I’m pretty sure I know why.

It’s empty.

No line of motorcycles leading to my driveway.

No trucks illegally parked in the road.

There’s no one around at all, and it’s stranger still when we get even closer and I see that my house is dark.

Dark and vacant looking, not a Demon Seed in sight.

“What did you do, Victor?” I whisper as he pulls into the driveway and puts the car in park. “What did you do?”

“Stevie, I—”

“Is he dead?” Tears sting at my eyes and oddly enough it has nothing to do with the idea of Beau being dead. “Did you kill him?”

Victor angles his body toward mine. “Stevie, baby, let me —”

“Just answer the question, Victor. Is my father dead?”

“No.”

And *that’s* what I was afraid of.

If Beau isn’t here, but he isn’t dead, I have a funny feeling I know exactly where he is.

I stare out at the darkened windows, at the empty front porch as a single tear rolls down my cheek. “He’s on Wulven King’ property, isn’t he?”

“No, Stevie, that’s just it. Just let me explain.” Victor sighs as he reaches for me but I pull away. “Stevie?”

My hand shakes as it lands on the door handle but I manage to open it anyway. “There’s nothing to explain. You were using me just like I thought, and you jumped at the first chance you had to get my father for the Kings. No explanation needed.”

He lunges across the center console as I get out of the car, Victor fighting with his seat belt in order to get to me. “What? No. No, Stevie, it isn’t like that! Stop, please, let me—”

“Since you have a hard time with things like this, I’ll break it down for you.” Swiping at another tear, I duck my head in the open door. “I appreciate what you did for me, I do, but I need some space because I’m having a hard time reconciling the man I got to know in the privacy of my bedroom with the one sitting here now, still lying to me after he’s been caught out.”

“I’m not a liar!” he snaps as he tugs on the belt. “I’ve never lied to you, Stevie. Just listen to me!”

“I don’t want to see you again, not for a while, anyway. I need some time to figure out what to do about how I feel. Thanks for the ride.”

Then I slam the door and run inside, ignoring the way my body aches, ignoring the man yelling for me, *begging* me to hear him out.

And I ignore the way I want nothing more than to believe that man, because despite everything, I really do love him.

I just don’t know if I’m going to be able to get past being used by him.

“STEVIE, ARE...”

“Hmm?” I look up from my book to find a pair of curious blue eyes staring at me. “What was that, bud?”

Prince purses his lips a bit as he shrugs. “I dunno.”

“I didn’t hear you, that’s all, buddy. Ask me again.”

“Never mind.” He goes back to the movie on TV, but after a few seconds Prince mumbles, “It was dumb.”

With a frown, I set my book in my lap and try again. “I’m sure it wasn’t dumb, Prince. I didn’t hear what you said because I was a little distracted.” Or *a lot* distracted, to be honest.

It’s been nearly two days since Victor dropped me off at home, two days since I’ve seen any sign of him, and I’ve spent every minute going over the last couple months and all of our interactions.

And I’ve finally come to a few conclusions about my relationship with the murderer I’ve fallen in love with.

The first being I genuinely miss him more than I have yet to miss him.

We’ve gone days without contact before, almost a week the last time I had the boys, and while I missed him more each time we went without seeing each other, this time feels different because of how I left things.

I meant what I said. I needed space to figure things out, but I can’t get the sound of his voice while he begged for me to listen to him out of my head. Victor was upset, panicked, he even sounded hurt. Those are things I’ve only caught glimpses of before, like in the hallway at The Dollhouse or the bathroom the last time we spent the night together. He’s been vulnerable with me and allowed me to see different sides of who he is but Victor still had his guard up to a degree, as if he was almost waiting for me to start treating him the way I suspect everyone else has.

Which led me to my second conclusion, I guess.

Victor hasn’t lied to me because in his way, he actually cares about keeping me around.

He doesn’t know how to properly convey it, not with words, and I’m sure he doesn’t really understand the feeling

either, but after hearing so much of his story and putting it together with the man I've gotten to know, I don't think Victor is capable of lying in order to keep people in his life.

I'm pretty positive he can't, actually, and I think it's because the vigilante ghost expects everyone to treat him like shit or walk away so he puts zero effort into what he views as something pointless. If people stay, they'll do it on their own and accept the things that make him who he is, or they'll leave and pretend they never knew him to begin with. And if Victor doesn't try then he's less likely to get hurt, even though he doesn't see it that way. Hell, he probably doesn't even realize that's what he's doing.

And despite the revelation that my ghost was putting effort into our relationship, or whatever you want to call it, in his own unorthodox ways, I realized that I'm *still* doubting him.

I shouldn't be, not after he's shown me time and time again that he will never hurt me, never bullshit me in order to placate or protect me, and he's *trying* to let me into his world without having the slightest clue on how to do that. All in all, Victor has never given me a reason to doubt him, serial killing be damned, since he's been totally transparent about that too, and I shouldn't question him now because doing so is rooted in all *my* insecurities and fears.

My fears that Victor will get tired of me, abandon me, that he'll turn on me or become the only kind of guy that would want me—to *use me* for my connection to the Demon Seeds because I wasn't good for anything else, just like my father always said. I'm still letting those kinds of thoughts rule my mind even though Victor has proven he's not doing any of those things and swore he never would.

But here I am, sitting in my living room with the boys, kid's Halloween movies playing on TV while I flip through a book I'm not really reading because I'm too busy questioning everything that's happened over the last couple months. And trying to figure out how to move forward has been distracting as hell, especially since there's still no sign of Beau and I'm getting far too comfortable with his absence.

Prince shrugs again before his eyes drift from the TV to look out the window over the back of the couch where he's sitting. "It was dumb."

"What was dumb?" King asks as he enters the room with a huge bowl of popcorn in one hand and a few sodas in the other. "I know you're not talking about the movie, little dude. *Beetlejuice* is one of your favorites."

"Not the movie, Kingy." The five-year-old sighs, apparently annoyed his big brother would even suggest such a thing. "It's a good one."

King flops down onto the couch next to him and pops the top on a can before handing it to Prince. "Then what was dumb?"

"Your brother asked me a question but I didn't hear him and now he's refusing to ask again because he thinks it was *dumb*." I smirk as Prince rolls his eyes, making King chuckle.

"Gotcha. Musta been a pretty silly question then."

Now I'm rolling *my* eyes because he's trying to get his baby brother to open up by getting under his skin, and while it drives Prince crazy, it always works.

"It was not *silly*, Kingy," the little boy huffs. "It was serious."

"Nah." King shakes his head and takes a sip of root beer to hide his smile. "Not if you decided not to ask it. Serious questions are never dumb."

Prince turns to him with the cutest scowl ever and I have to bite my cheek to hide my own smile. "Nuh uh, King. My question was too serious, I just changed my mind."

"I'll believe it when I hear it."

"Stevie, make King stop acting like a poophead."

"Stop acting like a poophead." I chuckle at the almost eighteen-year-old before looking at his little brother. "And try not to call people *poopheads*, bud, it's not very nice."

Prince folds his arms against his chest with a grunt. “Then maybe he shouldn’t be acting like one.”

“Just ask your question, little dude. If it’s really serious then *maybe* I’ll stop being a shithead.”

“King!” I half-laugh, half-scold. “Language in front of your brother.”

The teen shrugs as his brother giggles. “Ha ha. You got in trouble.”

King rolls his eyes. “Whatever.”

These two.

I seriously adore these boys so much, and it’s been really nice to have them around the last couple days. I’m not used to the house being empty and even though I’m glad there aren’t a bunch of creepy Demon Seeds lurking around, staying here totally alone was going to get to me. Even if it was ridiculous for me to think I’d actually be alone.

When I got home the other night, I ran inside and showered off the previous few days, cried my eyes out the entire time too, then looked around the house for any clues about where my father was being kept. Which was stupid because Victor took him and of course there was nothing left behind, not even any evidence of my beating in my bedroom, but while I was conducting my pointless search, Rochelle and Cal showed up.

To say I was surprised by their reactions would be an understatement, but it’s the closest word I have to describe it because they *both* looked relieved to see me, and Rochelle even gave me a hug. After a few minutes of gaping at them, I knew why.

When Beau didn’t show up for church the night after he knocked me out, then apparently missed an important run he scheduled himself, the entire club went on high alert and started looking for him. They came here first and when I was nowhere to be found either, I guess shit hit the fan. Every member of the Demon Seeds scoured El Paso County looking

for us, and as one day turned into two, they began searching all of Colorado.

They were just about to expand to the surrounding states and start kicking in other clubhouse doors when Cal and Rochelle decided to look at my house one more time, which is when they found me. And since I looked like freshly showered garbage and felt about the same, I was hit with a game of twenty questions that I barely managed to lie my way through because yes, I still lied for both my father and Victor despite everything that happened.

Somehow, whether it was because they were already frantic or due to a higher power, Cal believed me when I told him that I had gotten mugged leaving work after my last shift, then Beau sent me to a *safe house* so he could handle the unknown assailant. He didn't even bat an eye when I said my father dropped me off, told me to wait three days before coming home, and that was the last time I saw him.

Which is crazy because the Seeds don't have safe houses, and there's no way Beau would do any of that in the first place, let alone without telling Cal about it.

But they seemingly bought my story then left the boys with me while they went back out to search for my dad, and that's how things have been since I came home. Just the three of us hanging out and getting into the Halloween spirit just like any other normal people our ages.

I arch a brow as Prince's blue eyes travel to the window again, staring out into the darkened street before he shifts his little body around so he's leaning on the back of the couch. "You want to ask us your question now, buddy?"

The little boy shrugs, *again*.

"I promise we won't make fun of you or anything. If you have a serious question then you should definitely ask it."

"Ok." Prince sighs. "I was just wondering... are ghosts real?"

King barely hides his chuckle as I start choking on nothing, absolutely nothing but my own tongue as I cough

because for a split second, I took that an entirely different way than how the five-year-old meant it.

And my reaction was obviously not what he was hoping for because Prince turns to me with a frown. “You said you wouldn’t laugh.”

“I’m not,” I squeak out between coughs. “I’m not, bud, I swear. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“Are they real, Stevie?”

Yes, I want to say, but I don’t because my real life ghost isn’t the same as what he’s referring to. I don’t want him to feel silly, though, but I don’t want to freak him out either, so I clear my throat and give the best answer I can. “I really don’t know, Prince. I don’t think anyone does for sure, but if we can believe in things like heaven and hell, angels and the devil, or even things like Bigfoot and leprechauns, then I think it’s ok for people to believe in ghosts, too. You believe in that stuff, right?”

“Yeah.” He nods slowly, his gaze drifting back to the empty street outside. “Mama says angels protect us and we’ll all go to heaven one day.”

“Not everyone,” King mumbles and I shoot him a scowl. “What? Not everyone goes to heaven when they kick the bucket.”

“That’s not the point.” With one more *please help me out here* look, I attempt to navigate this conversation. “I’m just saying that anything is possible since we can’t be one hundred percent sure about what’s out there, so if Prince believes in ghosts, that’s totally ok.”

“Do you think...” The sweet little boy gets up on his knees and leans closer to the glass as he squints. “Do you think all ghosts are bad?”

I frown. “No...”

“And they don’t always haunt people to be mean or scary?”

“I don’t think so... Are you worried about a ghost haunting your house, buddy? If you are then—”

“Not my house.” Prince shakes his head as he looks at me over his shoulder. “The spooky one across the street.”

I can physically feel all the color drain from my face as I barely get out my next question. “Why... why would you think that house is haunted?”

“Cause I keep seeing a ghost walk in front of the window.”

King turns to look out the window as I get to my feet and quickly join them, the two of us now wide-eyed and staring at the abandoned house right along with Prince. We all watch in silence for a few seconds and sure enough, a shadow moves in front of the open living room window before it disappears out of view.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

That isn’t a ghost, not the kind Prince is talking about, because even from across the street and in the dark, that shadow carries a familiarity I couldn’t deny if I wanted to.

Victor.

I mean, I can’t say for sure it’s him, especially since he’s been scarce and the only time he stopped by after dropping me off was while I was panicking and lying to Cal and Rochelle, *my* ghost seemingly respecting my need for space. And I didn’t even see him when he came over. He just snuck into my room and left another charm for my bracelet and cellphone on my bed. Which I didn’t know until long after he’d done it, I’m sure.

But I found both once the Moreland’s left, the little vintage heart with a knife through it sitting neatly on top of a shiny new iPhone with a notification already flashing on the screen.

GIZMO: PLEASE CALL ME

MY HEART SWELLED AND BROKE AT THE SAME TIME, BUT I powered off the phone, added the charm to my bracelet, then put both in my dresser drawer and left them there.

So while I'm pretty sure the shadow we saw was most likely *my* ghost keeping tabs on me from a distance, and I could easily verify by running upstairs to use the electronic I'm not allowed to have, I won't. I miss Victor terribly and love him just as much, but I'm not going to leave the boys alone in order to satisfy my needs, or go back on what I said.

The time apart is important right now and the fact that it's killing me from the inside shouldn't change anything about it.

But as we keep staring at the supposed-to-be empty house, the shadow moves in front of the window again and heads toward what I think is the kitchen before it appears briefly in the side yard.

"Stevie?" Prince whispers, his tone starting to fill with fear. "Stevie, ghosts stay where they're haunting, right?"

I nod slowly, my eyes never leaving the figure until it's out of view. "Yeah. Yeah, buddy. They can't—"

The front door of my house opens and slams shut, all three of us jumping out of our skin before whipping around to face the entrance of the living room.

"Hello! I hope you three didn't spoil your dinner with popcorn and candy!"

Blowing out a very relieved breath, I climb off the couch just as Rochelle appears in the doorway, a huge smile on her pretty face and multiple pizza boxes in her hands. "Hey."

"Hey..." She lifts a dark brow in question as I go over to help her, Rochelle's gaze moving from me to the boys then back again. "You guys ok?"

"We're fine." I take the top two boxes and follow her down the hall. "Didn't think you'd be back until later, that's all."

"I guess not, since it looks like I scared the shit of you."

I chuckle a little as I set the pizzas on the island and start lifting lids. "We were just having a serious debate about ghosts

and haunted houses. Your timing was impeccable.”

“Tis the season, after all.” Rochelle smirks as she turns to get plates and cups from the cupboard. “The boys making you watch spooky movies, I take it?”

“Nothing too bad, just that countdown or whatever on TV.”

“Prince loves that stuff. Looks forward to Halloween all year just so he has an excuse to watch *Beetlejuice* twenty-four hours a day.”

I giggle. “I know. I keep waiting for him to ask for his own copy of *The Handbook for the Recently Deceased* for Christmas.”

“Don’t tell him, but we finally got him one.” Rochelle smirks as she starts putting slices of pizza on paper plates. “He’s going to lose his mind when he opens it.”

“Where’s Cal? I didn’t think you two would be back so early.” And honestly, I’m not ready for the boys to go home yet.

She sighs then huffs, “He’s still out looking for Beau. Cal probably won’t be back until morning but he sent me home to get a shower and real food.” I lift a brow as she laughs. “Ok, so pizza isn’t necessarily real food but it beats the crap we’ve been eating on the road. And I just wanted to see the three of you, so I chose quick and easy, and there weren’t many options since it’s almost 9:30 p.m.”

“True.” I chew my cheek a little. “So you’re taking them home after they eat, or...”

“We’re staying.” Rochelle gives me a warm smile, one full of understanding. “Cal insisted the boys and I stay until he finds Beau. And I don’t like the idea of you being here all alone in this house.”

Thank god.

Having Rochelle and the boys here with me is exactly what I need, and it is so much better than sticking a bunch of stupid patches on guard duty. It’ll actually be kind of nice

having them here, a little bubble of temporary comfort while I go back to pretending things aren't incredibly fucked up.

And even though I really want to see him, maybe Rochelle and the boys will be enough to keep Victor away while I decide what to do about things. In love with him or not, accepting that he wasn't using me or still doubting him, it's not exactly like the two of us can continue carrying on whatever this is in complete secrecy within the four walls of my bedroom.

Especially now that I've gotten a brief taste of what things could be like if I was normal, if *we* were normal.

It ended shitty, but being out in public briefly with Victor while a bunch of women I wish I could be friends with cheered us on was really nice.

"Ok," Rochelle says as she looks over the spread on the island. "Hawaiian, supreme, all the meat, or extra cheese? What sounds good, princess?"

I cringe a little at the nickname before attempting to maybe kill two birds with one stone. "I'm not very hungry." Which is true. "We've been snacking since I made grilled cheese around five."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I nod and chew the inside of my cheek. "I was actually... I thought maybe I'd go sit on the porch for a little bit since you're home?"

She frowns. "The boys weren't giving you a hard time, were they? I'll go say something to them, they know not to—"

"No, no," I blurt as Rochelle sets down the plate and starts to round the counter. "No, it's nothing like that. King and Prince are always so good for me and tonight was no different. I just, well, it's really nice out and it won't stay like that for long..."

"*Oh*," she drawls. "Want to sit and enjoy the *peace and quiet* for a change?"

I just nod.

Rochelle knows how busy the house usually is, how rowdy the patches get even when they're on watch, and she knows better than most that my nights are never peaceful unless Beau is gone. Unfortunately, I'm lying again because I plan to go out there for two specific reasons.

If she lets me *sit on the porch* without checking up on me or demanding I go back inside, I'll confirm that while my father is gone I might have a little more freedom than usual. And if that's the case, then I can sneak over to the abandoned house and finally talk to my ghost because knowing he's that close without actually seeing him is going to drive me crazy.

I don't know if we'll have the talk I know we need to have, but I have to see Victor while he's here or else I know I'll regret not doing it more than the way I left things between us.

"Go ahead, Stevie. Sit until your heart's content." Rochelle gives me a soft smile. "Make sure to take a jacket though, and come in before it gets too cold. I'll keep the boys occupied so you can have your alone time."

With my chest filling with warmth, I nod my thanks and quickly leave the kitchen and head down the hall, sneaking past the living room then slipping on my moccasins and jacket before quietly walking outside.

I take a deep breath, drawing in a lungful of the crisp fall air. My eyes close briefly as I listen to the sounds of nothing but a few animals scurrying around in the dark.

No rumble of motorcycles.

No screaming father ready to lecture me.

Nothing but the soothing sounds of a peaceful autumn night.

Until what sounds like the creaking of a screen door comes from across the street, reminding me why I came out here to begin with.

I wait for a few seconds to make sure Rochelle isn't going to follow or check on me, and when I think the coast is clear, I book it across the road and quickly make my way around the side of the house.

The back door is open but the screen is closed, so I know this is the entrance my ghost must be using, and movement behind the kitchen window confirms that as I creep up to it and let myself in.

Only to have all the color drain from my face once again, my limbs instantly numb and feet frozen in place at what I see.

A body.

There's a body on the kitchen floor.

A body covered in blood, and the longer I stare at it the more I realize it's no longer whole. No, this is more like body parts strewn all over the linoleum, hacked off the mutilated torso and tossed about in an incredibly gruesome display.

And there, standing across from me in a black hazmat suit, goggles and mask, holding a bloody knife, is my ghost.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE**

VICTOR

“STEVIE?” I frown, lowering the butcher knife in my hand before tilting my head in confusion. “What the hell are you doing here, little dove?”

“I... I...” She stares at the mess on the floor, her pretty lips forming words that seem to be caught in her throat—her throat that bobs and works hard to push the words out. “I...”

Which is when it clicks in my demented brain that she’s probably trying to talk through bile or tears—most likely both—because seeing one of The Ripper’s victims in the flesh isn’t the same as looking at photos online. “Baby dove, you shouldn’t be here.”

Stevie stands there, rooted to the spot as her crystal blue eyes move over the scene. The severed feet are still wearing a pair of tie dye socks, and the tattered scrub bottoms are hanging from shredded thighs. She swallows hard as her stare moves to what’s left of the woman’s torso, the arms sloppily removed and thrown in two different directions, but when Stevie finally gets to the face, the strangest thing happens.

My little dove suddenly goes from horrified and shocked to... to almost investigative.

Her brow furrows, her nose scrunches, and Stevie begins to carefully walk around the enormous pool of blood until she’s lined up with the battered and unrecognizable face of The Ripper’s latest victim.

“She... she doesn’t fit the victimology.”

“No.” Something I noticed as soon as I arrived. This woman is about the same age, but aside from that and the way she died she doesn’t fit the spiraling killer’s MO at all.

This woman was shorter, curvier, and her skin color—what I can see of it, anyway—is almost a mocha or milk chocolate shade. All of the other victims have looked a lot like my baby dove, and while I hate that with a fiery passion, I don’t understand the break in this asshole’s chaotic routine, but not just because this woman doesn’t fit.

The Ripper struck twice tonight, both earlier than usual, and the fucker took the left femur from *both*. Which I know because I just left the other crime scene.

That one was on point, following the rookie’s type and escalating methods, but the body was found in front of the new coffee shop directly in the doorway as if the woman had been attacked and torn apart right there. For all I know, she had, but Spider is working on getting the CCTV footage from all the cameras in the area in hopes of catching something helpful. Regardless of what he finds, I know for a fact The Ripper is losing his grip. He’s spiraling hard and fast to have two incredibly sloppy kills in one night, and I’d almost put money on a third before morning.

I just wish the bastard hadn’t hit so close to home.

Stevie’s home.

But you can bet your ass he won’t be getting my girl. Not tonight, not ever. I’ve already got Tenderloin and the Brick shithouse en route to hole up in her driveway and backyard all fucking night.

Now, if my baby dove would just go back across the street, I could finish up here and join them until morning.

“She...” Stevie swallows again, her nose scrunching further at the smell, but she crouches down and takes a hard look at the poor soul in front of her. “This girl is completely different from the others.”

I nod, oddly excited and becoming more so as I watch her analyze the scene firsthand, but last I knew we were fighting.

Stevie didn't want to see me anymore, and there is no place for boners in this sort of situation.

This is definitely not the same as banging against the wall with a dead Joker a few feet away.

"She is. Only similarity is the manner of death so far."

Baby dove nods. "I can see that."

"You shouldn't. You shouldn't be here at all let alone seeing this kind of thing. Why don't you go home and if you want to talk or something you can—"

"Oh my god," Stevie gasps. "Oh my god, I know her."

And those six little words turn my blood to ice in my veins.

"Oh my god." She gets to her feet, her eyes bouncing between the bashed in face and what used to be the woman's chest, which is now a relatively hollowed out shell with pieces of fabric inside. "This is Sasha."

"Sasha?" My brow furrows as I move toward where she's looking, but Stevie jumps and darts away from me. "Baby dove?"

She shakes her head, her aquamarine eyes wide and full of tears. "Don't call me that."

I stop dead in my tracks and blink as my heart rate starts to pick up speed. "What?"

"Don't call me that, please. I can't have you calling me that right now."

"I don't understand." I take a few more steps but Stevie bumps into the counter behind her and starts searching it for... "Are you looking for a weapon?"

"You lied to me, Victor."

"Never," I grit out through clenched teeth, dropping the knife to grab my mask before yanking it down then shoving my goggles up. "I have *never*, not once, lied to you, and if you would let me fucking explain myself you'd see that."

But she keeps shaking her head. “I had myself convinced, was sure that you were telling the truth about my dad—”

“I was! I am!”

“I couldn’t wrap my head around the way we were when we were together, everything we’d shared only to have it be a lie—”

“Because it wasn’t. It *isn’t!*”

Stevie keeps backing away, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Maybe not. Or maybe you didn’t understand what was happening between us, what was happening to me, but even if you didn’t lie about Beau, you lied about this.”

She motions to *Sasha* and something inside my brain fucking snaps.

“You’re The Harvester of Bones expert, Stevie. Look at this amateur bullshit and tell me without a shred of doubt that it was my work. Fucking look at it!” I start to pace, *my* grip slipping as *I* start to spiral out of control.

The last few days without my little dove have been torture. Torture worse than anything physical that’s ever been done to me, or that I’ve done to anyone else. Realizing how I feel about Stevie, what it actually all means, then having her reject me the way she did, god it nearly fucking ruined me.

I took it out on Beau, and went at him for another few hours before he blacked out again, but by then I was too damn tired to keep going. Being *emotionally stunted* means having emotions at all is draining as fuck for me, so I handled it by beating that son of a bitch senseless until I couldn’t lift my arms. Then I left him to rot.

I gave my girl her space, though.

Sure, not without leaving her an apology gift despite not knowing *what* exactly I was apologizing for, but then I stayed away, hoping she would come to me instead.

She didn’t.

Stevie shut off the phone and stayed inside her house the last two days and it destroyed me to not see her, to not hear her

voice or be there to protect her. And not fully grasping where things were left between us didn't fucking help either.

And now, standing here in a shithole house with a mangled body between us, Stevie actually accusing me of being The Ripper? If this is what it feels like to have your heart broken, this shit is for the birds.

But a quitter, I am not.

"From the very first body, you've said these kills weren't mine." I continue to pace, careful to avoid as much blood as possible. "Right from the start. You analyzed and picked apart countless bodies attached to my name, comparing them to this"—I motion *everywhere*—"bullshit and explaining *why* it couldn't be The Harvester, why it couldn't be *me*."

"But... I-I could have been wrong." Judging by her tone, she doesn't even believe that half-assed lie herself.

So I shake my head. "Not you. You haven't been wrong about either of us, not one fucking time, and you know how I know that, *baby dove*?" She flinches and it's like a punch to the dick, but I keep going because I have to. "I've been tracking this son of a bitch ever since he made himself at home here in El Paso County, ever since he started trying to pin this shit on me. I've been trying to catch the bastard myself because the cops are all too happy to chalk these bodies up to the Harvester, too."

Stevie watches my every move and doesn't try to leave, but she keeps her eyes glued to me as I move back and forth over the worn linoleum floor. "But everything you've said about The Ripper has been right, down to the escalating and losing control, and you've been right about me, about *everything* when it comes to the how, what, and who." I stop and turn abruptly, narrowing my eyes on her fucking beautiful, tear-stained face, pissed at myself for yelling at her. And for what I'm about to say next. "You were even right about the *why*, little dove."

"Your civilian kills," Stevie whispers. "They were personal."

I chuckle like the fucked up piece of shit I am. “I beat my father to death with a baseball bat when I was twelve-years-old. He was my first kill and I guess that whole *parent-child* relationship makes it personal.”

“Why?” She takes a step closer, her body relaxing a tiny bit. “You went twelve years suppressing your urges; twelve years putting up with the abuse. What changed?”

“Toby.” My god just saying his name is like reliving his death all over again. “Toby changed everything.”

Realization hits her instantly and Stevie gasps, “Your brother.”

“See? Always right.”

“Your parents abused him, too.”

“Not if I could help it!” I snap and fist my hair through my hood. “I did every chore, took every beating, shouldered the blame for every single thing that happened in order to protect him but I fucking failed. I should have known better. I *did* know better, and when I walked in to find my father picking up a nearly lifeless eight-year-old Toby off the floor, I lost it. I didn’t hesitate. I didn’t think. I just grabbed my bat from the hall closet and made sure that son of a bitch would never lay a hand on my brother again.”

Stevie swipes at her tears as she takes another cautious step. “And your mother did nothing.”

“Nothing but have us *both* sent away to a boys home—*Saint Pat’s*. The hell I found in that holy place was worse than anything I’d ever experienced at home.”

“Victor...”

I shake my head. “I tried to keep it from him then too, tried to protect Toby from every sick and sadistic thing the Monsignor did to me. Starvation, sleep deprivation, isolation. The beatings, the floggings to my *left thigh*, and rape. That righteous bastard took every shred of dignity I might have had and he did it *knowing* I wouldn’t fight him if it meant keeping my brother safe.”

“But it didn’t. Not forever.”

“Not even close!” I drop my arms to my sides and close my eyes, breathing deeply as Toby’s vacant, dead stare slams into the forefront of my mind. “The day the Monsignor killed my brother was the day Victor Crow died.” Slowly my eyes open and connect with Stevie’s clear blue ones. “That was the day The Harvester of Bones was born and I have never looked back, not once, but I swear on my scorched soul that this body and the ones that came before it *are not mine*.”

My little dove nods, sniffing and trying to compose herself the best she can. “I believe you. I’m sorry I doubted you, but I believe you. You’ve always done things for a reason, always gone after the monsters hiding in the shadows because—”

“Because I couldn’t save Toby. *He* has been my reason from my very first kill, and now...” My heart starts slamming into my rib cage so hard I might be sick, but she needs to know. Stevie needs to know how I feel about her in the only way I can properly explain it, and she needs to know now. “*You* are my reason, baby dove.”

“Tor,” she whispers as the hint of a smile tugs at her lips.

And I sigh in so much fucking relief my shoulders sag. “Leave it to me to do something like this *here*—”

Stevie looks around at the carnage and shrugs. “No disrespect to Sasha, but it does make sense.”

“I guess. And she’ll have justice because I’m going to catch the asshat who killed her, but I need you to know I have never lied to you, Stevie, and that’s because *you* are my reason.” She opens her mouth but I hold up a hand to stop her. “You should know that I have Beau and I’ve been torturing him ever since I pulled him off of you. He’s not on Kings’ property, and they don’t know I have him.”

Little John is still the only one who knows for sure, but the Kings aren’t stupid and if they haven’t figured it out already, they will soon enough.

“He deserves it,” Stevie says, surprising the fuck out of me. “Beau deserves to be taught a lesson.”

“He does...” With a sigh, I reach up and rub the back of my neck through my suit. “But here’s the thing.”

She frowns. “What thing?”

“I was kind of hired to kill your father.”

Stevie blinks at me then does it again before awkwardly laughing. “What?”

I nod slowly, now worried that everything I just said is going to blow up in my face because of my need to be transparent with my girl. “I’d already been tracking him when we met but I didn’t know you were his daughter until after that. And, honestly, it didn’t matter to me because you were mine the second I laid eyes on you.”

“But you never used me?” she asks skeptically.

“No! Fuck no! You should know that. He didn’t come up in conversation until *The Dollhouse*.”

“I guess you’re right...”

I quickly nod. “I tried to keep things as separate as possible because I just wanted *you*, not your connection to that slimy bastard.”

“Which is why you still haven’t killed him.” Stevie narrows her eyes. “But you’re going to, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” *Just call me Honest Abe*. But I fucking hate liars, and shit is already so fragile between Stevie and I. I don’t want to lose her by bullshitting her.

However, the way her eyes are welling with tears again leads me to believe I fucked up anyway.

“I don’t know what you expect me to do with that information, Victor.”

“Nothing?” I search her face and pray to whatever the hell higher power there might be that she understands what I’m saying. “Beau Williams is literally everything I look for in a

target. Abuse, murder, sex trafficking, drugs. He checks off all my boxes, Stevie, and I was contracted to kill him.”

“He’s my father,” she whispers before her expression goes hard. “My father!”

“Who beats you unconscious!”

“I know but, but—”

“But nothing! That piece of hot garbage who shot you out of his nutsack over twenty-three years ago has not given one single fuck about you since then. He tried to take you away from me, Stevie! And if I hadn’t come back for my gun, he would have succeeded.”

“But he’s still my father!” she yells. “He’s all I have!”

And I shake my head, my fists clenched at my sides. “You have *me* now. You have me, baby dove, and I will never let you go.”

“I know it’s hard for you to understand, it’s hard for me to explain, honestly, but... Beau is the last little connection I have to my mother.” Stevie drops her eyes to her purple moccasins as she gnaws her cheek.

She doesn’t even believe herself.

Again.

So I sigh and try very hard to remember some of the shit my many counselors told me. “It’s ok to hate him, Stevie. It’s ok to hate him, to not love him, to maybe even want something bad to happen to him. Just because he’s your father doesn’t mean you automatically have to be loyal and devoted. You don’t owe him shit. You can—”

“He saved me, ok?” My baby dove snaps as her eyes shoot to mine. “Beau saved me when my mother tried to kill us both. If he hadn’t come home and rushed into the house, I wouldn’t be standing here right now. And I can’t let you kill him because of that!”

Why do those words feel like Stevie is rejecting me all over again?

“And... and I don’t know how we can be together if you do.”

And there it is.

There’s the rejection I felt, plain as day, right up in my face.

I stand there staring at her, my gaze taking in every detail in case this is really the last time I get to see her, trying like hell to push down the confusion and anger because no matter what, Stevie doesn’t deserve that from me. “You should go.”

“What?”

“Go home, Stevie.” I nod toward the back door. “It isn’t safe out there, and you don’t need to be in here when the cops show up.”

“The cops? Victor, what—”

“Go! Please. Go home.” She starts backing away again, quicker than before, but stops at the door and looks at me with the same fucking sadness I’m starting to feel. “You know how to reach me if you change your mind or decide you want to talk, but right now you need to go.”

“Victor...”

“Go! For fuck’s sake, Stevie! We’re standing in an abandoned house with a mutilated body of someone you know, only a couple hours after The Ripper left his first victim of the night in town. Get home where I know you’ll be safe! You might not want me anymore but I still fucking want you. I want you alive and breathing, thriving in this fucked up world, even if I can’t have you in mine. You are my goddamn reason and if I can’t protect you now, then what’s the fucking point of any of this at all!”

And thank fuck, she listens.

Stevie barely stifles a sob as she runs out the back door, the screen slamming in her wake, and the second it does, I flip my shit.

I stomp into the living room and grab the first piece of broken furniture I find, launching the end table at the fireplace

with a feral yell.

How could she choose him over me?

The coffee table is next, flying through the foyer before crashing into the wall.

He beats her. He keeps her locked away from the world. He almost fucking killed her.

My fist goes through the mirror by the front door, tiny shards of glass sticking out of my glove.

How could she love him and not me?

I freeze as that thought echoes in my head, the revelation that not only do I have all the feelings for Stevie but I want her to love me in return, moving like lightning through my grey matter until something finally clicks into place.

Stevie doesn't want me anymore.

She won't ever love me.

And that means Beau Williams is fucking dead.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR**

VICTOR

I PARK my hands on my hips and scowl as I pace the junkyard, *pissed off* not a strong enough phrase for what I'm feeling at the moment.

Which is bullshit, by the way.

Feelings. Emotions.

Physical reactions to internal shit.

It's all total BS and I am so fucking over it I could kill something.

I *was* going to kill something as a matter of fact, but it seems as though I'll have to wait.

"Why the fuck are you naked?"

With a groan, I turn around to see Pope and Little John lumbering toward me, and if I wasn't in such a shit mood I'd have to laugh at how adorable they are with their matching scowls.

"I'm always naked. I was born that way, *Johnathon*."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm well aware of that, but you're prancing around out here with your junk flopping in the wind while you have a panic attack."

"Hardly," I scoff. "I'm *angry*, you merry old fuck. Angry and slightly concerned because I have a problem."

"So you said on the phone," Pope grunts as he reaches for my jeans that are sitting on the hood of the closest semi. "Cover up your dick while you tell us about it."

Instead of doing what he demanded right away, I gyrate my hips and helicopter my *dick* at the holy man for a couple of quick seconds before I start to get dressed. “Happy now, your holiness?”

“Idiot.”

“Snuggle butt,” I quip as I buckle my belt. “Anyway... Flirting later, shop talk now.”

Pope motions for me to continue, and for a split second I don't want to.

It's already bad enough I'm going to have to tell Little John what happened, but he's old, and he likes me for some fucked up reason, and he's used to my bullshit so he'll get over it pretty quickly then jump into *retired hitman mode*.

Pope on the other hand?

We've had our moments, sure, but I'm still not totally convinced he's anything but annoyed by me.

I mean, I *know* I annoy him, I literally just did it three seconds ago, but I was hopeful we were making progress toward becoming friends or some shit. And when Pope finds out what exactly my problem is, not only will he probably shut down any insane thoughts of hitting the gym together, he'll most likely squash my secret stupid dreams of becoming a King too.

Because apparently realizing I'm in love with Stevie Williams was all it took and *bam*, thirty-two years of pent up emotional diarrhea comes leaking out of every orifice.

Which has my nose scrunching.

Gross.

“I lost something,” I grunt as I tug on a t-shirt followed by a hoodie. “Something important.”

“I don't want to play games, Bones.” Pope sighs as he widens his stance and crosses his arms against his chest. “You got my ass out of bed at midnight, on my only night off this week, *after* helping Chop coordinate crime scenes and security. I'm fucking tired.”

“And grouchy.” I smirk as I lean against the grill of the semi and start putting on my socks. “Which is normally a huge turn on for me, but right now I need you to pull the anal plug out of your ass, hike up your big girl panties, and help me find what I lost.”

Pope stares daggers at me while John sighs. “Which is what?”

“Beau Williams.”

“Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.” My mentor moves toward the trailer and grabs the unlocked door, cussing a blue streak when he throws it open to find nothing but strips of Beau’s skin and other bodily waste. “How the hell did he get out?”

“How should I know, *Johnathon*? I was busy looking at dead bodies all night.” And having my heart torn out by my little dove. *Fucking emotional bullshit.*

“You had Beau the Butcher in there?” Pope looks over John’s shoulder, his face twisting in disgust at the smell floating out the door. “For how long?”

“Four or five days, I think. I don’t remember.”

He turns slowly, somehow still looking scary and ominous while fighting a dry heave. “You don’t remember?”

I shake my head.

“And during this uncertain amount of time, you what? Tortured him and forgot to tell us about it?”

With a shrug I step into my boots and crouch to start lacing up. “I didn’t think it was important.”

“Jesus Christ, Tor. You didn’t think it was *important* to tell us you kidnapped the president of the Demon Seeds after some shit went down on Kings’ property? All while we’ve been gathering intel on the fat fuck in hopes of busting him before he *frames us* for a sex slave auction?”

“Not really...” When he puts it that way though, I guess maybe I should have mentioned it. “I was busy.”

“Busy,” Pope grunts to no one in particular. “He was fucking *busy*.”

Little John steps out of the truck trailer, tossing my bone saw on the ground as he walks down the stairs. “Looks like he used that to get out.”

“And you left him fucking *weapons*?” Pope starts pacing before he stops and looks at me with those gunmetal grey eyes. “Please tell me his clothes and piece weren’t in there. *Please* fucking tell me you didn’t leave that shit for him, too.”

I purse my lips and shrug. “Maybe.”

“Goddamnit!” he yells before pacing again. “Such a fucking idiot!”

“Cool it,” Little John says to the enraged blasphemy. “Give him a break. Tor hasn’t ever done shit based on his feelings before.” Then my mentor looks at me with an arch of his brow. “Why didn’t you put his shit in your RV though?”

“I don’t know!” I throw up my hands as I get to my feet. “I’ve never kidnapped anyone before, *Johnathon*, I just kill them. This was all new to me.”

“Well.” He sighs as he starts the trek back to the sedans. “Let’s pick a ride and call the Kings. If Beau got out while you were gone, that was more than enough time for him to rally the troops and start some shit.”

Fuck me.

I really hope for Stevie’s sake John is wrong about that.

“WELL, THE ONE GOOD THING ABOUT YOUR DUMBASS LEAVING his clothes in that trailer was the fact that the bug was still attached to his cut,” the Goliath Birdeater says over speaker phone. “Unfortunately, now I have to wade through a good chunk of dead air where you’re either monologuing so hard I could use it as white noise to put James to sleep, or Beau is snoring and/or puking. Thanks for that.”

I roll my eyes as Little John exits the highway and starts creeping through Rolling Meadows, searching for the swine bastard. “I did it all for you, you fuzzy little arachnid.”

“Was his phone in his jeans?”

“Yes...” I hesitantly respond but only because I’d prefer not to get shit for that too, even though it’s unavoidable. I knew Stevie would make me sloppy, I knew it, I just didn’t think it would be like this. “I turned it off though.”

Spider mumbles something under his breath before we hear, “Gotcha, fucker. He just turned it on. Won’t have a location for a few but we can hear what the bastard has to say.”

The line goes silent for an ungodly amount of time, probably seconds but it feels like forever because I’m terrified for Stevie. I’m so fucking worried about my little dove that it’s making me sick to my stomach.

There’s no way Beau won’t go home, no way he won’t lose his shit on her when he does, and a huge part of that is my fault. Not just because I saved her from him, but because I flapped my fucking gums to Beau the entire time I had him locked up, and he now knows damn near everything about what I was doing to and with his daughter right under his nose.

If he touches one hair on her head, so help me...

“Are you going to share any of that with us or do I need to swing by and give your pickle a tickle before you do?” I bark, my nerves getting the better of me.

I was definitely not made for this shit, not at all.

“He’s talking to Jesus,” Spider whispers as if they’re in the room with him. “Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“Shit.”

“What!” I grip the phone in my hands and give it a shake. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Beau called off their deal. He doesn’t want to wait around anymore. He’s gonna... Christ, he says he’s gonna cancel the auction and take out the Cons, but not until he comes after us and...” Spider’s words trail off and my pulse skyrockets.

“He’s going to *what*, you gigantic eight legged—”

“Beau’s going after Stevie. Right now.”

John slams on the gas and makes a u-turn, my dumbass flying through the front seat right into the back of my trusty station wagon, still trying to hold a goddamn conversation. “Where is everyone? Can you get the rest of the Kings in transit? Who’s closest?”

I hear the clicking of keys for a beat before Spider comes back over the line. “You and John are. Marbles is thirty minutes out, Chop and Brick are thirty-five. Jackal is maybe fifteen minutes away but it’s backroads and I’m not sure he’ll get the message in time.”

“Where’s Pope?” My head bounces off the ceiling as John hits a curb. “He should—”

“He’s picking up Doc just in case.”

Fuck.

Fuck, ok. Things are getting a little intense right now and I really don’t fucking like it.

“We should be there in”—I look at Little John who mouths *ten minutes*—“ten. Can you hear anything else? Anything to indicate where Beau is exactly?”

“Fuck,” Spider grunts. “Fuck, he’s there, man. He’s at the house, he—shots fired! Two rounds! Go! Go now!”

A few minutes later, John is whipping the car in the driveway behind Cal’s Dodge, and I’m out before it even stops moving.

“Tor, hang on.”

I turn mid-sprint, facing my mentor with rage in my eyes. “What!”

“You need someone on your ass.”

The bear of a man stuffs a SIG in the front of his flannel pajama bottoms because yes, I woke his ass up too, and tries to get out but I run around to the driver's side and stop him. "You're retired, old man."

He shakes his head. "Retired from your line of work, not protecting my own. I'm coming in, Tor, so get out of the way."

"John," I say softly, the urgency of the situation still pressing on me but it's now accompanied by this weird need to protect the first and only person for a long time to see me as something other than fucked up. "The Kings are on their way. I know the house, I'll be fine."

Little John keeps shaking his bald head, and when he smooths down his beard to get ready to muscle through me, that's when I see it.

For the first time in over twelve years of knowing him, I can see it as clear as day. John Andrews is *afraid*.

And that does something to me, too.

"Look, when I get Stevie out, I'm going to need you. I don't know..." I glance back at the house and swallow hard before ducking into the open window. "I don't know if she's ok, but I do know that once she's out, once Stevie is away from that fucking shithole, the only place I want her to go is to your house in Birch Creek."

His brow furrows for a second. "Victor, I—what about—"

"I'll be fine." *Probably*. "I'm always fine. But Stevie isn't going to be no matter what happens in those four walls. And last I knew, she had Cal's boys. If they're all in there, they're going to need somewhere safe to go, somewhere they can be protected from anyone or anything that comes looking." I give him my patented grin. "Old and retired aside, you're still the scariest motherfucker I know and that makes you the bear for the job."

"Ok, Tor." John nods, his dark brown eyes going glassy. "But if your ass doesn't show up by morning I'll be kicking it the entire way from here to Birch Creek."

I wink. “You could bounce quarters off my ass, and don’t you forget it.”

With a few grunts and an annoyed shake of his head, Little John backs out of the driveway and takes off toward his house, hopefully to meet Pope and Doc just in case I need them, too.

And like so many times before, I sneak up the driveway along the side of the house, turn the corner, and head into the backyard, only this time I’m doing it with my gun drawn and my heart racing.

The back door is kicked in, the screen barely hanging on. I can see signs of a struggle in the kitchen; pizza boxes all over the floor, broken glass, and a little blood. No bodies though, alive or otherwise, and I have to take that as a good sign.

“Please, please just let him go!”

I hear my baby dove before I see her and the fear in her frantic voice fucking guts me, but I stay quiet and stay sharp as I move along the back of the house to check for any other Demon Seed bastards.

“Beau, just put the gun down.” Cal’s voice now, loud but calm with a strange edge I can’t quite place. “Let’s just talk about this.”

A gun goes off and Stevie screams before I hear, “Time for talking is done, you Judas motherfucker!”

I run around to the other side of the house to where the living room is, peeking in windows as I go and what I see when I’m close enough? Jesus, it’s worse than I imagined.

Cal is standing in the middle of the room, arms spread wide and lowered to show he’s not a threat. Stevie is standing behind him, thank fuck, bawling and hysterical, and at her feet... *fuck*. Rochelle is lying lifeless on the floor in a pool of blood, her head propped in King’s lap, the teenager silently weeping while he stares daggers at Beau. Beau, who’s standing in front of them looking about the same as he did when I left him save for the terrified little boy he’s holding by the hair, the muzzle of his gun pressed hard to Prince’s temple.

Fuck.

Fuck me, this is all my fault.

There is literally no one else to blame but me because I'm the one who ran his mouth and fueled a fire that was already hotter than hell itself. I'm the one who got sloppy and didn't make sure Beau couldn't get out. I'm the fucker who didn't kill The Butcher when I had the chance.

This is all on *me*, and the only thing I can do now is make it right.

"It was you, wasn't it? You was the one who took the hit out on me?"

I search for a way in that won't draw any attention but come up short before a thought occurs to me. As fast as my legs will carry me, I race to the backyard again and throw myself at the trellis as soon as I'm within reach.

Beau's position means he won't see me coming down the stairs. So as long as Stevie's window is open, I should be able to get in and down there without anyone but her or Cal seeing me.

And thank fuck my girl likes her room freezing cold when she sleeps.

I slip my fingers under the pane and push the window open, the trellis creaking and bowing while I do, and when the piece of shit breaks, I lunge through the opening just as another shot rings out.

"Ask him!" Beau screams. "Ask this motherfucker *why* he'd want me dead!"

Quietly I move down the hall and stop at the top of the stairs.

"W-why, Cal? W-why would y-you want someone to k-kill my father?" My baby dove sobs as Cal speaks up.

"Don't do this. Not like this. Just put the gun down, Beau, and let Prince go."

Another shot. More screaming.

“Nobody is going nowhere, and if you don’t fucking answer her question...” The click of Beau’s gun has me moving quickly down the stairs, and when I get to the end I stop against the wall and listen.

“Because!” Cal blurts, panic filling his tone. “Because...”

“Tell her!” Beau screams.

“Because he’s not your father, Stevie.”

What the actual fuck did he just say?

Beau laughs menacingly. “What, that surprises you? Cat got your tongue, *princess?*”

I cross the bottom of the steps to the opposite wall, pressing my back to it before barely peeking around the edge.

“I...” I still can’t see her, but I can tell Stevie is close. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course not. You’re too fucking stupid to get it.” Beau laughs again. “But think about it, *princess*, you ever wonder why you don’t look nothing like me?” He shoves Prince to the side a little as he sways on his feet. The fact that this bastard hit the bottle between the trailer and his house is now clear, and when he staggers a bit, the little boy looks up and his eyes immediately connect with mine.

I raise a finger to my lips, giving him the sign to keep quiet, and I swear the five-year-old gives a faint nod and steels his spine.

“So... so who’s... oh my god.”

Oh my god is right, especially when Cal says, “Me. I’m your father, Stevie, and I’m so goddamn sorry I let this happen.”

“How sweet,” Beau spits as he sways again. “Let this happen, my ass. You been fucking Celeste behind my back for months, knowing damn well the bitch was mine.”

Slowly, I keep to the shadows and angle my body, facing Beau and getting a better view without coming into anyone else’s line of sight just yet.

Cal shakes his head. “Celeste and I were engaged. We were supposed to get married. She never fucking loved you, you son of a bitch. She loved me and had my baby in her belly, but you took her from me anyway! You took my Celeste from me, you raped her, and you forced her to marry you. Then you fucking killed her when you found out Stevie wasn’t yours, just like you killed my Rochelle!”

“What... “ My baby dove stumbles backwards a little, looking up at Cal as he catches her. “Cal?”

“I swear to god, Stevie. That’s the truth. Beau found out when you were three.” Cal steadies her but doesn’t let go. “He set the house on fire, staged it to look like Celeste killed herself and tried to kill you, too. You survived, though. I ran into that burning shack and made sure of it.”

“Why didn’t...” She blinks up at him, searching his face that I suddenly see so many similarities in. “You didn’t want me?”

Cal shakes his head. “I wanted you more than anything, wanted you the same way I wanted King and Prince. Beau wouldn’t let me have you, though. He—”

“Gave him two choices. Either I kill his ugly as sin daughter right in front of him, or I keep you as mine and make you both suffer every fucking day for the rest of my life.” Beau chuckles with a sneer. “And it looks like I’m gonna make you all suffer then be the one who lives to tell the tale.”

“I’m sorry, Stevie.” Cal squeezes her arm and presses a kiss to her forehead. “I’m so fucking sorry for everything. I love you.” Then, just as I step out of the shadows and aim my Glock—because I have an overwhelming feeling that shit is about to get even more intense—Cal pulls a gun from the inside of his cut and spins on Beau.

He lets go of Prince immediately, shoving him forward to cover his own ass, and just as the little boy falls into Stevie’s arms, Beau and Cal fire their guns, both hitting the other square in the chest.

“Oh this is good. Real fucking good.” Beau spits as he glances back at me. “One of them Mexican standoffs right?”

“You hurt, baby?” I don’t take my eyes off Beau, but I can feel Stevie’s on me.

“Only a little.” My little dove sounds so fucking brave, even through the trembling and tears.

I cock my gun. “This bag of soggy dicks the one that hurt you?”

“For the last twenty-three years.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Cal asks and I flick my eyes to him briefly.

“The Harvester of Bones. I’m the one you hired to kill this son of a bitch.”

Both men snort as Cal says, “Bang up job.”

“Yeah, I know. I shit the bed on this, but I’m gonna make it right, then I’m gonna make this fucker real pretty for his fifteen minutes of fame.”

“You know what?” Beau looks between me and Cal. “I don’t fucking think so.” Then he opens fucking fire.

The living room window explodes in slow motion as I hear the boys start to yell, as Stevie screams, “No!,” over and over again. My eyes lose focus as the sounds become muffled and echoes like my head is in a fishbowl, and for a split second—one I’ll both cherish and regret for the rest of my life—time almost stands still. I ignore my instincts, fight the urge to fire at will, the urge to snatch Stevie up in my arms and run out of this house as fast as I can before I let these feelings take over. Instead of giving in to the high that beckons me, the euphoria starting to blur the edges of my visions, I seek clarity. I look to the woman I love to ground me, to bring me back and center me so I don’t give in to the monster I really am, the *ghost* hunting for black souls.

“Do it.” Stevie nods as Beau spins on me. “Do it, Tor.”

“*Do it,*” she screams, and before he can even get his gun in position, I pull my trigger in rapid succession, putting an

end to Beauregard Williams' reign of terror by painting his brain all over the living room wall.

I walk over and kick the gun from his hand, nudging him with my boot to make sure he can't fake a gaping hole in his head, and as the room and everything in it comes back into focus, I hear my girl sobbing.

"Please," she whispers. "Please don't..." Cal coughs up a mouthful of blood as Stevie tries to drag him into her lap.

I stick my gun in the back of my jeans and rush over, helping my baby dove while also checking her *real* father's injuries.

His obviously fatal injuries.

"King knows..." He coughs again. "Knows where everything is. You'll get all the... all the answers, princess. I'm sorry."

Awestruck, I watch from the sidelines as the boys join her, as the three of them beg and plead for their father to stay. I watch them hug his bleeding body while they weep, holding him the best they can. I keep watching as the most amazing woman I have ever met gives her real father the forgiveness he quietly begs her for, abundantly and selflessly accepting his apologies while insisting she understands.

And I watch as Cal Moreland tells all of his kids he loves them before he takes his last breath.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE**

VICTOR

I JOG down the stairs with Stevie's new phone and a small box from her dresser drawer in one hand, the stuffed baby doll, Jolene, in the other. They were the only things she wanted when I asked if she needed anything from her room before we left. Not that we're leaving any time soon, but I still wanted to make sure my baby dove had everything before she and her brothers came home with me.

Putting all three items in my hoodie pocket, I weave through the maze of county sheriffs standing around the hall and foyer *protecting the crime scene*, grinning to myself because a *ghost* walks among them.

Appropriate, all considering what just went down?

Not really, but I'm fucked up and can't help it.

I stop on the bottom step of the porch and pull out a cigarette, surveying the half a dozen cop cars, the motorcycles, and the WKMC members that ride them while I light it. Hitting my smoke hard and dragging it deep into my lungs, I watch as Snipe chats with Judge Abernathy and the new DA, Morgan Redding, attempting to get ahead of any possible issues for the club. Not that this scene itself creates any, but I'm sure Snipe is using it to his advantage since we have a ton of audio on the sex trafficking shit and still need to get a handle on that—Beau the Butcher breathing or not.

My gaze wanders to Harlow and Sofie sitting in the back of Doc's van with King and Prince, the two women caring for the orphaned boys the best they can while their sister, my sweet little dove, stands a few feet away talking to Sheriff

Withers—who jumped from SWPD to take on all of El Paso County a few years ago—while Doc gives her an exam.

And as I take one last hit from my cigarette and flick it, I can tell Stevie is on the verge of tears again.

“I was coming down the stairs when I heard... when I heard the back door get kicked in, I guess.” She chews the inside of her cheek as she sniffles, but when she pushes her hair out of her eyes and sees me heading her way, Stevie sighs in relief. “Rochelle screamed. She screamed and ran into the hall, but Beau... he shot her.”

The second I’m in range, I wrap my girl in my arms and place a kiss on the crown of her head as she leans back into me.

“And you are...” Withers’ pencil stops mid-sentence as he arches a brow at me. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Tor Andrews.” I nod, my shiny new papers and ID burning a hole in my pocket. “I’m the one who shot Beau.”

His eyes go wide as he starts scribbling again. “Your relation to Ms. Williams?”

“Moreland,” Stevie blurts. “My name is Stevie Moreland, *not* Williams. And Tor is my boyfriend.”

My fucking heart does a happy dance in my chest and I hug her a little tighter.

Look at us being all official and public, and using our legal names.

Well, illegal in my case, but the government hasn’t busted Spider yet so it’s legit in my eyes.

“We’ll need to speak with you next, Mr. Andrews, but I’d like to finish up with Ms. *Moreland* first so she can get out of here as quickly as possible.” Withers looks up at Stevie and smiles a little. “What happened after Mrs. Moreland was shot?”

My little dove wraps my jacket tighter around her and sighs. “I ran toward the living room in time to see Rochelle dive toward Prince—he was running toward the kitchen—but

Beau shot her again and she... she stopped moving right before Cal threw open the front door.”

Stevie continues to give her account of events like a champ, her chin held high, her gaze never wavering. The only time she broke was when she described what happened to Cal, and how he was her father who sacrificed everything for her and her brothers.

“You want to get out of here, baby dove?” Stevie turns in my arms as Doc and Withers finish with her. “Ready to get gone?”

She nods, burying her face in my chest while taking a deep breath. “You have to give Withers your statement.”

“I will.” Stevie tilts her head back, resting her chin over my heart as she gives me a slightly surprised look through red-rimmed eyes. And it makes me chuckle. “I will. Scout’s honor.”

“You were never a scout.” Her brow lifts. “And I thought you liked to avoid situations like this.”

“True...” I shrug one shoulder. “But this is a different kind of situation. It’s on the up and up. By all accounts I’m Victor Andrews, a Wulven King. I was coming by to see my girl, and I walked in at the nick of time. Nothing to worry about here.”

“About that...”

I shake my head. “We don’t have to—”

“I love you, Victor. I think I have from the beginning and whether I can pinpoint the moment it happened or not, it’s true. I want to be your girl, want you to be my guy—my ghost—my everything, and I need you to know that what I said across the street, I didn’t mean it.”

What did she just say?

With a bewildered expression I can feel, my arms go slack as I stare down into those aquamarine eyes, but when I open my mouth, not one damn thing comes out.

Stevie straightens up and looks over my shoulder briefly before she continues wreaking havoc on my heart, bringing it

back to life with every word she speaks. “I was upset. I was scared and surprised. I kept doubting you even though my gut was telling me otherwise, and when you said you were hired to kill Beau it just—I couldn’t process it.”

I nod slowly, not really understanding what the fuck is happening but trying nonetheless. “And now that you know he wasn’t your real dad—”

“No!” She blurts. “No, Victor, that’s not what this is. As soon as I left I wanted to turn around and tell you it didn’t matter. You were right about everything, about how he was and the fact that I never loved him. I wanted to tell you that, and that I didn’t care if you killed him because I knew if you didn’t, he’d eventually kill *me*. Before I found out about... before Cal.” Stevie’s eyes well with tears but she doesn’t break contact. “I wanted to tell you to kill Beau, to *free me*, and to do it because I wanted us to be together. Because I love you and that’s the only way we could make that happen.”

Like the emotionally stunted moron I am, I blink down at her, my mouth hanging open and tongue flapping in the wind.

Why can’t I fucking say it back?

Why can’t I say anything at all?

“You don’t...” Stevie starts chewing the inside of her cheek again as her eyes bounce around anywhere but my face. “You don’t have to say it back or whatever. I just... I wanted you to know how I feel, and if you’ll still have me, I really want to be your girl.”

“If I’ll still have you?” I blurt, my brain finally kicking into gear as she nods. “Baby dove, you have been mine since I scared the shit out of you in the parking lot of the nursing home.” Stevie snorts a little as I reach out and cup her cheeks. “The only way I won’t have you is if you decide you don’t want me to, and even then I’d be stalking you until you change your mind.”

“Yeah?”

“Goonies never say die, baby.” I lean down and rest my forehead against hers as Stevie’s nose scrunches in confusion.

“They never give up. We’ll watch that with the boys sometime soon, but my point is, I’m not a quitter. Your rejection would have rocked me but it wouldn’t have been the end of us.”

Stevie smiles as I press a gentle kiss to her lips. “I guess I forgot who I was talking to. That OCD comes in pretty handy at times.”

“Don’t forget about the hyperfixation.”

“That too.”

“Why don’t you take the boys and go home?” Giving her one last kiss, I straighten to look around the yard. “I’m going to be a while but you three don’t need to hang around for it.”

My little dove sighs. “Where’s *home*, though, Victor? I have nowhere to go, and they aren’t going to want to go back to their house.”

“My house.” *Where the fuck is Pope?* That unholy son of a gorilla was supposed to be here by now. “Well, Little John’s house until I get back. Then we’ll go to my RV. There’s plenty of room for the four of us.”

“You have an RV?”

“Twenty-seven footer. It’s a few years old but it has all the creature comforts, right down to indoor plumbing and electricity. It’s on John’s property in Birch Creek, been there for a while now.”

“How have you not mentioned this before?”

I glance at her with a grin as I turn in a slow circle to look for the walking blasphemy. “You never asked.”

Stevie sighs. “Figures. I keep forgetting who I’m dealing with.”

“Now you know. There’s room for all of us but it’s a bit of a mess. Well, not a *mess*, exactly.”

“Because you wouldn’t allow that.”

“Right.” I chuckle. “But there’s stuff laying around the boys probably shouldn’t see, so I’ll have someone take you to John’s house first and you can get cleaned up there and rest for

a bit.” With a frown, I face Stevie again. *Where the hell is he?* “I’ll swing by…” Thinking better of using *Cal’s place*, I give my girl a soft smile. “I’ll stop and get some stuff for King and Prince, just text me what they want, then I’ll pick up a few things for you before heading home to make it presentable.”

“You’re always saying how I constantly amaze you, Tor, but you have no idea how amazing *you* are.” Stevie beams at me for a second before her smile turns into a frown. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for Pope.”

“Why?”

“So he can take the three of you home.”

Stevie glances around the yard too. “He’s not here.”

“He should be,” I huff. “I texted him to get his wholesome ass here about twenty minutes ago.”

“It’s fine.” My baby dove reaches into my hoodie pocket and pulls out her new phone. “I’ll just call Linnie.” I frown and she rolls her eyes. “I don’t know any of the Kings, not really, and after everything that just happened, I could use a friendly face.”

My frown deepens as I point to my mug. “I’m a friendly face. I’m a fucking gorgeous face, and I’m a friend. Dare I say, your *best friend* at this point, since you know, I’ve killed for you more than once, would do it again in a heartbeat, and I deliver orgasms at will. I think that makes me *best friend* material.”

Stevie giggles and nods. “And you manage to cheer me up and forget everything going on around me, even when we’ve been through hell and are standing in front of a crime scene. You are definitely my best friend, Gizmo, but I don’t really want to ride around with a stranger right now. Especially one that grunts his words and looks like he can see into people’s souls before sucking them out of their bodies just so he can add them to his collection.”

“Pope does look rather demonic behind that clean-cut exterior, doesn’t he?” I chuckle as she nods, then let out a long

suffering sigh. “Ok, baby dove. If you want your friend Linnie to pick you up, I’ll allow it, but put Little John’s address in your GPS right now. I’ll text you his cell number, too.”

My girl gives me a beautiful, albeit exhausted, smile as she listens to my instructions: no stops, straight to John’s, Linnie is welcome to stay so she’s more comfortable sitting with the grizzly old fart, and so I can vet her when I get back. I’ve done a ton of research on the people my sweet little dove associates with and Linnie is no exception, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to grill her anyway.

I watch from a distance—having already said my good byes and been dragged away by Withers—as a little Corola speeds up to the house and comes to a screeching halt after hopping the curb about fifteen minutes later. Linnie bails out of the idling car, leaving the door open as she rushes to Stevie and hugs her tightly, both women crying a little before the blonde turns and is introduced to my girl’s brothers. Which surprises Linnie based on the wide hazel eyes and the way they move between all three of them.

But it doesn’t slow her down.

No, my girl’s friend says something about getting McDonald’s breakfast on the way to John’s, then piles them into her car still chattering away. And I watch as Linnie back off the curb with a thud before Stevie looks at me through the windshield, giving me a shrug and a small smile before pointing to her phone and blowing me a kiss.

BABY DOVE: We won’t stop for breakfast. I’m not hungry.

BABY DOVE: But maybe stop on your way home. Prince is going to get hungry pretty soon, even if he is still upset.

BABY DOVE: Straight to John’s though. Promise. Just hurry back. I love you.

MY FINGERS ITCH TO WRITE THE WORDS, TO SEND BACK THE sentiment and phrase that barely captures the amount of emotions this woman has pulled from the darkest parts of me, the three little words that could convey what Stevie truly means to me.

But for some fucking reason, I can't.

I don't know if it's still the fear of rejection, the concern over whether or not she means what she's saying, if Stevie fully understands what it means *to me*. Or if it's something far simpler than that. That I really am so fucked up that I've convinced myself I love Stevie when in fact I've fooled myself into believing I'm capable of loving her the way I've seen in movies. I've gotten so good at faking emotions and projecting what I think people want to see that even something like love can be pretended like everything else.

Or maybe... maybe I know, deep down, that loving me can be dangerous because when I love back it's like a disease. My love is insidious; it festers and spreads until one day it's all consuming. And when that happens, that's when people get hurt, so I'm really protecting her by not saying it back.

The only other person I've ever allowed myself to love died, and I won't let that happen to Stevie.

So with a sigh, I ignore my gut and respond.

ME: □□... □□□□□□

God, I'm such an idiot.

“HOW DID THEY *NOT* HAVE ANY WOMEN'S UNDERWEAR?” I grumble as I dump several bags into the back of Marbles' truck.

Not that I want my little dove wearing panties—ever—but it doesn't seem right having her go commando while her younger brothers will be sleeping only a few feet away. It's already going to be hard enough keeping the urge to fuck her under control since we'll be sharing a roof and a bed

indefinitely, and knowing Stevie won't be wearing any panties until we can go shopping tomorrow is going to drive me up the wall.

I'll deal with it, though.

Just like I'll deal with not fucking her until her grief and shock isn't so raw.

Stevie will need time to really process everything, I know that, and she'll have to help King and Prince process shit, too. They have a long road ahead of them, and I'll do whatever I can to help. I'm just shitty when it comes to helping with this kind of stuff.

Now, if my girl decides she needs me balls deep inside her pussy in order to help her deal with the new information she received, I can definitely do that, but even my demented ass knows we should probably avoid banging while she grieves, and while there's nothing but thin doors and a hallway separating us from the boys.

And panties or not, I'll deal because she's more important than my libido.

With a huff, I slam the door and climb into the front seat of the VP's truck, grateful the crazy son of a bitch drove separate from Snipe and didn't mind riding bitch on his bestie's bike in order to lend it to me. Which was a sight to see, let me tell you.

But Marbles gave me his truck to use, no questions asked, and once I was done with the sheriff and his men, I took off to the Moreland's house.

And I was surprised by some of the shit I found because yes, I snooped while packing for King and Prince.

Pictures of Stevie as a baby and a little girl.

Ones with her mother, ones with Rochelle, and the boys.

There were dozens of pictures of her all over their house, all alongside family photos of the four of them as if Stevie had always been a part of things.

And tucked away in a safe—one that is now in the bed of the truck—was a picture of Stevie when she was first born, Cal holding her and looking at her like she hung the fucking moon while Celeste rested her head on his shoulder.

I don't know the specifics, not outside of what the two men spit during the shootout, but I can safely say Cal was telling the truth. And once she's ready, there's a letter explaining everything to help her understand that truth.

No, I didn't read it, but I found it with the photo, as well as Stevie's original birth certificate—her actual name is *Princess Stevie Moreland*, which isn't great but makes a hell of a lot of sense—social security card and hospital records, all of it in an envelope with her name on the front.

So, I grabbed the safe, all the framed photos, as well as a few albums, the things the boys wanted, and split to the only store in Rolling Meadows that's open at six in the morning.

The store that also doesn't carry women's underwear, apparently.

I back out of the spot and head toward the highway, wondering if maybe I should call to see how important panties are, when the urge to do just that goes from curious to pressing.

Each mile I drive, the more anxious I get, and by the time I'm almost to Birch Creek, I've dialed Little John and have him on speaker.

"I thought you'd be back by now," he grunts down the line. "Was starting to get worried."

"Panty issues. I'm on my way, though. Stevie doing ok?" I signal to get off at the next exit then swerve when he responds.

"She's not with you?"

"No, *Johnathon*, Stevie and her brothers are not with me, just like my fucking text said. They were getting a ride to your place because I had to talk to the cops."

He curses under his breath. "They aren't here, Tor."

“Fuck!” I punch the steering wheel just as my phone beeps. “Hold on, I got a text.”

BABY DOVE: We stopped at Linnie’s. Please don’t be mad. She’s letting me change since I’m still a mess.

BABY DOVE: Please don’t be mad, Gizmo. I couldn’t stay in those clothes and neither could the boys. Just come pick us up here then we’ll all go to John’s.

BABY DOVE: I love you.

With a sigh, I get off the highway before getting right back on. “They’re fine. I’m going to get them at Stevie’s friend’s place then we’ll be there.”

“Good. Poor girl probably just wanted out of those bloody clothes.”

“Psychic bastard.” I chuckle, but maybe he’s not psychic, just more in tune with how to handle these things. “I’ll call when we pull up so you can let us in the gate.”

“Sounds good. Be safe.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I hang up and toss my phone on the seat after getting Linnie’s address from Stevie’s text.

She lives in what’s considered the nicer part of Rolling Meadows despite the entire thing being a shithole, and I’m glad for that because I know those buildings at least have cameras and a security guard in the lobby.

I pull around to the parking lot in the back, seeing a few people leaving for the early morning work rush and wait until they leave before I get out because I’m still covered in blood, too.

Don’t need to draw more attention to myself than my charming ass already does.

Checking my phone for her apartment number, I push the buzzer only to find that it’s broken, so I let myself in just as a text from Pope finally comes through.

BLASPHEMY: Got another body. Attacked a couple this time. Woman is DOA. Killed before the first one tonight, possibly even yesterday.

Great.

Looks like I won't be getting any sleep in the near future.

I'll get Stevie and the boys settled at John's then I'll go meet up with the unholy ray of sunshine so we can maybe get a lead on The Ripper.

If these bodies have been on site, undisturbed since yesterday, there's bound to be something we can use to get us closer to catching the bastard.

ME: Send me the coordinates. I need to get Stevie and the kids settled, then I'll meet your growly ass for a walk-through.

BLASPHEMY: Brick and I have it roped off. Hardly anything left of the woman but she seems to meet the MO. Location is strange though. And he either took the guy with him or he ran off.

That's odd.

The Ripper doesn't leave anyone alive and has yet to kidnap anyone.

Doesn't mean he didn't, though.

Serial killers change their MO all the time. Hell, I just did with Beaugard, and if The Ripper really is spiraling there's no telling what he'll do.

ME: Widen the search radius. If the guy took off, our boy wouldn't let him get far.

BLASPHEMY: Already on it. Signs of a struggle about a mile away. More blood, two different patterns. Lots of broken branches and shit.

ME: Drag marks?

BLASPHEMY: Yeah. Scraps of clothing left behind. Part of hoodie, a piece of what could have been a dress shirt, pocket from a pair of jeans. And a wallet.

ME: Got an ID?

Scrubbing a hand over my hair, I fight a yawn before heading up the stairs.

The Ripper is getting sloppy. Sloppier than he already was, anyway, and that definitely means he's losing his damn mind, or he's coming up on the end goal of whatever sick game he's playing. My money is on both.

BLASPHEMY: Brick is looking now. Don't think our guy realized it was dropped.

I sigh because *duh*, and go to respond as I lift my free hand to knock on Linnie's front door.

Her door that pops open the second I do.

I reach back and palm my gun as I slowly push inside, my senses on high alert because I know that's not right, and when I walk in to the apartment to see it in disarray, I pull my piece and immediately close out of Pope's thread as another text comes through, ignoring the name he sent—Chris Pendleton—because it means nothing right now, and call the bastard instead.

Clearing the foyer, I tuck my phone into the front pocket of my jeans, microphone up so he can hear me if needed then move to the kitchen and dining room, then the den before continuing down the short hallway to the living room where my blood turns to ice in my veins at what I see.

Linnie is lying on the floor on her side, her hands and feet bound in front of her with duct tape, her mouth gagged, and there's blood running down her forehead.

Fuck.

I rush over and motion for her to stay quiet as I pull the bandana from between her lips.

“Bedroom,” she whispers, her eyes wide, her face tear-stained as she nods down the hall. “He’s in there with Stevie.”

“Just one person?”

Linnie nods as her eyes well with tears. “It’s him. I know it.”

With a curt nod and ungodly amounts of rage brewing under my skin, I free her hands before I keep moving.

I find King and Prince in the extra bedroom, the boys terrified and crying while a very sickly looking cat walks around them, frantically rubbing their arms and legs that are bound the same way Linnie is, trying to speak through the cloth gags but I lift a finger to my lips, silently asking them to stay quiet as well.

Linnie will come in here next I’m sure, and she can get the boys to safety while I finally get this motherfucker that’s been ruining my life for the last few months. Then we’ll all get the fuck out of here and never look back.

“Got a situation,” I whisper toward my crotch. “Four civilians, one assailant. Gonna need backup and medical.” I check the bathroom and closet, just in case this asshole does have help, but the closer I get to the bedroom, the more sense of dread I feel.

If I get there and he’s hurt my girl, if that bastard has touched one hair on her head... I push the thought down and keep going.

This ends tonight.

The bedroom door is mostly closed, but the opening is big enough for me to see inside and when I do, I feel fucking sick.

Stevie, my baby dove, is tied up and gagged in the middle of the floor, fighting and squirming to get free. And that's enough for every bit of my training to fly right out the window, my instincts, my *emotions* taking over because I'm seeing fucking red.

I kick the door open and take aim, pulling my phone out to yell, "The Hills in Rolling Meadows. Building eight, apartment five-A. Move now!" But that was a mistake.

A huge mistake because seeing her like that, like a goddamn victim in one of my case files has me losing my shit in an entirely new way.

The night Joker tried to hurt her flashes in my mind followed immediately by images of walking in on Beau beating her. Even in those moments, Stevie was not a victim. She was a fighter, a survivor, a woman doing whatever it took to stay alive, and seeing her like this? It makes my blood fucking boil because my girl, my baby dove, is no one's *victim*.

"Where is he?" I whisper shout to my girl, even though I've already been yelling. "Where is—"

And that level of anger, of possessiveness and the urge to protect her, is all so overwhelming that it's left me vulnerable. My own feelings were my biggest mistake.

The knife glides through my hoodie and t-shirt like butter, slicing through my flesh until it pierces my liver with ease. The stab is deliberate and concise, one delivered by a practiced hand, and just as I try to turn, it slides out and goes back in two more times, purposely hitting my kidney then my lung.

Nice shots, asshole.

Kill shots, I think as I stumble to the left, gripping the dresser for support, my knees buckling while my head spins.

And just as my vision starts to blur, as the edges get fuzzy, I look down at my little dove, fighting harder than before to get free, tears rolling down her pretty face and I smile. I drop to my knees in front of her, barely feeling the pain while knowing it's there, and it's that instant, that split second in

time where I wish I'd been able to tell her how much I love her—how *in* love with her I am.

My love truly is a disease and it's rendered me helpless both times I dared to give it freely. My insidious heart infected them, and my diseased love ended up taking the two most important people in my life from me.

It did—I did—what I was scared would happen all along.

I lost Toby, and now I'm losing Stevie.

Death came for them like a venom injected directly into their veins; the venom, the poison of being loved by me.

I'm sorry, baby dove. I search her face and pray it's the last thing I see, even if I don't deserve it because I truly am The Harvester of Bones.

The vigilante ghost.

The bringer of death.

A fucked up man ruined before he had the chance to be anything different, but not so screwed up that I don't regret what I've done.

Twice the love; twice the death.

Twice the regret.

And whether I make it out of this alive or not, those will be my only regrets in this life, and they will be the only things that haunt this ghost during whatever comes next.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX**

STEVIE

NO! I try to scream as Victor crashes to his knees, my ghost smiling that gorgeous smile at me for a few beats while the color drains from his face. *No! No, please!*

I wiggle and fight against the restraints even harder, attempting to scoot myself toward him as he drops back on his ass before looking down at his side.

“I’m... sorry, baby... dove.” Victor’s eyes lift to mine, the indigo gone, the lavender and grey so pale his irises almost look white. He coughs out a mouthful of blood, the dark red liquid sputtering from his perfect lips as my ghost slumps back against the dresser with a thud.

No! God, please, no. Don’t take Victor away from me.

“So, *this* is Leon?”

My eyes dart to the doorway as fear races up my spine. The same fear I felt within minutes of arriving.

“Must have been one hell of a study date.” Linnie frowns as she walks into the room, stopping next to Victor before crouching on her haunches to look at him. She tilts her head as she twirls the knife in her hand, turning to me as her frown deepens. “You could do so much better, girlie.”

I twist and scoot, trying to scream through my gag as Linnie holds the knife to Victor’s throat, the tip millimeters from his windpipe.

“You know he’s a serial killer, right?” She nicks his jaw as she gets to her feet, chuckling and shaking her head. “Then again, that’s always been your thing, hasn’t it? Nothing but

true crime and murderers to keep you company?” Linnie walks over to me, her hazel eyes a little wild but focused. She crouches again before getting to her knees in front of me, resting the bloody knife on her thigh with a huff. “Even though I was here the whole time.”

With a sob, I shake my head and try to back away as Linnie reaches out toward my face and when I squeeze my eyes shut, she screams, “I was right fucking here, Stevie, but you never saw me!” The gag is torn from my mouth and I feel her fingers on my lips. “I was right here, right in front of you all along. Look at me!”

I force my eyes open, my tears falling freely as soon as my gaze connects with hers. “W-why are y-you—”

“You don’t fucking get it, do you? I did this.” She motions around the room, pointing to Victor first then the dead body of Chris, the RN from work, a few feet away from me then opens her arms wide. “I did *all* of this for you, Stevie. How else was I supposed to get your attention after years of trying?”

Oh my god. “You mean, you mean... you...”

Linnie nods. “All those girls, all the helpless victims of *The Ripper*. That was cute, by the way. It meant a lot that you gave me my very own nickname.”

Jesus.

Oh my god.

“So... so you’ve been killing them—”

“So we can finally be together! Jesus, Stevie, you’re smarter than this!” Linnie throws her hands up before lunging forward and crawling toward me. “Don’t you see? I did it all for you, girlie. Everything. I killed those women to get your attention, so you’d talk to me outside of work, so maybe you’d want to hang out and chat about the newest serial killer terrorizing Rolling Meadows. I was so fucking tired of hearing about The Harvester of Bones, tired of you shutting me down so you could go home and fantasize about him!”

She points the knife at Victor again and I scramble to get her attention back on me. *Leave my ghost alone.* “I wasn’t,

Linnie. It wasn't like that, I—”

“Bullshit!” she snaps, her blade now in my face. “I saw you, Stevie! I saw him talking to you at the nursing home, and saw the first night he climbed in your window! I fucking saw!”

“You’ve... you’ve been watching me?”

“For months! I have been watching you, *trying* to get your attention, to show you how much I love you, and this is how you repaid me! I saw every time the *vigilante ghost* snuck into your house and took what...” She shakes her head and whispers, “I can’t believe you let him touch you.”

“Linnie, I...” I don’t know what to say, I just know I have to keep her focused on me until I can figure out what to do.

“But that’s how I knew, how I figured out a way for us to finally be together.” She scoots around until she’s sitting cross-legged in front of me, smiling the way I’ve seen so many times without really knowing what it meant. “It was a loose plan at first, one that your *boyfriend* fucked up by killing that fat slob before I could get the girl, but once I heard how excited you were about the murder, once I realized you were sleeping with a killer, I knew my plan would work.”

“So, you kept killing people to keep me interested?”

“Yes! And it worked!”

I nod quickly. “It did, it really did, Linnie. I talked about The Ripper, *you*, all the time. I read articles and watched the news.”

“I know, and we were talking more. It was working perfectly until *he*”—she motions to my ghost with the knife again—“started coming around all the time.”

My gaze moves to Victor, his breaths so shallow, his eyes fighting to stay open. He’s not going to last much longer but I don’t know what to do, not completely. I just know I need to get her to free my hands.

But as I keep staring at the man I love, the man I’m determined to spend my life with, an idea starts to form.

“He got in your way.” Another nod as I bring my eyes to hers. “He got in your way, so you started following him, too.”

Linnie sighs. “I had to. I needed to see what he did that was so much better than what I was doing.” Anger flashes in her eyes as she gets to her feet and spins on Victor. “I needed to know why he could touch you, why he could spend time with you, why you could love him and not me!”

Linnie lunges toward my ghost and I quickly blurt, “I do love you.”

She stops and turns, the knife inches from Victor’s chest. “What?”

I nod emphatically and scoot toward her. “I do. I love you, Linnie, I always have. I didn’t... I just didn’t think you felt the same.” *Please let me be right about this.* “I didn’t think you’d ever feel the same way about me, so I settled for second best.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Yes, Linnie, it’s true. You always cared for me, always tried to spend time with me. You were the first person outside of my house that I let see my scars. I’ve always loved you, I just didn’t think we could ever be together.”

Slowly, Linnie walks over, standing above me with a skeptical look as she tilts her head. “You’ve always loved me?”

“Always.” Tears sting at my nose and I can only hope Victor is too out of it to hear what I’m about to say, but I’m doing this for him. “I don’t... I don’t love him, Linnie, I love you.”

She drops to her knees in front of me again and smiles so brightly, for a second it’s hard to remember that this woman is the same bat shit crazy lady that hit me over the head with a vase when we walked into her apartment, tied me up then dumped me with the day-old corpse of our coworker.

But she is, and I need to get all of us out of here so we don’t end up like Chris.

“You-you love me?” Linnie’s entire body sags as she reaches out and pushes my matted hair from my eyes. “You mean it?”

“I do. I mean it. And I can see it all so clearly now. The murders, the way you left the bodies. You remembered all the times I talked about Jack the Ripper.”

She nods as she traces my lips with her finger tips. “I did. I even looked up Mary Kelly so I’d get it right.”

“You did, and it shows. It means so much to me, Linnie. You paid attention and I can see that now.” I swallow the bile creeping up my throat as I turn into her touch. “And you killed Sasha and Chris for me, too.”

“I did. They hurt you; they killed Margie and that hurt you, too. Everything I’ve done, I did it for you, Stevie.”

“I see that now. I do, and it means the world to me.”

Linnie’s smile grows as she leans toward me, her eyes sliding shut while she cups my cheek and brings her lips close to mine but just before this psycho kisses me, I blurt, “Wait.”

Her eyes snap open and the look she gives me, the way her fist slides along my jaw and her fingers tangle tightly in my hair says I need to tread lightly.

“I... it’s our first kiss, Linnie. I...” *I’m going to be sick.* “Let me touch you, too. I want it to be special.”

“Bullshit.” Her grip tightens and she yanks my head back. “You’re just trying to get me to take the tape off your hands.”

“No! No, Linnie, I swear!” She tugs again and I whimper. “I swear! I’ve wanted to kiss you for so long, to hold you and share something so special with you. Please, just let me do that, then you can tape me back up and we’ll be together.”

Linnie searches my face for a few beats before her fingers loosen and she nods. “Ok, girlie. You’re right. This should be special. We’ve waited so long to be together and I don’t want to deprive us from making our first kiss one to remember.”

I nod and force a smile as Linnie helps me sit up and when she moves to cut the tape around my wrists, I glance at Victor.

Hold on, Gizmo. Hold on, Tor. Please. Don't leave me yet. Just stay with me.

“Ready?” The woman I thought was my friend asks as she climbs onto my lap, straddling my hips as she cups my face again with both hands. “God, I’ve wanted to do this for so long.”

“Me too.” But when she leans in, I wince from the way the knife in her hand pushes against my cheek. “Can you put that down first, though?” Rage passes over her expressions so I quickly lift my hands to her face and force her eyes on mine. “It stings a little and I don’t want anything distracting me from”—I close my eyes tight and brush my lips against hers—“from kissing you.”

Linnie’s entire body relaxes into mine as I press my mouth to hers, the knife dropping from her hand as both slide to my jaw. I squint to make sure her eyes are closed and when I confirm they are, I keep squinting so I can search for the knife.

“Stevie,” Linnie sighs as she kisses my jaw. “Stevie, I—”

Pushing down the urge to vomit and all of the other horrible things happening inside me right now, I slam my mouth against hers, shoving my tongue between her lips as I start to slide my hands down her body.

I’m going to be sick.

And it has nothing to do with the fact that she’s a woman.

If Linnie had been normal about her feelings, had handled them in a less psycho way and I hadn’t met Victor, I might have entertained the idea of something with her. She’s beautiful and funny, and Linnie has always cared so much about me, so in a universe where I wasn’t a prisoner in my own house, and she wasn’t a homicidal maniac, we could have tried to be more than friends.

But the fact that she *is* a homicidal maniac, one who is clearly obsessed with me in a very different way than my ghost, *that’s* why I feel sick.

And playing into that is the only way I’m getting Victor and my brothers out of here alive.

“Stevie,” Linnie moans as I hesitantly cup her breast, her arms wrapping around my neck as she deepens the kiss.

I barely suppress a gag as I do it again, my other hand moving over her side around to her ass—just an inch or so away from the knife. And when I squeeze it, pulling Linnie closer to my body and further away from the blade I desperately need, the psycho has the nerve to bear down on my lap and start humping me.

Fucking gross.

Which is hypocritical, if I’m being honest, since Victor and I have been in a similar situation, but it isn’t the same. Not even a little. There was consent between my ghost and I, for one, clear consent that wasn’t given because of fear. And even then, standing a few feet from one of his murder victims and after only seeing him once before in a dark parking lot, I felt our connection. From the second he started calling me those stupid nicknames, I knew Victor was different; he was special, and when he killed purely to save me without thinking twice about the repercussions, I think that’s when I fell in love with Victor Crow. So, what is happening now is nothing like what my ghost and I did because we’ve loved each other from the start, even if we didn’t understand it.

And I keep going because I still love Victor and plan to walk out of here with him, so I need that knife.

My hand leaves her breast and joins the other on her ass, holding her close as Linnie moans into my mouth and grinds against me.

Her back arches and she breaks the kiss, gasping for breath on a throaty moan. “Yes, yes, Stevie. God, I’ve wanted you for so long.”

“Me too,” I lie as I kiss down her neck, grimacing as I glance over her shoulder to check on Victor while slowly moving my hand toward the weapon. “So long.”

“Tell me again,” Linnie says as she suddenly looks me in the eye, my hand freezing in mid air inches above the knife. “Tell me how bad you want me.”

“So bad, Linnie. I want you so bad.”

She moans before kissing me again, hard and aggressive, her hips working faster in my lap and when I squeeze her ass and pull her even closer, I make my move.

I grab the knife and don't even hesitate to plunge it through her side.

Linnie gasps in pain and shock as her head jerks back, her eyes wide and mouth agape. “S-Stevie?”

“Sorry, Linnie.” I yank the knife out before shoving it back in and twisting it next to her spine. “There's only one serial killer I love and you made the mistake of stabbing him in front of me.”

With a shove, I throw Linnie off my lap and quickly cut through the duct tape around my ankles before climbing on top of her only to drive the kitchen knife through her chest again and again. “No one. Fucks. With my man! Or my brothers! Ever!”

I lose track of how many times I stab her, years of pent up pain and anger mixing with my fear as I choose fight over flight for the first time in my life. Years of never having anyone truly care for me, years of being under Beau's thumb and having to follow his rules. I plunge the knife into Linnie's chest over and over as Cal's words play through my head; how he loved me and my mother, how Beau Williams took both of us away from him and threatened to do the same with the boys and Rochelle. I take out all of my loneliness and frustration on someone I thought was my friend, someone I thought did truly care for me only to find she was just like everyone else in some twisted way. She wanted to keep me as a possession, as a sad and morbid trophy of a victory that came at the loss of so much, and I keep going because she tried to take Victor away from me. Everyone has always tried to take away the things I love and in return I got nothing but so much pain and heartache I was ready to end things on my own.

Not anymore.

No one is going to take anything away from me ever again.

Victor is mine, my brothers are mine, and this new chapter of my life I'm about to start writing is mine, too.

All of those feelings and more come down with each dig of the knife, and I only stop when Linnie quits fighting me, when her body goes still and she does nothing but gasp and gurgle around the blood pouring from her mouth. And when that happens, I switch gears completely.

Quickly, I scramble off of her and rush to Victor, cupping his cheeks before patting them to keep him awake. "Tor, Gizmo, can you hear me?"

"Baby..." he whispers, but his eyes don't open.

"Victor, please. Open your eyes for me, ok?"

One brow struggles to lift as he squints one very pale grey eye. "Amazing."

"Good enough." Using all the strength I can muster, I hook my arms under his and start dragging my ghost out into the hall, the knife still firmly in my grip, and the second I get to the extra bedroom and confirm my brothers are ok, the front door bursts wide open and an entire crew of leather-clad men coming storming in.

"In the bedroom!" I scream. "Please! She's in the bedroom! Make sure she's dead. Make sure..." The sobs that wrack my body as I drop to the floor and cradle Victor in my lap are so intense, so hard and so deep they're nothing like I've ever experienced before. "Help us!" I yell before looking down at my ghost, at the ash-white face of the man I love as his head lolls to the side. "Please. Please, don't leave me. You can't. Don't leave me, Tor. Please."

"Get the... cat."

I frown through my tears and ignore his delirious demand as his breathing turns raspy, even more shallow than before, and everything around me fades while I focus on his chest. "Breathe, Victor. Please, just stay with me. I need you. *We* need you. Please, don't leave me."

Please.

Please, stay.

Stay with me, now and always.



**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN**

VICTOR

I NEVER EXPECTED to go to heaven when I died.

For one, I never believed in it.

As a child, I couldn't wrap my head around the idea of some *supreme being* that created the entire world and everything in it just because it was bored, and as I got older and heard how *God is love* and *He wants the best for His children* from my parents—who were sadistic bastards that beat us and led a closet, hardcore BDSM lifestyle—I had an even harder time with the concept, so heaven was a stretch since it would have been created by something that allowed that to happen.

Then I went to St. Pat's and despite having the catholic ideals drilled into us on a very regular basis, the Monsignor and his bitches blew apart any chance I had of ever believing in the God they preached about.

The second reason I always assumed heaven was off the table for me? I started *playing god*.

Passing judgment, deciding who gets to live or die based on their actions while they walked this mortal plane. Watching the life leave someone's horrified eyes as they take their last breath because I decided they weren't worthy anymore. That kind of goes against everything the *good book* says and I figured my choices solidified my place in Hell, if there was such a thing.

So, when I actually died, thanks to a homicidal RN that put my life's work and overall charming personality to the test, I was surprised to find I was wrong.

Am I saying there is a heaven, hell, or God as the Catholics or any Christian portrays them? No, not necessarily, but I'm questioning a lot right now because when I flatlined in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, I saw Toby.

For the first time since I cremated my little brother all on my own at fifteen-years-old, I saw Tobias Crow as clear as day, looking exactly the way I remember him.

His curly brown hair even more sun-kissed than mine, his dark blue eyes ringed in grey so full of life. Toby's cheeks were pink, his skin tan and healthy, and he smiled at me with that toothy smile that used to light up the entire room the second he was in it.

My little brother fucking *smiled* at me while he told me he loved me, that he was proud of me, and couldn't wait until we could play together again.

And I was ready.

I was so goddamn ready to go wherever Toby wanted me to go: heaven, hell or fucking Nebraska, it didn't matter. I was ready, and he knew it.

Which is why he shook his head and smiled wider before saying, "Not yet, Victor. We'll play together again soon, I promise, but you still have work to do, and your family is waiting."

Do I know for sure that what I saw, *who* I saw, wasn't just a lucid dream, the result of shock and blood loss, or some hallucination that could be scientifically or medically explained away? No. I'm intelligent as fuck but the inner workings of our subconscious and the other unused ninety percent of our brains isn't where my expertise lies. And no, that shit didn't turn me into a believer all of the sudden, and it didn't give me some sort of magical or spiritual epiphany where I change my ways and set myself on the path of righteousness. But it did put things into perspective to a degree, regardless of what caused the telepathic visit from my deceased brother.

Unorthodox at best, seriously fucked up—and illegal—at worst, I still have work to do, assuming Toby was referring to giving into my urges in order to rid the world of its scum, one bag of dicks at a time, and I *do* have family waiting for me.

It might have taken nearly thirty-two years and a lot of bullshit to get here, but for the first time in my life I have a family waiting for me to come back to them and that really got to me.

Especially when the paramedics zapped my ass back from wherever the hell I'd been and the first face I saw when my eyes snapped open was Stevie's.

I wasn't awake long, seconds really, but I saw my sweet little dove's face, heard her beautiful voice, and I felt her small hand slip into mine and squeeze. And each time I nodded in and out of consciousness, each time I woke up and was able to focus my eyes long enough to look around, it was the same.

Stevie has been by my side ever since we left Linnie's apartment and I don't need anyone to confirm that she toughed it out even while I was knocked the hell out because I felt her. Her presence, her essence, her beautiful pure soul. Whatever it is that emanates from my baby dove in warm and soothing waves, I felt it even when I couldn't see her, but I won't bother analyzing that too much either because if the universe doesn't have its mysteries, then where's the fun in it?

Myself being one of its many mysteries.

A slow smile spreads across my face as Stevie wiggles around in her chair, the metal and vinyl recliner creaking with each movement. Her forehead pinches and her nose scrunches as her head slips off her fist, my baby dove probably uncomfortable as fuck sleeping in that sorry excuse for a chair, but I won't wake her.

I'm sure the past few days have been hard enough while she processed everything that happened relatively on her own. I don't doubt that Ember was here, that any of the women associated with the Kings stopped by and brought her clothes, necessities, anything Stevie needed while she endlessly sat watch over my recovering ass, and I'm sure they even stayed

to chat. It wouldn't shock me if some of them camped out with her for a few hours at a time, trying to keep her company and probably attempting to get her to open up about all the fucked up shit that's been going on.

But I know my girl didn't.

She isn't used to that sort of treatment.

Friendships, confidants. A support system that is genuinely concerned with her wellbeing and would do anything for her without my little dove ever having to ask.

It's one of the many things about Stevie I could relate to, an almost *lone wolf* mentality that makes you standoffish and wary. So, I can guarantee my baby dove wanted to open up to those women, wanted to spill her guts and let everything fly, but she didn't because she's still unsure if it's ok to do that.

She will, though.

Stevie will eventually adapt and embrace everything the females of the WKMC will undoubtedly force on her—with the best intentions, of course—and she'll flourish because of it. My girl has been made already and it's only a matter of time before she's running around on her own motorcycle flying Kings colors with the rest of them.

Me, on the other hand?

We'll see.

I'm wired differently than Stevie, differently from most of the population regardless of the feelings and emotions that have started to bleed through my extremely charming exterior.

Basically, I'm an arrogant and annoying fucker who has no idea how to *people* and that makes it hard to have me around for extended periods of time.

Just ask John, he'll tell you all about it.

“You need anything, Tor?”

I jump about thirty feet in the air as my head snaps toward the voice coming from the corner of the room, then I wince

and tilt toward the left as pain lances through the entire right side of my body.

Pope raises a brow as he leans out of the shadows. “I scare you?”

“No,” I hiss, holding my side so my guts don’t fall out before darting a look at Stevie. *Still fast asleep.* “Keep it down.”

“She’s not gonna wake up.” He chuckles as he rests his elbows on his knees. “Your girl is exhausted. She made sure to stay awake all night and well into the day just so she could grill anyone who came in to check on you. Crashed after your last transfusion was done because she couldn’t keep herself awake any longer.”

My gaze travels back to my little dove and I can’t help but feel a stab of guilt right along with something I’d call *humbled adoration*, if I were inclined to describe it that way. This woman never ceases to amaze me with how incredible she is.

And as soon as I’m out of here, I’m going to show her exactly how much I appreciate her.

I owe my baby dove all the orgasms.

“You been here long?” I ask as I turn back to the walking blasphemy. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from any pressing confessions or routine floggings.”

Pope gets to his feet with a sigh and walks over to the end of the bed. “Nice to see that psychotic nurse didn’t stab the sense of humor out of you.” Then he scrubs a hand over the scruff on his face, something the unholy man never sports before producing a Blow Pop from his pocket. “I’ve been here as long as you have, Bones.”

I frown and look out the window at the setting sun in order to try to hide how much that moves me, too.

Using my fake club name is one thing, something he and a few of the other guys have been doing ever since the party at The Dollhouse, but hanging out here, the shitty hospital in downtown Rolling Meadows while I recover is something else entirely.

“Don’t think about it too hard.” He yawns, stretching his arms above his head with a loud *pop*. “And don’t fight it, either. Kings don’t let each other go through shit alone, it’s what it means to be a part of the club. We have each other’s backs, wade through the bullshit and stick together, whether it’s life and death or not.” Then the bastard smirks as he unwraps the sucker and sticks it in his mouth. “Whether we *want to* or not. You’ll get it, though. At some point this shit will make sense in your demented brain and when it does, we got a shiny new cut—a real one—ready for you, stupid nickname and all.”

Then the walking blasphemy grunts something about coffee and disappears into the hall.

Jesus. Hallucination Toby wasn’t kidding, was he?

“Mmm hey,” a sweet voice says from my left, and I turn to see my baby dove sitting up in her seat. “When did you wake up?”

“Just now.” My smile is back and it grows impossibly wider as Stevie gets to her feet and without hesitating, climbs onto the side of the bed and burrows into me. And I fucking sigh in relief as I wrap my arms around her the best I can.

I might not believe in heaven but having my girl pressed up against me, breathing in the scent of Christmas while she snuggles in close, this is the only heaven I need.

“We probably only have a few minutes.” Stevie presses a kiss to my throat and because I truly am all kinds of screwed up, my dick twitches when she does it again.

“So...” I look down as my girl tilts her head to look up at me. “Blowjob?”

Stevie giggles and rolls her eyes. “*No*, I meant until we get company.”

“Right. And since my dick hasn’t had any contact with you in far longer than he likes, a few minutes is all he’ll need to be very satisfied by a blowjob.”

“If I wasn’t so happy that you’re awake and acting like yourself, I’d be annoyed by that. But I am happy that you’re

awake and nothing is going to change that. Not even how impossible you like to be.”

I reach out and push her cinnamon and honey hair from her eyes, searching those aquamarine pools and finding nothing but the truth. “I’m sorry you’ve been camped out here so long, baby. You could have—”

“No, no I couldn’t.” Stevie shakes her head. “I was not going to leave this room until I knew for sure you’d be leaving with me. Watching you, watching...” I cup her cheek as her eyes well with tears. “I almost lost you, Tor.”

“But you didn’t. You didn’t and you never will.” And as her mouth opens to speak, her pretty lips forming words I don’t need to hear because I know exactly what she’s going to say, I shake my head, dip my chin and press my lips to hers. Stevie melts into the kiss, melts into *me*, as her fingers slide up my chest until she’s gripping the side of my neck firmly. “I love you, baby dove.”

Then, she starts bawling.

And my dumbass starts to laugh. “Stevie, why—”

“I told you, y-you didn’t have to s-say it b-b-back.”

“I wanted to then and I want to now.” I chuckle and wipe the tears from her cheeks. “I love you, I mean it, and I’ll say it whenever I feel the urge, thanks.”

The smile she gives me, the look of pure joy that lights up Stevie’s entire face makes my heart flip in my chest, and when I kiss her again a little more deeply, ready to try my hand one more time at a blowjob, the door to my hospital room flies open.

“This guy can be my dad,” James—Spider and Tate’s son—says with a very serious expression as he shows Prince a Venom action figure. “And this one can be...” He looks at his new friend, I’m assuming, with a frown as he hands him a Batman figure. “What do you call him again?”

Prince takes the toy with a smile. “He’s pretty much my brother. Stevie is my sister and Kingy said since Victor and her is in love, he’s like our brother now, too.”

“Cool.” James smiles back. “Vicita can bes Batman then. And all these guys in here”—he pats his little Star Wars backpack—“can bes the rest of my uncles cause they’re your uncles now, too.”

I watch the two little boys walk over to the bed before climbing up on the foot of it without even hesitating. James dumps a whole gaggle of plastic superheroes onto the sheet as they get situated and as they start very seriously deciding who’s who, my heart does that little flippy thing again.

Right up until Stevie gasps and hops off the bed, anyway. “What is all over your face?”

“Chocolate.” Prince looks up with a shrug, his eyes almost the same shade as hers tracking her while she goes to the sink and starts wetting paper towels. “Papa Little John gave us Hershey bars.”

“*Papa Little John?*” I ask the man himself as he comes strolling in, my eyebrows practically disappearing into my hairline.

“Meh.” He shrugs. “Felt weird having them call me *John* or *Mr. Andrews.*”

“So, *papa* seemed like the next best thing?”

“I told them to do it,” Tate says as she comes breezing into the room holding a couple of happy meals. “You’re basically John’s son, even have the papers to prove it.” She gives me a pointed smirk. “Prince and King have done nothing but refer to you as their brother since we’ve been here, and since you’re unofficially officially a King, that makes John the boys’ grandpa.”

I frown in confusion, looking at King, Spider, and Pope as they come lumbering in with coffee. “What the fuck is happening right now?”

“Don’t ask.” The Goliath Birdeater lifts his hands in defeat. “All the girls have been flapping their gums about all of us being one big *happy family* ever since Snipe said he was gonna make you. And I’ll be damned if I understand it myself.”

“Hey, which one is supposed to be me?” John asks, pulling my stare toward the end of the bed where he’s crouching next to the boys.

“This one.” Prince hands him The Thing from the Fantastic 4 and I have to laugh.

And I keep laughing as what feels like forty more people come barreling into my room; Marbles and Harlow, who goes right for my chart, and Ember, Shithouse, and Tenderloin.

My hospital room is fucking packed and loud, it’s messy and chaotic, and while it’s all making my OCD itch, I just keep fucking laughing.

“You ok?” Stevie comes to stand next to the bed, her brow arched as she pushes her hair behind her ears. “Do you want me to get rid of them?”

I shake my head as I lift a finger and caress her scar before cupping her cheek.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I pull her toward me and smile against her lips. “It’s fine. Gonna have to get used to it, right?”

“We both will.” My little dove kisses me sweetly. “It’s been a lot, but it’s really helped.”

“Yeah?”

She nods. “We have a long road ahead of us, a lot of shit to deal with, but knowing we don’t have to do it alone really helps.”

“I love you.” I kiss her again and smile when my girl sways toward me. “I love you, baby dove.”

“I love you, too, Gizmo.”

“Good, because you didn’t really have a choice.”

“No?” Stevie arches a brow and crosses her arms against her chest.

And I shake my head. “No, you didn’t. Told you in the beginning I was taking your heart, and I meant that. So it’s a

good thing you gave it willingly cause this shit”—I motion around the room—“is going to be a serious adjustment for me, and since I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, it won’t be an easy one. Which means, only a woman who loves me is going to be able to put up with how insufferable I’m about to get.”

Stevie dissolves into a fit of giggles, looking around at all the people invading my space while she nods emphatically, and it’s that exact moment, that second in time, when I can one hundred percent confirm what Toby said is true.

I did have a family waiting for me.

A family I didn’t intend to be a part of, but here we are. I’m in, so there’s no going back now, and I’ll just have to learn how to deal with it.

And for the record, Toby was right about the other thing, too.

There’s still *work* to be done, and just because I’ve caught a case of the *warm fuzzies* doesn’t mean I’m about to stop killing people. I’ll just add a few more reasons to my list, that’s all.

Toby. Stevie and her brothers. John and the Kings.

The list is growing and that means my work is even more important, so why stop now?

Who knows? After watching Stevie do a little killing of her own—because, yes, I absolutely caught her hacking into Linnie even though I was on the verge of death—I might even be able to get my baby dove in on the action.

And that thought, that thought *alone* is more than enough to keep The Harvester of Bones alive and kicking with renewed purpose. And fully erect, if I’m being honest, but still.

Toby was right, and wherever he is, I know my brother is happy for me. I finally got the life we both deserved and while I wish he were here with me to enjoy it, Toby will be my reason to keep it for as long as it’s mine.

Stevie’s and mine.



EPILOGUE

STEVIE

One Year Later

I FINISH LOGGING out of my computer before shutting it down, and with a smile, I lean back in my chair, fold my hands behind my head, and kick my feet up on my desk.

My desk, which sits in my office at The Heart of Sabine Family Center.

I can't believe this is mine.

I can't believe I'm here, honestly.

All thanks to my ghost.

Mostly.

Either way, though, everything in here is mine because thanks to Tor and his connections, as well as about a million other things, I'm the newest counselor at the center specializing in children who experience family trauma.

After the insanity with Linnie, I very quickly quit my job at Rolling Meadows Nursing Home.

There was no way I could go back there, not after losing Margie, and definitely not after seeing what was left of Sasha and Chris once they became victims of my former coworker who I thought was my friend.

All of that was too much to think about as is, and having a daily reminder every time I set foot inside the facility was definitely off the table. So, I quit my job, took some time off from school, and dove head first into attempting to cope with my new reality.

Not that I had much of a choice in that because everything I found out, everything I went through in such a short period of time, was enough of a mindfuck to force my hand.

I moved through the first couple of weeks like a robot.

Victor had brought back so many things from Cal—or *Dad*, as I've taken to calling him—and Rochelle's house that not only supported everything he said to me in those final precious moments, but also proved he really did love me and only did what he did to protect me and the boys. And as we went through the house to get it ready to sell, we found more.

Pictures, papers, and mementos I didn't even know existed. Cal had my hospital bracelets and footprints from when I was born, the outfit they sent me home in, he even had the nub from my umbilical cord because *he* was the one who cut it. My dad had saved everything he could get his hands on, right down to locks of hair from the first time I got it cut when I was two, and amongst all of that were dozens and dozens of letters.

Letters from Cal to me, letters between him and my mom.

They were absolutely in love, so in love with each other, and even though Beau forced my mother to be with him instead, she still wrote back and forth with Cal almost daily until she died.

Tor sat with me for *hours* while I carefully read each and every one of them, sat and rubbed my back or held me while I cried, while I got to know my parents the only way I could. And those letters were how I found out that my mom had smuggled as many of my belongings as possible to him before her life took a scary turn.

Celeste Williams knew she was going to die, and she knew Beau would be the one to kill her.

So she started having Cal come by when he was gone so he could spend time with me, to see me and save anything sentimental because she felt like it was only a matter of time before everything came to a head. And she was right because when Beau was hurt pretty severely during a run when I was

three and needed a new kidney, the in-house doctor started with my mom and I to see if either of us were a match.

We weren't, and that was because my mother and I both have O+ blood while Beau was AB-.

Huge red flag.

For two people to make a baby with type O blood, neither of them can be AB. And during that same ordeal, Beau the Bastard found out Cal was O-, and shit hit the fan.

My dad's letter, one of many addressed to me, explained all of that as well as what really happened the night of the fire. Beau strangled my mother, hung her from the banister then torched our house with me sleeping inside. I really did wander down the stairs, and my mother fell on top of me when the railing broke, but Cal was the one who ran in to save me, and if I'd been paying a little more attention I would have noticed the burn scars on his hands from doing so.

But I didn't, and while I wish I had the chance to thank him and get to know the man my father really was and not the one who was forced to bite his tongue in order to protect his children, I feel like I know him now.

In his letters to me, Cal told me all about his life before the club, his parents, where he grew up and how things were for him. My dad shared advice and life lessons, stories and memories, and I even got to see him grieve for my mother, and struggle with how much he still loved her as he fell head over heels for Rochelle.

And I found out that he had plans to take me and my mother far away from the club before she was killed, and while Cal wished that could have happened, he knew he was supposed to stay so he could meet Rochelle and have the boys. He didn't like it, he didn't like any of it, but my father did what he had to do and I don't blame him one bit for any of it.

It was both comforting and heartbreaking to read all of his words written in his messy script, but I felt them all the same, and the love that clicked into place and started to take root when Cal died, grew and flourished tenfold because of them.

Cal Moreland is my father and he was a good man who loved me and his sons.

His sons who are more like him than I would have ever known.

Which helps a lot, too.

Becoming legal guardian to King and Prince—per Cal and Rochelle's will—was a welcomed surprise, even if it only lasted a little while for King since he turned eighteen shortly after they passed, and having them around all the time because no, I have no intention of letting the older of my two brothers move out, has been a huge help.

A help in getting to know Cal, a help in our shared grief, a comfort in knowing that while it was in trauma, we're bonded together in a way that no one can take away. It's been really good, actually, but it's been hard, too.

The boys watched Beau kill their mother, watched him kill our father, and try to do the same to us. They witnessed everything the same way I did and we're closer than ever for it, despite the challenges it's presented.

King withdrew into himself, shut down and tried dropping out of school. He's known since he was nine that I was his sister and apparently he's been living in fear of something like that happening ever since. So my big little brother shut down and tried shutting everyone out and funny enough, my ghost was the one to bring him out of it.

Not that I think Victor is incapable of being supportive or helpful, understanding or compassionate. I've known all along that he was capable of all of that and more, *Tor* was the one who took convincing. And taking King out to a gun range to teach him to shoot did the trick.

They went out early one morning and didn't come back until super late because Victor showed my brother the ropes then let him open fire on anything and everything in sight before my brother finally had the breakdown he'd been refusing to have. And shockingly, my ghost told him all about Toby when he did. The two of them bonded over their losses,

over their trauma and how to heal, and even though it's still hard for King, things are better for him, too.

Since then the two of them have been pals and I'm happy to report King and Tor gang up on me on a regular basis.

Prince, my sweet little boy, is still having a rough time.

Meeting James and the club, hanging out with Papa Little John all the time, it's all been really good for him and made it easier for him to adjust to the new life we're living, but Prince still has nightmares and ends up in bed with Victor and I more often than not.

Seeing him like that, seeing both boys go through so much and cope the best they knew how, being there for them through all of it while they supported me, it got me thinking.

And they—my brothers, my parents, and Rochelle—are why I talked to my ghost about what I wanted to do. After countless breakdowns, almost manic episodes, panic attacks and my own nightmares, anyway.

But everything I was experiencing, everything the boys were going through and what our parents went through—Victor refuses to let me acknowledge that he and John's experiences played a role in this too, but they do—are why I switched my majors to child psychology and trauma counseling, and why I talked to Pope.

Well, my ghost talked to him first but then I sat down with the all seeing gorilla and talked to him, too.

And that talk is what led me here.

I'm still working on my license but I've been through some accelerated courses so I could get certified and start counseling kids here at The Heart of Sabine. I want to help kids who have lost their parents, been abused or neglected, or struggle having their needs met whether they be emotional or tangible. I want to put my experience and pain, my trauma and heartache, to good use, and I want to do it in a way that might help others out of situations that could end up like mine.

Save for the *obsessed coworker who started a killing spree to get my attention* part. I'm sure that's not something I'll

come across very often, especially in children.

And today was my first official day on the job, complete with shiny new office and everything.

A knock on the door has me quickly throwing my purple sneaker-clad feet back on the floor and acting like I was putting my hair up in a bun while I scramble to look professional and not like I was about to take a nap.

My eyes dart to the open door to find Pope leaning against the frame smirking around a Dum Dum sucker. “You ready to call it? Or did you want to admire your space a little longer?”

I give him a sheepish smile as my cheeks heat then blow out a breath. “Sorry, I—”

“Stevie,” he grunts, holding up a hand to stop me before a rare smile touches his handsome face. “It’s fine.”

“Ok.” I blow out a breath, dropping my shoulders as I actually put my hair up. “Ok, yeah. No reason to apologize.”

“Nope.”

“I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“Not even a little.”

“And today is my first official day. I have a right to be excited and appreciate my surroundings.”

I smile as Pope chuckles. “Exactly. It was kinda nice to see you like that, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He nods and pushes off the frame. “You’ve been so anxious about starting that I thought you might explode before you had your first kid in here.”

With a giggle, I shake my head then nod. “I was close, I won’t lie about that, but when Paisley came in I forgot about how nervous I was and it was a piece of cake after that.”

Pope watches me get to my feet and grab my bag. “She’s a good kid, they all are, but their stories are rough so it won’t always be that easy.”

“I know.” I hit the lights as he steps into the hall then pull my office closed and lock up. “Paisley nearly broke my heart after the first five minutes but she was so receptive, so eager to talk to me and hear what I had to say. That made it a lot easier.”

“It does. If they’re willing to open up it makes things a hell of a lot easier, and she was excited to have *another girl* to talk to.”

I giggle a little as we walk down the hall toward the back entrance.

Paisley told me that, too.

Pope is one of two counselors here at the center, the only other one being Mrs. Carson who is approximately *one-hundred-and-fifty-years-old* according to all the kids I saw today, and while they all adore Pope Crenshaw, a few of them were excited they finally brought in a female counselor who wasn’t a *dinosaur*.

“You heading to The Dollhouse?” my gigantic escort asks as he locks up the building.

“Yeah.” I nod with a sigh. “Tor was helping Spider and Elias vet the new bouncers so I have to pick him up before we get the boys.”

He gives me another rare smile as we make our way through the parking lot. “Bet that was interesting.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was. He probably scared the shit out of them just by being himself, and I’m sure Spider is ready to strangle him for it.”

“Probably.” Pope opens the door of my shiny new ride—Cal’s truck he also left to me in his will—and chuckles as I try to hoist myself in. “But that’s nothing new. Spider doesn’t do *people* well, and guys like Tor or Marbles, even Jackal, they get under his skin quick.”

Which is an incredibly true statement if I’ve ever heard one.

But I like Spider.

I like *all* the Kings and their girls, and I really like the way they've not only accepted my ghost, but the way they welcomed my brothers and I into their family too. And every family has at least one black sheep, so Victor driving Spider or Pope crazy is pretty normal.

Even if my amazing boyfriend is *not*.

"Are you heading to The Dollhouse?" I arch a brow as I buckle up and start the Dodge. "Or do you have other plans tonight?"

Pope shakes his head. "No plans. I'll probably swing through the club and see if Spider needs anything before I go home. Got a quick stop to make first, but I'll be there." He gives me a knowing look before his entire face takes on a warmth that's usually reserved only for the kids at the center. "You guys heading out after that?"

My stomach flips at the thought but I nod.

After I get Tor, we're swinging by John's to pick up the boys and our bags—and Harvey, Linnie's cat who wasn't as spoiled as I thought because he was emaciated and sick, and Victor wasn't as delirious as I'd assumed when he instructed me to grab him so he's ours now—then we're heading to Denver to spend a long weekend with Cal's parents.

My grandparents.

While we were going through everything from the house and getting ready for Cal and Rochelle's funeral, I stumbled across the info for a *Calvin and Penelope Moreland*. I had no idea who they were and for a second I thought maybe my dad had been in love a third time in his life, but King said they were their grandparents they hadn't seen since Prince was born and I didn't quite know what to make of it.

Especially when I realized that I needed to notify them about their son.

So, I called Cal Sr. and braced for the worst, only to find he and Penelope already knew all about me. They were devastated by the loss of my father, just as heartbroken as we are, but part of the grief and sadness they—I was on speaker as

soon as I told them who I was—so deeply felt was over never getting to know me and only seeing the boys less than a handful of times during their young lives.

More bullshit that can be attributed to Beau Williams and his reign of terror.

They came to the funeral, my grandparents headed to Birch Creek the next day actually, and even though we met and got to spend a little time together during all of that, and we've talked on the phone weekly ever since, I'm super nervous to stay with them in Denver this weekend. It'll be nothing but the two of them and the four of us for four whole days, and I'm excited, really excited, but the idea of doing this without any kind of buffer is terrifying.

"It'll be fine," Pope says with a nod. "You said they were really looking forward to seeing you."

I blow out a breath and slump against the seat. "They are. They're pumped, honestly, but I can't help but be a little anxious about it."

"I get it. Family stuff is hard."

"Especially when you didn't even know you had any *family* for there to be *stuff*."

Pope chuckles and backs up, gripping the door to close it for me. "True, but it'll be good. You've had a lot of shit going on over the last year and this'll be a nice break. No school, no work. You can check out and just be Stevie for a while. It'll be good." He shuts the door after I roll the window down, shaking his head with a slight frown. "Don't really know why you're bringing Tor, though."

The laugh that bubbles out of me is one I couldn't stop even if I tried. "Because I love him and want him there with me."

"Don't really get that, either."

"Oh stop." I giggle and roll my eyes. "You know damn well Victor has become one of your closest friends over the last year and I'd even go as far as to say *you* love him, too."

Pope just smirks with a shrug before rapping his knuckles against the door. “Better get a move on, Stevie. Don’t want to show up late to The Dollhouse and find Spider hanging your *ghost* from the chandelier right along with those Halloween decorations.”

Then the big oaf winks before lumbering off to his motorcycle, firing it up quickly then waiting for me to pull out so he can follow.

Such a good man.

But they all are, really.

My ghost, Little John, and the Kings.

All of them are good men, even if their favorite color happens to be *morally grey*, and I’ve never been so happy to be a part of a motorcycle club before in my entire life. And that’s coming from a girl who *was* a part of an MC her entire life. I just didn’t know how good it could be before.

With a smile that hasn’t left my face once today, I pull out of The Heart of Sabine and head toward the strip club to pick up my man, nervous butterflies flapping in my belly the entire way.

“Stevie!” Elias beams as I walk in through the front doors twenty minutes later. “You look ravishing this evening.”

I roll my eyes as he leans down and presses a kiss to my cheek. “And you look like a man who’s well-versed in flirting at anything with a pulse.”

“I am,” Elias says with a grin as he escorts me through the lobby and past the coat check. “But I have to try harder when they’re packing what I want. Someone like you, a natural beauty with personality for days who won’t reject my advances, you make it easy, babes.”

“I would never think of such a thing. Even if you are mostly full of shit.”

Elias barks out a laugh as we enter the main floor, the speakers blaring *Blinding Lights* by The Weekend, and when I follow the terrifying though sweet head of security to the

stage, my eyes land on something that makes me laugh along with him.

There, just beyond the pole in the center, next to one of the dancers—Tink, I think is what she goes by—shaking his ass and doing some kind of dance I’ve never seen before, is my ghost.

“What is he doing?” I snort as we stop at the edge of the stage.

“You’ve never seen that before?” Elias asks before we hear, “It was a TikTok trend.”

I turn to see Ember sidle up to my other side, a huge grin on her face and a box in her hands.

“No.” I turn back to watch Victor and Tink, the two moving perfectly in sync, throwing their arms up, shaking their legs and doing a bunch of other things I don’t understand but laugh at anyway. “I have no idea what that is.”

“It was super popular,” Ember says.

“Went viral. Everyone was doing it.” Elias adds.

“And Tink is using it for part of her Halloween set.” Ember starts shimmying her shoulders to the beat. “She’s dressing as a 1980s aerobic instructor and she’s coming out to this.”

I shrug. “Well, I’ve never heard of it, but I was locked in a tower most of my life, so it’s not surprising.”

The three of us continue to watch as the song seamlessly changes from The Weekend to Olivia Newton John, a remix of *Let’s Get Physical* blasting through the club at full volume, and that’s when I start completely cracking up.

Victor’s entire face lights up over the change in song as he starts doing what I’m assuming are his version of old school exercises before throwing himself at the pole. My ghost climbs it quickly, spins a few times then flips himself upside down, sticks his legs out, and twerks.

“Oh my god,” I say with a snort. “Has he been like this all day?”

“Yep.” Elias chuckles. “I think he made it, what, twenty minutes before he couldn’t help himself?”

Ember snorts too as she nods. “Yeah, by the time Jillian came out to rehearse and *Poker Face* started playing, Vic scrapped training and jumped up on stage.”

Of course he did.

I’m pretty sure my boyfriend is pushing for a male dancer set to be honest, just so he has a reason to dance and climb the pole on a more regular basis. Because apparently helping Elias at the club a few nights a week isn’t enough to satisfy Victor’s constant *dance fever*.

My ghost can sing and dance so well, and sometimes I wonder if he wasn’t born in the wrong decade because he would have made it big during the height of musicals and Broadway plays.

“Your order came in.” Ember nudges my shoulder. “I was going to give it to Vic but decided against it. He would have opened the box and started bugging Spider with everything inside.”

I blush hard as I take the white cardboard from her but I still give Ember a smile. “Thanks. I’d prefer my boyfriend *not* flash my lube and lingerie all over the club.”

“I figured. Especially since I threw in something extra.”

My entire face gets hot as I arch a brow.

That’s ominous as hell.

“Calm down, Stevie, it’s nothing crazy.” Ember laughs. “Just a new product for you to try, that’s all.”

“Ok...”

After Tor finally talked me into letting him use my dragon dildo on me, I’ve been a little more open to what my friend has to offer in her side hustle. It took a while for me to get comfortable talking about it, let alone using anything other than my vibrator, but my ghost showed me how much fun we can have with things like that, and I might have accidentally raved to Ember and the girls about the dragon D during a

Muppet Show marathon—where I definitely had too much wine, thanks—and ever since then she’s slipped me new things to try.

I’m not against that, not even against reviewing products for her, but talking about my sex life or what Victor and I do behind closed doors has been a little difficult, mostly because I’ve never had a real sex life before, or friends to share it with. I’m trying though, trying and learning how to be a regular girl in my almost mid-twenties who has a boyfriend she loves who meets her every need and more.

It’s just taking me time to get used to it, hence blushing like a tomato when I pick up my order from Ember.

“Vic actually picked it out.”

Ember laughs as my eyes go wide. “You let him pick out a new toy?”

“Yep.”

“By himself?”

“Yes, correct.”

“And you let him order it for us?”

Ember giggles. “Kind of. I might have suggested it to him while he was browsing the catalog. Vic jumped all over it and he’s been pestering me about when it was coming in ever since.”

“Great.” My eyes wander back to the stage as my boyfriend pulls himself up the pole and starts dry humping it. *This should be interesting.*

But I can’t say I’m that upset about it.

Victor has opened my eyes to so many things during our relationship and exploring my sexuality in a wide variety of ways has been one I can say I’ve thoroughly enjoyed.

Unfortunately for us, we don’t have time to explore *anything* right now because it’s getting late and we still need to pick up King and Prince in order to get on the road before it gets too dark. Denver is only about two hours from here but

it's almost seven and I don't want to show up at my grandparents' house at midnight.

So, I clutch the box against my chest as I step even closer to the stage and start trying to get my boyfriend's attention.

"Gizmo!" I shout over the music as he spins around. "Tor!" Still no response. "Victor!" He swings his legs around and flips again, gripping the pole with nothing but his thighs and calves before arching his back and reaching his arms above his head. "Babe, we have to go!"

My ghost spins around slowly as he slides down the pole and on his third revolution, he finally sees me. "Baby dove!"

"Thank god." I roll my eyes with a huff as he drops down to the floor and crawls toward me on his hands and knees. "I've been calling your name."

"I was in the zone." Victor grabs the front of my shirt and tugs me toward him as he dangles off the edge of the stage, planting a hard kiss on my lips with a smile. "Sorry, baby."

"It's fine." With a smile, I give him another kiss before he swings his legs over the edge and jumps down. "I'm pretty used to this."

"As you should be. I'm really thinking about asking the Goliath Birdeater for my own set. I don't care about the money my near perfect and chiseled body will no doubt bring in, I just want to dance. I have the *moves like Jagger* and the world is missing out."

Tor throws his arm over my shoulders as he turns us toward the front of the club. "I know, but I'm not a huge fan of anyone else seeing your body or your thing. No matter how pretty they are."

"How *dare you*." I roll my eyes and turn to face him as my ghost stops dead in his tracks. "How dare you call him a *thing* after I've worked so hard to get you to use the word *cock*."

"Tor, we don't have time—"

He shakes his head defiantly. "Say it, Stevie. You call him a cock right now or I'm not leaving this club."

“Really?”

Victor crosses his arms against his chest and lifts a brow in challenge.

“You are completely insufferable.”

“Stevie...”

With another huff, I cave because despite being in his thirties, my boyfriend will do exactly what he says if I don’t deliver. “Fine. You and your *dick* need to get out to the truck right now or else we won’t get to Denver until tomorrow.”

“You played dirty, little dove, but I’ll allow it.”

We say good bye to Ember and Elias, finally making our way toward the door, and when we stop at the coat check to get Tor’s jacket, that’s when I realize what he’s wearing.

“Does your shirt say *Saving lives one vag at a time?*”

My boyfriend glances down at his chest and the crop top I didn’t seem to notice before. “Yeah.” Then he meets my gaze. “New shirts for the waitresses. Thought it was appropriate since I kind of work here, and saving your life the first time resulted in getting your vag, and now it’s mine for always. So really.” Victor wraps his arm around me as we walk outside to the truck. “I saved you and your vag, then your vag saved my life, too. Shirt is kind of perfect.”

“For some reason I understand your logic, just stop saying *vag*, ok? And ask Spider for a longer shirt. I don’t like that people can see your happy trail.”

“The happiest trail on earth.”

“Insufferable.” But I’m giggling because he’s very cute, and he’s mine.

“How was your first day?” Victor asks as he walks me around to the driver’s side of the truck. *And he’s also so devoted and invested in me.* “Did the walking blasphemy show you the ropes?”

“He did, and it was great. I wasn’t nervous at all once my first client came in. It went so well, Gizmo. And things just

flowed after that.”

He picks me up and sets me in the seat before giving me a sweet kiss. “Just like I knew it would. You, my little dove, are perfect for this job.”

“It was a really good day, Tor. I feel like I’m going to make a difference with these kids.”

“You will, I have no doubt.” Victor nods firmly before his eyes land on the box in my hands. “*Oh*, is that our order from Ember?”

With a roll of my eyes, I hand it over and shake my head as my boyfriend quickly closes my door then jogs around to the passenger side where he climbs in and rips the cardboard open.

“Water-based lube.” He grins as I pull into the street. “A must have while we train your perky little ass to take my dick. Very nice.” Victor lifts the lingerie and holds it up, inspecting the strings and lace with a serious expression. “Also very nice. Your tits will look fabulous in this.” He tosses it back in the box as he pulls out the toy wash then a few pairs of panties, digging around until he exclaims, “Ah hah! Bless the dying fire for delivering!”

The *dying fire* is what Victor sometimes calls Ember because my boyfriend has silly nicknames for everyone we know, and judging by the unbridled joy on his face, he just found the *something extra* she ordered for us.

“*The Demon*,” he says as he turns the small package over in his hands before tearing into it. “*Oh*, it’s sparkly.” I glance at my boyfriend and the device he’s holding before he looks at me with his patented grin. “*And purple*. Your favorite.”

“Are those *horns*?” I squeak as I stop at a red light. “What is that?”

“This, baby dove, is the newest product in the supernatural line. A *demon dick*, if you will. It’s big, it’s ribbed, it has a base that will suction to any surface. And…” Victor holds up a little device, something that resembles a remote, from what I can tell. “The horns vibrate, the dildo pulsates and gyrates, and

I can control everything with this nifty little box as I watch you ride it into oblivion. Preferably while you're cuffed to the bed and completely at my mercy."

I blush right down to my toes as I switch lanes to head toward the highway. "Well, that's going to have to wait because we are *not* bringing that to my grandparents' house with us."

"Party pooper," Victor grunts before putting it neatly back into the package and boxing everything back up. "But..."

Before I can shut down whatever thought just popped into my boyfriend's head, he whips his crop top off and tosses it in the backseat before undoing his belt.

"What are you doing?" I glance over again as he pops the button on his jeans, Victor grinning wider as he unzips and palms himself through the denim. "Tor!"

"I can't help it, baby dove. Just thinking about using that toy on you makes my cock so hard."

"You can't jerk off while I'm driving!"

He shakes his head and bites his lip. "I'm not going to. You're going to pull over and fuck me right here on the highway."

"Victor, I..." I shake my head but it's a lie. I'm going to do exactly what my ghost says because he's telling me to do it, and my pussy is already wet from his words alone which means I want to do it, too, so why argue when it's inevitable. "We shouldn't..."

"Give me one good reason, Stevie," he grunts again as he rubs his dick through his jeans. "I know you're already wet, know your pussy started to drip the second I pulled that toy out, and I know it's already aching for me since you keep glancing at what I'm doing."

He's not wrong.

Especially when I look over at him again and find Victor watching me intently, those grey and indigo eyes darker than usual and fixed on my face. And when my gaze wanders to his

crotch—*again*—I almost whimper as my boyfriend slips his hand down the front of his pants and starts stroking himself.

“Tor, we shouldn’t.”

He shakes his head and rolls his lower lip over his teeth. “We *should*, though. And we can. This may be the last time I get to fuck you for the next few days so I might just die if you don’t let me.” I try to focus on the road but I can hear Victor pushing his jeans down his thighs, and no matter what we do next, I need to get off at the next exit so we don’t crash because of it. “Come on, little dove. I’m keyed up and ready, I know you are too. It won’t take long for either of us and we’ll be back on the road in no time. Let me make your pussy happy, baby. Let me take away the ache.”

I squeeze my thighs together the best I can as I pull into a rest stop, my ghost chuckling in victory as I drive around to the most secluded spot I can find.

“If we get in trouble...” I scold as I kick off my sneakers and look around. “If someone sees us—”

“Let ‘em look.”

“Victor.”

“*Stevie.*”

Scowling, I lift my eyes in time to see Victor reach over the center console and grip the side of my neck with one hand as the other moves to the button my jeans. He undoes my fly quickly while pulling me in for a kiss, the kind of kiss that makes me forget every single one of my concerns as well as my damn name.

Victor’s mouth moves against mine feverishly, hard and crushing, like he can’t get enough. He licks and sucks before running his tongue along the seam of my lips, slipping it inside at the same time his skilled fingers find their way into my panties.

“Oh god,” I gasp as he abruptly pinches my clit then swipes away the sting. Then his fingers are inside me, two of them deep in my core, pumping and curling as I start to roll my hips.

“Such a sweet little dove.” Tor grins against my lips. “Such a morbidly sexy little creature, your pussy already so fucking wet for me.”

I nod because he’s not wrong, because all this man has to do is look at me for me to be ready; one look is all it takes for me to want to maul him and it’s been like that since the first time we were together.

He lets go of my neck, his hand sliding down the side of my body before he cups my breast. Victor squeezes it hard, pinching my nipple through my t-shirt and bra before squeezing again and continuing his path down my side. He taps my left hip while still fucking me with his fingers, kissing me in between satisfied smiles. “Lift, baby.”

My body jerks as Victor adds a third finger to my core but I manage to lift my leg for him, and after a few hard tugs my left leg is free and my jeans are hanging around my right knee.

“Climb over,” my ghost demands as he removes his hand from between my thighs, then he laughs at my scowl. “I want you on my cock, Stevie.” He lifts his fingers to my lips and shoves them in my mouth, watching intently as I lick and suck before he does the same. “*Now*, baby dove.”

Without hesitation, I climb over the center console and straddle his lap, my gaze raking over the man I love and how beautiful he is as he reclines the seat.

The messy, sun-kissed curls on his head, those gorgeous eyes twinkling with mischief, the ring in his perfect nose, and his full lips a little swollen from our kisses and turned up in a devious grin. My stare moves over his body, leaving goosebumps in its wake, and when I get past his pecs and abs to see his beautiful erection resting against his belly, the head leaking precum against his tan skin, my mouth starts to water.

I love seeing all the shiny metal in his cock; the apadravya in the head, the Jacob’s ladder underneath, the pubic piercing on the top. I love this man and his pierced dick, and I love it even more knowing exactly how it’s going to feel sliding inside me.

“Stevie,” Victor growls as he fists his shaft at the base. “You know what it does to me when you look at me like that.”

“Mmhmm.” With my own devious grin, I look him in the eyes as I hover over his cock then reach out and take his nipple rings between my thumb and forefinger. “I do. I know exactly what I do to you, Gizmo.”

Victor hisses, arching his back as I give the little hoops a twist and when I let go to flick them, my ghost slides my panties out of the way and thrusts his hips up, driving his erection deep into my body so hard I almost hit the ceiling of the cab.

“Fuck,” he groans as I bear down, twisting his nipple rings again before planting my hands on his chest. “Fuck me, baby dove. Your pussy feels like heaven and I need you to fuck me.”

I nod as I start to ride his cock, moving up and down quickly over his length and biting my lip each time I feel his piercings hit in all the right places. Victor grips my thighs tightly, his blunt nails digging into my flesh, my ghost grunting and cursing every time I swivel my hips.

My orgasm is already there, right on the edge of a razor thin wire, but I don’t want this to end. It feels too good—Victor feels too good and being connected to him in this way is something I crave as much as the rest of him.

“I love you,” I gasp as he starts pumping his hips, meeting me thrust for thrust. My fingers curl against his chest, trying to find purchase as my pussy spasms around his cock, as my ghost brings us closer to tipping over that edge, and when I break the skin on his pecs, we both moan.

“Baby,” Victor grunts. “Do it.”

My back arches as his hand drops between us, his thumb now moving over my clit in circles that match the rhythm of our hips. “Tor...”

He pinches it to get my attention, my eyes snapping to his as I jerk forward. “Do. It.” Victor growls, his hips now slamming up into my core. “Do. It. Now.”

And with a subtle nod, I lean down and kiss him hard before I lift my hands from his chest.

My ghost watches with rapt attention as I grind against him, his eyes focused on the way his cock moves in and out of my body for a beat before they move to my hands. And when I finger the newest charm on my bracelet, sliding the tiny razor blade from its hiding place inside a tombstone, I grip it tightly and bring it to his flesh.

“*Fuck me,*” he groans as I cut a line in his skin, tracing over the heart I put there a year ago. “Goddamnit, Stevie. Fuck.”

I keep going, closing the heart and moving faster, riding his cock harder while my pussy clenches and squeezes him, carving our initials again before watching Victor tip his head back in bliss.

“I love you,” I whisper as I reach out and smear his blood over the cuts, bringing my finger to his lips and relishing in the way Victor sucks it into his mouth.

His thumb circles my clit faster as he moves his hand from my thigh to his chest, pressing his index finger to his flesh and gathering his blood. Victor coats the tip and his thumb then brings both to my mouth, painting my lips before shoving his finger inside, growling when my tongue darts out to meet him.

And as my orgasm slams into me, shooting up through my core out to every inch of my body, my ghost buries his hand in my hair and sits up before crushing his mouth to mine in a positively brutal kiss while he moans and grunts out his own release.

“I love you.” Victor sighs as I press my forehead to his. “I fucking love you, Stevie.”

With a smile, I kiss him sweetly then all but collapse on his lap. And that apparently makes my ghost chuckle.

“You want me to drive?”

I nod against him with a giggle. “My legs are jelly.”

“Good.” He slaps my ass and kisses the top of my head. “If they weren’t, I’d have to fuck you until they were, and I don’t think we have time for that.”

Which is why my extremely sweet boyfriend helps me clean myself up and get situated in the passenger’s seat before tucking his dick into his pants and hopping out of the truck to go around to the driver’s side to take us home.

“Am I good?” I ask as we pull through the gate at Little John’s. “No blood anywhere?”

“You’re perfect, baby dove.”

My face heats at the way his words move me, over the warmth in his indigo eyes, and my nose starts to sting a little when Victor gives me a lopsided smile before pulling on his hoodie. “Thanks.”

He leans over and kisses me as he puts the truck in park. “Anytime, baby.”

We get out and head to John’s front door and when Tor is about to throw it open, I grab his arm with a gasp. “What about your *job*?”

“My job?”

“Yeah, you know, the next *job* Little John lined up for you.”

Victor shakes his head with a grin. “You really need to work on not making that sound suspicious, little dove. When you say *job* like that, it definitely sounds like I’m up to something nefarious.”

“Well, you kind of are, aren’t you?” He laughs as I huff. “It’s not like your side gig is on the up and up.”

“You are not wrong, baby, but it’ll be fine. The next bag of soggy dicks waiting to meet The Harvester of Bones will still be there when we get back from Denver.”

“You’re sure?”

Victor nods as he throws open the door. “Positive. Just like the junkyard and the strip club, my *gig* will wait for me to

spend some time with my family before I come back refreshed and ready to get back to the grind.”

I smile as he gives me a quick kiss and it grows as we walk in to see my brothers sitting on the couch with John, the three watching *Beetlejuice* and snacking happily. And even though they all gripe and groan as Victor jumps over the back and sandwiches himself between his mentor and King, I don't miss the warmth in their tones or the smiles that are trying to break through their grumpy expressions. And when Tor steals a handful of popcorn from Prince before picking him up and setting him in his lap, those tears prick at my eyes again because this right here, these men really *are* my family and I've never felt so much love or been so grateful for anything in my life.

For twenty-three years I was the princess locked in a tower but I got my happily ever after. It just took meeting an unorthodox knight who wields a knife, and having him rescue me from the monster holding me captive to get it.

WULVEN KINGS MC SERIES
**INSIDIOUS
HEART**
BOOK FOUR

PLAYLIST

[Insidious Heart on Spotify.](#)

The Kids Aren't Alright - Fall Out Boy

Bad Guy - Eminem

PRINCESS - Lil Peep

Somebody's Watching Me - Rockwell

Happiness is a butterfly - Lana Del Rey

Killer - Eminem

3 a. m. - Eminem

Heathens - Twenty One Pilots

Can't Feel My Face - The Weekend

HandClap - Fitz and The Tantrums

Poker Face - Lady Gaga

Blinding Lights - The Weekend

Here in My Room - Incubus

Paris - The Chainsmokers

Bad Romance - Lady Gaga

Moves Like Jagger - Maroon 5, Christina Aguilera

Hemorrhage (In My Hands) - Fuel

No One Knows - Queens of the Stone Age

New Killer Star - David Bowie

Them Bones - Alice In Chains

Bodies - Drowning Pool

Glory and Gore - Lorde

Bang! - AJR

Sympathy For The Devil - The Rolling Stones

I Wanna Be Yours - Arctic Monkeys

Outside - Staind

Leather and Lace - Stevie Nicks, Don Henley

I Will Run to You - Stevie Nicks, Tom Petty

Psycho Killer - Talking Heads

when i'm with you - We Three

Daughter - Pearl Jam

Last Kiss - Pearl Jam

Cirice - Ghost

Dance Macabre - Ghost

Psycho - Muse

Madness - Muse

Dark Horse - Katy Perry, Juicy J

In Your Eyes - Peter Gabriel



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the incredibly supportive Mr. Graves and our three little Graves, thank you for putting up with the long hours and high anxiety to make this dream happen. I couldn't have done this without your words of encouragement, never-ending patience and fierce love. You four are why I'm doing this. You are why I'm reaching for these goals, why I'm making them a reality for all of us. I love you.

To my tiny tribe of incredible friends that have helped and supported (and tolerated) me every step of the way; thank you for being the badassess you are. Without you, I would have lost my shit a long time ago. You are boss bitches and I am never letting you go.

To my entire team—my alpha and ARC Diggers—thank you so very much for reading my words in their most unrefined and raw forms, and loving them anyway. Your hours of hard work and feedback, the ranting sessions and plot discussions, the car ride ramblings with A.K., all of it helps keep me motivated and I would be lost in this crazy world of writing without you.

To the words of many that inspired me, the authors I read that made me realize I wanted to do this, that I can do this, thank you for sharing your gift with the world. You are why I fell in love with reading and because of you, I fell just as hard for writing.

And to my readers, the ones I never thought I'd have but hoped for all the same, thank you for taking the time to read my words, I truly hope you love them as much as I do. I will forever be grateful for your kind words and support, and I'll be forever shocked that you're sharing both with me.

ALSO BY A. K. GRAVES



[Sinister Red, Book One](#)

[Surviving Midnight, Book Two](#)

[Broken Warrior, Book Three](#)

[Insidious Heart, Book Four](#)

[Wicked Vow, Book Five](#)

Coming March 2023



[His Creation, A Prequel Novella \(FREE\)](#)

[His Fate, Book One](#)

[His Story, A Collection of Short Stories \(FREE\)](#)

[His Retribution, Book Two](#)

[His Atonement, Book Three](#)

[His Curse, Book Four](#)

Coming Fall of 2022

Their Bond, A Novella

Coming Fall of 2022

His Crusade, Book Five

Coming Fall of 2022



**Want all the latest and greatest from The GravesYard before everyone else?
Join [The GravesSite :: A. K. Graves Gorgeous Ghoulies](#) with the link or the
QR code above!**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. K. Graves is a thirty-something, happily married mother of three fabulous girls and hails from America's very own high five, a Michigander born and raised. When she isn't on the brink of blissful exhaustion, A. K. is an avid reader, music enthusiast, fine art lover as well as a huge fan of photography and film, but writing has stolen her heart and found its way into her soul.

A writer of both paranormal and contemporary romance, A. K. believes that everyone should have their own happily ever after. She also believes until everyone gets a HEA, they should be able to read about smoking hot dragons, vampires, rockstars and MC members who fight hard and love harder to prove true love never dies.

www.akgraveswrites.com



Signup for News from The GravesYard here or with the QR code above! —>

<https://www.akgraveswrites.com/newsfromthegravesyard>

