



PART ONE
UNSAINTED
BOOK 5

like
Grim,
Death

K. V. ROSE

THE
Grim
Death

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UNSAINTED
BOOK 5

K. V. ROSE

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For more information, please contact authorkvrose@outlook.com

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To the good parents.

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Author's Note

Proceed with caution. This book contains disturbing themes throughout. It does not get lighter. Recommended for those 18+.

In order for any of this book to make sense, I highly recommend you read the Unsainted series in order:

[These Monstrous Ties](#)

[Pray for Scars](#)

[The Cruellest Chaos](#)

[Boy of Ruin](#)

Please take care reading. It's a dark ride.

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6 Virtues

Discipline

Obedience

Piety

Carnality

Self-sacrifice

Vengeance

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Playlist

I write everything to music. Once upon a time, I had a microphone and used to sing gospel songs in my living room. I'll leave it to you to figure out what happened there...

Anyway, all of my playlists—including the one for this book—can [be found on Spotify](#).

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Act One



“There is scripted death, then there is the agony of truly dying. Which, do you think, films better?”

Arlo Estere, director

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Little Saint James, located in the U.S. Virgin Islands, was owned by Jeffrey Epstein until his death. It was also known informally as “pedophile island” when under his ownership.

Epstein was a convicted sex offender who had connections with many powerful people. His death was ruled a suicide.

While the above information is true, all characters and locations in this book are purely fictional.

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I

The Name of Malikov

B E F O R E

THE MALIKOV NAME carries its weight in blood. In lavish sex parties too, festering around the edges with cocaine and hookers alongside the biggest players in politics and police work combined. Mafiosos and mayors shake hands at Shadow Villa, then catch glimpses of one another blown in orgies straight through to orgasms.

Located in Acid City, Virginia, Shadow Villa isn't listed as a Malikov property. But everyone who is anyone understands who owns it. The smartest crime bosses know to keep their names off the books.

There's something else that happens inside this house though. Something darker. Past the lustful exterior of a raucous sex club, sinister liaisons lurk. Networking occurs through shaking hands but here, in Shadow Villa, it's the corpses who seal the deals.

And it's the dead who keep the secrets too. Loose lips... Well, the Malikovs know exactly what they can sink if their ships start to talk.

So they're eliminated before they get a word out.

Mikhail Malikov, *Boaz*, boss of Rival's Claw, doesn't let anyone speak a whisper of a secret. Priests, politicians, and pied pipers won't pay up if chit chat gets out of hand and rumors threaten reputations.

Money makes the world go round and Mikhail Malikov was raised to understand exactly that. Rival's Claw, *RC*, covets funds above just about anything.

Anything except...*family*.

Blood means bonds and RC doesn't play with those monstrous ties.

There's an exception though, for babies. Infants haven't learned loyalty.

They're disposable in Mikhail's world. They can be recreated.

And when word of a Malikov child reaches Mikhail's ears at a time of unrest among RC, the 6, Unsaints, and other gangs along the Eastern U.S., he understands exactly how to smooth things over.

A visit to Shadow Villa, to start. Then a trip just a little further south.

Because there's the issue of Liar's Island as well.

So many birds can be brought down with only one very wicked stone.

Yes, the Malikov name carries its weight in blood, and Mikhail—elder brother to Lazar, first son of Alexander—knows exactly how and when to shed it.



L A T I N , B E G I N

S H A D O W V I L L A

THERE IS ROLLING, fuzzy film, then...there is a person.

The film is black and gray and blue, strange hues in darkness. The person is in white, a dress or gown, their knees bent and pulled to their chest as they sit on a cement floor. Their arms are chained to the wall behind them so they're spread, upper limbs pinned like wings. The gown droops to their elbows, and you see shimmering writing scrawled on their pale skin. You cannot decipher the words, but it looks like it was done with a permanent marker in silver.

There is something on their head, and you think it might be a hat, at first.

A lump forms in your throat, and you are glad your loved ones are not here as you view this film, but you are not so sure they are any safer out *there*.

Bile burns up your throat.

The camera is level with the head, not looking down on them, like the camera operator is sitting or a tripod is filming.

And suddenly, as you blink a few times to clear your vision, you realize it is not a hat at all.

It is a plastic bag.

It is wrapped around their head.

The plastic is pressed close to their mouth, their nose, and you understand they are trying to breathe. Music plays, or a recording. Eerie, demonic sounds coupled with someone speaking. *"Everybody has an evil inside. Everybody has a goodness."* A man's voice with an underlying beat. Like maybe the intro to a song.

Your skin crawls.

You sit up straighter, wanting someone to reassure you, but there is no one there.

The person's arms jerk against the chains, and they clank on the cement wall behind them, but the soundtrack grows louder, repeating the same things over and over.

The bag presses in over their eye sockets, smooth along the top of their head. You do not know if it is a man or woman, the gown is so loose and there is nothing distinguishable about their facial features.

You bite down on your back teeth, anxiety crawling and snaking and shifting and growing inside of you.

What is this? What the fuck is this?

The person panics. They are yanking at the chains, twisting their head this way and that, trying to get air, their body seeming to *vibrate*. They could stand, hypothetically, but they do not try to move their lower limbs. Perhaps they *cannot*.

Your stomach hurts. Dread fills your body, and it is hard for you to breathe. There is a sour taste on the back of your tongue as the struggle only increases and you want it to be over. The bag forming a smooth hole over their mouth, the

jerky movements of their limbs, the cruelty of the clanking chains...

You realize with a vicious sharpness, *you want them to be dead.*

But before they are, before it ends, a figure appears on screen.

A long, lean shadow of a person. They are dressed all in black and they step in front of the camera, then squat down before the prisoner.

They lift their fingers and slash them across the bag, the portion sucked to the person's mouth.

Relief unfurls inside of you as you try to catch your breath like the prisoner does, sucking down air in noisy gulps, a sound you have never heard before in this way.

Their body goes still save for their chest and shoulders, heaving beneath the gown.

You are very still yourself.

And on screen, *you* turn to stare at the camera.

A gasp leaves your lips, your own unsettling eyes gazing straight into the lens. You are still squatting before the prisoner, and there is no expression on your face.

You touch your own cheek, unsure which you is...you.

The victim is still swallowing air, the soundtrack is playing on repeat.

"The evil is in you too. The evil is in your mother, and your brother, and your sister, and certainly your children."

Record scratch.

It starts again.

You do not blink. In your seat, or on screen.

You drop your hand in reality. *(Or is it?)*

A shadow falls across your skin on the film, and slowly, you stand to your feet. Then you reach out one arm, the sleeves of your hoodie pushed up to your elbows, you can see the familiar scar on your hand the moment before you accept a thick wooden pole.

No.

A hammer.

You start to tremble, thinking of it as a weapon.

The metal of the hammer's head glints under the dim lights wherever they, you, are. You spin it in your hand, glancing at it like you have never seen a tool like that before.

You cannot look away from the screen.

Slowly, the shadow seems to slither back as it disappears and you turn to face the victim, still catching their breath, although the sounds are quieter now.

They have not spoken.

You cock your head, the hammer hanging by your side, almost limply, like you could drop it at any moment.

Seconds pass.

"The evil is in your child, and you are foolish if you believe otherwise."

You only know you are holding your breath when the ache begins in your chest, your lungs yearning for air.

In that moment, when you inhale, the version of you on screen moves so fast you are not sure you really even saw it happen in individual parts.

You are gripping the hammer in both hands like a baseball bat, and you swing, arms extended, the hammer's face catching the prisoner right on the temple.

Blood sprays against the inside of the bag, arcing at an angle, dripping crimson over their temple as the prisoner's head is knocked backward, his mouth twisted in a strangled sort of scream.

You swing again.

And again.

And again.

Blood spatters through the bag against the wall. It looks strangely blue in the filter of the film.

And just as you start to swing once more, your body blocking most of the prisoner now, someone steps into the camera, placing a hand on the small of your back.

You still.

The hammer hangs by your side again, and you step to the left.

The plastic bag is wrecked, and *meat* is beneath it. That is all there is to see. Ground beef, eye sockets, blood.

The person touching you gently reaches around you and pulls the hammer from your hand. As if you are dreaming, you walk backward, out of frame.

Blood and matter are clotted on the silver of the hammer's head.

And slowly, the figure, wearing the black hood from their hoodie, twists around to look at the camera.

You see pale skin.

And light, silver eyes.

A smile curves the man's lips.

"The evil is in the heart of your family too."

Then everything ends.

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III



ONE MONTH AGO

THE MEDICI HOME

“THE MALIKOV MARRIAGE WAS UNSANCTIONED, and Ella is not meant for Maverick.” My dad holds my gaze, his hands gripping the sleek banister of my childhood home. It’s not a stairwell. Instead, there’s a circular hole on the third floor, cut into the black marble beneath my feet. Expertly. Intentionally. Red carpet lines the gap, and down below? It’s a trick of the light. You can see nothing. Darkness. I don’t know the mechanics of the trick. All I know is when I dip my chin and stare into the abyss, obsidian peers back at me. I’m not even sure what’s down there, save for flecks of my dried blood if they haven’t turned to dust over the years.

Absentmindedly, I cup the back of my neck, my fingers brushing the lowest scar on my head, just underneath my hairline. A raised ridge even my backwards hat won’t cover.

No memories come to mind with the feel of it. Nothing painful or traumatic.

I have no recollection of the days each scar belongs to.

“Why don’t you tell *them* that?” I keep staring into nothing as I speak to my father. I drop my hand and shove both into the pockets of my gray sweats. Dad called me here this morning, just under two months before Halloween.

I know what he’s hoping for on the thirty-first of October. Rain Malikov will be nearly three months old, and as another generation begins to grow, Adam Medici is trying to pull the weeds of our twisted brotherhood.

Silence stretches between Dad and I. Across the diameter of the circle, he stares at me. I don’t meet his gaze. I’ve spent most of my life avoiding it and I have no plans to stop doing so now.

Still, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Just below the scar I touched.

“I’m telling *you*.”

I grind my teeth as I scuff one gray, high-top sneaker over the thin strip of red velvet lining the bottom of the railings.

“Why?” I know the answer, more or less, so I’m not entirely surprised when he responds.

“Because you’re going to fix it.” *Because you never prove your worth.*

You’re not valuable here.

I’m embarrassed you are my son.

You’re not ruthless like Lucifer. Angry like Maverick. Cain is a machine. Even Ezra, for all of his fuck-ups, has a magnetism you don’t possess.

Words echoing in my head, spoken to me many times before. And *this* is how I become something. *This* is how I prove I belong.

I close my eyes and take a breath. In my mind, I see two girls.

The first is Ella Christian. Red hair. Freckles. Green eyes. Curves.

Submissive.

My chest tightens because when I picture her in my head, I have the phantom taste of blood in my mouth.

I feel Maverick's fist against my face. The edge of the merry-go-round digging into my spine. I've always had problems with circles, including this hole in the fucking floor.

Lover's Death all those years ago was no exception.

I had a busted blood vessel in my eye for two weeks. Maverick broke my canine tooth. Even now, as I run my tongue over it, I feel the jagged layer left from the piece gone missing. Somewhere in Raven Park. Probably still there with darker secrets and bigger bones. Maybe in eight weeks' time, I'll find it again.

The second girl is Sid Malikova. Silver eyes. A stormy darkness around her small frame. I never knew such bitter violence could come in someone so tiny. And behind her, always looming, is Lucifer. He will *never* let someone get their hands on her again. It wouldn't matter what *she* wanted. He can't breathe without her. I wish I could think him pathetic for it, but Natalie's laughter echoes in my head, silencing any feelings of smugness I might have over Lucifer.

"How?" I don't bother hiding my irritation when I question my father. I don't open my eyes either. Instead, I finger the rosary in my left pocket, the cool metal between the beads grounding me here to this moment.

"Maverick is volatile." Dad speaks with a fondness in those words. He was never a fan of Maddox Astor, and I think he appreciates his son loathed him in life too. Their version of brotherhood never had layers of love buried underneath like the Unsaints. "Lucifer can be used as leverage. Do whatever it takes. Make *Maverick* do it if you have to."

My eyes snap open as I stare across the abyss at my dad. His hands are in the pockets of his tailored black pants, his eyes on me. "He won't," I inform him. He might hurt them in other ways. Maybe make them wish they were dead. But he would never end their lives.

He loves both of them far too fiercely. It's obvious to everyone but the people who need to see it.

"At the very least..." My father's jaw clenches as his turquoise eyes narrow. I'm taller than he is now by a few inches, yet I get the distinct feeling he's always looking down on me. "Ensure he doesn't mourn *her* absence. Sid can be dealt with in other ways. She is not your priority. But Ella *is*."

Without another word, he turns his back to me. But before he steps down the narrow, dark hallway just beyond the abyss, he speaks again. "Clear your schedule for this evening. We're leaving soon. There's someone you haven't met yet at Shadow Villa..." He laughs, a low, wicked sound. "But tonight, you will."

Shadow Villa.

Located in Acid City, Virginia, on Snake Street.

A land of broken statues.

A barren circle in the woods.

A massive building on property I believe my father owns, but truthfully, I'm not sure. Someone else lives there occasionally, someone in the film industry. I know crews swarm it for footage every now and then, but I've never been told what for, nor have I asked.

My memories of that place are fractured nightmares.

But nothing too bad happened to me there. I might not remember it, but I know I got the scars on my skull in *this* house. I was blessed with blackness on those nights, recalling nothing of the terror I guess I felt.

But at Shadow Villa I saw what happened to Lucifer. And I think I'm the only one who did. I had snuck out that night because I never really fit in with my brothers. I ran into the

woods for solace, a whispered memory of a safe place on an island, and instead I found horror.

I'm not even sure if Lucifer remembers it. He was the one to lead us. He was his father's son. It's why it happened to *him*, and none of the rest of us.

A burden he took from us before he was old enough to understand he'd be doing just that for the rest of our lives. Saving us. Shielding us.

Thinking of it—the wicked property, along with all the horrors *here*—I grip the crucifix tight in my pocket. I'm not even fucking religious, but in a house like this one, you hold onto any sliver of God you can get. Otherwise, the darkness will swallow you whole.

"Lover's Death." I hear the smile in my father's words. "Keep the tradition alive. It's always a good night for someone to disappear."

My heart picks up speed, and I have the urge to run my finger over my scar again, but I don't. I stay perfectly still for a breath. A point on the cross digs into my palm and I feel a sharp pain as I bite my tongue.

My dad speaks again, and my hands feel clammy and slick against the cross in my pocket. "Don't fucking embarrass me, or you'll never see her again."

"Where is she now?" I can't swallow the desperation in my tone and regret instantly fills my lungs, like wet cement poured inside my mouth, thickening the moment it drips down my throat.

Dad laughs, shaking his head once. "She always wanted to be an actress, didn't she?"

My breath catches. I don't take in air.

"You two are fighting again?" *Something like that.* "I'm still surprised she didn't tell you, but maybe tonight you'll catch a glimpse of her."

He walks off without another word, and I breathe in through my nose. Out through my mouth. Dizziness nearly

makes my knees buckle. I grip the edge of the banister, bowing my head over the blackness beneath.

I hate everything about my life.

It's the single thought that blares louder than the others. *I hate everything.*

I fucking hate everything here.

But I know I'm still going to do it. *Halloween*. Dad is right. A good time for girls to disappear at the hands of the Unsaints.

I'm going to Lover's Death then, while Rain Malikov is safe and sound with Brooklin Astor, the unofficial babysitter of us all. I'll spare Rain this shit, because he's my nephew too, in everything but blood.

And yet, that's not quite true either, is it?

I've bled for all of my brothers.

I'd bleed for Rain too.

But the girls are not one of us, and I know what the 6 see. *A weakness. A liability*. Sid holds too many secrets. Ella isn't meant for Maverick. She has nothing to lose, and their downfall is what they envision when they look at her. *Pathetic*. That's how they view her. Her mom, if she ever found out where her daughter ran to, if she ever cared to know, she would sell 6 secrets for her next fix, even if it killed her.

Fucking. Pathetic.

I clench my jaw. My father called me much the same, many times growing up. Even still, I might hate this, and loathe him, but it won't stop me. You're born into the 6, you follow orders.

Or you die. It's very simple.

And Sid... She might not be my priority, but I know the 6 aren't done with her just yet. She is a loose cannon. A wild card. Only so many Astor children can fit in Alexandria before things start to go sideways.

I think though, she might trust me, and I could get Ella to do the same. Maybe I *am* pathetic. Maybe I am as lowly

as my father believes me to be. No one seems to fear me like they do my brothers. But on the plus side, the good thing about being the nice one is how much you're underestimated.

Natalie never saw her addiction coming, did she? It was easy to be her downfall.

And Maverick chipped my tooth Halloween night all those years ago. Fractured my cheekbone.

He wouldn't ever think I'd fuck him over again.

That night I hadn't meant to.

But this Halloween?

It's a little different.

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IV

Lucifer

PRESENT: MONDAY, OCTOBER 1

SANCTUM

SILENCE IS THE ONLY SOUND. My brothers stand by my side, the five of us forming a circle, joined by the three remaining members of the 6, and...others. Others in the black hooded robes etched with silver snakes; mine and the rest of the Unsaints with a purple skull instead. Though in the absolute darkness of the room, I can see none of these details.

The scent of incense causes my chest to tighten. My eyes close, involuntarily, like I can shut the past away if I don't look at the present.

But it doesn't work that way. It chases me, all the same.

Inside my mind, I see smoke swirling to the ceiling. I feel my stepmother's heavy pants against my throat, her nails raking down my chest. So many times, I wanted to squeeze her neck until I felt it crack. Until she fell into a

lifeless heap on top of me, a solid and unmoving weight. I wanted to come inside of her as she died. I wanted to bury her with the reminder of one thing in her corpse.

Me, me, me.

When I came, and I would, it was to a flash of violence playing out in my brain. Snapping her neck, stopping her breathing, my forearm barred over her nose until the bones gave way beneath the pressure. She was screaming my name in my fantasies because she was losing her useless fucking life to *me*.

I swallow the memories. The desire to wreck her.

It's over now. And two of the three people who love me most in this world did that. Murdered her, violently. *For me*.

A hum begins to fill the room. A cold chill runs down my spine as I blink in the dark, trying to ignore the thick, herbal scent filling the inner sanctuary of Sanctum.

No, I realize. It's not a hum at all.

The notes of a piano. This underground room is as large as the entire cathedral; I have no doubt a piano is tucked into a shadowy corner of the space, and since we were escorted down here in nothing but blackness, it could've been here all along.

I wonder though, who the fuck is playing it.

The music is high and cheerful, in the strangest way.

Then the notes drop.

Maverick, to my left, sways toward me, his shoulder brushing mine, like a reassurance. I clench my teeth, my head bowed, the hood of my robe pulled low over my eyes. The fabric feels itchy, despite the fact I'm dressed beneath, in all black.

I hate these ceremonies. I hate the 6. And I hate how I don't know everyone in this fucking room. But my uncles rank far higher than I do, regardless of the fact I'm the son of a former *Dominus* and the current leader of the Unsaints. If they don't want to give us anything, well, we get nothing.

Next month though, *November*, things change. Elijah informed me as much. Apparently, having a child is some kind of factor in rising through the ranks.

I just wonder what sort of hell I have to endure in silence before we get to *Ortus*.

The melody is haunting now, and I'm aware of the gun stowed in the back of my pants. A breach of protocol, but Elijah has been off his game lately, and no one bothered to check me for fucking weapons when I came in here just before midnight.

Someone starts to chant alongside the music of the piano, and I'm surprised to hear Russian instead of Latin. But I know what the single word means, regardless of the language.

Rebirth.

Over and over again, a low voice, singular, because the rest of us dare not speak. I have no doubt I'm not the only one with a fucking weapon, and the 6 always know just how to keep us in line, guns or not.

My mind flicks to Lilith. Rain. My entire body grows rigid, and I have to take long, deep breaths to keep myself here, in this room; my presence support of something I'm not sure I believe in any longer. Something I'm not sure I ever did.

My wife. My son. *That's my fucking religion.*

I want to go home and worship.

The chant picks up, harsher, more voices joining. Those of the 6. Lower. Darker. The pianist plucks one final, dark note, and the voices have no lull as the echo fades. No break. Just the single Russian word, over and over and—

Silence.

The voices stop all at once, startling me with the quiet.

Something flares behind my closed eyelids, vivid and red, like a spark of light.

I open my eyes, but it's gone. Vanished. Only the scent of smoke mingling with incense any proof it had ever

existed at all.

Still, I think I see something in the afterglow... In the center of the circle.

Something.

Someone.

“Lucifer.” My name spoken from an unfamiliar voice, heavily accented. *Russian.*

I say nothing. My mouth is dry, but I know what’s happening. It’s similar to another ceremony.

Death. It’s typically *mortem*, the Latin word, laced in the chanting, when someone dies for their—or our—sins.

But not tonight.

My stomach swoops.

No, tonight...

“*By your hand, he is ours.*” The same voice. Speaking to me.

I clench my hands into fists.

Home. I want to go home. No more flinching, I have too much to live for to ever long for death again.

By your hand, he is ours.

I know what this means. Those words.

I’ve been at ceremonies just like this, when the 6 inducted new members to various subcults, then they were sent to different corners of the world. I was very young, but I remember the words spoken. For those who didn’t serve from Alexandria. Who flew back to Moscow, Dubai, Dublin, London. Other places where the 6 could subtly corrupt the government and get away with it, over and over and over again. Pull the strings of politicians.

Puppet masters. It’s what we are.

I know what this ceremony means, but I’ve never had to do it before. Never taken more than a passive role. None of my brothers have. It’s always been something we’ve simply listened to and observed, and always in Latin.

I don’t like what I think this means.

A. New. Fucking. Member.

My body feels hot.

In the quiet, thinking of twisted family, my mind conjures up my stepmother again. What my wife and Maverick did to her.

A smile curves my lips.

I'm leaving here alive, whatever it takes. I don't know who is in the center of this circle, and I don't really want to know why. But I'll do what needs to be done because I have a reason to live. I'll repeat what I've witnessed when I was simply able to stand on the sidelines.

I step forward, and I hear a rumble of approval.

The snick of a match, then a sconce is lit. A shadowy figure moves around the inner circle, lighting another fixture. Two poles on either side of the body at my feet, the slate gray of the cement floor glows beneath the light.

The person who lit the sconces recedes back into the circle of eleven around me. Around the victim, the initiate—I assume—lying before me.

A cold sweat breaks out over my neck as I think of Lilith. What would happen to Rain if I did not obey tonight.

I don't want to grow this brotherhood. We can't fit any more loyalty in our veins. But perhaps this one will be sent away like the others. Maybe the Russian means nothing at all. Maybe it's not just meant for *my* ears, like an implicit directive.

My eyes drop to the plastic body bag, and I bring my fingers up to the edges of my hood, flipping it back off my face. I'm grateful for the fingerless skeleton gloves I wore tonight. I won't get blood all over my fucking hands.

My smile inches higher, thinking of the bloodshed.

Suddenly, I feel very differently than I did a moment ago. It's like I'm a little high, which is something I've been struggling with *not* being for months now.

Diapers and bottles and lullabies. Coming off of coke, and desperately craving it. Sleepless nights and a despondent wife struggling with the realities of a child.

I'm not dealing with any of that right now.

Tonight, I'm not a father.

Tonight, *I'm a fucking demon.*

"By your hand..." A voice in my ear. I know this one very well. *Intimately.* I turn my head, looking over my shoulder. The candelabras glow over the sharp planes of Mav's face, most of him hidden by the robe's hood over his head, but his pale blue eyes are alight, locked onto mine. He looks for a moment as if he's searching for something in my gaze.

For a second, I think of all we've been through together. My mouth on his. His body on top of mine. The way he has *always* had my back.

I think of loyalty to the grave. Bones buried with secrets.

It's this. *It's him.*

Then he reaches around me and puts something in my hand. It's leather and solid and I know it instantly as the hilt of a knife when my fingertips graze the leather handle. My wife carries so many around, I'd recognize the feel of them in any room, darkened for ritual or not.

"He is ours." Mav whispers the words, his lips an inch from mine. I can smell his breath, clean, like mint, tinged with the softest herbal scent of marijuana.

I close my fingers around the grip of the knife. He releases it, then covers his hand with my own, holding onto me. His touch is cold even through the fabric of my gloves, and we don't look away from one another as silence fills the room.

His jaw is clenched, his lips pressed together. His eyes dip down to my mouth, and it seems as if he might say something else. Something beyond the standard initiation lines. But a second passes and he releases me, retreating into the darkness, the line of eleven standing around me.

Thirteen people breathing in this room, minus the pianist.

But that number might dwindle very soon.

I swallow the sudden knot in my throat. Now is not the time to grow a fucking conscience or consider what Maverick's lingering gaze means.

I turn to the person in the body bag at my feet. Heavy, nearly opaque plastic, yet the man—and it must be a man, because this is the 6 after all, and just like the mafia, they've made zero strides toward inclusivity because it's the very thing they fight against—is sitting up.

The light from the flames flicker over the curve of his head, his shoulders, and I think his arms are behind his back, from what I can see. He's dressed all in black. Perhaps a plain black robe of his own, without the silver snake on the hood, or the purple skull.

He won't have that yet.

But maybe, for reasons I don't understand, when I'm done with him, he will.

Maybe. If he survives.

He shuffles a little, a movement which gets him nowhere, only succeeding in rumpling the bag. He's awake. Drugged, likely, and bound with a gag to save us all the annoyance of hearing him beg and plead. Although if he's 6 material like my uncles seem to believe he is, he'd do none of that.

Then again, a knife through muscle hurts no matter who the fuck you are.

I squat down on one knee, the other bent as I rest my wrist on it, twirling the knife between my fingers.

There's quiet around us all, and I can't even hear my heart beating. It's steady in my chest.

I was born from evil, bred in darkness, baptized in cruelty.

I am Lucifer fucking Malikov, and I was created to do this.

My blood warms, and I think of my stepmother again. My father's blind eye, the smirk on his face when I told him. His taunts. Hits. Bruises.

A rope around my throat. Spinning in a dark forest. Shadowy memories that never become opaque.

Lilith fucking a man who haunted my childhood, a man whose very existence mocked me with all the ways my life could get that much fucking worse.

I think of Rain Valentin Malikov. *My son.* I think of the day he was born. August seventh. Of the message given to me by the 6. *"If anyone in your family betrays us, his blood will spill at your feet."*

I tighten my grip on the handle of the knife. My pulse is still even.

No one moves around me, not even the initiate. I think I hear something, like a strangled sound to my left, where I know Atlas stands in the circle. But the moment passes, and I could've imagined the noise.

Then a voice speaks from behind me, and I know it's my brother's; he was tasked with this to prove just how far we'd go for one another. *Would he push me if I was standing on the edge of a cliff and the 6 told him to? How far does our loyalty go?*

But he doesn't have to push me. Not right now. All he has to say is, *"Incipe."*

Begin.

And, with no more hesitation, I do.

Pammie. Jeremiah in a cage. My dad's brutality. The ring on his finger. The red rope around my throat. Being reborn. A pounding inside my head. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

I need my dad, I need my dad, I need you, I need you.

Lilith leaving. Maverick telling me. Imagining her being raped by Jeremiah, our child suffering at his hands.

The scar on her hip.

He took a knife to her skin.

He fucking made her bleed for him.

Something warm sprays across my face.

My lips part, and I taste iron on my tongue, over my teeth. My arm is aching, but I lift it again, bringing it down

over the body on the ground before me, my other palm flat on the cold concrete, one knee grinding into the cement. A whimper leaves the initiate's lips as I drive the blade into his shoulder, but I know I don't cut through muscle because the knife doesn't stick inside of him. I'm familiar with the way it feels when it does. It's satisfying lodging sharp steel into a human body.

But this time, the downward arc of my movement only brings the blade's tip to the concrete, through the plastic of the bag, jarring my own shoulder.

I'm breathing hard, and I don't know how many times I've cut him when I go to lift the weapon again, eager to drive it into his fucking skull—*just like I did at Sacrificium with my useless fucking father*—when fingers wrap around my upper arm, and a forearm is barred over my chest. Someone is saying my name, dragging me backward. I stumble on my feet.

I want to fight.

I want to silence my dad's voice inside my head, the look in his eyes, the way we are nearly carbon copies of one another, in more than just the physical. He is everything I cannot escape. But Maverick pries the knife from my trembling fingers and drops it to the ground, and I *refuse* to fall apart again.

I don't do that anymore. My family depends on me.

I take a breath as Mav's hand comes to my shoulder, massaging me.

"It's over, Luce, you're done—"

I throw his arm off, twisting around to stare into his eyes. "Fuck. *Off.*" The copper taste of blood is sharper when I speak, but I ignore it as I get my balance again, turning my back to Maverick and wiping my hand over my mouth.

The figure on the floor is slumped over, rips in the plastic revealing nothing but torn black fabric and crimson, dripping along pale skin.

I lift my gaze, directly across the circle, to Elijah Carter van Damme. *Dominus*.

His dark hazel eyes appear black, and he stares back at me.

“Am I fucking done here?” My wife. My son. *Home*. My pulse is still calm inside my chest. None of those memories assaulting me a second ago are there anymore.

There’s only silence, in my head, and inside this room.

Elijah glances at the man on the floor. Then he opens his mouth, but before he can get a word out, another, colder voice cuts him off.

“Now take him home.”

I turn my gaze to the left and catch vivid blue eyes staring back at me.

The man steps forward, a smile on his face, and I note the shock of dark hair over his brow. The silver snake on his hood. He’s 6, or else he wouldn’t have it. His eyes are a strange blue, familiar somehow. He could be in his late thirties, maybe forties.

Something itches in the back of my brain, a memory worming its way out. But I can’t quite grasp it. It’s tinged with pain, blurred with trauma. *Who are you? I know you.*

“Excuse me?” I face him fully, aware of the gun in the back of my pants. But it’s under my robe. It will take too long to grab if this man has a weapon in his hands, folded behind his back.

He flashes white teeth when he smiles, no doubt noting the track of my eyes. “I have heard so much about your stubbornness, Lucifer; it is really incredible to witness how it has grown, in person.”

I clench my teeth together, sensing someone take half a step closer to me at my side.

Maverick. I know without looking. But so does this man.

He holds up one hand—no gun and I note he doesn’t have an X on his palm—to stay Mav, without looking away

from me. "I suppose it is your blatant disregard for tradition which gave you your wife and son."

My body feels very cold with those words.

He drops his hand. "Congratulations." It sounds genuine, which is exactly how I know it's not.

But I don't speak. If he wants something from me, he can fucking spell it out.

He nods toward the body I've mutilated for him and everyone in this fucking room. "He goes home with you, if he is still alive." His blue eyes slice to mine, a smile still fixed on his face. He's daring me to argue.

I say nothing.

"He stays there until I find a suitable position for him."

That memory is stretching, growing. *Who are you?* I've seen him before. I should know.

Who. The fuck. Are you?

Woods, dirt, the taste of blood. It's the only thing I can grasp, and even that is at the very edges of my mind, floating through a web of darkness like the rope around my neck. Vague glimpses of horrors I'm not even sure are mine.

I can feel the tension in the fucking room. Everyone is waiting for my reaction, including this man. He's spoken instead of *Dominus*, which means his rank is higher. But I couldn't give less of a fuck about his rank, or his command. Elijah is my uncle, blood or not, and I listen to him because of it. Because he's not a completely useless asshole like my dad. I respect this *Dominus*, as much as I respect anyone, I guess.

But this man? I don't fucking know him, and I don't fucking trust him, and I'm not listening to shit he has to say.

I cock my head, smiling at him.

He doesn't blink.

"Yeah? And who the fuck are you?"

The man arches a brow, but there's no hint of anger on his face. It's amusement, the way his lips pull up a little at the corner. He lifts his hands and pulls back his hood. I see his hair is wavy, most of it gelled back. Beneath his robe, there's the hint of a tie. He's wearing a suit.

"You do not remember me, Lucifer?" he asks softly, words curled with something like glee. He sighs, clasping his hands behind his back again and glancing at the floor. I see his leather shoes, inches from my black Chucks. "Well, I suppose you would have a few problems, after the..." He lifts his gaze back to mine. "*Incident.*" He enunciates the word carefully. With purpose. It makes my skin crawl.

I don't outwardly react. It's what he wants. To push me.

Lilith. Rain. Home.

"Either way, it is neither here nor there." He glances toward the body again. "He stays with you. It is an order." His tone hardens and gone are his sly, manipulative tactics. I recognize this shift well. It's how my father would change too, when he had other places to be. More important things to do.

But I don't give a fuck about what this man has to do.

No one is staying in my home, order or not.

I smile at him and see his eyes narrow because he's done playing games, but I never even started. I shrug out of my robe, hearing Elijah hiss my name to my left, but I ignore him, letting the robe drop to the fucking floor. I smooth down my black hoodie, reach around and pull the gun from the waistband of my boxer briefs and my black sweats. My finger is on the trigger as I tap the gun against my thigh, and this man is looking between me and the Glock with his lips pressed together and a crease between his brows.

"Find someone else. He's not staying with me." Then I turn my back to him, step carefully over the person lying motionless on the ground, and head toward the stairwell. Cain and Atlas make up the bodies I need to get through to

leave, and they both step aside, Cain knocking his shoulder casually but with cold violence against someone I don't know standing on his other side, a 6 robe covering his features.

I give my brothers a head nod, then shoot my eyes to the stairwell. I'm fucking done here.

I hear movement behind me and sense shadows following.

I can't bite back my smile at who I know is Cain, Ezra, Atlas, and Maverick, taking up guard and following me out of here.

Yet as I reach for the curved silver banister of the stairs, clenching my fingers around it, one foot on the bottom step, I hear the man speak down below.

I stop, listening.

"You will find the most monstrous of your *familia* have vast amounts of patience, Lucifer Malikov. Your father defied tradition by marrying a woman not meant for him."

I clench my jaw, thinking of my mother's car crash. Of all the times I wondered if my father had killed her himself, to marry the woman who would become my nightmare.

"We waited until he had *you*."

My trigger finger twitches on the gun, still held by my side. I close my fingers tighter around the banister, refusing to look back. My father was a monster, but is this man saying in this one thing, he wasn't to blame?

I don't think I believe it. But then the man speaks again, trying to cast out any doubt in my reeling thoughts. "Then we murdered her, to make it hurt... *just a little more*."

I feel something at my back. A hand pressed flat to my spine. One of my brothers.

I don't react to the words, or the touch, even as I feel sick, my stomach burning.

"Your son is very cute, Lucifer."

I want to fucking puke. *How the fuck would he know?* The only photo I sent of my son was to someone I hate

more than anyone else in this world, and I know he wouldn't pass it along, if only to protect my wife.

The 6 have seen Rain—something which made Sid very uneasy when they stepped into our home—but even they weren't allowed to take photos.

I'm holding air tightly in my lungs, and it burns at the back of my throat, but I know this fucker isn't finished.

"Your wife is *stunning*." He pronounces the word with care, his accent curving around it like he no doubt wants to curve around *her*.

My heart hammers rapidly inside of my chest for the first time all night.

"*Obedience*." My nostrils flare as he keeps talking. "*Discipline*. You remember your virtues, do you not?" He doesn't wait for me to answer, likely knowing I won't. "In case you have forgotten the most important among the 6, hug your beautiful little family tightly tonight as you reflect on it."

I stay completely still.

"*Self. Sacrifice*."

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V
Lucifer
MONDAY, OCTOBER 1
S A N C T U M

“WHO THE FUCK WAS THAT?” It’s Ezra who asks the question first, leaning against his dark gray Audi—which he hasn’t wrecked in a while—hands in the pockets of his ripped, black pants which are tucked into slate-colored military boots.

The first night of October is unseasonably cold, my shoulder is aching, and I’ve stripped off my gloves and tossed them into the trunk of my blue M5. All I want is to go the fuck home to Lilith and Rain, but I run this shit, so I have to deal with the aftermath of what just fucking happened.

I’ve got a cigarette pinched between my thumb and forefinger, and I bring it to my lips, inhaling and watching the cherry grow bright in the night.

I glance at Sanctum, a quarter of a mile away down the dirt road we drove out on to put some distance between ourselves and the 6. Sprawling gray stone, a cross atop the steeple, stained-glass windows, and a paved parking lot. Our new headquarters, it looks so similar to the old one, Jeremiah fucking Rain shouldn't have wasted his time burning it down. I clench my front teeth around the cigarette, thinking of him and wondering where the fuck he is.

Unlike my half-brother, *we're* still here, the evil carried with us. The only difference, I guess, is the gated cemetery around back of the church isn't full of our dead relatives.

Yet.

"And where's Atlas?" Mav's words. I look at him, his McLaren's rear close to the grill of my BMW. We're parked in a twisted circle made up of mine, Mav's and Ezra's vehicles, plus Cain's blacked-out Camaro. Cain is leaning against his car, fucking around on his phone, probably playing a game or something because we don't have any service out here. An intentional thing.

I exhale smoke through my nose, holding Mav's baby blue gaze, which seems to glow in the dark. Bass beats from Ezra's Audi filter through the quiet of the still night, a dense forest at our back, fields surrounding the new Sanctum. A desolate road, the 6 snapped up all the land alongside it.

I pull again from the cigarette, then drop it and grind it out with my shoe, shoving my hands into my hoodie pocket. Taking a deep breath, I catch the scent of something rotting. Pungent and meaty.

Probably a dead animal. We're beside a forest in North Carolina after all, and it's almost hunting season.

I shrug my shoulders against the cold and the stench, my breath coming out in little clouds I can see by the interior glow of Ezra's car.

“Said he had to talk to his dad a second.” Cain answers Mav’s question, but his dark eyes are still glued to his phone. The only one of us not in a hoodie, he’s got on a tailored wool coat. From the light of his screen, I see blue and purple swollen beneath one eye from his latest fight down at Nox, the gym we own in the heart of downtown Alexandria.

Ezra turns, ducking down through the rolled-down window of his Audi and pulling something from the car. When he spins back around, he’s got a silver flask with a skull on it in hand.

I glance up at him, and his hazel eyes meet mine as he takes a pull, no remorse on his face. It’s the kind of thing money can buy. A lack of shame, where our vices are concerned.

When he’s done with the flask, he pushes it into the zip-up pocket of the bomber vest over his black hoodie. He jerks his chin to me. “You got anything to say, *Dominus*?” If he only knew how apt the title was. But Elijah entrusted the information regarding Ortus solely to me. I can’t even tell my wife, or I risk losing the ascension.

I arch a brow, tilting my head. I know Ezra’s not referring to his alcoholism. I couldn’t give less of a fuck about that. Although I think briefly of how he’s usually with Brooklin—the sister Maverick *didn’t* fuck—and her confession she’s off Adderall now after admitting to a problem with it from her time with Jeremiah, and how hanging out with an alcoholic all the time is a sure fire way to pick back up an addiction. She’s once again in Alexandria, her escapade to the coast a failure. I trust her to watch Rain for minutes at a time here and there for Sid to shower or run when I’m not home. I don’t bring her up now though. It’s not the time. Instead, I say to Ezra, “It’s *your* dad calling the shots. You tell *me* who the fuck that was.”

“Which one? The Russian fucker who gave you an order you didn’t follow, or the young kid you probably just murdered?” There’s an edge to Ezra’s words, and I wonder about his mom, Edith. The kidnapping we never solved, as far as I know. I wonder what kind of secrets he’s keeping, and if he’s sharing any of them with Brooklin.

Mav laughs, a boyish sound, and I catch the scent of marijuana at the exact same time I turn and see him pulling from a hand-rolled joint, tucking the lighter back into the pocket of his black joggers. He swallows the smoke into his lungs, tips up his chin, and exhales from his nose with a smirk on his face.

“You know,” he says, pinching the end of the joint as he lowers his hand by his side and scuffs a black boot in the dirt. His eyes lift to mine beneath heavy lashes, pinning me with his gaze. He brings up his free hand, the one with my fucking wife’s name on it, and circles his index finger around his eyes. “He had Malikov eyes.”

My blood runs cold as the tickling of a memory drifts forward from the back of my mind.

A rope. Darkness. I was spinning. My head felt so... strange.

I remember *that*. It’s everything else I can’t hold onto.

A bitter taste is on my tongue, and I shake my head once, trying to clear the cobwebs of my mind. There’s something *there*, but it’s so far beyond my reach, I can’t quite grab it.

Mav spits on the ground before he inhales once more from his joint. When he blows out smoke again, through his nose, he mutters, “Fucking stinks out here.”

I sniff on reflex and regret it, tensing at the scent of something dead. If it is a goddamn deer, that’s a problem because hunters shouldn’t be anywhere *near* here.

“He’s from Rival’s Claw.” Cain’s indifferent words cut into my thoughts, confusing me for a second.

Mav and I both turn to stare at Cain as he pushes his phone into the pocket of his coat, his dark gaze on mine. I sense Ezra watching too.

The name is vaguely familiar but it's like looking into the eyes of the Russian man at Sanctum. I can't *remember* clearly.

"The overseers of the 6," Cain keeps going, filling in the gaps of my mind from the history of our brotherhood I've forgotten, parts of my childhood blank in spots, like a second-hand puzzle with missing pieces. "Governor of most cults on the East Coast, high-ranking gangs. Italian Mafia, Bratva, some cartels. They all report to RC. Moscow headquarters with a frequent liaison in Wilmington *and* Virginia." Cain clears his throat, a slow smile spreading on his face, causing the purple and black bruise to crease. "And Mikhail Malikov, *Boaz*, is your father's brother."

Silence rings out, but I feel nothing with his words. No sense of fear or respect or desire to know my family. I feel nothing except a vast pit of emptiness. I knew my dad had a sibling. I must have met him before. But none of us are close to any extended family. Still, Dad went to Moscow all the time. Brought back prostitutes and sent them to me, whether I wanted them or not. To make me a *man*, I was to use them. I didn't, most of the time, but sometimes...well, sometimes I fucking did.

Thus, *Mikhail* must have come by too, like the girls Dad flew in. But I can't think of any time I've met him. I can't recall any memory connected to him at all. Just a vague... *knowing*.

"All right, Mr. Encyclopedia, how the fuck do you know all this about Luce's fucked-up family tree? And what the fuck is *Boaz*?" Mav demands, unease threaded through his words as he glances at me, and back to Cain. As if his family tree isn't just as fucked.

Cain shrugs one massive shoulder. "I was with Alivia at Nox last night." *Alivia*. The name snags in my brain. A

childhood friend of his, he never talks about her, much like I don't speak of Ophelia. The fact he mentioned her surprises me, but his tone doesn't change with his words. "Mikhail came by the gym with some chick to talk to Dad. Dad filled me in after your uncle left. RC is here to look into Edith's abduction." He glances at Ezra, whose jaw tightens, then snaps his gaze back to me. "Sid's former stalker. Not you, by the way." Cain doesn't smile but I know it's supposed to be a joke. I stay perfectly still, remembering the photos left on Elijah's dead guard's lap. I assumed Jeremiah had something to do with it. Some sort of distraction. I guess the 6 don't think so. "And the fuckery happening with all of us. I tried to tell you, but you didn't reply to my text last night, Lucy boy." His dark eyes flash when he uses the name Mav sometimes calls me.

Yeah, I didn't reply to his text because I was rocking Rain to sleep. He didn't have a good night last night. I can feel that exhaustion weighing on my shoulders even now.

"Boaz is a nickname. Every member of RC takes one. And *your* uncle is the leader—"

"Don't call him that." I snap the words out. "He's no fucking family of mine. But go back a second. Mikhail, what do you mean he was with some *chick*?"

Cain shrugs. "Bad as fuck, latched onto his arm like candy."

I narrow my eyes. "Who was she? And why are you taking *Alivia* to Nox?" That gym isn't open to the public.

"Is she who hit you?" Mav asks with amusement, glancing at Cain's bruises. "And does she look as roughed up as you do?"

The corner of Cain's mouth twitches, and I don't know if it's a grimace or a smile he's trying to hide. "I don't hit girls."

I glance at Maverick and watch as he exhales smoke through his nose again. He shrugs one shoulder and says lazily, "Can't relate."

I don't want to hear any more about his fucking kinks. "So, who was with *Mikhail*?" I press, trying to get us back on topic.

But before Cain can reply, Ezra swears under his breath. When I glance at him, he's not looking at us. He's got his phone's flashlight on, his flask in one hand, and I see the metal lid is missing. He walks away from the circle, searching for the damn thing.

I roll my eyes and look back at Cain.

"I didn't get any details on the girl except she had a huge cross around her neck, and she's got a fat ass and big —"

"There's gotta be something dead this way. Smells worse over here." Ezra's deep voice cuts off Cain's useless information. Ezra is probably about to find the fucking deer or whatever.

"We'll buy you a new one, Ez, don't pick it up from fucking *carrion*." Of course Maverick would use the word "carrion." Cain might be an encyclopedia, but Mav is a 19th century poem.

"Anyway," Cain continues, his tone even as Ezra wanders further away. I glance over my shoulder for a second and see the flashlight of his phone jerking haphazardly over the cold ground. "We've clearly got some visitors. *You...*" His eyes narrow onto mine. "Need to ensure you do *not* fuck up while Mikhail is here. Not when you've got Rain to worry about—"

"*Fuck*," Ezra says again, something like panic furred in his words as he interrupts Cain.

Slowly, we both drag our gazes toward Ezra. He's far from the circle, and we can only see him by the glow of his phone's flashlight, several yards away standing with his back toward us, gazing out at the dying grass in the field.

I push off from my car and pull the gun from the back of my pants, my finger on the trigger. Cain and Maverick

follow as I squeeze between mine and Ezra's cars, my shoes scuffing in the dirt at the same time headlights swing in this direction, coming from Sanctum.

I stop walking, glancing up, and Cain says, "Just Atlas's Range." He seems to be coming pretty damn fast along the bumpy dirt road, and I feel dread twist a knot in my gut, but I don't know why. It's like my brothers and I have this connection I can't explain, where we read each other without words, and tonight, it feels like something bad is about to happen between us.

I tighten my grip on the Glock.

Then I tear my eyes from Atlas approaching and close the space between me and Ezra, my brothers fanning out around us as Atlas parks his car adjacent to Ezra's, and I hear the silence creeping as he cuts the engine.

I stop short when my shoulder brushes Ezra's, jostling his flashlight over what he's staring at, the rest of him completely still.

There's a sour taste on my tongue, the hair stiffening along the back of my neck, and that rotting scent swells.

Because curled up in a fetal position at our feet is a goddamn body.

And as my eyes trail over the blue of his bloated, bare toes, the whites of his wide-open eyes, deep gashes across his face like he was whipped, and the bullet wound in the center of his temple, wrists and ankles bound by thick, black twine, his bare chest exposed because he's only wearing damp, white boxers—like he pissed himself before or after he was shot—Atlas's footsteps sound behind us.

There are more lashes, across his torso. Was he whipped for punishment? Or to leave a message? Both? *Why?*

There's something written on the inner bicep of his left arm, scrawled silver marker with the word, *Silentium*.

Silence, in Latin. *What the fuck?*

Atlas walks around our semi-circle, so he's on the other side of the body as he looks down.

I tear my eyes away from the corpse, and I note Atlas's dark gaze is bloodshot, his face pale. Slowly, he shifts his focus to me, and for a long moment, all five of us stand in silence around a corpse while Atlas and I stare off.

Then he says, his voice clear and alarmingly calm, "It's Natalie's little brother. Samson."

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VI

Lucifer

MONDAY, OCTOBER 1
ALEXANDRIA UNIVERSITY

THE COLLEGIATE Gothic architecture isn't how I remember it, but nothing has changed. Mercy Tower still stands tall and looming in the night. Next to it, the Malikov Science building's spiky turrets jab against the stars, stretching for the full moon. From my view—tucked against a gray stone column of Fren Hall, a cigarette between my fingers—everything looks the same. It's just, in my memories, Alexandria University's entire campus is tainted with a drab, pitying hopelessness.

A girl dressed as Lilith with a gun strapped on her thigh changed all of that for me one Halloween, but that was after I graduated.

Monday night in October, a few students walk with their heads down, books or phones clutched to their chests, a couple of girls in a group shooting glances my way, giggling

as they quickly walk off. But all the lights are off at Fren—home to literature professors; a building Lilith would love—and no classes will meet tonight. Could be divine timing, or it could have a little something to do with—

“Salve.” *Elijah*. “You seem to create a little fan club everywhere you go.”

I bring the cigarette to my mouth, turning as I face Dominus, his back pressed to the stone column opposite mine. He has his hands in the pockets of his beige jacket, his dark green eyes unfocused as he watches people in the courtyard at my back. We stand around the side entrance of Fren, obscure and thrown in shadow.

Elijah doesn't look as if he just supervised the crude burial of a teenager's corpse. Then again, I probably don't either.

As I pull from my fix, the nicotine fills my lungs, but something else does too. Like guilt, and it's not about the dead body. It's the fact *I'm trying to quit smoking*.

I drop the cigarette when I exhale from my nose, then extinguish the cherry with my black Chuck, the sound a scuff in the night. “I would've jumped all over that shit back then, but I'm taken now by a woman who plays with knives. Wouldn't want to put those girls in any danger.”

“I would have thought that *woman* would carve some sense into you. What you did tonight was foolish.” Despite his admonishment, he still doesn't look at me. I know it's not from any meekness on his part. He's scanning the area, ensuring our relative privacy. His broad shoulders lack tension, but the way his eyes jump over every detail of my former campus, I know he's on alert. “You have asked for something, I've promised to give it, and in exchange...” He trails off, waiting for me to supply the rest.

I obey. But I don't say that. I don't think I could ever force those words out of my mouth now. Maybe to my father, before I killed him. Before I had something greater than him to bow for. That *something* is certainly not Elijah.

“You couldn’t have told me?” I keep my voice low, and I stare at the side of Fren as I speak. If anyone looked our way, they’d think we were merely strangers on some sort of prolonged smoke break, our heads turned in opposite directions.

“No.” The answer doesn’t waver. “You are to obey without question, and if Boaz had any hint you knew he was coming, you would arrive home to a family of corpses.”

I ignore the last part, so I don’t kill Dominus. Instead, I focus on the first. *Boaz*. “I don’t recall the term, or Rival’s Claw. And I don’t remember Mikhail *fucking* Malikov.” I also don’t mention the fact Cain knew of him from Callum and tried to warn me. I decide to keep that sliver of loyalty to myself.

Elijah sighs audibly. “Yes, but since I didn’t say his name, I assume one of your brothers did remember.” *Oh*. “It’s a good thing they have your back, Luce, where your memory is... faulty.” He says it the same way Mikhail said “incident.” It burns inside my brain. “Lamia tried to shield you from RC most of your life,” he speaks lowly.

At the mention of my mother’s name, I feel as if the world is falling away. Brown hair, light eyes, gentleness. That’s all I can recall of her.

I tense, my hands pushed into my hoodie pocket, my body rigid. But I clench and unclench my jaw several times before I react. “What’s next?” I blink, trying to clear the vivid vision of Mikhail Malikov’s blood splattering the stone wall of the English building. That would solve many of my problems. “And why else is he here? Is it for Edith? What happened with her? Who took those photos of Sid?”

A muscle in Elijah’s neck jumps but he does not look at me. *Yeah, doesn’t feel so hot when someone is after your fucking wife, huh?* “It’s likely Jeremiah, or someone connected to him, had a hand in both those things.” I do my best not to scream when I hear my fucking half-brother’s name. It feels as if I can never escape it. “Boaz is only here

to confirm, and to look into what happened to the governor.”

Phil Cooper was attacked inside his own mansion, then placed in a private hospital for *weeks*.

“How’s Phil doing, by the way?” I ask casually. I don’t know who did it, but I have a fucking hunch. And due to the darkened rumors I’ve heard about him, I don’t feel any type of pity for his assault.

Elijah sighs. “Don’t get so giddy. Sometimes the mighty have to stay in place to appease the status quo. You want something Phil would be very helpful in giving. A person with morals takes his place and it’s hard to get an in, you understand?”

I roll my eyes, but I don’t speak.

“And as for you and your task, Mikhail has decided it’s easier this way, with your refusal. The initiate will heal, *briefly*, the ceremonies will continue, then... he stays with you.”

“No.” Forgoing protocol, I drag my gaze to Elijah. “I thought you heard me the first time.”

I can see the tension in his forehead, a vein threatening to burst, even as he continues to face away from me. He’s under his own pressure, dealing with his familial messes. But I don’t care. I won’t have a stranger in my home.

“Two things will happen when you refuse.” Elijah’s words are remarkably calm, his gaze flickering around AU. “You can forget your request to me, and...” He cuts his eyes to mine. “You can forget the safety of your family.”

“If he’s in my home, I think I’m already forgoing that, don’t you?” I speak coldly, but it’s hot anger in my chest. I’ve jumped through a lot of fucking hoops for my wife and my son. They *deserve* to be protected. And I will give up *everything* for that.

“Don’t act like a child,” Elijah snarls, his gaze narrowing. “The initiate is a wounded, confused *mess*—”

“Those are the most dangerous.” *I would know.*

“He does not want to go back to where he came from, and he will not risk his own reward.”

I tilt my head, scanning my eyes up and down Dominus. He’s formidable, expensive, put together. He ranks very high in my world and in the greater world too. But he does not intimidate me. After everything I’ve been through, only Sid could do that. “Which is what? His reward?”

“I couldn’t tell you even if I knew.” And I can’t figure out if he truly does know or not. His body language doesn’t change with his words. “You bring him home, you teach him, and you, Sid, *and* your son are secure.”

I run my tongue over my teeth. I don’t like when he speaks my fucking wife’s name. “How long?” I haven’t agreed, but I’m not stupid enough to tempt the 6. Not right now.

“Halloween.”

It’s like my heart skips a beat. October thirty-first is wrapped in knives, blood, and something like love for me, ever since the night I met my wife. “Where does he go? After that?”

Elijah doesn’t respond before he pushes away from the stone column and turns toward the inner courtyard of Alexandria U. It’s his sign he won’t give me anything else.

“Samson,” I call softly as he takes a step in black brogues, toward the grass. “Who did it?”

Elijah shakes his head once and doesn’t look over his shoulder at me as pinpricks of rain start to drop amongst the grass, but he does respond. “Scrawling Latin in silver on corpses is an RC speciality, but I’m still on the fence. If you figure it out, be sure to let me know.”

VII



MONDAY, OCTOBER 1
THE MALIKOV MANSION

IN THE DARKNESS of the room, standing by my bed, I hear something. My pulse flies and I press a hand to my chest. I know it's okay. *I know I'm fine.* It was the floor creaking, maybe a branch scratching the window. Nothing more. Rain is asleep, safe and sound in his crib, just across the hall. Lucifer insisted we move him there only days ago. I still have the bassinet beside our bed with a lilac-colored fitted sheet, just in case, but his feedings are five hours apart now, and it's manageable.

Still, in the night alone in our home, a shiver drifts down my spine as I stand frozen by the bed. Monday night with a full moon, I'm usually not by myself. Lucifer only has Council on Sundays, but tonight, everyone was called in for fuck knows what.

I'm alone with Rain.

It's storming outside, rain beginning to lash against the windowpanes. Thunder rumbles every so often, and even with our heavy drapes, blue-violet forks of lightning flash inside the room. My mind races, nightmare scenarios of men in robes, coming up the stairs, guns in hand.

The fear squeezes my chest as I try to blink the paranoia away.

I pull open the top drawer of my nightstand and my fingers close around the leather handle of the switchblade, my thumb on the trigger. I stride across the room in nothing but my oversized tank top and sleep shorts. My eyes feel heavy with the need for sleep, the hardwoods are cold on my bare feet, and my mind is fuzzy because I'm not thinking clearly and haven't been for a while now.

Every night, I see him in my dreams.

My dad.

Even now, as I step out into the hall, sweeping my eyes to the left, the right, soft motion lights flickering on with my appearance, I can *feel* the warmth of his blood on my skin. The gunshot rings inside of my head.

Did you regret it? Did you ever love me? Ever wonder about me? Even once? Did it eat you alive at night? Did you ever think about all the men who touched your daughter, Daddy?

My muscles feel tense, my mind conjuring the worst memories as I hurry to my son's room. I push open the door, gripping the knife tightly with my free hand. Inhaling, I catch the scent of lavender swirled together with Rain's innocent, baby smell.

Lucifer says he smells like me.

I'm positive I've never been so innocent in any sense. It was all stripped away from me before I got a say.

But I've started to take pride in being grown from evil.

It's how I survived.

A dark angel nightlight casts a faint purple glow inside my son's bedroom, and my gaze immediately goes to his

black crib. He's on his back, and I can see through the spokes he's still inside his purple sleep sack, his arms bracketing his beautiful, peaceful face.

Still, I cross the room, my palm sweaty as I tighten my grip on the knife, and I reach inside with my empty hand, pressing it softly to his warm chest. Only when I feel his breaths underneath my fingertips do I start to relax, the smallest measure.

He's safe. He's safe. He's—

"What the fuck are you doing?" Those raspy words cause me to jump, and I spin around, holding the knife up at an angle, ready to drive it into someone's heart.

Inches from me, my eyes find vivid blue ones, piercing through the darkness of the room.

"Lucifer." I breathe his name out with relief, my body immediately softening as I start to lower my hand. But before I can, my husband has crossed the space between us and he's grabbing my wrist in a tight grip. He slides his fingers down my hand, pulling the knife violently from my hold. I take a quick breath, surprised at his hot wave of anger, but before I can say a word, he's stepping close to me, cornering me against the crib, the railing digging into my spine as he presses the blade to my throat, the steel cold on my skin. He forces my chin up, so I'm looking into his eyes, and I don't see love right now.

"Answer me, Lilith." He snarls those words, and my chest heaves as he stares down at me, dressed all in black, skeleton bandana around his neck.

My hands are clenched into fists, my knees feel weak, and my heart drums hard in my chest. *"Get. The fuck. Off of me."* I think of a knife to my temple. The scar on my brow. A glass bursting against the wall. *Shut the fuck up.* How many times did he say that to me?

Not anymore, but now...*this.*

We haven't broken the cycle. We're just spinning in it.

He presses the knife closer to my skin, and I wince, expecting pain. It doesn't cut through me, not yet, but his other hand comes to my hip, under my tank, and I feel the coldness of his fingertips. "I need you to know something, baby girl."

I clench my teeth together, and my fists, my nails forming crescents in my palms.

"I'd kill for you. I would fucking *slaughter* for you." His eyes dart past me, to Rain in his crib. "But if you hurt our son..." He leans in close, tilting his head so his mouth is slanted over mine. "I'll bury you myself."

Tears burn behind my eyes, and I hate that shit. I hate *feeling* all these things, but lately, since Rain was born, it's like my hormones have wreaked havoc in my mind, my heart, and it's all I can do. I go through the motions some days, numbly, delirious with the need for sleep. With my father's death playing over and over in my head. Lucifer's mood swings and the way he can barely contain himself from hitting up another dealer, drowning his pain in another line.

Jeremiah in the hospital bed.

"It's time to fucking fly, Sid Rain."

I close my eyes, squeezing them tight, and I'm acutely aware of the steel blade against my throat. *Am I flying now, J?*

A few seconds of silence pass.

Lucifer steps away. I hear the knife's blade click back into place.

I take a deep breath, but I don't open my eyes, and I don't move from beside the crib. Footsteps, the clunk of the knife on a dresser.

Three words, whispered in the darkness, full of exhaustion, of regret. *"I'm sorry, Lilith."*

I shake my head. I don't want his fucking apologies. I'm kind of sick to death of them.

"I'm not the enemy." I swallow the lump in my throat. Lucifer is far, the scent of pine and nicotine no longer close, and I imagine him leaning against the opposite wall as we throw up our pain all over our son's room. "I'm not...*her.*"

Pammie.

I can recall the satisfaction I felt from choking her while Maverick swung that hammer into her head. So much shit came out of her. Bursting red and gray and oddly, green.

I felt as if I'd redeemed my husband.

He hated that I'd done it.

I still don't quite know why. We can't talk about the things that eat us alive. It makes them real; it makes us feel, and neither one of us likes to do that. I don't think I *can*, aside from these hormonal episodes creating chaos within me, and Lucifer lets anger override every other emotion he might need to process.

"I know." His voice is hoarse, and it breaks on the second word.

I open my eyes and see his face thrown in shadow, his eyes downcast. He's leaning against the wall, hands in the pocket of his black hoodie, bandana pulled down around his neck. With the glow from the dark angel nightlight, I can see the hollows under his eyes. Smudged shadowy purple.

We're both drained. But it's hard to trust anyone to help us.

It takes a village to raise a child, they say. But I've seen the evil in the village. I've been under the village's cruel hands, felt them break a child's innocence. *Mine.*

Fuck the village.

It's me and my husband. The only two people I trust completely to look after our baby boy.

But when I swallow, I still feel the phantom blade against my throat. I sigh, crossing my arms. I won't be able to sleep now. I would ask him why he's on edge, what happened tonight at Sanctum, but the past few weeks, since he's been back to work for the 6, he hasn't liked to

talk about any of it. He's been oddly more secretive than usual on his work. I don't have the energy to pry questions from a brick wall tonight.

"I'm going for a run." I whisper the words and make my way across the room, bare feet skimming quietly over the floor so I don't wake Rain. I could scream at my husband. I could demand to know why he'd dare think I would hurt our son, but what's the point?

What's the point of anything anymore?

Rain Valentin Malikov.

That's it. The entirety of my reason for existing. Although that's not quite true either, is it? I've started to find joy in words again. Poetry. Reading. In my solo runs. In Lucifer's body beside mine, curled around me tight, even when we've fought during the day. Small glimpses of happiness, I've begun to see them, more than I ever have in life.

I hug myself as I enter the hallway, and I hear Lucifer following, pulling Rain's door to, but not all the way closed. He knows how I feel about that.

He's behind me as I cross the hall, entering our bedroom. I need to get changed for the run. But when I veer off toward our walk-in closet, he's grabbing my wrist and spinning me around.

My free hand comes to his chest, feeling the tightness of his muscles through his hoodie. He's been working out more since his fight with Jeremiah. His shoulders seem broader, his body more muscled. He's always been far bigger than me, and taller, but now, he seems more so.

I tilt my head up, searching his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he says again, with meaning.

"I know."

"I just saw the blade, and you were leaning over the crib, and I thought..." He looks away from me.

Hands all over me. I was too small for him, but his fingers...he could use those. He could wrap mine around

him. He could help me stroke him until something warm and sticky was on my wrist, and he was beaming at me and breathing hard and—

Lucifer wraps his arm around the back of my neck, pulling me into his chest, memories from my past dissolving with his touch.

Yeah, I know what he thought.

I go willingly, stumbling, one ear pressed against his heart, I can feel the even beats. He still has hold of my wrist, like he's comforting me and forcing me close all the same. I close my eyes tight, trying to push away the evocations. All the things that can go wrong when you bring a new life into this world.

"Do you ever think about it? All the things that got to *you* when you were like Rain?" Lucifer whispers the words, his chin on my head. "Because it fucking eats me alive, thinking of every bad thing that could happen to him if we aren't *constantly* on guard. I know you would never hurt him, but it's like this twisted shadow inside my head, constantly racing for him, and I'm running after it, but I feel so fucking behind. And *you...*" He's quiet, a moment of silence between us as I envision his analogy, understanding it more than anyone else could. "I wish I could have stopped the shadow from coming for you."

Bile threatens to burn up my throat. "Lucifer, I don't want to..." *Talk about this. Remember. I don't want to cut open old wounds.*

He's quiet a moment, then he says against my hair, "You cry out sometimes in your sleep."

My entire body flushes hot. I try to push away from him, one hand still planted on his chest, but he won't let me go. He holds me tighter, crushing me to him. "I hate it for you, Lilith."

I still, frozen. He always speaks of my past, of people who have hurt me, with anger. *Rage*. But now, his tone is softer.

It unnerves me.

I feel dizzy with emotion, and I don't want it. *Run away, run away, run away.* Those words have been stuck inside my head ever since we first met at that intersection, nearly two years ago. But I can never run far enough, never fast enough.

He's always there. A constant. And I know somewhere deep down, buried under my survival mechanisms, I'm grateful for his possessive love. I need someone to *keep* me here.

"I wish I could take it all away from you, baby girl." His grip is so fucking tight, but I don't try to squirm away. "I wish I could...rewrite everything for you. Find you sooner. And knowing how my dad played a part in it all..." His tone hardens, rage taking its place again. "I just need you to know, if you ever want to talk about it, *anything*, I really am here, okay?" Finally, he loosens his grip, and I step back, meeting his gaze, searching mine.

I nod once, pressure building behind my eyes, but I won't cry.

I won't.

"Okay." I say the word softly, ready to be done with this conversation, but I see something in his eyes. Some kind of buried pain. I wonder if *he* wants to talk about something, but I'm almost scared to ask. I'm almost terrified to know.

I work up the courage though. If he can do it for me, I should for him. "Are you...okay?"

He blinks, surprised by my question. We are strangers to confessions. But all he says after a quiet moment is, "Yes." His eyes search mine and his voice is a whisper as he asks, "Are you?"

But I break the spell because I'm so very good at it. Because I don't quite know how to open up. "I'm fine," I say, and it's a festering lie.

He smiles a little, but it's cold. Like he knows I won't ever give him what he wants. *All my secrets, all my pain.*

Sighing, he releases me and steps toward the entrance to our closet. He pulls off his hoodie, one handed, his shirt at the same time, and I see the broad expanse of his back, muscles flexing.

My mouth goes dry as he heads into our walk-in closet, his curls dishevelled. He disappears, then a soft light flicks on a second later. "You're not going for a run," he says from inside the closet, nonchalantly.

I dip my chin, my eyes wide. "Excuse me?" All the bad memories are wiped away, only annoyance is coursing through me now.

I hear him rustling around in his drawers, but he speaks over the sound. "You can get mad, baby girl. But you're not going."

I laugh, shaking my head. "Yeah, fuck you." I pivot, headed to our bathroom, full of black marble, and I know I left some leggings and a sports bra in there—since we can't run together anymore because of Rain, we take whatever time we can get, and my house is messier because of it. But before I enter through the open door to the bathroom, he's behind me.

I freeze.

He doesn't touch me, but his presence stops me in my tracks.

"I'll *fuck you*, but you still aren't running."

I start to spin around to ask him who the fuck he thinks he is, but his hand comes to the back of my neck as he grabs me, and he leans down, his mouth over my ear. "Trust me, Lilith. This once, okay? It's not to control you."

Yeah, fucking right.

"Just let me keep you safe. Just for tonight, give into me."

My chest tightens, my body warm all over. I'm not good at submission outside of the bedroom, but when he speaks like that, it makes the idea seem... appealing.

But I want to go for a damn run. It's one of the only things that quiets my mind. I started well before I was supposed to, much earlier than the six-week postpartum mark. I'm slower than I used to be, and I walk more than I actually run sometimes, but I need to breathe out there when it feels like, sometimes, I can't in here.

As if he can read my mind, as if he knows he needs to drive it in a little deeper, he says, "I spent tonight mutilating a man for an initiation ritual with the 6. Then I watched as our guards dug a hole for a teenager's body."

My mouth goes dry. It doesn't surprise me exactly, but the fact he's so candid about it is interesting. We usually don't speak of his *work*. We have fundamental disagreements on what we believe our involvement should be with the 6. Initially, after Jeremiah vanished, Lucifer didn't go to Council. He didn't want anything to do with it. Them. But he changed his mind after we discussed it. I thought it would be best if we tried to intervene. To change things.

Nothing, however, has changed, and he's a loyal, blind servant once more. Apparently *mutilating* people to have them join the ranks, and being literal gravediggers.

"Whose body? Whose initiation?" Perhaps they're the same. My own initiation was far less violent and intensely more sexual than winding up...*dead*. My face warms, thinking of fucking every single member of the Unsaints, and the heat in my veins expands with my fear.

Lucifer skims his teeth over my exposed shoulder. "It seems Atlas Medici has fucked up." He whispers the words across my skin, and I think of unassuming, cherubically handsome Atlas. *What secrets are you hiding, pretty boy?* "I don't know the initiate, but it's almost as if the 6 expect one of us to..." Lucifer licks a line along the side of my throat. "*Fucking die.*" There's a harsh venom in his voice that reminds me just how ruthless Lucifer can be. "Why else would they want to train a replacement?" His breath

glides across my neck, and it's as if he asked the question out loud for the first time, here, with me.

Despite—or maybe *because* of—the words, shivers run down my spine, and I feel warmth pooling in my low belly for him. Motherhood has zapped my energy, my mind, made my breasts rock hard and painful since I decided not to breastfeed, but it didn't take my sex drive. We started doing *that* before the six-week mark, too. The first time, I was anxious.

Would it feel the same for him? Would he get off? Would I? Do I look different? Feel different?

But he finished faster than he ever had, and I helped him bring me to an orgasm, too, and ever since then, it's been like it was before for us. *Fucking like demons.*

I wonder if I'll ever *not* be horny. It fucks with my own mind, my inability to decipher feelings from fucking. It's like something is snarled inside my brain.

"It won't be me. I promise you won't get rid of me so easily." He laughs, a raspy sound that has me curling my toes. "You're not going for a fucking run, Lilith. I don't regret much of anything I've done, and I won't start with you. I don't care if you fucking hate me for protecting you, but I'm never going to stop. I'm *never* going to let up."

That's exactly what I'm afraid of. I don't say it though. I'm too tired to fight.

"I meant what I said in Rainy's room." *Rainy.* My heart flutters when he uses the nickname he reserves for our son. "I would do *anything* for you." He kisses me, open mouthed along my shoulder blade, his fingertips pressing into the side of my throat. "Even tie you up in our bed and fuck you until you forget you ever wanted to go on a goddamn run, baby girl."

I turn my head then, my heart racing in my chest as I push past lust. "A teenager?" I whisper it, thinking of Rain. "What does Atlas have to do with it?"

"It was Natalie's brother." His words glide over my skin.

My stomach tangles into knots. That's too close to home.

"Why?" Even as I ask, I know I won't get an answer.

There's a moment's silence. Then, in a way that seems truthful, my husband says, "I don't know. And I'm not so sure it matters." *It isn't our family, so I don't fucking care*, he means. And because maybe I'm not so different from the 6, because Natalie and I have never really been great friends I let it go. Just like that.

Or at least, the part about Natalie's brother, because in this, we're united. *I can't find it in me to care either*. Atlas is whole and alive, that's what matters. But the initiate... "What if you're being tested?" I ask him quietly. "What if the initiation is a hoop to jump through? Why didn't you meet him? What happened to him?"

He is perfectly still behind me. For one second. Another.

Then he curls his fingers into my hair, tugging me toward him, and a second later, his mouth is fucking devouring mine. He spins me around, pushing me back, and back, and back, until my spine hits the counter of our bathroom.

His mouth is slanted over mine as he says, "I did what I had to do. I don't know anything else. But you're so fucking smart, baby girl."

The breath leaves my lungs as he pulls away, his hands needy as they come to the waistband of my sleep shorts. I glance down, between us, and in the dim light from the far end of the bathroom, I see something flecked on the back of his pale hands.

I did what I had to do.

He glances down, inky lashes sweeping over his cheekbones as he sees it too. He furrows his dark brows, fingertips still curled in the hem of my shorts, his knuckles grazing my skin. "I wore gloves," he says, like he's disappointed.

I smile a little, because it's a funny thing, hearing my husband complain about blood. My hands come to his

shoulders, hard beneath my touch, even over his hoodie. “Look at me,” I command him.

He drags his gaze up my body until his eyes are on mine.

“I don’t give a fuck about a little blood—”

“It’s from another man, I don’t want—”

I clamp one hand over his mouth, silencing him. The warmth in my veins is growing hotter. We come alive like this. *Always*. We fight about everything else in the world, but we fuck like we’re twin flames. “You know what I don’t want?” I slide the hand I have on his shoulder down his arm, feeling his muscles flex, then I come around to his abs, lower still, dipping my fingers into his sweats and his boxer briefs. I fist his hard cock in my hand and watch his eyes darken with lust as a low groan leaves his mouth, warm against my palm. I stroke the length of him, and there’s a fucking *lot* of him. Widening my thighs, I hiss when he pushes his hand down my sleep shorts, then cups my pussy, grabbing me.

“I don’t want you to be capable of *ever* thinking I’d hurt our family.” As I speak, I keep my palm pressed firmly against his mouth while I stroke him faster, squeezing tighter. I watch his chest rise sharply, then fall as my thumb comes over the sticky precum on the tip of him. With my other hand, I dig my fingers into the sides of his jawline.

He grits his teeth, I can feel it beneath my hold, then he pushes his middle finger inside of me as his blue eyes narrow.

I tighten around him, my knees shaky as he fingers me hard while I’m stroking him.

“Don’t ever do that shit to me again.” I keep talking, but my words are broken, and I feel his lips curve into a smile. I dig my nails into his face, deeper.

His smile fades, but he adds another finger inside of me, and I have to lean back against the counter to support my body weight.

“Ever, Lucifer. I will always protect our family.” My eyes lock on his.

For a moment, we stop moving. He’s deep inside of me, my hand is still wrapped around his cock, but it’s like we’re holding our breath, daring each other to trust. Slowly, I slide my fingers down his lips, pulling his bottom one down too, before my hand comes to the strong column of his throat, squeezing softly.

He’s still staring down at me.

Then he moves, slowly sinking to his knees, pulling his fingers from me and gripping my inner thighs with both hands instead. He tips his head back to stare up at me and my hands come to his hair, fingers tangling in his thick, dark curls.

He turns his head and kisses the inside of my thigh, shoving aside the loose material of my shorts, exposing me to him.

My heart pounds faster, and I widen my legs more. His lips pull into a smile, then he’s *biting* mine, before his tongue flattens over my clit, still holding eye contact with me. His hands are fucking cold, but his mouth is so warm.

I moan as he bites me again, then licks me, then bites.

“I know,” he says against me, demon blue eyes searching mine. His hands slide up higher, coming around to my ass, he squeezes me hard enough to bruise.

I bite down on my bottom lip to stop from whimpering, because I don’t want him to let go.

“But you’ve got it all wrong, Lilith.”

I fist the strands of his hair as he rises a little on his knees, nudging up the hem of my tank with his nose, then he bites me again, *fucking hard*. Tears spring behind my eyes, but I only widen my thighs more, letting his chest press against me as he keeps biting, and biting, *and biting*, the pressure and pain *deep*.

I know he’s broken the skin when he pulls back, and I see blood on his bottom lip. He licks it with his tongue, so

slowly, still staring up at me as the deep pain flares brighter, even though he's not clamped down around me anymore.

It fucking hurts, but I like it.

"You don't have to do anything." He dips his head again, and it's only then, the moment before his teeth clench against my skin once more, I see what he's biting.

The J on my hip.

I grip his hair tighter, loving and hating the way he's trying to ruin the mark. My eyes flutter closed and he's clenching so hard, it's a vivid, hot pain on my hip, a deep, soul-touching ache. He pulls my skin between his teeth, making it sting more as he rolls it out, and I'm gripping onto his curls so hard my hands hurt.

"I'm the *daddy*." My eyes open as I look at him sinking down until his bloody mouth is inches from where I want him, my heart racing so fucking fast. One of his hands still has my shorts pushed to the side, cold fingers on my inner thigh. "You don't have to be scared. *Ever again*." He presses his tongue to me, pushing up into my hole, then out, his hot mouth coming up to my swollen clit. He licks me, gently, then pulls back, meeting my gaze. His lips curl up into a snarl. "If anyone lays a fucking hand on my family..." He turns his head, nipping the inside of my thigh, softer than he did the J. "I'll bury them in pieces." He turns back to me, shuffling back on his knees, my hands gliding from his hair, and down by my sides. "Now get on your fucking knees, Sid." He grabs my skin where he bit me, and I whimper between my teeth.

I know he hates it, what Jeremiah did to me. But with the deep throbbing from his bite marks, I wonder if he'll need to make good on the threat he once gave me about *cutting it off*. I think he may have permanently fucked it up and left his teeth marks as scars.

It makes me want him more, the ways his love bloodies me. I understand that kind of love, even if I'm still learning

the meaning of all the other types.

I come to my hands and knees, my bones pressing into the cold tiles, his hand flat to my spine as I angle my ass up. I glance over my shoulder and find he's staring at my knees even as he pushes down his pants further, with the heel of his hand, then starts to stroke himself.

"You okay?" he asks me quietly, refusing to meet my eye.

I see a fleck of crimson on the corner of his mouth. "Look at me, *Daddy.*"

His eyes widen as they come to mine. We don't usually call each other those names, but once upon a time, he threatened me with roleplaying as my foster dad. I don't think he realizes there's almost nothing he could do that would turn me off.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Unsainted brand on his thigh. A skull with a U through one eye socket, smoke through the other.

The scars from Lover's Death, but mine is the deepest. Longest. And I'm the only one still here.

"You don't like my scar?" I ask him, and I know he knows what I'm talking about. I feel a twinge of pain at the marks he left, and his eyes narrow.

He pushes roughly on my spine and slides his palm down my back before grabbing my ass, shoving aside the thin material of my shorts. "Shut the fuck up, Sid." Then he's pushing into me without warning, the tip of his cock stretching me. He shakes his head, biting his bottom lip, his eyes now on where we're joined. "Still so fucking tight, *Mama.*"

I moan as he pushes further in, his hand coming to my side, then dipping lower, his fingers brushing over where he bit me.

His eyes connect with mine as he keeps pushing, filling me up, so big I swear I can feel it in my fucking stomach.

"Don't play with me about this," he says, his voice low.

I arch my back more, and he groans, his eyes fluttering closed a moment.

Then they're back on mine, and he's all the way in, his hips melded to my ass, my shorts bunched to the side. It feels so good, and I'm so fucking full, and for a moment, it's just him and I. Right now. *Here*. Alone, in some kind of sick and twisted love that makes up our marriage. Nothing else matters for these minutes.

His thumb circles my wound, softly.

But the thing is, I don't like things fucking soft.

I rock my hips, fucking him, and he smiles, gripping a handful of my ass.

"That's my girl."

Not quite. "I don't think your teeth will fix it," I pant as I fuck him, rocking back and forth on my hands and knees, but keeping my eyes on his narrowed ones. "I don't think anything can make that scar go away."

He squeezes the bite marks so hard I whimper as he twists my flesh. Then he's over me, his chest to my back, so far inside of me, it's almost painful. His cold fingers come to my throat, circling around me and jerking me up to him, so I'm looking at him upside down, our eyes connected, his fingers still pinching the bite marks.

"You think anyone else has a claim on you? When I fuck you like this?" He dips his chin, circling his hips as he moves inside of me. He knows what I want to feel. The filthy things I want him to say. "You are *my* wife. You should know I always find a way to cut the deepest parts of you." Then he spits on me, on my fucking face, and I close my eyes as he starts fucking me again, harder, deeper, pinching my skin, tightening his grip on my throat. The warm, wet feel of his saliva on my cheekbones, across my mouth, feels fucking good.

He groans, but it sounds like a snarl, then he dips his head lower, a shadow behind my closed eyes, and bites into

my cheek, *hard*. Like he wants to own me. Like he wants to fucking claim me.

But he already possesses me completely; even God couldn't pry me from his unholy hands.

He squeezes my throat so tightly I can't breathe, and he's still fucking me so hard, I go down on my elbows, my head twisted, my cheek pressed to the chilly tiles as he uses me. I got him mad, and I like how he feels when he's jealous. He *hurts*. It's my favorite pain.

I know he's close, his mouth still against my cheek, because his thrusts are shorter, more violent, then he's coming inside of me as he whispers my name, spots popping behind my eyes.

"Lilith, Lilith, *Lilith*." His hand slides up from my hip, squeezing my hard breasts beneath my shirt, and I feel a *release*, and I know I've got my unused milk on his fingers. "*Fuck*," he swears against my ear, loosening his hold on my throat.

I gasp, gulping down air, but he's pulling out of me, grabbing my shoulder and spinning me around. I lie flat on my back, my knees bent, thighs splayed, my shorts exposing me to him. He's staring at the back of his hand, then he brings it to his mouth, licking it as his eyes come to mine.

He moans low in his throat, then drops his hand to the marks he left on my hip.

I glance down and see his finger trail through blood and the start of red, ugly bruises.

My belly jumps. "I love that I can make you hurt me," I tell him, my voice low as I stare at him.

He frowns, his fingers frozen, one hand on my inner thigh, clamped down like he wants to keep me spread out for him. The smell of sex is thick between us, and there's still blood on his mouth.

We just stare at each other, and I feel spent, fucking exhausted, even though I didn't get off, which rarely ever

happens with him, because he makes sure I'm taken care of and if he doesn't, *I make sure of it*. But I know this probably isn't over.

And I'm proven right when he slides down to his belly, his face between my thighs, his breath hot on my pussy. Before he licks me, his hands gripping my thighs wide, shoving aside my shorts, all he says, eyes locked on mine, is, "*I don't.*"

For some reason, with thoughts of what he said about Atlas and the initiate swarming back into my brain, it feels like an omen.

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VIII



MONDAY, OCTOBER 1
EMILY CEMETERY

A SCREAM RIPS *through me as I slump to my belly, palms flat against the dirt-covered floor. The numbness that blanketed the backs of my legs is now gone, burning pain like fire dancing beneath my skin instead. Tears prick my eyes and I want to call out for him.*

Mavy, please. Help me. Help me.

But he isn't here, and he wouldn't hear me.

"Just breathe, Ella." A voice like a coiling serpent slithers through the air. "It's all over now."

I run through the cemetery, desperate to put distance between me and *him*. But it doesn't take long before my sprint tapers off to a walk, then I'm limping, the humid North Carolina air clotting in my throat. Damp grass grazes

my ankles, the patch of skin between my loose sweats and burgundy boots. The cotton of my pants sticks to my wounds, and I pull up my dark green sweatshirt, biting the material of the collar between my teeth to stop from screaming.

The moonlight glints on a crumbling gravestone to my left. There's an angel perched atop it; one wing eroded to dust. As my breaths come in shallow pants, the scent of cemetery dirt filling my nostrils, I take it as a sign and come to a desperate stop. I unclench my teeth and run my fingers through the strands of my wavy red hair, damp now with sweat. The little church inside the gates of Emily Cemetery isn't but half a mile through the woods behind mine and Mavy's house, but the blinding fire along the backs of my thighs is making getting home hell. It's not like I could've gotten a ride with my tormentor, either. Although all of my boyfriend's brothers from hell should be at the unexpected meeting taking place in Sanctum, the boys tend to be in a lot of places they shouldn't.

Kind of like me, now.

I sink down beside the perishing angel, the grass wet beneath my butt. I don't mind it though as I double over, elbows on my knees, head in my hands. The coolness of the leftover rain is a balm against my wounds and for a moment, I just keep my head bowed, my pulse thundering in my temples. I know I have to get home before he finds me missing—if he hasn't already—but my chest is heaving, and I just need to breathe.

Spots of white and gray pop behind my closed eyes, sweat damp along my temple and under my arms. Tears threaten to prick behind my lids, but I bite them back, swallowing the tight lump in my throat.

If I cry, he'll see my mascara streaking down my face. I didn't even shed tears in the chapel. I can't now, not when I'm so close to home. Working out he'll understand, if only

because it's a new "hobby" I've picked up. Mavy probably thinks it's because I'm bored.

He doesn't understand I'm just trying to save our lives.

Lucifer's demonic blue eyes flash inside my head at the same time thunder cracks somewhere high above me. I gasp, lifting my chin and dropping my hands as I stare at the darkening sky overhead, a gray cloud moving menacingly to cover the beauty of the moon.

A drop of rain taps my temple and I know I have to stand and go home.

Slowly, I get to my feet even as my knees shake, and I haven't quite caught my breath yet.

Then I put one foot in front of the other and head towards safety.

I enter through the back gate using my thumbprint to unlock it. It's incredible to me that the fence has iron, spiky turrets atop it, like something out of an old Gothic novel, but there's a tiny black box which will spring the lock free with mine and Maverick's touch.

I walk onto the Astor property and instantly feel relief as the gate clangs closed behind me. My shoulders drop, lightness in my chest as I continue along the cement path that winds through the overgrown garden and past the stone fountains in the backyard. The gurgling of the water is soothing and so is this lingering scent of marijuana which always seems to invade anything Maverick has touched.

Squinting in the dark as I wrap my arms around my body, I can't see any lights on in the mansion looming up ahead of me. Every window is filled with darkness, and I smile softly to myself.

He isn't home yet, and I'll be able to shower and pretend I didn't just scramble my way out of a graveyard with blood sticking to my pants. I can apply cold compresses, take

medicine, maybe sink into an ice-cold bath if I'm feeling brave. And by the time he gets home, he won't notice a thing—

"Mea vita," a familiar voice whispers in my ear and I flinch, jumping back against his hard body, the Latin ringing in my ears. *My life.* His arms come around me, strong and secure even though I cringe a little because the backs of my thighs are pressed to his hips, and it stings.

Shit, there goes that plan I had.

Fear knots in my throat as his fingers splay along my collarbone. My knees feel shaky and despite the fact I only want to drown in his embrace, the tension doesn't leave, and my lips start to tremble.

How long was he watching me?

He nudges his nose along the side of my neck, and I dig my fingertips into the corded muscle of his forearm, clinging to him. "You didn't scream for me, Ella." He sounds amused. "Not yet anyway."

I smile a little, but it's forced. Flashbacks of kneeling at the chapel, flecks of blood beneath my palms, make my stomach churn.

He seems to stiffen behind me, sensing my mood and coming alert as lightning forks the sky above our heads, shrouding our home in eerie tones of pale blue.

"Baby," he whispers, his lips by my ear as he holds tight to me beside a gargoye fountain, "what's wrong?"

His voice is so soft, threaded with tenderness, that I want to tell him the truth.

I was bleeding for you. Help me. I need you now more than never.

But the second ticks by and I remember my promises. More than that, I remember the consequences.

I close my eyes in the night and relax against his embrace. He's safety scarred in ink, my refuge drenched in darkness. I can't give him the truth, but I still find solace here with him and all my secrets.

“I was just running.” It’s only half a lie, isn’t it? I force down my confessions, the things I really want to speak. Instead, I give him another truth. “I’m really glad you’re back.” My voice breaks on those words and I feel heat warm my cheeks. Gratitude fills my lungs as a curl of wind caresses cooler air over my face.

His chin rests on the top of my head and as he holds me, only our own muscle and bone separating our entwined hearts, I wonder what secrets he could be keeping too.

“Me too, kid,” he whispers, and I don’t mind the nickname. Not tonight when I just want to stand forever in his embrace. “I fucking hate being away from you. It’s kind of embarrassing.” His boyish laugh fills me with so much joy, it almost eclipses the physical pain I’m in. He dips his chin and kisses the crown of my head. “Why are you out so late?” His voice takes on a different, darker edge.

In my mind, the cemetery flashes, bits of pale gray and forked black trees in the night. My muscles tense and fire catches along my wounds. I know I need to ice them to lessen the chances of bruises and I have to suck down ibuprofen, but I can’t duck out of Maverick’s arms so easily. Or avoid his question.

He squeezes me tight, triceps flexing against my sides. “Answer me, baby,” he whispers over my ear. He’s not mad yet.

“I couldn’t sleep.” This isn’t a lie. “Not with you gone. And I didn’t do any cardio this morning so—”

He pulls my earlobe between his teeth and a whimper leaves my mouth. “Why’re you working out so much, huh?” He kisses just beneath my ear as I tilt my chin, arching my neck. I can see the darkened peaks of our home against the night sky. A house fit for a vampire and I’m the immortal bride.

Except we’re not married. Except I haven’t been changed yet. *But I’m working on it.*

He scrapes his canine tooth over my neck, shifting one hand up to knead my breast over my shirt. I feel his erection growing hard at my back and my stomach drops.

It's not that I don't want him. It's that I don't think I could survive sex with him tonight without blacking out, considering the state of my thighs, and a little higher up, along my low back. Briefly, I worry about my kidneys. Ever since Lucifer dragged me into this, I've been covertly reading about what's happening to me. What's safe and not safe.

When I kneel at the little church in Emily Cemetery, I'm not safe at all.

He slips his hand down my shirt, his strong fingers pulling at my tight nipple. He's always so casual about his ownership of me. This isn't even foreplay; it's just a regular Monday night. "I don't want you going out after dark. We have a fucking gym."

I let my eyes flutter closed, feeling the tendons flex in his arm as he pinches my nipple, his other hand splayed flat over my belly. "I know, I just wanted the fresh air and—"

He grabs my breast hard, sucking the skin on my neck and silencing me. "Let me rephrase it for you." He runs his bottom lip where he bit me, soothing the sting as his hand splays over my heart. I wonder if he can feel the fear inside the beats. I wonder if he knows it isn't fear of him. *"Don't go out after dark."*

The urge to cry grows stronger. To collapse and give in. Confess and be done with this, consequences be damned.

But one truth usually leads to another and another until they all topple like dominoes. And I think of Atlas and can't betray that. Not yet.

So all I say, as he grabs my chin and turns my head to face him over my shoulder, his baby blue eyes intent on mine, is, "Okay."

Maverick

I stand at the end of our bed, watching her sleep. She's on her back, elbows bent and arms bracketing her pale face. The softest sliver of moonlight streams in through the drapes over our windows, illuminating the heavy spray of freckles along her skin. Her chest rises and falls softly beneath one of my shirts, her red lips are parted as she breathes. Her wild, wavy hair is splayed over the black pillowcase, and in the darkened night, the coloring is like crimson.

The taste of marijuana is thick on my tongue and my head is free—for now—of everything that went down tonight.

Everything except watching Ella look over her shoulder before she unlocked the gate to our property, her pale fingers curled through the iron bar like she was clinging onto it for dear life.

I take a step closer to our king-sized bed, careful my feet don't creak against the hardwood.

Then I reach out a hand, resting it atop her foot over the smoky gray covers, clenching my fingers gently around her toes.

She stirs, her breaths hiccupping as she turns her head, and I worry I've woken her. My dick is hard, and I didn't get to fuck her tonight, but she clearly needs sleep. After she questioned me about Sanctum and I gave her nothing,

she pretended to be annoyed with me and went upstairs to get in the shower. But there was something else in her eyes. Nothing to do with my evasive answers on the unexpected meeting tonight. Some kind of lie she's keeping in her brain. With Ella, you never know what she could be warping inside her mind. But I know she would never be disloyal to me, so I can wait for her to spit it all out when she's ready.

After a few seconds, her breath turns even again, her pale throat exposed with her head shifted toward the windows of our room.

I squeeze her softly and decide to brush my teeth and slip into bed with her, the clouds of THC lulling me to sleepiness.

But just as I let go of her foot, something lights up on her nightstand.

A knot forms in my throat as I realize it's her phone, set on a wireless charger atop the dusky blue dresser.

Glancing at her again to ensure she won't wake up, I walk quietly over to her side of the bed and look down at her phone.

The number isn't saved, but it's an Alexandrian area code, and besides that, I have this one fucking memorized, just like I do all of my brothers' numbers.

I shift my gaze to Ella another second, the peacefulness from my high wavering.

She doesn't move, her breasts rising and falling so slowly. So calmly, full of what I believe is innocence.

I turn my attention back to her phone, reading the text.

Unknown: Tell Mav to send me that photo of me and Rain.

I furrow my brows, confused. I know her and Atlas are friends, since the one month birthday party we hosted for my nephew almost a month ago now. But *what* photo of Rain? I glance at the time on the top of her phone screen just before it goes dim.

It's nearly two in the morning.

Why would Atlas be asking for something like that at this hour?

I grind my teeth, wanting to pluck her phone up off the charger and tell Atlas to fuck right off.

But I look at my girl again.

Her long lashes splayed over pale skin. The Cupid's bow above her parted lips. The vibrant red of her hair splayed along the pillowcase.

She can have friends, right?

Jealousy warps and bends the muscles of my stomach, but I try to push past that overprotectiveness. *It's good for her to have friends.* The more people who look after her, the better. I mean, she really only needs *me*, but after what went down tonight, and if something were to happen...

I close my eyes tight.

I try to calm my breaths.

She can have friends.

I trust my brothers.

I trust her.

I try to repeat it enough times inside my mind that I believe it, but even when I force myself to walk away from my girl and her phone, I can't help but think of the graveyard dirt we spattered over the tarp wrapped around Samson's body.

IX

Maverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2
CORPUS AVENUE

“TOMAS.” He answers the call from my burner phone quietly the next night, like he’s fucking annoyed, and he probably is because it’s *my* name showing up on his screen. I know he knows I’m going to ask him some shit he doesn’t want to give me answers to. The line he walks between being my personal whipping boy—literally, except I gladly take the punishment instead of him—and conducting business as priest of the 6 is growing increasingly thinner.

“Shadow Villa.” I hike up my shoulder, pressing my phone closer to my ear so I can keep both hands on Rain’s sleek, black stroller as I push him two houses down to my brother’s. “Tell me what you know about it.”

Tomas groans on the other end of the line as I shoot my eyes around the street, keeping vigilant.

It looks like Halloween threw up on Corpus Avenue. Pumpkins line each of our driveways, glowing from the inside out. Pale white skeletons seem to drift in the trees with the light breeze. Behind me, the numbers *666* are spray painted in some glow-in-the-dark blue that'll wash off over my garage door. All of it paid for by Ezra. That motherfucker loves the thirty-first of October like no other. Probably because getting drunk and passing out are expected outcomes after Lover's Death, and at least this time when he does it, compared to every other time, it seems normal. He hides his problems in black plastic cups and the flash of silver from his skull flask that's become a permanent accessory of his.

I think of him last night, staring with wide eyes at Samson Savage's corpse. In my head, it plays out again. The way the tarp around Samson's body crinkled as he was thrown into a six-foot pit out in the field by Sanctum. Our first corpse, a nineteen-year-old boy with an unknown killer. Elijah was silent, watching it all unfold, and *Boaz* sure as fuck didn't show up.

Neither did that bleeding initiate.

I don't know how it was Atlas remained quiet throughout the entire fucking ordeal, then got in his car and drove home without a word.

I might not have given it much thought, but last night after I saw he texted my girl, it seems to be one of the *only* things I'm thinking about.

That, and everything I researched as Ella slept through the night.

"Why are you asking me that, Maverick?" Tomas's voice is so hushed, like he's trying to keep someone from hearing him and I wonder if he's got someone sleeping in his bed he's trying not to wake.

Some priest.

"Answer the fucking question." I drop my eyes to Mini Malikov, asleep in the stroller. So peaceful; startlingly

unlike his father last night, who didn't hold back his demons when he went in on whoever the new initiate is. None of us have any clear answers on everything that happened after, and I had to convince Lucifer to shake it off and set him at ease with me watching Rain a few hours this afternoon so he and my sister could get a head start on sleep tonight. Sid was anxious about it and even though it hurts that she doesn't trust me fully with him, I understand it after what she went through. Besides, she looked like a corpse walking, exhaustion in her eyes.

I'm tired too after my *investigation*, but I don't have a baby to feed most nights.

And truthfully, Rain distracts me from all of that and more.

Including nightmares of my parents, and the way it feels like we're all fucking falling apart. Cain's fights are more brutal—and fucking weird, since he's getting hit by girls, Ezra is getting fucked up more often, Atlas suddenly seems to have a lot of problems we don't know about, and Lucifer... he's fucking paranoid and since he doesn't have any coke, *always* angry. It's a new kind of rage though, quieter and deadlier than his usual.

The only thing that seems to bind us—besides cult shit and bullshit—is my nephew. We might hate each other some days, but we all agree Rain will never have a childhood like we did. *We'd wreck the entire world* and each other *to make sure he grows up safe and loved*. Because it might be one of us. It's arrogance to assume we won't become exactly the people we wish we could run from.

I wonder if it's in our genes to become our bastard fathers.

"Your uncles own it," Tomas finally whispers. "Acid City property. Huge. Ridiculous security. Spiky fence around it to keep everyone out—"

“How huge?” I interrupt, then I circle my fingers around the stroller’s handle, switch my phone to my other ear.

“A thousand acres, give or take.”

A thousand fucking acres.

“I don’t know why you’re asking me this. You’ve *been* there.”

I ignore his statement. “Has anything ever been filmed there?” I ask instead.

He’s quiet a minute as I keep pushing Rain, my eyes scanning the darkness again. Nothing but forests surround our homes.

“Yeah, a few movies here and there; studio executives pay your uncles a pretty penny for it,” Tomas finally answers my question, a prick of unease threaded in his words.

A Death at Shadow Villa. I stumbled upon it in my search last night and I’m watching it with my girl tomorrow, but I’ve mentioned none of my suspicions to her. I don’t want to involve her anymore than I have to, in order to keep her safe. Ignorance, in my world, is protection.

“Seems careless, the 6 putting themselves in the spotlight like that,” I say, keeping my tone casual.

“Hollywood has a way of keeping everything on the low.”

Of course they do. Just look at all the theme parks in the world catering to kids but servicing adults.

“Why are you digging into this, Mav?” The way Tomas asks sends a chill of the unknown down my neck.

I pause for a moment on Corpus Ave, doing a three-sixty spin to ensure I’m alone. There’s nothing but Halloween decorations for company. “Thanks for your help.” Without waiting for his response, I end the call and pocket my phone, coming up the Malikov driveway.

Last night when I couldn’t sleep and Ella was safely in bed, I did a little digging online about *Rival’s Claw*. There was *almost* nothing, but a dozen pages of search results back, Shadow Villa was listed as a mythical stomping

ground for the “old academic society,” as RC was referred to on some now-defunct blog. Lucky me there was a link listed in a lone comment which led me straight to the movie, *A Death at Shadow Villa*. It’s not widely available but I got it.

Now, saving what Tomas said for me to examine later, I enter the code on the keypad of the double garage door to Luce and Sid’s house; no Satanic numbers painted over it which is slightly surprising since Lucifer is, well, *Lucifer*. Still, *1313*, they should really get a better fucking code.

After the garage creaks open, I put my weight on the handle of the stroller, popping up the front tire to get it over the hump from the driveway. I push Rain between the two backed-in BMWs—Luce parked Sid’s for her but she doesn’t like to talk about that—and over to the stairs which lead inside the house. It delivers me into the basement, because Lucifer is weird and sneaky, and the interior structure of his house doesn’t make much sense.

His architectural quirks aside, at least he’s not a cokehead anymore. *For now*. I think me and my brothers know more than most circumstances can change in the span of a second.

We’re never settled. Happy endings don’t exist here. Samson’s corpse and RC’s arrival is proof of that. But sometimes... I just like to be naïve and believe they can. *They will*.

Just this fucking once. I can’t handle Luce as an addict anymore. I can’t watch him rip my family apart again. And Sid and Rain are just that. *Fucking family*.

I mean, there are some familial lines I shouldn’t have crossed with Sid, but... too late to fix that now. And as I look at Rain’s full cheeks, his long lashes giving Sid’s a run for her money, I wonder what it would’ve been like... if he had been *ours*. It could’ve happened. I could’ve fucked us

both up for life because I'm impulsive and careless and stupid.

Don't think that way.

Don't think that way.

It would have started a goddamn war. I have never seen someone hold onto another human being as hard as Lucifer holds Sid. *He will never let her go.* He'd kill me before he ever touched her. *Metaphorically speaking, anyway.*

And Ella... I don't want to think about what it would do to her if Rain was... *mine.*

I push the button on the panel to close the garage door, flip down the brake on the stroller, and unbuckle Rain, gentle and slow so he stays his cute ass asleep. His presence soothes something wicked inside of me, banishing thoughts of RC and Shadow Villa and cults from my mind. He's a balm. An exorcist, and he doesn't even know it.

But even in the midst of doing all this baby shit, calling Tomas, of thinking of Sid and Lucifer and what could have been, there's a loud, single thought reverberating in my skull about Ella that has nothing to do with Rain's parentage.

Something is wrong with Ella.

It's the way she looked over her shoulder last night, like she thought someone was following her, but then said nothing to me about it. It's her workouts at the crack of dawn or in the middle of the night, highly unusual for a girl whose favorite sport is baking.

It's that fucking text from Atlas at two in the morning. It's the fact I deleted it from her phone only to find there was no message thread between them.

And maybe too, my paranoia over Ella has a little something to do with the private meeting I had with Elijah shortly after Rain was born.

What if each of us has a secret?

But thinking of Rain, I try to focus. Babies are breakable, despite what Sid likes to tell me.

I cradle Rain against my chest, one hand on the blankets—I wrap them around his bum—and another under his head. Using my elbow, I push down on the handle of the door in the garage and it unlocks after I peer up at the invisible camera I know is planted just over the door. Facial recognition, I wonder what would happen if Lucifer took my fucking face off the very short list of people who can unlock this door. *But that'll never happen.*

I enter the hallway that connects to the house. It's dark, inside and out, but soft lights flick on automatically after I close the door and walk in, ensuring I don't fucking trip.

And if I dropped Rain... My stomach squeezes and I hug his tiny body closer. He has this smell, and I can't describe it, but it's clean and pure and makes me wonder if I ever smelled this innocent.

I bite back my laughter, refusing to think of Malachi or Brooklin or Sid and all the ways our innocence never was.

Instead, when I get to the steps that lead up to the main level of the house, I pause, closing my eyes tight in the darkness. I bring my nose to Rain's head of dark hair and inhale.

The newborn scent makes me feel dizzy, and for a second, I think of Ella giving birth to my baby. *Our* baby.

My chest feels tight. I don't know if she'd want kids. I don't know what's going on inside her head most days and bringing a baby into the middle of our chaos seems selfish.

I open my eyes and try to let it go. She's young. We have time. I'm going to figure out what the fuck is wrong with her, and we can go from there.

I've been trying to play peacemaker between Lucifer and the 6, helping out with Rain whenever I can, taking on more work from Dominus to ease the burden on Lucifer, trying (and failing) to talk to Sid and help her cope with being a new mom in a fucked-up world like ours. Attempting to figure out how to open up to Brooklin, which I fucking suck at because she won't talk to me. Regardless,

I want to erase the shit between us. How she thinks I let her get banished from our home, finding her way to Jeremiah fucking Rain.

I've been *busy*, and truthfully, sometimes, I'm glad Ella is distracted with other things like her workouts and her baking. It's one less person I have to take care of.

But after last night, her odd behavior is eating at me.

Sighing, I walk quietly up the stairs, knowing Sid and Luce need their sleep. I offered to keep Rain overnight, but Ella glared at me, and Sid insisted eleven was late enough.

They didn't even go out.

They had dinner delivered, and Luce texted me at seven to say they were going to bed. I know he probably fucked Sid good before they actually slept because they can't seem to keep their hands off of each other even when they're fighting, but now, the house is silent.

Which means Lucifer isn't up.

He's not using.

He's clean.

I settle Rain in his black crib in the too-big room close to his parents. I pull all the blankets away from him and toss them on the change table adjacent to the crib. The nursery is in shades of black and gray and purple, and there's a fucking Unsainted skull with the smoke and the U painted on the opposite wall from the crib.

I check the stripe on Rain's diaper and do a mental cheer when I see it's yellow and not blue. Clean. *I love you, but I want to fuck my girl, pal.* Words I will never speak out loud to him. Not until he's... way older.

Stay innocent, baby boy.

I swaddle him in his zip-up sleep sack and roll my eyes at myself because I know how to do all of this shit.

When I creep out of the room, I have to double back in to make sure he's on his back and not his stomach because Sid's tiny ass will break my neck beneath her boot if I don't do this part right.

He's on his back.

And still asleep. My uncle duties are done for the night.

I turn, slipping out the door and pulling it to, but not closing it all the way.

And I sense her behind me before I see her.

Slowly, I lift my head and we make eye contact in the dark, my hand still on the doorknob to her son's room.

Sid takes a step back, further down the hallway. Dim lights flicker on with the movement, a soft, white glow.

I watch her as she retreats a little more, but she doesn't turn away from me. Almost like she doesn't want to put her back to me. *Smart.*

My heart ricochets in my chest.

It's an uncomfortable feeling, because it's about her, and I don't like it.

I remember straddling her on my bed when she was chained there, still trying to run from Lucifer. I think of learning who she was, after I'd fucked her for Lucifer to get his head out of his ass. I remember her in my lap at Ignis. My hand on her thigh. *I wish I didn't have these memories.*

"Thank you." Two words, her voice soft, but there's so much meaning in them despite how quiet she is. Her and Luce are both tired, and becoming parents is probably hard no matter what your life looks like. But being recently initiated into a cult, grieving the disappearance of her ex-foster brother, and dealing with someone like my best friend, I know she's got to be exhausted.

She looks down, one foot skimming up her bare calf. She's in black shorts and an oversized black, band T-shirt with white, illegible lettering, which means it must be a death metal band. It's ripped, exposing olive patches of skin along her sides and at her hip.

Her hair is just above her slender shoulders, and it's a fucking mess. I glance behind her, toward her and Luce's bedroom, the door closed.

"He asleep?"

She looks up then. "Yeah." A smile graces her lips and it releases some of the tension in my body, seeing it. To know her and Luce are finally on track. We all knew they'd be endgame, didn't we? Even before Lucifer scarred her for *Coagula*, I knew it. He's obsessed with her, but deeper than that, he sees something in her as a reflection of himself.

Shared pain.

Probably the same reason Jeremiah clung so tightly to the girl he knew he couldn't keep. Sid might've been torn, but Lucifer dances far more violently with her demons, and he *lets her do it*. Dance.

He let her break his heart. He gave her space.

Jeremiah needed more.

Lucifer waited without letting her go.

He's probably still waiting. I know Sid will always love her first protector. I'm not sure I could ever blame her for that.

"Lucifer said there was an... initiate." She trails off, and I feel a pang of guilt I didn't tell Ella about what happened. Not about the ritual, or the reason I want us to watch that film. Not about the hole the guards dug. It seemed like Samson's body was a message to Atlas, which seemed like... none of my fucking business. In a world like ours, a corpse is nothing new. And if Atlas won't talk about his problems, there's nothing I can do. Even if it does get under my skin someone knew about Sanctum's location. About where my brothers and I go to talk after every Council meeting. Still, Elijah didn't warn us about anything, and I don't have time to play detective. Calling Tomas about Shadow Villa and watching this movie with Ella are the most I'm willing to do for now.

But with Sid's words, and Atlas's strange text in my head, my heart picks up speed a little. I swallow, my mouth dry. "Yes."

"Who?" Sid holds my gaze, her eyes piercing.

"I don't know, Angel."

She frowns, and I know she has so many questions. *How do you not know? Do you not talk? How could you not see?* But she's so deeply entrenched in this life—because it's not much different than how she grew up, in complete chaos—that she swallows all those questions down. “Is he going to be... one of you?” I wonder if she's trying to get more information from me because she thinks Lucifer is hiding it from her.

I love her. I'd *die* for her. *Kill* for her. But the brotherhood... well, it's complicated. All I know is it's deeper than any other bond in my life. It's as second nature to me as breathing, having my brothers' backs.

Lately though, *blood* bonds have been competing with my loyalties. Like now.

I give her the best answer I can. “Not if your husband has anything to do with it.” I'm positive that shit show isn't over though.

Sid smiles a little, but it's gone in a second. “And Atlas... Natalie's *brother?*”

Another shrug. “You're asking the wrong person.”

A heavy silence settles between us.

I clear my throat. I don't have any answers to give her. I don't have any fucking answers myself. And I don't want to deal with any of this tonight.

“Liber soon? Before October ends?” I decide spur of the moment we all need to relax. It's been a while since we've gone up to the Unsaint's party house and Halloween is barely four weeks away, but we have to honor it at Raven Park.

I mean, we did just get together last month to celebrate Rain's one-month birthday, but still. Besides, that wasn't really a *party*, exactly, considering Rain was there. It was at my place, just us. My brothers, my sisters, and my girl. Atlas and Ella were holed up together where I found them in the basement, both being antisocial. Despite my misgivings about his text, I know Atlas is decent, and I

know he's probably a good friend for my girl. But he's also just as fucked as the rest of us. The most broken people hide behind quick wit and a bright smile, right?

Then there's the small matter of the *corpse* from last night.

Thinking of them sitting side-by-side on the treadmill in the gym suddenly feels a lot more sinister than it did when I was high and drunk at the party.

But maybe it's because I'm here, in the dark, with a girl I once fucked.

Maybe I have a guilty conscience because Ella wouldn't fuck me over, right? It makes me feel sick, just imagining it. I clear my throat, trying to shake the thought.

"If you don't want to go..." I trail off, watching Sid and focusing on the present moment. Sid and Luce don't have a nanny. They won't get one, either. Our trust in anyone to look after our kids is nonexistent. But we'll all be there. And shit, maybe they could just bring someone, to stay under their watch but to do the hard work. Diapers and feedings and all the baby shit. Brooklin already volunteered for Halloween night, and she's come over a few times to watch Rain while Sid got in the shower when Lucifer was at work. She's only cold toward me, and I know she blames me for everything that happened the night she fucked with Atlas. And all the nights after when she was exorcized from our family.

He probably does too.

Guilt is heavy on my shoulders. I don't know how to apologize to her. I never knew how to say sorry to Mom, either, about Malachi.

His name in my head hurts and I do my best to blink it away.

Sid nods once, tilting her head, her bangs falling into her eyes. "Sure, we'll go."

I love how she doesn't defer to Lucifer, but if I were him, I'd hate it. My thoughts flicker back to Ella.

Her bullshit.

I always want to know everything about her. I always want her... under my control. It's why even though her distraction is a reprieve, I need to figure out what the fuck is going on with her.

Sid is extremely volatile. I love her, but someone with her personality could never be what I need.

I need to control someone.

Does that make Ella a puppet? Is it unfair?

I shake my head, scrubbing a hand over my face. I don't think I ever get anything right.

"You okay?" Sid asks softly, and when I drop my hand, I lean against the wall opposite her, the wooden floor creaking beneath my boots. I rest my head back, eyes on the ceiling and the soft lights overhead.

"Yeah." It's bullshit, and it doesn't even sound true. But despite that word, I don't really try to pretend, just for this moment with her.

I hear the hardwoods shift again, and I can sense her coming closer.

I let my eyes flutter closed, sagging my entire weight against the wall. I give myself this moment only.

Just this moment.

To not think about Ella, about the 6, Dominus, Ezra, Rain, Jeremiah, Brooklin, Ria, Samson, the new initiate, and RC, or the film I found.

I just let my guard down, and when Sid's head comes to my arm, resting against my elbow and leaning into me, I think maybe she's doing the same.

"It's a lot." She whispers those words, and I know she doesn't expect a response. She's not asking for reassurance. We'd never do that with one another, depleting each other's energies for encouragement we don't feel.

I swallow hard anyway, with those words.

It's a lot.

My entire life has been a lot. I'm newly twenty-five, but I feel decades older. Luxuries and money and connections... it should free up some space in my head. Lighten the burden on my body.

It doesn't.

When you're at the top, you're constantly looking down at the people trying to knock you off your fucking pedestal and break your spine while they're at it.

But it's not always the people below us intending to do harm.

Our fucking family. They're above us, but there's no trust there, either.

"But at least he's better." Sid adds to her statement, and I know she's talking about Luce. I can hear her smile as she says the words, but there's something dark lurking beneath her tone. I don't press her. If she wanted to share, she would. The thing about Sid though, is she lets her demons play beneath her skin, inside her own mind, never bringing them into the real world. I know what that's like. I want to tell her they might just devour her whole if she doesn't talk about things, but who am I to give her fucking advice about *communication*?

I don't open my eyes, but I shift slightly to the side, then wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

She has her arms crossed, but she still lets me move her so we're touching more fully. There's no stiffness or tension in her body. She trusts me right now.

I'm not so sure she should, but I don't say anything.

"And we'll get through it all." She keeps talking, turning her head to my chest. Or just under it since she doesn't quite come up that high. I wonder if she's trying to convince me, or herself. "Liber." She repeats my earlier offer, changing the subject. "Let's do it. Let me know when."

I lower my head, resting my chin on her temple. I inhale her scent. Lavender. She used to make Lucifer's car smell

like that, but I don't really ride in his car much anymore. Not since Rain. Not since Sid gave birth to him just down the hall, in their bathroom.

We were all here.

Lucifer wouldn't let us in the room until Rain was actually born, but we listened to her with the midwives and her husband, and my eyes had locked with Ella's. But Ella... she seemed uncomfortable. The attention wasn't on her. Worse, it was on *Sid*.

Her jealousy will poison her.

But I don't know what to do about it. I want to mention it to Sid, but I'm sure it wouldn't go over well, so I say nothing as I press my lips to her hair.

"Liber," I whisper against her. *Free*. "I'll text you a date, Angel." I start to unthread my arm from around her, but she pivots, enveloping me in a hug.

It's such an expected gesture from her, I'm momentarily shocked into stillness.

But I hug her back, squeezing her tight.

Then we pull away without a word and I start to leave.

Except... I stop at the top of the stairs.

She's still staring at me as my pulse thunders in my ears.

Her tank top had pulled up from our hug, the rips in it adjusting over a different part of her body.

A part I can see right now, covered with a dark bruise, the size of a fucking fist.

I grab the railing at the top of the staircase and squeeze hard. I can't discern the colors on her skin in the dim light, but I imagine there's bleeding beneath the top layer, splotches from how deep the wound is.

She frowns, confused, until her eyes track mine, then she freezes, her hands clenched into fists. Quickly, she adjusts her shirt, and the bruise vanishes from view.

My heart slams hard against my ribcage. I know what's there, on her hip, beneath that brutal mark.

The fucking J. I saw it before Lucifer ever did.

My mouth goes dry as I drag my gaze up to meet hers. There are a few feet between us, and I want to close them and demand to know what the fuck that was. She said he was better. I know they fuck rough, and so do I, but that's... *No.*

I glance at their bedroom door, violent thoughts of me snapping Lucifer's neck slicing through my mind.

"Maverick. *No.*" She repeats the same word I'm fucking thinking, her voice cold.

I cut my eyes to hers, arching a brow. I don't say a fucking word.

Her arms are crossed, and her chin is lifted high. "It was consensual."

I don't look away from her. I don't speak.

She narrows her gaze. "Leave it alone," she snaps.

"That's a really big bruise, Angel," I say quietly, my voice deceptively soft. My blood pressure is skyrocketing in my veins, and I want to fucking murder my brother. "If he's hurting you..." But I trail off. Catching myself. Reminding myself I *know* Lucifer. I *know* how he feels about her. He can't live without her. He wouldn't truly hurt her.

Would he? No more than they usually do to each other, right? But maybe last night he was fucked up from everything that happened at Sanctum. Maybe it's no longer just the usual to him.

I feel sick, imagining it, and I see the scar on her brow now, something I didn't pay attention to before. It's just become a feature of hers, like her pillowy lips, gray eyes, and short dark hair. But now I'm thinking about how she didn't used to have that scar.

About how he put it on her.

I swallow, my throat feeling thick. "*Tell me.*"

She doesn't relent. Nothing in her body language or her facial expression falters. "There's nothing to tell. You don't get to decide how I like to fuck."

I clench my teeth together, thinking about a belt. Her throat. I take a deep breath in. *Out.* “Let me find out he put his fucking hands on you—”

“Go home.” She squares her shoulders. *“We’re good.”*

We stare off for long moments. I know, right now, if Lucifer comes walking through their bedroom door, I’m gonna fucking wreck him.

But he doesn’t.

He’s asleep. *Better,* she said.

I see the splotch of color from the dark bruise inside my head. *Yeah fucking right.*

But what can I do if she’s saying she wanted it?

After the tension has built sufficiently between us, I just nod once, feeling like I’m failing, like I’m missing something, and she watches me head down the stairs. I take them quietly, only for Rain’s sake, but I want to fucking break his dad.

When I get to the landing midway, she calls out two words at my back. “Be careful.” Two words full of meaning. Of last night. Of cult secrets, a body, a brutal initiation. Maybe she’s nervous for all of us because she’s finally found a family, and she wants to keep it. *I know the feeling.*

I nod once, because if I turn around and say something, I’m going back upstairs and beating the fuck out of her husband. *My brother.*

My thoughts linger on him and Sid all the way out of their house. If he’s hurting her, if he’s putting his fucking hands on her in any kind of malicious way, I think I could kill him, now that Rain is in the picture. I try to relax, breathing in and out, because maybe it’s just what she said.

He wouldn’t.

He. Would. Not.

I brush my hand over my face as I escape into the night through the garage and turn to enter the code to lower the door. We have guards and a gate, but it’s *us*. We can never

be too fucking careful here. Still, I can't help but wonder if I'm trapping my sister *inside* with a monster.

Let it go.

The door closes and I spin around, shoving my hands into the pocket of my hoodie. I try to shake Sid from my brain. There's nothing I can do about it right now anyway. Just like with Atlas. *Nothing I can do.*

I think instead about getting home to Ella, pressing my nose to her neck. How she'll be sleepy and warm and all fucking mine, and *no one* will touch her like Lucifer let our brothers touch Sid.

Nobody. Not anymore.

We're going to figure this out, pretty girl.

I take one step down the stone driveway, eager to get home to her. Bury myself inside of her.

But a second passes, and I snap my head up, every sense on high alert. Just like with Sid, I sense it before I see it.

There's a figure at the end of the drive.

I hold my breath, my hearing acute as I stand stock-still.

I don't have a weapon, but I know if I whistle, a guard will hear.

I don't know if I want a guard to hear though. Truth be told, I kind of want to handle this myself. My adrenaline spikes, and although I don't want to start trouble, I wouldn't be too mad if I had to finish it.

As I blink in the darkness, wondering if maybe Cain, Atlas or Ezra came down to check in on Rain or saw me leave or some shit, the shadow disappears.

My pulse pounds faster and I keep walking toward the end of the driveway, casting my eyes around the night. I glance to my house, seeing the porchlight is off.

I stop again.

I left the light on so I could see the keypad clearly when I walked back up the steps. There are fake spider webs strung up on my porch as Halloween decorations, and the lights beneath the numbers are dimming and the unit is

getting replaced next week. I wasn't chancing leaving my girl there with unlocked doors, so I turned the light on to see the keypad.

Someone turned it off.

My entire body is tense, every limb locked up as my heart pounds too fast. *But I'm ready to finish shit, aren't I?* I mock myself inside my head.

It's like two separate halves of me, screaming at one another for dominance. Protector and predator, I reason with myself maybe they're one in the same.

I blink in the darkness and start to think I imagined it. It's late, and I'm exhausted. Rain can be a lot of work, and I've seen my fair share of shit recently, so maybe I'm just delirious. But I didn't imagine my porchlight. I *know* I left it on because I *know* I locked our fucking door. I glance at the glow-in-the-dark blue paint.

666.

I have the sudden urge to run to my house to check on Ella. To know she's okay. I left her *right upstairs*.

But where is she now, a voice whispers in my head. *Maybe you'll fail her just like you failed Malachi. Brooklin. Sid. Ria.*

I grind my teeth, and I know I'm a sitting duck right here in the dark with nowhere to hide. Then again, *when the fuck do I ever hide?*

Either way, there's no more noise, and I don't see any more shadows.

Fuck, I need sleep.

I rub my fist over my eyes, spots flaring behind my closed lids. Then, sighing, I fix my gaze on home and take another step on the damp walkway, the sound sticky from the afternoon rain today.

As I walk, a bird caws overhead, which seems a little ominous. It's not time for birds, right? Don't they come out in the morning? Isn't it their whole thing? I shove my hands into my pockets and keep walking, my shirt beneath the

layer of my hoodie sticking to my back with the warm night from North Carolina's volatile weather, and my adrenaline.

I want to get to Ella.

I need to get to Ella.

She's okay. I repeat it over and over in my head. This one thing, I'm going to get it right. *This one fucking thing.*

We're safe.

We're safe.

I make it off Luce and Sid's driveway. I don't see the shadow. It was nothing. I'm just exhausted.

I take another step.

Another fucking bird caws.

Another step.

I look at the ground, breathing in through my nose. Out through my mouth. But something feels off.

Something isn't right.

Another step.

A pause seems to hover in the darkness. A moment of perfect stillness.

Then there's a voice, to my left. "*Salve.*"

Hello in Latin.

My heart pumps violently fast inside of my chest as I turn my head, blinking in the dark. I see nothing but wet pavement, the shadows of dying trees. Then there's the shuffle of feet, boots on asphalt.

And *Atlas* appears seemingly out of nowhere from the inky night.

I should feel relief, but for some reason... I don't.

He's wearing all black, including the backward cap on his head, but as he steps closer, the lights from Lucifer and Sid's garage illuminate the script in pastel blue on his black hoodie.

Who loves you in the dark? It's written with a spiral, into a circle.

Normally, I might make fun of his fashion choices, but tonight, nearly midnight on Corpus Avenue and a day after

we buried his girl's brother, his presence unnerves something in me.

"What are you doing?" The words are out before I can think the better of them. It's not as if he's not *allowed* to walk our street at night. But where is he going? Certainly not to Lucifer's. He's dead asleep, like most people should be at this time. We're growing out of all-nighters.

And the porchlight from my house... I look toward it now, gritting my teeth the longer the silence stretches between me and one of my brothers. When my eyes find his again, he's closer, like he just *appeared* the extra three steps he took.

It's not possible, obviously. But Atlas moves like a snake. Fluid and graceful, every movement quiet, you're likely to forget he's in a room. You'll underestimate him, and the next thing you know, his fangs are in your skin. His venom sliding in your veins, toward your heart. Just ask my sister about that. Still, it was *me* who chipped his fucking tooth, and while it's been years, and Brooklin is back under our protection, he'd do well to remember the night I almost killed him on a merry-go-round. His blood painted the sleek metal red.

You haven't forgotten, have you? What kind of secrets are you keeping? Can you not sleep at night, after what you saw? Why are you texting my fucking girl when you're up so late? She's not your distraction.

"What does it look like?" He smiles as he asks the question, dimples flashing in his smooth skin. He looks younger than the rest of us. A baby face, and he has no tattoos, except the U with the skull. Our *brand*. It's on his chest, huge, there's no mistaking it when he's shirtless. I glance at his black hoodie, the blue letters.

"Did you stop by my house?" I lift my eyes to his, raising my chin. We're close to the same height. The funny thing about Atlas though, is he always seems smaller in your mind, when you think back on him. Quiet, polite, funny, he

can shrink in your memories. But here, toe-to-toe with him, I remember the punches he threw at me too, the night of Lover's Death when he fucked with my sister.

His dark eyes slide from my house to me. "Why do you ask?"

I arch a brow, and I wonder if he can read my mind. *That's not a fucking answer.*

He laughs at my expression, his white teeth flashing, and I catch the scent of spearmint. "No." He slips one hand from the pocket of his hoodie and adjusts his black, backward hat, blond curls briefly visible before he pulls the cap back on then drops his hand to meet his other in his pocket.

He's worn a hat for as long as I can remember. I know what his hair looks like, because of the things he does just like that, adjusting the brim. But he never takes it off. Not really. I wonder why.

Even as kids, I think he had one. I try to recall a flash of memory without it, or a reason why he's worn it, but I come up short. We never really spoke about demons, and maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I wouldn't be surprised if he's hiding something under that hat.

Right now, I think he's hiding something else. I think it starts with the fucking corpse.

I flex my fingers in the pocket of my own hoodie and the movement makes me think about Malachi's name. Sid's on my hand. How much Ella hates it. She's never said it outright, but I can tell.

I clear my throat and alongside it, the cobwebs of memories containing all the ways Ella is annoyed with me. All the secrets she seems to be keeping, and I've been too exhausted to force them out of her. "It's late."

Atlas's brows furrow. "Is it, *Dad?*"

I chew the inside of my cheek, and I know he didn't intend to spark the thought, but I imagine Ella again, pregnant with our baby. It's like I can't stop fixating on it,

probably because of becoming an uncle, being so close to Rain.

Two feelings spring up with the image in my head of having my own kid. Elation, and fear.

I push it aside. *Focus.*

“You good?” I bring it up because Sid did. Because normal people would. Because *brothers* should. “After... last night?”

A shadow crosses his face, but shocking me, his lips tip upward into a smile. “Great.”

Goosebumps travel down my arms as I stare at him, assessing. Something seems... *off* about him. I think about the text he sent my girl. Why would he want photos of Rain so late? Was it an excuse? Some kind of code? I know why he didn't text me. We all have a group chat and I *never* check the messages, so that's explainable. But even so, something about it all doesn't sit right with me.

“What was that all about?” I ask. “You just fucking ghosted us after we watched your mess get cleaned up.”

He tilts his head. “Who said it's my mess?”

I laugh a little, shaking my head. “Don't play fucking stupid. That was *your girl's* brother.”

The shadow is back, darkening his eyes. “She's not my girl.”

“Really?” I step closer to him; unnerved and pissed off all at once. “Then why the *fuck* was her brother's dead body on our property?”

He stares at me a minute then he asks, “How's Ella, Mav?”

Really, motherfucker? “Wouldn't *you* know? You sure as fuck don't have a problem messaging her in the middle of the fucking night. And what the *fuck* is your problem?”

He doesn't back down from me, and instead, he comes half a step closer. We're nearly toe-to-toe, and I'm thinking about shattering the bones in his nose again if he doesn't get the fuck up out of my face.

“You feeling insecure, *bro*?”

I am going to kill you. But I don’t say a fucking word. If he gets closer to me, I’m going to hurt him. I’m not insecure. I’m... *jealous? Overprotective? Not going to let anyone take Ella away from me?*

“Why don’t you pay attention to *Ella*...” he whispers, the words laced with darkness. “And stop trying to clean out skeletons from closets that don’t belong to you?”

I grind my teeth, my muscles tensing. “What exactly are you fucking saying to me?”

A dimple in his baby face flashes as he smirks, inches from me. But all he says, his voice light, is, “You don’t need me to repeat it.”

The hairs along the back of my neck stiffen, apprehension coiling through me. “What do you know that I don’t?”

His smile brightens, and he takes the smallest step back, like he’s just about done with this conversation. “Nothing,” he says quietly, glancing past me, to the Malikov house. “I’m just fucking with you, man.” Then he steps around me, glancing at his shoes as he does before his gaze comes to mine again.

We stare off and I want to say something else. There’s a strange feeling beneath my skin. A prick of something, like the tiniest splinter, just at the edge of my awareness. But before I can extract it, Atlas starts to walk away from me. “Have a nice night,” he says over his shoulder, heading around the cul-de-sac.

I stand where I am, watching him in the darkness.

He doesn’t look back, and as his cryptic words ring inside my head, I can’t help but wonder about the light on my goddamn porch. When he’s vanished into the night, I hear something in the other direction. Whipping my head around, my heart leaping inside my chest, my mouth open—as if to call Atlas back, like I might need him—I strain my eyes to see in the nightfall. Halloween decorations light

parts of the street in blue, others in purple, but even that neon glow isn't enough to make anything out.

But I could've sworn I heard something.

A laugh. Low, hushed. It couldn't have been Atlas because he's at my back.

I hold my breath and take two steps forward, blinking, trying to see, to hear.

Nothing.

There's nothing.

Am I losing my fucking mind?

Then I think about last night, how this week started. Lucifer with the knife in his hand. He didn't even hesitate with the ritual, did he? I have no idea who was in the body bag at his feet; all I remember is Lucifer's clear refusal to take the initiate home, and we didn't discuss it again, even when Elijah came out for Samson. The 6 are always doing wicked shit. Still, I'm a little surprised they let him get away with saying no.

Probably for the best. He could've been lugging a corpse into his house.

But as I cast my eyes about the darkness, pins and needles beneath my skin, I can't help wondering about who, exactly, was in that fucking bag.

I take another step, but the sense of unease hasn't let up. I hold my breath, debating doubling back and finding Atlas. Dragging him out into the street and making him tell me what the fuck he's hiding. But before I can decide what to do, screeching tires explode in the quiet night, drowning out the beat of my own pulse in my ears.

I watch careening headlights flood onto our protected street, my body locked up. My heart thuds too fast in my chest as I see Cain's Camaro nearly sliding on two fucking wheels until he comes to an abrupt stop in front of *my house*.

I hear the bass thudding in his car, and it pours out when he throws open his door, car still running.

I open my mouth to call out to him, but for some reason, I rethink it, and stay quiet.

Why?

He strides up my driveway like he owns the place, and all I can think about is Ella in there. Atlas's cryptic words. His text to her.

My pulse quickens.

"Angry" doesn't really begin to cut it.

I start to run toward my driveway.

Rage and something like fear floods through my body, pushing me onward. But just as I propel myself forward another step, my back foot pushing off the road, a shadow looms in the corner of my eye. I pivot at the last moment, turning toward it, but it's too late. It doesn't matter.

Whoever's there is strong and smart, because their legs sweep mine out from under me as my face crashes against asphalt. My head spins with the impact, and I taste blood in my mouth.

Stars explode in front of my eyes, my gaze fixed on home.

My ears ring.

I can't move.

I don't see Cain come back out through my foggy vision.

I should have called out to him. I should have trusted my brother.

But I didn't, and I don't hear him, or Lucifer, or Atlas, or Ezra.

I press my palms to the ground, gravel digging into my skin as I try to push *up*, but it's like there's a weight on my back. A knee.

Someone is fucking kneeling on me. Rage and panic for Ella war inside of me as I try to get to my fucking knees but I feel sick and whoever it is puts all of their weight against my spine.

As I struggle, I hear a voice in my ear, the moment before something soft and wet is wrapped around my

mouth and over my nose, and everything goes fucking black.

"Hate to do this to you, Maverick."

But as my vision swims and my body seems to float into oblivion, I get this feeling he *really, really doesn't*.

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3
THE ASTOR ESTATE

GRAY EYES *like cloudy ice watch me from the darkness. Inside a black room that seems endless, those irises are the only things I can see.*

"Give him back to me." My voice seems to echo and crawl at once, resounding but weak, on its knees. Like my own words are taunting me.

I push to my feet but stumble alone, as if I can't do this without him. But the eyes, they stole him from me.

"Give him back." I try to gather courage as my bones grind against a hard floor, and my palms slap the ground, slipping in something.

Something warm and liquid, but with a certain thickness to it.

My stomach turns hard, my throat closing up as I gag.

The silver eyes watch from a corner of the room. Something scuttles on the floor, behind me. I whip my head around and swear I feel my neck crack, my hands still deep in what I think is... blood.

"Who's there?" I gasp it, like I can't get volume to my question. "Who?" I try again, but it comes out fainter still, as if my voice is seeping from me.

A baby cries in the dark. A sharp, jagged sound that sends the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

I suck in air, but it's as if there's a plastic bag over my mouth, sealing my airway, and when I turn in the other direction, sensing something close, too close, those gray eyes are inches from my face, but they're looking at me upside down.

Like the body they're attached to is...hanging.

"Maverick." I gasp out the ghost of his name as I sit up straight in bed. I bat down the covers, turning to his side, but in the dark, I see no one.

I swipe my hand along the empty sheets, trying to feel for his warmth, but there is nothing but ice cold.

Swallowing the fuzziness of my dry mouth, I turn to look at the clock beside my bed.

It's three a.m.

*My stomach sinks and swoops and dives, like a crow feasting for carrion. *He should be back.**

I reach for my phone on my nightstand, but just before my fingers can close around it, I hear a creak downstairs.

*I freeze, remembering *why I woke up.**

There was a noise, wasn't there? Like a door closing?

My breaths are shallow pants, only sips of air, but I reason with myself it has to be Maverick. Maybe he just went outside to smoke.

I fling the covers back, cold air whipping around my legs, bare from the knees down. I'm in Maverick's gym shorts, the cord tied tight to my waist, a white T-shirt of his that hits my thighs.

I grab my phone, knocking over a packet of Benadryl tablets. They thwack against the hardwood, but I don't pick them up. They're the only reason I was able to sleep tonight, knowing he wasn't back from *her* house yet.

I click on my phone screen, but there's nothing. No missed calls, no texts.

I stand, slipping down from the bed, and hurry across the room, only pausing a second before I pull open the door, the cold from the hall frostier than in the bedroom.

I tiptoe over to the second-floor railing and call out in the dark, "Maverick?" My mind flickers to the nightmare as my voice cracks, like I'm losing it as I did in my dream.

I circle my fingers tighter around my phone, feeling my pulse beat heavy and deep in my neck.

Silence greets my question, and I hold my breath, waiting. No one broke in. They knew the code, or an alarm would have gone off. But on the other hand, if it was Mav, he'd say something, wouldn't he? And he's always worried fingerprints can be stolen, biometrics hacked. I've heard him mentioning it to Lucifer in low whispers.

I edge toward the top of the stairs, thinking of the pepper spray in my nightstand. The gun in Mav's. He didn't bring it. He said he didn't want it around Rain. He said, on this street, we're safe.

Chills grow colder along my skin the longer the silence stretches on.

Did he find out? About Atlas?

My stomach flips. But no. If he did, he wouldn't wait. He's not patient. If he knew, he'd be flying up these stairs and he'd...

I push the thought aside. No way he knows, or Atlas would be dead, and I'd be close to. But maybe he just got

back from digging his grave.

I don't make a sound though, because Maverick doesn't play games like these.

Atlas though... *"Just try it, Ella. Be something besides his puppet for the night."*

Shattering the memory from a month ago at Rain's party, the floor shifts downstairs, just inside the foyer.

My entire body feels cold, and I look over my shoulder, debate running to our bedroom and grabbing the gun. But I don't know who it is, and if I shot one of *them*, I'd wind up dead too.

"Go to sleep, Ella."

I blink in the darkness. I recognize that voice. It definitely isn't Maverick, but it isn't a murderer, either.

Or at least, not someone who would murder *me*.

"Cain?" I whisper his name in the dark, like it might make this conversation easier to have. Still, panic seizes my limbs. Where is Mavy? He was just taking Rain back. He said he'd be five minutes.

My thought snags.

He was just taking Rain back to *her* house.

Panic gives way to anger. I drop my hands by my sides and clench my fists, my imagination running wild. Except it isn't all my imagination, because I have a perfectly twisted memory of his cock down Sid's fucking throat.

He wouldn't.

He fucking wouldn't.

Cain coughs, the sound muffled, like he had his fist over his mouth. "I'm sleeping over for the night. Go back to bed. I just had to piss. Sorry I woke you up." He doesn't sound sorry at all.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Blinking my bleary eyes, trying to make myself *alert*, I take the stairs down two at a time, wincing at the pain in my backside as my hand slides along the smooth iron of the banister. I jump the last three steps, landing on bare feet as

I whip around the corner, glancing once to the frosted glass of the front door. Part of me wants to run outside. Down the street. Straight to Lucifer and Sid's fucking house but if I walked in and saw—

I collide with a hard body in the darkness of the hall. No light filters in through here, but as I pick my head up, my pulse flying and Cain's chest beneath my palm—one hand still curled around my phone—I see the gleam of his dark eyes. His hands are wrapped around my wrists, the feel of his fingers calloused and rough.

Inhaling, I catch the scent of soap. Like he just showered before he came here.

"Where is he?" I whisper, and I grind my teeth together as I drop my hands, but he doesn't release my wrists. I'm not scared of him, not inside my own house, but I'm more concerned I'm not going to like his answer.

He leans down close to me, his breath warm against my lips. "Did you have anyone over, Ella?"

I shake my head, confused and angry and panicked, my mouth going dry. I try to jerk back, but with Cain's grip on my arms, I can't really get away. "No? *What?* Where is—"

"You sure about that?"

Confusion slips through my anger as I blink in the dark. My spine crawls, thinking of someone in this house I didn't know about. I glance to the right, seeing darkness in the living room.

"I don't even have fucking friends," I hiss the words, and I'm grateful for Cain's hold on my wrists as my knees shake. "Where is Mavy?" I start to think something terrible happened to him.

Maybe Cain was sent here to kill me.

His eyes flick to my mouth, then back up. "You tell me."

I furrow my brows, my stomach fluttering. "What are you talking about? Where is Maverick? No one is here—"

"Okay," Cain cuts me off. "Then go to bed." His voice is deep and raw, almost as if from underuse. He doesn't talk

much, not when I've been around him, but when he does, everyone seems to listen.

Still. My boyfriend is out *there*. And Cain is questioning *me*.

"What's going on? Why do you think someone is here? Is he with *her*?" The words rush out before I can stop myself from looking like a *kid*. But I'm not.

I'm just not an idiot, and I don't want to be played like one.

Cain straightens, then laughs, a sound that seems to come from his gut even if it is mocking. He grips my wrists tighter but if he thinks he's intimidating me, he obviously has no idea all the things Maverick does to me in the dark.

"Go to bed." He repeats his words, an undertone of anger injected into his voice. "You'll see him in the morning."

I try to yank my arms from his hold, but he only pulls me closer, until my palm is once more planted against him, this time lower, over the hard muscles of his abs. Cain is bigger than all of them, but I'm still not scared. Not of him.

I'm too annoyed for fear. All these thoughts of Sid and Maverick are bubbling into my head. I've *watched* her touch him. "Where. Is. *He*?"

Cain would cover for him. It's not entirely out of the realm of possibility that my boyfriend would drop his nephew off, then get caught up in some sick and twisted, incestual fuck fest with his half-sister and her husband. There are no lines that aren't crossed between adults in Unsainted. I've seen it firsthand.

My stomach flips.

There's a pause after my question, and I think Cain isn't going to answer me. No one ever does, do they? But finally, he just says, "He's safe." He sounds annoyed, and tired, but I don't care. I want to know why my fucking boyfriend isn't coming back. "Go. To. Bed." His eyes are narrowed, and I feel his body tense beneath my fingertips. He doesn't want

a fight. I wouldn't put it past him to drug me to get me to sleep, but until he does, I'm not going to bed.

"Is he with her?" My chest heaves as I ask the question again, slick, hot jealousy deep in my veins. But Cain said he's *safe*, so he can't be on a job or anything, right? And I can't stand the thought of where he might be. I was good to her. I was kind. I don't understand what the fuck is happening with her and Lucifer and Jeremiah, not wholly, and I know when she found out I...

I don't want to think about Lucifer, and what I did with him. Shame engulfs me when I do, because I did it at Maverick's command. She didn't get mad at *him*, did she?

Another thought bursts in. Something I've been asking myself a lot lately, seeing the way Sid defies Lucifer at every turn, even in casual conversation, and all the ways I go along with everything Maverick tells me.

Whispered words in the dark of the basement from Atlas have kept me up at night.

Do I always just do what he says? Do I ever think for myself? My tired mind and the anger in my body has my thoughts confused and annoyed and I just want him back here. Where the fuck is he?

Cain stares at me a moment, his fingers loosening then flexing again around the bones of my wrist.

"Does he know you're so jealous?" he asks quietly. There's no humor in his words, or I would think the question was meant to taunt me.

"Answer me first." I watch his dark eyes flick over my body, and I'm grateful the T-shirt is Maverick's, and oversized. But I'm very aware I'm standing in my pajamas in front of Cain, the biggest whore I think I've ever met, and that's saying a lot, considering my mom. And Sid.

Slowly, as heat blooms over my chest, Cain's eyes come back to mine.

Then he pushes me back, controlling my arms as my spine collides with the wall in the foyer. It isn't painful, he's

not forceful, but he's dominating me, all the same.

His thigh comes between mine and I bite my lip, shaking my head. "What the hell are you—"

"You have to get that shit under control." He doesn't lean into my space, but with his body effectively pinning me to the wall, he doesn't have to. He forces my elbows to bend, pressing my forearms beside my head and restraining me, his thigh still pressed between mine. "The more you show how much she affects you, the more everyone will play with it. It's a weakness. Dismember it."

Dismember it.

The words crawl down my spine, lifting the hairs on the nape of my neck. But I don't focus on the unease. Instead, I say, "They fucked each other. She was with him at Ignis—"

"You don't trust him?"

The question hits me in the gut, pulling my thoughts from that stupid initiation ceremony. *Do I trust him?* I ran away from my entire life for him. For a better one, yeah, and more attention and love and *stuff* than I've ever had. I left Mom behind, and I don't usually feel guilty about it, but sometimes, those emotions hit me. Maybe I messed up. Maybe I'm delusional.

But we don't talk about it.

And sometimes, I think I can feel Maverick's own grief about his mom, someone he too, refuses to talk to me about. His dad, either. He buries it. It's like he didn't lose both parents at the same time. It's like nothing happened at all. He's still hot tempered and volatile, but he's never sad. He never lets me see that.

What does he let Sid see? Is he hiding things from me like I'm hiding from him? Like the dull ache beneath my thighs right now? *Will you be proud, Mavy, when you find out what I've done?*

Cain scoffs, a short, abrupt sound. All at once, he releases me and steps back. "Go to bed. He's not with her." He turns his back to me and it feels like a rejection. As

usual, I'm the last to know anything going on in this fucked-up world. But now I have a few secrets of my own and I don't take cryptic avoidance as an answer anymore.

I step away from the wall. "I'm going to find out where he is." I start for the staircase, intent on putting my shoes on and walking to Lucifer's house, and... what? Barging in? Ringing the damn doorbell? What if Maverick really isn't there? Maybe I can punch Sid in the face just for the fuck of it. Maybe it would make me feel better.

"I'm really fucking tired." Cain's words are through gritted teeth. I've never seen him angry before. He's intimidating in his indifference, and this, a flare of emotion and the true exhaustion in his words, has me pausing as I circle my fingers around the railing of the staircase, glancing at his shadow in the foyer, his back to me as he faces the hallway toward the living room. "I don't want to be here just as much as you don't want me here. It was a last-minute thing. I was busy. Do me a fucking favor, get your ass to bed, and take this shit up with Maverick in the morning. He isn't with her, he might still want to fuck her, but if he tried, Lucifer would cut his dick off. So, if you don't trust him, at least trust *that*."

I feel sick, hearing those words. The ones that stand out. *He might still want to fuck her.*

No, no, no.

I release the railing and curl my fingers into a fist, slamming it on the iron banister. "Fuck that," I snarl, one foot on the bottom step, pain reverberating through my hand. "Why does he even want her?" The anger expands in my chest, the words vomiting up without my permission. Like Cain actually has answers. Like he gives a fuck. Of all of them, he probably cares the least. Maybe that's why I keep going. He won't gossip or run his mouth. "I don't get it. I do everything for him, and she's... she's..." I shake my head, clenching my jaw as I search for the word.

Everything I'm not. Feisty and angry and fed up and unafraid.

But I think of last night. Crawling through a graveyard, blood bubbling beneath my skin. *I'm brave too, aren't I?* Or am I just stupid?

"A mess," Cain finishes. "Just like you. Just like him. But what I find funny about all this..." He cocks his head, looking over his shoulder as I lift my gaze to him. "You're fucking around with Atlas. Seems you've figured out how to play the game *just like us.*"

He turns his back on me again, like he's going to walk away. "I'm sleeping in the living room. If you try to leave this house, I'll know, and I will lock you in the fucking basement, do you understand?"

I think about the girl Maverick had locked in the basement before.

My jealousy surges hot.

But there's no use fighting against Cain while he's still awake. So, instead of saying what I want to say, I just nod once.

When I hear his footsteps disappearing down the long hallway, I bound up the stairs. After I walk into our bedroom—the scent of leather and marijuana heavy in the air, but something else too, that I can't place—I close the door behind me, then toss my phone on the bed. Maverick left his here—it's still charging on the nightstand and of course I don't know the passcode—so there's no use calling him.

I go to the walk-in closet, and fling open the door. Here, the scent of something else, like an unfamiliar cologne, is stronger. I flip the light on, peering into the huge closet at the neat rows of black clothes, the shirts and hoodies and bomber jackets on hangers, a center island with built-in shelf space for shoes, an inverted cross in black underneath the glass top.

There's no one here. Maybe the scent is Cain.

My bare feet skim over the hardwoods, and I pull on my leather jacket over Mav's shirt, then a pair of socks, before I stuff my feet into boots I had tossed haphazardly along one of the shelves. I walk out and flip the light, wrinkling my nose. Cain smelled like... a shower. Besides, he hadn't been in here.

I sniff, running the back of my hand over my nose and making a note to ask Mav if he tried a new cologne, but first I have to find him.

I close the closet door, head for my side of the king-sized bed. Snatching my phone from the charger, my fingers poised over the keyboard, I see the person who I meant to text to ask if he knows what's going on has already texted me.

Unknown: He still gone?

How the fuck do you know, Atlas? I type exactly that to the number not programmed in my phone. Cain and Atlas both know something I don't about the whereabouts of my fucking boyfriend.

Cain sounded genuinely tired. I have no idea if he's a light sleeper or not, or how long he's been here and if he heard me wake up and walk out of the bedroom, but either way, he can't keep me trapped inside my own home. Besides, I have a right to find out where Maverick is. He didn't say anything about going anywhere. He was taking Rain home and coming right back.

My phone lights up in my hand, no vibrations or ringtone because it's permanently on silent, except for when Mavy calls since he's saved as my only favorite.

Atlas: Don't come here.

I frown in the darkness of the bedroom, the sole light the glow from my screen. Outside the closed curtains, I hear nothing. I know Maverick's cars are both in the garage, and Atlas must be at home if he's warning me away.

Irritation crawls under my skin.

Me: Why'd you text me in the first place, then?

I inhale, staring at my phone, annoyed. Again, I catch the scent of something unusual. Typically, this room smells like Maverick. Leather. And sometimes, weed, although he's been smoking outside more since we became a daycare for Rain Malikov.

But I brush it aside, still staring at my phone as the screen dims. Rolling my eyes, I turn around and flop down on the bed, looking up at the ceiling in the dark, the phone cradled to my chest.

I'm going to get out of this house when I know Cain is asleep. I don't have my own car, but I've got shared access to the Audi Mav keeps because a rich boy-toy like the McLaren isn't a daily driver.

My phone glows, and I hold it over my face.

Atlas: Because I know you, Ella, and I knew you'd think to come to my house. Don't.

I don't know if this is some kind of code. Like, is he telling me he actually wants me to come? He's always saying one day Mav might read our texts, and I wouldn't put it past him, but it's weird Atlas would even know he's gone. Then again, they are brothers, aren't they?

I blink in the dark, staring at the words on the screen. Sucking in a breath, I use my abs to sit up, but just as I go to text him back, I sense something behind me.

There's a tremor in my fingers as I grip my phone tighter, knowing I need to look, I need to scream, or move, or run, but I do nothing.

I don't want to look.

I don't want to fucking look.

The dream I had comes to haunt me, silver eyes in the dark, in the corner of a room.

I take a breath, trying to convince myself I'm paranoid. Nothing is happening. I'm just tired, and none of this shit makes sense. That's all.

Besides, Cain is right downstairs. I could scream, and he'd hear me. With that thought, I turn my head as my phone dims, and look over my shoulder. I see the leather couch on the far side of the room, the low industrial-looking coffee table before the three windows covered in slate gray curtains, slivers of moonlight peeking through the only glow to see by.

There's nothing else though.

Rolling my eyes at myself, the way my emotions and confusion are playing tricks on my senses, I turn back to my phone and send another text.

Me: I don't want to play these games.

And as soon as the message is delivered, I hear it.

A beep.

A generic ringtone.

I stand up, my entire body full of pins and needles as I spin around, putting my back to the wall beside the closed bathroom door. My eyes sweep over the cavernous bedroom in the dark as I grip my phone so tight my palm starts to sweat.

Nothing.

There's nothing here.

My heart slams against my ribcage too fast, and my gaze turns to the closet door, pulled closed, on the wall adjacent the windows.

I swallow down my fear and look back at my phone.

Atlas hasn't replied.

Me: Wtf is going on?

I hesitate over the send button with shaky fingers. Maverick's phone might be here, but at night, it's always on silent. He rarely sleeps as it is, he says if he does manage to get to bed, the cult can burn while he's dreaming for all he cares.

My thumb hovers over the button.

I send the message, holding my breath, thinking I just imagined the sound.

I glance at the screen, tense, but the very second the message is delivered, I hear it again.

A low beep, just for a beat.

I clamp a hand over my mouth, turning my head to look at the bathroom. The door is pulled to, and I can see nothing under the crack in the door in the darkness, but the sound was further away.

The closet, I think.

But I was just there. There was nothing. *There's nothing.* Maverick has suits though, that I've never seen him wear, hanging up along one wall. Dress shirts. Ties. Someone could have hidden there...

No.

Not possible. No one is here.

I press my thighs together, fear coursing through my veins as I clutch my phone to my chest, my hip bumping the bed as I rock back and forth a little. *Maverick, please come home.*

I glance at the door to the bedroom. The *exit*, it feels like now.

I don't think for a *second* it's actually Atlas's phone. He can't be here. He wouldn't dare because we both know the consequences of Mav finding out our shared secrets.

He wouldn't.

Someone else... someone has his phone. Maybe it's not Atlas I'm texting at all.

Shit, shit, shit.

I hold my breath, trying to hear beyond the drumming of my pulse.

Then I feel it.

Something cold seizes my ankle from under the bed.

A short, violent scream leaves my throat, scratching at my vocal cords on the way up. I stumble backward, kicking my leg out, and the cold fingers leave my skin. The floor creaks, my breaths coming in loud pants, but I keep moving.

Run downstairs. Scream for Cain.

But my eyes are glued to the space underneath the bed. Nothing there. There's... nothing there.

I edge past the bathroom, toward the bedroom door. I hear nothing, and there's just no way. There's no way someone was under my bed.

Get your shit together, Ella.

I fumble with my phone and flip on the flashlight, then squat down, and with terror in my heart, I aim the light to underneath the bed.

I see...nothing. Only a long, wooden box shaped like a coffin where Maverick stores stuff he writes that he won't keep in his office because he doesn't want anyone to read it. Nothing else.

Nothing.

Slowly, I stand to my feet, clicking off the flashlight. I turn around and reach a shaky hand out for the door, unlocking it and pulling down on the handle while I hold my phone in the other hand.

I'm going to wake up Cain.

I don't care how mad he gets. *Someone may be in here*, which echoes his question. With that thought, I don't hesitate as my phone lights up in my hand again. I run from the bedroom, my heart crashing in my chest.

I sprint down the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other holding my phone over my face to read Atlas's text.

Him: Be very careful tonight. Stay where you are.

No. Fuck that. I push my phone into the pocket of my jacket as I hit the landing, looking toward the living room down the hall.

I freeze, listening as I hold my breath.

I hear Cain's soft snores.

I glance up the stairs, debating on waking Cain, or getting the hell out of this house. Maverick isn't here. Atlas knows something is up, and Cain is refusing to talk.

Fuck this.

I head toward the door, flipping the locks and disarming the keypad.

I'm going to find out where you are, Mavy.

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XI

Maverick

SOMEWHERE UNCOMFORTABLY CLOSE, a raven caws and it sounds like a death sentence. Splinters of past Halloween nights, parties at Raven Park in the abandoned asylum, they're jagged as they play out behind my eyes.

Girls I've used, clouds of forgetting smoke, the burn of marijuana in my lungs. Shadows scattered through with vague wisps of Malachi Astor, but I know my brother was a fully formed person maybe only Brooklin ever saw. I protected him, but did I have fun alongside him? Did I get to know him? It's like being buried beneath a tunnel. I hear his laughter, but I can't see his smile. *Did I ever make any part of your precious life worth living?*

"Where does he sleep? Inside the Malikov home?"

I blink open heavy eyes, the sensation of space dense and wavy as it curls around me. I'm not sure how my body

is positioned in the universe or what's happened to my limbs, because I can't feel them.

And only blackness, pure and opaque, stares back at me through my pupils.

"Upstairs, but is he across from their room? Does he sleep beside their bed?"

I don't know this voice, or if I do, I can't place it. I try to open my mouth, but if anything comes out, I can't hear it.

"Tell me about their security system. How hard would it be to get inside? You can unlock the door through their cameras." A laugh, light and airy. "That seems lax."

A splitting headache erupts inside my skull. It jolts me into alarm. *Is this it? Memento mori come to life?* I think I'm sitting as I jerk upright, and I distantly hear chains clanking. I try to lift my hands, but they're bound to something hard and cold, and the sound of the chains connects with my thoughts in a way my body can't quite place yet.

I'm tied up.

That laughter again, like this is a fun fucking day at the park.

Park. For some reason, the word sparks the thought of Rain.

Fear engulfs me, and there's an iron taste in my mouth as I try to move my tongue again. Blood?

The questions replay in my head as I attempt to get my vocal cords to work. *Security system. Where he sleeps.*

Rain. They're asking about Rain.

I have to pry my fucking eyelids open, only to see *nothing*. Because there's something over my eyes, and when I shift my body, I find my wrists ache and my hands are nearly numb, pins and needles stabbing through my palms and fingers, the chains clanking once more.

I shuffle my feet, but it's the same. More chains. I'm sitting up, I'm in a chair, and I'm not getting out.

I suck down a breath, incense woody and floral in my throat as I try to stay calm. To *think*.

But with all this shit going on, the only thing I can think about is like an echo inside my skull, and it isn't helpful, and it's why I swore I'd never do it. *Never fall in fucking love.*

Ella.

Ella.

Ella.

I kick out my legs once more and get nowhere, only the rattling of metal links the result of my action. But I'm also able to feel the fact I'm still clothed.

Thank Satan for small miracles, I guess.

As my adrenaline spikes and maybe the fading drug from the cloth that was wrapped around my nose and mouth drags me into awareness, the pain aching through every muscle in my body comes back around too.

My heart races, and my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. I don't know how long I've been here, but however long it is, it means I've been away from Ella for *that long*.

Before I can fumble a word out, a searing, blinding pain explodes across the side of my temple. My neck jerks back, my body seizing in the chair as chains clank, then a voice is whispering with venom beside my ear.

"Where does he sleep, Maverick Astor?"

My chest heaves, a growl leaving my lips as I straighten, attempting to blink back the blow.

There's silence, only the sound of my pulse rattling around inside my skull.

Then another blow, this time on the opposite side of my head. My neck cracks from the force of the hit, and red stars explode behind my eyes.

"What's the passcode for the garage? We saw you enter tonight. Don't waste time with lies."

I grind my teeth together to stop from screaming as I squeeze my eyes shut tighter though the blindfold does a

good enough job keeping me in the dark.

"You have two seconds to answer one of my questions."
The voice is accented. There's a thread of familiarity running through it, but I can't grab onto it.

I don't answer.

This time, a sharp kick hits my ribs.

I try to hunch over as a snarled sound leaves my lips, but the binds are around my chest too, and my ab muscles flex, attempting to soften the blow. I feel bile burn up from deep inside my stomach, spurting into my throat.

"There's a panic room in Lucifer's house. How do you access it?"

If I weren't in so much pain, I would laugh. I forget he has a panic room, and he's certainly never told me how to get inside. The devil keeps secrets even from his demons.

But I *don't* laugh, and I don't speak, and that gives me another blow, this time a slap to my abs, which my mind reasons shouldn't hurt so badly, but after the kick, it's like my body wants to levitate off the chair to get away from the torture.

I don't go anywhere though as tears from physical pain prick behind my eyes. The binds keep me in place.

"Fuck," I grunt out, my voice a splintered whisper, *"off."*

There's quiet.

Then, "She's alone right now. If you don't answer my question, if you don't give me *something* on Rain, I'll ensure my men fuck her with everything in your house until she's absolutely *useless* to you."

The pain seems to abate. Cold fear numbs it. I'm rigid in my chair, my mind teleporting to my beautiful, red-haired girl, hopefully sleeping through my absence.

But no. Not hopefully. *Wake up, pretty girl. Open your eyes.* If someone came for her, would she know how to defend herself? Why have I never taught her? Why did I make her entirely dependent on me?

My thighs tense. My jaw hurts from clenching my teeth. *Rain, or Ella?* Is that what's happening right now? I'm being forced to choose between the only person who accepts me entirely as I am, who loves me despite every fucked up thing inside my head, *and a baby?* My *nephew?*

It's too clean, this set up. Too far-fetched.

It's too... Russian thriller.

If they had really spied on me, watched me type in the passcode to the Malikov garage, they would have simply followed me inside or else used something to capture the numbers I entered.

Horribly, I realize *this is a test.*

So all I say is, "Yeah? Well when this is all over, when I get out of this chair, *I'm going to fuck you with it.*"

There's a strange quiet. I wonder if they know *I* know.

Then there's a different voice. "Very good." It's the person who attacked me, *and I fucking know him.* His praise doesn't make sense to me. I didn't give them *anything*, I didn't make the choice. But maybe they believe because I didn't immediately rat out Rain's whereabouts after they threatened my girl, I decided. Or maybe, since this is a test, they went easy on me.

Either way, I go perfectly still. Instinct makes me want to slam my knees together and hunch over to protect my heart and my dick, but I know the voice that just spoke, and I know he won't go for either. It must not have been him attacking me, because *he* would go for my back.

"Hope you're not feeling too fucked." Father Tomas speaks as if we're still on the phone, having casual conversation over creepy 6 property. "But it's all over now."

I still can't see anything, and I want to rip the fucking blindfold off of my face, but I don't strain my wrists anymore against the bindings. They'll only tighten if I do. This isn't my first fucking kidnapping. It's a 6 specialty.

"What do you want?" My voice is hoarse and my lip splits as I speak, dry and cracked. I can hear my pulse in

my ears, and I can hear *her name too*.

I need to get to Ella.

Father Tomas laughs, but it isn't mocking. Not even cruel, really. We trust each other, in the way people do when they know secrets that could wreck one another's worlds. It isn't loyalty born from love or respect. It's cold-blooded blackmail we have hanging over the other's head.

But he's the priest for the 6. Nothing changes that. Not even what he's done to my fucking back. Is this about my phone call to him? How long ago was that now? I've lost any sense of time.

At the end of his bizarre laughter, I hear him sigh, followed by the sound of his shoes on the cement floor, a soft and subtle echo. I wonder if we're at Sanctum. For a second, I imagine my parents' ghosts drifting around the graveyard, peering inside to see what's become of their son.

But the imagination is just that. *Imagined.* They aren't buried here, at this new version of Sanctum.

For reasons I can't explain, I feel like I got punched in the gut with the thought. They didn't have a proper funeral. They were buried by the 6 while Sid was in the hospital. I didn't even get invited to their funeral. I didn't know it would happen without me.

But of course, the police don't need to pry into the ways my mom died, by Jeremiah's knife. Or my dad, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

No one needs to know all the ways we're fucked up. All the ways we hurt.

Just like with Malachi. I know now his death was swept under the rug too. No funeral, no memorial, I didn't get to attend his burial.

For a second, I can't breathe. *I'm running through my childhood home. I'm right behind him, I'm so close, but she's closer, and if she gets his hands on him, she'll...*

I sense something near me, and a second later, the blindfold is pulled from around my eyes, then the figure steps back. I have to blink once, twice, three times, until my pupils adjust to the dim light, a small room illuminated by a sconce on the wall, enveloping the dungeon-like place in warm light. Cement walls, dark floors, and in front of me is *Boaz*, Mikhail Malikov, a man who could make my life a living hell if he wished.

As it is, considering the circumstances, I think he *does* wish. My temple feels as if a truck ran over it and my core muscles are on fire.

“Would you really choose the 6, *Rain*, over the girl?” he asks carefully, his hands behind his back. He’s dressed in a black, long sleeve shirt, buttons done up high. Tailored pants, black shoes. No robe this time. Just high pale cheekbones and the eyes that mark him as a Malikov.

I don’t think he was the one to hit me, because behind him a few feet is a man I vaguely recognize as being some distant childhood friend of Lucifer’s. Golden eyes, dark blond hair, tattoos snaking beneath his own dress shirt. He’s wiping his knuckle over his lip, and I see flecks of blood on his mouth. *Mine*.

I lock eyes with him, and a slow smile curves on his face, but he says nothing.

“Or did you know it was us all along?” Father Tomas asks the question, coming into view from behind me, standing closer to Mikhail but not *too close*.

Mikhail’s eyes seem to spark in the darkened room. “How did you guess?”

I think of Father Tomas’s voice in my ear before he hit me and drugged me, and consider telling Boaz just to watch Tomas squirm. I’m sure Tomas wasn’t supposed to let on it was him. But I say nothing as I glare back at Mikhail.

“Would you let her die, for us?” Mikhail asks, his lips curling upward.

A cold sweat breaks out along the back of my neck, under my arms. I feel sick, thinking of my past and present colliding.

Malachi.

Brooklin.

Sid.

Ella.

I failed the first three. Atlas fucked up any chance Brooklin had of staying under the 6's protection when she was younger. I remember my fist launching into his face at the merry-go-round. I remember the sticky feel of his blood. How I thought I might've actually killed him when Cain jerked me away from his limp body. That took him a while, but no one can get away from Cain.

But I won't fail Ella like I did my sister.

I won't fucking fail her.

I have to answer these questions carefully though. I work up my saliva and spit blood from my mouth, turning my head so it lands on the dark floors. Then I slowly drag my gaze back to Mikhail.

"Go fuck yourself, *Boaz.*"

His smile widens. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Father Tomas turn a little pale, his brown eyes going wide as he fidgets with the ends of his clerical robe. I don't trust him. He's a snake, just like we all are. Truth is currency, and none of us are very charitable. But his reaction isn't feigned.

Mikhail comes closer to me, slowly, then he deliberately squats down right in front of my knees. He cocks his head, props his chin in his fingers, one tapping his lip as he stares up at me.

His other hand comes to my knee, gentle.

I stiffen, but I don't stop glaring down at him. "I am told, among all of the 6's offspring, you are the most grounded. Interesting, considering your head seems to constantly be inside a haze of marijuana."

I bite down on my back teeth and say nothing.

His fingers trail higher, up my thigh, and I hold in oxygen. His eyes don't leave mine. "Your brother, your first in command, he disobeyed a direct order of mine last night." Another smile, dimples flashing in his cheekbones. It is unnerving how similar all the Malikov men look. "There is no room for waywardness here, Maverick. You should know that well. Obedience is a 6 virtue, but disobedience is punished in blood drained from your families."

My teeth are clenched so tightly my jaw aches and I want to scream.

"I could have hurt *her*, you know." Mikhail whispers the words, but when he says it, I flinch like he screamed. His fingers crawl higher up my thigh, close to my dick. "Those men from the ceremony? They are more powerful than your father's friends could ever be, and they are very upset with you and your brothers. They want me to take revenge, to *teach* the next generation, and I could have directed Father Tomas here to whip *her* pretty little back and they would have delighted in it. She is so pale, the wounds would be beautiful."

Fear comes first. It constricts my lungs. I usually reach for the anger. It's easier. But thinking of him knowing about Ella's appearance and imagining the fucking blood from being whipped... I feel dizzy in the darkness. And the fact Mikhail *knows* what Tomas has done to me, it stuns me into silence.

Father Tomas shuffles in the distance, his feet sliding across the concrete floor.

My body tenses, but Mikhail's touch is gentle as he kneads my thigh. I almost hate it more because of it as he stares at me, unblinking.

I want to kick him. But I don't, because I'm scared that if I retaliate, he'll go to Ella.

No.

He rises only enough to lean in toward me, pressing his temple softly to mine, the blue of his eyes frightening.

“Maverick,” he says carefully, like I’m a wild animal and he’s trying his damndest to tame me. “I think you have astonishing potential with the 6. But if you or your brothers disobey again, the violence we extract as payment will not come from one of the boys. *We will start with your pretty, red-haired girl.*” He drops his hand but doesn’t lean away from me, his breath over my mouth. “So while I am here, I expect you to stay my nephew’s hand, unless you would like for me to slit the throat of *yours*,” I know he doesn’t mean my hand, he means *Rain*, “after I finish dismantling your girlfriend.” He turns his head, his lips pressing to my cheek.

My skin crawls, pain lighting up along every tense muscle.

“I know you have your own secret duties.” He speaks against my skin. “This should mesh well with them, yes?” Then he pulls back and pats my cheek hard, a breath away from a slap. He turns his back to me and nods at Tomas as he straightens his blazer. “Keep all of this between us, *Mavy*,” he says without looking back. “The more keepers of secrets, the more bodies to bury.”



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3
CORPUS AVENUE

I LOOK over my shoulder in the darkness, but Cain's Camaro is harmless in the driveway, and Cain himself must not have heard me creep out. A bunch of bullshit about him knowing if I left, I guess.

Am I leaving him with someone else in there?

I shake my head. I was paranoid. *No one was there.* I probably imagined the ringtone, right? I had taken Benadryl and too many pain meds and my mind was a mess. Besides, I'll just ask Atlas. He'd know if someone was... hiding inside my closet.

I shiver, even as the warm, late-summer air causes the hair at the base of my neck to stick to my skin. I shove my hands into the pocket of my jacket anyway, feeling more comfortable with one on, especially as I approach the end of the long, winding driveway to Atlas's house.

It's at the furthest end of the street, and I take a breath as I tilt my head up, glancing at the sliver of moonlight in the dark sky, thinking of where my boyfriend is.

Two houses from mine, it seemed like every light was off in the Malikov fortress, so I don't think he's there.

But where the fuck are you?

A light wind rattles through the trees surrounding the street, lining the back of Atlas's property.

And the front.

I dip my chin, noting the way the black sliver of his drive disappears into thick woods, obscuring any vision of his house. In the sunlight, you can see the dark shingles of his roof half a mile back, but tonight, I can't even catch a glimpse of his place.

Atlas has secrets.

I know that, because now, *I'm one of them.*

Balling my hands into fists inside the pockets of my jacket, I start down the shadowy drive, trying not to look too hard into the thick forests surrounding it.

The echoes of insects and snaps of branches within the woods cause my pulse to skitter a few times as I walk, but I keep my eyes straight ahead, focused. If I have to, I'll start running. But it's not like anything will get me out here. North Carolina woods could be littered with wolves or coyotes, I guess, but despite the forest, this *is* a domesticated street.

My thoughts flicker to each of the Unsaints.

Maybe *domesticated* isn't the right word.

Still, I keep walking, my spine straight, my phone in the side pocket of my long shorts. If I take it out, the light will only draw more attention to me if someone is out here but... *no one is here.*

They're just not.

Atlas might know I'm coming because I didn't respond to his command telling me I shouldn't. But otherwise, no

one is going to get me. And besides, it's not like Atlas would kill me.

For a brief moment, I remember Rain's birthday party. I don't think about how ridiculous it was, to celebrate thirty days of life, or about Maverick's eyes on Sid as he drank, his tattooed fingers curled around the neck of his beer, her name inked across the top of his hand.

I don't think about any of that.

Instead, I'm in the gym in our basement.

My thigh brushes his.

He casually puts his arm around me, adjusting his backward hat with his free hand, a smile in his dark eyes. "He's oblivious sometimes, isn't he? He doesn't really see you some days. He's always been like that. Only focusing on what he wants in the moment, ignoring all the rest."

I take a breath, inhaling the scents of the forest. Pine, which makes me think of the demon Lucifer himself, and wet pavement from the rain this evening.

I keep walking, my boots making a *whooshing* noise against the asphalt as I do. The drive curves to the left, the trees following the manmade passage. I follow too, and I hear an owl hoot in the night.

The sound makes me smile, reminding me of cracking my window open in West Virginia, listening to the lullaby of the forests in the mountains.

For a second, a pang of longing hits. I think of Mom. She was a terrible parent, but... I wonder if she could have been better, if she had *more*. *Maybe I'm just making excuses for her.*

After all, Maverick has a lot. He's still a murderer, isn't he?

Maybe we can't truly fight who we really are.

I run my tongue over my teeth, trying not to think of all the things I don't know about him, and what makes him who he is.

Distracting me, I catch the first glimpse of Atlas's house, gray, jagged stone with dark blue shutters that look black in the night.

I smile to myself, wondering what he'll do when he sees me at the door. For a moment, I consider the possibility he might not open it. But I think his curiosity will win out. Still, as I approach the circular driveway, his detached garage closed and no cars in sight, I slip my phone from my pocket.

I see he's texted me as I stand at the bottom of the stone steps, two granite pillars framing the door.

The text came a minute ago.

Atlas: Te video.

I frown at the words, confused. Latin, of course, because all devil-worshipping, old money cults should know Latin, right? But I don't know enough of it. Just a few basic phrases Maverick's taught me when I curl up in his lap in the office.

I don't know this one.

I roll my eyes as I copy the words and paste them into my browser, glancing around me but seeing nothing.

I'm used to the 6's weird ways and doing a lot of Googling. I'm used to my boyfriend's strangeness too. The way he comes home in the middle of the night covered in blood. How he uses me, those nights, to release some anger or stress or maybe, really, at the heart of it...*grief*.

But this has never happened before.

I've been kidnapped though, my brain reminds me. By the 6. Taken from Lucifer's house.

The memory is fuzzy, but I know what happened before Maverick chose me over the girl he had stuffed inside our basement. *Noctem*.

Goosebumps prickle along my skin and I force myself not to think of it.

I read the translation of Atlas's text before I can trail too far down those memories.

I see you.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as my mouth goes dry, my palms sweaty as I grip my phone tighter. No sound, no light, and no shadows emanate from the house as I flick my gaze to the door.

I glance at my dimming screen, reading the words again.

I see you.

Before I can decide if I should text him back or take a step toward the house, a hand comes around my mouth, a voice in my ear, my phone pulled from my hand.

I know it's him.

Atlas has a distinct scent. It's clean and minty, like spearmint.

Still, my heart gallops too fast in my chest as I try to reach for the phone in his hand. He throws it, aiming into the bushes lining the front porch. I hear it hit the ground, and I try to spin in his arms, attempting to get away like I've been taught.

But before I can gain any leverage, he brings his forearm to my throat, his hand still over my mouth.

"I told you not to come here."

For a moment, I'm speechless, fear enveloping me like his hard body at my back. He's so disarming, with his blond hair beneath his hat and the dimples flashing in his boyish face when he smiles, it's easy to forget just how tall he is, how *strong*, but in his arms, I feel like nothing.

His muscles are lean, like a swimmer's, but his strength is apparent even in his hand over my mouth, unrelenting as I try to speak.

When my lips part, he pushes two fingers in, gliding over my tongue, his knuckles hitting the corners of my mouth as my stomach convulses. He lowers his arm, banding it around my stomach as I gag, and I know he can feel it in my gut.

Saliva pools on my tongue, and again, I try to turn in his arms, but his grip is firm. Panicking, my mind in overdrive,

I go to bite down on his fingers when he seems to read my mind with the prick of my teeth.

“Go ahead.” His breath brushes the shell of my ear. “*Do it.*” His tone is light, almost like he’s telling a joke, and somehow, it unnerves me more.

I hold my breath as he jams his knuckles further into my mouth, stretching my lips, so I *can’t* bite him.

“You’re going to get your phone,” he says, his words low. “And you’re going to walk back to your house.” His fingers splay over my jacket, just above my shorts. He drags them further down, then up under my shirt, so his cold skin is against mine.

The muscles in my stomach jump with his touch.

“Do you understand?”

I can’t speak, but I nod once, knowing I’m lying.

“I’m going to let you go,” he tells me, spit running over my chin, his fingers still down my throat. “And you’re going to do exactly what I said, Ella.”

A second passes.

Then another.

His fingers slip lower, just underneath the waistband of my shorts. My mind stops racing for half a second, and cold fear envelopes me.

But then he does what he said.

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth and drops his arm.

Immediately, I put distance between us, then spin to face him, wiping my sleeve over my mouth.

I’m breathing hard, relief like pins and needles beneath my skin as I back up another step.

He’s never been like that with me. He’s been manipulative, and I know, somewhere deep down, he’s part of the reason I’m... all messed up.

But he’s never done *that*.

I open my mouth to say something, but he’s looking at his index and middle finger. The ones he pushed into my throat.

I take another step back.

A floodlight flicks on from the porch, and in the soft glow, I see my saliva dripping down his fingers.

His expression doesn't change. He looks like he's studying it. I take in his backward hat, T-shirt, and his ripped, gray jeans and white, high-top Converse.

His eyes flick to mine.

And while he holds my gaze, he puts his fingers in his mouth and sucks off my spit, never looking away from me.

My skin crawls, and I don't know if it's revulsion or desire warming in my gut.

I clench my fingers at my side, my chest still heaving.

He drops his hand after he pulls his fingers out with a *pop*.

"Remember what I said?" he asks, his voice low, his chin dipped as he stares at me. He jerks his head toward the bushes. "Get your phone. And leave."

I shake my head. "Where is he?"

He smiles at me, and it causes me to take another step back because it *is* genuine. At least... it looks that way. Somehow, it's even more terrifying. "I don't fucking know, Ella. *Go. Home.*"

"No." My voice shakes, but I don't care. I wrap my arms around my chest. "What the hell is going on? Cain came over and—"

"Cain is there right now?" He sounds surprised as he tilts his head, his dark blond brows furrowed.

I nod once. "Yes. *Watching* me." I roll my eyes at the last sentence, but Atlas seems more confused.

"Watching you." He doesn't ask it as a question.

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth.

He slips his hands into his pockets, staring up and to the left, like he's thinking. Then he shakes his head, and I know it's a dismissal. "Go back."

"No. I want to know where the fuck my boyfriend—"

Atlas laughs, and it's the same boyish laugh as always, but there's a bite to it that cuts me off. He walks toward me, closing the distance between us. I don't back up, but it takes effort to stay still.

Then he says, "Your *boyfriend*?" He moves his hand from his jeans pocket and at first I think he's going to pull out a weapon, but as he grabs my wrist and cool beads splay along my exposed skin, just below my jacket sleeve, I realize what it is he's holding as he flips my hand.

The crucifix from the rosary lands in the center of my palm.

Just over the scarred X.

"He's not your fucking *boyfriend*." He snarls those words as his chest heaves. In the porch light, I can see the blue-green veins against his skin, below the sleeves of his T-shirt. He presses the crucifix with his thumb over my scar. It doesn't hurt, because the backing is smooth, but I see the skin of his finger blanch over the crown of thorns of the miniature Jesus. He keeps pressing, and I keep resisting, giving him leverage, and after a moment, he quickly twitches his thumb, and hisses between his teeth.

I think I know why.

A second later, blood oozes along the cross from his finger. He snatches up the rosary, pushes it in his pocket, and before I can lower my hand, he's grabbing my wrist with his other hand, then smearing his blood over my palm.

"He is your *master*. He *owns* you."

The words make me feel...strange, coming from someone else. A confirmation of what Maverick's claimed all along.

Do I always just do what he says? Do I have any thoughts that are solely mine?

But I'm here, aren't I? I'm doing *this*, behind his back. "He doesn't own me—"

Atlas's grip tightens, cutting off my words. I look up to find his dark blue-brown eyes on mine.

“I thought we fucking covered that. You are not free,” he says, his words hushed. “You are not *dating*. You cannot *leave him*. It’s why me and you do any of *this*.” He jerks me closer, the soles of my boots sliding on the damp pavement. “Is this the kind of life you want? Always at his beck and fucking call? Sneaking around to save your fucking life?”

I don’t know what to say. I knew it would be like this. What else would I do? I have no past to return to, no home to welcome me with open arms. For all I know, my mom has moved from the trailer Maverick took me from.

I have nothing.

But I don’t...want for anything.

I like it here.

And yet, last night, the pain tonight along the backs of my thighs, worries about my kidneys, the reason I ever accepted drugs from Atlas in the first place; it all blurs with trauma inside my mind.

Before I can speak, figure out how to put everything into words without sounding pathetic, without revealing my biggest secret, Atlas rolls his eyes at my silence, scoffing, but he doesn’t release me.

“If you ever wanted anything more for yourself, Ella, if you ever wanted to *be something*...” He leans in closer, tilting his head so his lips are just over my own. “*Run*.”

I don’t move for long seconds, his blood on my palm.

Irritation, confusion, exhaustion, it all slithers in my veins. Before I can formulate a response, he laughs, his breath sweet against my mouth.

“I know what you really want, and it’s not Maverick.”

A thrill of something forbidden knots my stomach.

“I know why you walked all this way in the dark. You’re in over your head and you can’t cope. And more than that, you’re greedy, huh?” But despite his words, I can tell by his tone... *he’s going to give it to me*. But as he pulls back, reaching around to grab something from his back pocket, he glances up at me. “I needed you last night and you

didn't answer." His words are softer than anything else he's said.

I dig in my brows, confused. "Answer? Answer what?"

He pulls a baggie from his pocket but keeps his eyes on me. "I texted you."

My face flushes hot as I shake my head, my gaze darting from him to my escape. And I give him the truth. "I didn't get anything."



In the darkness, I pace along the side of the road, in front of mine and Maverick's house. But is it really mine?

Atlas's words ring in my head. One word, really. Over and over and over as the night wind tangles through the trees, a roaring sound that sends a shiver down my spine. I cross my arms tighter over my chest, head down as I stare at the slick pavement, mulling over the possibility.

Run.

I won't.

I don't want to. But there was something hidden beneath the command, wasn't there? Some sort of warning or sign. Does he know what's happening to me? Is he trying to save me? Does he need me to save *him*? He never told me what he claims he needed me for last night.

Bursting through my thoughts, I hear the engine of a car. Steeling my spine, I pick my head up, watching the watery headlights coming from the entrance to the street. I glance toward my house, the dark shutters, the looming stone, and Cain's Camaro. No light inside is on that I can see, and for a moment, I think of running back in through the front door. If something happens to me out here...

The car screeches to a stop at the fork in the road, where it can turn left, toward us, or right, toward Atlas's house.

I make my move then.

I run to the side of the house, creeping close to the stone, my jacket scraping on the rough wall as I slide my hands into my pockets and hold my breath, waiting.

It's a white Mercedes, although I don't know enough about cars to know anything more than it's four doors, and I see the symbol on the hood. The lights are blue-white, and it doesn't put on a signal as it turns into the driveway, coming to an abrupt stop at the end, even though there's plenty of room for it to get closer.

The car shifts to park, and I hold my breath, my heart thumping too fast.

Cain is a shit babysitter if that's what he was supposed to be. Am I going to end up saving *him*?

I peer around the side of the house, my boots slipping in the mud, but I right myself quickly, digging my nails into the stone.

A door opens.

I hear an angry voice I'd recognize anywhere.

"Stay the fuck away from here." The door slams closed without a response that I can hear from the driver.

My mouth goes dry as I lick my lips, wondering if I should walk around the corner now. If Maverick goes inside, he's going to know I'm not there. What if he thinks I'm with Atlas? What if he suspects something? I'm not in workout clothes so I can't use that as a cover like I did last night.

But who the hell is driving the white Mercedes?

I wait a few more moments as the car backs up, slowly, as if trying to be respectful. It doesn't peel off, instead cruising down the street, and I swear, it seems to coast when it gets level with me, like the driver could be looking right at me.

I think about the blood on my palm. I tried to get it off, spitting on my hand and rubbing with my opposite thumb, but even though it's mainly gone, I feel guilty all the same as the car slows.

I don't move until it turns right, toward the entrance and the guardhouse.

Maverick's angry steps seem to ricochet on the pavement, but relief unknits itself in my gut. He wasn't with her.

I feel another wave of guilt for going to Atlas's. For the taste of mint in the back of my throat. As I imagine his fingers in his mouth, sucking me off him, the shame turns hot in my chest. But I try to shove it aside, ready to sprint toward my security blanket.

Until I hear him speak.

"What the fuck was that?" His voice is low, those words little more than a snarl. He's pacing, and a second passes before I catch the sweet scent of marijuana.

I lean my head against the stone, the rock cold on my temple as I let my eyes close, listening.

Tell me your secrets, Maverick.

"I don't care. You could've fucking warned me. *That* was bullshit and you know it." There's no arguing with that tone, but I know whoever it is on the other line is probably doing just that. Arguing.

Another pause.

In my head, I can picture him exhaling smoke through his nose, his baby blue eyes livid.

"Threats don't work on me, Dominus."

Elijah. Ezra's dad. I still have trouble sorting everyone out in my mind, not least of all because I've yet to meet them in any official capacity. The 6 and their sons seem to want a certain distance. This street is evidence of that.

"I will *bury you* if you threaten her again."

Her? Me? My heart skips a beat. I know Dominus is important. I don't know exactly how important, or what he

means to the world, but they have their hands in everything. For Maverick to threaten to kill him...

"Try me. Your wife might've gotten out alive last time, but next time, I wouldn't be so sure."

Another pause.

Then he laughs. It's full of humor, shockingly, but I know it's got an evil intent beneath the sound. "Right," he says, his voice caustic. "But here's the thing. I'm starting to think none of this shit is worth it. I'm starting to think it might be best if all these secrets came out from beneath the shadows. And yeah, I know, I know, you'll kill me before I can talk. But that's the problem, right? With the internet, it only takes a second to spread a plague. Is that what happened with Samson?"

Samson? Who is he?

Another pause.

What if Maverick left? The thought occurred to me before. I know Sid has begged much of the same from Lucifer.

But they can't leave.

It's one of the first things Maverick ever told me about this.

I flex my fingers in my pocket, thinking of the scar on my palm. The smeared blood.

"I'll see you soon. We can talk about this face-to-face." A second passes, then he says, his voice full of emotion and I know he isn't on the phone anymore, "*Fuck.*"

I take a breath, wanting to go to him. But he never opens up to me. I don't know how to coax it out of him, all these sins eating him alive. I hear his boots on the concrete, pacing.

I yearn for him. I want to hug him and hold him just like he's done to me so many times.

I step away from the side of the house, ready to beg him to talk to me. I want to touch him and be there for him in ways maybe he didn't think I was ready for before. I want

to ask him what the hell is happening, and why he was gone.

I want his secrets.

He has most of mine.

I want a piece of him.

I round the corner, and I catch sight of him below the porchlight. Tall and lean, his side profile to me as he inhales from his joint before he flicks it into the grass. Smoke curls from his nose as he holds his phone in one hand, the other in the pocket of his black hoodie. He doesn't have the bandana on, and I know Jeremiah was wearing it when he murdered Mav's mom because I heard Lucifer mention it.

When his dad put the gun to his head.

Maybe he doesn't want the reminder.

But I freeze, and it isn't at the sight of him without a bandana.

I do a double take, looking at his phone again.

His phone. I finally remember. It was on the nightstand upstairs. It's why I couldn't just *call* him, or text him.

I feel a little sick, dizzy, and off. *He has a secret phone?* My mind gurgles up excuses. It's probably a burner phone, a work one. But why didn't he text me? Let me know he was safe? How come I don't know about it?

I blink, taking the rest of him in, feeling like I'm falling.

He's in black, ripped jeans, and black, lace-up boots, just like Luce wears. But where Lucifer is only darkness, Mav has blond hair, longer on top and shorter on the sides. His lips are pressed together, but they're beautiful even in his anger. His jaw is clenched, showing the sharp planes of his face.

I see a shadow along his temple, but from this distance, I don't know if it's a smudge of dirt or if...someone *hurt him*.

I feel a warmth building in my body, a desire to envelope him even though he towers over me. Even though he's

keeping this phone and clearly other secrets from me. Despite it all, I want to soothe him. I want to take care of him.

“Play God with me.”

I want to.

I want to be by his side.

I take a step, my lips parting to call out his name. Maybe I’ll tell him everything too. *Do you know your friend is fucking you over? Do you know he’s not as nice as he seems?*

But before I can get to him, Mav puts the phone to his ear, his eyes fluttering closed. I still, waiting. Is he calling me? Is he going to tell me he has a secret number? My phone is in my pocket, and I shift it out, glancing at the screen.

It’s black.

Frowning, I lift my gaze back to him.

And then all the lines in his face, even the tension I could see in his shoulders, it all softens as he says, *“Angel,”* like he’s found a lifeline.

My body grows hot, my throat tight as jealousy strangles me.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Pressure builds behind my eyes.

“I just needed to talk.”

I feel nauseous.

I take a step back, and another, and I’m not quiet this time, but he doesn’t notice. Because... He’s too wrapped up in her. I think I hear something else, but my ears are ringing and it’s hard to discern the words.

“Is Rain okay?”

But then my phone starts to glow in my hands and wild hope, something like desperation engulfs me. The number is blocked, but I swipe to connect the call anyway, because maybe it’s him and maybe he only called *her* first to check on Rain and...and...

"Hello?" I whisper it, staring at the side of my house, my pulse thrumming so hard inside my head I can't hear Maverick anymore, but a voice I recognize slides through the phone.

"Ella. Turn around."

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XIII

Haverick

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3
THE ASTOR ESTATE

“TELL me why the fuck you came here.” I take the joint from Cain’s fingers as I speak the words. His dark eyes are bleary, a red-purple bruise blooming over one. He leans back against the couch, tipping his chin as he stares up at the ceiling. I glance at his black sweats, his black T draped over the arm of the couch beside him. He’s wearing all-black sneakers, and I know now when he wheeled into my driveway, it was straight from the ring. From a fight, probably. Now though, his breaths are slow and even.

His arms are sprawled out around the back of my couch, fingers of his right hand an inch from my shoulder.

I don’t care. I just want to know how the fuck he knew to come.

“I got a call.” That’s all he says.

Feeling my temper spike, I inhale from the joint, closing my eyes as I do, trying to relieve some of the tension in my body. I haven't gone upstairs yet, an hour from when one of the 6's drivers dropped me off. From when I called Elijah then Sid on my burner phone—the one Ella doesn't know about because if I got kidnapped, like last night, my attacker would be able to find her number and maybe track her. I can't risk that with her, so I lie by omission.

It seems it's what all of us are fucking good at.

Clearly, Cain knew something was going to pop off, but are we supposed to sweep it under the fucking rug like everything else?

I checked in on Ella as soon as I got inside after calling Sid, knowing my sister would probably be up. My girl was sleeping peacefully, and she hasn't come down yet. I think it's for the best. I'm grudgingly grateful Cain was "called" here to watch over her, because she thinks I'm invincible, and I don't want to prove her wrong. These things are so fucking hard to explain for people who don't get it. I've never really *had to*, but now, talking to Ella about it, I feel like I'm searching for a word in another language I've only heard once. How do you explain total devotion? Loyalty to the grave? Constant mistrust?

I don't think it's possible.

"Yeah, I'm gonna need a little more than that from you." I mean, I know Cain hasn't been sleeping well. He's always at Nox, the gym we own in downtown Alexandria. It's not like anyone would've woken him up, but it doesn't make fucking sense.

"Elijah. He told me to get here, and fast, because you had an *appointment*."

I think of the blow to the back of my head, then the ones on the side of my temple, the blooming bruise along my abs, the aches still throbbing through my body now. "An appointment." I want to scream, but the marijuana is doing

its job, working through my system, keeping me still. Numb.

“He gave me nothing else. So why don’t you tell me what happened?” Cain asks it quietly, like he says everything.

I just laugh. There’s nothing I can fucking say. Instead, I glance at him, the nasty marks on his face. “You still letting that chick beat you up?”

His eyes flutter behind his closed lids. “It’s my foreplay, fucker.”

A snarl of a laugh leaves my lips. I think about the time he almost got run over by his own car, an older Camaro he had when we were in high school. Loud as shit, just like his new one. We used to push it down the driveway of his parents’ house when we’d sneak out at night, engine off so we didn’t wake them, and once he was behind it instead of to the side. He screamed before he leapt to the grass by the driveway and I couldn’t stop fucking laughing. Maybe the danger gave him a taste for violence, or maybe he’s always had it.

God, we were invincible in high school. Nothing could touch us, and we pretended our demons didn’t exist. Now, they’re all catching up to us. Briefly, I think of the guy who actually hit me a few hours ago. The one I know Lucifer used to be friends with. I can’t quite place him, but I’m not entirely surprised he was there. Everyone around us orbits close to the 6.

My thoughts drift to Rain and I feel like I got sucker punched. What kind of shit is he going to get up to? What kind of danger will he be in? Who will want to hurt him? Who else will threaten him?

Tearing me from my morbid thoughts, Cain says, “You should go sleep with your girl. She’ll want to wake up to you.”

I take another inhale, leaning my head back against the couch like he is.

After I exhale, I reach over and drop the roach in the ashtray on the side table adjacent to the couch. I don't even have to fucking look, I've smoked so many joints in this exact spot.

Could be coke, I think to myself.

"I don't know about that."

Surprising me, Cain's jaw clenches, a long, lean line full of tension. I'm amazed because Cain never lets anything get to him, and if he does, he never shows it. "Why do you say that shit? You two need to be solid while we're dealing with RC here." He still doesn't open his eyes, but his words combined with what happened tonight eat at me.

"We *are* fucking solid." It's an automatic response and it isn't true. I was just thinking, before my walk back was interrupted, how Ella is keeping shit from me. How I'm not *there* for her like I should be. "Does she know you're here?" It suddenly occurs to me she was *alone* with Cain, and he's a fucking whore. My muscles go tense, spiking pain through my body as I stare at his closed eyes.

But suddenly they open, his gaze dark and inky in the night. A small smile pulls on his lips. "Don't worry. I didn't touch her too much."

Red blurs my vision, but I force myself not to react. "She wouldn't want you."

"Why? She doesn't like Arabic men?"

I roll my eyes but hold his gaze. "She only likes *me*, motherfucker."

He gazes at me a long moment, a smug smile on his lips before he lets his eyes drift closed again. "Don't get too cocky. That's how you get left."

I imagine Ella leaving me, or trying to. But that's the thing. *I wouldn't fucking let her.* "Alivia," I say instead, remembering the name of the girl he said he was with last night at Nox. The one who has apparently been hitting him. I vaguely remember her from high school. Even then, Cain was a big whore, but he hung around this chick. She always

dyed her hair, that's the only reason she stands out. I remember it was orange a lot. I forget everything else about her. There're so many things I've either forgotten or blocked out over the years, and I don't want to think too much on if it's the marijuana or the trauma, but I lift my fingers lazily, circling vaguely toward his face because he's cracked open his eyes again with her name. "It's that little chick with orange hair. You still talk to her? She, what? Your Ophelia?" I drop my hand by my side, laughing a little because I'm fucking high.

Cain turns away from me and closes his eyes once more. "You bring up Ophelia's name again in the wrong company and you might be responsible for a homicide."

"*Another* homicide, you mean." I exhale, my lids closing, heavy and pressing on my eyes. I don't have enough energy to go down this path of the orange-haired girl, but my thoughts on Ophelia are very clear. "If I see her near Luce again, I'll kill her myself."

Cain grunts, and I swear I think it's in agreement.

For a long while after, we sit in silence, half asleep. Part of my brain is still alert, just waiting for Ella to walk down those stairs, but the other half is being dragged down to darkness. In my mind, I hear Father Tomas's voice in my ear. Mikhail's threat. And a nagging question. *Did Atlas see any of this go down?*

I almost wish Father Tomas was here, meeting me in the garage right now to unburden some of my thoughts.

My back aches, thinking of my scars, fresher wounds from when I couldn't help myself, my brain clicking the memories of the whip into place.

It must be enough to calm me, because my mind goes quiet the longer we sit, and I start to drift off. It feels good, relaxing, just sitting here beside a softly snoring Cain. He rarely lets his own guard down, but his fights have been pretty brutal lately, whether they're with a girl or not. He

almost crashed his goddamn Camaro two weeks ago at the strip on a Friday night, fucking around with Ezra.

He hadn't been drinking; he was just fucking exhausted.

I never would have thought it before, but now I imagine he's having girl problems. Usually, Cain has every problem but *that one*.

Girls have problems with his lack of commitment and utter indifference to things like feelings.

Now though... Well, if he's letting a woman beat his ass up, *something* is going on.

In my head, I see Ella's green eyes. I wasn't much for commitment either, until her. I wasn't much of anything, really, until her. I don't even know what it is, exactly. She ran from me in those woods, she wanted me to hurt her when we fucked the first time, and afterward, she was content to let me carry her in my arms into Liber.

She let me control her.

The only thing I feel I have control over in my life *is* her.

I blink my eyes open. I think of Atlas walking the street. Laughter in the dark. It couldn't have been Father Tomas. What the fuck would he be laughing about? *Is this how it happened for Lucifer? When he started to lose his motherfucking mind?*

"You heard anything more?" I break the silence even though I know Cain is sleeping, because I can't stop thinking about it now that Mikhail made his threat since Lucifer didn't obey orders. "About the initiate?" It's not surprising they told us nothing. The 6 goes beyond Alexandria. Beyond this state, this country, even. Like the mafia, it's far-reaching. Unlike the mafia, almost no one knows who we are. There could have been a thousand reasons they brought this initiation ritual here. To bind us, bring us all together, keep an eye on us. Maybe the unlucky fucker was related to one of the 6 who were in the circle. Anything.

“No.” Cain barely speaks the word. Mainly a grunt. He wants me to shut up, but I cannot shake the fucking feeling someone was watching me on the street, and not Atlas. Not Father Tomas. *But did Atlas know Tomas was coming? What was that shit he said, about skeletons in closets?*

I think about Shadow Villa. The movie me and Ella are going to watch. The call I made to Tomas. The way he was whispering. Is it because he was spying on me?

Silence stretches between me and Cain. I should go upstairs, change clothes, get into bed beside Ella. I should hold onto these small, quiet moments. *Let it go, let it go, let it go.*

Then I hear it again. Something like laughter on Corpus Avenue, echoing in my mind.

“Do you ever feel like someone is...watching you?” I ask the question quietly, but Cain abruptly stops snoring, and I know he heard me. It’s probably how we all sleep. *Half awake, one eye open to danger.*

“Okay, MJ, what the fuck do you mean?” Cain’s response is gruff, but I know him. I’ve known him my entire life. There was something just under his taunt, his tone. Something like a...knowing.

I stare up at the high ceiling in the darkness, my mind hazy with exhaustion and marijuana, but it only makes me more paranoid, somehow. It was indica, and I know my fucking weed. But this time, it doesn’t stop that itch under my skin, like someone is outside this house. Someone is *stalking us.*

There was that dead kitten at Julie’s house.

Ezra’s mom’s kidnapping, which apparently RC is investigating.

I thought it had something to do with Jeremiah fucking Rain. And the fucker has been silent lately. I didn’t think he’d really do it; stay away. I didn’t think he had it in him.

But maybe... someone is *keeping* him away. Or maybe he never left at all.

I clear my throat. "Lately. Have you felt like someone is following you? Have you seen anyone weird recently, hanging around where they shouldn't? Besides the obvious, with RC?"

Cain is quiet. I expect him to dismiss my question, to tell me to shut the fuck up and go upstairs and sleep.

Instead, he says, "At the gym tonight. Mikhail came by." He speaks all of this with indifference, but I listen closely. He wouldn't be saying it if it didn't mean something. "He had his fucking hood on, but I could see him."

This was right before he tied me up to a chair to fuck with my head.

"My dad was there, and they talked in an office."

You and your dad seem to be spending a lot of time at the fucking gym. But maybe Callum Bonavich is using it as his meeting place. I wouldn't be surprised. He used to be a professional fighter in between the work he did for the 6.

"Was this before or after you let your orange-haired childhood friend clock you again?"

He narrows his eyes. "She wasn't there tonight. And let that go, Mav. I'm not talking about her."

I decide to drop it. "What did they discuss? Your dad and Mikhail?" The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I was really hoping I was just imagining all of this shit. I guess it doesn't prove someone else was lurking on our street, but it stacks up a little evidence in the form of Mikhail Malikov is a sneaky fuck.

Cain is quiet a second. He always chooses his words carefully, or maybe he just doesn't like to waste them. Then he sighs, shifting on the couch, his fingers grazing my shoulder for a second. "Dad wouldn't say. And after their talk, Boaz just watched us."

I sit up straighter too, turning to glare at him. "He watched you." I echo the words back, frowning.

Cain's dark eyes are still on the ceiling, and he purses his lips a second, shrugging. "Watched me almost kill

London Hamilton.”

Fucking London Hamilton. Football star of Alexandria U back when he thought that shit mattered. “Lucifer would’ve loved that.” London made the mistake of flirting with Sid at Liber a while ago, and Lucifer almost killed them both for it. It’s why we keep him around, in case he ever needs to die. He knows a few of our secrets.

Cain snorts. “Lucifer has to learn he can’t murder everyone who has ever laid eyes on Sid.” He glances at me, and his dark irises seem to spark in the darkness of the living room as his lips tip up into a sly smile. “Or else he’d have to kill both of us too.”

Warmth flushes through me, and again, I think of Sid at Ignis. Her pretty fucking smart mouth. I chew the inside of my cheek, shaking my head. “Then what?” I press, trying to focus. “*Boaz* just...what? Left?”

Cain leans back against the couch again and his eyes flutter closed. “Nah.” He exhales, and I know he’s going to sleep soon, no matter what I do or don’t want to talk about. “A girl walked in. Same one that was with him before.”

“Do they seem to be together or—”

“If they hadn’t, I would’ve tried to fuck her.”

Of course you would. Maybe he doesn’t have girl problems after all.

“He acted like she was his property. Didn’t touch her but made sure she followed him around the ring. She kept her head up, that hood on, but I could see enough.”

Acting like she was his property doesn’t mean shit. It’s what the 6 does. *Own people.* Including all of us.

“Who do you think the chick is?” I stare at the high ceilings, seeing remnants of smoke curling up and up and up.

Cain lifts one shoulder in a shrug, but he doesn’t open his eyes. “An escort from Moscow, maybe. Lucifer better be looking over his shoulder, turning down the boss like that.” He sighs. “Shit, we backed him, and I’d do it again in a

fucking heartbeat, but if you're thinking someone is always *watching you*, if you're being dragged from the street and I've gotta babysit Ella, we need to keep our guard up."

I almost laugh out loud. I want to tell him about what went down tonight, but I'm not putting my girl in jeopardy. And unsurprisingly, he doesn't push me to divulge it.

"I'm serious, Mav. You know Lazar was as wicked as he could be because he had the backing of the highest order." Cain speaks quietly, and I'm mildly impressed with all of his knowledge. "Mikhail Malikov doesn't fucking play."

Yeah. Neither the fuck do I.



I wake to the sound of a clatter in the kitchen. It's really fucking loud, and I shoot up from the couch, straight to my feet, my head spinning and back aching with the sudden movement, my eyes feeling heavy.

Glancing at Cain, I see his forearm is slung over his eyes, and based on the steady rise and fall of his chest, I don't think he's awake.

I take a breath, orienting myself. The sun is vivid and bright, streaming in through the blinds, and when I look toward the nook in the kitchen, I see those blinds are open too. A nice, fall day. I kind of hate it.

Another clatter, a slam of a cabinet.

I smile to myself, my eyes finding Ella's ass. She's got her hands in a mixing bowl, her back to me, long, dark red hair down her back. She's in yoga pants and a white T, tied at the hip, giving me a glimpse of her love handles. I want to fucking grab a handful of her and fuck her over the counter, right here.

I glance at Cain.

Never mind. Ezra already saw too much of her, and Lucifer got to experience things he shouldn't with her. Fuck that.

I walk past Cain, coming into the kitchen, surprised Ella didn't wake me up herself and start slamming me with questions.

I come up behind her, my hands going to her shoulders as I knead her flesh and dip my head, pressing my lips to her neck. Inhaling, I catch her vanilla scent, and something like sweat, like she might've been working out. I groan as I skim my teeth over her skin. She's all warm and a little sticky with perspiration.

My dick is hard, pressing into her back, and I walk forward, pushing her against the counter.

She doesn't make a sound.

Doesn't say a word.

Her body doesn't even react to me, like mine is clearly doing to her. I pick my head up and watch her slender fingers working the dough in the silver mixing bowl. She has a baking tray across the open eyes of the stove, and below them, I see the blue light indicating the oven is heating.

"You already worked out, pretty girl?" *What time did you wake up? Why didn't you come see me first?*

She doesn't answer me.

I dig my fingers deeper into her skin, feeling the flex of bone and muscle. "Ella?" My voice is rough, from lack of sleep and maybe because I'm horny, but whatever.

She keeps kneading the dough, soft white powder dusting her fingertips.

I slide my hand up her shoulder, to the curve of her neck.

She stills, stopping her movement. Her breathing, I think too.

I curl my fingers over the front of her throat. "Are you not speaking to me?" I keep my tone even because I don't

mind her games. *Play with me, baby.*

She takes a breath. Then says nothing.

I roll my eyes, flexing my jaw. She still doesn't move though, and I want to take that fucking mixing bowl and throw it across the room.

But I don't.

I didn't come to bed last night. Didn't use my burner phone to send a text, a call, or an explanation after I walked to Sid and Luce's house. She wakes up to me sleeping on the couch downstairs with Cain. Probably the least bad thing I've ever done, but I still can't be mad she's annoyed, even though it is getting under my skin a little. But if *she* hadn't come to bed, I would've taken my ass down the stairs and found her. I would've turned this city upside down looking for her.

Own your fucking power. Don't you realize how much you have over me?

I press my thumb against the hollow of her throat. I hear her sharp intake of breath, one hand still on her shoulder.

"Are you mad?"

Silence.

I smile, staring at the back of her head, her red hair in messy waves. "Tell me."

I watch her fingers tighten around the dough in the bowl. I release her throat, then trail both of my hands down her arms, over her elbows, then her wrists, coming to her pretty little, flour-coated fingers.

"Let go," I whisper in her ear.

She does, obeying me, and it makes me feel good. *Control.* I crave it. She gives it. *We work together this way.*

I lace my fingers through hers, then release her only to spin her around and push her against the counter. Picking up her hands again, I bring her middle finger to my mouth, just holding her other hand.

I suck off the flour, the taste slightly salty as my eyes lock on hers. Her pupils dilate in her green eyes, but her

lips are pressed into a line, anger etched all over her freckled face, deep shadows beneath her eyes, like she didn't sleep much either. *When are you going to learn I'm yours too? You could've come downstairs and fucking demanded answers from me.*

I suck her finger clean, then pull it down my lips, parting them as I stare at her. I step closer, my cock aching and finding more taunting than relief at the feel of her low belly against it.

But she chooses that moment to notice the bruises on my face. Her mouth falls open, her eyes going wide. "Mavy," she gasps, her voice broken. "What happened?" She tries to reach for me, to touch my wounds, but I grip both of her hands tightly in my own, holding them between us.

"It's almost nine," I tell her, glancing at the clock above the stove behind her and ignoring her question. "Why'd you wait so long to find me, pretty girl?"

She shakes her head, her eyes darting to mine, then my bruises. "Who did this to you?" There's an angry undercurrent in her words.

It turns me on more. "What are you gonna do to them, huh, pretty girl?" I pull her hands to my chest, grateful I'm wearing a fucking shirt and she won't be able to see the bruises on my abs yet.

Her body is rigid with tension and fear and worry for me. It's a beautiful thing to see as she keeps darting her gaze back and forth along my temple. "I would kill them," she whispers, breathless. "What. *Happened?*" Those words are very clear.

Transferring her hands to one of mine, I reach up and brush a lock of hair behind her ear, resting my fingers along the back of her neck. I feel her shiver, but I start to second guess myself. Maybe she isn't just mad on my behalf at all. There's something hinting at sadness in her eyes, like a shine of unshed tears.

“Don’t worry about it, okay, kid? I’m okay. I’m home. I’m here now.”

“No, Maverick. *No*. Where were you? Why didn’t you come up?” She snaps out the words, her frustration jumping in her tone.

I try to keep my voice neutral, even as thoughts of Atlas and that *laughter* and the threats against her swirl in my brain. “I got called into Sanctum for a quick job.”

Her green eyes narrow and she tries to spin away, pulling her hands from my grip.

I bring my fingers to her hips, keeping her still. She glares at me like she wants to hit me upside the head with her mixing bowl.

“Yeah? And where, exactly, did you get a call when you didn’t bring your fucking phone?”

Shit. Dipping my head, I press my brow to hers. I have to keep digging the hole deeper. I reason with myself it’s for her own good. “Lucifer let me know when I got to his house.” If I have to make something up, I’d rather tell her it was Luce than Sid. “I’m sorry, baby.”

Her hands are by her sides, and now, I wish she’d just touch me. I kind of want to talk to her about everything going on, but aside from my explicit order not to, I’m not so sure she can handle any of it. I’m scared it’ll freak her out more than is necessary.

“Right.” She snorts, but then her tone turns more serious. “Who the fuck hurt you, Maverick?” She says my full name with fury.

I wish I could talk to you. I wish I could tell you. “Shut up and kiss me.” I tilt my head, staring at her lips, the pronounced Cupid’s bow that gives them a sexy fucking pout.

“Mavy,” she says, and my heart warms at her nickname for me. It was annoying at first, but like most things about her, I’ve just fallen for it more as the months have passed. “Tell me what’s really going on.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I whisper, smiling a little. “*And kiss me, pretty girl.*” I run my mouth over hers, and her lips part for me. I’m not sure if this is what she really wants to do in this moment, but her body reacts to me all the same, and at least I can hold onto that.

Her breath, clean and fresh like toothpaste, fans across my mouth, and I close my teeth on her bottom lip, tugging gently. She moans, her hands coming up my back, over the scars there.

Over the other wounds.

She stiffens. I know she’s thinking of it. Him. *Father Tomas.*

Pulling away, her eyes searching mine, she says, “I was scared.” Her voice is low but her admission is bright and clear. It pulls at my heart. “Where were you? I thought maybe something happened to you. And now I see it did. Just...please, tell me what happened. *Please.*”

My chest feels like it’s cracking with her supplication, but I won’t put her in any more danger than she’s already in. “Just kiss me. Be here with me. *Right here.*”

She closes her eyes a second, a flurry of emotions flickering across her face before she stares at me again and says, “I saw blood this morning.” She swallows, looking between us. “On your...robe.”

Shit. She does all of our laundry. I should’ve known she’d see it and know it for what it is. Lucifer left his on the floor of the bottom level of Sanctum, but I stuffed mine in the backseat of the McLaren and dropped it in the laundry basket in our walk-in closet the night before last.

“You said it was just an extra meeting Monday. Now you come home looking like this, and...” Her eyes find mine, searching for answers. “What happened?”

I’m so sorry I can’t tell you. I’m so sorry I dragged you into this life.

Instead of saying that or answering her question, I pick her up, swiping the mixing bowl off the fucking counter,

where it clangs loudly to the floor, my name in her mouth as she protests, but I don't care, and I really don't care that Cain is in the next room. I'm already reaching for the hem of her leggings, but her body is tense, and she doesn't help me get them off.

"Ella," I say through gritted teeth. "I fucking need you," I tell her truthfully. Sex is a balm for me and fucking her is a cure for everything.

"And I need answers, Maverick," she snarls back.

She's growing bolder around me, and I like that. But right now, I really just want to sink myself into her. "It was a ritual." It's part of the truth. "I just...please let me do this." It's like it's suddenly all that matters. Losing myself in her, to get a few moments of reprieve from all the heavy shit. I try to yank down her pants, but she doesn't budge.

I meet her gaze, growing angrier.

"Was it your blood?" she whispers, and just like that, some of my anger melts.

I shake my head once. "No, baby. It wasn't mine."

She stares at me a long moment, like she's looking for the lie, and I wonder if I'll just fucking make her fuck me. "What about..." She glances past me, and I know she's talking about Cain.

I smile at that, tilting my head. *Do you think I give a fuck?*

Then she asks, looking down between us, "Do you really love me, Mavy?"

My heart squeezes inside my chest. I think of what Mikhail said about hurting her. The choice I had, when my attackers were pretending to be someone else. *Rain, or you?*

I grip her hips and see her wince, so I loosen my hold as she lifts her eyes to mine. "You have no idea all the things I would do for you."

We lock eyes for long seconds. Her gaze drifts to my bruises, a frown marring her beautiful features.

“Hey, I’m okay,” I tell her. “Just let me fucking have you.”

She goes very still. Seconds tick by. It’s like she’s fighting some internal battle with herself. To press me more, or to obey.

Finally, she nods. And it’s like a switch flips. Like she’s *on*, for me. Her arms come around my neck as she lifts her hips, letting me pull her leggings down. She uses her foot to push them off, first one leg, then the other, and before they hit the floor, I’ve got my hands on her thighs, spreading them.

“Mavy,” she whispers, her fingers coming to my belt, and with the next words out of her mouth, my blood runs cold. “I want this. But I need to tell you...” She takes a breath, glancing down, her lashes fluttering. “I had an odd dream last night, and this morning... I found the blood and...” She swallows hard, trailing off.

I pull the belt out after she unbuckles it, then I loop it around her throat, pulling it through the end, tight, but loose enough for her to speak, her big, green eyes locked on mine as anticipation for owning her runs through me, but I need to hear this too.

“What did you dream about?”

Her eyes search mine. I see something in them that makes my chest tighten. Adoration. Total fucking devotion. But then she says, “Someone was inside our house. Someone who wasn’t Cain.”

I take a deep breath, waiting. She doesn’t add anything, so I press my brow to hers, one hand on the long end of the belt strap, the other keeping the buckle digging into the pale skin at her throat. Anger flares inside the coldness of her confession. *Someone in our house? Someone laughing on our fucking street?*

Atlas? A friend of his? An enemy of ours?

Mikhail? Tomas? The guy with tattoos and golden eyes?

“That’s it?” I press.

She glances down, like she's avoiding my gaze. "I took a Benadryl." *To help her sleep.* It knocks her out cold. She doesn't do it often, but sometimes. And maybe because I was gone with Rain, she was annoyed and knew she couldn't settle enough to sleep. "And I can't remember if..." She trails off, quiet for a moment.

"If *what*, Ella?" My words are sharp, and she looks up then, obedient.

"If I dreamt it or if I really saw someone."

I tighten my hold on the belt, her face flushing pink. "Well I'm going to need you to think really fucking hard, and figure it out. Was it real, or was it a dream?" The laughter from last night rings inside my head again. It's fucking haunting me.

She stares at me a moment, and I wonder if she's fucking with me. If she's trying to get me to tell her something myself, the uneasy truths I'm hiding from her.

Then she pops the button of my jeans, her thighs on either side of my hips. Her brow is furrowed, and I hold my breath, wanting to hear her give in. To answer me.

Then she mouths the words. "*Just a dream.*"

Fuck.

Her pale, freckled face flushes a brighter red as my knuckles graze her neck, the belt so tight around her throat. I know she can't breathe, her eyes growing wider, but she pulls down my zipper, then leans back as I keep the belt tight around her. She uses her toes to push down my pants.

Her fingers come to the belt around her throat as she silently pleads with me to let her breathe. But I like this. *Her under my control.* I like controlling everything about her, from what she eats, what she wears, when she finds out what's going on around us, *when she breathes.* And lately, with her new addiction to working out, and my worries about things outside of our home, I don't feel I've had that damn control.

“Stop pulling at it,” I tell her, tilting my head so my lips brush hers, my cock rock fucking hard. “Relax, and I’ll loosen it.”

Her fingers are still trying to pull at the leather, her mouth open, desperate to inhale.

I grab her face, keeping one hand on the buckle at her throat. Running my thumb over her bottom lip, I lick the top one. “Kiss me, just once, then you can breathe.”

She’s panicky, shaking her head, her face blushing from pink to red, but I hold her chin in my hand and when my tongue slips past the seam of her lips, she listens, kissing me hard, our teeth clashing together, a pleading in her mouth, her tongue twirling with mine, her hands coming to my chest, scratching at my shirt.

I shift the buckle of the belt, and she gasps into my mouth with the release.

I let go of the belt, shoving down my boxer briefs and stepping out of them, then wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her to the edge of the counter. Her hand drifts down my T-shirt, across my abs, to my cock. She wraps her fingers around it, and this time, *I’m gasping*.

I grab the inside of her thigh, *hard*, and she hooks her leg around my back, pulling me closer.

I thread my fingers through her hair as I yank her head back, staring down at her.

“Don’t put it in,” I warn her, gripping her tighter, tears pricking at the corner of her wide eyes, my hand still on her thigh.

My brow to hers, I look down between us, watching as she shifts her hips, closer to the edge, her thighs spread wide, her knee bent as she keeps her leg hooked around me.

I bite my lip, my chest tight staring at her pussy opened up to me, exposing her pink, swollen clit. She brings the head of my cock to it, but I slide my hand down from her

hair to her throat, squeezing tight beneath the belt like a leash around her neck.

When I look up, she's peering up at me through dark lashes.

"Ask me." My voice is rough, full of lust.

"Mavy," she whispers between us. "Let me."

I press my thumb into the hollow of her throat. "Ask."

"W-what do you want me to ask?" Her words are breathy, and we've slipped into our roles. She lets me dominate her, and I take control. I'm thinking of nothing else right now. It's a break. A fucking reprieve.

"Ask me for permission for my cock to make you feel good."

She whines, her leg falling from my waist as she spreads herself wider. I smell her between us, and her scent drives me fucking wild.

"Please let me." Her eyes search mine as she strokes my cock. "Please, please let me."

"Do you deserve it, pretty girl?" I run my mouth over hers, my body hot with need. But I want to drag it out. I want to stay in this moment, because when it's over, she's going to question me again, and I don't have answers. I can't give them to her. I don't even know what the fuck is going on. "Do you deserve to feel good, Ella?"

She nods, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth.

"You've been good for me?" I whisper, sliding my hand up her thigh, to her round fucking ass, more toned now from these workouts she's been doing and I'm not sure I really fucking like that. But I like *her*, and I squeeze her hard, digging my fingers in. She sucks in a breath, sitting up straighter, a whimper leaving her mouth.

"Yes, always," she says to me. "I'm always good for you. *Please.*" She tries to pull me closer, and I feel the tip of my dick brush up against her clit, but I angle my hips away, not letting her get what she wants. Not yet.

"You *always* listen to me, huh?"

Her face flushes pink all over again, a smile pulling at her lips. I shift my hold on her throat to her jaw, fingers splayed alongside it. “You think it’s funny, Ella? You think it’s cute to be a fucking brat?”

She shakes her head, still not looking at me. I grip her tighter, angling her head up.

“Look at me when you answer me.”

Her eyes come to mine, so full of lust and love and *pleading*. “I always listen,” she promises me. “I’d do anything for you.”

I believe her. Warmth spreads from my chest to my core, nearly choking me with the heaviness of her words. *She really would do anything, wouldn’t she?*

I grab her hand from my cock and yank it away, bending it behind her back as I plant her fingers on the counter.

“Pull up my shirt.”

She grips the fabric in her free hand, shoving my shirt up to my neck, exposing my abs, the tattoos on my skin, and *her fucking name* on my hip, in big, bold letters.

But the shoe-sized wound is there too, splotchy red and blue, fading to the latter color, enormous, alongside her name on my hip.

Her eyes come to mine, and I know she saw it too. There’s horror in her wide gaze, her lips circled into an *O*.

“Mavy—”

I tighten my grip on her wrist, but she doesn’t seem to care as I push my cock against her entrance. She’s so fucking hot, and wet, but I don’t push in, even as she widens her stance more, her leg banging into the oven door.

“Tell me what happened.” She almost chokes on the words, a sob threatening to claw its way up her throat. I can’t listen to her cry right now.

I can’t.

“Who owns you?”

She shakes her head once. "What happened to you?" It's breathless, her question. "What—"

"You need to obey me, even when it's hard. *Especially* when it's hard." I grit the words out, my temple pressed to hers as her eyes drift closed, no doubt images of my pain flashing in her brain. "Let this go. And tell me. *Who. Fucking. Owns you?*"

I pull back then, drinking her in. I see the slickness of her pussy, so fucking ready for me.

Then her eyes fly open, locking onto mine.

She's panting, as much as she wants this, her chest heaving beneath her shirt. "*You do.*"

"What's my fucking name?"

"*Maverick.*"

I push into her, loving the sound of my name on her lips, and the feel of her walls tightening around me, resisting, even more.

I groan, but I don't go all the way in. I pull out a little, staring at the head of my cock inside of her, the way she's spread open, just for me.

"Please," she whines again, gripping my shirt tighter, one arm still behind her back as her legs dangle from the counter. I think she's going to ask about last night again and I'm going to get really fucking mad, but instead she says, "Please, Maverick. *Fuck me.*"

You are fucking perfect for me, pretty girl.

I dip my chin and let saliva drip from my mouth, right onto her clit.

She whimpers, and I bring my thumb to where I spit on her, circling her slowly as we both watch.

She shivers, her entire body trembling.

"Look," I tell her, knowing she is. My tattooed fingers against her wet, pink flesh. "You're so fucking perfect." I push into her, just a little more, enough to make her gasp and break her arm free from my grip, trying to reach for

me, but I slam it back down on the counter and squeeze her clit hard. "Don't test me, pretty girl. *I'll stop.*"

Her lips are parted as she stares at me like I really do own her. "I'm sorry," she says, and I fucking love that. She doesn't need to apologize for anything at all, but hearing the words, her submission...

I can't take it anymore.

I push all the way into her, and she tightens around me while I keep circling her clit, watching as I fuck her, her name in my view too, inked on my body. I'd fucking tattoo her name on my dick if she wanted me to, because as much as I own her, this naïve, beautiful, loyal girl, she fucking owns me too. And I could probably fit her first and last name on my cock, which I'm sure is more than any of the other assholes who got to sleep with her could say.

I look up at her to see her watching me. I let go of her arm, and she immediately starts to reach for me, but I stop her, pinching her clit so she yelps.

"Keep it behind your back." *Let's see if she can restrain herself.*

She swallows, her throat rolling beneath my hand, then she says, "Okay, Mavy," and does exactly what I say.

I reach for her calf, feeling her soft, smooth skin beneath my fingers. I lift her leg, propping her foot on the ledge of the oven door, hitting an even better angle. I think I saw a red mark along the back of her thigh, but I imagine it's only her skin from sitting on the counter. She's so fair in her complexion.

"She is so pale, the wounds would be beautiful."

I want to get Mikhail's words out of my head and I'm going to do it by fucking her.

I can't circle her clit and fuck her how I want at the same time, so I say, "Touch yourself," and release her, gripping the counter beside her hip.

She does, one hand still behind her back.

“If you move that arm,” I promise her through gritted teeth as I fuck her slowly, listening to the slick sounds between us, taking a deep breath to catch her scent, “we’re done, do you understand?”

She nods, two fingers coming to her clit as she rubs up and down it, then circles it, her top knuckles grazing my dick as I push in and pull out.

“Use your fucking words. *Answer me, Ella.*”

“Y-yes,” she moans as I shove all the way in, the counter digging into my thighs as I grip her calf tighter. She’s so fucking wide open for me, I can see every inch of her that I’m not inside of, I can feel her squeezing so hard around my cock.

“Yes what?” My eyes lock on hers.

For a moment, she seems frozen. Then she says, “Yes, *Daddy,*” and I swear to fucking God I think I’m going to come right now.

But I just grip the counter harder and watch her touch herself as I slow my thrusts into her tight hole.

Until her muscles flex around me, her walls clenching onto my dick, and I know she’s about to come.

I fuck her faster, harder, watching her fingers on her clit and my cock inside of her.

And when she’s close, my name on her perfect mouth, I pull all the way out, even though it fucking kills me, because I want to see her entire pussy as she comes.

She knocks her head back against the cabinet, her fingers still circling fast around her clit, and I bring two of mine to her entrance, pushing down on the wall of muscle, watching it tighten and open. I catch sight of Sid’s name on my hand, right next to Ella’s pussy, and I feel pre-cum leaking from the tip of my cock. It’s perverse, getting more turned on by a tattoo, but I don’t fucking care.

I push three fingers into Ella, all the way to my knuckles, so the ink of Sid’s name brushes against her opening, right there at her fucking pink pussy, and Ella

moans my name louder than she ever has, her hand still behind her, like the good fucking girl she is.

And I can't wait anymore.

I pull my fingers out of her, guiding my dick into her instead. I bring my fingers to her mouth as I fuck her harder, feeling her squeezing so tight around my cock, like she's still fucking coming. She sucks my fingertips, her mouth so warm and soft.

"Look at me."

She drops her head, meeting my gaze, her eyes wild. I'm all the way inside of her, and I don't even want to move much, I don't *have to* move much as she bucks her hips, fucking me herself, her fingers still on her clit as she whimpers.

"Push them in," I tell her, jerking my chin, my fingers in her mouth. "Push them in beside my cock."

I think of Ignis, and how this is the closest she's going to ever fucking get to it.

She obeys me, curling her fingers up and one into her tight hole, alongside my cock. She hisses between her teeth. It feels so good, feeling her expand and stretch and squeeze around me, and her.

"Add another one."

She does, her eyes still on mine, drool leaking from the corners of her mouth.

I'm so fucking close, the pressure building, warmth hot in my chest, all the way down lower, to my stomach, but I'm not ready yet. I don't want this to end.

I look down, and she does too, leaning forward, our breaths mingling.

Then I shove my fingers further down her throat, making her gag and drench me with her saliva. I remove my fingers from her mouth as she pants, and I bring them, dripping wet with spit, to the stretched lip of her pussy.

Gasping, she tenses.

"Relax, pretty girl," I whisper. "If it hurts, we stop."

When I look up, she's staring at me, my entire body buzzing, thinking about it. All of me inside of her. Everywhere.

Her lips are parted, drool still falling from the corners of her mouth. Her eyes are rounded, full of apprehension.

"You'd do anything I wanted you to, right?"

Slowly, she nods, and I massage the inside of her calf, still propped against the oven door.

"Then relax for me, baby."

She takes a breath in through her nose, then does just that. *Relaxes.*

I look down again, pushing one finger into her, alongside the two of hers already inside, on my cock.

I feel her walls stretch, tightening, and I'm only up to the first knuckle.

"Take a breath for me."

She does, a shuddering sound.

I keep pushing, and I can feel how much pressure she's under, but I see her clit glistening, her lips spread wide, and I know it feels good too.

But I know the moment she sees it.

Sid's name on my hand.

Because I'm looking at it too, right when her entire body tenses.

I wait, holding my breath.

She says nothing, her fingers still stuffed inside of her own pussy alongside my cock.

And Sid's name, there between us.

"You mad, baby?" I ask her, my voice low, no taunting in my words. If she had some other man's name on her body, I would lose my fucking shit. Yeah, I'm a hypocrite, and I know it.

She shifts her hips, fucking me, and her fingers, and mine. She's so fucking wet, I don't think I've ever felt her like this.

I lift my gaze to her, every muscle in my body coiled tight. *I'm about to fucking come.*

"You think about her? When you're fucking me?" she whispers.

Ah, fuck. Now I fucking am.

But not like that.

Not like that. No, no, no.

"Do you want me to?" I counter, my voice rough, but Sid isn't even a thought inside my fucking head now.

It's all Ella. *You, you, you, pretty girl.*

Her eyes narrow. I thrust my hips, because she's stopped. Then I try to slide another finger inside of her, but she's too fucking full, I can't get it in. "Yes," she says, and it sounds like a confession. Like something she doesn't want me to know. "Think about fucking her when you're inside of me." Her face flushes, her neck too, but she doesn't look away from me. "When you're tearing me apart, *think about her.*"

"Ella." I don't know what to say. I'm not thinking about *her*. Truthfully, I don't know what to think, but I just know I'm so. Fucking. *Close.*

"You wish I was her, don't you?" she says, and I hear the hurt in her words.

I look down again, at Sid's name.

Then I slide my finger out of Ella and clamp it over her mouth. "Such a dirty little slut," I whisper, forcing her head back against the cabinet as I fuck her. I can feel her trying to move her fingers from inside of herself, but I grab her face, hard. "No. Don't you fucking dare." I thrust harder inside of her, feeling the slap of skin, her fingers above my cock as I grip her calf tighter. "You keep fingering yourself, because you need it. You need everything you can get in this tight cunt, don't you?" The entire stove seems to shake as I fuck her harder, lust and anger and love raging inside of my head.

She tips her head back, parting her lips, and I push my finger into her mouth. "Suck on it. Taste yourself, pretty girl."

She closes her lips around my finger, obeying, then she's calling out my name, and I feel her tighten again at the same time I'm coming inside of her, the release barreling through me as I groan against her shoulder, dipping my head and biting *hard*.

At the same time, her foot slips on the oven and I feel a wave of heat, feel her body go into panic mode at the thought of being burned.

I grab her calf, stopping her heel from touching the inside of the oven as I wrap her leg around my body, the pain from the fresher wounds on my back lending something morbidly satisfying to my orgasm.

She's panting when I open my eyes and pick my head up, slamming closed the oven door with my knee.

Panting, and her arm hasn't moved from behind her back.

Not even to save herself from getting burned by the goddamn oven.

I grab her hips, sliding her even fucking closer, the two of us still connected.

I reach for her wrist, pulling her fingers out of herself, and I bring them to my mouth, sucking the earthy, sweet taste of her off her skin as I hold her gaze.

When I drop it, I thread my fingers through hers, our hands resting on her thigh.

"I fucking love you," I tell her, meaning it. "*And only ever you.*"

But her eyes aren't on me. They're over my shoulder.

Slowly, every muscle in my body tense, I turn.

Cain stands in the doorway, his shirt still off, arms crossed as he leans against the frame. His dark eyes go from Ella, to me, and a smile ghosts his lips. He drops one

hand down to his cock, and I watch him stroke the outline of it.

Ella whimpers, and I squeeze her fingers *hard*.

“Fuck, you’re lucky, boy.” Cain’s low voice is a rumble, then he turns and heads toward the hallway to the door. A second later, I hear it close softly behind him, his steps light. Then his Camaro rumbles in the driveway and I turn back to Ella.

Her cheeks are pink, and I grip her jaw, jerking her mouth to mine as my nose touches her. And all I say is, “Don’t even think about it.”

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3
THE ASTOR ESTATE

“HOW OFTEN DO YOU SEE HIM?” I trace a scar along his back and he’s quiet a moment. I wonder if he’ll tell me it isn’t my business. If he’ll try to shut me out again, like he did this morning with the bruises on his face, over his abs.

He eventually told me he got into a fight at Sanctum, but he wouldn’t give any specifics.

Now, we’re together on the couch in our bedroom, the drapes pulled open and dark night staring back. He’s lying on his side with his head on a dark blue pillow in my lap, his hands pressed together as if in prayer, tucked close to his body, casting the front of him in shadow.

But I can see the broad expanse of his back, and how my pale finger is so much lighter than his golden tan and the etchings of black and gray ink from all of his tattoos.

We spent the day eating food I cooked, then made a quick run to the grocery store to pick up flour. I wanted to ask about Sid, about him calling her. The phone he lied to me about. But that would give away my own indiscretions. It's like swallowing back bile constantly, my hypocrisy not letting me truly question him how I might if I were innocent. But none of us are that.

Finally, he says, "Not as often as I used to." And strangely, the words have a hint of sweetness.

My throat feels tight with emotion. As I draw broad circles over and around the line of his spine, I want to tell him what's happening to me. What happened while he was having a ritual, only two nights ago. Part of me hoped when we fucked this morning, he'd see the evidence, but I think he was too focused on what's between my thighs to notice the bruises marring the back of them.

I know he would care though. Atlas might be teaching me to defend myself, but he's corrupting my mind in other ways. Putting me against Mavy too.

My boyfriend would care and more than that, unlike anyone else who has ever been in my life, he would *do something about it*.

I open my mouth, pausing my slow tracing of his muscles and scars. I feel the flex of his body, like he's picked up on my faltering.

Slowly, in the darkness of our room, he picks up his head and turns in my lap, cheek on the pillow, but now his pale eyes lock onto mine.

Warmth and love and hope erupt like lightning inside my chest as he stares at me, his elbows flared at an angle, one grazing my hip.

I can't read his facial expression in the dark, but the look in his eyes... it's like he's swallowing me whole. Like everything I am is absorbed by him.

I press my palm flat to his back, near his shoulder blade. With my other hand, I massage my fingertips into his scalp.

His hair is thick on top, buzzed around the sides, and I like the different textures.

But I know this moment is more than his damn haircut. I know I should confess. And it's right there, on the tip of my tongue.

Someone is hurting me.

I need you.

Protect me.

I'm so sorry.

And yet... it's Lucifer Malikov who stays me, and he isn't even inside this house. *"I don't answer questions. Do as your told. Don't call me if you need help. Use your fucking head."* He barely even looked at me as he snarled out the instructions. But I hear them so clearly in my mind, and I know how much he loves Mavy, and the feeling between them is very mutual. Lucifer wouldn't tell me to do something if it wasn't important.

So... I clench my teeth together.

"Does it bother you?" His voice is a soft caress in the darkness, but it feels more like a growl through my guilt.

I knead his muscles, his scalp, and I slowly nod as I bite my lip, anxiety nipping at me. "You know that." Unlike everything else, it's not a secret. "I don't want... anyone to hurt you." I gaze at the blackening bruises along his temple, and the worse one on his abs.

He arches a dark brow. "Why not? Don't *I* hurt you?"

I roll my eyes. "That's completely different and you know it."

His body tenses beneath my hand, and my heart thumps faster like it always does when I feel his mood shift toward something like anger. "Do I?" The question sounds dangerous.

I keep touching him, and I feel him melt under my hands. Like I can pull him back from the abyss. Even his eyes flutter closed as the question hangs between us. I know he expects an answer despite the fact he isn't looking

at me. "Don't you? When you... hurt me, when we're having sex, you don't mean anything malicious by it, right?" My face heats, my entire body growing warm, particularly the part of me his head is on. I don't like to examine our kinks, our relationship, in too much detail. It unnerves me.

A lazy smile tips up his lips. "What if I do?" His eyes flash open, locking onto mine. "What if I get off because you're in pain?"

"You do, but it's still different than someone whipping you until they scar your skin. The intent behind the actions is not the same." I chew my bottom lip when I finish because I'm not sure I'm right. Maybe I just want to be because I want to believe he cares for me more than whatever the priest feels for him.

"It doesn't upset Father Tomas when he scars me." His words come slowly, carefully. "And it doesn't upset me when I put marks on you either." He watches me, waiting for a reaction. "In fact, it turns me the fuck on, knowing you'll always carry moments of what I did to you on your body. In your skin." His gaze drops to my heart, completely covered with his oversized black T-shirt, but I think he's watching how fast my chest is heaving. He lifts his eyes to mine again and I wonder if he sees the fear and lust in my gaze. My fingers are no longer caressing his skin, his scalp. Now, it's just like holding on. "What is it you *want* the difference to be, Ella?"

The words rush out of my mouth before I can stop them, and no amount of thinking of Lucifer and his threats and my task can quiet me now. I've always been bewitched by Maverick Astor; no one else can banish that spell. "But what if someone hurt me? Someone who wasn't you? What if someone else hit me? Slapped me? Wouldn't that be different to you?"

His eyes flash, his pupils contracting, the baby blue edging them out as he stares at me. A vein along his neck ticks, cords of his throat pushing against his skin, but he is

perfectly still. "If someone else hurt you," he says carefully, "for *any* reason..." He doesn't blink as he looks at me. I get the disorienting feeling he is falling into the blackness of my brain, and it scares me, a chill haunting down my spine. "I wouldn't kill them." He traces his gaze over my face, like he's memorizing me. "That would be too merciful for what I *would* do."

I drop my eyes to look at my fingers in his hair. "Then that's the difference," I whisper.



"You're doing so good. You'll keep this secret. For him, won't you? For his sake?" I flinch, agony along the backs of my thighs, but I only nod my head, because I'm good at this. Because Mavy taught me all about being submissive.

In my mind, Lucifer smiles at me, his eyes devilish.

But he wouldn't actually kill me.

I know he wouldn't. I know he wouldn't.

I know, I know, I know.

Water rushes all around me, drowning out my memories from Monday night. The ones that eclipsed even Mavy's phone call to Sid. I shiver in the shower stall, clutching my fists tight to my chest. When Maverick carried me in here after he went down on me in the darkness, right there on the couch, I assumed he'd flick on the lights and fear seized through me again, nerves tangled up in my chest he would see all the secrets I'm supposed to keep from him. I have a story to tell, a tangle of lies to offer, but I know he'd see right through me.

He didn't turn the light on though. He asked if I wanted the candles, I said yes, and now, I stand under the hot stream of water of our luxury shower, three heads, opaque glass, and dark gray tile.

He helped me in here with the flickering flames the only light, and I positioned my body in a way he wouldn't see my betrayal from Monday night until I could slide the glass door shut, giving him only a glimpse of my shadow. It's a small mercy *he's* not showering tonight.

I hear him sigh and I know he's positioned himself on a bench seat outside of the shower. I can imagine him with his head leaned back against the wall, in gym shorts and a hoodie, eyes closed, tattoos snaking up from the collar of his sweatshirt he shoved on in our bedroom.

I massage my hair with my fingertips, the eucalyptus and mint scent of my shampoo sparking my senses alive even as the rest of me feels heavy with grogginess.

"You must be tired of all these secrets between us." His words are soft, and I close my eyes against the steady stream of water, letting it run through the shampoo in my hair. "But I wouldn't keep anything from you unless I knew it was...for the best." He sounds tired too, and I think of him with Rain before everything happened last night. He never put the kid down, save to change his diapers.

Jealousy of something I don't understand coils through me as I just stand under the hot water, letting steam fog up the glass walls and soothe the healing marks along my thighs.

"It's okay," I whisper, and I'm not sure he heard me. "I think I get it." And I do, more than he knows.

"You know, before I went to Sanctum, I saw Atlas, after I dropped Rain off." He says it so fucking casually.

My eyes snap open, some of the relaxation leaving my muscles as they tense. Even still, I keep my voice cautious. "Oh?" Despite the fact it makes no sense, mental images of him with Sid flash through my head and I feel heat in my

chest. I don't want to be so jealous of her, but she isn't very nice to me. Besides, I know the connection she has with Maverick. I can see it. It kind of eats at me, because I don't feel he loves me the way he loves her.

I swallow down my confused thoughts and press a hand to my soft belly. Squishy, despite the workouts I've done. I pinch my skin, water beading down my full breasts.

Then I think of how he pinned me to the couch to fuck me with his tongue, only moments ago. *He wants me.*

I release the loathing grip I have on myself and turn, grabbing the conditioner bottle from the shelves built into the shower. I squeeze too much cold conditioner into my palm, but I let myself take a breath in his strange silence, setting the bottle back and raking my fingers through my wavy, red strands.

"How often do you talk to him?" He keeps his voice light and innocent, but I know Maverick. He's anything but.

I bring my wet hair over one shoulder, slathering the ends in conditioner, the bright scent helping me think quickly, on my feet. "Hardly ever. But he says you don't reply to his group chat messages." This is true.

A snort. "I don't reply to any fucking group chats."

I smile in the darkness of the shower. *Also true.*

"Just be careful with him, okay, pretty girl?"

I'm not surprised at his casual directive. I murmur my assent. Our relationship is pretty clear cut. He leads, I follow. The few secrets I'm hanging onto, I wouldn't even bother if I didn't think, in the end, they'd benefit *him*. I want his attention, his aggression, his commands.

And yeah, maybe I need more of it. Lately, he's been so caught up in being a new uncle and taking on work from the 6 so Lucifer doesn't have to that I've felt pushed to the sidelines.

But it's these moments, when he tells me what to do...I feel like I matter. I feel like he loves me. And I think, I *hope*, when I obey, it's love he feels too.

“Some shady shit is happening at work, and I think he’s involved.”

I frown, sliding my palm down the length of my hair before I wrap my arms around myself and huddle with my back to the shower. The warmth helps soothe the bruises and I want to let the conditioner set.

“Why do you think that?” I don’t usually ask questions, but Atlas *is* doing shady shit, and my heart is pounding violently inside my chest, hoping Maverick doesn’t find out my part in it.

Another sigh, like he’s ready for bed.

I step back under the water, letting it rinse my hair for a final time.

“Remember Natalie?”

I tip my chin up as the water falls over my back, the ends of my hair plastered halfway down my spine. I keep my arms wrapped around my body.

Of course I remember Natalie. She’s the entire reason I met Maverick, inviting me to the New Year’s party at Liber.

“Yeah.” I don’t think Natalie and Atlas are doing well, but I keep that to myself.

“Her brother’s name is Samson.” My breath catches as I remember that name he spoke on his call to Elijah last night. “Or *was*. His body ended up in a field at Sanctum.”

My eyes widen and I hunch my elbows in toward my core, panic zipping up my belly. “*What? When?*” Thoughts of Atlas, how he might take the news, it overwhelms me. I’ve had few friends, and he probably doesn’t even consider me one, but even after his weird behavior last night, I kind of adore him. Automatically, I want to check in. “*Who killed him? Why?*”

“It was Monday night. I didn’t want to...worry you.” He seems to choose each word carefully, like he’s laying traps with every one. *Two nights ago, and he just told me.* But I can’t be mad he’s keeping things to himself when I’m doing far worse. “And if I knew why, baby, I’d tell you.”

I see his shadow beyond the pane of glass, hear his footsteps coming closer. His answers don't reassure me, and I can only imagine how Atlas is feeling. Is that why he was so aggressive last night?

I swipe a hand down my face, clearing my eyes, then I reach for the metal tap, and turn off the water. A moment later, Mav opens the door, steam trailing out, cold air greeting me and causing my entire body to erupt with goosebumps.

He stands there for a second, hood pulled over his head, baby blue eyes trailing down my body. He observes me with unrestrained lust, his pupils dilated as his nostrils flare. His wide, soft lips press together, then he reaches outside the shower door, where I can't see, and pulls out a large, white fluffy towel from the built-in shelves.

He jerks his chin, stepping back, indicating the dark tiles at his feet. "Come here."

I step out, still hugging myself, thankful for the fact one of the candles—set along the onyx marble ledge of our clawfoot tub at his back—has already gone out, the scent of vanilla and strawberries heavy in the room.

He wraps the towel around my body, and it hits at my ankles, oversized as it is. It smells good, the laundry detergent I use organic but scented with essential oils. I got used to using a limitless credit card after his many attempts to assuage my guilt at spending his money. "*Our money now*," he said.

He spins me around, so my back is to his chest, his arms banding over me to pull me to him.

His mouth comes to my ear. "You're fucking perfect," he whispers, and my eyes flutter closed. He kisses me gently, on my lobe, causing me to shiver from more than the cold. "Listen to me, okay? I want to keep you safe."

Warmth knots in my belly, spiraling upward, into my chest. I feel sleepy and loved. I don't want to hold onto these secrets anymore. I want to let it go. *Let it go.*

But there's far too much to lose and the guilt zips through me, sewing my mouth closed.

He kisses the side of my neck, and I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access. He laughs boyishly against my wet skin, then inhales, taking in my scent, exchanging it with the toothpaste mint of his breath. "I'm not going to fuck you again. You need to sleep. But fuck, do I want to."

He straightens and steers me by my shoulders toward the bathroom door, into the darkness of our bedroom. He helps me dress in the night, toweling off my body with reverence, opposite to how we fucked this morning.

When everything is done, and my head is lying on his chest in bed, his arm around my back, the covers pulled up high, I let myself drift off into oblivion.

I let myself pretend I deserve all of this.

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XV



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 4
CORPUS AVENUE

“SO, someone gets murdered, and we just don’t care?” I sweep my gaze over the decorations on Corpus Ave. Skeletons dancing in trees, spiderwebs lining our bushes, everything lit with forefront lights, combined with neon blue and purple, depending on the home. Night has fallen early, a chilly breeze rolls through as I grip my fingers tighter around the padded bar of Rain’s sleek black stroller. He’s bundled in lilac blankets, a lime green baby hat perched on his sweet head.

Sweet, but he also kind of looks like a lumpy pumpkin in that way babies do.

Ezra breaks away from our group walk, spinning and holding up a *Halloween* tumbler, his arms stretched wide, a gesture to the street. “Sid,” he says, his voice deep and full

of drunken amusement. *"Take a minute to soak this shit up."*

I stop pushing the stroller on our loop back around the neighborhood, Brooklin on one side of me, Lucifer the other, hovering just behind me. Cain, Maverick, and Ella stop too, but since Mav saw the bruise two nights ago—even though he didn't bring it up when he randomly called me and I was up feeding Rain—he's kept his distance, his arm looped through Ella's and a scowl on his face anytime his eyes shoot to Lucifer. He has bruises around the side of his head he said were none of our business, but I wonder if Ella clocked him.

Thinking of it almost makes me want to laugh. It feels kind of nice, being out here with everyone.

We try to do these walks once a week, on Thursdays. Our own ritual. *Fuck you, Council.*

I nod, taking in the sheer number of pumpkins lining the paved, circular driveways. At our back, Ezra's house has a glowing pumpkin in every window. *And there're a lot of fucking windows.*

"Yeah," I say. "I'm taking it in." I nod my head, feigning being impressed, although secretly, I do love it. "It's great."

The only house without decorations—or at least, none I can see—is the one to my right. Nothing but dark shrubs there, a driveway half-hidden by forests. It's hard to even make out the roof of Atlas's house though I know it's as big as every other home on our street.

A few yellow and red leaves skitter along the road, and Lucifer wraps his arm around me, pulling me close, one hand coming over mine on the stroller. We're both wearing fingerless skeleton gloves, and I tilt my head, leaning back against his chest as I look up at him.

He's smiling, but he's watching Ezra. Cain separates us from Maverick and Ella, and Brooklin has a lot of distance from her brother too. They don't speak.

Her shoulder bumps mine as she giggles at Ezra, dropping his hands but drinking from his tumbler. I know it's not water in there, but no one calls him out on it. He turns to face our home, at the end of the street, tilting his head. In a deep burgundy hoodie that clings to his broad shoulders, and dark gray joggers, he looks hot as hell. I mean, I'm not checking out his ass or anything, but every one of my husband's brothers are in stupidly good shape.

Then, apropos of nothing, my pulse drums like a hummingbird from my anxiety, yanking me from the moment, seizing me with a fear about Rain's breathing. I reach a hand out to press over the blankets, just to feel him take in air.

"He's okay, baby girl." Lucifer's reassurance in my ear should soothe me, but my face heats, because he knows what I'm doing. An anxious tic, of sorts.

I feel Rain's little chest rise and fall, and my fear is abated, if only for a moment.

Lucifer's lips come to the side of my temple, and he lets his mouth linger.

"It's really fucking fantastic," I force myself to say as Ezra falls back to walk with Brooklin, and we all continue on. "But still. Seriously. Should we be worried?" I brought up the surprise dead body because this is the first time I've been around all of them and no one else has mentioned it. I just don't know how concerned I should be, when these murderers around me act like it's nothing. But I can't help wondering... *Is someone going to come for Rain?*

Cain sighs beside Lucifer. His phone is in hand, and his thumbs are working over his keyboard—complete with a privacy screen, so we can see nothing. You'd think he'd be distracted, not really paying attention to us. But he's always listening. "Nah," he says, voice low. "It's Atlas's problem. Not ours."

There's a moment of quiet save for the night breeze rustling through the trees around our private street, then

the most unlikely person among us speaks up.

“Why isn’t Atlas here? Is he upset?” Ella’s voice, quiet and shy.

When I glance at her, I see Maverick’s jaw clench, and her green eyes peeking from his other side, looking around at all of us.

“It was probably his fault,” Mav says, his words full of annoyance, but he doesn’t look at her.

I frown in the dark as we continue to walk together, fanned out in a horizontal line. “Really?”

“No,” Cain cuts in before anyone else can. “When Lazar wanted to murder Sid, whose fault was that?” He doesn’t even raise his voice. There’s no edge to his tone, and he doesn’t pick his head up from whoever he’s texting over there.

Lucifer stiffens beside me, but he doesn’t say a word, just holds me tight to him while we walk. He has one hand on my upper arm, his own arm over my shoulder, but I know he’s got his other hand free, in case he needs to reach for his gun.

It should unnerve me, feeling the need to always be *on*. But I feel safe with Lucifer. I know Rain is safe with him too. Because to everyone else, Lucifer Malikov is a fucking demon.

“Atlas isn’t home,” Brooklin says quietly by my side. “He’s visiting his parents.”

I glance at her, wisps of her long bleach blonde pixie tucked beneath a beanie. It’s not really that cold, but she looks cute, and she knows it. Ezra does too, judging by the way his eyes keep darting to her perky ass.

“You keepin’ tabs on him?” Mav’s question, low and cold.

Brooklin brings the disposable coffee cup in both her hands up to her lips, taking a sip and ignoring her brother.

“Fuck off, Maverick,” Ezra says. “Don’t ruin the family walk.”

“I wouldn’t have to if my fucking *family* actually wanted to speak to me every once in a—”

“Don’t do this.” Brooklin’s words.

I feel a little guilt, like a pressure on my chest, being caught between them. Brooklin and I aren’t exactly good friends. She’s amazing with Rain, and she gets along better with Lucifer, surprisingly. Something about her getting caught up in an addiction she’s working through. Although hanging out with Ezra probably doesn’t help, but they’re both adults.

Regardless, she won’t talk to Maverick at all.

I think, maybe, she feels some kind of comradery with me because of the shared pain of Jeremiah, and Maddox. But she’s angry and hurting because Maverick sided with their—our—dad to upend her entire life when Atlas had sex with her on Lover’s Death years ago.

It was a betrayal, Maddox Astor believed.

She was set on the streets as a teenager, cut off from the wealth of billions. Most people don’t understand just how much money *billions* mean. I’m only starting to grasp it myself, and I realize it would have been *nothing* for Maddox to toss her a few million to look after herself, but he left her with absolutely nothing.

“Moving on...” Ezra says the words with an edge. He and Maverick seem to get along fine, but I can only imagine there’s some tension there too. “Heard any more about the initiate, Lucy?”

Lucifer doesn’t react as we all loop the cul-de-sac, heading along for our third and final circle of the street. For long moments, we just walk in silence, and I catch Ella peering around Maverick’s tall form every few seconds to look at Lucifer, waiting for him to speak. She seems confused and I wonder what Mav has told her.

I jut my hip into my husband, wanting more of me touching him. Wanting her fucking eyes off him.

I tighten my fingers on the handlebar of Rain's stroller, dropping my gaze to him to ensure his cheeks are still just a little pink, his neck isn't compressed. He's still alive. Breathing.

Lucifer massages my upper arm, and finally, when we pass the neon glow of the 666 on Mav's garage, he answers Ezra's question. "Yeah. I've heard more." His voice is raspy and fucking hot, and I'm suddenly feeling flush all over. But I'm also surprised at his words, and I glance at him in the night, his demon eyes coming to mine. He doesn't smile, but he holds eye contact with me as he speaks. "We're all going to meet him soon."

Maverick laughs, but it's caustic. "How soon? And when did you plan to tell us that?"

Lucifer shrugs, his gaze back on the street, eyes alert. "Just now."

Maverick stops walking, and naturally, we all do too. If one of us moves, it seems we all move. I pivot toward Mav, Cain backs up a step so his massive frame isn't between Maverick and Lucifer, and the two brothers square off against one another, a few feet between them.

Ella is holding onto Mav's arm, her in a white hoodie, her red hair braided down her back, and him in black, blond hair and baby blue eyes diabolical with the tattoos snaking up from the neck of his sweatshirt.

His eyes come to Lucifer's and tension sparks between them. They were fine I think, until Maverick saw my bruises. But he hasn't mentioned them to Lucifer, and I hope he doesn't now. I don't know why he thinks it's such a big fucking deal anyway. It's no secret I like rough sex. *He* knows that firsthand.

Lucifer says nothing, his arm still around me but his body facing Maverick, just waiting for something to come out. I angle the stroller, so we're all looking at one another.

Mav's eyes drift to mine. His hard expression softens, his jaw unclenching a little.

Lucifer notices. "You wanna say something to me?" He keeps his voice low, but the snarl is there in his question.

Warning my brother, I shake my head, just a fraction of an inch.

Maverick glances at everyone here. Brooklin, Ezra, Cain, Ella, me and my family. He brings his gaze back to Lucifer. "When are we meeting him?"

I exhale quietly, relief in the breath.

"Tomorrow they'll let me know."

My pulse trips in my chest and I look up at him.

He's already staring at me, an apology in his eyes. I can't explain how I know it's there. I just...know. Like I'm finally starting to read him sometimes. "We meet at Sanctum first," he says softly. "Don't worry baby girl, you won't be seeing him just yet."

"Then when?" Because I hear the unspoken words. And he knows how I feel about strangers in our home.

"You tell her about your uncle?" Cain's words, shockingly, not Maverick's.

My body tenses, and I see Ella lift her green eyes, lined in eyeliner, to Cain, who has put his phone away. He's looking at me, his irises so dark, right now they seem black.

Lucifer grinds his teeth, turning to stare at Cain. "Why don't you let me handle shit with my wife, huh?"

"Your uncle?" I repeat the words, surprised. He didn't say anything about any more relatives.

Lucifer rolls his eyes as he glares at Cain. "He's no fucking family of mine."

"He's *here*, in the States, investigating shit with the 6," Mav snarls. "He oversees the entire East fucking Coast, and more. Family or not, it's kind of important Angel knows —"

"How much do you tell Ella?" Lucifer cuts Maverick off, even though I'm agreeing with him, but with Lucifer's question, silence rings out.

Ella tightens her grip on Mav's arm. She only comes up to his shoulders, and she's holding onto him with both hands.

He has his in the pocket of his hoodie, and he looks down for a moment, smiling. Then he steps closer to Lucifer, Ella moving with him.

Maverick lifts his eyes, baby blue against something darker and more devilish. "I think if we're gonna start counting secrets..." He rakes his gaze over Lucifer's body, up and down. Then he takes another step closer, until they're nearly toe-to-toe. "*You're the most likely to drown in them.*"

What the fuck does that mean? I want to ask, but I wait to see how my husband will respond. Eventually though, without looking away from Mav, he just smiles, which feels more wicked than any words he could say.

It seems to work too, because Maverick backs off, and together, in silence, we finish up our *family* walk.



In the darkest night, Lucifer is edgy. I can see him pacing on the porch overlooking our renovated backyard, along the covered overhang of our home, heaters built into it. I stand at the opaque glass panes only we can see out of, but he currently can't look into.

He's got a cigarette pinched between his thumb and forefinger, and the cherry glows bright every few seconds, then he exhales smoke into the air. He stops once, turning to look at the stone fountain topped with a bat, the gardens edging up to the trees. We've got a patio area with a firepit too, purple lights strung up for Halloween, ghosts floating

along the coverings, in the trees, the water for the fountain dyed black to celebrate the holiday.

Candles are lit in the all-weather, black dining table under cover and able to be closed in by glass doors, now open while he's outside. The deep purple of the wax glows beneath the flickering flame, and I watch Lucifer take in the outdoor space of his home.

Our home.

Sometimes, it even feels like it's true.

I grip the monitor tight in my hand and step outside, sliding the door closed behind me. I shiver in my shorts and ripped tank top. I really should be upstairs, and shower, or shave, or floss my teeth, all the things I'm neglecting, but I'm exhausted, and Rain won't sleep long. He didn't finish his bottle, which means he'll wake up from hunger soon.

Lucifer drops the cigarette butt into a vaulted ashtray at his side, then turns to look toward me, my arms crossed over my chest.

He studies me a long moment.

"What's wrong?" I finally ask the question.

He tilts his head. "Nothing."

I smile, inhaling the pine scent of him, even with all these feet between us. "You're a liar."

His lips tip upward. "Married to a liar," he agrees. But despite his wicked smile, there's a harshness to his words.

He wants a line. He wants his vice. I can tell in his abrupt manners, the tension in his tall, lean body. It comes like this when he's stressed.

"Come inside. Tell me your secrets." I'm teasing him, but not really.

His eyes narrow, the candlelight flickering across the sharp planes of his pale face. "You trust Maverick over me?"

I shake my head. "Don't start."

He takes a step closer. "Answer me."

I move a step back, my spine pressed to the cool glass door as we do this strange dance we've never stopped since the day we first met. "Are you keeping things from me?" He told me about his uncle and Rival's Claw. It's all very fucking weird and no amount of searching online brings a word up about it except some obscure reference to an "academic society" with a small drawing of what I guess is their symbol. Two crossed keys and a shark's tooth between them.

Cult shit, then. I'm not surprised. But when I asked how he felt, knowing his father's brother was in our city, he didn't answer me.

I know how *I* feel. *I want him dead too, just like Lazar is nothing but bones.*

Now, Lucifer curves a dark brow, taking another step closer. There's nowhere for me to run. "I want to know," he says, his words low. Another step. He's a foot from me, and I have to tilt my head up to peer into his midnight blue eyes. He comes closer still, then he moves faster, his palms planting against the glass by my side, his body pressed to mine, trapping me to the door. He looks down his nose at me, and I bring my palm to his chest, one hand still curled around the monitor, it grazes his hoodie.

"*You trust him more than me?*" He whispers the words, and I catch the tobacco and mint on his breath.

My pulse pounds fast, staring up at inky lashes, his swollen top lip, bigger than his bottom. His asymmetry is divine.

"Should I?" I counter his question about trust.

His eyes darken, the blue vein in his neck seeming to pulse faster at the hollow of his throat. "*Sid.*" It's a warning.

Fuck warnings. "You didn't tell me you had an uncle. That you had to go in again tomorrow. You didn't tell me about Rival's fucking Claw or whatever it is—"

He steps even closer, crushing me to the door, my arms dropping to my sides, my breasts pressed to his abs as he stares down at me. "Sometimes," he whispers, dipping his chin, so his nose is inches from mine. "I like to fucking *forget* all this shit. I just like to *be* with you."

I swallow, dropping my gaze to his mouth, then slowly dragging it back up. "I get that, but I need to know these things too. If you want me to be *in* this with you, I need to know." *Do I want to be in it?* I'm coming to the realization I don't have a choice, which means I need to stay informed, if only for my son's sake.

Lucifer's palms slide on the glass, coming closer to my body, a hair-raising sound. He tilts his head, his lips over my mouth, breath skimming across my parted lips. "Do you trust him, *over me?*"

My chest heaves, pressing into him with every inhale, falling away for a brief second with every exhale. My heart is frantic, my veins warming with lust. I think I'm starting to like this possessive side of him. The way he wants everything about me to be all about *him*. "No," I tell him, and it's only half a lie. Maverick wouldn't keep anything from me to protect me. Not anymore. Not about the 6, at least.

Lucifer though...he might.

His eyes search mine and he brushes his lips over my own, a soft moan coming unwillingly from the back of my throat. He huffs a laugh, slipping his tongue into my mouth, twirling it with mine. Our kiss is wet, and passionate, and he presses his chest further into me, pinning me to the door, but he doesn't touch me.

"Good," he whispers, then kisses me again, sucks on my tongue, causing my pulse to shoot up. He pulls away, but just barely, our lips still touching, saliva between us. "He's your brother. I'm your husband. I don't have anyone else to think about. *It's only you, and Rain, and me.* I'm fucking selfish, and *I'm* the one who's going to be loving you *to*

death." He finally reaches for me, his fingertips slipping under my shirt and gliding over the swollen flesh from where he bit me. My stomach muscles jump, but I don't flinch.

There's no remorse in his gaze, and I stare defiantly back at him.

Yes, Lucifer. I know. To. Death.

When Rain and Lucifer are both sleeping, each in their rooms, I clutch the baby monitor tight in my hand as I walk quietly down the hallway of our second floor. My phone is in the pocket of my black sleep shorts and I have a verse typed out there in my Notes section.

*Nightmares are not warnings,
They are merely shadows of our own minds.
Dark corners lit from sleep,
Flickering candles over snakes,
who
creep.*

I don't think I'm the next Poe or anything, but it's the reason I woke and jotted down the verse which has me quietly entering Lucifer's darkened office.

A dream of a boy with gray eyes, watching me in the night. He smiled, and a snake flicked out where his tongue should have been. It was fucking disturbing, and it hasn't left my mind.

Slowly, I close the heavy, dark wooden office door behind me and for a moment, I only stand against it, breathing quietly in the night. The scent of old books I'm sure Lucifer has never read, alongside his pine scent, invades my nostrils. It smells like home and after another exhale, I push away from the door and walk across the hardwoods to Lucifer's desk, black wood, ornate corners and edges.

I sweep my gaze over the entirety of the office—towering bookshelves; gauzy, black curtains pulled closed on floor-to-ceiling windows at each end of the office; an oval mirror I do not wish to catch my reflection in; and the desk itself, with an electric fireplace behind it, alongside a burgundy, leather chair.

The desk is not hollow. There are drawers on either side of it. I sit down in the cool leather chair, my thighs sticking to the seat, then I carefully place the sleek monitor on the desk, gazing at Rain sleeping peacefully in his little sleep sack.

My mind flickers to the walk today. Lucifer's words to me later, about his uncle, *Boaz*, Rival's Claw. How some secret societies have pages of information for the public to gawk at and devour and yet this one had almost none. I think of my husband's insistence that he doesn't know the initiate nor why he's suddenly arrived.

I wiggle the gray mouse for the desktop computer, watching as a black screen asking for a password pops up. *The Malikovs*. That's the username with a bat and his outstretched wings as our icon, but I know Lucifer has his own too, even though he's never shared it with me. He'd have to in order to honor cult secrets even wives aren't supposed to know.

But I don't plan to be merely a pawn to threaten or a decoration to perch. If my son could be in harm's way—if other children could be in harm's way because of the 6—I want to know. I want to do something about it.

It's what Lucifer and I agreed to. There may be many powerful people around us, security for the type of sickening trafficking which gave me my childhood, but Lucifer is powerful too. The Unsaints could be the change in their own right. I don't believe they'll ever be heroes, but some things cannot stand.

Even so, I do not enter the password on the computer. Instead, I glance around the desk. An hourglass timer—for

thirty minutes—a skull pen holder, and two candles both in small black cauldrons. I bought those.

There's a black lighter too, and a white one, beside the candles.

I ignore all of that.

Instead, I flick on the only lamp—dark purple, royal, in its way—then, as light spills over this corner of the office, I lean over and pull on the lower drawer's wrought iron handle. There's a keyhole, but the tiny key is in it. The drawer doesn't open, but I turn the key softly, then it does.

There are black file folders stacked all the way to the back. They aren't labeled, and I study each of them, until I find one that seems to have been bent a little, near the top. Like someone tightened their grip on it in the throes of some strong emotion.

Dark corners lit from sleep.

I reach for the folder and splay it open with two fingers, then extract the printed papers inside with my free hand.

There are only two, which surprises me somehow. I thought angry secrets would be thicker. I guess though, it doesn't take much to turn my husband into an asshole, even against printer paper.

I lean back in his office chair, hearing it creak as I do. One leg crossed over the other, I stare at the first page, gripping it softly in both hands.

Governor Phil Cooper discharged from hospital; attacker unknown.

No known suspect list released to the public.

ALEXANDRIA - Governor Cooper has been discharged from Astor Hospital tonight—the only private hospital in the state—after months of recovery from unspecified injuries.

Police say they do not have any suspects at this time.

Cooper was attacked at the Governor's Mansion in rear of the building. Footage results have not been made public by police.

The investigation is ongoing.

Frowning, I shuffle the pages, going to the next. I've heard of the governor's attack, but considering everything else going on in my life, I didn't let it take up too much of my brain space. Still, I think of the photos of me I know were placed on Elijah's dead guard's lap at the governor mansion. *Is this all related? Is it...Jeremiah?*

My heart beats faster inside my chest and my mouth goes dry as I stare at the second page. It's then I understand why Lucifer dented the folder these papers were in.

What I don't understand is why he never told me this. It's a headline that looks as if it was copied and pasted onto this page, separated from the original article. There is no date, no name of the newspaper. But the title itself sends chills down my spine.

Dozens of missing children have mysterious link to academic society in heart of downtown Alexandria.

OceanofPDF.com



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5
THE ASTOR ESTATE

“OPEN YOUR MOUTH.”

I do, and Maverick spoons ice cream onto my tongue. The flavors of cookie dough and brownie pieces explode along my tastebuds, and I smile at him in the dark as I swallow, the only light from the projector on the wall across from us in the entertainment room.

“Good girl.” He smirks at me, his pale blue eyes gleaming as someone gets stabbed on TV. The film was shot by a young director, someone named Arlo Estere, who lives in West Virginia. Mavy mentioned it when he started the movie, making the connection to my home state.

He leans in closer, his shoulder touching mine as he slouches down, scooping more ice cream onto the spoon. “Would you ever let me stab you?” he asks, looking down into the frozen dessert.

I laugh, clamping a hand over my mouth, hugging the throw pillow in my lap tighter to my chest. I'm in baggy sweats, high-waisted, even though that particular fit sucks for my round belly. But it covers everything he absolutely cannot see, and so I deal with the material pressing into my middle.

His eyes come to mine as he pauses, his tattooed fingers still along the silver spoon. "You think getting stabbed is funny, huh?" He shakes his head once. "Because I can assure you, *it is not.*"

I think of when I cut him with a knife before and burst into another fit of giggles, then drop my hand from my mouth and squeeze his thigh, feeling the hard flex of muscle beneath his sweats. I decide not to mention Chelsea, even though what he did with her right in front of me kind of scarred me.

"It's not funny, I just didn't think you were paying attention." I glance at the screen, the aftermath still shot of a man lying in a pool of blood seeping onto a white tile floor.

Mavy arches a brow. "I'm always paying attention." He lifts the spoon, careful with it so it doesn't drip as he guides it to my mouth. "Especially to you."

I part my lips, taking his offering, a chill running down my spine with the cold of the ice cream. And truthfully, maybe his words too.

Because is he really paying attention? If he was, he'd know my secrets, wouldn't he?

I think of last night, the weekly walk I find uncomfortable because I never know what to say, or how to act. I remember the tension between Lucifer and Maverick I didn't understand. The words Mavy spoke to him, so strange, about secrets. I was terrified Lucifer would look at me in a way that exposed *ours*. But he didn't. He's very good at keeping the dark things hidden when he needs to.

“Who do you think is the... initiate?” I try to think of smart questions, like Sid seems to have. Mavy told me they didn’t get a good look at the person being brought in, and he assumes they’re for some other subsect of the 6. All stuff that makes no sense to me, but I’m trying to follow along. “That everyone was talking about last night?” He told me Elijah called them in for tonight, confirming what Lucifer said on our walk. I know he has to leave soon.

He leans over to set the ice cream carton on the black coffee table, his triceps flexing with the movement.

He grabs my hand when he settles back, bringing it to his lap again as he faces me, eerie music from the movie soundtrack playing through the mounted speakers in this room. “I don’t know, pretty girl.” He squeezes my hand.

I roll my eyes, but I’m not content with his answer.

I think of doing our laundry earlier this week, the way I stilled as I held up his black robe, the one he sometimes wears to Sanctum. Pushing through my nerves at questioning things I don’t understand, I say, “Did he get hurt?” I avert my gaze, unease a pit in my stomach. The only other initiation ritual I’ve seen was Sid’s, and I don’t like to think about it. *She wasn’t hurt. “The initiate?”*

Silence stretches and I look up, seeing Maverick studying me closely. “Why do you ask?” His question betrays nothing. Not a confirmation nor a denial.

“The blood on your robes.” It clicks in my brain, and I remember how hard it felt. I licked my finger and ran it over the stain. Crimson circled around the pad of my fingerprint. “Was it his?”

He doesn’t confirm nor deny but instead counters with, “Well, if I’m potentially meeting him tonight, he must not have gotten hurt too bad, huh?” There’s a lightness to his words but his eyes are rapt on mine.

“And none of it was yours?” I double check. I want to stop him from seeing Tomas completely, but I don’t think anyone can take away the guilt and remorse filling his

brain. Punishment though, seems to help lighten the burden.

I think I'm beginning to understand that.

"No." His face softens. "None of it."

I feel marginally better with those words, but possibilities of the cult ceremony spin inside my brain. Blood, robes, all under the cloak of darkness? It's a horror movie playing out in my mind.

"What're you gonna do while I'm away, pretty girl?" The question tears me back from the terror.

I try to keep my expression guilt-free, but I'm on edge. I'm all out of the few pills Atlas gave me, which is fine, I reason, because I don't want to be like my mother. Besides, I've been sleeping a lot lately, and sometimes reality seems to blur inside my head. I think it's from the withdrawals, and it's messing with me. Like I don't know the difference between sleeping and waking in small moments of blinking my eyes open.

It's good I'm out of pills.

I'm worried my secrets will come up out of my mouth and over my tongue before the right time. I'm worried Mavy will kill me when he hears what I've done.

I swallow down my nerves and try to work on my bravery. "I was thinking of looking into more online schools?" Film, social work, my interests are scattered. I like to cook and watch movies and spend all of my time with Maverick, but he has important things to do. And even as I'm trying to become something, I still feel...useless.

His eyes darken at the mention of school and I'm positive he's going to disagree. But all he says is, "Just looking, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

He studies me a moment, then a shadow seems to cross his face, and he jerks me close, so I'm falling over his lap, my hands against his chest. He slides one hand down my back, cupping the curve of my ass over my sweats as I look

up at him, inhaling his scent. Leather and a hint of cologne, he smells so good.

“You’re not flirting with other boys online, are you?” he asks, smiling, and I see the inverted cross at the corner of his eye shift upward.

I roll my eyes. *Not even close.* “You’re not going to a creepy sex ritual tonight, are you?” I counter, trying not to feel the pain of Ignis in my heart, or the phone call he made to Sid instead of me. “I mean, how do I know you aren’t screwing someone else—”

He smacks my ass and I dig my nails into his chest, over his shirt. “I’m only fucking you, pretty girl.” He lowers his head, kissing my nose, then he pulls back, his eyes locked on mine. “And you better only *ever* be fucking me.”

My heart pounds too fast inside my chest, and I know I should laugh, or promise him I will, but instead, playing into his possessiveness, I say, “What if I didn’t, huh? What would you do then?”

He trails his hand up my arm, over my shoulder, my throat, all the way to my jaw, pulling down my lower lip with his thumb. He glides the pad of it across my bottom row of teeth, then along the top.

Little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as his baby blue eyes stay glued to mine. “Is that why you’ve been working out so much, huh? You fucking around on me?”

My pulse seems to skip, and I freeze for a second, before I see the smile creeping on his lips. He’s just joking. *He’s just joking. He doesn’t know.*

I swallow hard, forcing myself to blink. “What’re you gonna do about it?” Even as I play back with him, guilt flashes hot in my body, and I’m on edge.

“I’d tear them to fucking pieces.” He isn’t smiling now.

“And me?” I ask, my voice lower, his thumb still in my mouth. “What would you do to me?”

He pushes his finger against my top two teeth, enough that I feel the pressure. I wonder if he would ever break

them. If I could shove him just that far.

“I don’t want to say,” he tells me, and there’s no teasing in his words anymore. “You don’t want to know. *Just don’t fuck me over, Ella.*”



I push through my last sprint on the treadmill, my mind going over the end of the movie. I finished it after Mavy left, over an hour ago, and in the final ten seconds of my run, I picture the last scene.

A woman lying on a polished wooden floor in white, she wasn’t even in the rest of the film. Long, brown hair, her eyes unseeing as she stares up at the ceiling of a church. All along the aisles, men in suits are crammed into the sanctuary. Some offer her a few glances, but as a man speaks on stage behind the pulpit—his words muted by the song playing, “Troubled Boy”—most simply stare at him instead. The preacher. At first, you don’t know if the brunette has died. Her light eyes appear glassy. Otherwise though, she is untouched. No visible wounds. Then, suddenly, she gasps, reaching for her throat. Her body convulses, and she starts to choke on nothing, her tongue lolling.

The men turn to stare at her. The preacher’s words trail off. Kid Cudi hums, and the woman’s face slowly shifts from red to blue, her movements less frantic, her eyes still on the cathedral overhead.

The movie ends.

A Death at Shadow Villa. I kind of wish I hadn’t watched it. There was something entirely too realistic about it, or maybe I only think that way because now I know morbid rituals like those exist.

The timer on my phone bleats in my ear and I slam my hand on the emergency stop of the treadmill even though I know I'm supposed to walk, to slow down before I stop completely. I jump my feet to the sides of the belt as its pace comes to a crawl, and I tighten my fingers on the handrails, bowing my head. Every inch of my body is soaked with sweat down here in the gym basement, where Maverick used to keep Ria. My chest heaves, and I close my eyes, spots popping behind them as I gasp for air.

Just like the actress in the Arlo Estere film.

All those men watching, no one helped her. Because they needed her dead. She carried a secret that could bury each one of them.

I feel dizzy, and despite the perspiration coating my body, my mouth is so dry. The treadmill's belt stops completely below me as I pop open my eyes, remembering briefly sitting here with Atlas all those weeks ago for Rain's birthday party.

"Do you hate the crowd? Or the people in it?" he asks, his dimples flashing as he smiles at me beside him.

I feel woozy, the pill he gave me calming me down but making everything off balance too. Tilted. I fold my arms across my knees and rest my cheek on my hand as I close my eyes. "I love Maverick," I say quietly, as an answer.

He laughs a little and I imagine him shaking his head, but I keep my eyes closed. "But not everyone who comes along with him, huh?"

A chill slides down my spine even with the flushed feeling in my veins. Kid Cudi plays in my ears, just like he did in the movie. I reach up and pull my earbuds out, pocketing them as I twist around to look over my shoulder, like I might find someone looking back.

The gym is immaculate. Gleaming hardwoods. Glass walls through which I see the lobby of the gym with a coffee table, a loveseat, carpet. There are various cardio machines beside me, including an elliptical and two

stationary bikes. Beyond the lobby is another glass room packed with weights, then another for yoga.

I crane my neck, checking out the stairwell leading up to the first level of my house, just past the weight room. It's dark, and I tuck my elbows in toward my body, staring into the gloom.

But no one is here.

I'm safe. I've done what I'm supposed to do, and I haven't gotten any summons for more. Whatever I felt on Tuesday night was all in my head. No one would be under my bed, or hiding in my closet, getting texts at the same time I sent them. Even the person I met in the shadows wouldn't dare do *that*. It's irrational, and I was high on Benadryl and lack of sleep.

I pluck my phone from the cupholder of the treadmill and hop off, heading up the stairs and leaving all the lights on down in the gym. *Just in case.*

I switch the faucet knob to cold. It's too late now to treat the bruises this way, but with the sweat from my workout and the lingering pain, it feels good all the same. I close my eyes against the ache, my knees shaking as I wrap my arms around myself and step under the spray completely. The scent of mint from my conditioner relaxes me, and I inhale in the glass shower, keeping my eyes closed and trying to fight the tremble that seems to overtake my entire body. I know my sprints aggravated the muscle and sometimes it feels like the bruises go just that deep. At least the marks have faded away to pale yellow. I'll still need to be careful with Mavy the next few days, but if he *does* see, it'll be easy to explain away.

I swallow the guilt and open my eyes, then reach to turn the shower off.

Silence descends in the bathroom, only glowing candles beyond the frosted glass of the stall, and I stare at the muted, flickering light. It dances macabre shadows across the glass, and they transfix me, pulling me in. Then I blink and the spell is snapped.

I take a breath, freezing from the cold water. I reach for the silver handle of the door, but just as my fingers close around it to push it open, both candles go out at once.

The hairs along the back of my neck stand on end, and I bite down on a whimper, cutting my top teeth on my bottom lip.

The sound of my own pulse thuds fast and vicious in my ears, and I want to call out. My reflex is to ask, *Who's there?* But in horror movies, that's how people get killed.

And they die in showers too. Naked, usually.

Always women.

My mind flickers to the Arlo Estere film. *I should not have finished that movie alone.*

I hold onto the cool door handle tightly, biting the inside of my cheek and pressing my thighs together so I don't pee. Fear is freezing in my veins, and I blink, trying to see a shadow, but the moon is waning tonight, and nothing comes in through the big bay windows to the right of the shower stall.

It's like the darkness has swallowed me whole.

Seconds tick by. There's only silence.

I start to think somehow the candles fizzled out on their own. It's the explanation my brain reaches for even as I know it isn't logical. The windows certainly aren't open so they couldn't have blown out, but... I lit them at the same time. Maybe they *did* melt down to the wick all at once.

"No," Lucifer says, his voice cold as he stares at me in the darkness of the abandoned house. "Don't question this. You do it, then you're done. You don't do it..."

I hold my breath, wanting Maverick as I hug myself and shift from foot to foot.

“Then you die.” He takes pleasure in the words. I can see it in his smile.

I blink, and the memory gives me strength. Fuck this. I know I’m doing the right thing and therefore, no matter how much he wants to avoid looking at me, I know I’m under some semblance of Lucifer’s protection. He wouldn’t allow someone to break into my house, if only for his own sake.

I push open the door and step out of the shower, dripping wet, the chill from the spacious bathroom causing my teeth to chatter. I dart my gaze around the darkened room, but I see nothing. I shake it off, the scent of blown out candles heavy in the air, gray smoke drifting like ghostly tendrils in the darkness.

I shut the shower door and step around it to the built-in shelves, my fingers grazing over a luxurious towel I know is white, even though I can’t see it. But just before I can grab at the soft fabric to wrap around me, a cold, amused voice breaks the silence of the room.

“Are you afraid of the dark, Ella?”

I stiffen, sucking in a breath, but I yank the towel on anyway, wrapping it around my body and stepping back, so the shower door is behind me. My pulse is flying inside my chest, stealing the breath from my lungs. I can’t speak as cold courses through me, my knees shaking all over again.

In the darkness, a shadow moves toward me. I don’t scream, saving my breath and my energy like I’ve been taught, but I step back, away from the shower, from the door of the bathroom.

I lift up my hands in a defensive gesture even though my instincts are to keep myself covered, and so slowly, the towel drops, whisking me in cold again.

A gentle, quiet laugh comes from a darkened corner. *“That’s better.”*

The praise heats the tip of my ears, the voice familiar, but I don’t let down my guard. Every muscle is keyed up,

tense and ready.

“You’re stupid to come here.” My words sound steady but I feel as if I might faint.

“Stupid, huh?” The voice is closer though I didn’t see him move and I can’t see him now.

Then, somehow, he’s behind me, because a hand comes over my mouth and immediately, if I wasn’t sure on his voice alone, I know it’s *him*.

Spearmint.

But I don’t focus on that. Instead, I tip my chin forward then jerk my head back, aiming for his nose or his throat, whatever I can reach. And I move fucking *fast*, the pain in my thighs secondary to survival.

Atlas grunts as the back of my skull collides with some part of him, and his hold loosens over my mouth.

I duck down, then spin, fists up, blinking in the dark as I take a step back, toward the door.

As my eyes adjust, I can see the whites of his, staring right at me. I’m pretty sure he let me get away, but I don’t care. He shouldn’t be here, in my house, while I’m naked.

This isn’t what we agreed to. “Why are you here?”

“Why are you asking questions?” he counters, so quietly. “I would’ve already had you choking on your own blood by now.” He steps closer, and I step back. We continue this dance, my bare feet on the cold tiles, soles slippery from my shower. Then I’m close enough to reach for the handle of the bathroom door behind me, one hand still balled up and tucked to my chest, for defense. “*Run, Ella,*” he whispers, and I don’t have to think about it.

I throw open the door, sprinting into mine and Mavy’s bedroom. I don’t stop there though, dim starlight cast over the king-sized bed, the couch and table and glass decanters by the window.

I grab the door to the bedroom and twist, my wet feet nearly slipping on the hardwoods, fear attempting to seize my limbs, but I’ve been taught to push past this.

I go for the stairs, slick hand gliding along the banister as I take them two at a time, afraid I'm going to pitch forward too far and fall headfirst down them.

He wouldn't really hurt me, would he?

But I hear him chasing though I don't glance back. *"Don't look over your shoulder. That's how you fucking die."* He taught me that, but I think I already knew it from watching too many horror movies.

I plan out my route in my head, envision myself going to the kitchen, grabbing a knife. I hate that I'm naked, that he snuck into my home, but I don't care. I'm not going to show any more weakness around these boys.

But when I'm almost there, almost on the first floor... I slip.

I grab onto the banister, but I'm still falling, my arm jerking as I do, my heels scrambling for purchase except there's nothing there to save me. I try to right myself by my hold on the railing, hearing Atlas's footsteps echoing on the stairs, but my wrist cranks the wrong way and I have to let go or I might break it and I'm crashing forward, falling, bracing for impact, except...

Someone's hard body catches me, right at the bottom of the stairs.

A snarl leaves my lips as they stumble back a few steps from the impact. My limbs are flailing, my nails raking across their face. I feel stubble, but I don't know who it is in the dark, just a massive form. I kick my legs, my knee colliding with his groin as his fingertips try to keep hold of my wet body. A grunt leaves his lips, but he doesn't let go, short nails digging into my skin. Panic makes my limbs go numb and my brain is fuzzy. I forget everything I know about attacks head-on except... eyes. I try to press my thumbs to his eyes but he turns his head, then knots his fingers in my hair and spins me around. Before I can even blink, he's looped his arms under mine, then clasped his fingers behind my neck, exposing my body and keeping me

locked in his hold. My hands are free but I can't move far, the way he's compressing my arms.

"Let me go!" It comes out as a broken scream.

There's a deep laugh, low and quiet, crawling across my skin like a dangerous caress. Then he says, "I think you and I are bound to fuck each other someday."

I recognize his voice immediately simply because he rarely speaks and when he does, it's like a novelty.

Cain. Why is he here?

My lungs squeeze together as cool air hits my bare chest and I lick my lips, trying to jerk my arms away but he only clamps down harder on my neck, right at the base of my skull. He dips his chin, his mouth by my ear.

"Calm down," he whispers, a lazy command.

"Let me fucking go!" My mind spins, and I don't stop trying to twist in his grip, but the hold puts pressure on my neck, nearly pulling my arms out of socket the more I struggle.

I hear footsteps on the stairs, and I shoot up my gaze, catching sight of Atlas trailing down the steps, one hand gliding along the banister.

My face heats, the warmth trailing lower, to my exposed chest. My stomach and hips, *lower still*. He can see all of me, even if it is dark.

"Tell him to let me go," I hiss, adrenaline coursing through my veins and its anger that's the result. *"Let me go, now. Why are you here?"* I demand as Atlas continues his descent. *"Why is he—"*

"You think I'm in charge of Cain?" Atlas interrupts me with amusement, coming to the landing, feet from me, the entrance to mine and Maverick's home at our side.

Atlas's dark blue-brown eyes drop to my toes, then trail slowly up, taking in every inch of me as I try to jerk out of Cain's grip again.

"I'm not Atlas's bitch," Cain says quietly. *"Besides, I like when they fight."* He speaks those words like he's talking to

Atlas alone, like I'm not even here.

I clench my teeth and go perfectly still as Atlas's eyes linger on my breasts before moving casually up to my face. He has one hand on the banister beside him, and he cocks his head, a slow smile curving his lips.

"I prefer to watch, but I like a fight too," he says, like a purr. "Maverick doesn't though, does he? Not when it's *you*, anyway."

There's a pain in my chest, humiliation in physical form. "Let me go," I say again, a broken whisper. I close my eyes, so I don't have to see Atlas staring at me, my body caught between two dangerous men. "*Please.*"

Cain laughs darkly at my back. "That's all you had to say, baby." He unthreads his arms through mine as I blink my eyes open.

Immediately, I start to spin, tucking my arms to my body, intending to dart past him, but he bands one arm around my breasts, covering me, and brings a rough and calloused hand to my hip. "Well," he says with calm, "you fucked that up."

I dig my nails into his forearm as my tight nipples chafe against his hold, but it's when his fingertips press into the bruises along the back of my thigh, just under the curve of my ass, that I stop struggling.

I stiffen, an ache lighting up around my muscles.

Atlas stares at me a moment, backwards hat on, blue T-shirt, gray sweats, white high-tops. He's so tall, even with feet between us, he's looking down at me.

Without warning, before I can understand the look in his eyes, Cain spins me around, grabbing my upper arm and pulling me to him, a gasp leaving my lips. Then he *picks me up*, and I try to kick my feet to get free, but he says, his voice a growl, "I'm not going to hurt you. Let me hold you."

Warmth spreads through me with his words, my chest still heaving from running and trying to fight.

“Come on, Ella. Humor me,” he presses, his hands on the side of my hips, gripping me to him. “*Wrap your legs around me.*”

Illicit feelings of lust threaten to choke me, and I don’t understand why he wants this.

I don’t want *him*, I don’t want anyone but Mavy, and yet I have a feeling he won’t let me go if I don’t obey. It’s how Maverick works too.

Slowly, I let him haul me up against him, my hands splaying on his chest, the expensive fabric of his button down soft and silky beneath my fingers. I try not to feel *him* between my thighs, wrapped around him, not nearly enough space between us.

His hands grip my thighs, and his coal-black eyes look down at mine when he asks, so carefully, “Just how hard does he fuck you?” He flexes his fingers, the tips of them digging into my flesh. It’s like he’s trying to test my wounds, but I don’t know why he cares or what it matters.

A hiss comes unwillingly from my mouth, and I dig my nails into his shirt, pressing my head to his chest, arching my ass, an instinctive reaction to try and get my body away from the hold he has on my wounds. My core is flush with his abs, our bodies so close.

The pressure on my bruises lessens, but he’s still holding me up. I close my eyes tight, my heart tripping in my chest. I’m very aware of Atlas at my back. The fact I’m naked and vulnerable for two Unsaints, neither of them Maverick.

But as I inhale Cain’s dark scent, feel the strength of him holding me to his chest, for some reason... I am not as afraid as I should be.

“Or is it him at all?” Cain whispers the words against the tip of my ear.

“I’m sore. From...from w-working out.” I don’t know why I stammer over the words except maybe it’s because... I was never one to *exercise*. It feels weird, being that person

now. Like I'm ashamed somehow, as if my insecurities about my body are exposed for Cain to see. And it's not even the whole truth, of why I'm hurting. But I certainly can't tell him *that*. For all I know, that's why he's here. He's testing me, flexing my loyalty.

"Is that right?" There's a knowing in his question. A humor.

I bite the inside of my cheek, brow still pressed to his chest, but I refuse to answer him. The desire to break down is strong. To tell him exactly what's going on. Maybe because if he's *not* testing me, he wouldn't care. It's the second time I've thought maybe I could confide in him, but that would mean confessing to Atlas too, and I'm not so sure he wouldn't use the secrets I'm keeping from him too, as leverage against me.

Cain's full lips brush against my lobe, and shivers crawl down my naked body, my nipples tightening between us as his fingers flex dangerously close to my ass. "Does he ever go too far?" His words skim my ear, his voice a rumble I can feel against my own chest even though I don't understand what he's saying.

Unless...unless he thinks Mavy is taking something out on me? But that's not true, and the thought makes me feel flush all over. No, he's not *beating* me. It isn't like that at all.

Cain drops his head, nudging his nose to my neck.

Warm pleasure floods my body, but I do my best not to react.

"You let me know if you ever wanna get him back for anything, Ella." He enunciates the Ls carefully. I can hear his tongue hitting the top of his teeth as he says them. It's attractive, and it's coupled with the feel of his erection growing between us. But so slowly, he slides me down the length of his muscular body, setting me on my feet, naked and soaking wet.

Alone like this, I blink, alert. I try to spin, to get distance from both him and Atlas, but immediately, Atlas's forearm bars over my throat and he tangles his fingers in my hair, wrenching my head back.

"God, you're so good," he whispers against my ear as Cain stays silent in front of me, his dark eyes locked onto mine. He isn't smiling, his expression unreadable. But I see very clearly when he reaches down and adjusts himself through his tailored pants, all while holding eye contact, the back of his hand grazing my low belly, as close as we all are. It's a repetition of what he did Wednesday morning, in my house.

"What you did wouldn't stop us from murdering you, if we wanted to, but it was still impressive, Little Red." Atlas's words, and for a moment, I'm speechless, confusion colliding with fear in my mind.

"Why are you here?" I ask again, my throat arched from Atlas's grip in my hair.

Cain is silent, but he's still staring at me. I watch as his chest rises sharply, then falls in the same way.

"Where did you go after you left my house the other night?" Atlas teases against my ear. "I tried to follow you, make sure you got back okay. But you were gone, and Maverick was...busy." He drags his hand from my throat, but he doesn't touch my breasts. I think it's because there is still one half of him who is the man I believed him to be. Kind, gentle. His fingers come to my low belly, splaying over my bare skin. Fire courses through me, the way I'm exposed to him and Cain, but pushing those thoughts aside, I think of Maverick calling Sid when I only wanted to run to him. To have him confide in *me*.

And yet, I feel strangely protective over that moment. That hurt. It was mine, and I don't want Atlas trying to pry Maverick and I further apart.

"You were watching him?" I whisper, staring at Cain, remembering he was inside our house. Did he know Atlas

was spying? Did anyone see where *I* went? “Why?”

For a moment, Atlas doesn't speak. Then he says, “There are some secrets you shouldn't keep.” He loosens his grip in my hair, massaging my scalp in a way that feels forbiddingly *good*, his fingers working with ease through my damp strands. “Sometimes, baby, you really should *trust me*.”

And just when I think his good side has decided to stay for the night, he shoves me back to Cain, like I'm a toy for the both of them.

I try to run free, deeper into my house, down the hall of the foyer, but Cain easily hauls me back with his hand clamped around my upper arm. He jerks me to face him, fingers tightening, and he says, “Do not move.”

Then he releases me and before I can do exactly what he said not to do, he starts to unbutton his shirt.

I see the Unsainted tattoo—a skull with the U through one eye, smoke through the other—inked on the back of his hand as his thick fingers quickly undo each button. The outline of his defined chest appears, light brown skin, then his hard abs.

He shucks his shirt off, biceps flexed, shoulders broad. Maverick is in really good shape but Cain... he is something else.

With a smirk on his lips, he offers me his shirt.

I don't think about it. Immediately, I pull it on, the silky fabric cold on my skin. It hangs down past my ass, and I clutch it closed, over my chest as I put distance between me and him, so I can see Atlas too.

“Thank you,” I murmur, even though I shouldn't be thanking him for anything. He's the one who broke into my house. But seeing him here with his tailored pants hanging on his hips, the V leading down to the thickness of his erection straining against the fabric of his clothes, it almost makes up for it. His shirt smells like him too, dark and heady.

“Anytime,” he whispers, like a suggestion.

My body grows hot and I’m breathing hard, relief like pins and needles beneath my skin as I back up another step in bare feet.

Now that my body is covered, it’s like my mind tries to fit the missing pieces here. I don’t understand. *Why is he here? And why is Atlas chasing me inside my own house?* Every time I see him, it’s like he grows crueler, more aggressive.

And why is Cain connected to both of these nights I’ve met up with Atlas, willingly or not?

I take a step back, darting my gaze from one to the other. “Was it you?” I manage to ask. “Was it *you* who was in my...closet? Or...under the bed?” I know the questions are insane, but I keep my gaze on Atlas as I ask. “I mean, what are the chances you’d both be here after...after that night?” I dart a glance at Cain, but I can read nothing from his expression. I don’t know if he knows I snuck out of the house while he was watching me or not. I can’t fucking tell. And neither of them answer me.

“What the hell are you doing? What do you want?” I manage to ask, my voice raspy as I take a turn to stare at Cain, shrinking into myself. “If Maverick knew you two were here—”

Atlas snorts. “Maverick should be paying better attention, huh?”

I shake my head, confused. “Why aren’t you at Sanctum? You’re supposed to be...meeting the initiate.” It’s a small mercy I don’t stammer over the words. I want them to leave. I want to go upstairs and hide. But Atlas is at the foot of the stairs, and Cain is blocking the path to my front door.

“I think we’re supposed to be right here,” Cain drawls, and when I flick my gaze to his, I see he’s smiling.

Another step back, like I can disappear into the shadows. “But why?” I look from one to the other, and both of them are just staring at me.

I didn't even know Cain knew about me and Atlas. *When did he find out? Why?*

"Don't ask stupid questions, Ella," Atlas says, and there's the hint of a snarl in his words. But then his voice softens and he says, "We're just looking after you. Trust me. Besides, we're not meeting him tonight, baby." His eyes search mine, and I know he uses the pet name to make me pliant.

For half a second, it almost works. The girl I was before I met Mavy would've fallen for it. I would've bent to his caressing voice and his single scrap of tender affection. His revelation tonight they didn't actually meet the initiate. A trinket of information I might not otherwise know.

But I've been sleeping with a demon for far too long. I can see the horns beneath the pretty face.

He isn't taking my questions seriously, and he just broke into my house. I feel like, with the secrets between us, I've earned a sliver of his loyalty.

Screw him. "No. I *don't* trust you. At all. I want to know why you're at my fucking house, why you're spying on me, on *him*." I tighten my arms around my chest, shrugging my shoulders as I say the words.

Atlas smirks at me. It *enrages* me. I feel as if I have no control here, no say. The agreement I entered into with him wasn't *this*.

"He should know this." I keep talking, bouncing my gaze from Atlas to Cain, and it's like I can't stop speaking now that I've found some semblance of my voice. "Maybe I should tell him you both aren't as loyal as he thinks. Maybe I should tell him what you two—"

Atlas takes a step toward me and my words die in my throat. "You do that, Ella. You tell him and see what happens to you. Maybe I'll never see you again. Maybe you'll end up in fucking *pieces* on your own bathroom floor."

"I'd tear them to fucking pieces." Mavy's threat echoes in my head. *No*, I think quietly, *maybe you will, Atlas.*

"Get out of my house." I keep one arm crossed over my body but thrust the other to the door, glancing at Cain so he knows my directive includes him too. "Get the fuck out."

Atlas reaches into his pants pocket and for one strange second, I think he's going to pull out a gun. Or maybe the rosary. But I hear the pills bouncing around the bizarre black tinted prescription bottle the second before I see it. He shakes them, holding them up for me to see.

My face burns and I don't look at Cain.

"Wherever you're disappearing to, you're hurting for it, aren't you?" He takes another step closer and his eyes stay locked on mine. One more step, and I have to tilt my head up to hold his gaze. "Whatever they're doing to you, you want to forget it, don't you?"

"Atlas." Cain's voice cuts through the pause.

I stiffen, watching as a scowl pulls over Atlas's lips, but I don't dare look at Cain.

"Put that away." *So Cain must not know everything.* "You don't wanna cross that line with his girl."

We all know who he means by *his*. But it's too late. Atlas has obliterated the line.

He doesn't react for a second, then another, until finally, he winks at me, his back to Cain so he doesn't see. "You're right, man." He shrugs, slipping the bottle into his pocket and I feel a sickening desire to lurch toward him, to grab the pills.

I'm not addicted. I only get them sporadically. They help me relax though, and when Maverick comes home, it's going to be hard to pretend none of this happened.

But I know I'll have to, because Atlas turns his back to me and walks toward the door. Cain stares at me a moment, then nods toward my shirt. *His* shirt. "Make sure you hide that, beautiful."

I almost let them go. But I remember Maverick's words. His confession to me. *Samson*. Is that why Atlas needed me Monday night?

"Wait," I call out softly, my voice raw.

Atlas stills and Cain turns to glance at me over his shoulder.

I keep my eyes trained on Atlas. "Are you okay? About... Samson?" I force myself to ask it, even with everything he put me through tonight.

Atlas tenses. Curiously, Cain turns to stare at his brother too.

Then Atlas just says, "That's none of your fucking business," before the both of them leave.

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XVII



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6

THE MALIKOV MANSION

A FATHER OF BONES,

A son sheltered in the ribcage of his own demons.

The verse comes to me as Lucifer holds Rain, dipping his chin and pressing a kiss to his son's soft head of dark hair. My husband's eyes drift closed, long lashes along his pale, high cheekbones, and I see the hollows under his lower lash line. Deep, purple circles like bruises along his fair skin. He got in late last night from Sanctum; I was half-asleep. Today, I woke before sunrise with Rain and let Lucifer sleep in.

I almost fell asleep myself moments ago, giving Rain a bottle here, in my husband's office, the place where I unearthed a secret I don't want.

Two nights ago, those papers in my hand, I waited until Lucifer woke to ask him about them. He snatched them

from my grip, tucked them away and told me the article was from before either of us were even born.

He refused to have a discussion about it. *“There’s nothing to discuss. This is not our concern.”* No amount of screaming between us would unlock the vault that is his brain. The tension swirling around us is still incredibly dense.

Sighing, I flick my gaze to the window. There are so many in here, two entire walls of them. I enjoy watching storms from this room. Now, I stare at the rain patter along the glass, thunder booming like a soundtrack to my desperate need for rest.

It’s early afternoon, but it looks closer to twilight with the lazy storms we’ve had all day.

I shift in the red leather chair, several feet from where Lucifer is leaning against the front of his expansive, black desk. His arms are coiled tightly around our son, his shoulders filling up the black T-shirt he’s wearing, his arms knotted with lean muscle, hands splayed over Rain’s back. Rain is in a black and white striped onesie, sleeping peacefully in his dad’s embrace, the empty bottle I fed him on the small coffee table next to my knee.

“Atlas skipped last night.” Luce’s words are hushed, whispered against Rain’s hair. It’s like he’s talking to himself, but there’s an edge to his tone. “No one said a word about it. Then Cain left early. He walked right the fuck out.”

“And the... initiate? Did you meet him?” My voice is cracked from lack of water and a surplus of exhaustion. But I have to keep up with these things. Not just because I’m part of this now, but because if I don’t have something else to do, something to occupy my mind with... well, all I think about is Rain. His breathing, his feeding, how easy it would be for him to drown in a bath or to roll on his stomach one night and stop breathing.

It's paranoia, drilling holes inside my head. I don't even know how to talk about it. Say all these vile thoughts out loud. It's like I'm walking a tightrope and one wrong move, my son falls from my arms.

Lucifer's demon blue eyes drift open, and he holds my gaze, his mouth still pressed to Rain's head. "No. They're just fucking with our heads." He keeps the words a whisper, but there's venom in them, like *I'm* to blame.

I know it's not about me though. Maybe there's frustration from our fight this week, but what's really irritating him is the fact he's being kept in the dark.

I have a few things I could teach him about that, but I don't bother.

Regardless, it's smart for a cult. For *war*, where the winning side is their fathers, dangling knowledge above their heads, just out of reach, letting them feed from scraps but never an entire meal.

I think they're doing this because of Rain. Because they sense Lucifer's loyalties have shifted toward his family, and that could represent a threat for the 6. If Lucifer channeled his power—his leverage with his own brothers—toward control and rising in the ranks, it could be a disaster to Elijah and what's left of his brotherhood.

I curl my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around my shins as I rest my chin on my knees. I try my best to ignore Lucifer's edgy words as I watch Rain's little back rise and fall beneath my husband's hand. "Anything more on Natalie's brother?"

Surprising me, he has a quick response. "Elijah said Samson had some kind of conspiracy theory social media account which is a big fucking red flag for all of us, but not enough to die for, unless..." He trails off, then his words turn sharp as he lifts his head, carefully cradling Rain's in one hand. "He actually *saw* something." There's electricity in his words, but it isn't the kind that supplies power. It's the type to blow fuses. His eyes narrow on me. "Atlas

wouldn't be that stupid. But what if..." There's a bristling to his tone that causes goosebumps to rise on the back of my neck. "You read the news. Governor Phil was in the hospital but what they didn't report was the fact his *entire* computer system, in the governor's mansion, was hacked. Did you know that?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the wind pick up. Fall leaves swirl in a gust of it, flicking against the windowpane behind Lucifer's desk. An omen of the coming storm between us.

"Anytime I try to *know* anything, you shut me out. Like two nights ago with the fucking newspapers. How would I know that?" I counter. I don't like the way he's looking at me, as if I have some part in hacking the governor's computer system, which is insane. "You tell me absolutely *nothing*, Lucifer."

He said this house is *ours*, this office, everything in it, but sometimes, nothing feels like ours. It's all his. It all belongs to him. His cult, friends, family, work, house, cars. I glance at Rain, still oblivious to the tension between his parents. Rain is his too. His *son*, and not just biologically. *I wouldn't be able to run to save us, Rainy*. The 6 would kill us first.

"Yeah, but maybe someone *did* tell you something, baby girl. You've always been so good at getting people to expose themselves to you."

I grit my teeth as his innuendo.

"And the rumor going around is Order of *fucking* Rain had a little something to do with the hacking." The violence in his words causes me to flinch, and with mention of the Order, I'm completely thrown off, but now I see why Lucifer is getting himself so worked up.

I stare at Rain's back.

Today marks five days since Lucifer bit me. It *still* hurts, my flesh swollen and tender. His anger now reminds me of the rage in his teeth then.

I twist my fingers together in my lap, but I don't say a word.

"Tell me, Lilith. What did he tell you? What do you know? Maybe Samson was being fed information against us, and perhaps *you* know exactly what that is. I mean, it wasn't so long ago you were letting *him* put his fucking hands all over you." I know who he means and it isn't Samson.

Bile works its way up my throat. It's like an assault of flashbacks when he brings Jeremiah up, and it's not just about my time spent with the Order. I remember other things too. *Why* I ran. The fear I felt around my own husband.

But as for the fucking accusations, those are baseless. If I knew something, I would've confessed long ago. Jeremiah kept me out of his work, for the most part. *Just like Lucifer does.*

I laugh, a broken sound, as I lift my gaze to my husband's. "Don't drag me into this. This has *nothing* to do with me. You make sure of it."

His eyes are like blue fire. He straightens from the desk, holding Rain carefully, but I see the tension in Luce's shoulders, the vein in his pale, strong neck. "You haven't mentioned him at all. You don't think about him? Or maybe... maybe you're actually talking to him. Maybe you haven't had a chance to miss him, because for you, *he never fucking left.*"

I stand quickly, my thigh knocking into the coffee table. The bottle atop it sways and I turn to watch it fall over, a fleck of milk leaking on the dark, polished table. The bottle rolls, the valve inside to help prevent colic spinning, and the plastic container drops, coming to a stop on the soft, black rug beneath my feet.

Slowly, I turn my gaze to my husband. "Give him to me." I clench my fingers into fists at my side, digging my nails into my palms.

Lucifer's dark brows shoot up, a wicked smile curling his lips. "Are you serious?" He scoffs, a dimple flashing in his pale face as he rubs Rain's back. "You think... what? I'd hurt him?" He shakes his head, dismissing the words.

I step closer, leaving the rug for the coldness of the hardwoods. Lightning forks violently behind Lucifer, outside the wall of windows. Rain slams against them, bearing down on our roof too. Every muscle in my body is tense.

"I want to put him in his crib."

Lucifer smiles, taking a step closer.

Then another.

We meet in the middle. I have to tilt my head up to stare at him. Between us, I catch the scent of Rain's fresh, new baby smell. I hope it never leaves him. It's almost enough to make tears prick behind my eyes, for reasons and hormones I can't decipher.

"No." Lucifer's denial drives me closer to the brink of falling.

Panic. It's what unfurls inside my chest. Squeezing my lungs. It's irrational. I know Lucifer won't hurt Rain. But maybe it's what he felt when he walked in on me with the knife in hand, looming over Rain's crib, on Monday night.

I don't know what to say. I feel wired and tired, all at once. My knees are shaky, and I'm not afraid of Lucifer anymore. But when he gets like this, and when *I* get like this, I just don't want Rain around it, and I know Lucifer isn't done talking.

"So do you talk to him?" he pushes me, his eyes lighting up.

Fire burns in my low belly. "Stop." It's barely a whisper. "Let me put him in his crib." I don't plead, but I try to make it sound rational. I'm so scared of being called crazy, of *being* crazy, it's like I'm tiptoeing around my own emotions. The unfairness of it claws at me too. The way Lucifer can

be completely unhinged, but no one will fault him for it. It's *me* who has to behave properly.

Lucifer's fingers drift over Rain's back, and I note the veins in his hands. The secure way he holds Rain, very sure of himself, not afraid like Mav was when he first held him. "Answer the question, Lilith."

I want to scream. I take a deep breath. Then I reach for Rain, my fingertips grazing Lucifer's arm as I feel my son's warm body beneath my touch, my hands secure on his tiny sides. I don't drop my gaze from my husband though. "*Please.*"

Something softens in Lucifer's face with that word. He swallows, hard, his throat rolling as he does. His brows knit together, and after a tense moment, the storm growing louder outside of our home, he nods once and carefully shifts Rain into my arms.

Relief unfurls inside my body, blooming warm but cooling the heat in my stomach. I clutch Rain closer, dropping my nose to his hair and breathing him in. Then, on light steps, I turn from Lucifer and I leave the office, my bare feet cold against the polished wood.

"Come back when you're done, baby girl." The whisper calls after me, and I nod silently but don't look over my shoulder.

The walk to Rain's room seems long. It's only a few steps away, and I'm inside the darkened nursery, the Unsainted "U" looming on the wall, but all the way, it's like I was walking an endless corridor of nightmares. Of Lucifer sleepwalking. Holding a knife to my head. His temper fraying when he's on edge, when he can't think ahead of his uncles, when he's worried about his family.

Once I'm inside the room, I don't want to let my baby go. I hold him close, pressing him to my heart, and I close my eyes in long seconds of silence.

Then thunder rumbles, causing both Rain and me to flinch. But when I snap my eyes open, I see Rain has merely

adjusted in my arms and fallen back asleep, a heavy little breath leaving him.

Carefully, with a lump in my throat, I step closer to his crib and lower him inside, on his back. I straighten, gazing at him, watching his limbs flail a moment when he searches for something to hold onto. But finding nothing, he simply relaxes, hands above his head, and dozes back into blissful rest. It's almost like he doesn't need us already. Independent at zero, I don't dare want to imagine him grown up.

But with his peaceful slumber, my relief sharpens, tightens, and I grab the sleek baby monitor on his dresser before I step out of his room, leaving the door wide open as I head back to Lucifer.

When I step into the doorway, he's sitting on the edge of his desk, black, high-top sneakers flat on the floor, and there's a blade between his long, pale fingers.

I stop where I am, my palm grazing the trim of the door as I steady myself, my fingers tightening around the monitor.

He spins the knife like he can't stay still, the tip biting into his thumb, one knee bouncing. It's like now he doesn't have to be careful around Rain, he can let all of this volatile, wanting energy *out*.

He does this often, probably when he's fiending for a fix.

I've become the lines he cuts.

It drains me.

"Tell me you don't know anything." The usual bite in his words is absent. It's a plea. A cry. A need for attention and relief. A desire for a balm.

"Lucifer... don't be stupid."

His gaze cuts to mine, but his voice isn't any less broken. "*Tell me.*" It's desperate, and it makes my skin crawl.

I want to reassure him, but I'm fucking drained. Sometimes, I feel I can barely make it through the damn

day. Nightly feedings and humming the twinkle, twinkle, little star song, changing Rain's outfits half a dozen times a day because I can't stand to see any spit-up on his clothes. Doing laundry, over and over and over, scrubbing bottles by hand until my skin is dry and cracked. I don't know why I'm like this, so fixated on these things. I was never so neat. And when it comes to me... well, I'm still in the torn, black tank I've worn all week. It smells a little like Mav; leather and marijuana, it's comforting. My shorts aren't visible beneath the hem of my tank, and my hair is clipped up in an oily mess on top of my head. I don't have much to give him.

"I don't know *anything*." I don't want to fight. I want to fucking sleep. Rain won't forever. He'll be up soon, and he likes to rest during the day. I try my best to do the same, like Lucifer tells me, but it's hard.

For one of the first times in my life, I wish I had a close female friend. Ria could help me, but she's... well, I don't know. That guilt knots in my stomach.

Where are you, J? I need help. Why were we so fucked?

"I know that look." The edge to my husband's voice comes back in full force. Low and raspy, he stops spinning the knife. Instead, he unfurls his fingers, resting his hand on his lap, and he draws blood with the sharp steel of the knife. Right over top of the X on his palm.

Coagula.

I see crimson stain his fair skin.

For one wild moment, I think desperately of Maverick. I imagine him earlier this week, when he dropped Rain off. His arm around me. Leaning against him. I wish he'd come over, just for me. Not for work or Lucifer or cult secrets.

Just me. I need to talk to someone.

But then I remember how angry he got, seeing the wound on my low belly. And it *is* a wound. I've had to apply ointment, and I *wanted it*. I did. But I wish it had been made out of something besides hatred and loathing.

Maverick was fucking pissed. I could feel the tension snap between us when he saw it. I can't deal with that, settling wars where there shouldn't be any arms drawn. I just... I just need someone to fucking *listen* to me, and I don't want to feel like I'm stepping on eggshells while I'm speaking.

"You're a million miles away." My husband says it without any sort of wonder. It's just a low burning anger.

"I'm exhausted." The truth, shaking from my mouth.

"You're not the only one." A sharp retort.

I keep my gaze on the branches scraping against the window as the wind blows. "You're asking questions you know the answer to, meanwhile, you give me *nothing*, Lucifer." I shake my head, pressing two fingers to my temple before I drop my hand. "I don't want to fight," I add in a whisper.

"You don't want to do anything." A snarl in his voice.

I snap my eyes to his, watching him glare at me.

His words cut too deep. Sometimes I feel like I'm wasting away. I'm thinner than I was before I got pregnant with Rain. Ella shot me a look one night when Mav commented on my weight loss, but I heard the concern in his words. It wasn't a compliment, and the slimming down isn't intentional. I didn't care about getting back to my "pre-baby" size.

I just forget to eat when I'm running around taking care of Rain. Or, when I try, food tastes like ash. Lucifer has cooked, had meals delivered, offered to bring someone in.

I don't want more people here.

I don't know what I want, which is the story of my life, but this time it feels different. There's the black hole of indifference twisted up in a ball of nerves that I'll fail Rain. That, even now, with the baby monitor in my hand, Rain will stop breathing and it'll be all my fault. Another way I was born wrong. *You can't even be a fucking mother, but you hate Maddox Astor for failing you?*

I almost laugh at the voice inside my head. It's correct, and it crashes high waves of anger into me.

"And what do *you* want to do, huh? Get high? Have *Ophelia* suck your dick? Or maybe you wanna fuck Ella again—"

"You are delusional." He speaks quietly, but cuts me off all the same. The hypocrisy dripping from his words is either unnoticed by him, or simply ignored.

"Have you heard the questions you're fucking asking me? And *you* thought I was going to cut our son in his crib Monday night. I don't think I'm the only one with *delusions*."

He ignores my retort. "When's the last time you washed your hair?" It could sound concerned but it doesn't. The words are snapped out of his mouth like bullets from a gun.

I take a deep breath. Pressure builds behind my eyes. He gets like this when he's stressed and antsy for coke. I know it's about Samson, and the initiate, and all the things he doesn't know. I understand he's worried and fiercely protective and pent-up over Rain. But even still... *fuck him*.

"I just gave *birth* to *your* son." I take a step closer to him, my hands clenched into fists at my side. "I've been running again. I've been getting up with him. Feeding him. Drowning in diapers. I've—"

"I get up with him too. I do *all* of those things too. Don't erase my part in this, Lilith." There's a warning in his words.

And he's right. But even when he gets up, I can't sleep, either. I listen to Rain sucking down his bottle. I silently wish for Lucifer to hum him songs like I do, but he doesn't. I wait until Lucifer has crept out of the room and put him back in his crib. He should just stay in the bassinet, but I know the real reason my husband moved him out.

I couldn't sleep. I watched him all night long, making sure he was breathing by the dim glow of the nightlight in

our room. It's like this anxiety is *eating* at me, consuming me from the inside out.

I'm grateful for Lucifer. I'm grateful, I'm fucking *grateful*, but I have to supervise everything with Rain because I don't trust anyone. I don't even trust myself. Lucifer doesn't trust me either, does he? It's why he assumed the worst when he caught me with the knife, peering into Rain's crib.

I don't know what to say, what to do, so I try to give him a truth. To make him *see*. "When you get like *this*," I gesture vaguely to him with one hand, "*I* am the one who fucking suffers, Lucifer." I drop my hand back by my side, my voice cracking on his name.

He stares at me, his expression unreadable. I don't know what he's thinking. He flexes his fingers and I force myself to look at the blood on his hand. It's a sliver of a cut, but I think I know why he did it. To get my attention. A reminder, like all the scars on his thigh from Lover's Death, that I can be written over. He has another palm free. Just like his father, he might end up with two Xs.

He flexes his fingers, the pads of them sticking softly to the blood on his skin, the knife held in his other hand, now by his side. Dressed in black sweats, a black shirt, the skeleton bandana around his throat, he looks every inch the beautiful demon who stopped me at that intersection. The only thing he's missing is the skeleton paint.

When I lift my eyes, he's staring back at me, vivid blue seeming to glow in the dim light of his office. He doesn't need fucking paint. It's child's play. Lucifer *is* the devil.

"You think you're suffering now?" He whispers the words, a deadly lullaby. A smile pulls on his lips. "Do you understand how much worse it could be? Do you know how my dad treated my *fucking mother*?"

I'm surprised at the mention of his mom, because he rarely talks about her. But we both know no matter what he does to me, I can't leave. Where does that leave us? He was

born into a life of crime, luxury, mistresses, and maltreatment. He doesn't know how to have a happy family anymore than I do.

"You want me to end up like your mom?" I whisper, never taking my eyes off him. "You want to relegate me to a body who warms your bed? A nanny who raises your children? Is that what you want for us? Are you accusing me of knowing something you don't know because you want an excuse to never trust me?"

A bone in his jaw jumps. Then he says, "If that's what I wanted, I'd never allow you to speak to me the way you do." It comes out like a snarl. "But you have *no fucking idea* all the things I'm doing for *us*, Lilith. I am *drowning* in protecting you. I am *barely* keeping my head above fucking water—"

He doesn't get to finish his sentence, a chime like a church bell ringing throughout the house. The doorbell. His fingers curl into a fist at the sound, playing in his own blood.

I grip the monitor tighter, glancing at it. My heart picks up speed a little as I see Rain sleeping soundly in his crib.

"You need to get that," I tell my husband, because I'm certainly in no state to greet anyone. "Before they wake up Rain."

I am drowning...

He shrugs one shoulder, muscles flexing as he does. Blue veins run down his forearms, evidence of the lifting he's done since Jeremiah put him in the hospital.

My stomach swoops.

I push thoughts of J away.

No, no, no.

Lucifer needs reassurances I don't still want Jeremiah. That I don't still think about him. But I really don't. I do not allow myself to imagine where he is, if he's okay, if he thinks about me at night, if I haunt his dreams like he haunted mine. How to get rid of this bond wound tightly

between us. Everyone wants me to *get over him*, like life and hearts and souls are ever that easy.

I am barely keeping my head above water...

"You get it, baby girl." None of the emotion in his voice from a moment ago is still there. It has vanished completely. He lifts his bloody hand, running his tongue over his top lip, swollen and perfect. He has a nice mouth, even if all that comes from it is evidence of his corrupted god complex. "I'm a little bloody."

I narrow my eyes. "That's your fault."

"Come clean me up." He tilts his head, watching me closely. I glance down the hallway, toward Rain's room. "Look at me." Lucifer snaps the words out.

I slowly turn my gaze back to him.

"I know who it is. They'll wait." There seems to be an unspoken threat in those words.

"Who is it?" I ask, thinking it could be Mayhem, except he knows the code and he wouldn't ring the doorbell because he actually thinks of Rain.

"Come. *Here.*"

I fist my hand over the monitor, then the other in the hem of my shirt, glancing down at my bare legs. I have a light dusting of hair on them because I haven't shaved in... I don't even know how long now. The days all feel the same, dragging along at a snail's pace, except I get nothing done and I don't even know what day of the week it is now.

Saturday?

I know Halloween is coming in a few weeks, and I don't know what'll happen this year. Lover's Death? Will my husband hunt down another girl? Maybe someone untouched, maybe a freshman at Alexandria U, maybe...

Ophelia.

"I don't want to ask you again."

"You didn't ask the first time." My thoughts flicker to whoever is at the door, and how Lucifer knows they'll wait.

Then again... he's Lucifer Malikov. Everyone seems to wait on him.

Everyone except me and J.

Do. Not. Think about him.

"Can't you ever just do what *I fucking say*, for *once*, Lilith?"

I only stare at him, hearing the frustration in his words.

"I mean, you don't do anything else. You don't cook. You don't clean. You don't like to do anything at all except sit in silence and read your fucking books and stare at the walls and—"

I'm moving before I realize it, cutting off his words as I come closer to him. The hardwoods are cold against my soles, and it's the only thing I'm thinking about as I close the space between us. Icy, blind anger grips me, and I set down the monitor on his desk then yank the knife from his hand, the leather handle soft against my palm. I throw it across the room and hear it hit the bookshelves before it thuds to the floor. I'm nearly between his thighs, but even with him perched on the end of his desk, I have to look up at him.

I see a slow smile pull on his lips.

I grab his hand, the one with the self-inflicted injury, and I press my thumb into the warm spot of his blood.

His face betrays nothing. He's staring at me with detached indifference, save for that fucking smile on his face.

"Fuck you." I spit the words, and he doesn't so much as blink. Cold blue eyes, long, dark lashes, pale, high cheekbones. I'm overcome with the sudden image of him fucking Ophelia. Ella. Anyone who isn't me. The way he groans low in his throat when he comes. How he likes everything rough. Hands around their throats, maybe he streaked them with blood too—

"Fuck. You. You're pissed off because you can't snort shit up your nose. You're mad because you're in the dark

about your stupid fucking cult. You're taking it all out on me because you're a little boy in a man's body. *Fuck. You.*" I can't stop saying it, and I dig my thumbnail into his cut. Still, he betrays nothing but detached amusement.

"A little boy?" He scoffs. "A little boy wouldn't know what the fuck to do with you, Sid."

I hate you, I hate you, I fucking hate you. The blood in your fucking veins did this to me. Your family fucked me up. They have fucking destroyed me.

I am nothing, because of them. You.

You, you, you. My mind is a tornado of violent thoughts unbidden, they well up inside my brain.

"You don't know what to do with me. You hate protecting me?" I snarl the words. "You want to treat me like Lazar did Lamia?" His mom's name, he told me only once and I've never spoken it aloud until now. I see his eyes flash. "Go for it. I don't give a *fuck* what you do. I never did. *You* were the one constantly chasing *me*." I step closer, and his knees are on either side of me. "You think I do *nothing*? Then let us fucking *go*."

Finally, *finally*, I see a glimmer of some emotion in his demonic eyes.

I don't know what it is. Hurt, maybe? But I don't know why I think he's capable of the feeling, because a second later, he's jerking his hand out of my grip then he curls his fingers around my throat, pulling me toward him, his blood hot on my skin.

He doesn't touch me with his other hand, but he squeezes his thighs around me, keeping me still. I inhale, sharp pants, my hands fisted at my sides because I refuse to touch him at all.

His grip is just under my jawbone, and he tilts my head up, eyes boring into mine.

I catch his scent. Nicotine and pine. *I hate it. Sometimes, I hate you too.*

“There are so many lines I’ve let you cross.” He speaks softly, his voice full of that throaty rasp I still love. His eyes search mine, like he’s looking for something, and I know he’ll never fucking find what he wants inside of me. “So many traditions I’ve let you fucking crush.”

My heart beats hard inside my chest. *Fuck you and fuck your traditions.*

“The amount of disrespect you’ve shown me is fucking obscene, and I’ve let you get away with it, over and over again. Maybe I have acted like a *little boy*.” He smiles and it is fucking wicked. He jerks me closer, fingers closing tighter around my throat, his blood all over my skin. “Not anymore, *baby girl*.”

I narrow my eyes, and for the first time in a long time, I feel alive with this fight. But I don’t speak. He isn’t finished, we both know that. Besides that, anything I’d say would be nasty and vile and handing him over weapons to use against me.

His breath dances on my lips, his eyes there too. He smells like mint gum, his newest obsession. “You’re not going to like the visitor downstairs.” His voice is like a purr, the sound a lion makes before he launches himself at you to rip you to shreds. “And you know what you’re going to do about it?”

I grit my teeth, feeling the flex of my muscles and tendons beneath his pressure on my jawline.

“Fucking. *Nothing*.” He releases me then and I stumble backward, moving away from him.

He stands, looming over me. Then he brings his palm to his mouth, and runs his tongue over his own blood, his eyes never leaving mine.

Finally, he lowers his arm, grabs mine, and steers me toward the door. “Let’s go and welcome our guest.”

I dig my heels in just before we cross the threshold. He stops, and I turn to glare up at him. “If you’ve brought a

girl you've fucked to our house, she's not leaving here alive."

He blinks at me, and I know he didn't expect me to say it. But a mess or not, I'm his fucking wife and in front of everyone else, we're going to treat each other like we're actually married.

His grip loosens on my arm, dark brows pulling together as he tilts his head. Then, it's my turn to be surprised. "I would never do that to you ever again, baby girl." He glances across the hall, where our son is sleeping. Then his demon eyes come back to mine, darkening as he stares at me. "*Ever.*" He keeps looking at me like he could do it forever. "Remember what I said? About protecting you?"

I nod once, surprised at his mood swing.

"Don't fucking forget it."

I am drowning.



Lucifer takes the man's hand, and together they do some kind of bro hug, which blows my fucking mind because I've rarely even seen him do that with Maverick. Then again, I guess *their* love is a little more intimate.

I have my arms crossed over my body, shoulders hunched as I turn to look up the stairs, where my son is sleeping peacefully in his crib. The baby monitor is clipped to my shorts, under my shirt, and I hear the soft static sound, reassuring me he's still okay. My knife is strapped just above the hem of my shorts—I grabbed it from our bedroom on the way down—so it's mainly hidden from view, but I wouldn't have hesitated to use it if Ophelia walked inside this house, despite what Lucifer promised me.

It's not her, thankfully, but I haven't decided yet if this guest is any better. And in some strange way, he kind of resembles her. The coloring of his hair, maybe.

"Nikita, this is my wife." Lucifer's voice is curiously upbeat, nothing like it was when we were upstairs. I glance at his hand as he slips it into his pocket and wonder if he got any blood on Nikita.

Nikita is white with fair hair—a little damp from the storm, plastered to his forehead—and bright golden eyes. He smirks at me, arching a brow as he holds my gaze, nodding his head once. He looks to be in his twenties too, maybe a few years older than Lucifer, and he's dressed well, in dark pants and a white dress shirt. I see tattoos snaking up from his neck, just to the underside of his jaw, and I get the feeling he'd fit right in with the Unsaints. Clearly, he already does, given he's on Corpus Ave, and he's standing inside my house, beside my husband right now.

"I've heard a lot about you, *Lilith*." His voice is like silk, low and smooth. I glance at Lucifer as I tilt my head. I find it interesting he used Luce's nickname for me, and wonder how often my husband meets this guy, and for what. When Lucifer said upstairs I wasn't going to like who was at the door, I fully expected it to be a woman. I was prepared to grab the knife strapped to my thigh and slit her throat because Lucifer might fuck other women, but he isn't doing it in my house with our son.

"I would never do that to you ever again, baby girl."

Now, I'm a little lost. With his mood swings and our fight and his cutting words, I don't know what the fuck is going on here.

Lucifer smiles, coming to stand beside me and draping his arm around my shoulder, his fingertips pressing into the skin on my upper arm, beneath the strap of my tank top.

"Really?" I counter Nikita as Lucifer hugs me to his side. I don't drop my arms from around myself. "Because I don't

know who the fuck you are.” Or why you’re in my house with my child upstairs. *You’re too close. Back off.*

Nikita dips his eyes, laughing, a rich sound. Lucifer says nothing but out of the corner of my eye, I can see him smirking. His scent engulfs me. Nicotine, pine, the coldness of his body against mine, knowing his dried blood is on his palm, pressed to my arm.

Even though I might be upset with him right now, I can admit his presence soothes something inside of me while giving me fuel to be bigger, bolder, and braver in front of a stranger. And those words we spoke to each other before we came downstairs... they seem to have somehow bonded us a little more.

We’re a fucking tornado, but we both thrive in storms.

“Lucifer Malikov,” Nikita says after a moment, lifting his eyes to my husband, a gleam in his golden irises. I hear the note of familiarity in his voice, and I’m amazed I’ve never met or heard of this man in my life. “It seems like you married yourself.”

I grit my teeth, and my husband tugs me closer. This man has no fucking idea.

“She’s feisty,” Lucifer says, then he turns and presses his lips to the top of my head, between all the clips in my hair.

I’m surprised by the showy gesture, and I look up when he pulls away. Our eyes meet for only a second, but I see something pass over his gaze. Something dark, the way his brows pull together too, a frown marring his beautiful lips. Like he’s... regretting something.

But the moment passes, and we’re both looking at Nikita again.

“She’s beautiful.” He stares at me as he says the words.

I feel Lucifer’s body stiffen beside mine, his fingers digging deeper into my flesh. A small smile pulls at my lips. I don’t think this is quite how Lucifer envisioned whatever this is working out.

“I know.” That’s his response, said in a low voice, almost a growl.

Nikita turns his gaze to my husband, amusement sparking in his eyes. This guy has fucking balls. Most people are terrified of Lucifer, myself and his brothers the only exception. I’m not even sure about the latter sometimes. Whoever this is, he holds some kind of sway somewhere.

After a moment, his grin widens, and he pushes a hand into the pocket of his pants and brings out a baggie.

My heart pounds faster as I suck in air. It takes an effort to stay completely fucking still as Lucifer’s fingertips dig into me, like his grip is a leash.

Nikita laughs, and I don’t know why. Maybe my expression. Maybe Lucifer’s, although I have no idea what kind of face he’s making, or why he’d be surprised. This is what he meant, isn’t it?

“On me, of course,” Nikita says, curling his fingers around the baggie. “I was in the city when I texted you to see if I could stop by and picked this up along the way.” Nikita jerks his chin toward my husband, and for a second, he clenches his teeth, the sharp lines of his cut jaw prominent. My eyes dip to his tattoos, and I wish I could see what they are. Maybe it would give me a clue to who *he* is. “Got a little caught up, hearing the gossip. Some strange things are happening in Alexandria these days, yeah?”

Lucifer doesn’t speak, and Nikita’s eyes flick between us. Gone is the flash of anger on his face as he laughs, exposing white teeth and looking down at the coke in his hands. “Order of Rain is strangely silent.”

My stomach drops. I feel like I’m swaying on my feet, and I’m aware Lucifer is holding onto me so tightly I think it’ll leave marks, but I need his grip to keep me up right now.

Nikita continues talking, like it’s fucking nothing. “Maddox and Lazar are both in the ground, Dominus is

nervous, and *you...*”

Dominus. Elijah. Ezra’s father. I don’t know shit about him, but I know enough. And I know my husband is first in command with the Unsaints and Elijah is with the 6. The organizational hierarchy always seems far-fetched to me. Like playing pretend. But then I recall Sacrificium. The fear I feel over my son. I know it’s all very real.

“Well, you have a baby and a wife, and word is she didn’t come from any mob royalty.” He whistles low, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “You know, that’s partly why we’re here. You kinda fucked up the lineage, huh? Can’t have you ascending ranks if you’re not toeing the line, right?”

I furrow my brows, momentarily distracted from the coke in his hand. Ascending ranks? *Mob royalty*? I’m as trashy as they fucking come. I thought everyone in Lucifer’s orbit knew that much, at least. I’m about to open my mouth and let Nikita know I might not be royalty for organized crime, but once upon a time I was an escort and I could show him some neat fucking tricks.

But Lucifer speaks before I do. “Careful.” The rasp in his voice makes the warning deadlier. “You’re in my goddamn house.”

Nikita lifts one hand in surrender, smiling as he drops it back to his side. “No offense meant.” That sounds like bullshit. “But I did hear you got a look at the new initiate, and it was *you* who stabbed him thirteen times.” Nikita whistles through his teeth as shock runs through me, but I don’t show it.

The meeting Lucifer had on Monday... *Mutilating a man for an initiation ritual*.

Nikita sweeps his eyes around our house in a showy gesture, then keeps talking as my mind spins. “Have you met him yet? Pretty brave, walking out without him after your orders to the contrary. Though I think Boaz might have had a talk with Maverick to help him keep you in line.”

Lucifer says nothing. I glance up at him and see the blue vein in his neck pulsing under his skin, the way it does when he's about to murder someone. This is all backfiring on him tragically, and I thought I'd like that, but in this moment, right here at his side, I only feel like I want to defend him and tell this guy to get the fuck out of our house. Invited or not, he's no longer welcome.

Nikita smiles. "I remember when you used to disobey Lazar too, Malikov." For the first time, when he says the new—albeit, Americanized—version of my last name, I hear the notes of an accent in his voice. Subtle, but certainly not Southern, or American, for that matter. "Got my sister tangled up in that shit when my father was testing yours?" Before I can make sense of what he's saying, Nikita tosses the coke up with his palm, catching it as he nods toward Lucifer. "Anyway, that's all in the past and this is just a little truce. Maybe you can invite Maverick to cut lines."

His eyes flick up to the second floor, and my blood runs hot as he glances at the space my son currently occupies. I have the sudden urge to claw at his throat, but he looks away before I do something drastic.

I grit my teeth, but I don't dare look at my husband. I want to tell Nikita that Maverick doesn't do coke, but I know something worse will come out, so I stay quiet.

Nikita laughs softly as he examines the baggie. "You can't turn down a present, of course. That would just be..." His eyes come up to mine. "*Rude.*"

I try to count to three in my head. I try to breathe. I try to remember this man could be armed, and considering he's in my house, he's dangerous. But so is my husband.

And right now, *so the fuck am I.*

Before I can stop myself, I shrug out from under Lucifer's arm and stand in front of him, tipping my head up to hold Nikita's gaze.

"*No.*"

For the first time since he's been here, a look of real anger clouds his eyes and stays. No amusement, no laughter, no pretty smile. I note his fingers tighten around the baggie, and his gaze narrows on me. He's as tall as my husband, but he's a few feet from me, and I don't back down. Besides, despite how we can't seem to get along for fuck, I know Lucifer wouldn't actually let anyone hurt me... would he?

"No?" Nikita echoes the word back to me. He doesn't look at Lucifer, but as his nostrils flare and he starts to speak again, I know he's talking to him. "Since when do Malikovs let their bitches speak for them? Is this new 6 protocol? Hide behind your women? I know for damn sure you'd never let Ophelia or Julie or any other woman you've fucked stand in front of you and make decisions for you, Luce."

My chest is hot and tight, my hands clenched into fists at the mention of her name. Ophelia. Fucking. *Ophelia*. I've accepted Julie. He doesn't speak to her often, only sends money to help with Finn, because children are his weakness. But Ophelia... *Fuck that*.

My hand is moving before I can even think straight. I'm pulling up the hem of my tank and grabbing the knife from my thigh strap, flicking open the switchblade and holding it up as I stare at Nikita. His eyes go to the knife, then back to me, that same look of rage on his face, like how dare a fucking woman speak out of turn, then draw a knife on him?

Lucifer clearly hasn't told him shit about me.

"Get out of my house."

Nikita's eyes darken when I speak. They no longer look like gold. They're oil, slick and heavy as he stares at me like he wishes he could strangle me. "I could teach her a few lessons, Lucifer, just say the word."

"Get. Out. Of my *fucking* house." Lucifer is silent behind me as I speak those words, but I feel his presence at my

back. He's almost close enough we're touching, but not quite.

"You left a scar on my little sister, you fucking cunt." With those words, Nikita drops the baggie, then he grabs the knife on the sharp side, yanking it from my hand and dropping it to the floor. He's reaching for me when Lucifer pushes me to the side and I stumble, watching as he backs Nikita up against the door, the other man's head hitting the solid wood with a thud.

Lucifer's pale fingers are around Nikita's throat, covering the ink of his tattoos, and his other hand comes to the waistband of his own pants, pulling out a gun.

He brings it up slowly, twisting Nikita's head to the side and pressing the barrel of the gun to the back of his skull, at an angle. His back is tense, his shoulders too, and I step forward, swiping up the knife, standing at his back.

"Don't ever come into my house and disrespect my wife again, do you understand?"

Nikita's breathing hard, his eyes averted, his jaw tense, and Lucifer's fingers dig into his flesh, but he says nothing.

"Don't ever come at her like you're going to hurt her. Or fucking *touch* her." He shoves Nikita's head against the door again, and I glance up the stairs, worried Rain will wake up. Paranoid he'll somehow sense his father for who he is.

But in this moment... I don't think I'd mind.

This is a real villain. We don't do heroes here, Rainy.

"You said I could stop by when I asked. I came as a favor, because there's clearly a lot you're not caught up on." Nikita's words are shockingly clear. Cold, even. "I've never traveled with RC before, but now I am, and you need to understand *I've stepped the fuck up*. You know we'll be seeing each other again soon. You might want to watch how you treat me, Malikov." He must look at me with the pause, although I can't see him because of Lucifer's back. But he says, "And you wanna get your bitch straight. If she talks to

me like that again, I'll fucking slit her throat and you know the 6 would sanction it."

Lucifer flicks something on the gun, then drops it. It clatters loudly to the floor but doesn't go off and before I can make sense of what he's doing, he turns toward me and swipes the blade from my hand. His eyes meet mine for one single second, and it's in that second I feel it.

Our bond.

It's sharp like the blade on this knife. It's messy, bloody, dark. But it's there, and it's real, and when he turns from me and drives the steel into some part of Nikita, who groans inhumanly, slumping against the door, I know I never want it to break.

We're going to work this out.

We're going to fucking fix it.

I'd kill for him, and obviously... well, he already has stacked up a graveyard full of bodies for me. Looks like he might need to add a mausoleum soon.

I take a deep breath, watching as Luce leans in close to Nikita, whom he's having to hold up so he doesn't slump against the door.

"You said it yourself. Thirteen times, fucker, but the thing about me is I really like even numbers. This will do."

The sound coming from Nikita seems animalistic as Lucifer makes a twisting motion with his arm, and I have a vivid flashback of Lucifer driving a knife into Jeremiah's gut.

"Now get the fuck out of my house, and don't bleed on my goddamn floors on your way out." He reaches around Nikita, no knife in his hand, and flicks open the locks on the door, shuffling him to the side. Cool, fall air blows in, darkness on the street as rain pounds down in an onslaught. Lucifer pushes him out onto the porch. "If you're still in my driveway in sixty seconds, I'm going to run over your fucking skull." My husband steps back, and as Nikita hunches over and sways toward the stairs between the

columns of our porch, Lucifer slams the door closed and flips the lock, turning to stare at me, his expression indifferent.

“You like even numbers?” The question leaves me a little breathless after I ask. I sway on my feet.

He shakes his head once, his blue eyes gleaming. “No,” is all he says. I didn’t think so. “Just sounded good, huh?”

I nod once, fighting back a smile. It did sound good. “He has my knife.” I say the words quietly, and for a moment, neither of us speak again.

Then Lucifer lifts a dark brow, the corners of his mouth rising too, his hands by his sides, the gun on the floor between us alongside the coke. Neither of us look at the weapons, and that’s what they both are, in their own way. “My apologies. I’ll buy you a new one.” His chest is rising and falling fast, but otherwise, he looks completely put together. Like a criminal, a fucking *hot* criminal, but put together nonetheless.

“I have others.” My words are raspy.

His lips twitch.

I bite my bottom one.

The steady static of Rain’s monitor plays between us.

A second later, the engine of a car roars, then wheels squeal on wet asphalt. I guess Nikita listened.

I swallow the lump in my throat as my husband’s eyes are locked on mine. My heart is racing, and I’m torn between wanting to kiss him and wanting to hit him. And in this moment, with *this* feeling, I remember watching him fuck Ophelia.

I remember what I did to her afterward. “*You left a scar on my little sister.*”

“That was... her brother?” I don’t speak her name, but Lucifer isn’t confused.

He nods once. “Why do you think she was my neighbor?” he asks quietly. “He grew up mostly in Moscow, she grew up in the dark. So she could... live. So her father

could keep an eye on mine for the cult in Russia. Nikita is a *shestyorka*." Despite the gravity of our conversation, the way he says the word is fucking hot. "An associate. A nobody. But he's traveling with RC now, and I think he's taking over the role his father once had with mine. Only... with me, now."

I remember the story he told me, of seeing Jeremiah in the cage for the first time as punishment for revealing Sanctum to Ophelia. It brings everything into cutting clarity for me now. Lazar was angry because he was being *watched*.

My mouth goes dry. "Is that why you two were friends?" Maybe I just want it to be true. It would make his infidelity hurt less.

He studies me a moment before he answers. "I didn't know all of this until recently, baby girl. But Lilith... she means nothing to me." He glances over his shoulder, at the door he just pushed a bleeding Nikita out of.

I think of him stabbing the dealer, for me.

Twisted love. We have so much of it.

His eyes are on mine again. *I am drowning*. "You though? *You're everything*."

I blink, surprised to hear him say it. It's like I can't move, rooted here to the spot by his emotion.

"I'm sorry for the shit I said, upstairs." He swallows hard. "You are an *incredible* mother." His voice is hoarse.

My heart beats too fast. I feel suddenly dizzy. But his eyes plead with me to say something. Do something. *Anything*. "Thank you." I want to say so much more than that. *Do you have any idea how much those words mean to me? How much you mean to me, even when we fight? You are my savior, in every way that counts. You are an amazing father. Rain is lucky to have you, and so am I.*

But I can't say it. It's stuck in my mouth, clogged with every emotion I've ever pushed down in my life, and there are so many of those.

Ignoring my spinning thoughts, I turn, swiping up the baggie from the floor, feeling as if I'm handling live ammunition. I look down at the scaly off-white coke, biting the inside of my cheek. "How would you feel, if I did it?" I won't. My days of fucking up my life entirely with substances have passed, considering the baby that came from my body upstairs sleeping peacefully.

I just wonder sometimes.

Silence rings out for a tense moment, save for the soft static of Rain's monitor.

Then Luce says, so quiet it's barely more than a whisper, "Don't break my heart again, baby girl." I hear something solid in his words, something real. "I didn't know he'd bring it. I could've guessed..." He trails off. There's something knotted in his words. "It doesn't matter. Just... don't break my heart." He says it again, his voice softer this time.

My chest feels heavy, and slowly, I turn to look at him.

He's staring at me, and it's nice to see his pupils look normal. It's beautiful, noting the color of his irises. The shock of black curls against his pale skin, the bandana around his neck.

I take a deep breath and nod once, but in my head, he's pushing me against the crib, the knife to my skin. In my mind, he's holding a blade to my temple. It's like I can feel the scar burn when I think about it. Like I'm Sid fucking Potter.

My stomach flexes, trying to hold in my laughter at my own thoughts, but I feel the bite marks then, a slice of pain through my hip, and I press my hand reflexively to it, trying to muffle the hurt.

A frown creases his brow. "Lilith..." He drops his eyes to my low belly. I know we're thinking of the same thing.

I shake my head, waving his concern away with the motion. "I won't," I promise him about his heart, and I think I mean it as I turn my back to him and head down the hallway, toward the bathroom so I can flush all this shit.

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XVIII

Lucifer

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6

THE MALIKOV MANSION

"YO, BRO."

I roll my eyes at Maverick's greeting and stare into the gargoyle fountain in my backyard. Lilith and Rain are sleeping, I cleaned Nikita's blood off the front porch, and now I have a phone in each hand. One pressed to my ear, Mav on the line, and a burner phone clenched tight in my fist.

Flecks of water from the fountain graze my face, and I inhale the fresh water scent under the night sky.

"Sanctum tomorrow night." I whisper the words, like someone else might hear me. I could've gone to his house, but I don't want to leave my family. Anxiety screams at me when I'm too far away.

Even now, I turn to glance up at the second floor of my estate. Gray stone, high windows, I know Sid is safe in

there with my son.

I intend to keep them both that way, no matter what it fucking takes or who I stab in the back to do it. Briefly, I think of Nikita. *Or the front.*

“If we don’t actually meet this fucker instead of dancing around him, I’m not going in again.” I hear Mav exhale, and I know he’s getting high.

I don’t say a word, but I drop my gaze to the burner phone in my hand. Flipping it open, I stare at the still shot of the fifteen second video. Atlas in a backward hat, Cain dressed well as usual. Both of them walking up Mav’s drive when I know he wasn’t home.

Because last night, he was with me at Sanctum.

I rub my thumb over the screen, the image crisp despite the dark night on the video.

“Is that all you want?” Mav, impatience in his words. He seems edgy with me, like he’s dying to slit my throat more than usual lately. I know he doesn’t know about what’s in my hand, or he’d really do it.

“Where was Atlas last night?” I ask him quietly, keeping my gaze on the burner. We didn’t discuss it after we left Sanctum, where we went over some cult shit, like a primer before we mingle with the initiate who I assume is still healing. I had to stay after to discuss other matters with Elijah, then I got in my car and went straight home, a little disappointed but kind of relieved to find Sid already asleep. Lying to her is becoming harder, the more tangled we grow. The more she wants to be involved. The more I want to *let her*, because she’s far smarter than I am.

Mav is quiet a beat, then he says, “Why are you asking me that?” I hear him switch the phone over to his other ear. I have so many of his tics memorized. In my mind, he’s sitting in a chair outside, his elbows on his knees, back curved as he glares at the night.

I snap the burner phone closed and hurl it into the fountain where it drops in the dark water with a splash. It

had Nikita's number in it and I don't want that shit anymore, nor do I want the knowledge of what I saw to unexpectedly fall into Mav's hands. Things have a way of coming back to life around us when they should stay buried, but the water will kill the footage.

I dive my hand into my pocket and pull out a lighter, flicking it over and over. "Why not?" I counter softly.

Another moment of silence. "You know where Natalie is, *Dominus?*" he goads me.

I grit my teeth, still sparking up the lighter as I stare at the dim shadow of the ruined phone in the bottom of my fountain, bubbles drifting to the surface. I'll have to extract it and bury it before I go inside. "Do you?" I counter.

"You gonna keep answering all my questions with fucking questions?"

"And if I am?" I smile a little, even though I don't feel it.

"You're a dickhead and I hate you." He coughs. "By the way, did you take Sid to the doctor to have a look at that bite mark?" There's no amusement in his words.

I stiffen, pressing my thumb to the warm, metal tip of the lighter. He shouldn't be seeing Sid without a fucking shirt on. And when would he have seen it? She was fully dressed on our walk, which is the last time they were together as far as I know, and I better know all of it. "*Excuse me?*"

"You heard what I fucking said."

Maybe it's because she has holes in her favorite shirts. And she's been wearing the same one all week because she's so busy with Rain and any remaining energy she has she uses to scrape up scraps of sleep. Today, I criticized her for not washing her hair because jealousy and fear and nerves are looped in a knot under every inch of my skin, squeezing my bones. It was fucked up and besides, she's hot as fuck with that dirty, sexy look. I am never *not* attracted to her.

I close my eyes tight and remember her taunting me as I squeezed the bite mark between my fingers earlier this week. I think of today, when Nikita put his filthy fucking hands on her. It's different when someone else does it. He's lucky he's still alive, *if* he is.

"Hey, do me a favor, Mav." I whisper the words, crushing the phone in my hand as my fingers circle tighter around it.

"You wanna suck my dick again?"

"Mind your fucking business when it comes to my wife." I think of Cain and Atlas walking into his house with only Ella home. "Pay attention to your plaything." Then I end the call without giving him a chance to respond. I stare into the dark water of the fountain, gripping the lighter and phone tight in each hand.

But after a moment of regretting ending the call that way, I push my lighter into my pocket and stare at the bright screen of my phone. I unlock it, then open up an email account I only use for this one thing.

There's a file I sent to myself from the burner phone. A video clip.

Poor lighting, no audio.

I watch grainy footage of Ella on the side of Mav's house. Her body stiffens suddenly, when moments ago she was peering around the wall toward Maverick.

Then she turns, but even in this shitty quality, I can see the whites of her eyes the moment before she spins around, tipping her chin up like she's staring up at someone.

Chills spider their way over the back of my neck.

I pause the video.

Using two fingers, I zoom in.

Nothing.

She's staring up at *nothing*.

I press play.

She walks further toward the backyard, but she's shaking her head over and over again, dragging her feet like she doesn't want to go.

When she reaches the edge of the light which had spilled over from the front porch Halloween decorations, she appears to drop to her knees and a frame later... *she's gone.*

I pause the video the instant she disappears.

Zoom in closer.

There is nothing there, but neither is she.

I am fucking drowning.

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XIX

Haverick

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7

SANCTUM

I PULL through the gates of Sanctum and they close behind me in the night. I see Lucifer's blue M5 double parked right at the front of the cathedral, in a spot that would probably be reserved for the handicapped if this was a public church. There's Elijah's blacked-out Lincoln too, at the far back of the lot. I can only see it because the lights of my car are on. Otherwise, it's nothing but darkness out here.

I sweep my gaze around the place, my throat a little tight. I didn't want to leave Ella. She's been more emotional than usual all week and Luce sounded weird on the phone last night. He really didn't like when I brought up Sid.

But I really didn't fucking like when he referred to my girl as a *plaything*.

For one wild second, I wonder who my brothers would choose in a fight. But everyone is always dying to have a go at the leader, aren't they? It's pack mentality. They'd probably support me, or at the least, simply watch it happen.

Thinking of my brothers, I glance around the parking lot again.

Where is everyone else?

I park the car over two spots, cut the engine, flick off my seatbelt, then open the door.

Grinding my teeth, I hesitate, then grab the handgun from the glove compartment, check the chamber, and close the door of the Audi. I don't always bring guns into Sanctum, but things feel weird here, just like they did Tuesday on Corpus Avenue and that ended with me getting kidnapped. It's Sunday now, nearly a full week later, but we're allegedly meeting the initiate tonight and there is zero possibility I'm going to trust him.

I push the gun in the back of my pants and think about how Sid would scold me for that. Gun safety. I guess when you live a life like ours, it's kind of the last thing on our minds.

I cross the lot, walking past Lucifer's car. I glance through the tinted windows, but I can't see shit. Still, when I walk around the front, visibility is a little better through the windshield, and he's not there. The empty car seat in the back makes me think of Rain, and where Luce *should* be. At home, not dealing with all this fucking cult shit.

I wish I could stop worrying about him. I know he's a big boy and I know he can take care of himself. Why can't I just... detach from everything, like he can with anyone who isn't his fucking immediate family? He doesn't even care about his stupid goddamn uncle. It's not that I blame him, but I thought maybe he'd feel *something* knowing his father's brother is here, ordering us around. *Something* about RC and the investigation into Sid's stalker. I mean, I

even watched that shitty movie about Shadow Villa which gave me absolutely nothing, but I wanted to try and figure this shit out.

Let it go.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I take the stone steps up to the heavy, burgundy doors, the number 6 curved into the steel handles, one flipped to mirror the other. Even with a new building, this place is way too fucking weird.

I reach out for the handle, knowing if the 6 called us here, it'll be unlocked. It is, and the darkness and cold incense-tainted air is like a smack in the face as I step inside the foyer. No lights flick on, and as the door creaks closed at my back, I'm engulfed in darkness. For a moment, I just stand there, thinking about fucking Ella this morning. She made us breakfast after. Pancakes, with eggs and bacon.

Now, tonight, she's alone again. I need to focus more on her and I know it. I need to stop taking on everyone else's problems inside my head, but it's like, since she's safe in our house, I feel like I can shift my attention to more pressing matters.

But I *know* Ella. She craves love. If I'm not giving it to her, I worry someone else will. Then again, she rarely leaves our house without me. Who the fuck is she gonna run to?

The thought makes me laugh a little, but on its heels is another thought.

Why does she put up with this shit?

I scrub a hand over my face, shaking my head.

Right. Because now, thanks to me, she no longer has a fucking choice.

"Boo."

I jump, dropping my hand and reaching for the gun stowed in the back of my pants, whirling in the direction of the noise, one hand extended, the other braced against my

opposite one to steady my aim even though I don't know what the fuck I'm aiming *at*.

A raspy laugh and the scent of minty gum—Lucifer's new habit—fights through the thick haze of incense. "Goddamn," he says, his voice betraying how tired he is. "You're jumpy."

I don't lower the gun, blinking in the darkness. I can make out Lucifer's tall and lean figure, the gleam of his eyes, but nothing else.

"Why were you just waiting in the fucking foyer?" There's another set of double doors ahead of us, and this is not a hang out.

"I heard you pull up," he says easily enough. "Put the fucking gun down."

I slowly lower it to my side, but I don't put it away. "Where is everyone else?"

I hear Lucifer sigh, and I see him lean against the wall beside the doors leading into the sanctuary. "Who fucking cares?" He shrugs. I can make out the silhouette of his shoulders as my eyes adjust. "Hopefully it'll mean this goes quickly." A beat of silence, then, in a lower voice, he says, "I don't want to be here."

I don't want to meet this person. I don't want to take him home. I don't want anyone else near my family. I want to kill my fucking uncle.

My chest tightens with those things he won't say, and I almost forgive him for what I saw. It was probably nothing. It was probably, like Sid said, completely consensual, because I *know* he doesn't want to be here. I know when he agreed to come back, it was for Sid. For Rain. Maybe to right some wrongs within the 6. Pedophilia we might be able to stop, homicides against innocent people, dealings and inner workings of the Bratva and others.

But most of the time it seems like we can't do shit. We don't even *know* shit. Elijah denies any of *those* kinds of

wrongdoings, and since we've been questioning everything, they tell us less.

I think about Atlas and that *laughter* on Tuesday night.

I think about the greater betrayal. The blow to my head, the interrogation, Mikhail asking me about Rain.

If I pushed past the fact I truly believe I'd be putting Ella *and* Rain in danger if I told Lucifer right now, I still don't want to worry him.

It's probably a series of routine tests, and Lucifer is having a hard enough time holding his shit together. I don't need to burden my brother with speculation. And maybe there's a part of me that thinks he'll hate me for it, and maybe it would hurt a little even though I know why. Lucifer doesn't give a fuck about anything except my sister and their son.

Before I can reply to his confession, the door beside him is yanked open, and soft light pools into the foyer from candles lit along the windowsills of the sanctuary. Lucifer and I both step away from the door, shoulder-to-shoulder, and I've still got the gun in my hand, my finger on the trigger, even though I keep it by my side.

I blink, adjusting to the light, and the first thing I see is the red cross painted on the wall where the baptistry would be if we, you know, baptized people. Shit, maybe it's still there, but we've never used it.

Then my eyes find Elijah Carter Van Damme, *Dominus*, his palms propping both doors open as he stares at us, his face thrown in shadow.

He's in a dark red dress shirt, tailored gray pants. His shoulders are broad, and for a dude pushing fifty, he's in impressive shape. He always looks like he just walked from a mob meeting, coming out on top. Now, he looks like he wants to kill me for the shit I said to him when I was pacing out in front of my house.

It was you who wanted Cain to babysit my girl. Should I be thanking you or fucking decking you?

“Maverick,” he says, turning his gaze to me. “Put the gun away.”

I glance over my shoulder, and I don’t even know what I’m looking for. I just know all this shit feels weird. Where are the rest of my brothers? But Lucifer’s shoulder brushes mine, and I know it’s his silent code for, *I got your back*.

I tuck the gun in the back of my pants again and cock my head, leveling my gaze on Dominus. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They’ll be here momentarily.”

The hairs lift at the base of my neck, and I glance at Luce, but he’s staring at Dominus, a muscle in his jaw ticking.

Well fuck that. “‘Momentarily’ is how many minutes, exactly?”

Elijah narrows his eyes at me. Then he just says, “Come with me.” He turns, holding one door open for us as the other falls shut with an ominous thud.

Luce doesn’t look at me as he heads through the door, and I sigh, following him, thinking about Ella and wishing her and Sid were together right now. Last time they were, it didn’t work out too well for them, but I think they’d be more vigilant now, especially with Rain.

Rain.

I wonder if Lucifer is thinking about him, the way his hands are balled into fists at his side, his head held high as he surveys the sanctuary, the hardwood floors creaking beneath our weight and velvet red pews empty, no Bibles in the back pockets.

Lucifer runs a hand over his dark, curly hair, and I catch sight of the ring on his finger, the veins in his hands. He’s in a black hoodie, fitted black joggers, and boots, a bandana around his neck. Basically the same clothes he was wearing on our walk Thursday night. His hair is a fucking mess just like before, and I wonder how much sleep he got this week, or what time he woke up this morning.

I think I see a tremor in his hand, dropped back by his side, and my stomach sinks, but I push it aside and refuse to think about his bad habit. The shakiness was probably nothing. He wouldn't use with Rain in the house, right? He just... he wouldn't. Now that they're parents, Sid would probably cut him if he did. At the very least, she'd tell me, wouldn't she?

Lucifer and I continue walking in a line, following behind Dominus.

Surprising me, he doesn't turn right, toward the door that leads to the interior of the church—fellowship hall, classrooms, offices. Instead, he takes a left around the stage, past the pulpit, and to a smaller door I always assumed was a closet, but now, as he uses a key to open it before pocketing it, I realize this door leads to the baptistry. Sweeping my eyes to it, recessed behind the stage, that red, painted cross above it, I can't really see anything. Just darkness, exactly like the hallway we walk through now, the door closed at my back.

I don't speak as questions whirl through my mind, all three of our footfalls in sync in the dark hallway. There are no windows here, and it's hard to even see the figures of my brother and Elijah in front of me. My heart thuds loudly in my ears, apprehension twisting my stomach into knots, but I know the gun is *right there*, and Lucifer is too. We have each other. Always. Still, I'm thrown off that Cain, Atlas, nor Ezra are here yet. Lucifer and I might be first and second in command, but we usually don't meet without the others.

At what appears to be the end of the hall, Elijah hooks a left. "Stop here," he says, his voice deep like his son's. I stop, Lucifer does too, and a second later I hear the scratch of a match, the scent of sulfur, then a sconce is lit in the wall, flickering a soft, red glow over the small hallway we're currently on.

Elijah shakes out the match, then turns to look at us, his dark green gaze flicking from me, to Lucifer, and back again.

“Both of you have broken many, many years of tradition this past year. And you...” His hazel eyes come to Lucifer. “*You* made a fool out of me inside this building on Monday night, in front of people none of us should fuck with.”

“We’ve discussed this,” Lucifer says through gritted teeth, his words news to me.

But Elijah just keeps talking like Lucifer didn’t. “*Then you stab* a very important—albeit a piece of shit—lackey.”

What the fuck? It looks like I’m not the only one keeping secrets. I cut my gaze to Lucifer and open my mouth to ask who and when he stabbed someone, but I’m cut off before I can.

“Now is not the time to ask questions, Maverick.” There’s a hard edge to Elijah’s words. He’s usually pretty calm, and he’s done all right in my opinion as Dominus. Far better than Lazar ever did, that sketchy, skeletal, *dead* fuck. But now he seems pissed and I’m not sure it’s all because of Lucifer’s refusal at the ritual. I want to know who the fuck he stabbed, but I shut my mouth because if it doesn’t come out now, I’ll beat it out of Lucifer later.

“An initiation ritual with outside members of the 6 is *not* a place you get to fuck up,” Elijah continues, hard eyes on my brother.

Lucifer snorts. “Thirteen,” he says softly, a rasp in the dim light. “I think I did just fine.”

Elijah’s jaw clenches.

Oh here we go.

“That’s your problem, Lucifer. Your arrogance will fuck you.”

I think his wife fucks him enough, but that’s just me...

“I’m all right with getting fucked.”

Don’t laugh.

Elijah smiles, and it's concerning, because it's certainly not a nice smile. Then his eyes come to me, and he studies me for a long moment.

I feel myself tensing, already on the defense, because Ella's name is roaring in my head. I wonder if he's going to bring up my secret interrogation right here in front of Luce. The commandment I had to make sure my brother follows orders. If he does, I'm going to tell him he and Mikhail can fuck themselves.

I take a step closer to Elijah, standing beside Lucifer. I can feel the tension rolling off my brother in waves too, but he doesn't say anything else.

Elijah doesn't look at all deterred by my move.

Instead, he glances at the gold watch on his wrist, and I see the flames from the sconce dance over the bronze of his 6 snake ring.

Apparently satisfied with the time, he clasps his wrist with one hand, both in front of him as he lifts his gaze back to mine. "You two have been allowed to engage yourself in petty pursuits and frivolous hobbies. Tonight, you will remember who you really are. The blood that runs through your veins. The two of you, in particular, need the reminder. First and second in command of who we are, *what* we are, cannot be given to mindless adolescents."

Lucifer says nothing to this speech.

I have a lot to fucking say. "I do your bidding whenever you snap your fingers. I have *murdered* for you, Elijah. I've been *attacked* for you. I've killed for *him too*." I glance at Lucifer but don't let myself think of Pammie. "What more could I possibly do to prove how seriously I take this?" *I was beat over the head for doing absolutely fucking nothing.*

Elijah simply stares at me for a long moment. "You could have come to me about Ella Christian *prior* to marking her, for one. You could have told me the truth of Ria, for another. You are risking spreading the secrets of the 6 like

a catching disease, oozing our enigmas around this city, this *world*, and *that* cannot be tolerated.” Without waiting for me to respond, he turns his back to us and continues the few feet down the hallway, another door at the end.

Anger builds inside my chest, hot and tight. I want to say so many things about Ella, about Ria, about the *guilt* I carry, but I keep my mouth closed. Lucifer and I follow him instead, and he pulls the door open.

Then he steps inside the small space of what I realize is the baptistry. I follow, Lucifer coming behind me this time. We fan out around the small rectangular space, white steps leading into the water on either side of the plastic basin set into the floor, the sanctuary to my left, flickering red candles lit around the nook in the baptistry against the wall beneath the cross.

The baptismal pool is a clear blue. The scent of fresh water permeates the air. I glance at Lucifer, then Elijah, the latter’s hands behind his back as he stands between my brother and I, his head bent while he stares into the shallow pool.

My brows furrow and I open my mouth to ask him what he’s waiting for, but before I can do so, I *feel* Lucifer’s eyes on me. I cut my gaze to him and find he’s staring back. There’s a strange curiosity in his gaze, something I don’t think I understand. The unease I’ve carried with me all week swells up my stomach, higher still, tightening my chest, my throat.

“What the fuck are we doing—”

All at once, tearing my words from my mouth, the red candles flicker out. We are ensconced in darkness, but as I blink, I can see the vivid blue of Lucifer’s eyes, lined with the whites of them. He is still looking at *me*, and appears completely unaffected by the sudden loss of light.

I reach behind me, intending to grab the gun, but there is a hand on my wrist, a tight, cold grip, before a voice whispers in my ear. “*Veni mecum.*”

Latin. *Come with me.*

I suck in a breath, dragging my gaze from Lucifer's, still pinpointed on me, to a looming shadow at my side. I could fight this person off. Attempt to pull them down into the baptistry and drown them, but pale gray eyes are inches from my own, and there is something frighteningly familiar about them. For a moment, I almost believe it's Sid herself, come here to test me like she appeared in my trip at Noctem.

But the voice didn't belong to her.

The fingers around my bones grow tighter still, and I can't look away from this man's eyes. "Where are we going?" It's the only words I can get out.

He doesn't answer, but after a second of silence, there's the click of something that sounds strangely like a projector.

Light.

It comes from my feet, casting everything else in a greater shadow.

Dropping my gaze, I'm startled to see a perfect, glowing rectangle taking up the blue of the baptismal pool. It's a... video, projected in the baptistery. A recording of some sort, only just beginning to play.

I hold my breath, feeling dizzy. Lifting my gaze, I find Lucifer still watching me. Turning my head, Elijah is staring at the footage.

I pull my wrist from the stranger beside me, and he lets go, but before I can look at his face, he slips away, behind me. I start to turn, but then there's a strange, girlish giggle emitting from somewhere above me. Without knowing how I understand it, I realize it's in tune to the projector screen of water below.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I slowly drop my chin, forcing myself to see the video footage playing out beneath my feet.

There's a red-headed girl. Long, wavy locks curling at the ends, sashaying toward her hips. She's in faded overalls, sitting on grass, her knees bent and pulled to her chest, an off-white shirt over her pale skin. She has a daisy between her fingers and she's twirling it, green eyes locked on the little flower. A smile curves her lips, freckles dot every inch of her face, and a breeze blows through, disturbing her hair, pulling locks across her round cheeks. White, crooked teeth flash as she uses one hand to tuck the hair behind her ears, but she doesn't stop looking at the flower. In the distance, far beyond the grassy field she's sitting in, I see mountains, stretching to the blue sky. There are no other homes in the shot, and I know instinctively where she is.

West Virginia.

But it's *who* she is that seems to stab a knife into my chest.

"Ella?" A voice calls from behind the camera, the film shaky as the person moves. *Her mother.*

A young Ella, maybe nine or ten, looks up, still grinning, faint dimples in her soft face.

"That's a pretty flower, huh?" Her mom seems to be smiling through her words. Whatever is happening here... it's a moment of peace.

Ella laughs again, the sound resounding around the baptistry, and I have to remember I'm supposed to breathe to live.

How do they have this? Where did it come from? Why am I seeing it?

The camera angle is rocky as the lens comes closer to Ella, sinking down to her level. It is strangely difficult to see her like this. Innocent, happy, with a mom who seems to care, a mom I *wouldn't* have choked out, at least for this single stolen moment in time. I have to look away.

Lucifer's eyes are still on mine.

My chest heaves, and I wonder about his silence. Did he know what we were getting into? Why am I seeing this, I want to ask him. I want to walk around the pool and get in his face. I want to grab him, and I'm not sure why.

But before I can think of what to do next, what to say, the click resounds through the baptistry again, like film changing.

And there is the sound of sirens.

Lucifer's eyes leave mine before I can look down, and his shadow seems to stiffen as if someone struck him. If I was closer, I know I would see a muscle in his jaw flex.

Because when I watch the film now, it is a completely different scene and a very different girl.

Flashing lights of red and white and blue. There is crime scene tape in the distance, surrounding a home of white. A picture perfect house in the early morning light cascading down on police cars and firetrucks, and at the focal point of the footage, the back of an ambulance where a little girl with short dark hair sits, her legs dangling down from the perch. She is wrapped in a blanket, blood streaked over her chin, and a paramedic is by her side, asking her questions.

Sid Rain does not look up.

She stares at the dirt ground.

In the distance, the front door of the home is swung open violently, then the screen door after that. Sid flinches at the thwacking sound, but otherwise, she doesn't move.

A police officer steps through the door, one hand up, urging everyone to stay away as cameras flash in the dawn.

There's a gurney.

Large, pale feet not covered by the sheet.

But the rest of the body... it isn't visible.

I cut my gaze back to Sid. Her hair drifts across her sullen face, and she reaches up through the blanket, her fingers bloody as she tucks strands behind her ear.

Silence.

It suddenly cuts through the footage.

The projector lights disappear, plunging us into darkness again. I close my eyes tight. I don't want to think of what I could have done for Sid. The ways I could have kept Ella innocent and happy. It's irrational the way my brain jumps for possibilities—I could've given money to Ella's mother. I could have dragged Sid into my own home. I could have... I could have...

The sound of a splash echoes in the room. Water reaches my face, flecks of it as I step back from the baptismal pool. A shadow scuttles behind me, and I ball my hands into fists but I can't speak. The footage of the two girls who mean the world to me continues to play in my head.

Then a light flicks on, cold and cruel and clinical too bright above our heads, blotting out the movie inside my mind.

I suck in air, like I've just broken the surface of a pool.

Narrowing my eyes against the sudden onslaught of light, dropping my gaze to get away from it, I see the baptismal pool once more.

The water is no longer a clear blue.

Instead, as I'm rooted to the hardwood floor, my heart pounding too fast in my chest, I see its tinged pink.

No one speaks as I take in the blood.

And the body.

Propped up on the steps, head tilted back, throat exposed and flayed open in a flap, crimson staining a sticky, white T-shirt, is a girl.

A woman?

I don't know. From this angle, I see she's wearing underwear, but her legs are exposed, blood pooling and bloating her feet. There are bruises beneath the pink surface of the water, along her inner thighs. Her wrists, propped up on the sides of the baptistry, look raw. Chafed. From being... tied up? My mind works in overdrive as I note her halo of long, wavy blonde hair, wet and stuck to her scalp, tendrils floating around her, but I can't really see

her face from here, the way her neck is tilted backward. The water is eerily still, and it looks like blood has stained the white interior of the baptistry, smeared along the edges.

What I can see of her is vaguely familiar, but I don't have a good view and I can't place her. I take a breath, the scent of decay like a punch to the gut, and I try to breathe in through my mouth, but the *taste* is on my tongue.

I retch, bringing my fist to my mouth as I cough, my eyes watering before I drop my hand.

When I lift my gaze to Lucifer, I see he's angled toward the corpse's head, staring down at her presumably open eyes. There's no expression on Lucifer's face. His hands are in the pockets of his hoodie, and he could be contemplating what he's going to have for a midnight snack, nothing giving away his thoughts.

Fuck that. I have a lot of fucking thoughts.

"Are you going to tell us who the fuck this is? And why you put her in *here*?" I manage to ask, my voice strangled. "Is this some kind of fucking *show*?" I want to touch my own throat, the way the deep gash in this woman's is slit. It doesn't expose anything but a fuck ton of blood, and that's the scary part. It didn't take but a single cut to kill her. Did she bleed out? Where? Why was she moved *here*? To shock us?

Where did that film come from?

The sharp tang of iron beneath the smell of decay suddenly seems all-consuming, and I want to get the fuck out of here. But I stay exactly where I am, meeting Elijah's gaze again.

He looks calm as he studies me, hands in his pockets. "Our *initiate*," his eyes cut to Lucifer for a second, "delivered this for you. He loaded up the film too." He looks to me and almost as an afterthought, he says, nodding toward the body, "Take a good look, Lucifer."

I furrow my brow, darting my gaze from Lucifer, who is perfectly still, to Elijah. There's something between them I don't understand. "Who the fuck is this? And where did those videos come from?" Unease is like a caress on my scalp, raising the hairs there.

Elijah lifts his chin. "You always seem so shocked at just what we can unearth, Maverick." With those words, he smiles. It's serene, and it makes my blood pressure spike.

I take a deep breath in through my nose—big mistake; I feel bile burn at the back of my throat with the stench of death—and out through my mouth, trying to let Dominus's bullshit go. "What, exactly," I keep my voice low, "is the fucking purpose *of all this*?"

His eyes narrow, but instead of reprimanding me, he only looks to Lucifer.

Long seconds pass as he stares at my brother.

Lucifer is gazing down at the body. His expression doesn't change, but it's like he can't look away. He takes in her oversized shirt, sticking to her body, but floating in the water too, like her hair. Like the shirt is too big. Like maybe she... wore it to bed. Was dragged from sleep.

My fingers itch to grab the gun at my back, but I resist. "Luce." I say his name carefully.

He doesn't react.

I glance at Dominus, because it feels as if something is still transpiring between them that I don't get. Like they both know who this woman is, and I'm the only one out of the loop.

Elijah has a strange smile plastered on his face, but it doesn't meet his eyes. In fact, he just looks really fucking tired. I wonder how the investigation into Edith's brief kidnapping is going with RC. He has a lot on his shoulders, but I have to wonder how much of it is the 6's own making.

"Tell him who it is, Lucifer," he whispers.

My throat feels tight, my abs clenching as I drag my gaze to my brother again. His face is paler than usual,

which is saying something. A feat, really, for him. The shock of his black hair against white skin is startling, and for some reason, I take a step back from the baptistry.

The body.

“Luce.” My voice breaks on the word. *Ella. Sid.* What did it do to him, seeing them? The same thing it’s doing to me? But it’s with bitterness I imagine he felt nothing at all when Ella’s innocence played.

He still doesn’t look at me.

Elijah glances at Lucifer, then me. His smile vanishes. Whatever momentary happiness he felt putting us in our place is gone. “Well until he can figure out how to speak again, I’ll fill in the gaps of silence. *This* is what happens when you don’t obey the edicts of our organization. When you think you can say to *fuck* with hundreds of years of ritual.” Elijah’s jaw clenches as he stares at me. “Do you understand?”

I shake my head. “No,” I say, throwing up my hands. “I don’t fucking understand. Lucifer, who *the fuck* is this?” I stare hard at the side of his head, but he still doesn’t move. He doesn’t say a fucking word.

Elijah’s gaze shifts to Lucifer, and I know he feels it because I watch a bone in his jaw jump, just above the bandana around his neck.

But it’s still Dominus who speaks next. “You got very lucky with Sid, Lucifer.”

A slow smile pulls at Luce’s lips as he adjusts the bandana, but he stays silent.

“And you should be *grateful* Ella is still *breathing*.” Elijah’s gaze is on me.

My blood pressure shoots up. I can *feel it* inside my veins, weighing down on my chest. I want to reach for my gun again and go home. It takes an effort to stay here. “What *the fuck* is going on right now?”

Silence echoes.

The scent of the corpse lingers thick in my nostrils, down my throat. My temper is fraying, and I feel like I'm going to toss Elijah's dead body down in that baptistry too. But before I can say a word, Lucifer moves.

He leaps across the corner of the shallow pool to get to Elijah as fast as possible, an inhuman roar leaving his lips. One hand goes to Elijah's throat, the other curls into a fist and he swings as he lands, but this isn't Elijah's first fight.

Dominus steps back, bringing them both away from the lip of the baptistry as he plants his feet in a fighting stance, his fingers gripping Lucifer's wrist tightly, stopping the punch from connecting.

"You don't get to do this." Lucifer whispers the words, and they sound harsher somehow, because of it. "*You don't get to fucking do this to me.*" Every muscle in his body is rigid and tense, and I can't see his face, just the back of his head, but I watch Elijah's eyes lock onto his.

And it isn't anger there, despite the fact Lucifer just tried to attack him.

Lucifer shrugs out of his grip, backing up and pulling at his hoodie.

Elijah keeps his hands up in a placating gesture, which is smart, but Lucifer stays still, staring at Dominus.

"You don't get to fuck me up like this again. Don't you think I've had *enough?*" Lucifer's hands are curled into fists at his sides, but his voice sounds weak. Broken.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you." Elijah says the words with a sincerity I'm not sure I've ever heard from him before, even though he speaks quickly, like he's trying to calm him. "I'm sorry you weren't protected. I'm sorry I never stepped in. I'm sorry Lazar never... learned how to parent."

Lucifer backs up, like he's been hit, dangerously close to falling into the corpse-water.

I can see his side profile now, and his mouth is pressed into a thin line. He's shaking his head, like he's lost for

words. Like he can't believe what Elijah just said.

He swipes his hand down his opposite arm, brushing off Dominus's touch.

"Never learned how to *parent?*" he repeats, his words low. "He did a lot worse than that. Being an absent *parent* would've been a fucking *blessing.*" I see his chest heaving. I *feel* his pain, even though it isn't mine. But I know. My dad was the same way. I think we all know how he feels.

In fact, ironically, Elijah might be the best father any of us have ever had, and yet, Ezra is still fucked up.

Something happened there too, something we never told one another, growing up as kids. We hid our pain well. Even then, we knew the cost of not keeping secrets.

You forfeit your life for that shit.

"I'd never do it to Rain," Lucifer is saying, and I hear his voice crack. I wonder if he's imagining Sid on that video, her legs dangling off the ground from the back of the ambulance, the night she killed Reverend Wilson, her foster dad. "I can't even... imagine. I will *never* be like him." *Lazar.* He fucked Sid *and* his life up. The rawness in his words fucking shatters me. "I will *never* do what he did to me. I will... never let Rain or Lilith feel what my mom felt. What *I* felt." He curls his fingers into a fist and knocks it against his chest, almost as if he's pleading with Elijah. As if he's saying, *don't let me. Don't let me be him. Don't let me. Don't fucking let me.*

We never even talked about what Mikhail said, when we left the ritual room Monday night. That *they* had a hand in killing Lucifer's mom. We always assumed it was Lazar, and I think, in some ways, Lucifer just wants to go on believing it was, because he murdered his father, and maybe in a way, he felt he avenged not only Sid, but his mother too.

He takes a breath, and no one speaks as he does.

I think of Sid's bruises. Of the tremor I swear I saw in Lucifer's hand. The coke. The ways he's trying to change. Trying, and maybe... failing. Both him and Sid are

transforming, but growth fucking *hurts*. They're clawing away all the parts of themselves they needed to *survive*, and that can feel like death.

But I still don't understand wholly what's happening. I still don't know who this woman is.

"Why did you do this to me?" He whispers the words, gesturing toward the body, but he doesn't look back.

Elijah's eyes soften, and it surprises me, seeing it. "I didn't." His words sound truthful, even though I don't let myself believe him. He shakes his head once, glancing behind me, toward the door we entered from. "I didn't do it, but I needed you both to see." His gaze comes to mine. "Some things, you must *obey*." There is reluctant pleading in his words, like he's trying to get us to understand just what it is he *isn't* saying as much as what he is. "Tonight, when you meet him..." I know he means the initiate, and he trails off, finally dropping his hands. "Follow protocol. Listen to Boaz. Keep your families safe. You both have women you shouldn't, and I'm trying to keep them *alive*." He snarls the last word, but his anger isn't toward us.

In fact, he's staring at the woman.

Does he think Mikhail did this? It must be him, or someone connected to RC.

Lucifer doesn't look away from him as Elijah's eyes come to his.

For long seconds, it seems like no one even breathes.

Then Lucifer turns, but I hear his boot slip as he does, and my mouth drops open even as I lunge toward him, trying to stop him from falling into the baptistry.

His boot is less than an inch from the water, from the blood and the fucking corpse and the warning about our own indiscretions, when Elijah grabs Luce's arm and jerks him away from the ledge, pulling him so they're head-to-head.

Luce is breathing hard, and Elijah's grip is firm on his arm, his knuckles blanching.

“Let me go,” Lucifer says through gritted teeth.

They stare off for a moment, but after several seconds, the tension seems to deflate from Luce. Like he’s done. Like he’s fucking exhausted. Like he’s falling into Elijah’s touch, letting him hold him up. And he whispers, so quietly, I can barely hear him, “Where is Finn?”

I frown, confused, until... until I look back at the water.

The woman.

The wavy blonde hair.

The unseeing eyes.

My stomach drops.

I step back again, putting more distance between her and me, between my brother and my uncle and myself.

It seems like the room is spinning.

Bile burns its way up my throat, and I have to swallow it down, hardly hearing Elijah when he answers Lucifer’s question.

“I don’t know.”

And I realize exactly who it is in the water.

Julie.

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XX

Haverick

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7

SANCTUM

“WHEN THIS IS OVER, you’ll find out what you want to know.” Mikhail Malikov leans against Elijah’s mahogany desk like he owns it, his hands in the pockets of tailored gray slacks. A fire roars in the hearth—unnecessary, but I watched Mikhail burn documents as we all settled in and assume that’s its sole purpose—and the light from the flames dance along Mikhail’s lifted cheekbones. In his early forties, I imagine he, like many members of the 6, dabbles in magic known as Botox and filler.

I cock my head, watching him closely from the tan leather chair I’m sitting in. He glanced at Lucifer with his cryptic little sentence, and I know he’s referring to Finn.

Lucifer doesn’t react.

I’m sure he’s feeling kind of how I’m feeling. Like I want to rip apart Mikhail limb from fucking limb. I want to pay

him back for threatening my girl, for killing Julie, for endangering my fucking family.

But I don't move, because like everyone else, I am a fucking puppet.

There are five others aside from us in the large room with no windows and rows and rows of bookshelves, built against the dark walls. The rest of my brothers, save for Atlas, arrived shortly after we saw Julie's body, but they know nothing of it as far as I'm aware. *They* aren't the ones with unsanctioned relationships, Xs on their palms.

Cain, Ezra, Lucifer, Elijah and Adam sit in identical chairs, set in a semi-circle over the thick, red rug on the deep brown hardwoods. Callum is away for work, and Atlas... Well, I'm pretty fucking interested in where Atlas is, especially after Lucifer's question about him over the phone last night.

I glance at Luce, closest me, and see although he's slouched in his chair, hands pushed into the pocket of his black hoodie, his eyes haven't once left Mikhail's.

I think of the words he spoke earlier to Elijah, about not being like his father. I can only imagine that's exactly who he sees when he looks at his uncle.

A bone in Lucifer's jaw flexes, and I wonder if he's seeing Julie's body in his head. Sid surrounded by police lights. Ella smiling in another life, another time when she was... happier.

My stomach burns, and I wonder if he, like me, is thinking of the subtle threats against our families, and how it's our *family* that fucked up our girls.

Despite the ways I'm annoyed with him, right now, we have a common enemy, and that means more than any fights between us.

I grind my teeth together and drag my gaze back to Mikhail. Before his remarks, he'd been giving us a refresher on RC. How "overseers" are more like "helpers," and all this other bullshit I don't believe. Apparently things

we learned growing up, part of the unwritten code—Mos Maiorum—but where has Mikhail been all this time? He never bothered to help bury his younger brother last year.

His vivid blue eyes find Lucifer's, seated only a few feet in front of him.

"I forgive you, you know, for what you did to Lazar." Mikhail speaks the words with ease, like he's read my mind. Like we've all been waiting for this moment.

Lucifer doesn't react at all. I know it's probably eating at him, wondering where Finn is. If he's safe, if he's hurt. Luce has a weakness for kids, and he always has. But I wonder what will become of Finn. It would be very hard for Sid, raising another kid when she's nearly drowning with her own. It would be fucking unfair, and nothing in her life has ever been anything but. He wants to give her a life she's only ever dreamed of, but all he keeps snatching up are nightmares.

"We had our own council on it." Mikhail keeps talking and he glances at Elijah, the closest to the fire. Elijah smooths a hand down his button-down shirt, but his facial expression betrays nothing. He doesn't look away from Mikhail though, and that's something. "Your *Dominus* speaks very highly of you. And I've known, since you were a child, you would go far."

Lucifer says he has no memory of this man, and neither do I, but the words make my skin crawl.

"*Omnia dimittuntur.*" *All is forgiven.* Mikhail whispers it like an incantation.

"With all due respect..." Lucifer sits up straighter, his elbows on his knees and hands clasped together as he stares up at his uncle. "*Fuck your forgiveness.*"

Silence rings out, save for the crackling of the fire. I note all my brothers' eyes are on Mikhail, and Elijah has his closed, like he's internally groaning. Adam though, in the chair between Elijah and Cain, has a small smile playing on his lips.

I think of Ella and Sid, asking about Samson's death, and now we have another on our hands. They had the right questions. None of us are asking them, *pressing* for answers, because we've been so deeply entrenched in this cult our entire lives, mindless devotion comes too easily. *Puppets.*

Mikhail laughs, and I watch him cross one ankle over the other, tipping his head back a little to gaze down his straight nose at his nephew. "You will warm up to me soon, Lucifer." He lets the words linger, and when I feel as if *I* might jump out of my chair to break his stupid cheekbones, there's a knock on the door. Just one, and as we all turn toward the door at the opposite end of the room, I notice Adam Medici is still smiling.

Without waiting for a response, whoever it is pushes inside, and a second later, I watch as Atlas brushes back the hood from over his head, a hat pulled on low. He casts his eyes about the room before they come to rest on Mikhail. His expression is only of mild pleasantness, lips tipped upward, and he doesn't say a word, but it's like a flicker of darkness seems to pass over his features. They tighten, his eyes narrow, even his fingers at his side curl upward into fists. But the moment passes, and he's got the same smile on his face his father does.

"Well," Mikhail says, straightening from the desk. "I am glad you could make it." His gaze lingers on Atlas, then scans the room. "As I am sure you know, we have a ceremony tonight. It is for all of you, but tomorrow and the night after..." He trails off, looking at Luce. "Those two nights, it is just you and him." Without elaborating on "him," he starts to fuck with the cuffs of his white dress shirt, rolling them up, at the same time he begins to stroll across the room. "Let us begin."

But just as he passes by Lucifer's chair, my brother moves. He's a blur, and I know he's planned this since we

all settled in this room. He grabs Mikhail's wrist as he stands, then shoves him backward, into the desk.

He's taller than his uncle by a couple of inches, but Elijah and Adam are on their feet, both shouting Lucifer's name in unison and I know they won't hesitate to pull him off.

Lucifer, however, is undeterred, and as one, Cain, Ezra, and I stand too, and Atlas takes a step closer, glancing at Elijah and Adam, both clearly wanting to move toward Luce, but they eye us and stay still.

"Yeah, let's fucking *begin*," Lucifer snarls. "How about we start with this? You talk about my fucking family again like you did Monday night, I'll put a knife in your skull just like I did to your little fucking brother." His words are low, but we all hear him. "I don't give a fuck who you are and I don't give a fuck who you kill. *They're off fucking limits.*"

Mikhail, shoved against the desk by Lucifer's hand on his chest, doesn't react for a moment.

Then he does.

He wraps his arm around the back of Lucifer's neck at the same time his knee comes up, striking Luce in the groin. He uses the momentary flinch from my brother to get his wrist free, and spins Lucifer around so his back is to Mikhail's chest, one arm barred over his throat, his other palm pressing hard against Lucifer's face, just over the bridge of his nose.

My heart hammers in my chest, but no one speaks.

There could be far-reaching consequences, going beyond Julie's death. Lucifer lets his anger get the best of him sometimes, but he has to remember Mikhail doesn't work alone. I doubt it was him who actually killed Julie, which means someone did the dirty work for him, just like someone acquired the film of our girls.

Anything could happen outside of these walls, where Ella, Sid, and Rain are. Now Finn too.

Lucifer's face flushes pink as Mikhail squeezes tighter around his throat, and his lips drop to Luce's ear, but we hear everything.

"You seem to misunderstand me."

Lucifer tries to shrug him off, but I have to hand it to Mikhail, he's good, and Lucifer barely budes, his nose still threatened by Mikhail's palm pressing against the tip of it.

"I *want* to *help* you. I have no sons of my own." I don't miss the fact Mikhail doesn't say "children," and I wonder where his daughters ended up. "*You are my legacy now.*"

Lucifer closes his eyes, dangerously close to Mikhail's fingertips, and I wonder what he's seeing inside his head.

"Your wife and child are safe, and so is the other, as long as you remember *obedience*." Mikhail hisses the word and Lucifer's lips press into a line, his face going pale.

A moment passes.

Another, then Mikhail shoves his nephew away and Lucifer quickly gets his feet underneath him and spins around, so his back isn't to his uncle.

Mikhail rakes a hand through his hair, swearing in Russian under his breath.

I glance at Atlas, still by the door. Still looking nothing but... *pleasant*. And despite everything that's happened today, it's the expression on Atlas's face which unnerves me most.

Lucifer

Music pounds from hidden speakers. It reminds me of sex, bass beats and a low hum, turned up loud.

Obedience. The only thing I want to obey is the desire in my veins to murder Mikhail Malikov.

In my head, I see Sid sitting on the back of the ambulance, blood streaking her face. I watch her flinch as the door slams open and the man she murdered is carted out.

My chest hurts, imagining her loneliness, and knowing she didn't go to a better place. Not for many years, and maybe... not ever, because she's with *me*, isn't she, and being with me is a fucking nightmare.

Ella, watching her smile, laughing on a grassy hill, never knowing she'd be making deals with the devil when she grew up. Deals with *me*.

The video stops in my mind.

I see Julie's body. Bloated, engorged from water or pooling blood or maybe both. I knew it was her the moment I decided to look properly. To *see*. I wanted to ignore it. I didn't want to feel a fucking thing. But I helped her. I supported her, and not because she forced me. Because I wanted to. Because... *Finn*.

My chest aches, air burning my lungs. *Where is he?* But before I can spiral, I hold onto Elijah's private discussion with me, weeks ago, after Rain was born, and continuing every week since.

Ortus. It's coming. I only have to survive the next few weeks. I just don't know how much more my family can take.

All of it. We have to.

The hood of my robe is pulled over my brow, a silky blindfold covering my eyes. I know my brothers are here too. Elijah told us as much.

But so is someone else. Someone I have yet to see. *This is our proper introduction.*

Chains pinch at my wrists bound behind my back, my ankles shackled to the chair, rooted to the cement floor.

Inhaling, I catch the scent of incense, thick and heavy.

I just have to survive.

I hear movement, a rustling, then a feminine, accented voice brushing against my ear. *“Open.”*

My heart rate picks up speed, and I can smell the perfume she wears. It smells good, like roses. I don't want to obey her, but this is part of the initiation, continuing, Elijah explained.

I told him I don't want anyone else in our brotherhood. We don't need it.

Mikhail had laughed as we walked through the dark halls of Sanctum. *“We will tell you what you need.”*

But if I don't open my mouth right now, if this ceremony isn't completed, I might not go home. Worse, I might arrive and find no one else there.

Julie's corpse flashes inside my head.

Rain. Lilith.

The 6 keep us in the dark because it's hard to defend yourself when you don't know what's coming. I'm used to this aspect of my family's organization. But I'm not fucking comfortable with the possibility of someone else joining our ranks.

And why? What's the point?

Regardless, I force myself to open my mouth, because the consequences aren't worth rebelling.

Something is dropped onto my tongue, sickly sweet, thick and viscous. I've done a lot of drugs in my life, and some small part of me thinks the 6 should remember I'm in recovery. But they don't fucking care, and regardless, I don't recognize the taste of this. Chemical, like cotton candy in the extreme.

For a moment, I consider spitting it out. But whether they're in the room or watching by other means, I know the 6 are following along. My mouth waters, the taste makes

me grimace, but after a moment, the woman still close, her breaths fanning over my lips because she's no doubt waiting for me to comply, I swallow down the liquid. It seems to stick to my trachea, and I have to work up saliva in my mouth and swallow again, trying not to gag as I do.

It's manmade, whatever it is. Created in a lab.

I still sense the girl. I wonder where *she* was created, and for what purpose.

A moment later, her finger comes to my lips, circling slowly over my mouth. My body goes rigid, then her breath coasts over my ear as she speaks again.

"Lick it."

I think of Sid. What she would do if she could see me right now. Maybe nothing. Sometimes, I don't know how much she cares at all. But I imagine her as a little girl, and I know why. Everything she ever tried to love only hurt her, so deep she can't speak about it.

Something rough is around my mouth, the woman dabbing it on and dragging me away from hopeless thoughts. I tentatively run my tongue over my bottom lip.

Sugar. It's some kind of sugar scrub, and it helps alleviate the chemical, tinny, sweet taste lingering on my tastebuds.

I sense the girl move away, and I assume she's going to do this to all my brothers.

I bow my head, trying to even out my breathing and prepare for the come up. Whatever drug she gave me, I'm positive it's going to fuck with my mind. Apprehension steals through me. I've had a lot of trips in my life. LSD, DMT, mushrooms, Ketamine, nothing is new to me. But I'm prepared when I ingest those drugs. I'm *ready*. Here, I feel like I'm waiting for a bomb to strike and the only shelter I have is this robe over my head, which won't do me any good at all.

This shit could fuck my mind into pieces.

The music continues playing, the same beat, but it doesn't sound repetitive. It's unfortunate, because if it was, I could hold onto it, like a comfort. When I'm tripping, I like to grab something familiar. A song, a show, any form of art where I know what's coming next. It's like a blanket. Like a bottle to a baby.

Rain.

I try to hold onto him in my mind as time passes, but it becomes difficult. It's like his face distorts and stretches behind my closed eyes. My body grows hot, and I think I feel sweat along the back of my neck, but I'm distantly aware this room is very cold, like a morgue.

Rain.

His eyes become my father's become Mikhail's become lifeless.

Dull.

His mouth opens to wail, his tiny tongue flailing, but no sound leaves his lips. He's in only a diaper, jerking his limbs, and no one is there.

He's alone in a dark room, but I can see him so clearly.

I hear something knocking, deep, loud, dangerous. A pounding, really, a demon at the door. I want to grab my son, but I can't move. My feet are cemented to the floor, and Rain needs me, but I can't take a step.

I can't even fucking breathe. It's like my lungs have just... stopped.

The knocking grows. The room breathes like I wish to. Dark, purple inhales, the walls coming in, exhales, the walls expand. But every inhale, they get closer to crushing Rain. The room is a bedroom is a closet is a mistake, meant to be walled over.

His eyes are open even as he silently cries. His body seems to seize, and the walls come closer, inches from touching him, and somehow, somewhere, I can see it all.

The darkness knocks louder. Heavy, deep sounds.

My body jolts, and I blink behind the blindfold.

The knocking is my heart, hammering in my ribcage. Awareness seeps in, Rain growing distant behind my eyes.

Then... I feel her on my lap.

The scent of roses is dark and tempting, lifting me higher still.

Her hands grip my shoulders and her legs straddle me. She feels impossibly light, but so do I. Like my body is floating toward the ceiling, and in this moment, she's the only one who could keep me here.

Sid. I try to hold onto the fact I'm married and maybe it doesn't mean anything in this world, but it does in mine. Even still, my dick grows hard, and not for the first time in my life, I wish I could fucking cut it off. I close my eyes tighter, and I think of Pammie.

I'm fucking *grateful* for what Sid and Maverick did for me. I'm fucking *thankful* they destroyed one of my worst nightmares. But sometimes I harbor some resentment.

Some anger *I* wasn't the one to hear her scream for the last fucking time.

It's hard though, holding onto the anger. It's an emotion that feels slippery now. I can barely touch it. I'm on my tiptoes, reaching, reaching, but I grasp nothing.

The girl grinds against me, reminding me I'm actually still sitting. She moans in my ear. I can see nothing in the darkness of the depravation room, hear nothing of my brothers, only her breathy little gasps as she dry fucks me. I'm not sure there's anything at all between us. I don't know because I can't touch her.

If I could, I'd snap her spinal cord. I think... *No.* I wouldn't. Not right now. Right now, I'm no longer floating.

I'm melting into my chair.

Her hair tickles my neck, then she dips her mouth to my throat, sucking my skin. *She's going to leave a fucking bruise.*

Just like the ones I left on Sid to ruin the scar on her hip.

I squeeze my eyes tight to hold onto it. *Anger.* I want to let it burn, but it's like trying to start a fire in a rainstorm.

I keep striking the match though, and I think of how I'm trying my fucking *best* to fuck up that fucking *J.* I think of how she wanted to name our son Rain.

For a second, there was a roaring in my ears when she mentioned it. It was like I couldn't breathe. It was like I was drowning.

"It was my last name. It was me, for so long." Her silver eyes lift to mine. "It's how I survived."

Now, I can't imagine his name being anything else.

Rain. Stay in my head, baby boy. Keep me away from this. But he can't because this profane, sick shit is no place for him.

The girl's chest pushes against my own, slicing apart my thoughts, breaking them as easily as fingers darting through cobwebs. My memories disintegrate because my family doesn't belong in my reality. They're too good for this.

I'm still clothed though, I feel the vibrations of material on my skin, but I'm starting to think... she isn't.

She moans my name. *"Lucifer."* Russian. That's the accent.

She keeps grinding herself over my cock, and my blood runs hot. It feels good, and I want to hate her. *I fucking hate you.* But the words have no meaning as my head seems to trail from my body, floating up to the ceiling of this dark room.

The music keeps playing.

Since I can't seem to find the emotion for anger in my body, I hold onto the beat. *Stay away from this. Stay far away.*

She licks my lips, and I keep them pressed together. Then her hand comes between us, dipping into my sweats and my boxers.

I try to move, throwing my body weight, but this chair is cemented to the fucking floor, and the chains rattle against my arms, my legs.

I grit my teeth as she strokes my bare cock, running her thumb over the tip.

“Give in,” she whispers against my mouth. “Let me make you feel good. *You deserve it, Lucifer Malikov.*” Her voice curves around my name like her tongue would curve around my cock. “You deserve good things. You’re going to *lead*. You’re going to *own* all of us.” She strokes me faster, and a groan leaves my throat. I try to bite it back, but when my lips part, she’s kissing me, running her bottom lip over my mouth, her fingers in my hair, her hand pumping me harder.

“You will be the one they answer to. You will have all the power, Lucifer.”

She shifts her center and starts to ride my thigh, moaning against my mouth again, and for a second... I relax.

It feels good. *She* feels good. She knows exactly what she’s doing, and I need some kind of forbidden release. I’m on edge with everything happening so fast around me. With Ella, and *Ortus*, a secret I’m keeping. Even from my wife.

She loves me. I know she fucking does.

But this... *God, this feels so fucking good.*

“Let me make you feel good.” It’s like this girl can read my mind. Like our thoughts are snared. She drops her hand down to my shoulder, then lifts her hips.

I feel her cunt, the heat of her, hovering at the tip of my dick. I can feel how slick she is too, when she runs my head along her slit.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Another groan leaves me, my stomach clenching with desire. I yank tighter against my chains and they bite into my wrist.

No, no, no. If I can't be angry, I can feel grief, can't I? The ways this will break my wife apart.

"Stop." I say it. It comes out strangled, but it's there. "*Get the fuck off me.*" My voice breaks, but I know she hears me, because the moment before she fucks me, she stops.

But not quite.

She brings her hands back to my shoulders, then she's riding me with her wet cunt, nothing between us, but I'm not inside of her.

I can still feel her heat though. How wet she is. She breathes into my ear, whimpering as she rides me without insertion. It's barely cheating, right? It's not even crossing the line, is it?

My thoughts echo back an answer to me as I feel my balls tighten.

What lines, Lucifer?

But there are lines. I know it. *I know it.*

Sid.

Silver eyes. Full lips. Dark hair. So small and fierce and devilish, and so fucking *mine*.

I'm sorry. But because of the drugs, I can barely feel it, the regret.

I know it'll hurt me too though. When this is all over, it'll fucking hurt. I force myself to speak, trying to hold onto my sanity. "Get the fuck off me, or when this is over..." I twist my head, pressing my lips to the tip of this strange woman's ear, guessing in the dark. "*I will fucking bury you alive after my brothers rip you apart.*"

She freezes.

My heart races, and I almost groan, hating it. Needing her. *Hating her.*

But if she doesn't stop, I'll jerk my head back and crash my temple into her nose. I prepare for it, the motion repeating in my head even though it's hard, wanting violence, when I feel so... *fucked up.*

I don't have to do it though. Because slowly, her weight is lifted from me, and my dick is aching, still straining out the top of my pants, but... she's gone.

I lean back in my chair, my arms aching from being bound. My heart racing from a mistake. Desire though, it's still strong, its grip around my throat.

I wish my wife was here. My wife, my. Fucking. Wife.

Time stretches, and my mind reels, floating higher and higher with thoughts of Lilith, calming me down, down. The music keeps playing, and as the seconds, minutes, hours stretch on, it's like my mind is playing too. It feels as if my body is rolling in the notes, the bass, the snare drum, the hum of a voice.

I don't know how much time has passed, I'm not even sure I know what *time* is anymore, when there's movement around me. I hear my chains clank to the ground before I realize my wrists are free. The same with the shackles on my ankles, they clink to the cement floor before I move, slumping down out of my chair to the ground.

I don't remove my blindfold, pressed like a feather against my eyes. It feels like it would be too much work, and there's another voice in my ear. Maybe more, they all morph together, echoing.

"Crawl to him." It's masculine, sensual. Familiar, but not. *"Crawl to him, Luce."* That name, is it me? A hand comes to my hood, pulling it back from my head, and the air is cold, I realize as I shiver, still sitting on the floor.

More hands come to my body, pulling the robe off me. I have to move my hips, I have to angle my limbs, but they strip the robe away, then my arms are lifting of their own accord and my hoodie and my shirt come free, chilly air causing my muscles to clench.

"Crawl, lover boy." Someone licks the lobe of my ear and desire presses inside my body again, like it's squeezed onto my tongue from a tube. All I want to do is obey the voice, so

I shift to my hands and knees, cold concrete beneath my splayed fingers.

As I crawl, someone pulls off my sweats, pushes off my shoes. It's as if I'm crawling in the dark *out* of my clothes, and I only have on my boxer briefs when my fingers touch something warm.

Lips come to the back of my neck, fingertips gliding down my spine. Bodies press in beside me, worshiping me with hands all over me. Someone's fingers come around my waist, then lower, grasping onto my cock. It feels electric, the pleasure shocking through me.

"Own him, Lucifer." The same voice, so familiar. A brother, in my ear.

I reach my fingers out, still blind from the darkness pressing in and the velvet cloth over my eyes. I feel thick curls, then I trail lower. Cheekbones. Smooth skin. A mouth with wickedly sensual lips.

I have the urge to devour him with my own.

I dip my head, brushing my lips over his, the outside of my forearm bumping hard skin. This man's body. His breath catches, and he smells clean.

"Climb over him." The voice floats, but it caresses too.

I don't know how to move my body in this vast amount of space around me, but hands come to my arms, gently gripping, and help me position myself until my knees are straddling someone's hips, and when I lower my head, it's a hard chest my tongue is met with.

"Be gentle with him. You hurt him, remember?"

Hurt. I *hurt*? In this moment, it doesn't seem possible, but someone begins to stroke me again and I don't recall when the sensation let up. All I know is it's back, and as I lick a line up this man's chest, tasting the salt of his skin, I feel something soft on my tongue too. Something strange and cottony. Inhuman.

"He has bandages. Treat him good. Don't hurt him more. Love him."

Love him. I can do that.

As someone strokes me, squeezing me, running their thumb over my tip, I lick higher, along the column of a throat, a pulse beating beneath my tongue.

Then higher still, until my mouth brushes the man's.

He gasps against me as the head of my dick touches his abs. I slant my mouth over his, and he whispers, "*Can I taste you?*"

And I've never wanted anything more. Sid would forgive me this, wouldn't she? *She has before.*

I'm floating, I'm grounded, I'm high and I never want to come down.

He kisses me, soft, then he tentatively flicks his warm tongue across my lips, and I open for him. He groans into my mouth, twirling his tongue with my own. Then he's sucking mine, worshipping me.

"You're doing so, so good Luce." The voice in my ear. The hand wrapped around me. Others still touch me, caressing my inner thigh, my spine, lower still, gripping the curve of my ass.

I'm panting into this man's mouth, and he's swallowing it all.

"So, so good."

I'm cresting higher and higher as this man kisses me, his fingertips gently reaching for my throat, but not squeezing. My palms stay on the floor, because somehow I know, I have to hold myself up or I'll fall too far.

Maybe I already have.

The fingers tighten around my dick, moving faster, stroking me quickly, aggressively.

I lift my chin and the man runs his tongue over the column of my throat, his fingers slipping down to my clavicle.

Hands all over me.

"You're so good. God, I love you."

Love.

I feel it.

A moan leaves my lips, and I bow my head, panting. The man's mouth takes it all, even when drool dribbles inexplicably down the corners of my lips. He licks me clean, fingers come to my hair, and my low belly tightens as I come closer and closer and...

"Sit back. Let us all have you."

I'm pushed gently back, sitting on my calves, the man moving away from me, until more hands are on my abs, trailing over the scars I'm distantly aware I have.

Someone's tight, hot mouth comes to my cock, and I clench my hands into fists, stars popping behind my eyes, and I'm going to... I'm going to...

I'm coming, whimpers echoing from the room, a mouth finishing me, then another, then another, and it's like fucking an entire harem of people, but all I have to do is stay still and let it happen. Let them swallow my cum down their throats, suck me off with wet tongues and soft lips. The release is a lightning strike, pleasure coursing under my cock, higher, in my belly, and I'm panting.

Someone pushes me down, someone else pulls my legs out from underneath me, and I'm lying back on something soft. Kisses glide down my torso, from many mouths.

"You are so perfect." A voice in my ear.

I let myself believe it, for the first time in my life. Spent and sated, I let myself believe I'm worthy of it all. But as my mind drifts into outer space, someone drifts with me. A hand, searching for mine.

Silver eyes.

A downturned mouth.

A tear trailing down her perfect nose.



MONDAY, OCTOBER 8
S A N C T U M

I PULL on my shirt in the aftermath of the ceremony. A salty taste is on the tip of my tongue, and as I stand on shaky legs, buttoning my pants, I glance around in the darkness at my brothers, only a flickering sconce on the wall giving any light to see by.

They're nearly piled on top of one another, Lucifer their center, as he was mine when I woke with my mouth pressed to his lower abs.

I adjust my hat, running my fingers through my hair.

Maverick's head is on Lucifer's chest, Ezra curled up into a ball, his spine pressing into Lucifer's side. Cain is like a watchdog, sleeping at their feet.

And slightly set apart, his back to Lucifer's head, is Sevryn Otto Astor.

Our little *initiate*.

His arm is stretched out, cheek pressed softly to it, his curly, dark hair drifting in his eyes like he is a wind-caressed angel.

But even still, I can see the gray irises, peering up at me.

I smile at him, and he returns it with a wicked one of his own.

Then I turn my back on my brothers and walk out of the deprivation room.

Colors shimmer as I enter the sanctuary. The sun beams through the stained glass, rendering it gold and yellow and my eyes hurt at the sight of it.

I slip my phone from my pocket, glancing at my lack of service, and I curse under my breath.

But I sweep my gaze over the empty rows of red pews, then further up, toward the pulpit, then the baptistry, a red cross painted on the wall behind it.

There's a spot, just there, where I can place a phone call. It's also the one area in this church Mikhail won't go, so my father said. He has a thing about baptisms, almost drowned as a child for one. Maybe it's why he's so fucked up. Trauma handed down for generations.

A shiver crawls up my spine as I walk on the hardwoods toward the little door adjacent to the stage. Incense, oak floors, it's all heavy in my nose, and the salty taste lingers on my tongue as I disappear into the darkness of the narrow hallway which leads to the baptistry.

Here, with no light, fear grips my heart, and it's easy to remember I'm still coming down from a trip. Spots pop in the dark, green, then yellow, then red eyes flash, and I walk faster, gripping my phone tighter, my palm sweaty.

I reach the end of the hallway, bursting through the door, relief like a warm blanket wrapping around my shoulders as I enter the hidden place tucked behind the baptistry but still illuminated by the sun. Just out of sight from parishioners if we were to ever have any.

The thought of people coming here to see God makes me laugh a little, and the sound comes out like music, leftover from my high. But as I slide down against the wall, the scent of something like bleach—sharp against my nose as if they just cleaned in here—along with wood and incense and plastic—from the baptismal tub—spiraling in my nose, other remnants of my trip come on too.

A headache, just between my temples. Dry mouth. Paranoia, and images of Samson's bloated body, slashes across his face and chest, lying out in that field for birds to peck at and worms to sludge through.

I know my brothers were supposed to find the corpse.

It was set there purposefully. Nothing the 6 do is by accident when it comes to scare tactics.

I draw my knees up and lean my head back against the wall, my hat sliding off as I do. I let it happen because no one will find me here. The 6 are sleeping on the upper level, and my brothers will be as disoriented as me when they wake. I have precious moments alone, and I squeeze my eyes shut tight, my phone between my palms.

Hatred and loathing tumble like the shimmers and spots in the dark. They say you should never do psychedelics if you're working through a darkness unless you're truly *ready* for what might pop out of the shadows. Last night, Samson's voice echoed across space and time during my trip.

"Atlas?" One word, over and over, full of surprise.

Atlas, Atlas, Atlas? Innocence, brevity, a slight smile in my name.

I knock my head back against the wall, my eyes flying open.

I stare down at my phone, clicking it on. I have two bars of service here, and I hold onto them like I'm trying to do with my sanity.

Three messages from Natalie.

Her: Please call me.

Her: I'm scared we won't find him.

Her: Arlo sent me home again to help search. I don't know what to do. Life feels like it should fucking stop for me. I need you, Atlas.

Empathy floods me, more than usual, and the feel of it, warm and sticky beneath my skin, disgusts me. I want to turn it off, but I don't know how. All I can imagine inside my head is Natalie's dark hair, her bright smile. Her arms around mine as she hangs onto my neck, hugging me tight. Her Bohemian sense of style with too much yellow, it was like looking at the sun when she was around, and it was dangerous like that too because I could never take my eyes off her.

Pinprick pupils, cold sweats, feverish skin. *More*, she wanted. *More*. I pretended to disapprove. I scolded her, chiding her lightly, but what else did I do?

I handed her what she wanted. I put a smile back on her face. She slimmed down for castings, she was happy, her agent was happy. Then Arlo Estere got to her and I didn't know until my father told me, but I sure as fuck didn't do anything when she finally called and told me she was cast in one of his films.

I'm fucking her up.

I unlock my phone, opening my contacts. I scroll down to Natalie's name in my phone, just to see it. *Natalia*. A yellow heart. For one second, a wave of nerves crashes through me and recklessness threatens to drown my obedience. The things I know I *must* do. I want to call her. Tell her never to go back to Virginia. For now, they'll let her leave. She's free to come and go and the more empathy Arlo Estere shows her, the better. The more likely she is to return to Shadow Villa. She might even fuck him if I keep ignoring her and...

Fuck.

I don't have time for this. I scroll back up to the girl I am damning in ways she can't even begin to understand.

EC.

I dial the number and hold the phone to my ear, listening to the tinny sound of the ring stretching further into Alexandria, reaching toward Corpus Avenue.

Three rings and I think she won't answer. She loves Maverick, but she's starting to care for me too, isn't she? She thinks we're friends.

My palm grows itchy as I hold tight to my phone.

"Atlas?" Her question echoes Samson's. Same innocence and naivety, it's like a weight on my chest.

Atlas, Atlas, Atlas?

I want to scream. *I can't fucking save you. Run. Leave. Forget him. Forget me.*

I don't speak for a moment, squeezing my eyes closed. I should hang up. There's nothing for me to say. But Friday night before I arrived in this hell, when everyone else was meeting here and I got to skip it because of my father's tasks for me and Cain was allowed to leave early because of his own secrets, she was scared, and yet she fought me with everything she had. And before that, when she realized it was me in her bathroom, I felt her body relax for half a second. Maybe less. But in that moment, she thought, mistakenly, I was someone who would look out for her.

Don't you know I'm hunting you, baby?

"Atlas?" Again. "Are you okay?" It's genuine, her concern. She asked about Samson too, in front of Cain, even. She showed she cared. I think of how many times my hands have been on her body. Her sweat touching my skin. Always determined, if slightly embarrassed when she can't get something just right.

"I'm okay, Ella." I whisper the words in the holy quiet of the church. My tongue is like sandpaper and my voice comes out hoarse.

"Is Maverick okay?" Nervous and anxious for us, I want to break her little neck for it.

Run away from me, Ella. Run the fuck away. Look out for you.

But she must be thinking the same thing, or reflecting on the *last time* we met, with Cain too, when we ran a drill inside her house to see how good she is at defending herself. “Or do you want to apologize for scaring the fuck out of me Friday night?”

I smile at her snarly tone, the way she can flip like a switch and I know the pills I gave her make it worse, but I ignore it. “You’re going to meet someone in two days.” After Lucifer has his alone time with Sevryn. Another fucked up bond in our brotherhood. “And I need you to promise me something, okay?” I don’t know how the meeting will go, even where it will happen, but I’m certain Lucifer won’t want Sevryn alone with his wife. Not in the beginning. Not ever, if he’s smart. Which means he might push Sevryn onto Ella.

“The initiate.” Ella breathes the words. She’s catching on. *You need to catch on faster. Think quicker.*

“Are you listening?”

“Yes,” she whispers. I hear it, her wide-eyed optimism. She feels important, me telling her this. Like she belongs. Maverick wants to keep her separate. I think he doesn’t mind the fact that she and Sid dislike each other. It keeps both of them needing him, in different ways.

Maybe he doesn’t even consciously know it, but I can see it. It’s his need for control. He wants to hold both of their leashes.

But my meetings with Ella, this stolen call... I’m giving her what she’s always wanted. A twisted sense of belonging.

“No matter what he says...” I trail off, and it’s like I can *feel* her holding her breath. “*Don’t trust him.*”

XXII

Lucifer

MONDAY, OCTOBER 8

SANCTUM

MY FIRST THOUGHT is of her. *My wife.*

I feel bodies on mine, hear the soft, even breathing of many people sleeping. But it's a gasp in my dry throat, and I sit up like they do in the goddamn movies, looking around like I'm *alarmed* to be alive.

But this isn't a fucking movie. There's no end to this scene.

The guys shift, rolling over with nothing more than a grunt. Cain is at my feet, his broad back to me. Blinking heavy, dry eyes, realizing exactly where I am and remembering bits and pieces of what I did, I bury my head in my hands, pulling my knees to my chest. I have on sweats, but no shirt, and I start to shiver as I sit in the deprivation room surrounded by the guys who would allegedly die for me and all I want to do is run home to Sid.

A groan works its way up from my gut, and I squeeze my eyes shut tight. I feel the memory of the girl on me. Inhaling, I catch the fucking scent of her too, alongside incense, which makes my skin crawl.

The girl.

The... guy.

The initiate.

Our introduction.

I scratch my short nails down my face and push to my feet, feeling dizzy in the darkness of the cement-floored room with the sudden movement. I want to fucking scream.

Why are we like this? Why do we do this?

My heart is racing and I know I'm dehydrated and coming down from whatever the fuck it is the girl gave me last night, but... I remember mouths all over me. The girl dry fucking me.

Trying to hold onto Sid's face. To the fact I have a family now and the last thing I want to do is fuck it up. The last thing I want to *be* is like my own father. He had no ethics, no morals, and sometimes, I think I've already lost all mine too. I don't think I can get them back, but even criminals need a code. Maybe more so than most others, because it is the only thing we can hold onto in a life of twisted chaos.

I don't realize how fast I'm breathing, how shallow my inhales and exhales are, until I feel a palm pressed flat to the base of my spine.

I know that touch, even before he speaks, his mouth by my ear.

"Breathe," he whispers.

I think of another time he said just that to me. My face burns hot, and I shrug my shoulders, turning and pushing him off me. He drops his hand immediately, and in the dark, it's hard to see, but his eyes are such a pale fucking blue, I know I'm looking right at them.

I don't say anything, and he doesn't either.

For a second, I regret shoving him away. For a moment in time, I want to close the distance between us. I want to throw my fucking arms around him. I want to beg him to burn this to the ground with me. Fuck the 6, fuck RC, and fuck everything that isn't our chosen families.

But even in these fleeting minutes of desperation, I know better. I know I can't get away, save through death. And even then... with Rain depending on me, on his mother, I wouldn't escape. They'd use him, abuse him, maybe they'd murder him just to be done with the Malikov name.

I think of my uncle and grit my teeth.

At mine and Mav's feet, the others stir, shifting on the floor, exhaling, yawning.

I don't look down.

My brother and I don't look away from each other.

Then he says, so quietly I wonder if I'm the only one who hears him, "You know I've got you."

I think of the burner phone. The video of Cain and Atlas. Ella being led into darkness. Of stabbing this man in front of me in the back. One of the few people in the world I know would die for me.

I open my mouth. I want to tell him. But I think of a bond even stronger than this one. My son in my arms. My whole world.

And I close my mouth and swallow the pieces of loyalty I've shattered between us. They scrape my throat on the way down.



"Why's it just you?" I don't sit as Elijah's dark green gaze narrows on me. I stand at the end of the cement table in

the Council room, a pentagram etched in the center just like it was at our previous location.

The massive fire made the news, and maybe there were conspiracy theories spread around on fucking social media I've never had the luxury of using, but ultimately... Jeremiah's actions were symbolic. He was trying to do something for my wife. Trying to burn away her past in any way he could.

It means fuck all, clearly.

Elijah cocks his head, his hands clasped together on the table in front of him, the 6 ring—the shape of a snake curved into the number—on his finger glinting from the sconces along the wall.

“Why don't you sit down?” His deep voice makes me think of Ezra, and I wonder once more what the fuck happened with his mom. He doesn't seem to care and no one has said anything else to me about it. If RC has found anything, they haven't told me.

Was it Jeremiah?

An overseer, trying to teach *Dominus* himself a lesson?

Briefly, my thoughts flicker to Phil Cooper. His hospitalization. The headline Sid found, detached from the original article so it can never be searched for again. That piece of news no longer exists in history, deleted, erased, like so much of what powerful men don't want you to see.

It dates back to a time when our fathers were still in elementary school, so I hold onto that. I make *excuses* with that.

I clench my fingers along the wooden seatback in front of me, shifting my stance too so I'm leaning into it. We all got dressed in the darkness of the isolation room, but before I could decide what to say to our new initiate, Elijah opened the door and summoned me.

Now I'm here and all I want is to smoke a cigarette as I drive home to my family. But Julie's bloated body swims

through my mind, and thoughts of Finn, alone and afraid, curl in my brain. I don't leave yet.

"Why don't you tell me what the fuck was up with last night?"

Elijah's shoulders tense and I watch a muscle in his jaw jump. For a long moment, he says nothing and we silently stare at one another. My skin crawls, thinking of what I did. What I allowed.

His voice breaks my memories. "Sid herself had an initiation."

My entire body goes rigid, but I don't dare speak a word.

Elijah arches a dark brow. "But maybe you love your brothers enough... it didn't matter they had her?"

My pulse flies fast inside my chest, and it's hard to get air into my lungs.

"The bond the five of you share is impenetrable." He sounds almost amazed when he says it.

I think of them. Mav, Ezra, Cain, Atlas. Once upon a time, I think I'd have died for them. But then I met Sid at a fucking intersection and everything... changed.

She's the only thing that matters. Her, and Rain. I meant what I told her after our walk last week. Her and our son are the only people I have to think about in my life. I'm already proving it with all the ways I am fucking up.

Ella.

Nikita.

Betrayal.

"Perhaps letting them... *initiate* her didn't bother you because of it?"

I don't want to say anything. He's baiting me, trying to get me to lash out so he can twist my words and attempt to teach me some strange lesson. But I can't stop myself from saying it. "It *did* bother me." I sound like a child, the words spoken through gritted teeth as I press my fingertips into

the wood of the chair back so hard I hear it creak beneath my grip.

“But you still let it happen.” He’s so patient, like he’s merely observing the weather, and I want to throw this chair across the room.

“I didn’t have a fucking choice.”

Elijah smiles, his lips turning upward and faint dimples flashing in his dark skin. “But didn’t you?”

My stomach flips. I bite the inside of my cheek, refusing to play this game.

“Did you think we were watching from the window, Lucifer?” He’s still smiling. “That if they didn’t all... sleep with her, we’d... what, exactly?” He lifts one massive shoulder in a half-shrug. “Murder her?” He scoffs, as if the idea is laughable.

This time, I smile too, straightening to my full height and looking down my nose at him. “If I hadn’t killed my father, you would’ve done just that.” The coldness in my tone isn’t forced. I feel shaky with rage, just thinking about Sacrificium and what could’ve happened to Sid if we hadn’t arrived early.

Elijah nods once. “Very good.”

I don’t bother hiding my confusion, my brows pulled together as I wait for him to elaborate.

“We have ceremonies and traditions for a *reason*. To bond us. Pull us together. You break down your mind enough that you’d do *anything* for your brothers, for your wife, that’s how true loyalty is forged, Lucifer. I know you’re upset about last night. I know you’re angry that Mikhail is here. That a girl gave you a lap dance and the boys gave you a blowjob.” My blood heats, the way he says it like it means nothing. “But it is all proof of what you are willing to do for us. For your brothers. It is exactly what I need to see, what *Mikhail* needs to see, for Ortus.” I watch his throat roll as he swallows. Then he adds, very quietly, “And so Sid doesn’t end up just like Julie.”

Ice cold wrath stretches inside my veins with his last sentence, but I do my best to ignore it. To *listen*, instead of simply *feel*. I *have* to pay attention.

And it shouldn't surprise me that my uncle would have to approve my ascension. Still, I feel a jolt with the admission. I don't want to have to prove anything to Mikhail. I don't want to talk to him, see him, perform for him. I don't want anything to fucking do with him.

But I know if I don't *rise*, there's only one way to go. *Down*. You either climb ranks or you get buried in the fucking ground. There is nothing in the middle.

Elijah studies me for a long moment. Then he sighs and glances down at his clasped hands. "I know you feel as if you betrayed Sid."

I swallow, my skin feeling tight around my bones. I press my fingers deeper against the wood, almost wishing this chair would fucking snap in half. My blood is pounding so loudly in my ears, I want to cup my hands over them to silence it.

But I don't. I don't move at all.

"Just remember, Lucifer..." Elijah trails off and he's still staring at his hands. For one of the first times in my life, I wonder what he's sacrificed. What he and his wife, Edith, have done for the 6. For each other. For Ezra. Elijah is a black man in power, leading a mostly-white organization. What has he had to do, to hold down this position?

I wonder about the secrets I know Ezra is keeping, drowning them in the bottom of a bottle.

Why are we so fucked?

"If you hadn't done *that...*" He finally looks up at me, but his chin is still dipped down, and from this angle, he looks exhausted. I can see the circles beneath his eyes. The red in the whites of them. "Your son would be in danger."

I don't breathe. It's an inhale, then nothing.

I think of Rainy in my wife's arms. How it feels to hold both of them. Love like I've never known. Like I know I

couldn't find with anyone else. As much as I love Maverick, as deep as our bond goes, it's got nothing on how I feel about my wife and son.

And if someone tried to take them away from me...

I exhale, slowly, like the air is rattling its way up my lungs.

If Elijah thinks what I did to my dad was something... If he thinks I've shown my ass before... Well, he has no fucking idea what I'd do to him and the 6 if they came anywhere *near* my family.

I don't speak any of that though. If I say it out loud, he'll find me juvenile, and it makes the threat less real. Words don't mean much to me, or him.

Instead, I ask, "Who was she?" My stomach crawls as I think of the girl my dad had on her knees for me in his office, from Moscow, when Sid was tied to Maverick's bed. It wasn't the first time my father gave me an offering. For a split second, I wish he was alive so I could murder him all over again.

Elijah tilts his head, watching me. "Why do you want her name?"

Again, Lazar Malikov is in my head. Names are currency. Names have meaning. It's why I never knew Sid's, and it's just as well. She's always been Lilith to me, and nothing has changed there.

I don't answer Elijah.

He sighs, tapping his fingers on the table, wrist lifted as he drops his gaze. "Our pianist." Surprise jumps in my stomach that he's even offering that much, but I don't let it show, keeping my expression neutral as I think back to a week ago. The first initiation ceremony and the music playing.

He shrugs his shoulders, the white button up pulling tight as he does. "She has many talents."

I grind my teeth and press my palms to the stone table, dipping my chin so my eyes are fixed on my uncle in

everything but blood.

He slowly lifts his gaze to mine.

“Who. The fuck. *Is she?*”

He drops his hands back to the table, clasping them together as a smile tugs on the corner of his mouth. “Are you worried she might spill your secret?”

Am I worried she'll tell my wife what happened? We've got far bigger issues to contend with, but I think of when Sid thought Nikita was some woman I was going to fuck her over with. It was a nice surprise, her possessiveness.

Maybe she wouldn't give a fuck about last night, but I hold onto the hope she would.

“Her name is Monday.” Elijah doesn't drop my gaze. *It's a stupid name, but so is mine. Maybe her mom and mine had something in common.* “Do you want her zodiac sign?” Elijah presses. “Her age? Height? Weight? Did you develop a crush on her—”

That's not what I want to know, and he knows it. “I don't give a fuck about any of that shit—”

“That's the problem.” He cuts his hazel eyes to mine, and they narrow. He lowers his voice and scans the room, like he's looking for a ghost hovering, listening. “You keep running your goddamn mouth. You defy RC's *orders*, you keep fucking with people like Nikita, who you *know* is Mikhail's lackey now. You *stab* him inside your home, it's no wonder Julie ends up fucking dead to send a message to you—”

“Nikita put his hands on my wife,” I interrupt coldly.

Elijah closes his mouth and clenches his jaw. Yeah. I don't know what the fuck happened with Edith but I know he knows how it feels when someone plays with your fucking possessions. But when he speaks, it isn't any softer. “If you keep forgoing your virtues, it'll be *Sid* in a room like that, with another man. They'd do that, before she was sprawled in a tub like Julie.”

My entire body feels like it's on fire. My skin crawls, and my nostrils flare, and I want to reach across this fucking table and put my hands around his throat.

I don't move.

I stay perfectly fucking still because the threat is ringing in my ears. But I still ask it. "Where the fuck is Finn?"

Elijah glances away, only for a moment before he shakes his head. "You listen, and he stays safe. If you don't, you'll stumble upon his body too."

My lungs start to ache, imagining it, but Elijah keeps talking, breezing by it like the warning is nothing, his eyes back on mine.

"You know you only care if your secrets are safe. If Monday is going in the ground to swallow all of yours for eternity. You don't give a fuck about her because to you, she's a commodity. But once upon a time, Sid was exactly that. It's no secret Lazar and Maddox dabbled in human trafficking—"

"And do you?" I once asked him the same question. I once asked him if the 6 was fucking around with a pedophile ring, or if what happened to Sid and Jeremiah came from my piece of shit father and his best friend alone. He didn't answer me then, and I was too fucked up about Sid to give a damn.

The past few weeks, I went back into this building with the intention to change shit. I haven't changed a fucking thing. And maybe because of Sid's past, knowing what happened to her because of my dad's work, it fucking eats at me.

"Do *you* fuck around with pedophiles?" I repeat. *What will I do if he does? What can I possibly fucking do?* I think of the dissected article Sid found. All the ways I've convinced myself we don't *do that* anymore. But I made a deal with Elijah for a reason.

Because I am a liar, inside my own head, about so many things.

Elijah clenches his jaw. "No. I don't. My wife would murder you if you dared ask such a thing in front of her."

I blink, surprised he'd offer me something like that, but he keeps going, like it's nothing.

"But if you'll recall your texts, if you'll remember Mos Maiorum, you will know why RC exists. To oversee *all* of the crime syndicates and organizations under their rule. Which means it isn't just *us*. We're the original families of Alexandria. Of the 6. But there are others, and we rub shoulders with mafias all over, up and down the East Coast, the *world*, including Bratva, the Greek Mob, Irish Mob, Albanian, I could go on and on. Is there trafficking? We both know the answer to that. It's why I've agreed to our bargain." He flicks his gaze past me, to the door. "Monday is Mikhail's current mistress, which means he was *treating* you. A gift, to his nephew."

I lean closer, my fingernails digging into the stone table. "*I'm not a fucking dog. I don't need a goddamn treat.*"

"The point being," Elijah raises his voice. "It was an honor, in his eyes. Now, clearly, you have an aversion to gifts, but that's neither here nor there. Your time is coming, Lucifer. But in order to rise, you're going to have to do what you so stupidly refused to do last week." He leans back in his chair. "You and Atlas both aren't so good at following orders, and you saw what RC sent him as a reminder of who runs what, and what they sent *you*."

I swallow and my throat feels like sandpaper. "So Mikhail killed a nineteen-year-old boy, and then an innocent mother... what? In her sleep?" I recall what she was wearing. Pajamas. She'd been caught unaware.

But I remember what Elijah said too, when I questioned him last week. He said he wasn't sure RC murdered Samson.

Elijah shrugs. "No. But he likely had someone do it."

I say nothing to that, bristling as I think of my family.

“You have to bite your smart-ass tongue for as long as Mikhail is visiting. You have to follow his orders. And you have to take the boy you stabbed nearly to death home after our bonding exercises tonight and tomorrow, and train him. *This is how you assume command.* It’s not my decision. It’s *Mikhail’s*. There’re people who think you don’t deserve what you have—”

“Interesting. *I don’t think about those people at all—*”

“—so you need to *earn* it, Lucifer.” Elijah’s eyes are lasers on mine.

There are few things I want *less* than training a fucking kid. But one of those things is harm to my family. And for that, I’d do anything. Even fuck an escort.

“Who is he? Where the fuck did he come from?”

Elijah sighs, rubbing his temple with two fingers. “He’s an Astor.”

I stand straight, rearing back as I do.

Elijah drops his hand. “Please don’t act surprised. I can’t deal with your theatrics.”

My mind is still reeling, but I don’t show it. Instead I ask, “Does Mav know?”

Elijah narrows his eyes, but it doesn’t look like anger. It’s as if he’s studying me, searching for something.

My mind flickers to the burner phone. To the impossible things I’ve been tasked with. The shady shit we speak of as little as possible.

“No,” he finally answers me. “Why do you ask?” he pushes, but doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “Do you think he’s hiding things from you too? Like you are him?”

I straighten at the question, pushing my hands into the pockets of my pants as I glare at him. Unease threads through me, manifesting as a prickle along my scalp. “Is he?” My voice is rough as I ask, but I don’t look away from Elijah.

He doesn’t even blink. “What did I tell you, when we first discussed Ortus, Lucifer?”

I take a breath in. Out. "You said *don't trust anyone.*" But I do trust Maverick. I trust him with my life. *But what about with Rain's? Sid's?* Over the summer, the answer would have been *yes*. But now... I'm not so sure.

Elijah smiles, but it's not warm. "There's your answer."

"You're playing us against each other." I speak calmly, thinking of what Lilith said to me, about the initiation being some sort of test. I know she meant something more than the obvious.

But Elijah shakes his head once. "No." He shifts in his chair. "I'm certainly not. That would defeat the entire purpose of a family bound in blood." The 6. The Unsaints. "You are handling Ella to ensure she belongs, correct? But you, Maverick, Cain, Atlas, Ezra..." He pauses on his son's name, glancing down at the table, then bringing his gaze back to mine. "You're blood brothers. Loyalty unmatched." His voice is strangely quiet as he speaks those words. "You already belong together."

I don't say anything, but I know he knows what I'm thinking. *What do you mean, then, about Mav?*

"Even still, RC is not part of that bond. So, as I said, while they are here..." He lifts one hand for a second, before he sets it on top of his other, on the table. "*Don't trust anyone.*"

I ignore those words and instead ask, "You said Atlas isn't good at following orders. That's why Samson was murdered. So it's more than his social media shit?"

"He was told by his father to stay away from Natalie for reasons relating to Samson. Now, he's reaping the consequences of his disobedience."

We stare at each other for long seconds. I know why Atlas wouldn't stay away. Love fucks up your head. As far as I know, he hasn't been hanging around her as much as he was, but clearly he was communicating with her in ways he shouldn't if Samson was killed the way he was.

But I push that from my mind and instead, knowing I have to stay on top of this even if I don't want to, I ask, "Governor Phil. Have you been in touch with any of the Order's men? Do you think *they* are involved? Has RC come up with any evidence it was the Order who took those photos of Sid?" I don't say *his* name, because it means something more to me now, and I don't want to tarnish it, but Elijah knows what Order I'm speaking of.

Elijah is quiet for several seconds. Then he props his chin on his fist and speaks. "You asked me if I was involved in sex trafficking." He says each word slowly as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "As I said, I'm not." He lifts his brows, never looking away from me. "But the governor..." A sad smile. "*He is*. The hacking proved as much. And perhaps the photos were simply to throw us off. To worry you into thinking he should keep her."

My body tenses, thinking of those weeks without Sid. And I don't want to think of Jeremiah as some sort of hero. My half-brother is despicable. But in this, maybe he did the right fucking thing. "Why didn't he just kill him?" I press.

"It would make things far more complicated if he did. Like I said before, it helps to have someone already corrupted in power." Elijah says this like I should've known, and I hate feeling like Jeremiah was thinking two steps ahead of me.

I grind my teeth together but don't speak for a moment. Then I ask, "And no one is after him for this? Not RC? Not *you*?" Because I can only imagine Jeremiah was somehow involved in Edith's disappearance too. A way for him to escape, perhaps.

Elijah laughs a little, folding his arms across his broad chest as he leans back in his seat. "Well, Jeremiah has vanished. And besides that, the trail the authorities found leads them to Cruor."

I cock my head, confused.

Elijah shrugs. "A gang you don't need to worry about. Trust me. I'm doing enough of that for the fucking both of us."



I pace outside of the room the *kid* is being kept in deep within Sanctum. Another of Sid's relatives, I'll make *sure* she doesn't fuck this one. The hall is dim, I smell like *Monday*, or whatever the fuck day of the week the girl was named, and I'm itching to get home. For once, I want to talk to my wife about all of this. No one around me has any good advice, and I know she would.

I curl my fingers into fists, my gun stowed once again in the back of my pants. The door is red, locked, and Elijah let me know the kid was being prepped for the ceremonies we'll do together tonight and tomorrow evening. I got no more information on his background, not even his age. This is all part of being in a goddamn cult. *Blind devotion*.

It unnerves me, thinking of him staying under the same roof as my son. But I hold onto all this talk of me ascending higher. *Ortus*. No one has ever spelled it out for me, how I get the same power as my uncles, but I vaguely remember what Elijah referenced earlier. *Mos Maiorum*, the unwritten code of the 6, different from the virtues. It includes loyalty to our brothers, above all else, and I can almost grab a wisp of a memory of something else. Of a series of tests, before we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our fathers.

This is it. Maybe after this, I can change things, like Sid wants me to, if Elijah holds up our bargain.

But as I pass by the door again, I stop.

I hear a voice and lean in closer, pressing my ear to the door, listening with every muscle tense. I'm not even

breathing.

“Now, Lucifer Malikov? There are certain lines you don’t cross with him. They call his wife Lilith. You look at her too long or breathe near his son, he’s going to bury you alive.”

My heart thrashes inside my chest, pulse echoing between my ears.

I don’t move away from the door.

“Keep your distance in that house. Think of your goal. Stay alive. Stay free. Be reunited. Right?”

I don’t hear a response. But then there are footsteps, and I step back from the door the second before it’s pulled open.

Standing in front of me is the boy I stabbed thirteen times earlier this week, but I don’t even look at him. I’m glancing past him, into the small room he was occupying. There’s a bed that looks more like a gurney. A biohazard waste disposal. A sink. A door closed.

And nothing else.

No one else.

I slowly drag my gaze to the boy’s dark gray eyes, lined with brown, and I flinch when I think I might see Sid in them.

But I can’t even focus on him right now. I’m thinking about the pep talk he got. The voice I heard.

Adam Medici.

XXIII



MONDAY, OCTOBER 8

THE MALIKOV MANSION

MAVERICK: **We'll be there in two minutes, Angel.**

I click the side button on my phone and smile, watching Rain as he picks his head up, wavering with the effort of it, his tiny hands splayed on the black play mat in the entertainment room. We divided it in half, theater seats in the middle of the long room, a projector screen covering one entire wall. At the back where I sit, there are bouncy seats and baby toys and this mat on the gray hardwood floors, so Rain doesn't hurt his head when it comes crashing down because he's exhausted holding it up.

Like now.

I wince, reaching for him, my legs crossed, and my hair clipped up, but he only makes one tiny whimper before he's grasping at the fuzz of the black mat, his vivid blue eyes

lifting to mine for half a second before they stare in wonder at the rug.

There's no doubt he's Lucifer's son. I slept with enough people in my lifetime to comprise a medium-sized city, but the timing, the fact he ensured we had no protection... Rain Valentin is a Malikov, through and through. But even if there were doubts, it's his eyes.

They're Lucifer's eyes. And his hair, black, a shade darker than mine and so thick, I'm envious. Yesterday, Rain turned two months old, and there's no party like there was for his first birthday because his dad was away on cult shit, and I'm too tired to host anything by myself.

Sighing, I pocket my phone in my black sweats, then pick up Rain, cradling him over my shoulder as I stand, one hand on the bum of his black jumper, another holding his soft head. I leave the entertainment room and head down the spiral staircase, glancing at the front doors. I see shadows beyond the frosted glass.

Shadows.

More than one.

We have a camera, and I could check it on my phone to know who, exactly, is here, but since Lucifer is still away at Sanctum, I have a feeling I know who it is.

My eyes narrow, and I pause on the second-to-last step.

I do not want to see *her*, even if her cookies are... very good.

I gave Ella a chance when Maverick started fucking bringing her everywhere. I don't make friends easily, and even now, thrust into this maddening world, I have very few. One is the red-headed girl's boyfriend. *My brother.* And I don't want him to have to choose, but at the same time... I don't like her. I don't like the way she seems to hang on my husband's every word. I don't forgive her, and she's so soft sometimes, I don't even think it would be fun to try and make an effort with her. It's something I admire about Brooklin. She can be kind, but she's mainly hard

edges and matter-of-fact words. Probably what Jeremiah liked too. Or maybe that's who he turned her into.

Nevertheless, when Mav raps his knuckles softly against the door, I know I'm going to fucking open it. But when I get closer, the hardwoods cold on my soles even through my black socks, I hear multiple voices, and Ella's soft tone isn't one of them.

Frowning, keeping Rain pressed to my chest, I fumble with the three locks on the door and pull it open, the cool night air rushing over me, causing goosebumps to form on my bare arms, beneath my oversized red shirt.

"*Happy birthday!*" There's a chorus of voices, a few sounding a little grumpy, laughter trailing at the ends of the words.

Stunned, I blink in the night, the porch lights automatically flicked on, and I see Maverick in the front, his arm around Ella tucking her to his side, Cain with a black eye, Atlas's backwards cap on his head, and Ezra, hands shoved into the pocket of his red hoodie, a string trailing from it, above his head. Him and I match in crimson. And each of them, aside from Maverick, is holding a black balloon, and Ella has what looks like a glass cake tray in her arms, a frosted purple and black cake with *Rain Valentin* written in gray cursive icing on it.

A staggering arrow of vulnerability seems to pierce my chest. Shallow breaths leave my lips and I know I need to say thank you, but with Rain in my arms and all this love at my door, I can't find the words.

My mouth has gone entirely dry.

"We didn't get any presents because he's already a spoiled son-of-a..." Ezra suddenly trails off, his hazel eyes wide on mine. He clears his throat as Mav twists around to glare at him. "Son of a beautiful woman," Ezra finishes with.

I want to burst into laughter, but it comes out as a startled gasp instead.

I place my hand on the back of Rain's head and realize Maverick is stepping through the door. I back up so he doesn't bump me, and he's already reaching for Rain, a smile on his face, the upside-down cross creasing as he grins.

But despite the balloons and the cake and the feelings inside my chest, I don't give up my son. I'm thinking about Nikita, stabbed in this doorway. Is that why they're on my doorstep? Reinforcements since Lucifer is still away doing who-knows-what with the fucking *initiate*? Is this protection from RC?

I suddenly, irrationally, feel very uneasy.

"Is this just for Rain?" I ask Mav, my eyes meeting his as he drops his hands by his side, curling his tattooed fingers into fists when he realizes I'm not going to hand Rain off just yet. "All of you being here?"

Behind him, Cain, Ezra, Atlas, and Ella all come inside, dragging their balloons under the door with them, and no one answers me. Atlas is very close to Ella, elbow brushing her shoulder.

He seems to be exhausted, shadows beneath his eyes. I think of Natalie's brother's body. *Does he know who killed him? Why?*

As I watch, he closes and locks the door behind him and I'm left facing off with all of the Unsaints, minus my husband, plus Ella.

Even though I don't think they'd ever hurt me or Rain, my guard is up, and I cradle my baby closer as his soft head bobs up underneath my hand.

Maverick's throat rolls as he swallows. He's in a black hoodie and black pants, just like Atlas. Cain is the only Unsaint not in black sweats. Instead, he's wearing charcoal pants and a white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up his brown forearms, a matte black watch on his wrist.

He releases his balloon, letting it float up to the high ceiling, then slips his hands into his pockets, one tattooed

with the Unsainted brand, but I catch his bloody knuckles before he hides them. *What the hell happened at Sanctum?* Or did he go somewhere afterward? I vaguely recall he spends a lot of time at a gym in downtown Alexandria that the 6 own. Some place I've never been because Lucifer and I are mainly runners. In more ways than one.

"Can someone turn a fucking light on?" Atlas asks the question quietly. Faint light trickles in from the kitchen down the hall, but it is relatively dark in here. I like to keep it that way at night to try and adjust Rain to something of a sleep schedule.

Ezra gives a huff of a laugh, but it's Ella who reaches for the light switch in the foyer with her free hand, bathing us all in a low, golden glow from the black and gray chandelier in the high ceiling overhead.

Maverick twists around, and his eyes meet Ella's. She smiles at him, balancing the cake in her arms. Her long, red hair is in pretty waves, and she's wearing a flared skirt over black tights, a long sleeve black shirt tucked into her skirt. She's still very close to Atlas, who is looking at me with a slight smile on his face, dimples flashing in his smooth cheeks, the balloon in his fist making him look even younger than usual.

But with Mav continuing to stare at them, Ella quickly moves away from Atlas, coming to stand closer to her boyfriend.

Interesting.

"Thank you, all of you, for coming." I finally manage to say, knowing I should despite my anxiety. "For all of... this. You didn't have to, you know?"

Ezra makes his way toward me, his balloon trailing after him. He winks at me. "Not many people celebrated our birthdays growing up. We're gonna change that for him, okay?" He glances at Rain with real warmth in his eyes.

I nod, a lump in my throat. Then Ezra heads past me with his balloon like he owns the place, walking into the

kitchen, no doubt to look for alcohol. I think I caught the scent of it on him, beneath the freshness of his cologne.

Cain pulls his phone from his pocket and starts going through his texts but he doesn't disappear into the house.

"Why are you really here?" I ask Mav again, and he slowly turns to look at me.

He folds his arms over his chest, cocking his head, his baby blue eyes locked on mine. "Just relax, Angel." He glances at Rainy. "Happy belated two months, big boy." There's a softness in his voice that wasn't there when he spoke to me.

I widen my eyes, my chin over Rain's head, ignoring those words. *Relax?* I hear the freezer or fridge door shut down the hall, from Ezra's doing no doubt. "I do appreciate you being here but since when do all of you come by unannounced when Lucifer isn't—"

"I texted you," Mav counters, his voice low. "And my girl made Rain a cake." He cocks his head toward Ella. "Nice, isn't it?"

I glance at it. The perfect smoothness of the icing. The colors that match Rainy's room. Flicking my gaze up to Ella, I nod once. "Thank you," I say, feeling Mav's eyes burning a hole in the side of my head.

She smiles and her face flushes pink. "You're welcome." Then she stands there kind of awkwardly and I know I should tell her to put the cake down and lead them all into my house but I'm just a little overwhelmed and a lot concerned about why they think I need so many watchdogs.

"Is everything okay?" I check again, growing more frustrated the longer no one answers me.

"Didn't Luce tell you he'd be another day?" Mav presses.

I roll my eyes but don't answer him. *Yeah, his vague text told me.*

"You look like you've got this shit all figured out." Those words come from Cain, low and gruff as he pushes his phone back into his pocket, his coal-black eyes flicking up

and down my body. His head is buzzed as usual, and he looks every inch the fighter he is, the dress shirt clinging to his broad shoulders.

I don't know what he's talking about until I glance down and realize I'm swaying back and forth. An instinctual thing to keep Rain quiet and soothe him. It's about the only instinctual thing I think I've gotten down, and my swollen breasts beneath my son's soft body remind me of that fact.

"Thanks," I mutter to Cain.

He doesn't smile but strolls past everyone else and comes to stand beside Mav. I inhale, catching the scent of his dark cologne, remembering how it consumed me at Ignis. How *he* consumed me. Our gazes lock, and my heart flies in my chest. There's something slightly overwhelming about Cain's presence. Not just how big he is, or the darkness of his eyes, or how he always dresses so fucking well. He just... commands the space, no matter where he is or who he's with, all without saying a word.

"You look really tired." His voice has dropped so low, I don't even know if anyone else heard him. It's almost sensual, in its way. "Let me hold the boy." His eyes lower to Rain, and I see something soften in Cain's face. Maybe he unclenches his jaw, or his plush lips part slightly, instead of being pressed tight together. I can't pinpoint the specifics, but something changes about him.

"You don't know how to hold a fucking baby," Mav snarls, and I hear the jealousy in his words. "Besides, *I'm* his uncle."

Cain looks over at Mav, and I take in his side profile. High, broad cheekbones, five o'clock shadow, full lips, strong neck.

Damn, he's fine. And I remember just how big his dick is too.

Stop it, Sid.

"We're all his uncles." His voice is still quiet, but full of something cold. He doesn't say anything about knowing

how to hold a baby, but I notice Maverick's expression shifts. From angry and jealous to... something that if I didn't know any better, I'd call sad. It's like there's a story there I'm missing.

Cain turns to me, lifting one dark brow, as if to ask if he can take Rain.

I swallow the knot in my throat and glance at my son. It's hard for me to let anyone else watch over him. It's why Brooklin and Mav both have only done it a couple of times, and only for a couple of hours. But Cain isn't going to *leave* my house, I'm sure of it, so even though something overprotective and anxious grips my throat, I nod, and offer Rain to *Uncle Cain*.

He takes him with a gentleness that surprises me, and it turns out Maverick was wrong.

Cain holds Rain as if he's held babies dozens of times, one hand on his bum, other on his head. Cain's hands are huge, and they both seem to engulf Rain's entire baby body, but Cain tucks my son's head against his chest, and starts to sway a little like I was, with Rainy in his arms.

His eyes are on my son, and without another word to anyone, he walks off down the hall, toward the kitchen. As if he knows I'm on edge when I turn to track them with my gaze, he says, "I'm not going far, Mama."

Mama.

Something warm heats in my belly and I quickly turn back to face Maverick, Ella, and Atlas. The latter two trail further into the house, after Cain, and Ella glances at me with her green eyes, lined in mascara, and I realize she looks different somehow. I mean, I've seen her more than a few times since what happened at the Ignis house, and just a few nights ago, but it's the first time I guess I've really *looked* at her.

She's... lost weight. That's what it is. Her clavicle is more pronounced in the scoop neck of her black shirt, her

cheekbones seem sharper, and there's almost a hollow look about her, like she'd be better off at her usual weight.

Before she slips past us though, Maverick shoots his arm out and grabs her shoulder, yanking her back to his side, cake and all. A startled noise leaves her lips, but she stays near him, obedient, waiting, as Atlas goes further into the house. Frowning when I hear him taking jabs at Ezra for drinking, I fold my arms and face Mav, whose posture mirrors my own, like he's mocking me.

He still has a hold on Ella though, but it's almost like she isn't there, the way he's looking at me.

"Spit it out." I raise my brows. "What's going on?" Another thought seizes me, of Lucifer's kisses to Rain before he left. His lingering look at me. His fingers coming to the marks along my throat from our angry fuck after the shit with Nikita, then over my belly from when he had bit me. He didn't say goodbye. Didn't tell me he loved me.

We had fought again, over nothing at all, and with a coldness that seemed forced, he just walked out, softly closing the door behind him. I heard the locks click and knew he'd done that on his phone before he even got into his car, parked in the driveway instead of the garage because he was in a hurry after he got back from getting Rain more formula.

Now, in the dim lights of the dark foyer, Maverick keeps one hand on Ella, then lifts his other arm, his cool fingertips coming to my neck.

I shiver with his touch, but raise my chin, letting him graze his index and middle finger along the scratches on my throat.

His baby blue eyes seem to darken as my spine crawls with his touch.

I drop my own arms. My tight nipples graze my shirt, the ache in my breasts throbbing. Not because of Mav's touch or Ella's nearness, watching, but because they're engorged. Lucifer offered to help me one night when I

woke up with my heartbeat seeming to pulse inside my breasts.

I denied his help, sitting in the tub alone, pressure building behind my eyes, but I didn't dare fucking cry.

I remember how Lucifer licked me from his hand though, the same night he bit the J.

He would've liked it. I should've let him help.

"What happened?" Mav asks, ignoring my question. His thumb comes to the hollow of my throat. He doesn't press, but his other fingers curl around my neck, gently.

I keep my chin lifted as he examines me, the voices of the others drifting down the hall.

I swallow beneath his hand, grinding my molars together. I don't want his anger or his pity on my behalf. I saw how he looked at me in the dark when he noted the bite marks from Luce. "Nothing bad."

Mav's lips press together. "You're gonna need to clarify for me, Angel."

"Is something wrong with Lucifer?" I can't help but ask the question.

Mav doesn't move his hand as he whispers, "No."

"Then tell me why you're here."

He strokes his thumb up the curve of my throat, his eyes tracking the movement as I clench my hands into fists. I dart a glance at Ella. Her eyes are focused on Mav's hand on me.

"We wanted to celebrate Rain's birthday. It's what family does."

"But that's not all," I retort, and I know I'm right at the smirk on his lips.

He doesn't speak for a second, just smiling at me. "Cain is right," he finally says, distracting me and dropping his hand, but keeping his fingers pressed against Ella's shoulder.

I feel strange without his touch, and slowly, I dip my chin, but keep my eyes on his.

“You look tired.” His eyes search mine for a moment before he speaks again. “We’re here to protect you, and Rain—”

“I don’t need—”

“*Your protection,*” Mav mocks me, finishing my sentence. His nostrils flare as he clenches his jaw, staring at me with something like hot anger. It’s like he’s dying to tell me something, but after a moment, he shakes his head, and keeps ridiculing me. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. You’re good all by yourself in this big, empty, fucking house, alone and caring for a newborn, worrying your pretty little head off about where Jeremiah Rain is and feeling him break your heart into tiny little pieces in that hospital bed, over and over and over again. You’re all good, right?” He steps closer, his boots touching the tips of my toes, the scent of him—leather and earth—consuming me. It’s familiar, and comforting, and right now, I need it. “You’re good with not eating and watching Rain’s every movement like the moment you let him too far out of your sight for too long, something terrible is going to happen to him, and it’s going to be *your fault.*” He leans down close, eye level with me, his gaze locked on mine, and I can’t look away as Ella comes closer to his side, like she wants to remind him *she’s here.*

“You can’t sleep, and you’re wasting away, and you’re dreaming of him, and I don’t mean Jeremiah, although I’m sure he’s haunting you too, huh, Angel?” His lips tip upward, but it’s a cruel expression, nothing like a smile. “No.” His hand comes to my waist, pulling me even closer as my feet skid along the floor, my toes on top of his boots, and I have to let him hold me upright before I lose my balance. He puts his arm around Ella, pulling her in too. Her shoulder brushes mine, the cake bumping between us. I can smell her vanilla scent, and something like mint. It’s like we’re in some weird, twisted hug. My heart races, and my blood grows hot in my veins.

“It’s our fucking dad in your nightmares? When you close your eyes, you see it all happen?” I know he knows exactly what happened. I know Lucifer would have told him every scene, frame by frame.

My stomach drops.

I didn’t expect it would eat him alive, like it’s eating me.
Why do we never talk about this shit?

In my head, I see it again. I hear Maddox, what he said about Lucifer’s mom giving birth to him, in the hospital, naturally, and how Maddox and Lazar both thought it disgusting. Their hatred toward women was fully alive to me then, in that room, and even though, sometimes, I like to think Maddox regretted it, and that’s why he took his own life, I can’t forget what he called me.

His own daughter.

I can’t forget the words he spoke, even after he knew what happened to me. Where he left me. All the people he let feed off of me, as a child. No welcoming arms. No toys, no fun until Jeremiah tried to help, to protect me. But then I was ripped from him too and thrust into danger wrapped in gentleness, because sexual abuse isn’t always violent.

And that hurts the worst. Thinking I grew up the way I am because sometimes, I remember thinking it felt good, and it’s something I hate myself for.

“Yeah.” Mav’s breath is soft against my lips. He angles his body, so he’s holding both me and Ella, turned toward both of us as she remains silent, letting it happen. “You think you don’t need our protection from the outside, but it’s not that I’m trying to save you from, Sid.” His voice breaks, and some of his cockiness falters. He glances down, long lashes nearly brushing his cheekbones as his lips press together. Then he lifts his eyes back to me, his fingertips digging into my side. “It’s yourself. Those memories are going to eat you alive if you stay alone.”

“I’m not alone.” All of that, and it’s the only thing I can say. It comes out jagged though, like the splinter of a lie.

“Even when Lucifer is here...” Mav trails off, breathing in through his nose. Out. “You can’t seem to let him in, can you?” He glances at Ella. I know he means the words for her too, or maybe about himself. It’s no wonder we’re related.

There’s a lump in my throat. I couldn’t speak even if I knew what to say.

“I know he can be an asshole,” Mav continues, his eyes flickering with a spark of amusement. “He’s a fucking fallen angel if there ever was one. But once upon a time, he deserved a place in heaven too.”

The lump grows bigger. My teeth are clenched, my brows pulled together. I look toward Ella, who is watching me closely, and I don’t know if she’s sympathetic, or if she wants me to break.

Don’t cry. “I don’t need your Biblical fucking metaphors —”

“Once upon a time, he was as innocent as Rain.” Those words are a whisper as he cuts me off.

My bottom lip trembles. I fucking hate it. I hate that.

“But this ain’t no fucking fairy tale, and Lucifer didn’t get saved.”

My nostrils flare as I try to keep breathing. Keep holding on to my stoicism, to keep myself together.

Mav tilts his head, watching me carefully. “He didn’t get saved... not until you.” He turns to Ella, pressing his lips to her cheek before he focuses back on me.

No. No, no, no. I only made his life worse. More complicated. I’m ungrateful, and sometimes I hate him, and sometimes I like the things he does like invite Nikita here with the drugs and talking down to me, because it’s proof. Proof I can keep some parts of my heart hating him. Proof I can blame him for every bad fucking thing in my life.

Proof I don’t have to let my guard down and end up shattered into pieces on the floor when he breaks my heart.

“If anyone knows what it’s like to walk in the valley of the shadow of death, if anyone knows what it’s like to see evil up close and personal, it’s you.” Maverick’s eyes are glistening, and he cups my face with his hand, his thumb on my chin. “And it’s him.” He lifts his thumb to my lip, still trembling, but with his touch, I still.

Ella sucks in a sharp breath. Maverick squeezes her closer to his side and says, “Trust him to hold your hand. You’re not in that place anymore, and neither is he.”

It’s time to fucking fly, Sid Rain.

“You might still be in the darkness, and in the darkness, I think we’ll always stay. But burn it with him, Lilith. Catch fire in hell together, okay?”

I nod once, like I couldn’t help myself. Couldn’t stop even if I wanted to.

“And we’re here because this is what family is for, Sid.” His eyes jump to Ella, and it’s her he’s looking at when he says, “Family protects.”

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XXIV

Harverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9
THE MALIKOV MANSION

“YOU GOOD WITH ALL THAT?” Ezra nudges my shoulder, tipping up his beer. The weakest thing I’ve seen him drink in a while.

It’s been twenty-four hours since we all arrived here at the Malikov mansion, Ella’s cake is entirely devoured, and I haven’t heard from Luce yet. I don’t really want to imagine what it is the two of them—him and the initiate—are fucking doing together.

As it is, I’m trying to imagine what two other people are doing on the low, and it’s making me feel a little homicidal.

But I’ve got my nephew in one arm, his head turned toward my chest as I cradle him while he sleeps, and my phone is in my other hand so I can’t exactly kill anyone right now.

I glance at my screen then send off the text.

Me: Why won't you talk to me?

Tossing my phone down on the couch beside me, I lift my gaze and stare at Atlas and Ella sitting at a high-top table across the covered porch, cards in their hands, beer bottles on the table.

I feel someone's eyes on me and I turn my head, meeting a coal-black gaze. Cain has a smirk on his face, his dress shirt unbuttoned a little, showing off his broad, inked and bruised chest. He's got his hands in the pockets of his pants, taking up half the couch across from the marble table between us.

"Frequency" by Kid Cudi plays from the speaker on the table.

I jerk my chin to Cain as Rain stirs in my arms and I use both hands to rock him a little. "What?"

"You gonna answer Ez?" he counters, still smirking.

Ezra laughs beside me, then finishes off his beer. He leans over and sets the empty bottle on the table with a soft thud. "Where's Sid?" he asks, twisting to look at me, something I don't like in his tone. Like lust. He doesn't seem to mind that I didn't answer his goddamn question either. If he's looking for an orgy, he can look somewhere else.

I glare at him. "The fuck you wanna know for? We're all out here." I glance at the baby bottle beside the beer on the table. It looks a little obscene. But Rain is kicking his legs, stretching up his arms, and I know he's gonna be hungry as soon as he wakes up.

Ezra leans back, licking his lips as he shrugs. "She looked like she could use some company, like Ella's got."

I clench my teeth, my pulse roaring in my ears. "Do you wanna get hurt?"

His hazel eyes flash. "Looks like *she* does." He glances at my girl.

I swear to Satan, if my nephew wasn't in my arms I would break his fucking neck.

But before I can say or do anything, my phone buzzes beside my thigh. I glance down at it and it unlocks with my gaze, showing me the text back.

Her: We have nothing to talk about.

Predictable. But she must know that because a second later, another response comes in.

Her: And I don't want to speak to you.

I press my lips together, crossing one ankle over the other. I'm stretched out on the couch, and I glance at Atlas and Ella again before I pick up my phone with one hand while Rain stirs, and respond to Brooklin.

Me: We have a nephew. Both of us are caring for him. You're my sister. We're family. Talk to me.

She had a job on the coast. When I found out what it was, I drove all the way there to bring her home. She didn't need to work at a club anymore. It's not that I'm against stripping. But I just... it's where she ran to after Dad kicked her out.

She doesn't need that anymore. I have so much money I could bathe in it every day and never run out. I told her as much, and yet she refuses to take anything.

Sometimes she stays with Ezra, and I don't know what she does other times. Like right now, where is she? I asked her to come here in an earlier text, but she didn't respond, just like I knew she wouldn't.

Ezra says she's "fine," which means fuck all to me. Lucifer says to leave her alone. Obviously, I don't listen to Lucifer.

I set my phone down and run a hand over my face, closing my eyes.

But Ella's bright, tipsy laughter pulls me from my single moment of rest. I snap open my eyes, dropping my hand back to hold Rain closer, but I'm staring at Ella.

Her long, red hair is down her back, contrasted with a white crop top she's wearing over ripped leggings. She's got her elbows on the glass high-top, one hand curled

around a beer which I know she doesn't even really like. She's pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, her green eyes gleaming as Atlas tosses his cards on the table, shaking his head like he lost.

He reaches for his whiskey glass, stirring the rocks around before he tips it up to his lips, but he's staring at my girl, across the table from him. Her red boots are pressed against the lower rungs under the chair, and she's leaning in toward him.

A door thwacks closed at my back but I don't look away from my girl as Sid approaches, then sits down heavily beside me, so I'm in between her and Ezra.

"There you are," Ez says, speaking behind my back.

Sid sighs. "I tried to sleep but I can't. When the fuck is he getting back?"

"He'll be here tonight," Cain says, like a reassurance.

Sid's thigh nudges mine. I glance down and see her bare leg beneath black shorts, but I don't look up at her.

"Let me hold him," she whispers, reaching for Rain, but I don't let him go. "You look like you got your hands full." There's a dark undertone to her words and I know she isn't talking about my nephew.

Clenching my jaw, I slowly drag my gaze from Ella to stare at my sister. Smudges beneath her gray eyes, but her hair is damp from the shower she took earlier while I spent time with Rain. She's in a loose tank, but it looks like a clean one.

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" I growl at her. Just then, my phone buzzes between us, just under her thigh. When I look down, I see Brooklin has texted back.

Sid grabs my phone and turns it toward me, the screen unlocking.

Brooklin: I'm coming over but it isn't to see you. I don't want to talk.

I nod once, indicating Sid can drop the phone which she does, right in my lap, beneath Rain, and I ask, "You good

with Brook coming by?”

She lifts her brows, twisting toward me and rubbing Rain’s foot. He’s momentarily still again, his little chest rising and falling. “Ezra already mentioned she might.” *Fucker*. “You two are talking?”

“Not exactly.”

“She’ll probably be too busy to talk when I see her, Mav, don’t worry about it,” Ez rumbles from behind me.

I twist around to look at him. “Keep your hands to yourself in front of me. I don’t want to see you feeling up my fucking sister.”

He runs his tongue over his teeth, hazel eyes lighting up. “You didn’t seem to mind at Ignis, with your other sister.”

I narrow my gaze, but Sid is trying to pull Rain from me again and I reluctantly break eye contact with Ez to transfer my nephew to Sid’s arms.

She snatches up his bottle before she leans back against the couch, but her eyes come to mine. “Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” she scolds Ezra without looking at him. “And you.” Rain starts to whine in her arms, his eyes crinkled shut, his mouth open in annoyance. She guides the bottle to his mouth with ease, still addressing me as he drinks his milk greedily, his little fingers coming to the plastic of the bottle. “Since when did you let Ella fuck around with other guys right under your nose?”

“You Really Shouldn’t Love Me” by White Punk and TMTTMF starts to play from the speaker, and I smile at Sid.

“Since when did you think you could put *your* pretty little nose in my fucking business, Angel?”

She glances at Rain, then glares again at me. “Watch your goddamn mouth.”

I ignore her and instead I lift my chin and stare down at her as I call out, “Yo, Ella.”

It seems like silence descends over the deck, broken only by Cain saying quietly, “Here we go.”

I don't look at Ella, but I hear a low voice answer me with, "Yeah, Mavy?"

I arch a brow at Sid, a smirk pulling on my mouth. "Come here."

Sid says nothing, still holding eye contact with me.

The quiet, aside from the song playing, continues. A second passes. Another. But then I hear Ella's light footsteps as she crosses the deck. A second later, I see her shadow fall over me, then she's standing in front of me, her thick, pale thighs inches from me. I can smell the scent of alcohol and vanilla emanating from her. Her fingers are twisted together in front of her, and she doesn't speak.

I keep staring at Sid. "Hey, Cain, you mind taking Rain for me?"

Sid swallows, but as Cain chuckles and stands, coming over to lean down and gently pull Rain from my sister's hold, she doesn't protest.

Cain straightens, his steps quiet as he heads inside, still feeding Rain, the door slamming closed behind him.

"Ay, Atty, you should come here too," Ez says from behind me, amusement in his words as he addresses Atlas.

"Mavy—" Ella starts.

"Don't talk. Sit on my lap." I issue the command as I spread my arms along the back of the couch, behind both Sid—who has her arms folded and her gaze narrowed—and Ezra.

I hear Atlas as he walks across the deck, but I don't look at him.

I don't look at Ella either as she slowly lowers herself onto my lap, a little awkwardly, her feet on the deck floor.

"Nah," I tell her. "Straddle me."

Sid's pupils dilate and for the first time, she averts her gaze as Ella doesn't hesitate. She puts her knees on either side of my hips, her core coming flush with mine and her arms around my neck. Her tits press to my chest, and

behind her, Atlas lazily drops down onto the couch Cain was previously occupying.

Slowly, I lift my hands and drift them up Ella's thighs, feeling the firm, soft flesh beneath my palms, skin on skin where she has tears in her leggings. I keep going until I reach around to her ass, squeezing hard.

She whimpers and all the blood in my body seems to rush to my dick.

Finally, as Sid's scowl deepens, I turn my head to look up at my girl, her long, wavy red hair falling around me like a curtain.

Her green eyes are a little glassy from drinking and her lips are red where she was biting them. "What the hell are you doing?" she asks me.

"Whatever the fuck I want." I jerk her closer, so her center is against my dick. Her eyes widen, a flush over her freckled face.

I lean over a little, my shoulder bumping Ezra's.

Atlas is relaxed on the couch, his backward hat on as he tips back another glass of whiskey. He lowers it down to his thigh, his other arm extended along the back of the couch, dark blue-brown eyes on me.

I knead the flesh of Ella's ass and she moans a little, shifting on my lap and causing my dick to get fully hard.

"You wanna see my girl naked, Atlas?" I ask quietly.

Ella freezes, her fingertips pressing into the back of my neck.

She pulls back, her hair drifting over my arms as she says, "No."

Atlas just grins at me.

I hear the door slam closed, then Brooklin's voice asks, "What the fuck are you doing?" I don't even know who she's talking to.

Sid sighs beside me. "Welcome to the shit show."

Ezra laughs, and Atlas and I just stare at each other.

“Answer me, prick,” I hiss, pressing Ella closer by my grip on her ass.

“Maverick—” she starts, but I drag one hand up her spine and tangle my fingers in her hair, yanking her back so she’s staring at me.

“Don’t,” I warn her, my fingertips grazing her scalp with as much of her hair as I’ve got in my fist. I cut my gaze back to Atlas. “You wanna watch me fuck her, huh?”

He tilts his head, his eyes going to her ass.

Anger snarls inside my veins, and I jerk Ella’s head back, so her throat is exposed. Her fingers slide from my neck, her nails digging into my chest as she calls my name out again.

“As long as you’re just gonna keep treating her like a fuck doll. Like you have no respect for her at all.” He shrugs, dimples flashing as he smiles. “Then yeah, I wanna watch you fuck her.”

“Maverick, what the *fuck?*” Brooklin’s words. I know she’s staring at me. I know Sid is too. And Ezra.

I know Ella is blushing without even having to look at her. Her knees tighten around me with tension, her grip fierce in my shirt. I know she’s embarrassed. I know I’m making a fucking ass out of myself, but I don’t care.

Everyone needs to know what’s up.

She’s fucking mine.

“You mean how you treated my sister?” I counter. “How you ruined her fucking life? You want me to do that to Ella?” I glance at my girl, the tendons in her pale throat. “Take your shirt off, pretty girl.” I loosen my grip in her hair, then wrap my hand around her neck as she dips her chin, her eyes livid and her skin pink. “Let’s show Atlas everything since he can’t seem to keep his fucking eyes off you.”

She tries to push away from me, but I grab her ass harder and a cry leaves her lips. I press my thumb over the hollow of her throat as I arch a brow.

“You want me to strip you for him, huh?” My heart is slamming inside my chest, but I can’t leave this alone now. “I’ll hold you down if I have to. You’re gonna do what the fuck I said.” I drop my hand down her chest, grabbing her breast and squeezing hard. “Take your fucking shirt off.”

“Ez.” Brooklin’s voice, cracking a little. “Let’s go.”

“He’s not fucking leaving,” I snarl.

“I didn’t ask you,” she snaps back.

I twist around to glare at Brook, dressed in a mini skirt and a corset like she just came from a fucking sex club. “Yeah? Well I’m *telling you*.”

Brooklin’s eyes, so similar to mine, grow darker. She has her hands fisted at her sides, a crossbody bag over her chest, her corset so low I can see nearly every fucking curve she has and I want to puke. I like to believe women can wear whatever they want, but knowing what happened to her and maybe because of my father’s tainted blood in my veins, I’m having a bit of a fucking hard time with that thought right now.

“You don’t run shit around here, Maverick,” she snarls. “You fucking disgust me.”

Those words cut deeper than she knows, but I don’t react.

Ella takes the opportunity to push away from me again, scrambling off my lap but I grab the back of her neck and pull her into me as I turn toward her. “*Don’t*.”

Her fingers are knotted in my shirt, her eyes wide and chest heaving. “Don’t do this,” she whispers, staring at me like I’m the only person in the room.

That look, the vulnerability, it does something to me. I’ve got one hand on her hip and I pull her closer, so our chests are nearly flush. “Why?” I ask her quietly, the rest of the room silent. “You didn’t try to run when I touched you with Ezra.”

Ezra, beside me, laughs. “That’s because she likes me better. Not all the rest of you fuckers.”

Brooklin scoffs, but it sounds pained. Like maybe she doesn't like the thought of Ezra touching someone else. *Have I got news for her.*

Ella's pale throat rolls as she swallows and the numerous freckles on her face seem to stand out more than usual, contrasting against her complexion. She drags her fingers down my chest, glancing between us, long lashes brushing her cheekbones. "That was before." She whispers it, so quietly. Then she risks a peek at Sid before dropping her gaze again. "I didn't think you'd want to share me now."

I don't. That's why I'm fucking pissed.

Beside me, Sid shifts on the couch. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" she bites out. "Why'd you look at me?"

Both Ella and I turn to stare at her.

"Don't start," I tell my sister, narrowing my eyes. "She didn't say a fucking thing about you."

Sid's gray eyes are turned on Ella. She looks like she's gonna say something smart which won't go well for her, but finally she just shoots to her feet, then walks around the couch and I hear the screen door thwack behind her.

"Good one," Ezra murmurs.

I turn back to my girl and notice Atlas watching us from across the fucking coffee table. Then a second later, I hear him speak. "I'm waiting for the show to start. I've always secretly had a thing for redheads. I bet her ass would bruise easily too."

She stiffens with his words, but I fucking *explode*, Mikhail's threats ringing in my ear. I push Ella back and she scrambles to her feet, then knocks into the coffee table. I hear the bottles swaying at the same time, from the corner of my eye, I see Atlas stand, stepping around the table and grabbing Ella's arm.

He hauls her back into his chest and even Brooklin isn't glaring at me anymore.

I get to my feet and I don't think when I sidestep the table and shoot my hand out, grabbing Atlas's fucking throat and jerking him close to me, Ella between us.

"Let go of her," I snarl. He's got an arm banded over her fucking chest.

Ella tries to move, but she can't go anywhere between us.

Atlas smiles at me. "I don't think I want to. Her ass is pressing against my cock right now and it feels really fucking good—"

A snarl leaves my lips and I move Ella to the side at the same time I dive at Atlas, my hands around his throat, my feet leaving the floor as I launch myself on him.

He stumbles back and I hook my leg behind his so he fucking falls. The deck thuds beneath us and I hear his breath leave him in a rush from the impact. I squeeze with both my hands around his throat, his face going red as I choke him. But he brings his forearms to my wrists, his elbows pressing against the bones, and he lifts *up*, putting as much weight as he can against my wrists and causing my hold to loosen enough for him to gasp down air.

Ella and Brooklin both are calling my name. Ezra is silent but I know he's watching. Or maybe not because I hear the door open and close, someone walking off the deck.

I don't fucking care.

As much as it aches, Atlas's elbows on my wrists, I only tighten my fucking hold. "I'm gonna fucking kill you," I tell him, and in this moment, my body on his, I think I might mean it.

He smiles at me though, then he slips his arms up and his thumbs come toward my face. He presses against one eye but I turn my head so he can't get the other. It doesn't matter, the pain in the one and the panic in my brain is enough that my fingers slip from his throat and just when I rear back, grabbing his wrists to pull him away from my

eyes, the door slams against the wall as someone pushes it open.

A second later, strong hands are hauling me off Atlas, jerking me by my shirt. Then a hand clamps on my neck and Cain's knee comes to my back as he bodily pivots me and drives me toward the door inside the house.

I try to turn to call out for Ella, but Cain grabs the back of my skull and pushes me again, hard. Brooklin yanks open the door as Cain forces me inside.

Once we're in the house, I spin around, throwing up my hands and breathing hard as Cain closes the door to the deck, blocking it with his body.

"What the fuck was that?" I thrust my hand toward the door and I notice Cain has the baby monitor gripped in his fist. Rain must be in his crib. "He was talking about fucking *my. Girl—*"

"Keep your voice down. Sid and Rain are both trying to sleep," he interrupts me in that quiet, poised tone. He's not even breathing hard from fucking manhandling me when he asks, deftly switching back to our conversation, "And have you asked him once how he's doing?"

I try to look past him, onto the deck, but he moves with my gaze, blocking my view.

I pull at my shirt, then drop my hands and force myself to meet his gaze. "Why would I ask him that?"

He smiles. "Because his girl's brother's body was found in our field. Because when's the last time you laid eyes on Natalie, huh?"

"I don't give a *fuck* about Natalie."

"That's your problem. This is a brotherhood, motherfucker." Despite his words, he doesn't raise his voice. His tone is still indifferent, and it makes his words eerier somehow. "We have to be here. *For each other.*"

For a wild second, I suddenly want to tell him about Julie. It feels like a heavy secret, because of Finn, wherever he is, and maybe that's why I'm acting so unhinged. This

shit is getting at me. But I can't burden Sid with it and Cain might want to share it. I cannot do that with the implosion that's about to happen in Sid's life when Lucifer brings this initiate home. We haven't had a proper introduction with him, aside from the sexcapades in the deprivation room.

I don't even know his fucking name.

But I could talk about it with my brothers. Everything we did. Isn't that what Cain is getting at?

"Your mad because your girl gives a fuck. Because *Ella* cares. Well I've got news for you, Maverick, *someone* needs to check on Atlas." His annoyance slips through his words. "After what he saw, don't you think he needs us?"

Just wait until you find out what happened to Julie.

But I don't say it though. "Yeah? What the fuck are *you* doing about it?"

He smiles at me then, his mask back in place, but he ignores my question. "You need to start treating him like a brother, before the wrong people do."

I grind my teeth together, remembering that laughter in the dark after the night I saw him. Did he see what happened to me? Where the fuck is the brotherhood in *that*? "I asked him if he's okay," I say reluctantly, because I don't want to explain myself to Cain, but I feel cornered. "He doesn't wanna fucking talk about it. Not to me, anyway." I thrust my hand toward the door at his back. Just then, it opens, and he glances over his shoulder before he steps aside, letting Ella through.

She closes the door again behind her, her face still flushed and her chest heaving as she stands beside Cain.

I feel *relief*, knowing she chose me instead of Atlas, but I hate that feeling.

I keep my hand aimed toward her when I speak again as her big eyes find mine. "Please continue though, Cain. I want to hear the rest of all the things I've done wrong while I'm trying to keep my girl close."

She stares back at me. “Keep *me* close?” She scoffs. “Right in front of me,” she says through a clenched jaw. “You were all over Sid when we first got here yesterday, *right in front of me.*” Her chest is heaving. She’s really mad about that shit which is news to me, and I don’t know why, but it makes *me* mad.

“You know what? Never mind. I don’t want to listen to either of your bullshit tonight. There are far more important things to worry about—”

“That’s a good way to get cheated on, Maverick,” Cain says coolly.

I take a deep breath in, grinding my teeth as I stare at him, taking in the remnants of his black eye for the first time. “I don’t care what kind of fights you get in with your free time.” I narrow my eyes. “But I’ll fucking slit your goddamn throat if you try to insert yourself into my relationship again.”

Cain smiles, a dark thing as he lifts his chin, exposing his throat. “Come do it then.” He cuts his eyes to Ella, then drags them slowly back to me. He lifts a finger to his eye, the one that’s swollen and puffy and dark purple. “You know it was a girl who did this to me.” He smiles. “Maybe you should knock some fucking sense into *him*, Ella. It might help.”

Before my girl can say anything, before *I* can say anything, the three of us hear an electronic beep, and I know someone is at the door.

I don’t think, after a lifetime of being *on*. Instead, I sprint quickly into the kitchen, reaching over the stainless steel fridge and grabbing my Glock from the cabinet above it, where I stowed the weapon while Rain was up. My finger comes to the trigger as I walk back toward the back door, facing away from Cain and my girl.

She comes up beside me as I head through the house, but I push her behind me and hiss, “Stay.” A small huff of annoyance leaves her lips but she doesn’t move with me as

I tiptoe through the house. *Obey me, even when it's hard.* A strange feeling of pride and protectiveness grows through me when she does just that.

I hear Cain behind me, silent and focused now that we could be in danger.

I know Rain must be upstairs in his room—which is why he wasn't with Cain and the baby monitor was in his place—and I practically run to the spiral staircase. I quickly try to calculate the distance between the front doors and the second floor and how many seconds I have to shoot whoever the fuck this is, when a dark shadow steps inside, looming tall in the foyer.

The door closes, but the figure doesn't lock it.

It steps forward, and I smell him before I see him when lights flicker on overhead from his movements.

Nicotine. Pine.

Demon blue eyes are locked on mine, and he glances once at the gun in my hand, his lips twisting into a snarl. "Is my son down here?"

I lower the weapon, moving my finger from the trigger, but I don't put it away because he didn't lock the door. Cain is quiet behind me.

"No," I answer him.

Lucifer glances toward the spiral staircase.

"Yeah," I say, answering his unspoken question about where his family is. "Both of them."

Slowly, Luce turns to look at me again, and I see he's got blood on his knuckles. His skeleton bandana is around his neck, his hood brushed back. He's dressed in all black, and his eyes flick from me, to Cain at my back. He furrows his brow, looking questioningly toward me, but he doesn't say anything, maybe sensing the tension between us.

I think about the last time we saw Luce. All of us all over him. The lethargy that lingered after our trip, and how he probably doesn't want to tell Sid anything about it and how I feel uneasy about that. Maybe that's why I was *all over*

Sid, as Ella claims. She probably isn't wrong. I just feel... fucking guilty. I haven't told Ella, either, and I don't want to. I don't want her to think she's got permission to fuck around with anyone else.

My brother turns his back to us, and I see a gun in his waistband too, the hem of his hoodie caught at the top of his black sweats. "I need your help with someone."

After I tell Ella to go upstairs, leaving our confrontation for later, and I leave Ezra and Brooklin on the back deck, Cain, Luce, and I stand around Luce's BMW outside in the night. He's leaning against the driver's side door, his windows down for whatever reason, his arms crossed, all of us on the circular driveway, his car close to the front doors. I note a black SUV down the long drive, lights off, tinted windows, and I know it's one of our guards.

Lucifer is staring at the ground, and the scent of nicotine is heavy in the air even though he isn't currently smoking. "What the fuck is going on with you?" he asks without looking at me. "Cain said you attacked Atlas."

I glare at Cain, but I haven't forgotten what Elijah said, about stabbing a *lackey*. The shit I couldn't follow up on since we've had rituals. So all I say to Luce is, "I could ask the same of you."

Cain cuts in before Lucifer can respond. "Fuck that for now. Where is he?"

The three of us are so close, Cain's shoulder brushes mine.

Lucifer doesn't speak.

In the quiet that follows, I hear "Snow White" by Highly Suspect playing from inside Luce's car, which makes my skin crawl.

I open my mouth, about to echo Cain's question, but finally, Lucifer picks his head up, his gaze flicking from

Cain, to me. It's the first time I'm seeing him head-on, in the glow of lights from his front porch, and I notice the bruise on the side of his face, just over his pale cheekbone. Given his complexion, it's startling, red and purple and clearly fresh.

"The trunk." His voice is hoarse, and he lifts his eyes, locking them with mine.

The fucking trunk.

Cain glances at it and asks, his tone level, "He still alive in there?"

"Possibly." Lucifer grinds his teeth together for a moment before he adds, "His name is *Sevryn*."

It's startling, hearing it, and Lucifer says it like it's disgusting. Contaminated.

Sevryn. What a fucking name.

"I can't deal with this shit tonight." It's like an admission of failure, the way he says it, his eyes on the cement beneath our feet.

The next words out of my mouth are reluctant, but automatic. "We'll handle it." It's loyalty and love that forces me to say it, but I'm thinking about spending another night under the same roof as Atlas, Ella with me, and how I want a distraction from that. Her outburst about me being too close to Sid has me thinking maybe she's feeling guilty about something. I held her the entire time. I made sure to touch her. She's not going to keep me from my own fucking sister. My nephew's mother. She won't rip that apart.

Besides, *I'm* not getting drunk and playing cards with Sid right in front of her like she was fucking doing to me.

"He needs to recover." Lucifer snarls the words out, his chin dipped, but he lifts his gaze to mine. He looks skeletal like this, his lean face cast in shadows and the trick of light dancing on his bruise, causing his bone structure to appear hollow. His demonic eyes don't leave mine. "Someone will come to change his bandages. But I don't care. I need to talk to my wife."

My mouth goes dry. I think of Ella's jealousy, and I wonder how Sid will take Lucifer's confession tonight. Because as twisted as their marriage is, I have no doubt he'll tell her everything he can. About the girl, about *us*, and I don't know how much more she can fucking take.

"Maybe you should save that for later." Cain says it and I'm glad. Maybe too, it makes me feel less guilty about the fact I haven't confessed to Ella yet.

"What exactly does *Sevryn* need to recover from?" I jump in. The name feels strange on my tongue. I don't like it. "His wounds from over a week ago shouldn't be too nasty now."

Lucifer smirks at me. "It was a hell of a day." But he doesn't elaborate, and the longer we stare at one another, the further his shitty smile slips. Until, after several moments... it's gone.

He blinks, and redness rims his eyes. I watch his chest rise beneath his crossed arms. It lifts and lifts and lifts, his lips pressed together, and I know he's holding his breath, but instinctively, I know it's more than that too.

He's keeping everything inside. Whatever happened today, last night, maybe even *tonight*, he's pushing it down. Like if he swallows all of the poison, if he can only get it down his throat, it won't kill him. It'll pass through his system and he'll breathe again when it does.

He doesn't want to break in front of us, because he isn't supposed to. None of us are, but especially not him. He's always had the weight of all of us on his shoulders because of his father, because of his rank. And now he has a family, and you can't fall apart when your family needs you, can you?

"Lucifer." I whisper his name, but I want to say something else too. I want to say I'm here for him. *We're* here for him. I mean, even Cain, who never lets anything slip past his heart, is clearly keeping secrets and feelings in check.

I want to say he can unburden himself. He can let go. Fall apart. *We're here.*

But he feels guilty and embarrassed and ashamed of how he acted when Sid was gone. I *know* he does. He can't believe he let himself get so low without her, but I want to tell him the only reason he's even still standing is because she came back. *And that's okay.*

It's okay to love her. It's okay to want to kill for her, die for her, bleed for her. It's okay to want to help the little girl version of her you saw in that video. The remorse doesn't make you weak. None of this makes you weak.

But I don't know how to say all of that out loud. I think I'd rather swallow fucking razorblades, and I hate that about myself, but I don't know how to fix it. How to change *me.*

And before either Cain or I can say anything, Lucifer is digging in the pockets of his pants, pulling out a black lighter from one and a cigarette from the other.

He lights up in front of us, the spark of the lighter illuminating the concave illusion of his face. The tip glows bright in the night as he inhales, and I watch his eyes flutter closed.

He holds the smoke in his lungs and I catch the scent of it, so familiar to me.

After a moment, his eyes still closed, he exhales through his nostrils, smoke hazy and gray between us. He doesn't bother to turn his head, and neither Cain nor I cough or step back or say a word about it.

But I know the nicotine and tobacco aren't enough when Lucifer's face becomes pained. He squeezes his brows together, but his eyes fly open and all at once, he spins around, hurls the lighter over the top of the car where we hear it clink against the stone driveway a second later, and he drops the cigarette from his mouth as he slaps both palms against the roof of his car, as hard as he can.

His back muscles are tense, a strangled sort of scream leaving his lips, and he does it again, slamming his hands against the car.

Again.

And again.

And again.

He hangs his head but he doesn't stop, every movement jostling his body, sharp, angry cries from his mouth echoing in the night as he keeps hitting his car, over and over and over.

My stomach muscles tense, my hands balled into fists.

Cain, beside me, says and does nothing, and we just watch him on the verge of dissolving into pure emotion.

It's a miracle, really, he can still feel anything at all.

What did they do to you tonight? I want to ask. I'm desperate for it.

But he won't tell me for so many reasons, I don't want to think of them all.

For a moment, he stops, hands still on the top of his car, head still bowed. Somewhere in the distance, a crow caws, and a shiver zips down my spine.

But it's like I'm holding my breath, the way my lungs ache, waiting for his next move.

And when it happens, it confuses me.

He straightens, pulling his phone from his pocket. With his back to me, he dials a number, then presses the screen to his ear, his elbow bent, other hand still on the roof of the car.

I glance at Cain, but Cain is watching him closely.

And when he speaks, I know exactly what the fuck he's doing. "Bring me something."

I don't think anymore after that. I just react. I grab the phone from his hand, backing up after I do. He spins around and I hear a dealer's fucking voice on the other end of the line.

"I was wondering when you'd call me from your real number," he's saying. "What do you need?" There's a sick pleasure under his tone as Lucifer steps toward me. There's something else too. The voice is familiar and with a jolt, I recognize it as the guy who beat the shit out of me in the interrogation test.

"Give me the fucking phone." Luce snarls the words.

I'm not scared of him though, and I respect him, but I love him more than that, and I won't let him do this.

I end the call, pushing the phone into my own pocket, and as Lucifer reaches for me to grab it, Cain is behind him, threading his arm through both of Luce's and holding him back to his chest.

Lucifer's lips curl up as he stares at me, trying to shrug Cain off, but we both know that's not going to happen.

"Give it to me." His words are full of a raw anger that I can *feel*.

"Who the fuck was that?"

Lucifer's eyes are slits. "Give me my *goddamn* phone."

"I know that fucker. Who was it?"

Something in my tone must drag my brother momentarily out of his lust for coke because he says, "Nikita. He's the fucker I stabbed. He tried to give me blow at the house and Sid flushed it. I've been a fucking good boy, all right? *Just give me a fucking break.*"

Nikita. Only vaguely familiar just like the guy himself. But now I know that's who Lucifer stabbed, I don't exactly blame him and neither should Elijah. And grudgingly, I'm proud of Sid for flushing cocaine down the toilet. Lucifer must have hated that shit, a winter wonderland going down the drain.

I hold up both hands, palms toward him. "I know what you're doing and I don't just mean trying to score."

His eyes narrow into demonic blue slits. "Good for you. Now give me my *fucking* phone." He jerks against Cain's hold again, but Cain isn't even breaking a sweat behind

him, his dark eyes on me. If Cain ever got his hands on my girl, the way he exudes control and violence without a blink, I'd hack him into pieces.

I shake my head to Lucifer but lower my hands, stepping closer, until I can smell the nicotine of him again. He's still violently thrashing in Cain's arms, but he gets nowhere.

"You've got the weight of the fucking world on your shoulders."

With my words, he stills.

I step closer. We're a foot apart, eye level. "You're trying not to let it crush you. Crush Lilith. Rain."

He swallows, hard, his throat rolling as he does.

I feel Cain's gaze on me like a brand, but he doesn't let Luce go and he doesn't interrupt me.

"You've got this ache, don't you?" I glance at his chest, then bring my gaze back up. "Something in your veins. Something to make it all stop."

He grinds his teeth together, a muscle in his bone jumping.

"You can imagine it, can't you? Vividly. How good it would feel, burning at the back of your throat." Cocaine isn't my vice. Marijuana, they say it isn't addictive, but I've tried to cut down the past few months, and it's fucking hard. Because it was a crutch. It was a cloud of bliss. It was an escape. "You can *taste* it, can't you?" I think it's why I'm neglecting Ella. Why I'm so willing to resort to violence over communication with her.

Lucifer's chest rises and falls so fast, so deep, it looks like it *hurts* for him to breathe.

Another step. I'm in his face, my mouth close to his. I don't touch him, but I don't back up. I don't give him room to fuck this up.

"Whatever the fuck you're thinking right now..." I search his eyes, and he seems to stop breathing, his chest still. "*Don't.*"

His eyes change. From narrowed and angry to wide and... begging. It's like he's *begging* me to make this stop. And I don't know what form he wants that to take, but I'm not giving him his goddamn phone back tonight.

"Cut it off. Let it go. Crave *her* instead."

He knows exactly who the fuck I'm talking about. His pupils seem to enlarge, swallowing up most of the blue.

I lean in, tilting my head so my breath ghosts his lips. "You're not going to be like him."

It's like I can see it in his expression, what he's thinking. *I am. I'll be just like my dad.*

"You're better."

I'm not. It's there, reflected on his face.

"You're stronger than that."

I'm fucking not.

"You're Rain's dad, and you don't fuck that up."

He's perfectly still. I see it, the moment it changes. His thoughts. His lips press together, determined. *I won't. I will not.*

I bring my hands to either side of his face, gentle with my fingertips on his bruise, and I turn my head, so my mouth is over his ear. "You're going to go upstairs. You're going to find Sid, and you're going to show her just how much you love her." I drop my fingers to his bandana, twining it around my fist until my knuckles graze his throat. "Go."

Then I release him all at once, stepping back, and Cain shoves him forward but puts the monitor in his hand too.

He seems dizzy, off balance as his hands drop to his sides and he steadies himself on his feet. I know it's still there. *The want.* But he locks eyes with me and he doesn't ask for his phone again. But surprising me, he says, "You can't keep making my problems yours." He runs the back of his hand over his nose, fist clenched around the baby monitor, then drops his arm to his side. "You're not looking in your own backyard, Mav."

My throat feels constricted with his words and I don't want this conversation. I don't want him to turn his love on me. No. Fuck that. I can handle myself. I can handle Ella, our small family.

"Go inside."

He shakes his head once, sniffing. "I'm serious. I'm not good at this feeling bullshit like you are, this pep talk thing you just did." He nods his head to where we just stood, all three of us so close together, trying to work through this. "But something is off with you too, and something is off with your girl. Stop getting mad and wanting to beat everyone up and *figure it the fuck out.*" There's some sort of warning in his words. But then he just walks past me, shoulder checking me as he heads inside his house, leaving me and Cain out here to save him from himself and hope to Satan the initiate isn't just a dead body in the trunk.

The rest of the shit he said to me?

Yeah. I'm not fucking going there tonight.

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XXV

Lucifer

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9

THE MALIKOV MANSION

SID IS SLEEPING. She's curled into a ball, sheets up under her chin, baby monitor close to her face on the nightstand. I smile in the darkness of the room, the bathroom light on and the door pulled almost closed. I wonder if she kept it that way so when she wakes to feed Rain she can see. Or maybe... just maybe she kept it on for me.

I dismiss the thought almost immediately, smiling a little but it feels painful. Nah. Not for me.

Maybe she's scared of the dark now, like Atlas.

My mind flickers to his dad's voice in the room where Sevryn walked out of, before the rest of the rituals. Was Adam supposed to be the pep talk? The cheerleader? Is he toeing lines too, since Samson's murder, for his son's sake?

I decide I don't care enough right now to give it any more thought. After yesterday and last night, I'm fucking

drained, and all I care about is right here. I don't want to think about the ceremonies Sevryn and I had alone. I don't want to hear his screams inside my head or see the movie that played out for me, a personal film of all my deepest fears.

I lock the door to mine and Sid's bedroom, just for now, and swipe up the monitor on the nightstand, gripping it in my fist and heading toward the bathroom.

The itch is still there, under my skin, the reason I called Nikita, but I try to hang onto Mav's words.

"You're Rain's dad, and you don't fuck that up."

Fuck. Want and rage and self-loathing crawl beneath my skin, and I flip off the bathroom light before I open the door because I don't want it to wake Lilith. I catch sight of the blood on the back of my hands before I do though, and I put down the monitor immediately, on the black tile of the double sinks in my bathroom. Like I'm not worthy of touching it, anything connected to Rain, not when I'm like this.

It's not just Sevryn's blood. There was a murder too, between the two of us.

I know it's all part of the demonic dance of *Ortus*.

It happened inside Sanctum. I don't even know who the man was, and from the look on Sevryn's face, neither did he. We didn't ask questions though, and that's what they wanted to check. Was I doubting? Was I doubling back? Did I still have it in me? Since I let Elijah know I didn't enjoy *Monday's* lap dance, I don't think Mikhail was too happy with me, the way he egged us on.

Luckily, I didn't see any more of her.

Now I have to tell Sid, don't I? I mean, there's a hickey on my neck, just under the edge of my hoodie.

Fuck.

It wasn't only Elijah who watched me the past couple of days. Callum and Adam were there too, and Mikhail for the murder.

My skin crawls, and I want a hot shower. I took one at Sanctum before I would let myself come home to my wife, but clearly I didn't do enough. I want to scrub off the dealer's blood, and I want to drain my own Malikov blood.

Before I can close the door to the bathroom, startling me from my thoughts, I hear something.

Holding my breath, my pulse quickens, and for a second, I wonder if I'm imagining it. Fear slides beneath my skin, like ice. I blink, scared I'm hallucinating and I'll do something... horrible, if I am.

But then I hear it again.

A whisper in the night.

"Lucifer?"

I pull open the bathroom door, but only darkness spills out.

Still, I see a shadow, sitting up.

Lilith.

"Is that you?" Her voice is thick with sleep.

"Yeah, baby girl." I clear my throat, thinking of my hands. "Just one second, okay?" I don't wait for her answer. Instead, I duck into the bathroom, flip on the faucet to the sink in the dark, and with scalding hot water, I wash my hands, shoving up the sleeves of my hoodie to get up past my wrists. Then, still moving blindly with no light, I dry my hands on the hand towel hanging from the rack on the wall. Lastly, I pull off my hoodie in case it has blood on it, draping it over the ledge of our tub.

I come back out, making my way to the bed. I sink down onto the king-sized mattress, firm beneath me as I catch Lilith's scent, like lavender. She's warm and sleepy when her shoulder brushes mine, and I'm shocked as her head leans against me.

I don't move, worried I'll fuck this up if I do. *I don't deserve this tonight and I don't deserve you in this lifetime.* Those thoughts rarely come to me, but tonight, they're heaving in my brain.

“You’re back.” Her voice is low and throaty, and it does things to my dick. I feel it straining against my boxer briefs and my sweats, but I don’t otherwise move.

“Yeah. I’m back.” I wonder if she’s happy. Or maybe she likes it when I’m gone.

She turns her face, pressing it against my arm, and her small thigh comes up beside mine. I know from seeing it, her feet dangle off the floor. My high-tops are solid against the hardwoods, and the comparison in my mind makes me smile. I don’t let myself remember how her feet dangled from the back of the ambulance on the film. I don’t think about all the ways I couldn’t protect her when she really needed someone.

“I left the light on for you,” she says.

My pulse hammers in my ribcage with those words, a tingling under my skin where her face is against my arm. Electricity zips between us, and I’m so shocked at what she said, I can’t find any words.

“I missed you.” She speaks again when I don’t.

I blink in the dark, wanting her to repeat it. This is unlike her. She doesn’t ever act... like this. And we fought before I left. We fucked hard too, but it was the fighting that left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Yeah?” I whisper, careful with my tone. Scared this is all some kind of weird setup. Or maybe she cheated on me. Maybe she fucked Mav. Maybe that’s why she’s being so sweet and I shouldn’t feel guilty at all about Monday and the guys. Maybe I should’ve let Monday really fuck me.

Anger starts to replace love inside my veins, my body tensing as irrational thoughts dance through my mind.

But Sid laughs against my arm, a sound I rarely ever hear, and it’s like my nervous system automatically relaxes. “Just shut up and say you missed me too.”

A smile pulls on my lips, despite my misgivings. I breathe a little easier. “I did miss you.” I mean it so much. “How was Rainy?”

A second passes in silence, then she...grabs me. Her arms come to either side of my body, thrown around my shoulders, and she's cuddling up to me in a way she never has before.

I'm frozen, my body rigid. I'm used to her touch. Every inch of her I know so fucking well. Our demons fight beautifully together. But this lightness in the dark... it's strange. Fucking her, bruising her, my hand over her mouth, her nails down my back, my teeth in her skin, all of that we can do without any hesitation.

But this is brand new, and I'm already terrified it won't last.

What kind of person does that make me? Scared to death his wife's hugs will vanish into the ether? Be a fucking man. The words don't even sound like me in my head though. They're someone else. Someone buried in the ground, ashes scattered around them from a church my half-brother burned.

"Lilith?" I whisper her holy name in the dark, unmoving as she claws her fingertips into my shirt, holding onto me, her head resting on my shoulder. "How was Rainy?" I try again because I don't know what else to say.

"Good," she answers me, the word muffled against my clothes. "He was good, baby. Loving the attention."

My throat feels tight. "Are you okay with everyone here?" I haven't told her about Sevryn, but I'm not fucking up this moment. All the ones I've already fucked flash through my head. Rum down her throat at Lover's Death. Getting so fucking drunk I couldn't pay attention. Letting my father's plan put her in that cell at Sanctum. The way she was kneeling as a sacrifice on the steps of that altar. Holding a lit cigarette to her face. *Slapping her when I found her in the cabin of Jeremiah's.*

There's an ache in my gut. A burn behind my eyes. I think, maybe, I feel regret. She deserves better. *We* deserve better.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I’m fine.”

No, you’re not, baby girl. Despite this moment, I know we aren’t fine. This is just what happens in the dark. All of our demons are cast in shadows, and we can pretend we’re okay here because the good and bad, it all looks the same under the cover of night.

But if she’s willing to pretend, so am I.

She lifts her head before I can say anything else, then she plants her hands on my chest, twisting her body as she pushes me backward. I go willingly, coming to lie on the bed. She crawls into my lap, her body warm and her scent igniting something hot in my chest.

Then she stills, and I know the moment she sees it in the dark because her vision is too good. *The bruise on my throat.* Her fingers tighten on my chest, and she is frozen, but she still manages to speak, and I hate the way she doesn’t even sound surprised. “What happened?” It’s glacial, her tone.

I keep my arms by my sides, and I want to groan out loud. This was going so fucking well. But I don’t lie to her because I’m already keeping too much from her. “They chained me to a chair. A girl climbed over me. She... put her mouth on me.”

Sid’s nails dig further into my chest, over my shirt. Once upon a time, when I was angry and hurt, I would’ve relished speaking these words. Now, I hate it.

“Nothing really...happened.” It’s partly true, isn’t it? “Sid... was *chained*—”

“Why?” A cold question.

What can I fucking say? *It’s how the 6 do shit. I don’t fucking know.* I keep quiet, letting her come to that conclusion herself.

“I fucking hate them,” she says, her words a growl. “I fucking *hate* them. What else?” She sounds icily livid. “What else happened? *Do not lie to me.*”

I think of Sevryn. The rest of my brothers. My gut twists. “Baby girl—”

Her fingers circle my throat, surprising me as she cuts her eyes to mine. “And your face...” I think of the bruises there. Sevryn’s elbow against my cheekbone as we fought in one of the ceremonies. “Tell me what the fuck happened.”

I swallow hard, and I know she feels it beneath her slender fingers. “I... The initiate... The rest of them... They were all over me. I barely remember it. I was drugged, it was all fucking hazy, and you know I didn’t have a goddamn choice, Lilith.” I narrow my eyes on hers, but I’m fucking terrified.

I hate this shit.

I hate it.

She squeezes my throat, her nails digging into my skin, the pressure oddly soothing. Like if she’s still touching me, we’re okay. Then she asks, “Did they turn you on?”

I close my eyes tight. “*Lilith.*” It comes out like a frustrated groan.

Then she releases my throat and she slaps me, right across the fucking face, over the bruises on my cheek, and it stings as my eyes pop open, but before I can move, her lips come down to my ear as she plants her palms on either side of my head. Startled, mine come to her hips, slipping beneath her tank top. “Move back,” she whispers, a purr in her voice. “Fuck her. Fuck them. I’m going to remind you no one will ever fuck you as good as I can.”

My dick is aching, my mind spinning, and I have a feeling this won’t be over so easily, but I’m not arguing. I do as she says, shifting back further on the bed, lying on it horizontally.

She turns her head, her lips grazing my jawline. My skin erupts in goosebumps, and I’m suddenly *sweltering* in this shirt, but I’m not taking my hands off of her to take it off. Not unless she tells me to.

"Good boy." She scrapes her teeth against my throat, digging a little deeper over the hickey, then she crawls down my body, and my hands slide up, pulling off her shirt as she moves. She laughs a little but sits back on my thighs and lifts her arms, letting me pull the shirt off and toss it to the floor. My hand comes to her breast, feeling how hard and firm her flesh is in my fingers. She moans, and I start to knead her, tugging at her nipple with one hand, the other going to her hair as she moves further down my body.

Her cold fingers come to the edges of my sweats, and she yanks them and my boxers down, letting them fall to my knees, half my legs off the side of the bed.

"Lilith." I say her name just as she circles her fingers around my erection, stroking me hard. She has one hand on my abs, under my shirt, her nails digging into my skin.

When she speaks, I twist my fingers in her short hair, her breath falling over the head of my dick. "You deserve this." Her tone is dark and full of lust, her words echo Monday's, but they sound real from my wife. They sound like they mean something. I feel her shift on my knee, rocking her center against me, but her shorts are still on. *This is all for me.* "You deserve us."

I don't need to ask who "us" is, and I wouldn't be able to anyway because her lips come around my cock, and a groan leaves my throat.

I squeeze her breast, hard, still playing with her tight, drawn nipple, yanking on her hair with my other hand, my abs contracting as she deep throats me, and fuck, does it feel good.

She bobs her head expertly because my girl is not new to any of this.

She's a fucking seductress, and maybe she's forgotten just how much even the *thought* of her—the sound of her voice, the scent of her, *everything* about her—turns me on. But right now, she's remembering. And she's gonna remember really well when I come way too soon, because it

feels good to be taken care of. It feels good to have her take control and do this, for me.

She scratches her way down my abs, leaving marks, and I relish in the sting. Then she cups my balls, gently tugging and pulling on them as her other hand and her mouth work my shaft. Her throat is fucking tight, and she *does* have a gag reflex, but she knows how to keep going anyway, swallowing around it. I can *feel* it, when she's gagging, and I swear my eyes roll back in my fucking head when she does.

I move my hand across her sternum, kneading her other breast, hard and hot beneath my touch from the excess milk. I tug on her nipple and I'm not gentle about it because she wouldn't want that. She gasps around my cock, and I feel something warm on my hand.

Fuuuckkk.

My chest is tight, my entire body is sweating, my dick growing harder still, and everything is winding up, and up, and up as she works her full lips over me, her hot tongue flicking against my head, then her mouth devouring me again as her fingers work in tandem to get me closer, and closer, and...

I'm going to fucking come.

I squeeze her roughly, one last time, then I drag my hand up to my mouth, tasting her as I fist her hair and she deepthroats me one more time before I'm fucking coming, her pelvis grinding against my leg as she whimpers around me, still pumping me with her hand, scratching me with her other.

I'm emptying into her mouth, biting my own hand, savoring the taste of her as I groan her name. "*Lilith. Fuck, baby girl.*"

It feels so fucking good, emptying into her hot little mouth. *She* feels so fucking good.

I fucking love this girl.

It's the only thought in my head as my body gradually relaxes after bursting, my fingers loosening in her hair, but my stomach muscles jump as she trails her mouth up my shaft one last time. A hiss escapes my lips, then she's planting her hands on my abs, crawling up my body.

She takes my face in her hands. I'm fucking spent, tired as hell from the past few nights, exhausted from all the new bullshit the 6 are doing to us, from feedings with my son the past couple months—he's now two months old, and of course I fucking missed the date, but I saw the black balloons—and from introducing a new soul into this nightmare of a world. But all the worries, stress, doubts, terrifying fears, everything seems to fade away as Lilith's mouth comes to mine. Soft, as I lay my arms spread at my side, just letting her take over.

She kisses me, and I don't mind the taste of myself on her.

Her lips are soft, the kiss gentle, but she flicks her tongue across my mouth, and I open, letting our tongues twine softly together, circling and looping and tasting one another.

Her fingertips are gentle on my jaw.

We kiss this way for long minutes, enough that my heart rate slows, calming, and the feel of her warmth perched on my body is enough to lull me to sleep.

She pulls away, but her nose is pressed to mine, and under heavy lidded eyes, mine see hers.

Silver. Beautiful. My unholy little heathen.

My wife.

"I love you." Her words sound choked. Tangled.

I keep my arms by my side, surrendering to her for once. "Yeah?" I ask, the word a whisper.

She smiles in the dark, and I can feel it against my lips as she turns her head. "I love you so much, Lucifer."

I let my eyes flutter closed. "You're my whole life." I've never meant anything more. But as I hold her in my arms

and together we drift off into our heads, I'm thinking of Julie. Of Finn. Sevryn. Ortus. All the things I haven't told her.

I only hope when she finds out she'll forgive me for it as easily as she did tonight.

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XXVI



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10

THE MALIKOV MANSION

THERE'S A TALL, *shadowy figure standing at the end of the hall.*

I stand in front of my son's room, my fingers on the cool, silvery doorknob, and I wonder if I'm asleep right now.

I blink, fatigue heavy on my chest. Screams echo inside my head, chants from a man's voice. Your children are evil.

Evil.

It reminds me of a movie I watched recently, curled on the couch waiting for Lucifer to come home, but this feels so real.

My skin crawls and I tighten my hold on the doorknob. The dark hardwoods seem to tilt the longer I stare at the figure, a strange angle like in horror movies. And right now, in this moment, delirious from lack of sleep, it feels like that's what my life has become.

A horror film.

I try to breathe, but it's as if I have a phantom plastic bag over my nostrils, my mouth. Like I can't get in any air, like I'm going to suffocate.

I blink again, trying to focus on reality. What's tangible, like the floor beneath my feet. Lucifer across the hall.

But lately, it's felt like Lucifer is lying to me, no matter the truths he gave me last night.

Was it last night? What is today?

I sway a little and lean into the wall, the doorframe of my son's room. I place both palms against it, and I want to cry out for Lucifer, but it's like my tongue is sandpaper in my mouth and speaking seems impossible.

Is this a dream?

The figure steps closer, the floorboards creaking beneath him. The damask wallpaper seems to spin, colliding into strange shapes of blue hues, like a film's filter.

The figure takes another step, and I see his eyes. They're similar to mine, but not the same. A darker gray, circled with a light brown. His bone structure is skeletal, and he's wearing all black, but his shoes are high tops, solid midnight blue with black laces.

He has his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, and he tilts his head as he stares at me.

I feel like I'm falling.

My knees tremble, and I sink down to the floor, the hardwoods sharp beneath my knees. I shift my body, so I'm blocking Rain's room completely. There's a knife strapped to my thigh, and with shaky fingers, I reach for the hilt, but I don't pull it from the sheath. I'm in shorts, a long T-shirt with holes, and my fingers graze over the skin on my thigh as I stare up at the man, coming closer.

Is this real? Am I awake?

"You're scared of me." The man speaks. His voice is deceptively soft, but it's like he wants to beckon me closer.

I don't move, sitting back on my calves in front of my son's room, my fingers still on the hilt of my knife.

He steps closer until he's only a couple of feet from me, his shadow cast over me on the floor, dim lights in the ceiling glowing blue, they're motion lights. I swear I've seen them flicker on the past couple of nights, even when Lucifer and Rain are soundly sleeping in their beds.

Luce said I was imagining it. That I needed more sleep.

Now, I'm not so sure.

My nipples tighten and press against my shirt as the man keeps staring at me. I feel the ache in my breasts, throbbing beneath my skin. Something warm leaks from my left one, and I swear the man's gray eyes drop there, to my chest.

I hold my breath tightly inside my lungs, like I'm holding the hilt of my knife.

"Why are you scared?" he whispers, his plush lips circling the words carefully, like he's unfamiliar with them. He has an accent, but it's faint. Russian, but it sounds like it's mixed with something from the southern U.S. It's strange but not unpleasant to my ears.

Slowly, he drags his eyes back up to my face.

"I won't hurt you, you know." He shakes his head once, his pale skin seeming to glow in the night. "That's not what I'm here for."

My gaze finds the thin red circle tattooed around his neck. Did it just appear? He takes one more step closer, and he walks oddly. Like he's in pain.

Am I losing my mind? Is this a dream?

"Then why are you here?" I force the words out and they scrape up my throat, rough and sharp.

He smiles, his cheekbones lifting.

Shivers slide over my body. It feels like I've walked through a ghost, cold and clingy. "You'll find out," he whispers softly, like a caress. "You and I have lived very similar pasts, Sid Rain."

I stiffen at the surname, but don't correct him.

"We could be friends, you know." So soft spoken, it's almost enough to want to care for him. To hug him, put my hands into his wild, wavy hair, growing out rather than down.

But I'm not stupid. I've been in this world far too long to give in to a pretty voice and a soft smile. "I don't make friends easily." There's an edge to my words, but it almost feels like I'm speaking underwater. I sway, even on my knees, and I have to lean against the doorway.

Everything seems to wave around me, the walls, the floors.

My mouth feels like it's full of cotton and my eyes are so, so heavy.

The man laughs, and it's light and delicate. "Do you want to go back to bed?"

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" I mutter it, and I can't keep my eyes open. I slump against the doorway.

I think of Rain. I'll keep you safe, I promise. I would lay down my life for your next breath.

"Are you?" The man's voice is closer now.

I smell him. Like incense. Heady and dark. I feel his breath on my neck, but I can't move. More milk pushes through my nipple, and I ache all over.

"You are exhausted, living this life, aren't you?" The words are on my skin like a caress. Then his arms come around me, and I want to fight, I want to grab my knife, but my hands are limp. It's like they're not mine at all. Like I can't move my limbs. I have no motor control. "I have felt this too." He lifts me in the air, hugging me to his chest very carefully, but he makes a whimpering sound, like he's hurt.

Then his mouth comes over mine and all I can think is Lucifer will kill him if he sees this.

"Don't worry," he whispers, his lips touching my own. "I'll keep you safe, Lilith."



My pulse quickens as I clutch Rain tighter to my body. He's wiggly in my arms, twisting up to look at me, his little lips tipped into a smile. I return it nervously, my eyes glancing at his deep blue ones, his dark head of hair fluffy and sticking up all over the place. He just got up for the morning, and the sun hasn't risen, Lucifer still sleeping hard in our bed.

I know the boys are downstairs, and Ella. Brooklin left last night; her car wasn't in the drive on the camera. I haven't gone down to see if they've all killed each other yet but now, it doesn't seem to matter. I'm standing outside of one of the guest bedrooms on the rarely used third floor, the door ajar, and it's like all the breath has left my lungs. I'm only in a red sleep shirt, hanging over ripped-up black shorts, my feet pushed into white socks and black sliders. I don't even have my knife, because when I came up here for some alone time with Rain, to keep him from waking everyone else up, I didn't expect *anyone* to be here.

Now though, when I slowly lift my gaze from Rain, thinking for two seconds maybe my tired brain is playing tricks on me like in that strange dream last night, my eyes lock onto slate gray ones, circled with brown.

It feels like my muscles are frozen. There's a bite of cold in the house because it's Lucifer who lives here, and usually I've adjusted to it. But now, I cradle Rain's warm body closer to me, and I shiver as I stare at a man I've never seen before in my waking life.

But I saw you last night in my dream.

My mind is blank. It's like it's stopped working, and my thoughts tangle and twist together as my pulse flies inside my chest.

I glance down the hallway, seeing nothing but darkness, the black, damask wallpaper making everything even more sinister in this moment than it really is. The chandelier hanging above the spiral staircase is like slick, silver icicles suspended together, but the switch is off.

Slowly, I turn my gaze back to the man.

He's sitting on the edge of the four-poster black bed, with silver bedding. It doesn't look as if he slept under the covers. Then again, *why the fuck is he sleeping inside my house?*

He's wearing gray fitted pants, a white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up his wiry forearms, tattoos along his wrists, and on his hands.

It looks like candles inked into his fingers. A nun with a habit on one hand, a skull on the other.

With ice in my veins, I reluctantly drag my eyes up to his throat.

There.

A red line tattooed around his neck like a choker.

I feel sick. My stomach swoops, and I take a step backward, holding on tight to Rainy.

I glance at the rest of the guest bedroom. A velvet, silver couch facing a TV mounted into the wall, a fireplace below it. All the guestrooms look like this, but...*who the fuck is this? Who. The fuck.* Is this?

He has tattoos leading down into his dress shirt, but it looks like they're only on one half of his body. His hair is dark brown, curly; it's slicked away from his face. High cheekbones, a silver scar over one, another on his throat, leading down into the tattooed side of his chest. He looks... my age. He has on high-top, lace up, dark blue shoes, flat on the floor. They seem familiar somehow. He's lean, kind of like Lucifer, and tall, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

My tongue feels heavy in my mouth. I should call for help. I know the boys would run up here in a heartbeat. But

I can't seem to say anything.

And before I can decide what to do, taking one more step backward, my sliders sinking into the plush blue runner carpet on this floor, *he speaks*.

"Don't scream." He whispers the words, and I catch the curl of an accent in his voice.

Russian.

My heart hammers faster. I think of Nikita. RC and Mikhail. But this *cannot* be Luce's uncle because he's too young.

The initiate.

I know it's him, but I don't know why he's here. Lucifer didn't say he brought him here. He would've told me if I was going to wake up to a stranger in my house.

And last night—last fucking night—I dreamt you. You were in my fucking dreams.

I see, for the first time, bruises beneath his eyes, and one half of his full lips look swollen. Like he got... hit.

"Why the fuck are you in my house?" I'm glad my voice comes out strong, but my insides feel shaky. Rain wiggles again in my arms, and I cup my hand behind his head a little tighter, keeping him close, loving the silky feel of his hair, the warmth of his skin. Confirmation he's alive, alive, *alive*.

The boy swallows, and glances down at his hands, hanging his head. It's like his shoulders curve inward, and I see him wince, but I don't know why. "I'm sorry, I thought Lucifer would have—"

"It's okay, baby girl."

I jump, spinning around and finding Lucifer looming over me, his eyes scanning my body, as if to check for injuries. Then he's glaring at the boy in the room.

"Who is this?" I demand, feeling braver now with my husband by my side. I sway a little back and forth, trying to keep Rain calm even though I am anything but. "Who the *fuck* is this?" *Why did I dream him?*

I hear a creak on the stairs, and marvel over the fact I didn't hear Lucifer come up them, but then again, he knows every inch of this place. My eyes shoot past Luce and I see Maverick without a shirt on, a hand trailing down his tanned six-pack and all the ink under his skin.

"Oh good, you're getting a formal introduction to our half-brother like I did last night." He sounds fucking annoyed, and my heartrate triples in my chest.

My mouth hangs open as Luce turns to shoot Mav a glare over his shoulder.

Mav shrugs, a dimple flashing in his tanned face as he smiles and comes to stand beside Luce.

Lucifer turns back to me, frowning. "I'm sorry, it's just... last night..." He trails off, a slow smile curving his lips.

Impossibly, I feel myself blushing as I look back at him. I remember last night very well. It felt good to take care of him. To love him.

But... "You're forgiven," I snap out. "Now tell me who the fuck this is and why he's in our house."

I turn back to face the boy, who is peeking up through his long lashes at Lucifer and Maverick standing just outside his doorway.

Lucifer comes closer to me, his arm snaking around my waist as he pulls me close. I know what he's doing. Besides the fact he can never stop touching me, he's *claiming* me. I want to protest. To tell him if this kid is related to me like they're saying he is, then obviously, I wouldn't touch him. But then I cut my eyes to Maverick, who's staring with a furrowed brow at the boy, and I keep my mouth closed.

"This is the initiate." Lucifer speaks with a cold cruelty toward the new kid.

I glance at him and see he's grimacing. "The one you stabbed thirteen times?" I ask.

The kid looks at the floor.

"That's the one," Luce says with pride in his voice.

Maverick snorts. "Sevryn. That's his name." I turn to look at Mav, who is still staring at him. "Sevryn Otto *Astor*." He mocks his middle name, but absolutely snarls his last name. He tilts his head. "In the light, you look..." He trails off, then scrubs a hand over his face, not finishing his sentence. "Nevermind," he finally whispers, but I see him staring at his hand as he drops it.

At my name, and his dead brother's. *Malachi*.

My stomach dips and swerves. My family relations are always a little fucked up, and I'm not sure I want to know the story here, but I bite anyway. "He's Maddox's kid?"

Mav nods once, dragging his gaze to me. "Probably Maddox and some whore's—"

I narrow my eyes.

"Some *woman*," he amends, "at a brothel in Russia. That's where he grew up, anyway."

"And how long is he here for?" My voice rises a little, my head swimming.

"Not long. Halloween." Lucifer's words.

I tilt my head to look up at him. He's distracted by Rain, and a real, genuine smile spreads on his face as he looks at his son.

Rain coos, reaching his chubby hand out to my husband, and Lucifer lets him hook two little fingers around Luce's own pale index finger.

My heart threatens to burst through my chest.

"Halloween?" I repeat, trying to stay focused. I glance at Sevryn. He's still staring at the floor, silent. I'm doing my best to hold onto the wisps of my nightmare but the longer I'm awake, the more they fade. "Why? He's *living* here?"

Lucifer cuts his eyes to me, still letting Rainy hold onto his finger. "I don't want it either," he growls. "I don't have a choice." His gaze searches mine. "*We* don't have a choice."

"Trust that he means that." Maverick says those words.

I don't look away from Lucifer as I arch a brow.

Luce reaches for Rainy, and I let him take him, missing the warmth instantly as Lucifer cuddles his son. "Come on," he says to me, "let's go downstairs, Lilith." Then he looks up at Sevryn before he turns to go. "Don't come out of this room unless you want to die inside this house." He walks away, expecting I'll follow.

Mav turns too, but he catches my eye, seeing me rooted to the spot. He shakes his head once. "Leave it the fuck alone, Sid."

"If he's in my goddamn house," I say, my teeth gritted. Even Lucifer stops to listen at the top of the stairs. "I can say whatever the fuck I want to him."

Lucifer is staring at me, holding Rainy close.

Maverick sighs. "Our father was a fucking whore," he mutters. Then he glances back at me. "And not the good kind."

I roll my eyes and fold my arms, then turn, taking a step toward the doorway of Sevryn's temporary room.

"Lilith," Lucifer warns me, and I feel Maverick's eyes burning a hole in the back of my head. But I don't look away from Sevryn, who is staring up at me, but his head is still bowed between his shoulders.

"Where have you been? All this time?" A brothel in Russia, Mav said he grew up in... but why is he here *now*?

Something crosses his face. Something like... a slyness. It's hard to explain, but he sits up a little straighter, and he's suddenly staring at me with interest. I think the boys were asking the wrong questions. I think I'm asking the right one.

"You heard *Mayhem*," he whispers, enunciating our brother's nickname carefully, but there's something in his eyes. Something gleaming in the gray, the circle of brown around his irises. It's as if his answer is laced with a secret. And why is he referring to Mav as "Mayhem"? Why would my brother introduce himself that way to someone who will be so close to us?

“Why are you out now?” I press, ignoring his subtle threat.

He curves a brow, smiling a little. It’s eerie, his smile. “Why not?”

It’s not an answer, and we both know it, but Lucifer calls my name again, at my back, and I think about all the places *I* ended up. Something softens inside my chest, but I don’t act on it. This man is a stranger. It doesn’t matter if we share blood, it doesn’t matter if we share a fucked-up childhood.

Don’t trust him.

“You fuck with my husband,” I tell him, my voice soft and steady, “or my son...”

Sevryn’s full lips press together and his eyes narrow, surprising me, but I’ve dealt with demons before.

“I promise, I’ll slit your throat.”

Neither of the boys behind me say another word, and Rainy is quiet too.

Sevryn stares at me, not blinking, his hands still clasped together. Then he lifts his head and he holds my gaze as he says, softly in his accented voice, low enough only I can hear, “I’m not interested in either of *them*.” He smiles, an eerie thing. “*I’ll keep you safe, Lilith.*”

My blood runs cold. My heart threatens to leap out of my chest. The words are so familiar. Were they in the dream?

Regardless, I hear the threat, but I don’t speak. *I can play games too.*

Maverick grabs my arm and pulls me back, and without taking my eyes off Sevryn, I let him.

When I’m finally forced to turn around, I see my husband staring at me with unadorned love in his eyes—they’re soft and shining and vulnerable—and I wonder if that’s the first time I have ever stood up for him where he could hear me.

"I don't fucking like this." I pace my husband's office as he sits behind the desk, Rain in his arms. He's smiling down at our son, but his eyes keep flicking toward me with every turnabout I do, my arms crossed. "I don't want him here."

Slices of the sun spill into the darkened office, but most of the light is shadowed by Maverick, gazing out through the window with his hands in his pockets, back muscles flexed, he still hasn't found a shirt. "This is how it goes, Angel," he says without looking at me.

I stop directly in front of Lucifer but I shoot my gaze over to Mayhem. "Fuck that," I snarl, my nails digging into my biceps. "He can stay somewhere else."

There's a tense silence, broken only by a cooing sound from Rain. I keep my eyes trained on the back of my brother's skull though.

After a moment, he shakes his head, scoffing. "I assume you want *me* to take that responsibility?"

"None of you have kids. Any of you would be fine." I feel my husband's eyes on me with my words, but he says nothing.

"That wouldn't test him enough."

"He can't stay here. He can go *anywhere else* on this goddamn street, but he cannot stay here."

Maverick is quiet, still facing away from me. When he speaks again, his voice is low. "I can't always save you and him, Angel. I have my own family to worry about."

I almost laugh, but I hold it in. "Your own *family? Her?* She's not fucking family. *This* is your family—"

"Her name is Ella." He's still soft spoken, looking out that fucking window.

And it's not like I asked *him* specifically to take *Sevryn*, but Lucifer and I are the only ones with a child. It's unfair, but more than that, it's a solvable problem. What does Ella

have to do with it, anyway? Rain is my brother's blood relative, and he's completely defenseless. "I know her fucking name. But your nephew's name is *Rain*, and it's not as if he can look out for himself—"

"Don't speak to me as if I'm stupid, Angel." It amazes me, the way his voice is such a caress, but his words seem deadly. Almost enough to make me back down, but this is my son we're talking about. "Sevryn cannot stay with anyone else because this is an *order* given to Lucifer."

"I don't give a fuck—"

"You will if they break Rain's neck and make you watch and listen as they do." Maverick's voice is a low growl and slowly, he turns to stare at me. I can see the paleness of his eyes this far across the room.

My stomach feels sick. "Fuck you."

He lifts his lips in a half smile. "I think we've already been down that road—"

"*Enough*," Lucifer snarls.

I don't look away from Maverick, his smirk curving higher as he keeps his eyes on me too.

"There's nothing we can do about it, Lilith." My husband's tone is softer as he speaks to me. "It's temporary. I'll keep him away from Rain. And in the end, it will be worth it."

Maverick jerks his chin toward me. "Hear that? It'll be *worth it*, because President Satan over here is probably keeping secrets about what he gets out of this."

Confusion spins with annoyance in my gut as slowly, Mav and I both turn to my husband, who has his eyes on me. But when he talks, I know he's addressing his brother-in-law. "Here's a hint." He cuts his gaze to Mav, spinning in his office chair, holding tightly to Rain, who is reaching chubby hands up to grab at his dad's face. "You find out exactly what the fuck is going on with your girl and Atlas, because if she puts *my family* in danger..." He glances at me. "I will fucking kill her myself."

The feeling in the room changes. Even my mouth goes dry, watching Maverick lift his chin and stare down his nose at Lucifer. His nostrils flare, every muscle in his body tense. "You're crossing a line." He whispers it, but it's deadly.

Lucifer's dimple pops as he smiles. "Yeah. I tend to do that without remorse." He bends his head, kissing Rain's, but his eyes don't leave Maverick.

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XXVII



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10

THE MALIKOV MANSION

“HERE, LET ME HELP.” I pull open the smoky gray drawer I know contains silverware, then pluck out a spoon.

Sid swipes her bangs out her face with her fingers on one hand, turning to glare at me as she stands on the opposite side of the kitchen. She has an empty eggshell in her fist, but the mixing bowl she’s cracked the eggs into has floating pieces of shell in it. She was trying to get it out with her fingers, and I heard her low growl of frustration.

This morning when I woke up, I couldn’t find Mavy, but I hear his carefree laughter ricochet now through the closed screen door, all the boys—including Rain—on the back deck. I still haven’t gone outside to see him. When I was looking for him, I watched as he came downstairs with Sid, Lucifer, and Rain a few minutes ago, his eyes narrowed on mine. He kissed my forehead but trailed past me, following

Lucifer to the back deck without a word. I wanted an apology for the shit he did with me last night, trying to humiliate me in front of Atlas, but he gave me nothing.

Atlas is out there though, along with Cain and Ezra, and I'm annoyed how he's okay with *them*, but not me.

I cross the kitchen and Sid moves to the side, yanking open a drawer and dumping the egg shells in the trash as I pluck up the stray shells with the spoon, gliding them up the side of the mixing bowl and setting them on a paper towel beside it.

"He's here, isn't he?" I ask quietly, feeling Sid's eyes on me. I try not to think of Mavy's call to her. Her obvious disdain for me, for what happened with Lucifer after she left him for Jeremiah. The way Maverick seemed so into her when we first arrived here as her personal bodyguards or some shit. "The initiate?"

Sid is quiet. I set down the spoon and pick up the whisk, stirring and blending the egg whites and the yolk. I glance at the stove and see there's not even a pan there yet to cook the eggs. No butter set out, no serving plates. As awkward as I feel in the Malikov mansion, I don't think Sid feels anymore at home inside her own kitchen.

I ignore her silence as I set down the whisk and pull open a drawer beneath me, searching for a pan. On the third try, I find one. I grab the handle and set it on the stove, then turn around and head for the matte black fridge.

"It's nice of you to cook for them." I keep talking because my temper is spiking with her silence but so are my nerves. "They could make their own food." *It's really nice considering you don't know how to fucking cook at all.*

I pull out the butter dish in the door, eyeing the prepackaged salads, the formula pitcher, fruits and veggies and milk. No bacon, no meats at all. No cheese, or else I could make a casserole. But I don't see any potatoes, either, in the fridge or on the cabinet.

They can survive on eggs.

I nudge the fridge door closed with my hip, then pluck out a butter knife and a spatula from the silverware drawer before I return to the stove. I pull out seven plates from a high cabinet, setting the weight of them down on the counter. “Are we feeding him too?” I don’t expect an answer so I keep talking. “Do you have any pancake mix?” I start to scramble all the eggs because I’m not taking five individual orders from the boys. “I could make some—”

“Sevryn.” Sid says it quietly, and I turn to look at her over my shoulder. She’s dressed in a black hoodie and shorts; her hair is messy and smudges are beneath her gray eyes as she stares at me. She glances up at the vaulted ceiling as the scent of the food makes my stomach growl. “The initiate. His name is Sevryn.”

Interesting name, but I don’t say that out loud, considering she’s the wife of *Lucifer*. I turn my attention back to the eggs, using the spatula to stir them. I push the memory of Atlas’s call aside. His warning. He’s said nothing else about it since we all arrived here. Then again, it’s not like we’ve been together alone.

“You’ve met him?” I ask.

“Just now.” There’s something a little haunted about the way she says it.

“And?” Heat rises to my cheeks as I press her. Our conversations are always awkward, not to mention I’m annoyed Mavy hasn’t told me about *Sevryn*, or introduced me. I assume that’s where they were all coming from this morning, down the stairs. He’s probably locked up in his room like that chick Mavy locked in the basement.

The hunger pangs seem to vanish and I grit my teeth, grabbing the handle of the pan, then doling out seven servings of eggs in the center of each black plate. I don’t know how many eggs Sid cracked, but she must understand the appetite of the Unsaints, because there’s more than enough.

“I don’t trust him. I don’t want him here.” Her words are low, but unwavering.

My mind flickers to Atlas. *Good. Don’t trust him.*

I turn around, stepping by her as I put the pan and the spatula in the sink, then flick on the hot water to rinse it. I pluck up her dishwashing soap—lavender scented—and drizzle some over the pan, watching the bubbles rise up as I turn off the water and put the soap down, my fingertips coming to the ledge of the sink.

“How long is he staying?”

“Until Halloween.”

Almost three weeks. “What’s the point?”

There’s a moment of silence. Then, “I don’t know. Has Mav said anything?”

I clench my teeth, hearing another round of laughter from the boys. I flick my eyes up, to the hallway leading to the back deck. I can’t see anything, with the angle I’m at. “He doesn’t tell me anything.”

“What about Atlas? Does he whisper secrets in your ear?”

I whip around, my hands clenched into fists at my side as I stare down at Sid. Her chin is lifted, and she glares defiantly back, her arms crossed and lips pressed together.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Sid curves a dark brow, and I notice the scar above it, paler than her light olive skin. “Maverick didn’t attack him for nothing.”

“He *attacked* him because he has a short temper and he doesn’t know how to talk to me and—”

Sid narrows her eyes. “He’s looking out for you. He wants to keep you, *everyone*, safe.”

My chest is heaving. How dare she try to get into the middle of *my* relationship? It has nothing to do with her. Neither does my friendship with Atlas. Besides that, if she only knew what her husband is forcing me to do, maybe she’d take her attitude down a notch.

“Yeah,” I say, digging my nails into my palms. “Is that what you were doing when Jeremiah was whispering secrets in *your* ear? Keeping everyone safe, Sid?”

Her brows pull together as she grits her teeth, turning to face me fully, like she might try to swing at me. *Be my guest.*

“Or what about when Maverick called you the other night, around four in the morning? You two keeping us safe then?”

A flicker of surprise crosses her features, her lips parting slightly. Is she surprised I know, or is it because I’m mad? I can’t tell. But as Maverick laughs again and I glance at all the eggs steaming on their plates, I shake my head, stepping back.

Whatever. Fuck this.

“Don’t be a judgmental hypocrite,” I snarl, then turn on my heel and head toward the back deck. I charge down the hallway, hearing someone snort, followed by more laughter.

I push open the screen door and step outside on the covered porch, the October chill drifting through the space. Crossing my arms as the frustration in my body fades and I actually take in my surroundings, I’m glad I got dressed before I ventured around the house.

It’s kind of unnerving, having Cain, Atlas, Ezra, Lucifer, *and* Maverick staring at me, silence ringing around the deck, only the sounds of trees drifting in the breeze breaking up the quiet.

I stand perfectly still, except for the way my throat rolls as I swallow, my gaze coming to Mavy. He’s sitting on a couch by himself, Rain on his chest, the baby’s head wavering as he works his neck muscles, trying to peer up at his uncle. Mav’s tattooed fingers are gently pressed into Rain’s sides, keeping hold of him.

But his pale eyes are piercing on mine.

I’m vaguely aware the rest of the brothers are together in chairs around a black table, bottles of water and coffee

mugs in hand, a good distance from my boyfriend. It's like there's tension between them, and I hate the way it makes me feel slightly better. Like maybe Mav *is* still mad at Atlas and not just me over last night.

"Breakfast," I manage to say, my voice cracking as I keep my arms crossed and my eyes on Mav's while Rain's head comes crashing down on his chest. "It's ready."

Mavy doesn't even blink. He just keeps staring at me, his wide lips pressed together, jaw clenched.

Seconds pass. Maybe minutes.

The wave of annoyance crashes down on me. "*Thank you, maybe?*" I snap. "*I'll be in to eat soon?*" I throw up one hand before I curl both into fists at my side, my cheeks growing warm with every Unsainted eye on me. "Or you could even try, *good fucking morning, Ella?*"

Someone laughs. I think it's Ezra, but I don't dare look, my heart beating a mile a minute inside my chest. I hate the way I never feel like I fit in. I hate all the things I'm doing behind everyone's back to *earn* my place here, and no one can see me. No one seems to be able to guess it. They're all blind to the shit I'm doing to *belong*. The shit I'm holding onto in order to keep everyone safe, *including* Rain.

My boyfriend's gaze narrows.

Fuck you. I mouth it but I don't say it out loud. Then I turn, intending to go upstairs to our guest room and hide out until we can leave. Or maybe I'll just pack my stuff and go home myself.

But just as I reach for the handle on the screen door, Mavy speaks. "No, no. Where do you think you're going?"

His quiet, patronizing tone pisses me off more. I wrap my fingers around the handle, wanting to disappear. "Fuck you," I snarl it out loud this time.

No one laughs now. But as I yank open the door, I hear Mavy say, "Ella. You're not walking away from me. Come here."

Ha. I lift up my middle finger and stride inside, letting the door slam closed behind me.

There's only *one* person I haven't seen this morning who didn't either act like I don't exist at all or treat me like shit. Fuck Atlas's warning. Fuck all of them.

Fuck everything.

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XXVIII

Serena

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10
THE MALIKOV MANSION

RAIN DANCES ALONG THE WINDOWPANES. I sit with my knees to my chest on the bed, wishing for Monday. Watching the forked lightning brighten the sky purple, I think of how she'd hold me in a storm when we were younger. Our home was built well on the outside. But anytime the thunder shook the floor, my body would tremble.

Monday though, she's never scared. And at our home, when storms came, she took me up to the middle floor, the secret room no one ever seemed to see but us. It was almost like the weather was calm outside when we went there.

I close my eyes, grateful I cannot hear the people down below. They are quiet, but I know they are there. There is

no escape, the one with demon eyes said. He warned me not to try. He said it would hurt worse if I did.

His brothers are here, I think. I don't know why, but they have not left yet.

I think of the knife he plunged into me nine days ago and my throat feels tight.

There is no escape.

Russia, where I grew up, is too far, but leaving this street... somehow, it feels even more impossible. I tried to run from there more than a few times, to get back to the girl I dream of.

Not Monday. Monday was *after*. Monday is now, even though we're in very different places.

My stomach tenses as I think of the *other* girl. Blonde hair, blue eyes, golden skin with blue veins.

I wonder if she's still...alive. My memories of her are so fractured, I am not sure I will even recognize her when they give me what I am promised. I am not sure where it is, exactly, we existed together in this life. I only know she feels warm to me, inside my memories.

I hear something at my back then, causing me to startle. When I twist around to look over my shoulder, I see a girl with red hair and porcelain skin. Green eyes. Beautiful. Adam Medici told me about this one. Dropped her photo on the table inside the church when I was being taught what I needed to know.

Ella Christian. Nineteen. She is only one year younger than I am.

"She is inconsequential. Be nice to her all the same. They do not like when you play with their toys."

I have seen her in person too, she just doesn't know it yet.

I clear my throat, turning away from the girl.

"You should not be here." I don't want to say the words. I want to keep her here. I too, have always been inconsequential.

I want to hold her hand, like Monday held mine when I was younger. I want to brush her hair behind her ear, like I did with the other girl. Or maybe she did it to me; I cannot remember. But I wish to run my fingers through the redhead's strands and twist. Yet I don't want to play with their toys. I only want to exist quietly here before I can get what I've been promised.

She's silent at my back, and for a moment, I wonder if she is gone. But before I can turn to look, she responds.

"There's nowhere else for me to go." Her voice sounds sad, and I think of this dark house. Low lights. Covered windows.

And Lucifer Malikov.

Adam Medici said the boys share the girls and thinking of Lucifer touching her pale skin is kind of horrific. The look in his eyes over the days we spent together has been nothing short of murderous. But she seems too young for him. Not in years, but temperament. She is full of some kind of sadness, but I think I saw a spark of hope in her eyes when they met mine, seconds ago.

Twisting around to look at her once more, I see she's wearing red lace up boots and a black dress, the skirt flared out a little, swishing and dripping with lace all the way down to her ankles. Frowning, I say the only thing I can think of. "Your hair..."

Her face turns pink as she reaches a hand to her ends, slowly twirling a strand around her finger while her throat rolls.

I realize she is uncomfortable. At least, I think so. I'm not so good at deciphering body language. It all jumbles inside my head. "It's pretty," I finally say.

Her startled eyes dart up to mine. "Thank you." She drops her hand by her side quickly, like maybe I won't have noticed she moved it at all.

She glances over the room. Gray walls. A four-poster bed, dark sheets. A nightstand, a gargoye lamp. Softly, she

closes the door behind her, her palms splayed over the darkness of the door, her back pressed to it.

She does not look at me. Instead, she watches the storm.

I look forward too, hands clasped in my lap.

“Why are you so dressed up?” she asks quietly.

I glance down at my black dress shirt, tailored pants. My sleeves are rolled up, exposing one tattoo along my forearm. A piano with a rose over the keys. Monday told me to get it when we had a day pass from our home, years ago. I was underage, but none of that seems to matter in my world. Madame Mora did not like it though. She said it would be harder for me to find a new family. It only made me get more tattoos, every chance I could, even when I was beat for it.

But I don't know if I even like this tattoo. I am not sure what, exactly, I like.

“I'm not.” I say the words quietly, and I don't think she'll have heard me. Madame Mora always hated that. I spoke too low. I was too quiet. I did not... entertain well.

There are other things I do well though.

I lift my eyes to the storm.

“Well...” Ella pauses, and I think I hear something shy in her words. “You look nice, either way.”

I don't smile or laugh or thank her. Looking nice always got me feeling bad, back home. And besides, maybe she is just paying me back for the compliment about her hair. It is pretty, I meant it. The flash of color is beautiful. It does not remind me of home.

Home. The word is strange inside my head. It never felt nice, but maybe home, sometimes, is horror, and you simply learn to sleep with your demons. It becomes painfully comfortable, in its way.

The girl is quiet, and thunder is our only companion in the silence.

Until she says, her tone hushed like it's something forbidden... “Do you sometimes think they are planning to

kill you too?"

Ice creeps inside my veins. I go very still, staring at the storm. It's dark now, no more lightning to spark the night. But I do not take my eyes from the windowpane. My mind spins as I think of the bandages beneath my shirt. The things she can't see. The damage further under my skin, infecting my heart, turning it rancid. *Do you sometimes think they are planning to kill you too?*

I think of Monday in the bowels of the church. Her eyes on me as she stood beside Father Malikov, his hand parked on her waist. They spoke in Latin, a language I do not understand. But something shifted in her expression. Something darkened, and when Mikhail led her out, she tried to fight him, to get to me.

He did not hit her, as I expected. He was only staring at her, his fingers curled into fists.

It would have happened back in our home. Monday was hit all the time, because she is vicious and angry and defiant, and I would tell her to be quiet, to lay low, but it's as if she could not. Once she thought of something to say, it left her lips and there was no stopping it. Like a burst dam.

That was the night before I was stabbed. But maybe she heard something else too. Perhaps Boaz told her I was going to die.

I haven't seen her since then, when Mikhail decided not to hit her in front of me, and instead, called in two men to pry open her tongue and drug her. Her body became limp after many minutes of thrashing, and he simply carried her out.

I could not follow. My hands were quite literally tied behind my back as Adam Medici stood guard over me, to my side.

I have not seen her, but I felt her mouth on mine in the ceremony with all of the men. I heard her whispers in my ear. *"It is okay, Sev. You will be okay. I promise."* But she was crying through it, and so I don't believe her promises.

“I do not know what you mean.” I try to keep the fear from my voice. I have wished to die many times in my life. But I can’t yet. *They promised me something.*

My blonde ghost of a girl.

“Have you heard from...*him?*”

I frown, turning once more to lock eyes with Ella. It still feels bizarre, holding eye contact with a stranger, but I don’t look away because she seems concerned. Her face is paler than before, and she looks as if she is trembling. I shake my head once, pain radiating down my arm with the movement. I thought that was an initiation. I thought it was all over now. What does she mean, have I heard from *him?* “I do not know what you’re talking about.”

She studies me for many minutes, then she reaches behind her, and I hear the lock click in the door.

Pretty bold. I don’t think she’s supposed to be alone here with me. And if Lucifer finds out... But she doesn’t seem to care. Instead, she’s coming closer on light steps, her dress swishing. She crosses the room and stands beside me.

I clear my throat and slide over, placing my hand on the edge of the bed. “You can sit,” I tell her quietly.

I think she might refuse, the way she’s staring at my hand as if it is a problem she cannot solve. I glance down to see what she sees. The candles and Russian scrawled across my knuckles.

I retract my hand, bringing it to my heart, pain lighting up along my arm as I do, but I ignore it. She sits then, and I can smell her. She smells like food, but something else too. Fresh, almost like honey. Vanilla, maybe. It isn’t the overdone scent of someone trying to hide body odor. I know that smell well; sometimes, it was *me*.

Servicing my various “parents,” sometimes the sex would last for what felt like days. There was no time for showers.

We did what we had to do.

I push those memories back. It's easier to think on the other kinds of pain. From Mora, even from Lucifer himself. He has no idea those thirteen wounds he gave me were nothing compared to what I've gone through. The only thing I couldn't stand was the blood. The mess. *The feel of something liquid on my skin.*

My stomach rolls. I never want to feel that again.

"You can tell me," she whispers. Before I can say anything, she lifts her knee, placing her foot on the bottom rung of the bed. I watch from the corner of my eye as she slides up her dress with her fingers, bunching the black fabric between her pale skin. Her eyes come to mine for a moment, and I feel my face heat. She can't want what everyone else wanted from me, can she? I left that behind, didn't I?

My heart beats fast in my chest. She's far smaller than me. Curvy, but I am taller, and I have muscle now that I've been able to work out. At least, I could, until...*he* destroyed me momentarily. But if she touches me, if she tries to get me to work for her, I will snap her pale white neck. I will press my thumbs into her eyes, and I will murder her. I am not doing it again. Adam Medici said I no longer had to. Said this was different. This is supposed to be different—

I see them then.

My heart leaps to my throat, and I lean away, like it's a curse I could catch if I am too close. She fists her hands at her sides, and I can see stretch marks along her white skin like ribbons, but beyond that...*beyond that...I see something else.*

Fading yellow bruises, but lines that look like scars too. Unnatural marks. She has to lift her leg, twist her knee toward her other, because most of the marks are along the back of her thigh, not the front. All the way up to the curve of her ass, slipping beneath the black underwear she's wearing.

She straightens her leg just slightly, and the wounds disappear, impossible to see from this angle.

My mind goes to the orphanage. It's like nails clawing at the inside of my brain. I feel sick, warm and cold at once. *Feverish.*

"Did he do this to you too?" She whispers the words like a peace offering.

Bile burns up my throat. I think of the smell when I went to a particularly sadistic home. The scent of body odor, both mine and theirs. I think of the shame, in those brief moments of reprieve. Those seconds or minutes, so fleeting, when I laid on my back, staring up at the ceiling, wishing I could float too.

I think of being left alone. Never looked at when they were disgusted with themselves.

The way I always took every drink they offered me if I was in that kind of home. Every bottle of vodka, no matter how sick I would feel later. It was a way to pass the time. To make it all go...numb.

I stand, my head spinning. "Stop." I turn my back to her. "Please, stop."

I feel the bed dip and assume she's shifting down her dress. I grab the back of my neck, stepping closer to the floor-to-ceiling window. I press my temple to the cool glass, gulping down air. Trying to forget. Trying to breathe as the storm claws on, outside.

"It's okay. You can tell me." She's closer. Too close. "I think, maybe, we're in this together." She is right behind me. I have a vicious urge to lash out at her. To press against her bruises and make her cry. To make her feel what I'm feeling. *What I felt.* I stay still. Limp. I had to do that, sometimes. It is what they wanted from me. Obedience. I was a toy. I had to be *motionless*, to stay their doll. "But if we follow all the rules, we survive, don't we?" Too close. She's too close to me. "I've started seeing things

though, and I don't know if..." She pauses, like she has said too much.

She is. She has. *Get away, get away, get away.*

"I don't know what's real anymore."

She saw me, didn't she? *She saw me.*

Get. The fuck. Away.

"But I've been taking these pills to..." She catches herself again. She's going to spill all her secrets like the blood I want to take from her. *Get away from me.*

But she's lost too, is she not? She knows I came into her room, doesn't she? *She's just lost too.*

She steps closer.

I stiffen, not daring to breathe.

Her hand comes to my shoulder, so soft, so light. Like an angel on one side of me. Miraculously, I relax a little at her touch, but my body is still coiled with tension. "We're going to belong, aren't we?"

I don't know what she means. I want to tell her about my bandages. I want to show her what they did to me, as an offering, a reciprocal. I swallow thickly, then my fingers come to the buttons of my shirt. I hear her intake of breath, and I move quickly, wondering if she is as sick of naked bodies as I am. I keep going, forcing myself, because she won't hurt me. *She won't hurt me, and if she does, I will fucking kill her.*

Then I turn, shrugging out of my shirt, just letting it slip down to my elbows, and I know she sees the wounds because her eyes widen and the hand she had on my shoulder comes to her mouth, her fingers on her lips.

"He did that to you?" She looks up at me, then back down. "When? He..." She shakes her head, taking a step closer. She reaches one hand to touch me, gently, not on my wounds, but along my chest, where my tattoos are. Angels and demons and roses and more thorns. "Oh my God." It sounds choked. Her touch is featherlight, and I do not

despise it, because it isn't sexual. Because it is soft. "I thought mine was the worst and I thought—"

A loud *pop* cracks through her words, cutting her off. She gasps, but I duck, grabbing her wrist and yanking her down with me to the floor. I am *very* familiar with the sound of gunshots. Beneath me, she's silent, the ringing probably monstrous in her ears like it is in mine. My chest is to her back, my palms on either side of her shoulders. Her head is to the floor, and my brow is pressed to the top of her spine. I feel something very cold and for a second, I think I've been shot and didn't realize it.

It happened the first time.

Stab wounds you do not grow numb from. Gunshots can take a second to kick in. The first pain is brutal. The second, silent until it comes creeping into your awareness.

But I realize, as thunder cracks outside and I can hear it far clearer than I did before, the bullet splintered the window. Lifting my head, I see the smallest chink in it, the ammo lodged inside. Any normal window would have shattered. At the very least, there would be a spiderweb etched around it.

Bulletproof windows. *Of course they have bulletproof windows, just like they do at my temporary home, in another state I have forgotten the name of.*

The girl beneath me—*Ella*—makes a small whimper as she slowly starts to pick her head up. I press down against the back of her skull, her hair thick beneath my palm. Just as I push her face to the hardwoods to protect her from any future gunfire, a voice breaks the silence.

"Do not fucking touch her."

I vaguely recognize the voice. But Lucifer Malikov's has a distinct rasp. This one sounds just as angry, but more clear. There were a few men around the BMW Lucifer drove me home in. I was introduced, but sometimes meetings blur inside my head, I've had so many of them in my life.

I don't move my hand from Ella's head. But she's the one who speaks next.

"Mavy."

Mavy?

No, Mayhem. It must be. Lucifer said that name. The one with so many tattoos, I saw him this morning too. He was behind the dark haired girl with eyes like mine. What did Medici say about him?

"The Astor bastard will kill you if you get on his bad side. He has a temper."

Well fuck.

Underneath me, Ella's voice is breathy, and I do not know if it's an act, if she is trying to soothe him, or if this is the default she falls into around him. It wasn't like this with me. It was stronger. Friendly, kind, but crisper. Now though, it's like she is...groveling.

I feel her back move when she speaks. "It's okay. He was —"

The man laughs. *Mayhem*. He laughs, then I hear footsteps, and I raise up, peeking over the side of the bed. My heart tumbles in my chest. I see black pants, ink over golden skin, and nothing else before someone grabs the back of my neck and the warm barrel of a gun is pushed into my mouth as I am yanked to my feet, almost stepping on Ella, but I manage not to trip, not hurt her as I leap over her.

The hold on my neck is strong, but it slides to my throat, and I'm pulled against this man's chest, his other arm bound over me, holding the gun in my mouth. I taste metal, something more bitter. The warmth on my tongue is bordering on painful.

My eyes go to Ella, and she is slowly standing to her feet, her cheeks flushed and her hair a mess around her face.

A voice whispers in my ear, "Close your eyes. Don't fucking look at her."

I close my eyes, otherwise staying extremely still. *Go limp. Go limp. Limp, limp, limp.*

“Don’t.” That word is not for me, I can tell. I feel the man’s chest rise at my back, like he is holding his breath after he issued the command.

But the girl doesn’t listen to it. “He was just—”

“If you speak one more fucking word, I’m pulling the trigger. You want that, huh? You wanted me to murder someone for you all along? After this one, we can head back to your trailer park and kill your mom while we’re at it? How’s that sound for a date?” His voice is even, almost amused, and it makes the words he speaks even more threatening.

I squeeze my thighs together. I don’t want to have an accident, but my mouth is watering around the barrel of the gun, it is uncomfortable against my teeth, and I know his finger is on the trigger. I cannot fight back and I can’t defend myself with words either.

Limp, limp, limp.

Silence echoes in the room, and I am grateful for it.

He pushes the barrel further into my mouth. My stomach convulses, but I do not gag.

“You don’t have a gag reflex,” he whispers in my ear, and shivers slide down my spine. I squeeze my eyes closed tighter. “I can only guess how you learned that.”

Saliva escapes the corner of my mouth, dripping down my chin. Bad memories threaten to burst in my brain like pulsing lights knocking against a dark box.

“You think you’ve been through shit?” He laughs. It is a boy’s laughter, carefree in the most disturbing way. “If I find you alone in a room with my girl again, you’ll be praying you can get your sorry ass back to that fucking whore house of yours in one piece.” Then he pulls the gun from my mouth and shoves me away from him. I stumble toward the bed, my eyes flying open as I stare at the dark

duvet beneath my fingers. “Now get the fuck out of this room.”

My knees shake and the pressure on my bladder is almost too much. *Too much too much too much.* “I cannot leave. Lucifer said—”

I hear the girl gasp at the same time a dull pain registers on the back of my skull, bringing me down to my elbows on the bed. Spots pop in front of my eyes, the sharp pain in my head growing brighter.

He hit me with the gun.

“I don’t give a *fuck* what anyone said. *Get. Out.*”

I do not move. I do not breathe. I’m trying to adjust to the dazzling pain, but before I can, he tosses the gun on the bed where it lands harmlessly out of my reach, then he is grabbing the back of my neck again and yanking me around, aiming me toward the open door.

“Here. I’ll help you.” He walks forward with me, then purposefully knocks the side of my head against the doorjamb.

The girl makes a strangled sound, like a growl, but she says nothing, and I think it is for the best.

Dazed, the man throws me into the dark hallway, and before I can catch my bearings, the door slams shut behind me.

I stare at it as I twist around, stumbling backward, my palms splayed on the wall opposite the door.

My chest is heaving, emotions of past memories assaulting me.

I take deep, burrowing breaths.

It is for her, for her, *for her.* The girl with blonde hair. My ghost of good memories.

But another name spins inside my head.

Mavy. Mayhem.

I narrow my eyes, smiling even as the pain in the back of my head grows.

When this is all over, I am going to break your fucking spine.

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XXIX

Haverick

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10
THE ASTOR ESTATE

“TELL ME ABOUT LAST NIGHT.”

Atlas lifts his eyes to mine, backward cap pulled over his head as he uncaps his water bottle while we stand on the back deck. Lucifer’s words are ringing in my head, and so is the text from this fucker to my girl the other night.

I hold Rain close, staring down at his wide eyes, his fingers reaching for my face. Lucifer is showering and I’m not sure where Sid is. All I know is I’m glad she isn’t out here. After her bullshit about Ella in Luce’s office a few minutes ago, I’m not feeling too brotherly toward her right now.

We passed my girl on the stairs and I know I should have stayed and talked to her, but it feels like I’ll have to discuss a whole lot of shit I’m not ready to yet. What is it that’s keeping me from reaching out to her?

All the shit Lucifer said to me last night? About not looking in my own backyard? It's the thing I'm good at, handling everyone else's problems while I don't even glance at my own. Except I'm not so great at it, am I? It's why I have all these fucking scars on my back.

"There's nothing to tell." Atlas swallows his water, crinkling the plastic of the bottle as he stares out into Lucifer's renovated backyard.

"You trying to fuck her?" My heart races in my chest as I ask the question and Rain's fingers scratch at my chin.

Atlas snorts. "You expect me to say yes? So, what? You can carve me into pieces and feed me to Ella in her cookies?"

I don't answer that question as he avoids my gaze. Instead, I cradle Rain close and drop my voice to a low whisper, my breath brushing across my nephew's fuzzy head of hair.

"If you lay a hand on her, I'm not going after you."

The plastic bottle in his hands crinkles, but he doesn't look at me.

I stroke the side of Rain's cheek, staring at Atlas's. "I'll come for your mom. I'll fuck with her head like you're trying to fuck with Ella's, because I know your dad treats her like shit. But I'll be nice to her. I'll be her goddamn best friend." I smile as he closes his eyes tight, his jaw flexed. "I'll pay Natalie a visit too. I'll get them in the same bed, fuck them back-to-back." I dip my chin and kiss Rain's head, covering one of his ears with my hand, pressing the other to my chest so he can't hear me. "Then I'll slit both of their throats and watch them bleed out all over each other. I'll record it, so you can see them take their last breaths, covered in my fucking cum."

Atlas doesn't respond. I don't need him to. I just need him to hear me. For a second, I think about asking him if he saw what went down that last night we were both in the

dark on Corpus Ave together, but with the threat between us, I decide I don't want to know.

The walk back was silent, and as I sink down into my gray leather chair in the office, the house is silent too. In the immediate aftermath, I asked Ella what the *fuck* she thought she was doing with *Sevryn*, but I didn't get a good answer and listening to her try to explain it and blame me only made me want to kill *him*.

I bury my head in my hands, taking a deep breath as my eyelids feel heavy, even closed. The sweet earthy taste of marijuana lingers on my tongue, and when I inhale, I catch the scent thick in the office. I've been trying to smoke outside, since Rain comes here so often, but tonight I just... needed a break.

"Mom?"

She looks up from her book. The one she hasn't turned a page for in the long minutes I've been staring at her. It's like she's looking right through me, even as her eyes are locked on mine, shadows beneath them.

"Where's Brooklin?" I haven't seen my sister in two days. She's probably at another camp, but it just seems sudden. Too soon. Malachi was just buried last week, and I didn't even get to see it and... and no one is speaking about him. The blood stains from the hammer I used on the nanny have been painted over on the staircase. The floors are freshly polished. Everything smells clean.

Too clean.

"She's away." Mom's voice is low. It kind of reminds me of Lucifer's, because of the rasp. But I haven't seen Lucifer, either. I'm not supposed to talk about Malachi at all. I'm not supposed to talk about anything that happens inside

this house. There are family secrets, then there's the family vault, and everything here goes in the latter.

"Where?" I clench my teeth as I sit on the couch across from Mom in the sitting room. It's dark, all the drapes pulled closed despite the fact I know it's sunny outside.

I went to stand on the balcony earlier.

Where I pushed him.

I pushed him, I pushed him, I pushed him—

"She's at Shadow Villa."

I vaguely remember the place. In Virginia, on Snake Street, I've never forgotten the name. The property ends with a big house deep in the woods. Dark. I remember me and my brothers running up and down the velvet-lined halls, crashing toward the high window at the end, pressing our noses to the glass and shoving each other aside to get a good view of the forest. The circle.

Malachi was still alive then, that first time. He was grabbing at my shirt, and I laughed, pushing him away.

Later, I remember pulling on the handle of two giant double doors, an entrance to a room on the fourth floor, Cain pressing his ear to the carved wood, then my father walked around the corner and told us we were not, under any circumstance, to enter that door. I asked why, and he hit me so hard my spine crashed against the wall and blood sprayed inside my mouth.

I didn't ask any more questions after that.

Brooklin didn't get to go. No girls were allowed when I went, but women, they were. My Uncle Lazar's wife... she was there. Aunt Lamia. She always moved like a ghost with bright green eyes and soft dark hair, she was a spectre and I think I had a crush on her.

Lucifer was quiet, staring out into the darkness as we gathered at that high window, circles beneath his eyes, blinking slowly. He was silent most of the weekend we spent there. We were only kids, and all I knew was my best

friend wasn't talking to me and I probably mouthed off to him and taunted him for being so withdrawn.

Now I kind of feel the same.

My stomach churns.

I bite my bottom lip. "Can we go see a movie or—"

"No." My mom sighs heavily as I stare at the tops of my knees. "I'm reading." She blows out a breath, and I hear a door slam somewhere in the house. Suddenly, Mom is snapping closed her book and pushing to her feet, like an alarm has gone off. She's patting at her blonde hair, pulling at her necklace. Then she puts her back to me, striding to the doorway. Her heels click on the hardwoods. Before she disappears from view, she glances over her shoulder and says, "Don't let your dad see you moping."

The ringer on my phone shatters my memories and I snap my eyes open, my hand going to the gun latched under my desk. I rarely keep my phone on anything but silent and I can't recall why I would've flipped the switch, the weed making my brain fuzzy.

But my fingertips fall from the grip of my weapon when I see a strange name splashed across my screen.

Brooklin.

She's calling me.

I snatch up the phone as I sit straighter in my office chair, just staring at the screen for a moment, wondering if I'm *too fucking high*.

But I decide if this is a delusion, I'd like to live in it for a moment.

I answer the call, pressing the phone to my ear and resting both elbows on my desk.

"Brook?"

There's a pause as I squeeze my eyes shut and rub my temple with two fingers. She probably accidentally called

me and any second I'll hear background noise. Maybe her and Ezra fucking, and I'll throw up and cry about it because that's the way my life is going right now.

"Mayhem." She whispers my name, directly into the phone. A jolt of something like surprise and gratitude strikes through my brain.

"Why are you calling me?" I keep my tone even, disquiet coursing through me. She would only ever call if something was wrong. Immediately, I think of Rain, and I clench my teeth together, waiting for her reply, my eyes still closed.

Then she exhales through the phone, like she's been holding her breath for a long time. "I'm going to ask you something and I want you to first understand I am not trying to get in your relationship." Her voice is sharp. She's no-nonsense and it's good to hear it, the girl she was before she was Jeremiah's. But if she puts Ella down, we're going to have fucking problems.

I don't say anything, waiting for her question.

She doesn't make me wait long. "How much do you trust Lucifer? Right now, right this second?" She enunciates each word clearly, so I know I didn't mishear her. But I feel as if I've misunderstood, all the same.

I blink open my eyes, straightening my spine as I look toward my office door, which is ajar. Ella is in this house somewhere. I don't know why I reflexively think of her when Brooklin asks about Luce. The two of them can't stand each other. But my sister did preface this conversation with some shit about not getting into my *relationship*.

"Why do you ask—"

"Answer my question first." Her voice is steel. It's how she used to stand up for Malachi to Mom or Dad when he would get in trouble for something mundane, like not eating his vegetables or making a mess. She babied him, and their bond was stronger, in some ways. She might not have seen all of the damage I tried to shield him from with

our nanny, but she got his bright moments. Over the years, I've envied her for that. I wonder if I would be able to see him better in my mind if I had those.

But I force myself not to think of Malachi and instead think of Lucifer. My brother now. Brother-in-law, legally, but more than that, our love is something I couldn't put into words. So my answer is fairly easy to find.

"I trust him with my life."

Brooklin doesn't pause. "What about with Ella's life?"

I stand then, my chair rolling backward behind me as I tighten my free hand into a fist. I'm staring at the darkened doorway, and I think I hear a clatter downstairs, from the kitchen, where I'm sure Ella is. I've always wondered if she made food for her mom—or her mom's fucking boyfriends—a lot at home. If that's why she's always so hung up on it. Cooking for other people too. Baking, mostly, but she's tried all kinds of things in this house. I've seen the inside of a grocery store more times in the past few months than I have the rest of my life combined.

Inside my head, I see two different things. Mom walking out of the sitting room that day of my flashback, the sounds of angry voices and something slamming and a bright, high scream seconds later, and Ella touching Sevryn's fucking chest.

I clench my jaw then I speak very slowly. "Why *the fuck* are you asking me this?"

Brooklin is quiet for a moment, and I can feel my pulse inside my head. I press my knuckles to the wooden surface of my desk, relishing in the way they grind against it.

"I know RC is on you. All of you." She speaks quickly, and I'm sure she learned this from Ez, but I don't like her knowing about it. Like the closer she's connected, the more danger she's in. No matter what she's experienced, she's still my little sister. "They're big time, Mayhem. Even...even Jeremiah didn't fuck with them." I hate the mention of his name, but I did save his life once. I wonder if my feelings

for Jeremiah fucking Rain have to do with Sid's feelings for him.

Or the fact Brooklin loved him too.

Both of my sisters fell under his spell. He's a smooth motherfucker, I guess. But clearly, he picks his battles too.

"And they might be on your side, on the 6's side, but they've got enemies in this state and they're always proving *they* are on top. Not just along the East Coast, but all over the world."

Overseers.

I just don't understand what the fuck this has to do with Lucifer. Still, I don't speak, hoping Brooklin gets to it.

"If Lucifer is having to prove his worth to Elijah, and Elijah has to convince RC Lucifer is fit to rule, then they'd task him with something nearly impossible to show his loyalty to the 6."

I shake my head once, but I know she's telling the truth, because Lucifer isn't the only one keeping secrets, then there are those cryptic little warnings he's been giving me. Still, I press on. "Why would Luce have to prove anything to Elijah?" He let Elijah take over as leader of the 6, mainly because he was too young, but as Lazar's son, Luce could've clung to power if he wanted it. Now, he leads the Unsaints and I'm not sure why he would need to do anything disloyal to me in order to show his brotherhood with the 6.

Brooklin sighs like she's annoyed with me. The feeling is very mutual. "Lucifer is a father now."

I nod once, slowly, even though she can't see me. "Yep, I'm very aware."

"And it has always been this way and always will be. When the next generation of leaders becomes fathers, it's time for him to show just how loyal he is, how prepared he is to rise up in the ranks."

"What the fuck are you talking about? How do you know any of this?"

“I looked through our dad’s belongings. The shit he kept in a safe in the panic room.” This is news to me. I never wanted to look through my father’s shit, and I don’t know why Brooklin would start now. We agreed to keep our parents’ house in our name, have cleaners come monthly to check on things, but why she’d want to step foot in there, I don’t know. “But *you* should know from your training. All that stuff they taught you at Shadow Villa.” Her voice hardens on the last three words.

This place keeps getting mentioned so often, I’m going to fucking *show up* there. The film gave me nothing at all, the first three-quarters I watched of it anyway. Just some director using a mysterious house’s name to gain notoriety. And my memories of that place are vague, and I don’t recall anything about my *training*. I’m not completely surprised though. So much shit has twisted and vanished inside my head.

“Okay, so maybe Lucifer hasn’t mentioned anything about *rising* up in rank, but I’m not sure what that has to do with me trusting him. What do you think he’s been tasked with? Backstabbing me?” I scoff. “What would that have to do with Ella? Why did you ask about her?” That’s the part that fucking matters to me.

Brooklin is silent and I wonder what she’s doing right now. I don’t have any of her mannerisms embedded in my head anymore, if I ever did. I am truly a shit fucking brother.

Interestingly, it’s that word Brooklin leads with when she speaks again. “The brotherhood is the most important thing. Not the *women*, not the *children*.” There is true rage in her voice with those words, and I know she’s thinking of all she’s been through because neither women nor children matter at all to the 6. “Lucifer knows this, and he has one of each on the line. He would do *anything* for them.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t fucking know. I just want to know what the hell this has to do with *Ella*,

Brook.”

“Elizabeth Astor has been fully vetted and tried and is hereby inducted with all protection into the 6, based out of Alexandria, North Carolina, signed and sealed by Lazar V. Malikov.”

It takes me a second, but I realize from the lofty way she says the words, she’s *reading* something.

“Adam Medici set forth her trial and Lazar Malikov signed off on the positive results.”

“What the fuck does this mean? What the fuck are you reading?” I start to pace, thinking of Julie in the baptistry. Elijah’s words to me, a caution about Ella. Being attacked on Corpus Ave. Lucifer’s sneaky shit in his office about finding out what’s going on with Ella and Atlas. Will Ella be tried? Is that what’s happening? But how? She spends all of her time with *me*. And if anyone was testing her, I’d imagine it would be Atlas, considering how they’ve become so friendly so quickly, *not* Lucifer.

“It’s some sort of Bible-looking book with a skull and a key and a shark’s tooth on the cover. Ezra had to pick the lock from the box it was in. He said he hasn’t seen Lucifer doing anything sneaky, but...” She trails off.

“But Lucifer is always sneaky,” I finish the thought for her. No matter how deep our bond goes—and it shoots straight through to hell and back—he would murder me himself if he had to choose between me, and Sid and Rain.

“And Sid really wants to dismantle the... sex trafficking within the 6. I’ve heard her talking to Lucifer about it. All the things RC pays a lot of money to cover up. So if betraying you meant he got his wife protected by the 6, *and* he rises up to a position of being able to change things, he would do it, Mayhem.”

I grip the phone tighter in my hand and close my eyes. “Why did you decide to look through Dad’s shit now?”

She’s quiet for long seconds until she whispers, her words broken, “I miss Malachi. I wanted photos or art or

something, but...” She doesn’t finish the sentence. I think I can piece it together. They erased him from our perfect, dark little lives.

I bite the inside of my cheek, knowing I have nothing to offer her on this and I just ask, “Why did you call to tell me this? You haven’t been my biggest fucking fan lately.”

“I don’t understand your feelings for Ella,” she starts with, and I want to break something, but I don’t say a word as she continues. “But even she doesn’t deserve what happened to me.”

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10
THE ASTOR ESTATE

I PULL the pan from the oven, the wave of heat rolling unpleasantly over my face. I nudge the door shut with my knee then set the pan on the stove. I pull off the black and blue checkered oven mitt, tossing it on the counter.

I press my fingers to my temple, bowing my head as I take a moment to breathe in the darkness of the kitchen. Mav is mad at me, upstairs in his office. He got yelled at by Lucifer for firing a gun in the house, and he wouldn't listen to anything I had to say about Sevryn. I think about Sid asking me questions, then fucking judging me. I imagine Lucifer avoiding my gaze the past few days, but hear his rasp of a voice in my head.

Then there's Atlas's stupid warning, which I didn't heed because he didn't say a word to me either out on the deck.

No one is on my side, and I thought, in rejected desperation, maybe Sevryn could be.

Everything bubbles and boils inside of me and I feel suddenly weak. Not just my body, but my mind. Like everything has gotten too far out of my control and I don't know who to believe or trust or—

“What the fuck were you doing with him?” Maverick's voice from the shadows makes me jump.

I spin around, backing into the counter, darting my eyes to the archway that separates the kitchen from the dining room.

His gaze is intent on mine, his arms crossed over his bare chest as he leans against the wall.

My heart leaps to my throat and I swipe a few strands of hair behind my ears that came free from my braids. Then I fist my hands in my oversized white shirt, the one I changed into when we got back earlier today.

Night has fallen now. I guess it makes sense Maverick is reappearing in the dark.

“So now you wanna talk to me?” I manage to make my words sound cold.

He doesn't smile, but he does glance at the chocolate chip cookies behind me. Even my own mouth waters, smelling the sweet aroma in the air.

“Who said I didn't want to talk before?” Slowly, he shifts his gaze back to me.

“I tried to tell you it wasn't what it looked like.” *Not exactly, anyway.*

“Then what was it?” he asks quietly.

I think of the church floor last week. My body convulsing against the hardwoods. Crying out inside my head to a God who clearly does not exist. I push it all aside and speak. “He...he has scars, marks on his body. Bruises too.” I swallow down a lump in my throat, and I feel a crawling sensation over the back of my neck. “I was just asking if...”

I trail off, my bravery leaving me. This is too close to my own duties.

I sense him dip his chin.

"Look at me," he whispers.

Slowly, I obey, dragging my gaze back to his.

"You were just asking if *what?*" His voice is so low as my heart jumps high inside my throat.

"I was just asking what happened to him," I finish, and I know it sounds like a lie even if it is some twisted version of the truth.

"And did he tell you?" He tilts his head, watching me.

I lift one shoulder in a shrug. "You shot at us, which kind of ended the conversation." I speak it matter-of-factly.

A smile quirks unwillingly across his lips. "I didn't shoot at you," he corrects me, all the same. "My aim is always perfect."

"You wanted to scare me."

"I wanted to scare *him*."

"Why?"

"Because Ella... *You are my girl.*"

I lick my lips. "Is that why you wanted to fuck me in front of Atlas too?" My skin burns as I speak, but I don't care. "To show everyone I'm yours?"

He narrows his eyes, straightening from the doorframe.

I can't stop talking as he remains silent. "You can touch and talk and sit with *her* all you like, but the *second* I find a friend of my own, you wanna come piss all over your territory?"

He curves a brow, the inverted cross rising up with the movement as he stalks forward. "If *that's* how you want me to claim you, I will. Right now, if you'd like."

I cross my arms, hunching my shoulders as my entire body starts to sweat. "You can do whatever you want, fuck anyone in front of me you want, but if I so much as *talk* to another guy, you have to *humiliate* me in front of everyone,

including your fucking *sister* who you can't take your *fucking* eyes off of—"

He reaches me then, spearing his fingers in my hair and jerking my head to the side as he curves his body over mine, staring down at me. "Shut up."

I shove him, my palms pressed to his chest. He doesn't move, because it's like pushing a brick wall, but it makes me feel good all the same. "Let go of me."

He tightens his grip in my hair, keeping his other hand by his side, not touching me, and somehow it feels more humiliating like this, like I'm a dog he has on a leash. "Say her name," he whispers, his pale blue eyes gleaming.

My heart stutters inside my chest. "*What?*"

His lips curve into a smile as he tilts my head back, arching my throat by his grip in my hair. "I think you need a lesson in humiliation, because what I did back there was *nothing*." He leans down close, his lips over mine. "Say her fucking name."

"Fuck you."

He smiles, his voice a deadly whisper when he asks, "Why do you hate her so much, huh?"

It feels like the floor is tilting beneath me.

"I mean, that's what you're really worried about, isn't it? That's why you flirted with Atlas, snuck into Sevryn's room. You were worried about me and my sister. That I spent time with *her*?"

Even though he's bent down to my level, he seems to tower over me. Like I'm only living in his shadow, which is true, isn't it?

Who are you, without him?

Nothing.

No one.

I don't exist without him.

"You hate when I say her name and you can't stand to say it yourself. Can you?" he taunts me.

I suck in air to keep from fainting, and I catch the scent of leather and cologne and marijuana, which he won't smoke if *Rain* is here, or even Sid. Even the time she stopped by alone to pick up food I made for her.

Fuck her.

I don't say a word. I press my lips together and think about the boy in the guestroom. The words he spoke to me, the first ones between us. "*Your hair... it's pretty.*"

"Say it, Ella." Maverick steps closer, pressing me to the counter.

I think of the time, in this very kitchen, he told me about his brother. The tattoo he has of Malachi's name on his finger. Sid's too. He holds so fiercely onto everyone who shows him the smallest scraps of love.

Family.

He wants *family*.

But do I belong in that?

"Say her name, right now." He presses his nose to mine. His eyes are the lightest shade of blue. It's unfair, how they look like heaven.

But God didn't make this boy. He didn't have a hand in crafting any of the Unsaints. They all crawled out of hell.

"What is this about?" I whisper quietly. "Why are you being like *this*?"

A second passes. Then another. And in the next blink, he releases my hair only to slam his palms on the counter beside me, trapping me beneath him.

I cross my arms over my chest like I can ward off his wrath. "What happened?" I demand. "This morning, what happened? You wouldn't have shot at someone like that if something didn't happen."

He smiles. "You think our problems started *this morning*?" he mocks me. He aligns his nose with mine. "Say her name."

Hot anger courses through me. "Which name?" I whisper the words, lifting my chin. I'm not unfamiliar with

devils, which he always seems to forget. My arms are still over my chest, and I squeeze them tighter, hugging myself more as I stare up at him. His head is bowed, and our lips are only inches apart. “Which name do you want me to say?” *Angel. Lilith. Sid. Baby girl.* Once, I even heard Lucifer call her *love*.

I know Mavy sees the anger on my face, because his smile widens as the tip of his nose nudges mine. Our gazes are locked, and for a moment, he doesn’t speak.

But then he does. “*All of them.*” His voice is low, but he enunciates each word very, very carefully.

It feels as if I’ve missed a step. Like I’ve jumped from one of the mountains I used to gaze out at in wonder, back in West Virginia. There’s a strange sweetness to the fall, but it’s enveloped in a chaotic bitterness, like blood on my tongue.

“*Fuck you.*” I whisper it, but the venom is loud. “Get away from me. *Fuck you.*”

His eyes flash and one of his hands comes to my throat, gripping tight as he knocks my head back against the cabinet and tips my chin up. “Say them. Every one. Everything you’ve heard me call her and Lucifer too.” He angles his head, his minty breath coasting over my mouth. “*Say them.*”

My knees feel weak. I push at his chest, his skin hot under my fingers even over his shirt. His muscles flex, but I know it takes him minimal effort to stay where he is. “Get off me.”

He presses his lips to mine, kissing me harshly. I don’t open my mouth, but he bites down on my bottom lip, hard, then tugs it out as he pulls back. Finally, he releases it from between his teeth only to say, “You listen to every word I say, Ella. I’m not *asking*. Say. Her. *Names.*”

“Or what?” I keep my voice low, but I challenge him all the same, my bottom lip stinging. “What if I don’t? What if I attack her like you attacked Atlas—”

He releases my throat and presses his palm over my mouth, silencing me. He twists my head to the side as he leans in toward my ear. "There is no *what if*." He laughs, the softest sound. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I flex my fingers, my nails scraping against his chest. "You don't disobey me." I feel myself turning to mush with every word he speaks, and I hate it. Why am I so subservient? Why can't I defy him? How is it that Lilith can hit back at Lucifer with every word they exchange? How can she run so easily? How can she leave him and give him up and turn her back on him? I was kidnapped too. I was taken and used as a pawn too. And I never left.

But she must not feel this way when Lucifer tries to dominate her. She must not experience this borderline euphoria at hearing him tell her what to do. Because for me... I live for these moments. I feel loved, even when he's making me do things that are the opposite of loving.

Now, he waits. The seconds drag on. Maybe minutes, I don't know. My eyes are closed, like I can carve the feeling from my veins this way. Like if I don't look, it'll be easier to defy him. If I keep quiet and still right here, he'll see the way this will hurt me. He'll know I don't want to do this.

He still doesn't say anything, but his grip on my mouth tightens, his fingers digging into my jawline.

I squeeze my eyes tighter shut. "Sid." I start with the easiest one, but even those three letters taste vile on my tongue. My voice is muffled against his hand.

He scrapes his teeth against my jawline, and I flinch. "Good girl. Keep going." There's an undercurrent of mirth in his command. Like he knows I started light.

"Lilith." I cough as I speak it, but I manage to get it out. I've heard Lucifer say it so many times, it's like her real name now, when he's around.

Mavy presses his body to mine. I feel how hard he is, against my stomach. "Keep going." I'm not sure what's turning him on, and I don't know if I want to know. I

swallow the tightness in my throat, hoping I'll be able to speak clearly with the next one.

"Love." I choose it because it isn't... Maverick's name for her.

Mavy dives down, his nose against my neck as he presses a kiss there, just where my shoulder begins. "You're so good at this." He runs his bottom lip over my skin, and his hold on my jaw doesn't loosen. "One more."

My breaths come in pants beneath his palm on my mouth. My nostrils flare and I feel my insides twist into knots. I know the nickname. I hate that he even has one for her. I take a breath in. I exhale through my nose. Then I whisper it quietly, the word stifled under his hand. "*Angel.*"

He presses me entirely against the counter and the lingering ache in my thighs sting, but I don't let myself whimper. He's still holding my head up with his grip on my jawline, so my chin is lifted. He kisses along the side of my neck, toward my throat, licking a line up to the underside of my jaw. Then he lifts his head and presses his temple to mine after he turns my face back toward him. He drops his hand to my throat, and I feel cool air against my lips. "Was that so bad?"

"It gets you hard." I don't know why I say those words, but I can't stop them. My chest rises and falls so fast, like the beats of my heart inside my ribcage. "It turns you on, when I talk about her."

The corner of his mouth lifts, and he reminds me of Lucifer for a moment, with this crooked smile. "No." He licks at the seam of my lips, and I part them, wanting to kiss him now the moment is over. But he pulls back, and I dig my nails deeper into his chest. "She doesn't do anything for me. Not like that." He arches his hips, his dick against me, and I know what he means by *like that*. "That's all you."

"Then why did you make me say it?" I blurt out as his fingers close tighter around my throat. "Why did you order

me to sit in your lap last night and take off my shirt and—”

“You said it yourself, Ella. *Humiliation*. I get off on *humiliating* you.” The words are sharp. I’m not surprised, logically, but my emotions feel all over the place. *I get off on humiliating you*. “It turns me on, seeing you embarrassed and helpless and full of so much disgust with yourself.”

I don’t like this. Not at all. I knew it, on some level, but to hear it, to witness how hard he gets, how much he enjoys this, it makes me feel very low. Even though I *like* being degraded, I guess I just... don’t like hearing it all out loud. It’s hard to sort my emotions. I can’t find any clarity on how I’m feeling right now. “Mavy...”

He runs his bottom lip over mine. “Shh, I’m not done.”

I slide my hands down his chest, hooking my fingers around his sweats, for something to hold onto. He smiles, crushing me with his sternum pressing to my breasts. “I like toying with you, Ella. But you know what I don’t like?” Something sinister lurks in his question.

My mouth goes dry, but I answer him. “What?”

He steps back then, and my hands fall to my sides. But he doesn’t let go of my throat or drop eye contact. “I don’t like feeling as if things are *happening* around you that I don’t know about.”

I feel dizzy. *What do you know? Can we talk about this now? Can I say it? Am I allowed?*

But we aren’t on the same page and it’s so very clear when he asks, “Were you jealous, watching her at Ignis?”

What? I blink, thrown.

Ignis. The memory hurts. We talked about it beforehand, me and Maverick. He told me how it would go. What it was. But he didn’t give me an option to prevent him from doing it. It was watch, or step outside, go upstairs. Never *I’ll sit this out for you*. Never a question on how I’d feel. Not once. I didn’t have a choice. I rarely ever do.

“You want all this attention you think my sister has? You hate her, you saw what Lucifer was willing to do for her, and now... Is that why you’re flirting with Atlas? Are you that desperate?” He circles his fingers tighter around my neck. “Do I not give you *enough*?”

I shake my head once. “No, that’s not—”

He drops his hand from my throat and steps back, watching me carefully, the movement cutting off my words. I breathe deep, trying to follow along to his thought process but I’m confused.

“Don’t play games with me. I will *not* suffer like Lucifer did, do you understand me?” He keeps his voice low and his eyes piercing mine, like his words do to my heart. “I don’t have time to check your head every day. I know you have problems...” He trails off, looking down and to the left, and I start to sweat under my arms, along the back of my neck. *Problems*. BPD. Borderline Personality Disorder. I don’t think about it most days. I don’t use it as a shield, an excuse. I don’t think most people with mental illness do. We don’t realize our behavior is abnormal, or problematic. And now, when he references it, I feel like he slapped me in the face. “And God, I love you.” His eyes lift to mine again. “But I’m too old for games.” I think about when he chained me to the bed to fuck Chelsea, when he toyed with me in his lap last night, and I want to disagree, but it’s like I can’t think of a good argument. I can’t formulate the words to hit back. “You’re mine, *period*. Don’t try to piss me off. This shit you’re doing, I see through it. But it’s not cute, and I don’t work like that. You flirt with him again, someone will end up hurt, okay? I’m trying to *protect* you. I can’t do that if you’re acting like a *child*.”

There’s the sensation of falling, like my stomach plummets to the floor and along with it, I’m sinking, sinking, sinking.

My mouth closes. Whatever retort I had is gone. I cross my arms, like I’m trying to protect myself.

Maverick looks exhausted as his shoulders fall. Circles are beneath his eyes. His gaze is on the floor. "And if one of my brothers comes to you whispering some shit in your ear, it's too good to be true. Don't fall for that shit." He lifts his eyes to mine. "Your loyalty is to *me*. And if you need help with something you feel like you can't talk to me about, get over yourself and reach out to Sid. She knows what this life is like."

My breaths come in heavy pants, like my pulse in my ears. I feel like I should tell him. I should confess. I want to let it all go, but what if I fuck this up, when I'm so close to being done?

Before I can decide what to say, how to respond, he adds, "Don't go near Sevryn again." Then he turns around and stalks off, not even glancing once again at the fucking cookies.

I stare after him as I hear him head up the stairs. He is so incredibly *wrong* about whatever it is he's thinking. He is so fucking *off*. I want to scream. I want to hit something.

I ball my hand into a fist and turn my body, crashing my knuckles into the counter. It hurts, so I do it again.

And again.

And again.

My body is hot, and I'm sweating, and tears prick my eyes.

Fuck you. Fuck this. You don't get to say shit like that and just walk out on me.

A scream leaves my throat. I grab the hot pan without putting the mitt back on and I stalk across the kitchen, stomping on the pedal for the trashcan. I dump every single fucking cookie in the trash, then I fling the pan into the sink, my fingers burning from the heat.

Fuck. You.

I curl up alone in bed, my eyes open but there's nothing to see. Maverick is still in his office, and he's ignored me all night after our stupid fight.

I reach for my phone on the nightstand for something to do. I pull it from the charger and open up my contacts.

I have all of the Unsaints in there, except Atlas. I suppose, in retrospect, maybe that's more suspicious, but at this point, I don't care.

I think of Sevryn. The marks on his body. How scared he seemed around me. I think we could be friends, and I need a friend, but it's hard to tell any of that to Maverick when he is so wildly blinded by shit he's inventing inside his head.

My thoughts flicker to Mom and I wonder if she's still at that trailer. I have the sudden urge to call her. I'm not sure why. She was never one for comfort, but I wonder if we just always cling to it, the longing for a mom? Is that the ache inside my chest? A wish for an older woman to tell me sometimes boys suck, and it's okay, we'll get past this, and it'll be fine?

I squeeze my fingers around my phone, wondering what she would say if she knew how I was living now, minus the secrets. She would be angry, I think. She could never be happy for me. She could never be happy *with* me. Or pissed on my behalf, protective over her own daughter. I never got any of that from her.

I think of Sevryn's reaction when he saw the fading marks on my thighs. Even though they're mainly healed, he was still at least confused. Horrified. He didn't have the same ones.

I am truly in this alone.

And I've done all of this... for Mavy.

It's almost over, isn't it?

I wish I could tell him. Even with all this shit between us, I think of springing from this bed right now, running

down the hall and breaking down at his feet. *He* would take care of it. He'd take care of *me*.

But the whispered threats in my ear and Lucifer of all people telling me what I need to do... I can't run for him. It's almost done. *It's almost over.*

A tear falls hot and wet down my nose, and I hate it. My face burns hot in the cold night and I think of Sid. She'd never cry.

Maybe that's why Maverick loves her so much. She's tough and I'm... weak. Maybe that's why he wants me to reach out to her.

And maybe... I could.

I scroll through my contacts again.

Her name is there. *Sid Malikova*. I can send her a text. Maybe I could... try. I know her and Lucifer act as if they hate me, and even being around her kinda makes me sick with jealousy, but maybe if I tried to explain my side, to talk about all this, it would help.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I roll over onto my back and open a text to her. I've sent three that she hasn't replied to, just about her coming to get food or us dropping it off. Nothing she needed to send a response to, and I know she's been busy, so it's okay.

I'll try again.

Me: Hi! Are you up?

I don't send it yet, glancing at the time. She could be sleeping, and I'm sure with a baby, she isn't getting much rest. But it's only nine, and she seems like the kind of woman to sleep with her phone on silent if she doesn't want to be bothered.

I send the text, holding my breath.

I think of Mavy getting mad about Atlas and I wonder what he would think if he knew Atlas cornered me when I was naked, just getting out of our shower.

Remembering it, the eerie way the candles went out, I bat down the duvet and the sheets, pinning my eyes to the

closet door. The only hiding spot anyone could be in since I used the bathroom before I got in bed. The window is cracked, a cold, fall breeze drifting in, the sound of wind beyond. But there's no other sound.

I'm just paranoid.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

My eyes pop open, heart racing. I'm shocked Sid texted me back. She's...well, her and her husband avoid me like the plague or else when we do speak, I can tell she hates me. But maybe this could be the start of something else. Something better.

Yet when I check our texts, disappointment flickers in.

It isn't her. I see a new message in the corner of my screen, but mine to her is only delivered. Nothing came back.

Sighing, I exit out of that and open the new one.

My stomach flips as I read Atlas's text.

Him: Hey, are you okay?

Like you care. He was out there talking with Maverick after their fight the night before just like it was nothing too.

Me: Why are you asking me that?

Atlas doesn't waste time texting me back.

Atlas: It didn't go so well with Sevryn, did it?

My cheeks heat. It's like I can feel the *I told you so* in his text. And I know everyone else in the house heard what went down. It was a gunshot for fuck's sake.

Atlas texts me again before I can respond.

Atlas: I'm sorry.

I blink at his words, so simple, they could be utterly meaningless. But right now, when I really need someone to talk to, someone who won't explode at me, they mean the world to me.

Me: It has nothing to do with you.

And before he can say it, *I do.*

Me: Besides, you tried to warn me.

Him: I still care though. About you.

I roll my eyes because I want to brush it off. But this is the Atlas I first met. The nice version of him. The reason I wanted to be friends in the first place. Why I could keep secrets from Mav with him.

Atlas: Can you come on Sunday?

I swallow the lump in my throat. Sunday is Council, and I guess we could meet up. I flick my eyes to the door, thinking of Maverick, but the guilt I look for doesn't come so easily right now.

My phone buzzes in my hand as Atlas texts me again.

Atlas: You're not the only one who needs someone right now.

I frown at his words. On some level, I know he's manipulating me, isn't he? Maverick does the same, softening a little when he wants me to comply.

But Atlas is right. I *do* need someone.

Me: I'll be there.

"Ella?" I hear Mavy's voice from down the hall and I flinch, trying to exit out of my texts with shaky fingers as Mav appears in the doorway.

I sit up straight, and he steps inside the bedroom, his shirt still off, basketball shorts on. In the dim light he looks from the phone still in my hand, to me. He folds his arms over his chest as he ducks his chin.

"Who you texting?" He asks so casually, I know it's not.

I glance at my phone as Atlas's next text comes through. My throat feels swollen when I scan the words.

Atlas: I can't wait to see you.

I click the button on the side of my screen and I say, "Sid." My voice is high-pitched and Mav's brows dart up, the inverted cross with it.

"Really?" he sounds astonished, no doubt because of the little *humiliation* stunt he pulled earlier.

I nod once, the blood rushing to my limbs with my fear, causing pins and needles to tingle in my fingertips.

After a moment of scrutinizing me, he smiles a little, pushing off from the wall as he trails into the bathroom to brush his teeth, his nightly routine. He glances at me before he ducks through the door, but he doesn't say anything.

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XXXI

Sid

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14

DOWNTOWN ALEXANDRIA

MY HEAD SNAPS to the side, fire and anger lighting up along my cheekbone. I grit my teeth and plant my feet, circling my hands into tight fists as I slowly turn back to face my opponent.

Cain shakes his head, crossing his arms over his broad, bare chest. "Too slow to recover. If I was really a villain—"

"You are."

"—I would've had you on the ground with my fingers wrapped around your throat. Crushed your windpipe, rendered your body motionless beneath me. I thought you said Jeremiah Rain taught you how to fight?"

With the mention of his name, I take a step back, breaking my stance as I wipe my wrist over my brow, trying to stop the sweat from sliding into my eyes. When I drop my hand, I glance at the large analog clock that seems out

of place in this immaculate gym. Dim lights, black floors and walls, a boxing ring on a platform at my left side, black punching bags suspended from the high ceilings to my right, black glass windows and double doors with heavy locks. It's raining outside tonight, four days since everyone left mine and Lucifer's house after he dragged *Sevryn* home to us, and while the storm spatters against the glass, no one from the outside would think to come in *here*. For one, the double doors leading out spill into a darkened alleyway with only merciless gray skyscrapers on either side, hard for anyone to scale.

Nox, in downtown Alexandria—which, the more I get to know her, the more she reminds me of Gotham City—is secure, but me being here is not.

"He taught me to fight," I finally mutter, still feeling my heartbeat where Cain's fist collided with my face. I know he held back. I don't even think it'll bruise, but Cain is massive. The son of a former professional fighter.

Yet *he* does this shit for *fun*.

"Yeah, well he sucked at it. Anyway, we need to wrap it up. I can't skip Council completely." Cain takes two steps back in his minimal black sneakers, then snakes an arm through the ropes of the boxing ring, grabbing a black water bottle and squeezing it into his open mouth. Sweat glistens along his broad chest, his tight abs, dampening the gray shorts slung low around his hips.

I clear my throat and turn around, walking over to the water fountain tucked against the wall just before the lavish bathrooms. I lift up my black T-shirt and wipe the sweat off my face with it before I lean down and press my fingers against the sides of the fountain, gulping down cold water from the stream.

I feel a little nauseous, but I'm not telling Cain that or he'll stop training me. Still, I close my eyes, unsteady on my feet as my stomach churns, and I don't realize I'm about

to faint until a strong arm bands around my waist and yanks me back into a hot, hard body.

I snap my eyes open and whirl my arms, planting my feet to try and spin around but Cain's low voice comes to my ear as he stops me from turning.

"Chill, we're done practicing. Just take some deep breaths."

It's not in my nature to submit, but spots are popping in front of my eyes from our grueling workout today and the run I had this morning while Lucifer was with Rain.

Brooklin is at our house now. It's the first time I've left Corpus Ave with her babysitting, and the anxiety comes back in a hot wave, but for the hour I was training with Cain, I was able to forget about everything aside from staying alive and dodging his blows. He doesn't go easy on me like Lucifer would, and I like that.

Cain presses something cold to my temple and I flinch a little until I realize it's his water bottle, filled with ice based on the temperature. It feels good, the faint, sick sensation receding as I lean against him, our sweat between us, melding our bodies. His big hand is splayed over my abs, overtop my sticky T-shirt, and I let my own hands stay by my side as he keeps me conscious.

"You gotta eat more," he says calmly, his chin resting on my head as he holds me. His fingers glide back and forth over my shirt, making my stomach muscles jump. The sensations of hot—from sweat, and his body at my back, and his touch—and cold—from the water bottle—have my body coiled tight, but I think that's the point. He doesn't want me to pass out. "You need to stop going so hard. You're still only a couple months out from giving birth."

"I'm fine. Besides, you're the one who pushed me," I say through gritted teeth.

"Only because you came to me. You don't want me to be gentle, do you, Sid?"

My chest heaves as his fingers dance along the hem of my T-shirt. I have not forgotten what it felt like to fuck him. I don't say anything because his words sounded entirely too sexual.

"We won't be able to keep this up," he continues, ignoring my lack of a response.

"I think I could keep it up just fine," I counter without thinking.

He doesn't even stiffen behind me as I keep leaning into him. He just sighs, like he expected me to say that. "At your house was straight, but now Brooklin knows you're gone—"

"I told her I was going to the grocery store, and I'll stop by on my way back. Besides, Lucifer will know I left anyway. I can't back my car into the garage." I drop my voice with the last words.

Cain doesn't laugh, but he says something that sounds like *hemar*, under his breath. Before I can ask what he means, he keeps talking, still trailing his fingers around my lower abs. "I know we had to come here since he's keeping tabs on the street, but let's skip next Sunday so we're not too predictable. Practice on your own. Or fight him. I think he'd like that, don't you?"

I roll my eyes but a flash of violence plays out in my head. Lucifer's body pressing against mine, his forearm on my throat, a knife in his hand. *God, yeah, he'd fucking love that... and so would I.*

I feel steady again and slowly I straighten, putting space between me and Cain. His fingers lazily trail around my waist as I spin around, and he brings his water bottle back to his open mouth, thick lips and straight teeth visible as he drinks.

I rake a hand through my sweaty hair, pushing off the black bandana I had on to pull my hair back, then grip it in my hand. "How did you find out? That he's watching Corpus?"

Cain said Lucifer was more paranoid than usual, more cautious since RC is in town. But he only texted I needed to meet him here tonight instead of him coming by the house like he has the past couple weeks. He never told me how he found out Lucifer was talking to the guards at the guardhouse on Corpus Ave, and potentially having video footage taken of our street.

Cain's black eyes meet mine as he squeezes the water bottle in his fist, the one with the Unsaint's brand tattooed over it. I twirl the bandana between my fingers, waiting for his answer.

Finally, he just says, "Don't worry about that." Of course I want to push him but he shakes his head once, his perfect, dark brows lifting as I open my mouth to argue. "Don't, Sid."

We hold eye contact for a moment, but I know Cain won't give me anything if he doesn't want to. So I nod, accepting his non-answer.

I glance at the dark windows and the storm outside. I don't want to drive in that shit, definitely don't want to stop by the grocery store, but this is important to me. Feeling strong, prepared. For anything or anyone who might come after my family. I mentioned it to Lucifer and he wanted me to wait, but for some reason, I don't think that's wise. My thoughts flash to Sevryn, and almost as if he's reading my mind, Cain speaks again. "What do you think of the new kid?"

I cut my gaze to him, plucking at my shirt with my free hand, trying to cool myself down more. "Lucifer keeps him in his room. It's not like we've bonded or anything." I narrow my eyes and jerk my chin. "Why?"

"You didn't answer my question at all." Cain licks his plush bottom lip, raking his gaze up and down my body. He smiles a little, then shakes his head. "Try again, Sid."

"I don't trust him." I don't think about my answer when I blurt it out. It's true. I don't. At all. "If he wasn't with

Lucifer tonight, I would not have left Rain.” I feel as if I need to make that clear, like I’m a bad mom if I don’t. “I don’t like leaving him as it is—”

“Hey, you don’t have to do that shit with me.” Cain’s face softens, some of the hard, indifferent edges gone as he stares at me. “I know you’re a good mom. You need to know it too. *You are.*”

There’s a pressure behind my eyes. I grip the bandana in both hands, twisting the fabric. Something thick swells in my throat, and I blink, trying to swallow down all of my emotions.

But Cain doesn’t let me dwell on his compliment. On those words that mean the fucking world to me, in ways he cannot possibly understand. “Your instincts are good. Don’t let your guard down.”

I fight back the lump in my throat and ask, “What do you know? About everything going on? Sevryn, *RC*, Samson? Tell me something.” I glance around us, my fingers still playing in the bandana. “You know I’m good for a secret.”

He studies me for a moment, eyes unreadable. Then he says, “I know what you’re trying to do.” His tone is flat, not condescending. “You want to save the kids.” A smile curves his lips, but I do my best not to react to his words.

Save the kids. I mean, it’s not exactly how I’d describe it. It just doesn’t feel right, knowing we’re brushing shoulders with men who would do to other children what they did to me. But I’m not trying to be a hero. I just want it to stop.

Cain licks his top lip, eyeing me like he’s sizing me up. “My mother, Cyra, wanted to do the same thing.” For the first time, he breaks eye contact, glancing at the ground. “It’s not working out so well for her right now. Or my father.” He lifts his gaze, staring at me again. “Stay away from the secrets. Once you catch them, they’ll catch *you*, and there’s nothing you’d be able to do anyway.”

I've got more questions than answers now though, and I fist my hands in the bandana. "I don't want to sit around and watch," I protest. "What did your mom do?" Maybe I could work with her. I've never met any of them, the 6's wives. Maybe I've been trying to talk to the wrong people in the Unsaints. Perhaps it's the women who could help me. "What's happening to her?"

Cain's grip on the water bottle tightens, the plastic crinkling as his eyes seem to shift to black. I think he's going to tell me to fuck off, or not say anything at all. But finally, his broad chest expanding as he inhales, he says, "Liar's Island. That's all I'm giving you." He nods his head once, in a way to indicate we're done here. "Don't come asking me more questions when you fall down the rabbit hole, Lilith." Then he turns his broad back on me and walks deeper into the gym, leaving me staring after him with the nickname lacing through my brain, lodging itself somewhere in my heart.



Brooklin comes into the foyer quietly, her blood red leather bag over one shoulder, keys in her other hand. I know she was going to quietly leave after using the bathroom before her drive while I got Rain from his crib, but now, her blue eyes lock onto mine and she stops, like she's startled.

I hold Rain in both hands, his head over my shoulder, one arm around his back and the other beneath his bottom as I sit on the last step of the staircase in the foyer. His tiny breaths warm my heart, and for a moment, staring at Maverick's sister, none of the usual coolness I feel towards her is there.

Briefly, I think of Maverick's outburst with Atlas a few nights ago that both Brooklin and I witnessed. Not for the first time, I wonder what exactly is going on inside his head. Maybe he needs me as much as I need him right now. Perhaps he needs me *and* his other sister.

Brooklin's lips turn downward and her eyes narrow, fingers tightening along the strap of her bag, dragging me back to this moment.

My head is fuzzy with that need for sleep which hasn't relented in the slightest and my body is sore from running and all these workouts I'm doing behind my husband's back.

Now, there's *Liar's Island*, and Cain's mother to contend with. But I looked the place up and I found nothing that meant anything to me. I don't know if it's a metaphor, a real place. I don't know shit, and now I've only got another mystery making my head spin.

I stare at Brooklin, wanting to talk to her about all of this, but she always seems so frustrated with me. At the very least, annoyed.

Does she see J when she looks at me? Because the longer she stares, the more he's inside my head like he never left and maybe Brooklin and I both realize he never will. Jeremiah Rain is a storm that stays, a scar over the landscape of your heart.

I had what she didn't. Time with him, time with Maverick, and a thousand chances with my demonic soulmate. Maybe she resents me for it, the way things worked out for me and maybe not yet for her.

"Thanks for watching Rain." I force myself to say it, even though the gratitude isn't natural for me. For too long, I didn't have anyone to thank for a fucking thing.

She smirks, her high cheekbones lifting upward as she does. Everything about Brooklin is cuttngly beautiful, not so different from her brother in that way.

My brother.

Him and I are half-siblings, but it's hard to remember it's true too, with Brooklin.

"He's a very good baby." She glances at Rain in my arms, full now, the bottle beside my thigh on the stairs. I watch her smile a little even as her tone mirrors mine. Grudging.

I bend my head to kiss his, wondering if I'm anywhere near a very good mom, like Cain said I was.

I let my eyes flutter closed as I breathe in Rain's scent, holding him closer.

Before I can say anything, Brooklin speaks again. "And Lucifer... he's helped me out."

I snap open my eyes, lifting my chin to gaze at her. But she's staring at the floor, the tips of her leather heels. "Gum, he said." She laughs a little, but it sounds sad. I know she's talking about replacing one addiction with another, because Lucifer has been going through gum like crazy, trying to cut back on smoking. "I'm glad... you're with him." She raises her eyes to mine. I heard the faintest inflection on her last word. "Being with J..."

My heart twists inside my chest. I see the same pain reflected on Brooklin's face as she lets her eyes squeeze shut for one second. Jeremiah was there for her when the rest of the Unsaints weren't—her brother included—because of a night of fun she craved. *Deserved*, arguably.

Jeremiah was there for me as shelter, my entire life.

Brooklin and I probably have more in common than either of us realize.

"It was hell sometimes. I'm glad you're here." She swallows, holding my eyes. "I'm glad you have Rain and Luce and... even Mayhem." Another flicker of hurt across her face.

I nod once, wondering if I could talk to her for him, plead his case. He was stupid, just a kid. But I don't think it's my place to mediate for them. And he's so tense lately

for some reason. Maybe because he isn't getting high as often and it's fucking with his head.

I decide to mind my business.

"And *I'm* glad *you're* here." I repeat her words and I mean it. I think she sees that because her next smile seems real. "I wouldn't be able to catch my breath if you weren't." My voice cracks, and before I can embarrass myself further, she takes the reins.

She closes the space between us, heels clacking on hardwoods, then dips her chin when she gets to the stairs. She kisses the top of Rain's fuzzy head. I catch the scent of her perfume, dark and seductive, the second before she shifts her lips to the side of my cheek. A quick, informal little peck, then she's walking across the foyer and toward the door.

The moment before she opens it, facing away from me, she says quietly, "Please make sure Lucifer remembers to check on Maverick. I think he really needs someone too. Someone... truly loyal." Then she opens the door and I hear the alarm beep after it closes, the lingering of her lips on my face and her words in my head.

The former was the start of friendship, maybe? But the latter? What did she mean, "*truly loyal*?"

Before I can think much about it, I blink as I hear the hardwoods shift down the hall, toward the kitchen. My body is on alert, all the tiredness gone as I stand to my feet, holding Rain tightly in my arms. Immediately, I'm plotting our escape. I don't have a knife on me, I left it in my bedroom. And the front door is right here, I could just run after Brooklin.

But when I twist around, it's *Lucifer* I see leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and a lazy smile on his pale face. Before I can think of anything to say—*how long have you been here? Where is Sevryn?*—he dips his chin, staring at me as he speaks. "I like her, you know." His voice is pleasant enough, but there's something dark in his eyes.

Someone truly loyal. “But she’s gotta keep her mouth off you, huh, baby girl?”

“When did you get back?” I try to keep guilt out of my tone. I went to the store and grabbed formula, and I know he’ll have seen my car pulled in straight on. His BMW wasn’t in the garage when I arrived and I guess he got here when I was upstairs peering at Rain in his crib.

Lucifer’s demon blue eyes seem to darken. “Didn’t you miss me?” Something about the way he asks the question has the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

I hug Rain tighter to me as he snores softly in my arms. I peeled off my sweaty clothes when I got home, changed into sweats and another T-shirt, but I didn’t shower and I wonder if Lucifer somehow knows what I was doing.

“Where is Sevryn?” I counter his question with a question.

He arches a thick, dark brow. “Locked up in his room. Am I going to have to start doing that to you?” He tilts his head. “Locking you up?”

I try not to betray my nerves. “Shut up. You’re done with Council?” It was only eleven when I got home. It’s usually longer, and I thought with Sevryn attending, it would be longer still.

He studies me for a long moment, lips parted a little, his top one bigger than his bottom, even in these eerie moments, I love staring at his mouth. “I’ll have to go back,” he finally says softly. “But I wanted to see you both.”

I frown, swaying a little with Rain. “Go back? Why?”

“Work.”

I roll my eyes, but my thoughts flicker to Brooklin’s parting words. “What do you think is wrong with Mav?” I ask quietly, holding Lucifer’s gaze. “He’s been... jumpy lately. Off his game. Freaking out more than usual.”

“He always freaks out, he just does it in a smart way. And now he’s got a girl he loves, and he realizes how many things could take her away from him.” My husband’s tone

is hard, and I know he's not just talking about Maverick as he stares at me across the hall. "He's not smoking as much, and he doesn't have an outlet." Again, those words aren't just for Maverick.

"He doesn't trust Sevryn," I add. Saying his name is strange. I've thought more than once about mentioning my *dream* to my husband, but it all sounds insane and I don't want to be labeled that, anymore than I already am. Still, I've made it no secret how uneasy I am about him.

But I know Lucifer is keeping things from me. I can feel it between us, the weight of everything he's trying to stop from crushing me. I wonder if it's like the things I'm keeping from him, each of us convinced it's for the other's own good.

Someone truly loyal.

"You shouldn't either," he counters, unknowingly echoing Cain's sentiment.

I don't. But even so, Sevryn's words about a brothel, the bandages on his body, the tattoo around his throat. There's a dimness to his eyes too, like someone beat his spirit from him. Or fucked it out of him, one. My mind starts to spiral to my past and I clench my teeth, holding it back as I hold Rain.

"Don't start to feel sorry for him, Lilith. I know you better than that."

I smile a little, blinking and focusing on him. "I don't feel sorry for anyone."

"Good." The hoarseness of his voice causes butterflies to flip in my stomach. "He'll be gone by Halloween," he reassures me again, and I feel relief warm my veins when he says it.

Halloween is two weeks away. I can hold on until then, if we have to.

"In the meantime..." Lucifer trails off, glancing up at the ceiling, and I wonder who it is he's thinking of. "Be careful. Even inside this house." He reaches behind him, and it

takes me a minute to realize he's adjusting the gun in the back of his pants.

My fingers tighten around Rain. Lucifer knows how I feel about guns around him, even though I have my own in the bottom of my nightstand now, but my husband just smiles sadly at me.

"I have to go," he says, offering no other explanation except, "It's Sevryn's first job."

Briefly, I think of asking him about Liar's Island. But the way things are between us all, the chaos happening quietly around us, I don't speak a word about it as he heads upstairs to get the *initiate*.

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XXXII



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14

“DID you know RC used to pick the craziest, most unreliable patient from the ER to do some of their worst jobs?”

I lean against the counter in the kitchen, my arms crossed, fingers drumming over my biceps. My chest is still heaving from sprinting *here*, to this refurbished barn deep in the woods, not far from where I’ve spent too much time at Emily Cemetery.

Atlas sets down his keys on the gray marble island between us, the lighting dim, the sun having sunk hours ago in the sky. Despite this being *his* idea, he’s late.

I glance to my left, at the digital clock above the stainless steel stove.

It’s close to midnight, which means we have less than an hour, unless Mavy stays late, but I’m not risking a *maybe*.

“They had to be poor, of course,” Atlas continues, his blue-brown eyes on mine, both palms flush to the island, the muscles in his triceps flexing. He has a skeleton bandana around his neck, dressed all in black—black T-shirt, backward black hat, black sweats. “Few connections, prior arrests a plus.” He smiles fondly, like what he’s saying is a pleasant memory, but I’ve started to learn his cherubic grins flash with anything. He would smile as he stabbed you in the back, doing it in such a way you might thank him for it if only because of how pleasant he was being. “Mysteriously—using a liaison—they’d be set up with a modest home, an allowance every month for food. If they were addicts, RC would help them come off the drugs. Usually with ibogaine.” He shrugs, a bone in his neck flexing. “They invented a cover story for their new soldiers. A respectable career placement, but something lowkey, unable to be fact-checked.”

I dig my nails into my biceps, exposed from the sleeveless white shirt I’m in, tied to the side over my black leggings. The counter digs into my low back. My spine is arched so nothing touches the back of my thighs. Everything still feels tender there.

Atlas studies me a moment, his eyes dropping over my body then raking back up. “Then they gave them targets. Sometimes people to murder, objects to steal.” He raises his brows, sucking in his cheeks before he speaks again. “But when they completed their job and stopped being useful—when they started asking too many questions, now that they’re basic needs were taken care of and they could think clearly—RC would withhold their medication, drugs needed to participate in the real world. And in exchange, they’d leave them little bags of dope or crack or bottles of brandy, whatever their vice.”

I imagine my mother as the experiment. Clean and recovering and slightly bewildered about it all. Going down a bad path but unable to stop because there wasn’t another

option. I briefly dream of her holding me tight, telling me she's sorry for how she messed up my life. *Our* lives. Then I picture the rug being snatched out from under her.

But I imagine something else too. *Me*, as the experiment. Coming from no one, with nothing. My own mental health diagnosis. The ways RC could fuck up my life.

"They didn't want it, but the pull of addiction is fierce and the desire to slip into our old ways is strong." Atlas lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "They'd try to tell people, of course. New friends they'd made on their road to criminal recovery. It wouldn't matter the crimes they'd committed because they aren't thinking straight now, so they'd blab about all of it."

But as they suffered withdrawal from psych meds and placated it with illegal drugs, they'd grow unreliable. Shifty. Maybe stop paying any of their own bills, acting erratically around their new friends or old family members, who would've seen that type of behavioral pattern in the past.

My throat feels tight when I say, "But no one would believe them."

"But no one would believe them." Atlas repeats my revelation and I cut my eyes to his.

"Why are you telling me this?" Goosebumps dot my skin as I glance behind him into the open room we use to train. It's dark, there's only a couch along one charcoal wall, empty, but it suddenly feels as if someone else could be here.

I straighten against the counter, glancing toward the knife block only inches from me. My eyes find the handle of the butcher knife and I hear Atlas's sweet laugh, twisted up in a strange evil.

"That's how they'll spin Samson's death too," Atlas says quietly, instead of answering my question. Or maybe this *is* the answer. "He never got a chance to work with them

because he wasn't low enough in society, but he posted all kinds of nonsense on social media and people really underestimate how careful they have to be with that. They'll use anything you say of your own freewill against you, if you serve a purpose. Eventually, five years from now, maybe ten, the news will report Samson's body was found and it looks as if he took his own life. Maybe ran afoul of some big-time dealer."

My throat feels tight and I clench my teeth as Atlas's eyes don't leave mine while he stares at me.

"Not many will question it and those who do will be deemed crazy too."

"Are they going to use me?" I blurt out, unable to stop myself. "RC? Are they going to..." I trail off, shaking my head, the ends of my braids tickling my back where the hem of my shirt hangs an inch over my leggings. "They don't want me with Mavy?" *But why would they care?* They might oversee the 6, but it's the 6 who are adopting me in. It's *Lucifer* who told me the path I'd need to take. He let me know the scar on my palm—Coagula—was only the beginning. But even still, I'm doing everything they've asked, and Mavy and I are bound.

Atlas says nothing as I search his face. His expression is only one of mild pleasantness.

My heart beats uncomfortably fast in my chest. "Answer me." I whisper it at first, then say it again, louder. "Answer me!" I'm at the opposite end of the island, only a couple of feet between me and Atlas, my arms still crossed like I can ward off the truth as I tip my chin up to hold his gaze. My mind races and when he doesn't speak, I continue to. "They murdered Samson to punish you for Natalie, didn't they? They don't like her? But why not kill *her*? Where is she?" I shake my head, feeling lightheaded and frantic. "You know, don't you? Tell me where she is. Tell me if they're going to come for me too. What do they want me to do?" My voice breaks, my throat suddenly dry. I feel as if I might leap

across this counter and grab his shirt and scream at him until he tells me what I want to know because I've got conflicting information, what with Lucifer and Atlas's words and—

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

I shake my head once, a jerky motion. "If I did, I wouldn't have asked you."

Unnerving me, he grins, flashing green gum in his mouth. "Okay, killer, calm down."

My cheeks burn, but I don't look away from him. "Tell me what you meant. About RC. Why did you tell me that? Are they coming for *me*? Do they have a job for me? What is it?"

"Would it make you feel better if you had another fix, Ella?" He changes subjects so fast, my brain has a hard time thinking through his question.

And yeah, I desperately want another pill from Atlas, but I won't ask him for it.

I do have a little pride.

But then my stomach drops. I take a step back, then another. He watches me carefully, no smile now.

"You..." I trail off, thinking through everything we've done together in the dark. "You've been drugging me so I... so *I'll* be like the patients you spoke about? So they'll pinpoint something on *me*?" My voice rises at the end.

Atlas trails around the island, coming closer to me, and I want to back up but there's nowhere to go.

"No," he says softly, his hands hip level, palms down, like he's trying to calm me. "Think this through. Are *you* going to start spreading rumors, Ella? Has anyone asked you to kill someone? Rob a fucking bank?"

I shake my head back and forth, like I can clear my brain. "But why did you tell me that? What are you saying? I don't understand."

He comes closer and without thinking, I dart my hand out and reach for the butcher's knife on the block, a *zing*

resounding through the air as I hold it up between us, my hand shaky but I grip the handle tight.

He stops but only smiles. "Put it down, Ella."

I shake my head once, inching along the counter to put more space between us, my free hand clenched into a fist. "What are you saying to me, *and why?*"

"Put it down." He offers nothing else.

I'm tired of being kept in the dark.

"I don't want to say it again." The same calm, measured tone.

Fuck you. "I don't want to *ask* again!"

Silence follows my outburst. My chest heaves and my palm grows sweaty around the handle of the blade.

Then he moves.

He comes at me without hesitation, and I remember the words he first spoke to me, when we started training together. "*You only go for a weapon if you plan to use it.*"

And I don't. I didn't. Because as confused as I am, there's still something in me wanting to *trust* Atlas. To trust *someone* in this dark world.

He circles his hand around my wrist, pressing against the bones in a way that it's a reflex to splay my fingers, dropping the knife. Smoothly, he slides his hand along mine and grabs the handle, then he's pushing his body to mine as he holds the tip of the large, metallic blade to the underside of my chin.

I freeze, my hands up but not between us because his chest is already there, his thighs against my hips, caging me in.

I feel the pinprick of the knife on the soft skin just above my throat.

His pupils dilate as he stares at me, one hand gripping the counter beside my hip. But he doesn't say anything, and it causes me to talk *more*.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you even keeping our secret from Maverick if you just plan to throw me to the

wolves?" Everytime I speak, I feel the edge of the knife against my skin. "Why even bother?" It's hushed whispers, the words from my mouth.

He studies me clinically, and *that* scares me, considering our position. I could count his lower lashes if I wanted. See the pieces of dark blue amongst the brown of his eyes. But when I drop my gaze, it's only his wrist I see, the blue veins up his forearms as he corners me with this knife.

"No one ever believed in you, did they?"

My chest tightens, but he doesn't say it like an insult. I lift my eyes to his, not moving, not speaking.

"Not your mom. Not your friends." I never really had any of those, so he's right. "Not even Maverick." My lips are pressed together, and I inhale sharply through my nose. "Not Sid." He whispers her name, and it hurts me, somehow, hearing it. The ways I can't connect with her, and all of them seem to breathe in sync with her and I can't be that. "I know what that's like. You'll do anything to prove your worth, won't you?" His gaze rakes down my body pressed to his, but it isn't in a sexual way. It's like he's seeing the wounds that are hidden. The ones he can't possibly know about. "I would too," he continues. "*That's* why I bother."

The answer is heavier than I thought it would be and I still don't speak as I stare at him. He's missing Mavy's hard edges and unlike my boyfriend, he smiles a lot, dimples in his cheeks when he does.

But in this moment, he feels incredibly more dangerous.

"I could really hurt you right now, Ella." He glances down at the blade to my skin. "I could slit your fucking throat and watch as you bleed out."

My breaths are shallow, my hands shaky as I keep them held up, like I could stop him from doing what he's saying.

"I could fuck your corpse."

A whimper leaves my lips. "That's not you." I whisper the words as he drags his gaze back up to mine.

A slow, lazy smile spreads across his face.

I hate how I have to look *up* at him.

"But you know all of my secrets, Ella. Like this one." He glances up at the high ceiling, the recessed lights.

The Madilyn, Atlas calls this place.

The first night he told me about it was all those weeks ago at Rain's party. It's his playground.

"Why not a Latin name?" I hiccup, the vodka in the cup he gave me getting to my head as I lean against his shoulder, our arms touching.

He smiles, rolling his eyes. "When you know who you are, you don't need to scream about it. It sits quietly." He touches his fist to his heart. "Here."

How cute. "Latin isn't who you are." The words come without thinking, and I take another drink from my cup, wincing as it burns. But my face is feeling numb. It won't burn much longer.

"No," Atlas agrees, turning his head so he's staring at the weight benches in the basement gym. "Demons don't need dead languages, do they? They speak in horror." He laughs then, like it's nothing. "Anyway, it was my great-great something or another's first name, and I like it."

Again, I think about him sucking my saliva off of his fingers. About when he and Cain broke in. Things have escalated in ways I didn't expect when he agreed to teach me how to fight.

I have truly miscalculated all of this. And I never once factored RC into the equation, not when it comes to *me*.

Atlas leans down close, his lips over mine, the knife still between us. I smell spearmint as he speaks. "And you're not paying me. You're not fucking me. And you're not family." That last one hurts the most. I know he doesn't mean his blood relatives. He meant the Unsaints. The 6. I'm not one. I might have the scar on my palm, but I haven't been initiated. There are so many things I don't know. I never even got to meet Maverick's mom, something that

gets under my skin despite the fact I never heard a single nice thing about the woman. Maverick doesn't talk about her, won't share his grief with me, and it fucking eats at me.

"Why, exactly, am I keeping your secrets, Ella? It would be so much easier if you were only a lifeless little doll at my feet."

I clench my teeth, narrowing my eyes as I stare at his, so close to my face. "Because now, they're your secrets too. Killing me won't erase your disloyalty."

He smiles at that, humming softly. "Won't it though? Two can keep a secret if... you know the rest."

I flick my gaze past him, into the living room. I stare at the ornate baseboards of the black walls. This place is cavernous. But on the outside, it looks like nothing at all. The Madilyn. Crumbling and derelict, it's only inside you experience the grandeur. Black and white marble tile floors upstairs, white wainscoting, arched doorways.

It's opulence.

I've never even been inside his actual house, but I can't imagine the interior could be better than this.

Architecture distracts me from the sting of his cryptic words, but it's more than that. It's like it emboldens me somehow, to not be looking directly at the monster.

"You saw something in me, you just said yourself. And you wouldn't teach me all of this if you wanted to kill me." I say it with conviction, and it's not to talk him out of doing it. It's because I know it to be true. Being Maverick's girl isn't always easy. He's moody and broken and brooding. He's older than me and he's seen more of the world and his moral code is so far off from mine, it's laughable. I slept with my mom's boyfriend before. Maverick wouldn't count that as a sin. In his world, transgressions are deeper and darker and usually, far bloodier.

But I've learned how to hold my own in the almost year we've been together... at least with people who aren't him.

I've learned to see what it is they *aren't* saying, and Atlas doesn't want me dead.

Seconds pass, maybe minutes.

Then he steps away so suddenly, I feel like I'm falling. My breaths come in pants as I press my fingertips behind me, to the counter, bowing my head. A sound of relief leaves my mouth as I close my eyes tight. I hear Atlas stepping further back, putting more distance between us, but I know he still has the knife.

"I wouldn't," he finally agrees.

I shake my head, still panting, and I don't look up. "Then why are you being like this? Why are you *telling* me this?"

"Everyone around you is fucking with your head, aren't they? Including me, right?"

I raise my eyes to his, and find he's still staring at me, his expression neutral, the knife held by his side. His shirt forms around the curves of his muscles and despite his stoicism, I see his chest heaving as hard as mine.

Pressure builds behind my eyes. "Yes," I gasp out.

"And you've so blindly trusted us all. At the very least, given us the benefit of the doubt. Meeting with me, keeping even Cain breaking into your house a secret. Then I gave you a warning about Sevryn, and what do you do? You decide you might give him a chance too, with that bleeding heart of yours."

I blink at him, my face flushing hotter still as I rock back on the soles of my boots, my fingers on the countertop pressed into the marble to keep my balance.

He looks down his nose at me, then he steps closer. His tongue touches his bottom lip, just for a moment. "My plea for you to come *here*, you listen immediately. I mean, you think I won't hurt you, but how stupid have you been? You're alone, you meet me alone, and, what? You think you're safe?" He smiles again, his long lashes fluttering as he looks down at my mouth. "They don't even know this place exists."

My throat feels tight. I don't move.

"You think *I'm* safe?" His eyes come back to mine. "Little Red Riding Hood never saw the wolf when it was right in front of her pretty little face."

Nerves tangle in my chest, my arms, my limbs. Little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. But despite his tangled words and his display with the knife, I truly don't think he would dare hurt me.

As if he's reading my mind, he asks, "You think Mav can protect you here?" Another laugh and I catch the scent of mint from his breath. "What're you gonna do if I touch you, right now, baby? Worse than when I pushed myself down your throat?"

My cheeks flush pink.

"Run back to Mav and tell him how you've been lying?" He steps even closer, the knife by his side. "Tell him what I've done for you? How often we've met up?"

"You wouldn't—"

He cuts me off with a low voice. "He asked about where you're sneaking off to? Or those marks on the back of your thighs yet? Does he just think he did that?" He pulls his plush bottom lip between his teeth and my body is on fire. "I mean, he's fucking careless, isn't he?" He leans down into my face and his nose nudges mine. "But you know... I have a secret, pretty girl." He mocks Mavy's name for me, and it feels like my face is beet red. "I'm not as nice as everyone thinks I am. I might not be so rough, but there's all kinds of foreplay, right? Wanna know mine?"

No. "What the fuck is your problem?" I grind those words out, straightening from the counter, my hands clenched into fists. I don't understand where he's going with any of this. In the time we've been meeting together after he slipped me a sleeping pill that soothed my physical aches *and* my emotional ones—when Rain was cradled in Mav's arms and my jealous heart was about to explode at the sight of Sid smiling at my boyfriend at the party—I

thought I could trust him. I know I can, to an extent. Despite his tough talk, he wouldn't want to be outed as betraying Maverick.

Lucifer might lead, but Maverick holds sway. A lot of it. He rarely goes against his best friend, but if he did, I think Cain and Ezra would be more likely to have his back, despite the fact Cain was with Atlas when they broke into my home. Cain isn't afraid of anyone, and he'd betray Atlas in a heartbeat if his logical mind thought it best.

Atlas doesn't want that kind of trouble.

He cocks his head as he stares down at me, like he's deciding what to do with me.

We don't move. Seconds tick by, and I hear a creak upstairs, but Atlas doesn't look away from me. It's just the old, renovated building settling. No one is here. We're alone.

We're alone.

Somehow, it doesn't feel like a reassurance. Neither of us look away from the other.

Finally, Atlas pulls back again.

I find myself breathing normally, my heart beating faster with his absence. Or maybe what we didn't do.

"Where, exactly, do you go in those woods?" He glances at the knife in his hand and the wicked blade glints in the recessed lights overhead.

My heart picks up speed. "What are you talking about?"

He glances at me. "I've checked the cemetery near our street. The chapel. It would be an incredible hiding place. But there's no way just anyone could be that close to you and none of us know about it. Which leaves only one conclusion."

I hold my breath, waiting for him to guess.

"The 6. It's one of them, isn't it? Have they asked you to do something too? A job handed down from RC? What do they want you to complete?"

I shake my head. "No. You're wrong. They haven't—"

He smiles. "Ella. You know who I belong to. The 6 are professional liars. Do better with your bullshit."

I swallow down my irritation as he takes one step back in his black, high-top sneakers, twirling the knife expertly between his fingers without nicking himself. I watch the blade, fascinated, saying nothing.

"Come on. Tell me. Who else is hurting you, baby? Is it my dad? Is it Mikhail himself? Pretty big position, if the boss is coming to you, baby."

My heart flutters inside my chest. "It's no one. I've been working out. You know that. Sprinting." I don't stumble into his trap and instead I stick to the story I would have told Mavy, if he ever asked. "I'm clumsy. I... fell, before. No one is hurting me. And if they were, you wouldn't care."

His smile slips, and he clenches the blade's handle in his fist. "Wouldn't I?"

I feel warm all over, imagining it. Someone else in the Unsaints actually giving a shit about me. I see the way everyone reacts to Sid. She's... precious. I'm... annoying.

"No one else does." I hate saying it, but it spills from my mouth all the same. "I mean, even Maverick is too wrapped up in the Malikovs to give a damn."

Atlas stares at me a moment, the knife handle still, threaded between his index, middle, and ring finger now. "He know you're so jealous?"

I flush hot and I want to turn and run, maybe more so than when he held the blade to my chin. "Yes," I answer, my jaw clenched.

"Does he know just how much you fucking hate Sid?"

I want to hit him. I feel raw. Fucking exposed, especially as I remember her name on Mav's hand, his fingers inside of me when we were having sex that time in the kitchen. Then last night, when he made me say her names to embarrass me.

I think of texting her afterward out of some wild hope. How she never replied.

My stomach twists into knots and I feel sick.

“He wants you,” Atlas interrupts. He smiles then, lifting up one shoulder in a lazy shrug. “More than you know. He shot at Sevryn for you.”

At the mention of Sevryn, my face flushes, and he seems to notice.

He smiles, shaking his head. “You know you could wreck your whole world with this shit we’re doing.”

“Then why do you keep letting me?”

He glances down at the blade, flipping his palm and examining the handle between his fingers. He slides it out with his free hand carefully, then he closes his fingers around the blade.

I wince, but he doesn’t squeeze hard.

His eyes come to mine. “If someone else were hurting you, Ella, someone outside of us, I’d want to know. But you won’t tell me anything, I can’t find anything, and as for what happens between you and Maverick, no matter how bloody it gets, it’s not my problem.”

I blink, confused. “If he found out you were lying to him too, if he knew what you’re doing for me, he’d—”

Atlas smiles and I falter in my words. “He’d what?” He cocks his head, keeping his gaze on me.

I throw up my hands, rolling my eyes, thinking of what Maverick said he’d do when he was feeding me ice cream in the theater room. “I don’t know. Kill you?” I drop my hands, glancing at the bar stools along the island and suddenly wanting to sink down onto one. This entire night has exhausted me in ways I didn’t expect.

“Kill me?” Atlas deadpans.

I look up at him and find the hint of a smile still on his face.

He jerks his chin. “Come here, Ella.”

“Not with that knife in your hand.”

He rolls his eyes. “If I wanted to hurt you with it, I would have. Come on, we don’t have all night.”

After a moment's hesitation, I slowly close the few feet between us, eyeing the blade in his hand, his fingers still around the sharp side.

His grin widens, flashing his canines. His teeth are extremely white, but the canines are more pronounced. Almost like a... vampire.

I bite my cheek, chastising myself mentally for being so stupid, for noticing all of these things about him when all he wants to do is fuck with my mind.

He brings the knife up between us, still smiling, and this time, he's gripping the weapon by the black handle.

I suck in a breath as he taps the sharp point to his left canine. "What are you doing?" I ask, shaking my head. "What the hell—"

"Look," he says. He lowers the knife and leans in toward me. Again, I'm hit with his fresh scent, and the mint of his breath, but I blink, looking at the tooth he touched with the knife.

It looks... strange. Thinner than his other. I shift my gaze between the two, frowning, and abruptly, he pulls back.

Confused, I open my mouth to ask again what he's talking about, but he beats me to it.

"Your *boyfriend* did that," he says, mocking the word I used to describe Maverick. He flips the knife in his hand without looking, catching the handle as he smiles at me. "For fucking his sister."

Brooklin.

His gaze drops over my body. "He might try to kill me," he agrees, and I don't know why I feel pleasure at those words, but I do.

Like maybe I don't believe what I'm worth to Maverick, despite what he says. Maybe I think he just... feels stuck with me. I know he carries a lot of guilt over Ria, the girl in the basement. I've overheard him talking about her. I wonder if he ever wanted to marry her, just to save her. Maybe he blames me for not being able to do it.

“But I learned my lesson.”

I frown, dragging my gaze from the knife in his hand, back up to his dark eyes. “To not fuck his sister?” I think of Sid even as I know we’re discussing Brooklin. It’s what my brain does. Jump to the worst possible conclusion at any given moment.

Atlas reaches up with his free hand and adjusts his hat, for half a second exposing the soft curls of his blond hair.

“No, *pretty girl*.” He takes a step back, and I tense, my body going rigid. He bends his elbow, flexing his arm, the knife gripped tight in his hand. “To be worse than he is.”

I almost laugh, because there’s no way he could be worse. Even with that display with the knife, I want to tell him he could never be like Maverick, but I hear the insult in my words before I get them out, so I decide to say nothing.

But just as I reach for a subject change, his eyes lock on mine, and he says, “Duck,” just one second before he throws the knife.

Right at me.

I drop to the ground, my heart racing, not enough air in my lungs as my palms slap the floor, my knees banging against the tiles.

I hear the knife twang as it lodges into the cabinet at my back.

I can’t even lift my head. I’m barely breathing. That could have... that could have pierced my lung. My eyes. My brain.

The knife stops, everything seems to stop. Atlas doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak. I can’t find words, and my eyes are squeezed closed, my palms clammy against the floor.

For the first time since I’ve been sneaking around behind Maverick’s back and coming here, tonight is when I feel real fear.

And after a long stretch of silence, it only increases when I hear the floor shift. Atlas coming closer.

I open my eyes, adrenaline slipping from my veins, exhaustion in its wake as my chest heaves.

I see the leather of his shoes.

Then he offers me his hand.

Panting, trying to catch my breath, I'm not thinking clearly, and I take it. In one swift motion, he pulls me to my feet, then wraps his arms around my waist. My palms crash against his chest because I'm off balance, unsteady. *He threw a fucking knife at me.*

"Look at me," he whispers, his fingertips slipping under my shirt, drawing circles along my lower spine.

Shivering, clenching the fabric of his T-shirt in my fingers, I raise my gaze. My lips are parted and I'm still breathing hard, my pulse frantic in my chest.

His eyes scan mine. Then he says, "You did so good." He leans in closer, and our breath mingles. He pulls me further into him, and I can feel his erection against my low belly. Tilting his head, our lips are only inches from one another.

My heart thumps loud in my head.

"Is anyone hurting you, Ella? Is anyone giving you a job you don't want to do?"

I'm shaking, I realize. Trembling, like a scared little girl. *Be brave. You're doing good things. You're doing the right thing. Mavy will see. He'll love me for it, when it all comes out. He'll be proud.*

I close my eyes, squeezing them shut tight. Pressure builds behind them, and I want to tell him. For one single second, I want to confess to Atlas. Is this what he's been trying to do since we got here? Walk circles around my brain, scramble it into mush so all that comes out of my mouth is the truth I can't hide anymore?

"Baby," he murmurs, brushing his lips over mine.

My body is tingling, anticipation racing through me. Fuck a confession, I definitely can't cheat. I can't do this. No, no, no.

He runs his mouth over mine again. I taste him. Mint. He is so clean. His tongue licks along my bottom lip. "Kiss me back," he whispers.

I keep my eyes closed. I don't speak. I can't find words.

"He's not giving you enough attention. He's so focused on everyone else, he hasn't seen those marks, has he? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he doesn't care at all." He arches his hips, his cock pressing against me. "I care. If I didn't, I wouldn't do this for you."

"Stop fucking with my head. *Stop*. Why did you tell me all of that, about RC? Am I the crazy one? Am I the... The one they're going to use? What is *happening*, Atlas?"

He trails one hand around my waist, causing my stomach muscles to jump as he dances his fingers over the hem of my pants. "Do you feel crazy?" He runs his bottom lip over my top one, a moan coming from my throat. "Right here, with me? Or do you feel safe? Do you feel seen?" A sharp breath leaves my mouth, and he laughs a little. "There you go, baby. Just give in. Kiss me."

He slips his fingers inside my pants, just there, at the hem, over my low belly.

"Tell me the truth. Tell me if you're being hurt, okay? I want to protect you."

My knees feel weak. But inside my head, I see Maverick holding me close. His eyes sparking up when he looks down at me as we sit on the back porch, and he smokes a joint. I see him handing over a credit card, in my own name, like it's nothing, without a word. No limits, no rules. I feel him carrying me upstairs to watch a movie, and I get to pick, and he watches it with me without picking up his phone once. I sit on his lap in his office. He kisses me goodnight and compliments my food and goes to the grocery store with me every three days, without fail. I see him shifting gears in his car, his smile when I clap while he flies down the highway.

I see him holding tight to Rain, and I know, *I know*, he'd love any kids we had so fiercely. God, he'd kill for them. For *me*.

"No." I say the word out loud, shoving away from Atlas. My eyes pop open to see him studying me closely. I shake my head, rearing back so our lips don't touch. "No." I swallow down the saliva in my throat, waiting for him to accept my answer.

Finally, he drops his hands from around me, nodding once. Then he says, adjusting himself as he does, "I think we're done here." He smiles, winking at me. "Are you the crazy one, Ella? *Or am I?*"

I've become adept at moving through the woods around Corpus Ave, but that doesn't mean a slight apprehension isn't present as I gather what's not carved of my wits and turn toward the back door, my mind a mess.

But before I can leave, I hear it again.

The floor shifting, somewhere upstairs. This time, it's louder. There's no mistaking it.

I stop, my heart leaping to my throat as I turn to look at Atlas over my shoulder. He's already staring at me. "Go," he whispers, "and don't turn back, no matter what you hear."

What? I open my mouth to argue as the footfalls grow louder, distinguishable now as exactly that. *Someone else* inside this house.

"Go." Atlas mouths the word, but he turns his back to me, staring into the room we use to train, where I've seen the shadow of a staircase at times, but I've never ventured up. Never been invited to.

Is it Natalie? Is he keeping her here?

"Who—"

Atlas holds up his hand, the back of it facing me, to silence me. The steps seem to fade, but I think it's only because they're heading toward the staircase, which isn't directly above the kitchen.

I hold my breath, darting my gaze from Atlas to the door that slips into the backyard. I could just grab the tarnished silver knob. I could just leave. But he seems nervous, his shoulders tense, his hand still there, hovering in the air.

Does he even know who it is? Did someone break in?

Is it Maverick?

Fear in the form of vertigo washes over me, everything spinning as I stumble toward the door, circling my fingers around the knob. I could help Atlas fight off anyone else. I could try my best to save him.

But only if it isn't Mavy.

I cut my eyes to the knife embedded in the cabinet, only three feet from me.

The stairs creak, an eerie sound. But then the steps grow louder, each one a thud as whoever it is brazenly heads down here, toward us.

Atlas turns to me, dropping his hand. His face seems blank. No narrowed gaze, no pinched mouth. But when he speaks, his voice monotone, I understand every word. *"If you don't run, you will be the crazy one."*

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XXXIII

Lucifer

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14

DOWNTOWN ALEXANDRIA

RAIN SLASHES against the roof of my car and I lift my eyes, staring into the rear-view mirror. Gray irises edged with brown look back at me in the darkness of the BMW. His face is expressionless, and in the few days he's been staying at my house, I've got nothing on him. Not a read, not a feeling, *nothing*.

"Who is it?" Ezra asks, voice low.

I jump my eyes to him, sitting against the opposite window in the back seat, behind Maverick. "You think they told me?"

He tips back his flask but holds eye contact. When he lowers his vice, twisting the cap back on, he shrugs one shoulder. "Thought my dad might."

Maverick laughs. It's like a cackle from the passenger seat. Slowly, I turn to glare at him. His white teeth flash

like fangs and he slouches down, getting comfortable as he cocks his head, staring out the windshield. We're parked in an alleyway, across the street from our target tonight. Sevryn has to come on this first job with us, and I feel uneasy about it. I considered using him as a lookout, but I don't trust him in my fucking car.

"Mikhail gave us these orders without running them by Elijah, bro," Mav says to everyone in the car, but I know he's talking about Ezra's last comment. "He's calling the shots while he's down here and he's making sure we obey while he's at it." My brother's blue eyes cut to mine. "You obeying anything else of his you wanna tell me about it?" He drops his voice as he asks that.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, other elbow propped up on the ledge of my door. "If you think I'm taking orders from my dad's brother on the low, I'd say you don't fucking know me at all."

He studies me a moment and it kind of pisses me off because what I said isn't untrue. Then he finally just says, "We need to get moving," with a snarl, lifting up his right hand and showing the handgun in it, his finger off the trigger.

As if sensing we'll be outside soon, God makes sure to turn up the volume of the fucking rain and it comes down like hail over my car. I am never nothing if not unlucky.

I dart a glance at Sevryn, twisting in my seat to stare at him. He's dressed in a blue hoodie, the hood up but it can't cover all of his thick, wavy hair. Gray eyes peer out from beneath it, his elbows on his knees and hands together, fingers tucked under his chin.

"You follow orders, don't even *think* to reach for a weapon, and if you run off, I'm letting you go because I don't give a fuck if you live or die."

He doesn't even blink, but he asks, very calmly, "Where are the others?"

Cain and Atlas. Cain was late tonight, and Atlas didn't even show up—I know this is some sort of allowance because of Samson's corpse. Afterward, Cain spoke to his father privately, the two of them winding their way through Sanctum and away from us while Boaz gave me this task, to kill some woman tonight in an apartment complex the 6 own. No reason, no explanation, just an order. I only obeyed after I was able to go home and check in on Sid and Rain. Being apart from them fucking kills me. Even Mav and Ez didn't go back home. They don't seem to have the pull I do. It's like a fucking leash.

"Let's go," Mav says from the front, then he reaches for his door handle and opens it up, rain lashing wildly against the darkened streets and towering buildings of Alexandria.

"Never mind them," I quickly say to Sevryn. "This is on you now."

I pull down my hoodie over the butt of my gun, bowing my head as I shove my hands into the pocket of my sweatshirt. Mav's arm brushes mine as we cut down another alleyway, across the street from where my car is parked.

Behind me, Ezra and Sevryn follow. I can just make out the sound of their boots splashing along the puddles in the darkness. I glance at Mav's tall, lean form, dressed all in black. We're getting soaked because umbrellas are inconvenient to murders and none of us brought raincoats to Sanctum. I could've grabbed one at home, but it's not as if we bothered to check the fucking weather forecast. Maybe I'll make that Sevryn's job for the next few weeks.

Mav's light eyes seem to glow in the darkness as the scent of wet asphalt and garbage fills my nose from the city streets and his eyes meet mine for a second.

A sudden desperation seizes me, thinking of Sid and Ella on Corpus Avenue, alone now. Of what I've done behind my

brother's back in trying to get Ella a firm hold with the 6. I've treated her like shit anytime we've been in the near vicinity of one another, all while I'm attempting to ensure my uncles respect her. *But how could they, if I can't?*

I think of Mav taking my phone from me the night I brought Sevryn home. Diverting another argument with Sid, another fuck-up as Rain's father.

I owe you so much and when you find out what I've done, you might never let me pay you back for it.

Before I can snap myself out of all these emotions bearing down on me out of nowhere, a loud *pop* fills the air.

Something metallic pings somewhere close to my head and a hand comes to the back of my neck, grabbing me and pulling me *down*. I go to my knees, reach for my gun on reflex, finger on the trigger as I lift up my elbow, covering my head.

"Beside me," I hiss, grabbing Maverick's leg, hauling him close. As another crack goes off, I blink in the darkness and rain of the alley and see Sevryn is next to me, his head in his hands, but he was the one who pulled me down. Ezra is on his other side, elbow bent, and gun aimed up, his face turned away from me, staring at the entrance to the alley.

He's the one they'll be able to shoot the easiest.

Fuck that.

As Mav drops down to a squat beside me, his shoulder against the fire escape ladder the bullet glinted off of, I dart over, past Sevryn, intending to place myself on the other side of Ezra, blocking him from the entrance to the alleyway. I can see nothing through the onslaught of rain, just headlights as cars pass by, sludging up mud and water.

But when I start to shuffle past Ezra, keeping low, he grabs my arm and hauls me back, slamming me against the brick building behind me. His hand shoots to my chest, pinning me there as he gets in my fucking face.

"You've got a kid, dumbass. I sure as fuck don't want to raise him." I can scent the alcohol on his breath as he

hisses the words, and I know he doesn't mean it as an insult.

My heart thrums too fast inside my ribcage when he's this close to my face. I see his long, dark lashes, wet from the storm. The brighter green pieces in his hazel eyes. A drop of rain running down his nose.

Loyalty.

I feel it with Ezra, here. And what am I doing? Going behind everyone's back. Maybe it's for a good reason, like what I wanted to do just now, shielding Ez from the opening. But just like this moment, they might not appreciate it anyway.

He shoves me back again, ensuring I don't move, then turns his head, sweeping his gaze over the rectangular entrance to the alley, buildings looming on either side of it.

I shift my body, looking around him, even as he flings out his arm to catch me in the chest, making sure I don't expose too much of myself. Behind me, Maverick tells Sevryn to move, and I feel them shuffling their positions, then Mav is right beside me, all four of us squatting down to make our body mass smaller.

"Who the fuck do you think that was?" Mav says in my ear.

More cars zoom by, traffic nonexistent in the storm. I can see the reflection of a green stoplight, hazy on a growing puddle. "Someone trying to keep alive who we're going to kill," I mutter under my breath.

"They didn't try very hard," Mav comments and Ez laughs, dropping his arm from my chest.

"Yeah," I say, keeping my eyes on the entrance. "We're Unsaints. They're not gonna fuck with us too heavy—"

Before the words can leave my mouth, another explosion pops off, the bullet sailing over our heads.

"Get them." I snarl the words out as Mav, Ezra, and I do exactly that, the three of us fanning out but keeping low as

we aim toward the entrance, the direction the bullet came from.

I see nothing as the guns pop off, my finger squeezing the trigger for the third time. It's dangerous, stupid, firing into a street like this, but oddly enough, the cars have stopped coming by, like everyone knows a gang war is taking place right now.

The bullets scatter into the street, maybe a few strike the brick face of the building opposite us.

We all stop shooting, holding our breath.

My entire body is tense, my ears ringing as I think of Rain and Sid and everything I'd do to get home to them in one fucking piece.

My heart actually aches, pressure building behind my eyes. I never used to be afraid to die. In fact, I used to want it.

Not now. Not anymore.

I blink away the burn in my eyes, keeping my gun aimed, one hand braced against my inner elbow. Seconds tick by. The rain thins the slightest, not that it matters. My hoodie is already stuck to my body, my sweats too.

The minutes stretch on and I think we're in the clear as the ringing in my ears dies down.

But a second later, my limbs going numb from squatting, I see a figure of darkness, running across the alley entrance.

"Hold back," I mutter, because whoever it is isn't looking our way.

Flaps of a long, black coat trail after what I think is a woman, judging by the curves I see from here. High black boots, a hood that falls away, revealing inky black hair with one shocking stripe of white.

Beside me, Ezra stiffens, his shoulder bumping mine.

I turn to look at him as the woman disappears.

He's staring after her, his lips pressed together.

"Who the fuck was that?" I hiss.

He doesn't answer for a second. Then he just says, "No one. Let's go."

I'm glad I didn't bother to bring a lock pick. After we entered the door at the top of the fire escape, made our way here, into a narrow corridor that smells of mildew and rot, trudging mud and rainwater behind us, I realized this job doesn't have to be neat, in terms of breaking in.

The lighting keeps flickering, the ceiling is low, a few doors hang off their hinges and the numbers on them are peeling and faded. No one is going to bat an eye at a little breaking and entering in a place like this.

"Why do they own this place?" Sevryn asks quietly, shifting nervously on his feet behind me. His hood is still up and while he handled being shot at pretty well—maybe Maverick's antics helped—now that we're in here, he seems anxious. We all stop at the last door on the left, the numbers 323 curling up around the edges from their faux gold sticker.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Maverick glaring at Sevryn. Sevryn shrinks back, a step away from him. Smart move, considering Mav has a gun in his hand. "Stop asking fucking questions," Mav snarls.

Ezra nudges me with his elbow, his back to me as he acts as lookout for any oncoming, unneeded interference. "Hurry up and get inside."

Yeah. That's exactly what I need to do. *Hurry*. I don't know who fucking shot at us, and it very well could've been someone Boaz put in place to make our job that much harder. I'll have to ask him when we meet up next. For now, I try to brush aside getting shot. When you were raised by the 6, it's not so hard to do.

I glance at the door handle, a round, brass knob that's seen better days. Dents and scuffs, not to mention

fingerprints and something that looks suspiciously like chocolate is caked over it.

Reaching out, I try the easiest option first, grateful for my black leather gloves.

It's locked though.

I crank it hard to the right, feeling the lock flex under the pressure. It still doesn't give and I'm considering just kicking it in when the door suddenly pops open, flinging backward and granting us entry.

The scent of something sweet reaches my nose, like cookies or a cake. It's warm in here too, the air wafting over me like a hug, considering the damp chill spreading in my bones from my wet hoodie.

I move my finger to the trigger of my gun, staring into the short entranceway. The tiles are clean, leading into a small kitchen, one line of cabinets, a white oven. There's a fridge of the same color too, and a cluster of photos with magnets clinging to it, but I can't discern who is in the pictures from here.

There are no doors leading off the short hallway, aside from this one.

I take a step inside, glancing at my brothers.

Ezra nods toward the corridor of the apartment and I return the gesture. He's going to stay as lookout.

Maverick is behind Sevryn, who follows apprehensively as I swing my head back around and step inside, careful with my body weight so it doesn't creak on the clean floor.

Once we're all in, I hear the door click closed behind us and the strip of light from the outside hallway is gone.

My eyes find a living room, no table, no dining room. A thin, white curtain doing almost nothing to block out the city lights. But because of the glow, I see a tan sofa, a boxy television on a coffee table.

And something in the middle of the gray carpeted floor.

Frowning, I dart my gaze up, past the kitchen, toward the only other door in this house, and it's pulled closed.

Lifting up one finger, I stay Mav and Sevryn as I head into the living room, squatting down to see the cluster of objects on the floor, between the couch and the TV.

My heart leaps to my throat when I realize what it is.

Cars. Little toy cars, shiny red roof on one, bulging fat tires on another, like it's a monster truck. There are five of them arranged in a twisted circle, and my mind flashes to the way my brothers and I park our vehicles when we meet up to talk.

I blink, straightening to my full height as I take a deep breath, trying to stop the nausea overcoming me at the sight of toys in this house.

Turning back toward my brothers, I head silently over to the fridge, but I stop a foot from it, not daring to drag my eyes up to the photos stuck there with magnets.

It's better if I don't know.

It's better if I don't see, because no matter who this child is, I won't choose them over Rain.

I swallow down the knot in my throat, and just as I look up, my eyes on the white door pulled closed, the one which must be the bedroom, it creaks open and a second later I hear an unfamiliar woman's voice call out, "*Finn, get back in bed.*"

My entire world seems to stop.

White noise rushes to my ears, the room sways and tilts a little. I tighten my grip on the gun in my hand and distantly, I hear Maverick move toward me, but even when I sense him right behind me, I don't react.

Finn.

Fucking *Finn.*

"We still have to do it," Mav whispers in my ear, trying to overcome the darkness burrowing inside my mind. "It doesn't matter who it is, we have to—"

"There's someone in here, Ms. Esther." Finn's voice is high-pitched and lacking fear.

I blink, trying to focus, but all I can see is a crack of darkness into the bedroom. It's a mercy I can't see *him*.

"No one is here, Finn," the woman croons softly. Kindly. She doesn't even sound irritated Finn probably woke her up. "Get back to your bed."

There must be two in there. They're sharing a bedroom though.

"It's my uncle," Finn whispers, and I know even though I can't see him, he sees me.

Uncle. Did Julie tell him I was his uncle? What a lousy fucking uncle I was, doing lines in his house.

I think of Mav, and how he'd never do that with Rain.

The warmth in the apartment suddenly feels cloistering, like I'm catching fire despite my wet clothes.

I hear the creak of a step.

Another.

I know *Esther* is coming closer, and I turn to look over my shoulder. "Move out of view," I mouth to Maverick, my eyes locked on his.

His jaw clenches, like he wants to argue, but as Esther's footsteps get closer to the door, he finally nods, then grabs Sevryn's arm and jerks him back too, aiming the gun at his head.

Sevryn's eyes widen and I know Maverick doesn't need to do that, but clearly he's still pissed Sevryn was alone in a room with Ella.

Can't say I blame him.

I turn back to the door just as it opens all the way, a light inside the room flicking on before a woman appears in the doorway, blocking any view I might have had of Finn.

She's older, with white, curly hair and a wrinkled face. Wearing a long, shapeless yellow nightgown, she clearly just got out of bed.

Her mouth opens, eyes wide as I hear her suck in a breath at the sight of me, dressed all in black with a skeleton bandana around my neck and gun in hand.

She starts to close the door, her body moving again, reacting, and I'm mildly impressed it only took her seconds to respond.

But I close the space between us, no longer bothering with being quiet, and put my black boot in the door so she can't slam it closed.

"Finn," she says, still attempting to shut it, "go to the bathroom. Shower," she hisses, but she doesn't look away from me. I hear small footsteps, then a door slams. They must have practiced this, and the thought makes me queasy.

I hold out my hand, smacking my palm on the door to resist her futile efforts to shut it. She's shorter than I am, this room smells like baby powder—something soft—and yet when she glares up at me with blue eyes, I know she'd still try to fight me off to save him.

"Who are you?" I ask her, my words low.

She narrows her gaze. "You broke into my home. Who are *you*?" She tries to hide it, but her voice shakes and I watch her swallow after she asks the question.

"Why are you with Finn? Do you know what happened to Julie?"

Her face pales, eyes widening.

"Did you *know* Julie?" I press, seeing her surprise.

She shakes her head once, her eyes darting past me, no doubt looking for my backup, but I know she didn't see Mav or Sevryn yet. "He says her name," she whispers. "His mom?"

I nod once, flexing my fingers against the wood of her door. I take in her small bed, a tinier one beside it, only a mattress but it has a comforter with cars on it, flung back and messy now. "Why are you with him?" I try again. "Who gave him to you?"

"I can't say anything," she whispers, glancing at the gun in my hand. "And I need you to leave—"

I grab her arm, feeling the soft flesh, and push her into the door. It thuds against the wall and her eyes cut to the bathroom door, visible now that she's out of my way. There's a light on under it, and a shadow too, Finn huddled close to the crack.

Slowly, I turn my gaze back on her and hold the barrel of the gun beneath her chin. Her lips tremble as she tips her head up and I feel her pulse through my grip on her arm. She's fucking terrified.

I lean in close to her, my mouth inches from her own. "You take him far from here. I'm going to leave money in a black bag outside your door in ten minutes. Do you have a car?"

"Y-yes," she struggles with the word.

"Take the money, your car, and get the fuck out of this city. Out of North Carolina, then buy a new car. Do you understand?"

"They said I couldn't leave. They said—"

"I can promise you something, Esther." I lean in close, my mouth over her ear. "I am so much fucking worse than *them*."

I pull back and watch as understanding lights her eyes. "So, what are you going to do?" I ask her quietly, wanting to ensure she can follow directions.

"Get the b-bag in ten minutes." She wets her lips, closing her eyes only a second. "Get out of town. Out of state. Buy a new car."

I dig my fingertips into her upper arm. "If you don't, he will die, do you get it?"

Slowly, as I remove the gun from under her chin, she nods. She believes me, that easily, which means she knows the people who have threatened her aren't to be fucked with.

I back away, risking one more glance to where Finn hides, then I turn my back on her and stroll through the

apartment, jerking my chin to Mav and Sevryn, announcing our exit.

“That was stupid,” Mav says. “That was *fucking* stupid.”

I ignore him. “We have to get out of town.” I’ve got the bag of cash dropped off and now I throw the car in drive, speaking around the cigarette in my mouth, unlit. Part of me wanted to take the gas can I always bring to jobs—just in case—and burn that fucking apartment complex down. I don’t want to think about what other shit the 6 use it for.

I peel out of the alleyway, tires skidding on the water as I yank the wheel, blowing through the first stoplight, then the second.

“You needed to *follow fucking orders*, Lucifer,” Mav snarls. “You think you can just do whatever the *fuck* you want without consequences? You know that’s not how this shit works. I should go back there and kill her my fucking self—”

“Why was Finn there?” Ezra asks from the back, interrupting Mav’s tirade. “Where the fuck is Julie?”

I glance at Mav and see he’s smirking now, his chin in his hand, elbow propped on the door. “We’ll discuss it later,” I say, answering Ez.

Maverick’s grin widens, but I see the maniac in his eyes. “Where exactly do you wanna go, Lucy Boy?” he purrs. “Where do you think you’re untouchable?”

“Liber,” I answer calmly, knowing my guards will travel there easily enough, and the gate around the property is a deterrent in itself for any opposing forces. It’s got enough room for all of us, and a few hidden ones too, not in any blueprints.

“The 6 know exactly where that is. You can’t hide there.”

I smash through a yellow light, my heart jumping into my throat as I think of my wife and son alone, at home,

after I just disobeyed a direct order from Mikhail Malikov. "I'm not hiding from the 6." I think of Elijah. Our secrets in the dark.

"You think Boaz won't know about that place?"

Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it'll be more dangerous for them to break in than for us to stay there. They'll get shot on the spot if they come near our gates. I don't answer Mav.

"How long, then? How long are you going to hide?"

"We're not fucking hiding," I snarl. "I'm not telling him I didn't do it." I take a winding back road toward Corpus Avenue, fucking flooring it. "I'm not telling him anything. He expects it'll be done, when he decides to check in and sees it isn't, he'll ask me about it and I'll tell him she wasn't there."

Ezra laughs from the backseat. "That sounds like a great plan, Luce," he says sarcastically.

I ignore him, speeding through the night. "And I won't be in his immediate path when he loses his temper over it."

"He doesn't want to kill you anyway," Sevryn says quietly in the backseat.

I don't dare look at him, because I can't stand him.

Mav twists around in his seat. "Yeah? Then what does he want, little fuck?"

"He wants to make Lucifer his prodigy."

I smile a little, glancing at Maverick. "Aren't you excited about Liber anyway? I mean, this was your idea wasn't it? What you were whispering to my wife in the dark the other night when you brought Rain home?" I put my eyes on the road and nudge the speedometer up to 130. "We'll go tomorrow, in the morning. If we leave tonight, it's too sketch."

"That's their building, bro. They were probably watching and saw you return with the money—" Mav interrupts, saying nothing about how I knew he made plans for Liber with Sid when he dropped Rain off.

“They don’t have cameras there,” Sevryn says from the back.

The car goes quiet, only music playing lowly from the speakers, Asking Alexandria.

“How do you know that?” Ezra growls.

“They kept me in a room there before I...” Sevryn pauses, faltering over his words. “Before the first time I met you.”

I glance in the rearview and see his eyes on me. It’s a little alarming, kinda creepy, but I just flick my gaze back to the windshield.

“I searched the room. The hallways. I don’t like to be watched.”

I don’t want to know why he doesn’t, so I don’t ask.

“What about outside the building? Even on the fire escape?” Ezra presses.

“None there.” I know this for sure. “Because *I* checked, when I walked the bag back.” Could cameras *somewhere* have caught me? Sure. But none Mikhail is operating. Besides, he doesn’t want his own dirty deeds memorialized on footage anyway. “Like I said.” I accelerate around a curve. “We leave in the morning.”

Silence ticks by, my eyes jumping to my rearview every few seconds as I fly as fast as I reasonably can toward Lilith and my son. In my head, I hear Finn’s voice.

Uncle.

Fucking *uncle.*

I see Julie’s body in that baptistry, the video footage of Lilith playing behind my eyes. I know why they did it. To show just how far they can reach. Just how much they know. All of their resources, access, power. Some of the most dangerous threats are delivered without a drop of blood.

Anxiety eats at me, a physical ache in my gut as I grind my fingers against the steering wheel. But just when I start

to feel the smallest measure of fucking relief, just when I'm *almost* where I should be—home—I realize something.

Running my tongue over my bottom lip, I say, "We have a tail."

Maverick sits up straighter, lifting his gun as he turns to look through the seats, straight to the back windshield.

"How long?" Ezra asks, his gun in hand too.

Sevryn stares at his thighs, his head bowed. I'm not sure if he isn't scared or if he's just acclimated to stressful fucking situations.

"Since we left Alexandria city limits." About ten miles, and on the back roads I take, that's nine miles too long to be an accident. I keep one hand on the wheel, the other on my gearshift. I slouch a little in my seat. It's not from cowardice, but the fact if the driver dies, more people in the wrecked car are likely to follow suit. "Who is it?" I flick my eyes around the forest surrounding this street. We're about two miles from home, and that's too fucking close to my family.

"I don't know," Ezra says, voice low as he stares at the old, tan Town Car.

Maverick leans between the seats, trying to get a better view. His shoulder brushes mine and a jolt of something knocks through my chest. Guilt, maybe? *Now isn't the time to start confessing.*

"I do," he hisses, dropping back into his seat. I feel his gaze on mine. "Some fucker I don't know. And Nikita."

I don't react, but I can't help but ask, "You remember him?" I know damn well he doesn't, so how the fuck does he know who he is? O's brother paying Mav a discreet visit too?

"Nah," he says, snorting. "At least, I didn't."

I don't have time to interrogate him so all I say is, "He knows where we live. He'll know the girls and Rain are there. If we drive past Corpus, they might not follow, then we've left our family as sitting fucking ducks."

Ezra sucks his teeth. “You always wanna act like it’s just you and Mav, Luce, fuck. Call Cain or Atlas, and have them look out for the girls. If you turn onto Corpus, they’re definitely going to follow you, then what? You have a shootout?”

I shift my gaze to him in the backseat. He’s already glaring at me, his gun still in hand. I don’t like his fucking attitude, but I can admit he’s got a point. And Mav and I might be second and first in command, but we’re all supposed to be willing to die for each other. Still, do I trust anyone enough to protect Rain and Lilith the way I would? Of course not.

Now though, as the Town Car edges closer, headlights flooding my tinted windows, I don’t have a choice.

I use the controls on my steering wheel to bring up Cain’s number, dialing him first. Atlas has been acting sketchy as fuck, maybe having some breakdown over Samson’s death and Natalie’s distance. Cain has his own sneaky shit going on, but I know it isn’t to stab me in the fucking back. Not exactly, anyway.

The phone rings once. Twice.

I stare at Cain’s name on my dash, holding my breath as the Town Car comes closer. Judging by the year of that thing, it’s not a car anyone would mind totaling. That doesn’t make me feel too good.

Cain doesn’t answer. It doesn’t go to voicemail either, just some generic bullshit about “this caller is not available.” I end the call, darting a glare to Ezra, but I dial Atlas’s number all the same.

A few rings later and the same shit, but this time an automatic voicemail. I don’t bother leaving a message as I hang up.

“You gotta anymore suggestions on counting on our brothers, Ez?” I snarl, just as the headlights flood through the back window, nearly blinding me, and a second later, their grill taps my rear end.

My car's front angles to the left, the impact sounding worse than it was as metal grinds with metal. I keep control of the wheel, not jerking it, letting it pivot a little before I straighten back into my lane, accelerating and putting more distance between me and fucking Nikita and whatever muscle he's brought along.

We're half a mile from Corpus Ave's entrance. I can't call the guards and have them block off the Town Car because the gate won't close fast enough after me for that.

And I can't put any fucking faith in Nikita following me if I pass Corpus, instead of going after my family.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel. *"Fuck."*

Maverick is angled to the back, gun aimed, same as Ezra. Sevryn still has his head bowed, and he's muttering something over and over under his breath.

I want to scream at him to shut the fuck up as the yellow headlights flare closer, the car gaining on us as my speedometer reaches 140. I have to slow the fuck down if I'm turning on my street.

And I have to go there.

I can't risk Lilith. I can't endanger Rain by not being there.

My calf muscle jumps as my foot stays on the gas. Sevryn keeps talking, like he's praying. There's a ringing in my ears. A vision of Sid, lifeless and cold in my doorway. My son crawling through her blood, sticky prints tracking around the house. He's not old enough to crawl yet, and I try to hold onto that. The fact it's my worst fears flashing inside my brain and not anything that will actually happen.

I won't let it.

"Cave adsum. Cave adsum. Cave adsum." Sevryn's voice grows in pitch, rising higher and higher as the Town Car flicks on their brights and I blink to see ahead, the long driveway nearly hidden by trees.

I have to slow the fuck down, but they're going to smash right into me when I do.

It doesn't matter.
I can't go past my house.
My family.

"Cave adsum. Cave adsum. Cave—"

"Shut the *fuck* up," Ezra snarls, aiming the gun at the side of Sevryn's head. A sick bursting of relief erupts inside of me as silence fills the car and it's like I can think again.

Before the Town Car hits me another time, I quickly switch over to the other lane, then drop gears, the engine roaring and transmission jerking as I do. I turn the wheel, careful not to yank it, my rear end zigzagging behind me but it's not impossible to control.

The gates are peeled open, high and iron, and in the guardhouse I see a light flicker on, the side door opening immediately, but I'm not waiting around for backup.

Just as I gun it onto my street, the turn complete, a loud *crack* rips through the interior of my car.

My heart leaps to my throat as I bear down on my house, scanning the exterior, like I could see anything amiss within. Then my eyes dart to the back windshield. The bullet didn't pierce it, because these windows are fucking bullet proof, but that's not the point.

He fucking fired at me. At my brothers.

I'm thinking ahead, my pulse racing, sweat dripping along the back of my neck, and in my mind, I'm going to block the entrance to my driveway so at the very least these assholes will have to get out of their fucking shitty car to get to my family.

But as my speedometer ticks up, my gaze coming to the front again, Maverick's arm is suddenly flung out and over my chest, smacking me back against my seat. It knocks the breath out of me, the force of his barred arm, but it's not the motion that has the hairs on the back of my neck standing straight up.

"Stop the car, stop the car, fucking stop the goddamn car." It's Mav's voice, panicked in a way I've never heard

before in my life. It's chilling, the pure fear injected into his words.

And as my foot goes to the brake, slamming down on it because it's instinct to trust my brother, *I see her*.

Red hair whipping around a dark hoodie, she was almost invisible to me in the thick of the night.

But now Ella is caught in my headlights, even as she deftly leaps to the side, avoiding getting run the fuck over by the narrowest margin.

My gaze jumps from her, to the rearview, and I see the Town Car bearing down on me. I don't think, I just rip up the emergency brake, drifting into a complete U-turn, away from Ella but facing the Town Car head on.

Maverick is already opening his door, cold, October air snaking inside as Nikita dives his car to the left to avoid smashing into me, the sound of brakes screeching through the air.

I feel like I'm going to throw up but I don't have time to be sick.

I snatch my gun from the console and fling open my door, Ezra doing the same. Across from us, the Town Car's doors open too, and I don't bother waiting to get a good aim before my finger squeezes the fucking trigger of my gun, the loud *pop* erupting into the quiet night.

The scent of rain and burnt rubber fills my nose and I hear one of my guards calling out my name, but I don't pay any fucking attention as I stalk toward the Lincoln, headlights still bright and fucking with my vision.

Ezra is at my side, I don't know where Sevryn is, and I hear Maverick snarling, "*What the fuck are you doing? What the fuck are you doing?*"

I pull the trigger again, stalking forward, my adrenaline surging, making me feel invincible.

"You didn't have it in you." Nikita's obnoxious voice cuts through the night after the ringing of my last shot. "I'm not

surprised. You've always been a little pussy, Lucifer Malikov."

I pull the trigger again, coming closer to his car even though I can't fucking see him or his passenger.

And when Ezra leaps on my back and knocks me to the pavement, my palms catching me, the gun clattering from my hand only inches away, I'm about to elbow him to get him off me when gunfire erupts in return, blasting over our low-lying bodies, bullets sailing in the air. I hear a few pling against my car, and my temper returns with a fucking vengeance.

I try to push up, to get Ezra off me, but he slams my head down and whispers in my ear, "Let them empty their shit out. Don't be as stupid as they are."

More ammo pierces the night, but I don't keep track of their bullets and I don't even know what kind of weapons they've got. So when silence fills the air, I reach out my hand and snatch up my gun as Ezra rolls off me, allowing me to spring to my feet again.

Headlights flood past me just as they do in front of me, but I can see them now. Nikita and a guy with a shaved head, white skin, and a gun in his hand. He's dressed in red like Nikita, and the four of us—Ezra beside me—lunge toward one another, off to the side of the headlights because all of us are fucking blinded.

The engines of our cars are still running, all the doors flung open, and I want to turn around and look for Mav and Ella, but I don't dare take my eyes off Nikita's golden ones.

He smiles at me, a crooked thing, but his chest is heaving beneath his red dress shirt where I'm sure the knife wound I delivered to him is still healing, and I know he's at least a little afraid.

"You wanted to christen this street for its namesake?" I ask, stepping closer, until Ezra and I are only two feet from Nikita and his friend.

“Why can’t you ever fucking do what you’re told?” Nikita smiles as he asks it, and his friend snorts, then spits on the pavement, his gun held loosely by his side.

Mine is aimed at Nikita, and Nikita’s right back at me.

Ezra says nothing by my side, waiting for me to make a move.

“Your sister told me to let her suck my dick,” I answer, my voice low. I’m very aware of my home at my back. “I didn’t have a hard time listening to that.”

Nikita’s gaze narrows. “Don’t talk about my fucking sister.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry. I was *fucking* your sister. We were never *talking*.”

Nikita steps closer, his jaw tight. “You didn’t follow orders tonight. There’s consequences to that, you understand?” He gestures behind me with his gun, and every muscle in my body is tense. “So I can take it from you, or I can strip it from *her*.”

My mouth goes dry, but I force myself to smile at him. “Go home.”

He glances down between us, teeth flashing in a grin as he shakes his head once. “Nah.” He drags his gaze back up to me, steps closer.

I can smell his sweat. The fear in his fucking pores.

The barrel of my gun touches his abs and he’s got his weapon by his side now but I’m very aware of his fuck-face friend watching us all.

“I can’t leave this street without a piece of you, or a fuck from her.”

It’s like red lights erupt inside my head with thoughts of Nikita touching my wife. I want to explode. I want to squeeze this trigger with the gun against his fucking temple.

But before I can react, while I try to think clearly and temper myself, Nikita says, so quietly it’s a whisper, “Did you know there were three of us in the car? There’s me,

Raz," he jerks his head toward the guy beside him, "*and Leon.*"

The names mean nothing to me, but numbness floods my limbs. I glance at the car, seeing only two open doors, and I don't know if he's bluffing but it wouldn't have taken much for someone to crawl through the front. Or shut their door in the chaos of everything that already went down on this street.

Nikita laughs, a light, raspy chuckle. "You should be thanking me, really. I could have gone after the kid and the old lady, but seeing the way they meant so much to you, I decided to come after yours instead."

My chest heaves and in a flash of regret, I wish I had murdered Esther *and* Finn. He isn't mine, and I'd give him up a hundred times over to ensure my own is safe.

Nikita cocks his head, grinning at me. "Do you understand the kind of game we're playing now?"

And in the night, somewhere at my back, as if to punctuate his question, a scream pierces the air.

Ezra and I both turn on reflex, my body seizing to run, to fucking *fly* to my wife and my son, but before I can take a single step, the scream dying off in the night, I feel the barrel of the gun against the back of my skull.

"Don't move, or there won't be anything left of you to find him anyway."

I clench my fingers around my gun, staring into the night at my home. The pumpkins lining the drive don't illuminate anything, and there's nothing else to see by. Nothing else to *see*.

"Where is she?" I can't stop the words coming out.

Nikita trails the gun down to the back of my neck. "Be patient, Malikov."

"Where *the fuck* is she?"

Ezra's elbow bumps mine, but he's the one who speaks next. "You fuck with them, you understand even if you kill us, we have three more brothers who won't hesitate to

wreck your entire world, right? You won't leave this city alive."

Nikita leans in close to me, his mouth over my ear. "But I'm not so sure you're even getting off this street."

I hear something, then, besides the beating of my own heart thundering in my ears. It's a scuffling sound, like feet against pavement, heavy breaths. A soft whimper. I blink, still seeing nothing but my long driveway, the garage bays closed, the front door too. There's not even a light on inside my fucking house.

But then I realize the noise is coming from my left, toward Maverick's home, and as I try to turn, Nikita slams the barrel against the side of my temple, aiming at my brain. "Don't fucking move."

The whimpering grows louder, followed by a cruel laugh I don't recognize. Then a voice. "Shh, shh, it's okay. We'll let him watch you drop to your knees for me." *Leon.*

It feels as if an artery is going to burst in my veins.

And I can't wait anymore. I don't care if they've got more people than we expected. I don't give a fuck if Cain and Atlas aren't here to seek revenge for us. I can't just stand here and let my family get hurt. I take a breath in through my nose, the stench of shredded tires still heavy in the air.

Then I throw my elbow back, aiming for that sweet spot I stabbed Nikita in.

His gun goes off, right next to my ear, and for long seconds, I can't hear a fucking thing. I wonder if I've been shot, even as my elbow collided with his body, and I heard him grunt the second before he pulled the trigger. But now there's a ringing sound inside my head, and I feel dizzy.

Suddenly...weak.

A hand grabs my elbow, steadying me, and my eyes flick up to see Ezra's staring down at me. Another *pop* goes off in the night, another after that.

Panic makes it hard to breathe and I'm still not sure I didn't get shot. I spin around, only by Ezra's grip on my arm am I able to stay upright. But as my ears continue to ring, like my eardrums are bleeding, I realize Nikita isn't right behind me anymore.

And when I swallow, my ears pop at the exact same time I see Nikita is lying on the pavement, his arms splayed out beside him, head turned to the side, his gun by his torso. There's a hole in his temple, blood oozing down his white skin, other wounds along his chest.

I stumble backward, and Ezra's hand grips my shoulder. I hear someone groaning, but when I shift my gaze to the right, I don't see Raz.

It's not Maverick, either. Not Ella or Atlas or Cain.

My wife is standing there in an oversized shirt hanging down to her knees, her hair a mess, ends curling upward, she's barefoot, but she's got both hands wrapped around a gun, arms extended, and she's still aiming at Nikita, dead on the ground.

Her gray eyes flicker to mine.

My knees feel weak, and I bow over, my hands on my thighs, gun still in hand. I'm breathing hard, *panting*, and I'm not even sure it's all from what we just survived.

I think it's because my dick is so hard right now staring at my wife—who just *murdered* someone for me—there's no blood circulating elsewhere in my body.

"Holy fuck." I whisper it. I can barely hear the words, a tinny sound still berating my ears, but I say it again anyway. "*Holy fuck.*"

A smile curves her lips, but her eyes betray a different story. There's relief there. *Relief* I'm alive, and Nikita is dead.

Before I can soak in this moment, I see behind her his henchman, Raz, is crawling backward on his elbows, his feet shuffling along the pavement. She must have shot him too, but he's not dead yet.

She tracks my gaze though, and without hesitating, as he reaches for his gun a few feet away, she pulls the trigger twice, shooting him in the chest.

He falls backward, and he doesn't move anymore.

But in that moment, I remember Nikita's words. The reason I turned my back to him at all.

Three people.

Leon.

I straighten so fast I stumble, nearly falling to the pavement, but Ezra's grip on my arm keeps me steady. I open my mouth to ask where Rain is when I hear a grunt.

Spinning, holding tight to my gun and stepping to the side so I can block Sid from anyone's aim, it takes me a second to realize what I'm looking at.

Maverick, his blond hair lighting up the night. He's on his knees, straddling a figure on the ground.

Ella is behind him, a hand over her mouth.

And he's cocking his elbow back and landing his fist in Leon's face. There are two guns on the asphalt beside them, and my mind races as I quickly put together the pieces. Leon probably found Ella and Mav, but got to *her* under the cover of night since Mav didn't know there were three people. Leon probably forced her at gunpoint to walk toward us. He was the one talking about her getting on her knees.

Mav's fist launches forward again as I lift my head and see two of my guards lurking in the night.

"Sevryn," I hiss, jerking my chin toward my car. They nod, running to the BMW. I turn to Ezra, "Go find Rain." He immediately sprints toward my house.

Without saying a word to each other, Sid and I walk side by side to Mav, standing near Ella, over by the ditch, barely on the pavement.

She doesn't take her eyes off her boyfriend.

I don't know what the fuck she was doing running this street in the middle of the night, unless she's taking up a

new fucking hobby or...

I lift my gaze to hers, guilt choking my lungs.

But she doesn't even look at me.

The man Maverick is beating the fuck out of screams in the night.

"Shut the fuck up," my brother snarls, and he snatches up the gun by his side, slamming the butt of it against Leon's temple.

Leon is dressed in red too, brown hair, a bloody face, I can't make out a single feature of his.

Maverick slams the gun down again, his back muscles tense as he lands the blow, his face blank save for the way his baby blue eyes light up when he strikes the guy again, and again. There's blood flicking up from Leon's face, and it splatters along Maverick's neck, over his tattoos.

Maverick's chest heaves beneath his jacket, but he keeps hitting the guy, and hitting him, and he doesn't stop, even as a strangled sound escapes his own lips. Something a lot like grief in the noise.

Sid steps forward, but Ella holds out her arm, not touching my wife, but stopping her all the same.

I glance at Lilith, her eyes on me.

I nod once, indicating she should let Ella make the decision.

The sound of the gun against flesh seems impossibly loud in the night, and every hit is like a punch to my gut, seeing Maverick lose himself in this man who threatened his girl.

My abs tense, the familiar guilt snaking up my spine, coming around to my core.

Maverick hits him again, and again, until his own face looks injured with the amount of blood on it.

Then all at once, Maverick stumbles to his feet, his arm and shoulder no doubt aching. I can see it in the way he lets his arm dangle oddly from his body a moment before he shakes his hand, trying to brush the pain aside.

Impossibly, Leon makes a whimpering sound as he rolls over, and I see eyelashes fluttering among the whites and reds around his eyes. His lips are covered in blood, his nose looks *gone*, concave, but Mav isn't done.

He leans down, jerking the guy up by his neck.

Leon's legs stumble beneath him, black shoes scuffing against gray pavement. Maverick turns, dragging the guy behind him.

I don't know how he's walking, his knees bent as he reaches for Mav, and I think it's only to hold on.

Maverick keeps his grip on the back of Leon's neck, but I notice he leaves the gun as he jerks the guy toward the car and the other two bodies—Nikita's and Raz's.

When he gets to the Town Car, Leon crying now, *sobbing*, Maverick shoves him into the front seat. Leon drops down, bowing his head in his hands, blood all over his fingers from his wounds, whimpering sounds leaving his bloody lips.

Maverick doesn't look at any of us.

He goes for Nikita, hauling him underneath his arms as Mav walks backward until Nikita is level with the passenger seat.

Maverick heaves him into the seat, letting his body slump like a crumpled sleeping bag. Then my brother reaches the last guy, hefts him over his shoulder like a sack, and opens the back door with one hand, then drops Raz's corpse into the seat.

Without looking at me, he heads around the BMW, pops my trunk, and I know what he's got before I even see it.

The red can.

Gasoline.

You never know when you might need to burn fucking evidence from a job, and I guess, maybe in a way, that's what Maverick is doing.

Ella, Sid, and I watch as Maverick walks around the Town Car, pouring gas over the hood, then the bodies and

along the interior, taking special care to dump it all over Leon's head, his sobs jagged and broken in the darkness. *He's still alive.*

Then Maverick throws the gas can in the car, and carefully shuts each door, a loud thwack in the night.

He reaches his hand into his pocket, pulling out a lighter.

Only then does he turn toward me, but it's not me he's looking at.

It's Ella, by our side.

"Back up," he says quietly. It's a command, but there's a soft respect in the words.

Ella doesn't move, but Sid gently grabs her wrist, and all three of us move back, until we're on my driveway, a safe enough distance from the car.

Mav flicks the lighter, the flame orange in the night.

I see a smile curve his lips, the inverted cross on his face rising upward.

Then he throws the lighter.

The car goes up in fucking flames, erupting with a *whoosh*, I can feel the heat from here.

I know he can too, but he only very slowly turns around, walking toward us, the backdrop of the blaze framing his tall, lean form like a halo.

When he reaches Ella, he slings his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his body. But it's me he turns to and it's me he's talking to when he says, his eyes locked onto mine in the night, "Remember this. If you're fucking with me or my woman, I'll do the same shit to you, *bro.*" His eyes cut to Sid, and before he walks away with Ella, he adds, "Nice work, *sis.*"

XXXIV



MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

THE ASTOR ESTATE

I STARE at him in the dark, the full moon filtering through our curtains. A cool breeze floats through the open window, and beyond it, I hear the howl of a coyote, answered by another. I've grown used to it since living here. Sometimes Mav smokes a joint on the screened-in porch, and I sit in his lap as we listen to the coyotes together.

"How do you know they're not wolves?" I twist in his lap to meet his ice blue eyes. They're kind, his lids heavy from the smoke drifting through his nose as he squeezes my hip, digging his fingers in.

"Wolves howl deeper. Longer." He holds the lit cherry of his joint close to my bare thigh, only my underwear on as he keeps me in his lap, my legs dangling over his.

My breath catches as he gets closer. Less than an inch from my skin, I feel the small pinprick of heat.

"Mavy..."

His eyes lift to mine again. "Would you let me?" he asks quietly in the dark, and even the coyotes are silent to let the wolf speak.

I lean closer to him, threading my legs through the arm of the chair as he pulls the joint back so it doesn't burn me. I wrap my arms around his neck and rest my head against his chest, hearing his slow and steady pulse beneath my ear as I look up, meeting his gaze.

"I'd let you do anything."

He pulls me closer by my hip, his arm along my back. "I fucking love you, pretty girl." Then he tosses the joint in the ashtray on the glass table beside his chair before he circles my throat with his hand and kisses me until I can't breathe.

He's on his side, his hands tucked under his pillow, knees pulled toward his chest. Almost like...he's protecting himself. Before I woke, he had me against his chest too, but I moved slowly, disentangling myself from him.

When we got back inside, hours ago, he took a shower to wash all the blood off before he asked me again what I was doing outside.

I told him I was running, and it wasn't really a lie.

I don't know who was in The Madilyn upstairs, but I didn't stick around long enough to find out, and when I got back to Corpus Avenue, it was Lucifer's car I was suddenly face-to-face with.

Mavy took my answer, or else, he didn't push me, but after what he did to the guy who held a gun to my head, and the car with all the corpses, he must have been exhausted because he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the

bed. He told me it was some of RC's men after them, and in the morning we'll have to leave, but he didn't explain exactly what went down.

I'm kind of used to it though. And after what he did for me, it's not like I'm going to complain about anything.

Beyond the shock and horror, I felt something like lust watching him beat someone unrecognizable for me. Light up their car in flames.

It was fucking hot.

I lean against the headboard, my fingertips beneath the covers as I drift them over my cold skin, wincing when I feel the warm bruise on the side of my thigh. It's the last one, all the others have healed, and even this one is only the palest yellow. I haven't been summoned to Emily Cemetery lately, and I wonder if it's over now.

I smile in the dark, letting my eyes drift closed as I listen to Mavy's soft breathing. He only lets his guard down when he sleeps, and it feels good, sharing this bed with him and knowing he's relaxed and getting rest and *mine*.

It almost felt good, after the first few hits, to watch him get all of his anger and frustration out on someone who deserved it. It was cathartic to him, and when Sid seemed like she would step in, I couldn't let her.

Maverick needs a release too.

But even as I feel safe in bed with him, even as the car going up in flames plays over again inside my head, I can't stop thinking about other things too.

Like Atlas's words, on RC. I still don't know if it was a warning or only a story. If he's trying to educate me, in his own twisted way. And who was in the house? What if it was someone who came on the street tonight? What if Atlas is fucking everyone over in more ways than only the ones I know about?

I can't let him do that. Not to Mavy, at least.

Sitting up straighter, I open my eyes. I swing my legs off the bed, slowly, like I did the first night me and Maverick

met at Liber, after we had sex for the first time in the woods. It was everything I wanted it to be, and I'm not stupid enough to think sex is love, but it was something more than just fucking. It was like we let loose all of the twisted parts of ourselves, right there in the beginning. He gave me the attention I wanted, and I gave him a release.

Unlike on New Year's though, he doesn't wake as my bare feet skim the hardwoods, cool beneath my soles. I like to think something inside of me soothes something inside of him, but I'm not quite sure if I do, or if I only tease it.

I'm not sure which he likes better.

I grab my phone from the charger, glancing over my shoulder once to ensure he's still sleeping. If I toss and turn, he won't be. I know he might not care, but after everything that went down tonight, he needs the rest.

On tiptoes, I sneak out of the bedroom, cautiously closing the door behind me. I'm not afraid of him waking up, I just don't want to disturb him.

I smile to myself in the hallway, reveling again in his innocent, unguarded state. Outside of our bedroom door, standing in the way of him and any monsters that might haunt his sleep, I feel like I'm worth something. Like maybe he needs me too, the way I needed him tonight. Delirious, nighttime thoughts, because if someone broke into our house and came for either of us, I know *he'd* be the one to protect *me*, just like earlier, but even still, right here, in this moment, I feel like I could save him.

My phone lights up in my hand as I take a step down the hall, intending to go into his office because it has the best view of the moon.

I freeze though. The only people who text me are the Unsaints, if they're trying to get to Mav. Or... No. *They* wouldn't text me this late, knowing I can't get away.

But sometimes... sometimes, it's Atlas.

And that's exactly who it is as I stare at my screen, his number still unsaved, like somehow it makes this lying and

deceit easier.

Him: You asleep?

I frown at the screen. Does he know what went down tonight? I assume Lucifer probably filled him in, whenever Atlas got back from The Madilyn. And he would've seen the guards cleaning up the charred corpses and the guts of the car. But when *did* he get back? And who was there with him?

My fingers hover over the screen, and I think about not texting him back. With everything my boyfriend did for me tonight, I don't want to betray him anymore. But if Atlas is doing something stupid, something that will put Mavy in danger, I should find out.

Me: Yes.

I smile at my own joke. But my heart picks up speed in my chest and I head toward the office, pushing open the door, closing it softly behind me.

Right inside the door, I freeze, picking my head up from my phone, lighting up with another text from Atlas.

Something feels...*off* in here. A tingling down my spine, a tangle of unease.

I dart my eyes around the room, seeing nothing unusual from the moonlight streaming in the window, curtains pulled back.

Except there's the flutter of a page on Mavy's desk. It's neat and clean in here, papers tucked away, pens in a black holder, his laptop closed and the monitor he uses off.

But there's a single paper, and it flutters again, a whip of wind coming from the window.

Why would he leave his office window open? He rarely opens any windows. He usually keeps it so cold in this house, it's completely unnecessary.

I stare at the paper as it drifts a couple of inches toward his keyboard, his black leather chair facing it. Me.

No one is in here though. There's no closet, nowhere to hide, and the window is only cracked.

Still, pins and needles of fear slip beneath my skin as Atlas's message brightens my screen again.

Him: Can you meet me right now?

I almost laugh. No way in hell am I sneaking out of the house when Maverick is *in it*. Does Atlas want to kill us both? The man's face from earlier, covered in blood, his lashes moving beneath rivulets of it as he groaned, nearly dead from Mav's fist and the butt of the gun, it dances inside my mind.

Yeah. No.

Me: Wtf? Absolutely not.

I look around the room again, the little hairs straightening on the back of my neck.

My phone lights up once more.

Atlas: It's important.

I frown in the dark, clenching my fingers tighter around my phone.

Atlas: Just right outside. You don't have to go far.

I turn my head toward the other window of the office, opposite the open one. The heavy, charcoal curtains are pulled closed, but this one faces the front of the house.

On careful, light steps, like I might disturb something if I move too quickly, I head toward the window, shifting back one curtain and peering outside.

No cars in the driveway, both of ours backed into the garage.

I blink in the darkness, seeing nothing at first.

Atlas is lying. Or maybe he just hasn't gotten here yet.

I hold my breath, scanning the street. It's quiet, nothing moving, no cars leaving, a scorched spot on the asphalt and pieces of glittering glass from the car Mav set on fire the only evidence left of his crime. Halloween lights cause the street to glow in some places, but there's no one out here.

I press my temple to the glass and sweep my eyes two houses down. Lucifer's home.

Dark, save for pumpkins glowing on either side of his driveway.

Then a closer light catches my eyes. I step back from the window, one hand to the cool glass to keep my balance as I look down at the middle of our driveway.

Atlas.

Waving his phone, it's that light which got my attention.

I suck in a breath, inhaling the dark notes of leather inside Mavy's office. *He really is here.* It must actually be important, otherwise he wouldn't have risked it.

Sighing, I pull back from the curtains and glance down at my shorts, ripped, black cotton. I'm in Mavy's oversized white T, and I should change and put something else on, but then I'd have to go back into our bedroom.

Actually, there's a coat closet in the foyer. I'll grab a hoodie.

I turn, intending to do just that to see what the hell Atlas wants, if he knows something more about what happened tonight, and who was at The Madilyn, when someone grabs me.

I jump, my heart racing, a scream on the tip of my tongue as I'm forced backward, against the glass window, the ledge driving into my lower spine as fingers circle around my upper arms and I drop the phone, right on the screen.

But before I can make a sound, lips are on mine, Maverick's hard body pressed into my own as he devours me.

"What are you doing, baby?" he asks between kisses, pulling back and pressing his temple to mine. His hands skim down my arms, to my hips, tugging at the waistband of my shorts. I'm aware my back is against the cool glass of the window, meaning the curtains are parted because of my body, and if Mav sees Atlas out there...

My heart thuds too fast in my chest as Maverick pushes down my shorts, and they pool between my feet, leaving me

exposed.

He grips my chin, tilting my head up as I try to eye my phone, hoping to God it doesn't glow in the darkness. *Don't text me again, Atlas. Don't fucking text me.*

"Huh? What the fuck are you doing, baby?" Maverick whispers again, his mouth over mine.

I try to push him back, only to get him away from the window, but he resists, and trying to shove Maverick is like attempting to move a brick wall. It's not happening.

He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, biting me softly, one arm wrapped around my waist. "I woke up," he says, his voice hoarse. "You were gone."

My heart skips a beat. For a second, my palms on his bare chest, feeling the flex of muscle beneath my fingertips, I stop thinking about Atlas. The phone. What he's seeing right now.

Instead, I'm right here, in this moment with Mavy.

"You were gone." Those words were full of so much meaning. I have dreams like that. *Where he's gone. Where none of this is real. I'm back in the trailer. I'm starving while Mom gets high.*

"I'm here," I tell him as he presses his brow to mine. "I'm right here."

He groans, a guttural sound from his throat as he kisses me again, covering the side of my face with his hand as he holds me to him, like he's worried I might try to break free again.

My pulse picks up once more as he pushes his hard cock against my stomach. Then he pulls back all at once, leaving me breathless as he spins me around, shoving me against the window. I catch myself on my palms, the glass cold.

He presses his hand to my spine, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling my ass toward him, so my back is arched.

I step out of the shorts between my feet, my eyes closed as he grabs my ass, squeezing hard. Luckily, he's just above

the final bruise, and it's dark in here, on this side of his office. He won't see anything. Besides, he leans closer, his hard chest to my back as he kisses my neck.

His thumb gets dangerously close to the tight ring of muscle exposed to him as he uses his fingers to keep my ass spread.

"Let me," he says, his breath on my neck as his teeth skim the side of my throat. *"Let me, pretty girl."*

He's the gentlest when he fucks me in the ass. Not that he's ever really *gentle*, but he knows why I had an aversion to it, and it's like he's still trying to rewrite that experience for me. To prove it can be better.

And it is. It has been. Every single time. And after what he did for me tonight... I only had seconds of that gun to my head. Not even enough time to feel the fear before Mavy reacted.

"Okay," I whisper, turning my head and opening my eyes, looking into his. In the dark, it's hard to see just how light they are, but I catch ice blue and my throat feels tight, my body warm and wanting him as he circles me, but he doesn't push all the way in.

My chest heaves against the glass as my eyes start to close again, anticipation zipping through me.

"No, Ella," he whispers, his forehead pressed to mine. "Look at me."

I force myself to open my eyes.

"Relax." He curls his fingers up underneath me, stroking them over my swollen clit, and I bite my lip, staring at him through my lashes as he wraps the fingers of his free hand around my throat, squeezing slightly.

A smile curves his lips as he pushes two fingers into my pussy.

I clench around him, and with the movement, he tightens his hold on my throat, to the point it cuts off my air supply.

I smile at him, and he brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. "You're such a good girl, huh?"

I nod, eager to please him, wanting to agree with anything he says as he fingers me, hitting deep, up to his knuckles. Then he pulls his fingers out and reaches higher, circling the puckered flesh there.

Nervousness courses through me, and he lets me breathe, loosening his grip on my throat just slightly.

"You trust me?"

I think about Atlas in the driveway.

But he won't be there now. He'll have left. He would be able to see my face against the glass, wouldn't he? He wouldn't...*watch*. He's not interested in me like that, I tell myself.

My face grows hot and I'm thankful for the darkness.

"Yes," I whisper to Maverick, and it doesn't feel like a lie. "You killed someone for me." It comes out with the awe I feel, thinking back on it.

He pushes his finger inside of me, moving slowly. "I'd do it a hundred more times," he breathes against my skin. "I'll always protect you." His lips caress my cheekbone. "Now relax for me," he says, his nose nudging mine. "I've got you, baby."

I take a breath, my lips brushing his as my palms grow sweaty, slipping against the window.

"There you go." He tilts his head, kissing me, our mouths colliding, his tongue swirling with mine. "Give in to me," he speaks into my mouth. "Push back against me."

I do, loosening up my body, letting him finger me *there*, the fullness turning to pleasure instead of discomfort.

"Keep breathing, baby." He shifts slightly, pulling his finger out of me. A few seconds later, I feel his cock, thick and hard against me as both of his hands come to my ass, spreading me for him.

I turn my head toward the window, take a deep breath, then arch my back more.

He grips his cock, and I hear him spit, feel the warmth of it dripping down on me. "Such a good fucking girl." He pushes up against me and I take a deep breath in, sucking down air, my body tensing. "No, baby. Trust me. *Trust me, Ella.*" His words are gentle, and sleepy, and I imagine him in bed, hands tucked under his pillow. The curve of his shoulder blade, the muscles in his biceps, and the ink on his skin.

I relax as he crowns me, the pain minimal.

Pressing my brow to the window, I'm thankful the glass is cold.

He pushes further, his hand coming to the base of my spine and bearing down. "You're doing so good. You're perfect." I bite my bottom lip, and as he goes deeper, filling me up, stretching me tight, my eyes spring open.

And without meaning to, without looking for him, my gaze is on Atlas.

Watching me.

My pulse races, my skin hot, and Maverick starts to fuck me as I stare at his brother down below.

Mav's hands find my hips, then one tangles in my hair, jerking my head back. My neck is arched, and I can feel him *everywhere*, deep, and the sounds of his cock pounding into me fills the air.

But I'm still staring in horror at Atlas. It's dark in the driveway and he's got his backward hat on, so it's hard to make out his facial expression. But he's definitely looking up, and he's definitely *watching*.

"You're so fucking *tight*, Ella," Maverick breathes, leaning against me, his palms coming over top of mine on the glass.

I'm terrified he's going to see Atlas too, and I turn my head quickly, fear wound tight in my gut. I'm clenching around him, no longer relaxed, so each push and pull is uncomfortable, but I try to focus on *him*.

This moment.

I'm with him.

Maybe Atlas can't tell what's happening. Maybe he has no idea what we're doing up here. Maybe he can't even see me in this window.

"Say you're mine." Mav's words as I stare at him while he thrusts his hips, driving into me. "Say you're only mine." There's a desperation to his voice that drags my thoughts from whatever Atlas may or may not be seeing. "Ella," Mav pleads, his eyes on my own as he slows his thrusts. "Please fucking say it."

Please.

He never says please. Not for anything, not to anyone.

It scares me, seeing this vulnerable side of him, then I chastise myself for being nervous about the very thing I want most from him. *His secrets. His feelings. His wounds.*

"I'm yours," I tell him as he presses his fingertips harder against my own, trapping me to the window. "I'm always yours. Only yours."

I mean it.

I mean it.

"I love you," he says, and I remember how I told him just that after he went down on me the first time. How he said I didn't. How he couldn't fathom that I could love someone like him.

"But you're perfect." And those words leave my lips before I can stop them, a broken, hoarse whisper I didn't mean to offer up.

His lips quirk up, and he leans his weight into me. He's so deep inside of me, I can't fathom ever feeling empty again. "I'm perfect?" he repeats, amusement laced in his words, but something unguarded too.

My entire body feels like it's blushing, my hands slipping again against the glass, a loud, screeching sound in the quiet room as Maverick just stays inside of me, not moving. "Yes," I tell him, my heart full to bursting with the confession of his love. It's not like he's never told me

before. He tells me often, but not really when we're fucking. Not in moments like this. And yet even without words, he just proved it a million times over, down there on the street. And I tell him the truth, exactly what I think. "*You're perfect to me.*"

There's a flicker of something vulnerable in the sharp planes of his face. His brows pull together, his eyes going wide as he studies me.

Then it's like a switch flips.

He moves back, barring his forearm around my throat, his other hand on my ass, spreading me wide. He fucks me harder, hitting deep, keeping my chin tilted up so I can't look through the window anymore and I don't want to.

I don't want to think of Atlas.

I won't.

I. Won't.

Maverick's hips collide with mine, jostling my body with the force. I can't breathe with his arm barred over my neck, and he's speaking in my ear as he fucks me.

"I *am* perfect to you," he says, his words rough. "I own you." He bites my earlobe, sending shivers down my entire body that cause my muscles to tighten. He laughs against my ear. "Yeah, do that again, baby." He bites me once more, then lower, trailing his lips below my ear, down my neck, his teeth against my skin. He doesn't break it, doesn't make me bleed, but there will definitely be a bruise. And thinking of it, being covered in him, *his wounds*, makes me shiver all over again.

Spots pop in front of my eyes. I can't breathe, and when I try to move my hands from the window, to clutch my throat, I stumble, my head crashing against it.

I throw out my palms again.

"Don't be stupid, Ella. You don't breathe until I fucking come."

My vision swims as I tense again, Mavy's fingers digging into my ass so hard it hurts. Then he's groaning in my ear,

and I know he's finishing inside of me, his thrusts harder, deeper, then slower as his arm relaxes over my throat, a dull pressure seeming to release in my head.

"Fuck, Ella," he says, his words deep and low, and I feel proud. *I did that.* I feel him still coming inside of me, and slowly, so fucking slow, he pulls out, our bodies slick with sweat. But he doesn't move his arm from around my throat, even though now I can breathe normally.

I start to turn in his arms, wanting to collapse against him now that I can get oxygen in my lungs, to my brain.

But he shifts his arm, wrapping his hand around the side of my throat and keeping me in place. "Get on your knees," he says.

My mind flashes to the man who said something like that, only hours ago. But it's different when *he* says it. I only want to obey. Slowly, feeling exhausted and grateful for the rest, I sink to my knees as he lets me go, stepping back. I press my palms to the hardwood floor and look over my shoulder, shifting on my knees.

I meet his gaze as he stares at me, his shorts pulled up, but his shirt off, showing off the hard edges and all the lines of ink along his body. He swipes his thumb over his bottom lip, smirking at me.

"You know what I want."

My insides turn to liquid with those words. *Yeah. I do know.*

I take a shaky breath and arch my back, but he shakes his head. "Take off your shirt first."

I obey, sitting on my heels and crossing my arms, pulling my shirt over my head. But before I can toss it to the floor, my breasts free and nipples in hard points, Mav swipes the shirt from my hand. He lays it down beside me, tugging it out horizontally, then folding it in half, so there's more cushion.

He nods toward it, taking another step back. "Put your knees there." He keeps the same command in his words,

but my chest tightens, knowing he wants to protect my body.

From everything except his own hands.

I shift my knees, arching my back more, and he sinks down to my level. I'm completely exposed to him, but I'm not too shy anymore. Not in the dark, knowing all the evidence of my betrayal is nearly invisible to him.

He pushes two fingers into me, then with his other hand, he massages my clit. I moan, arching my neck, hair down my back making me feel sexy.

"Fuck my hand," he tells me, the pad of his thumb still circling my clit.

I rock on my hands and knees as he adds another finger into me, filling me. "That's it," he says, approval and lust and admiration all in those two words. "Fuck it, Ella. *Use me.*"

I keep rocking back and forth, swiveling my hips as his thumb circles me, the sounds of his fingers going in and out making me blush, but he only groans. Then I'm there, a knot hot in my stomach until I'm bursting, coming on his fingers, everything tightening and loosening at once.

"*There it is,*" he murmurs behind me, increasing the intensity of my orgasm, because I know what he's looking at.

His cum, dripping from me.

A second later, I know I'm right, because he's running his entire palm over both holes, causing me to shiver with the mess and the feel and exposure.

"Turn around."

I try to steady myself, breathing hard, my mind spinning. The high of my orgasm still lingers as my chest heaves. But I turn on hands and knees as I face him. He's sitting back on his calves. My tits sway, cool air causing them to feel full, and he glances at them, smiling. But he's holding up the palm of his hand, facing me, and I know what he wants me to do.

“Lick it clean.”

But I feel suddenly exhausted. Like I want to collapse into his arms. Snuggle against his chest. Having Atlas throw the knife at me, running from his house, nearly getting hit by Lucifer’s BMW, being held at gunpoint, watching Maverick unleash his demons on my attacker, then set fire to a car after he dragged three bodies inside it...

I just want to throw my arms around him. I just want us to hold onto each other. “Mavy,” I whisper, looking into his eyes. “Hold me.”

Something flickers across his face. Some unknown emotion as his lips press together and his throat rolls. But then his eyes narrow and he says, *“Do what I fucking say.”*

The words pierce me because I need him in a different way right now, but I feel selfish for my own needs and so, on his second command, *I don’t even hesitate.*

I do what he says, because... Because it’s what I always do, isn’t it? As I lean forward, my mouth open, tongue out and lips parted, those thoughts start to prick at my brain.

He’s telling me to lick his cum from his fingers that just came from my ass, right after I asked him to hold me.

I freeze, swallowing a lump in my throat as I close my mouth, light-headedness sweeping over me. I feel unsteady, even on my hands and knees.

For some reason, Atlas’s words echo in my head. *“If you ever wanted anything more for yourself, Ella, if you ever wanted to be something...run.”*

A hand comes over my lips. He presses himself to me, and the salty taste invades my mouth, my nose, all of my senses, bringing me back to the present.

“Open your mouth, pretty girl.” His words aren’t gentle. He grabs my hair, yanking it back, and I cry out, parting my lips. He slips his index finger and middle inside of my mouth, dragging it over my tongue.

I stare at him, feeling like a puppet. Like I've been detached from this entire thing. My mind isn't even here. Like he's using me, almost in the same way he used that man to get his anger out.

Hasn't he always? Isn't that what he does?

I want to run. I want to get up and run and lock myself in the bathroom and take a bath and scrub my skin clean.

I feel dirty, and I've never felt that way with him.

My face and neck and chest are so hot as he pushes his fingers further back, causing me to gag, my throat tightening. Then I'm coughing, and he *laughs*, pulling his hand out of my mouth.

I sit back on my calves, completely naked as I wipe my arm over my mouth, tears pricking behind my eyes. I can't look at him.

I wrap my arms around my chest, wanting to grab the shirt just underneath me, but I don't want to move. I don't want him to see any more of me.

"Hey," he says, his voice low, "look at me."

My pulse flies in my chest, my thoughts muddled, and I don't even know what to say. I couldn't describe how I'm feeling if I had to.

I've never really stood up for myself. Not with my mom. Not with Maverick. Not... ever. Just one toy after another. A pawn for my mom, when she realized my body could draw in her next fix. Something for Maverick to use, when he understood no one would come looking for me, and no one would care how horribly he treated me.

But he doesn't, another part of my brain whispers. *He loves me. I live here. I don't work. He doesn't care. He kills for me. I... What do I do?*

"Ella." Irritation is laced through those words. A second later, he's grabbing my face, tilting my chin up. We're both on our knees, but he's far taller than me either way. When I lift my gaze to his, I see anger in his eyes, even in the

dimness of the room. His bright blue irises seem to darken, black pits in the night. “What are you thinking?”

I can't tell him.

I can't speak at all. I just feel... ashamed.

“Talk to me,” he says, his voice low as his eyes search mine. But I see it, and it causes my heart to soften. I see some of the vulnerability, like when he told me to tell him I was his. It wasn't commanding, like usual. Not quite possessive, either. It was... a reassurance. And since when does Maverick Astor need reassurances? Maybe everything from tonight is getting to him too.

Still, I shake my head, that pressure building there, behind my eyes. “I'm just tired. I'm sorry.” Even my voice betrays me, shaky and despondent.

And before I can decide what he's going to do next—let this go, let us get back to bed, or push me—he does the latter. Literally. He's pushing on my chest, climbing over me, forcing me, completely naked, onto my back, on the floor.

I'm stunned, my arms by my sides as he towers over me and I get my legs straightened out, his palms planted beside my head.

“Tell me what you're fucking thinking.” I'm trapped beneath him, his knees on either side of my hips.

“Mavy,” I try, using the nickname I have for him, the one I think he used to hate but now kind of doesn't mind, “I'm okay. I just...I'm just tired.” My throat closes up, air constricted in my chest. I curl my hands into my fists at my side but don't touch him. I *am* tired. I'm spent, and I need to pee, and clean up and...

“Are you embarrassed?” His expression doesn't change with the question.

I shake my head, unable to speak.

“I meant what I said, Ella.” He brushes a lock of hair behind my ear before he presses his fingertips to my collarbone. He doesn't push, putting any weight on it, but

it's a possessive gesture all the same. "I own you. I can do anything I want with you. You gave me that power, didn't you?"

What if I want to take it back?

I don't speak, wanting this to be over. I don't know why I feel this way. My thoughts are racing, and I'm thinking of him pushing his fingers into my mouth, even though I didn't want it, and—

"Did you not like what we did?" he asks quietly, as if he's reading my mind.

I take a deep breath, shifting a little, the hardwood floor uncomfortable against my spine. "No," I tell him honestly. "I didn't."

His expression doesn't change. For some reason, it pisses me off, and I find my voice again. "I wanted you to hold me. After everything, I just I just wanted to cuddle with you." I feel stupid speaking those words to a devil, but I don't stop. "You...you didn't even give me a choice."

He snorts. "You think you ever have one with me?"

Anger blooms hot in my veins but I try to keep it in check. "This is about tonight, isn't it? What you did? Do you regret it or—"

"Shut up. Don't talk to me about tonight." His voice is low and calm.

The rage rises in my skin. "Don't tell me to shut up. I want to get inside your head. I want to *know* you, Mavy—"

"You'll know what the fuck I want you to know, Ella." The words don't even sound like him. They're cruel and vile and I don't know who he is right now.

I push against his chest with both hands, sitting up, but he holds me down with his palm on my collarbone. "Careful," he says, his words quiet but full of rage. "I could break this if you keep fighting me."

"Fighting you?" I whisper, my palms still against his chest, heaving beneath my hands. "I never fight you." The truths come barreling out. "I always do everything you ask."

Whenever you want. *Always.*" The emotion nearly chokes me, the tears spilling forward, but not quite leaving a trail down my cheeks. Not yet. "I...Everything is for you. All of me. *It's all for you.*"

He doesn't let go of me, or back off. He seems completely unaffected by my words. My confessions.

I bite my bottom lip, refusing to let myself cry in front of him. *I don't know what the hell is wrong with me.*

"And you think I do nothing for you in return?" he counters, his voice cold. "Because tonight, I'm pretty fucking sure I proved all the things I would do for you."

He sits back, releasing me, and I scramble backwards on my elbows, sitting up. He swipes up my shirt—his shirt—and laughs, as if proving his own point before he throws it at me.

I cross my legs and hurriedly put the shirt on, tugging it down over my thighs. His eyes follow the movement.

"I've already seen all of you, Ella. I already *own* all of you." He nods toward me. "Look at your fucking hand."

I don't, because I know what he's referring to. He doesn't wait for me to obey. This time, done with me, he just stands, his back muscles shifting as he turns away from me, the enormous Unsainted tattoo stretching across his back, the skull with the U and the smoke in the eye socket.

"You have it too," I call after him, grabbing for my shorts and standing too, the blood rushing from my head. I slip my feet in my shorts anyway, pulling them on, feeling sticky and messy and dirty, but I don't run out of the room like I wanted to.

He stills, his body tense and his tattooed hands curled into fists.

"I know you have *her* name on the flip side," I snarl, "but *you have it too.*"

He barks a laugh, shaking his head, the muscles in his shoulders rolling. "You're so fucking immature." Those words pierce me, fucking *gut me*, because I thought maybe

he *understood me*. I thought maybe he... knew how I felt about him. The same way he claims he feels about me. "Get your shit together, Ella, then come back to bed." Without another word, he storms out of the office, and down the hall when I hear our bedroom door slam shut.

Or is it even ours?

I don't own this house. My name isn't on it. We aren't married. If he wanted to kick me out, he could, easily, without thinking twice. Nothing legal to work through, no financial mess. And yeah, he killed someone for me tonight, but I think he enjoys murder. Maybe it had nothing to do with me at all and he's on the verge of ending things with me.

I'd be homeless and he'd be...fine.

What do the Xs on our palms even mean, at the end of the day? Clearly nothing, with everything else I'm sacrificing to stay with him. What is this scar? A cult ritual? They'd kill me without a conversation. They'd put a bullet through my brain and toss me into a lake, and I'd be dealt with, *Coagula* decaying like my waterlogged skin.

My shoulders drop, my chest collapses, and I stumble backward, against the windowsill.

It's only then I notice it, in the midst of an oncoming panic attack.

My phone lights up.

It's facedown, and I didn't see it while Mav and I were having sex. He must not have either, or maybe he just doesn't care anymore.

I lean over, swiping up the phone as I sit on the windowsill and flip the screen over.

It's Atlas.

He texted me three times.

I cling to it, to his words, in this moment, as a distraction.

I unlock my phone and read all three in quick succession.

Him: I'm in the driveway.

Him: I see you in the fucking window, just come down here.

Then, twenty minutes later, the last message.

Him: Fuck it. Have fun being a fuck doll.

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XXXV

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

THE MALIKOV MANSION

EZRA IS HOLDING *Rain in the moonlight, my son's head curled up against Ezra's chest. When Lucifer and I step into the bedroom, Ezra looks up.*

"He's okay," Lucifer says, confirming out loud what we can see. But it's as if my husband needed to hear it, even from his own mouth, to believe it.

Ezra nods once, kissing Rain's head before his eyes shift from Lucifer, to me, and back again. "Sevryn was in here, standing guard at your bedroom door." He jerks his chin just past us.

My muscles tense, my nails digging into my palms.

"He was saying the same shit he whispered in the car," Ezra continues, eyes on Lucifer. "Cave adsum." He bites his bottom lip, glancing down at Rain before lifting his gaze again. "It means—"

“Beware. I am here,” Lucifer finishes for him.

“We’re taking him to Liber.”

I look up at the sound of Lucifer’s voice, Rain clutched in my arms as I sit on a couch in our sitting room. My mind feels numb. I don’t remember the last time I slept more than an hour at a time. Earlier, after everything went down, I thought I saw Atlas walking the street in the middle of the night—or early morning—coming from Maverick’s house, but my dream states and reality are blurring. I’m not sure it’s what I saw at all. With Sevryn here, I moved Rain’s bassinet back to our room. I just can’t trust anything anymore. But last night, he was apparently standing guard even though he’s not exactly bonded with Rain, because we won’t let him.

I don’t know what to make of it, but I’m not so easily swayed to trust him.

I don’t care if we allegedly share blood.

I don’t care about anything except my son. It’s starting to consume me.

And only hours ago, when I heard the commotion on the street and took a gun to sneak outside while Rain slept, and I saw Nikita holding a weapon to my husband’s head, it wasn’t even a thought of killing him. It was just something I had to do.

I dip my head, inhaling Rain’s baby scent, my nose over his soft, fuzzy hair. “No.” I whisper it over Rain, letting my eyes close as I sink further against the leather of the emerald-green couch. Lucifer told me we had to leave in the morning, which is here, although the sun hasn’t risen yet. His car was getting repaired, but he said Nikita and his men were sent here because Lucifer didn’t complete a job. Now, we’ve got to leave because *Boaz* will want to repay us

for the loss of life and Lucifer's disobedience. He didn't tell me what the job was, even when I asked.

Even after what I did for him.

We did have sex though, after we came back inside and thanked Ezra for looking after Rain. We fucked right in the foyer, and Lucifer couldn't stop telling me he loved me.

Now though, there's silence.

It's heavy in the air and every muscle in my body is tense, knowing Lucifer will argue with me.

"I didn't ask, baby girl." His voice is wicked.

Rain makes a cooing sound and my heart swells as I shift on the couch, resting my head on the armrest, stretching out with Rain cuddled close.

"Yeah, but I'm *telling* you. If Boaz comes, I can kill him too."

My mouth is dry, my eyes so heavy. I can't open them. I can't find the will to argue, but I'm going to because Rain isn't going to Liber. "I don't know how that place is any safer than here." And despite what Sevryn did last night, keeping guard, I still feel uncomfortable with him so close to my son.

I don't want to get to know him. I don't want to speak to any more of my father's mistakes.

"It's like a fortress. Easier to defend. Boaz won't know yet what went down, but he will soon, and I don't want to be at this house when he does."

I let my heavy eyes drift open. Lucifer is leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed and a devilish curl to his mouth.

"What you did last night was fucking sexy, Lilith. But I'm still going to be the one looking after *you*."

My chest tightens. I flex my arms tighter around my son, his cheek pressed to my heart. "What didn't you do that you were supposed to, baby?" I ask Lucifer quietly. "What are you running from?"

He stares at me in the dim, rising light spilling from behind the heavy drapes of the sitting room.

Then his jaw unclenches, and I watch his chest rise, then fall, his eyes flutter closed, long lashes nearly sweeping his cheekbones. "There is...something going on. Something is happening to me." He speaks in broken rasps.

I bite down on my back teeth and slowly shift to sitting up. I glance behind Lucifer, to the hallway that leads to our spiral staircase, but there's nothing. The house is silent.

I flick my gaze to the ceiling. *What are you here for, Sevryn?*

"After it's over," Lucifer continues, an expression of pain passing over his face, the way his dark brows pull together and his entire body seems to stiffen, "I'll have more sway. I'll have... more power. I will be able to *change* things, like you want." He still doesn't look at me.

A cold sensation sweeps over the back of my neck. Before I can say anything to my husband's words, a low, quiet voice speaks behind me.

"You cannot change anything."

I stiffen, pressing my fingertips into Rain's soft body to keep him as close to me as possible as I slowly turn my head toward Sevryn. His posture mimics Lucifer's, except his gray eyes are open, cold as steel as he stares at me, leaning against the doorframe too. He must have snuck here on the quietest of steps because none of us heard him.

"All of this goes far deeper than you could ever imagine," he whispers, his eyes wide. A lock of curly brown hair is flopped over his eyes, and he's dressed in a blue T-shirt, black sweats. I don't know where they came from, but I assume it was in the duffel bag I've seen in his room. "There is nothing you can do." He drops his gaze to Rain and I cover the back of my son's soft head with my palm, like I could shield him from Sevryn's eyes. "You should leave and not to Liber. You should run. You cannot raise a child in this life. He will always be used as collateral

against you. There is nothing you can do to stop it. He is a living, breathing heartache in your arms. He will die—”

“*Stop talking.*” Lucifer’s raspy snarl, and Sevryn’s eyes jump back to mine.

I don’t move.

I’m not breathing.

Sevryn is staring at me, his own chest heaving, a vein ticking in his neck. “Run, Sid Malikova.” He pronounces my name with care, quietly, as if he doesn’t want to wake Rain. “Go as far as you can and never look back.”

Lucifer says nothing, but I hear his steps. He crosses the room, passes the back of the couch, and his forearm is barred over Sevryn’s throat as he pins him to the wall, towering over him, despite the fact he’s only a couple of inches taller. It’s his energy.

It is demonic.

Sevryn flinches, squeezing his eyes shut tight, and I realize Lucifer has a gun in his hand, his finger on the trigger, the same arm pressing against Sevryn’s windpipe.

“I don’t know where you came from,” Lucifer whispers quietly as Sevryn’s face goes pale. “But I know where you’re going.” A smile curves my husband’s lips and I feel unease run through my stomach. “I won’t bury you. I will *drown* you. I will ensure you stay at the bottom of a fucking lake. No one will find you for years, until one day, a kid will be fishing, and he’ll hook your femur on his line. And after he pulls it up, after the police are called, the media, *still*, no one will know who you were. *No one.*” His voice is guttural, harsh. “Now, you’re going to go upstairs and you’re going to stay there until I say, because if you come out again when you aren’t explicitly told to, I’ll give you that burial by the lake sooner than you expect.”

He releases him, but he casually aims the gun at Sevryn’s heart as Sevryn’s eyes pop open.

He doesn’t move though. And it isn’t the gun he’s staring at. It’s not even my husband.

It's me.

Nerves and anxiety tangle and tumble in my veins, causing my body to feel numb. But somehow, I get to my feet, unsteady, still cradling Rain in my arms.

"Sevryn." I whisper his name. I think of where he came from. What kind of shared pain we could have.

Lucifer glances at me, the gun still trained on Sevryn.

I ignore my husband's look and say, "Go upstairs." Two words, Lucifer didn't need to give a speech.

Sevryn blinks at me, so slowly, then his gray eyes dip to Rain. A moment passes as he watches my son. Lucifer's finger is still on the trigger.

Then Sevryn nods once, backs away until he disappears into the foyer, and a moment later, we hear him heading up the stairs, all while Lucifer glares at me.

"Don't you dare start to trust him," Lucifer hisses. "No matter what he did last night, he will *never* be one of us."

"Why are we going to hide at Liber?" I ask him as he lowers the gun, tapping it against his thigh and turning to face me fully. "We're parents, Lucifer. Of an infant. We can't stay on the run. Why don't we stay and fight? Why don't we kill Boaz when he comes for us?" The plan to go to Liber was different when Maverick asked, when he wanted us to have time to relax.

The initiate wasn't in our home then. Close to our son. We weren't being hunted like animals.

But Lucifer smiles, a poisonous thing, and it's as if he's reading my mind when he says, "You didn't say all that to Maverick when he asked you about Liber, did you?"

The exhaustion, the confusion, it all piles on top of me and I step back, sinking down onto the couch. "What?"

Lucifer cocks his head. "You look a little pale, Sid." Arching a brow, he glances at the gun in his hand. "I'm just going to give you a tip, okay, baby girl?"

I dip my chin, resting it on Rain's head, like I could protect him from whatever hell Lucifer is about to unleash.

“You go behind my back making plans with a man you fucked again, I’ll make sure the two of you are *never* alone together in your life, even if I have to kill him to do it. You’re not the only one of us who would murder for the other.”

My mouth drops open, but after a second, his gaze on mine from beneath his dark lashes, I actually laugh. “Are you saying you’d *kill* Maverick? Because you might be homicidal, but I don’t think you’d have it in you when it comes to Mayhem.”

A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. “It’s like I told you before. I don’t have to worry about anyone but *you*, and my son. If *anybody* gets in the way of that...” He brings the gun up, examining the barrel. “They’re fucking dead.”

I stand outside of my son’s room for a moment, sweeping my gaze over the pale purple, the Unsainted skull on the wall, the black furniture. Rain is asleep in his crib since we’re all awake now, and we’ll be leaving soon.

No matter how much I don’t want to leave my house, I have to trust Lucifer knows what he’s doing.

Exhaling a weary breath, I turn, intending to pack my things.

But I suck in air, conceding a step when I see Sevryn, directly behind me. Looming over me.

The dream I had of him before we ever met dances in my head.

Goosebumps lift the hairs on my arms, and I place my palms on either side of Rain’s doorway, like I am a human shield. And I would be. I *am*.

But Sevryn doesn’t come closer. His gray eyes lock onto mine, his tattooed hands by his sides. I glance at the red line inked around his neck, then the scar on his cheekbone.

What have you seen? Was it horrors like I grew up in?

“You are looking for things.” Sevryn speaks quietly, never taking his eyes off me as he dips his chin, holding my gaze.

I think of the newspaper articles in Lucifer’s office. The way he brushed my concern aside. I think of my futile searches on Cain’s mention of Liar’s Island and his mother.

“I can give you more,” Sevryn says, his words coming faster. “At Liber.” He pronounces the word with a flair.

“Give it to me now,” I whisper.

He shakes his head once. “It is coincidence I saw you here alone at all.”

“We don’t have to be alone. It doesn’t matter if Lucifer comes. I want to know what I’m dealing with. What do you know? And *how* do you know I’m looking for anything at all?” I haven’t mentioned Liar’s Island to anyone else. The only thing I’ve done is type it in my phone.

Sevryn smiles softly. It chills me to the bone. “I do not like Lucifer. I do not like most men with the most power. I will find a place. I will tell you. I will lead you to it.”

“It?” I press. “What is *it*? And how do *you* have it?”

A soft shake of his head. “Before I came here, I was someone too.”

XXXVI

Lucifer

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

THE MALIKOV MANSION

“DO you want to know how deep it goes? Sometimes, I think even you won’t be able to handle it.” Elijah rubs his eyes, resting his temple on his clasped hands in the innermost chamber of Sanctum. *“Sometimes, I think the knowledge, the betrayal, it kills you slowly.”*

I try to push the vivid conversation from my mind, the one we had the last time I met privately with Elijah, only days ago. Rain smiles up at me, his chubby little fingers latched around mine as he kicks his feet. He’s in a white shirt with a black bow tie attached to it and pale purple pants, no socks, so his bare blocky feet are flying everywhere as I grin at him.

Car doors are opening and closing in my driveway while I stand on the porch, the sun blocked by heavy gray clouds

in the sky. The scent of charred flesh and melted metal hangs thick in the air.

Brooklin's white Jeep is right in front of the steps, but her car is empty. Behind her, Mav's Audi is too.

Ezra and Cain are out here in Cain's Camaro, his fingers tight around the wheel as he stares straight ahead, waiting for everyone else. He apologized for not being there last night after Ezra filled him and Atlas in on what went down. Curiously, he didn't say where he was and neither did Atlas. The latter is driving over in his Range. He could have ridden with Cain, but he said he wanted his own vehicle.

Rain makes a cooing sound and I dip my head down as milk drips from his mouth. I press my lips to his forehead, closing my eyes as I savor the warmth of him. The way I feel a flood of love holding him in my arms.

I would kill for you. I know your mother would do the same.

I sway a little with him, his grip tightening around my finger, then I hear the double doors open behind me, feeling a gust of cold air as they do, coming from inside the house.

I straighten, opening my eyes and curling Rain closer to my chest as I take in Maverick, filling up the doorway. He's dressed all in black. In one hand, a black duffel bag swings from his fingers. His eyes are bleary and red, like he's fucking high, but maybe he just didn't sleep well last night. I don't think any of us did.

"You sure you wanna bring him? I heard Brooklin say she'd watch him. Could be better if we separate, find one of the safe houses to put them in." His voice breaks on his sister's name, but he doesn't stumble over it as he nods toward his nephew, in my arms.

"I'm not leaving him here." Samson's and Julie's bodies haven't left my mind for a second, and now I've got three other corpses inside my head too. I never told Sid about Julie and so I couldn't tell her about Finn, but now all of my

brothers know thanks to Ezra's question last night and my insistence we head to Liber this morning.

Mav nods once, his baby blue eyes cutting to mine. "Ella is going to ride with them. Sid and Brooklin, I mean. I'll ride with you and Mini Malikov. We'll flank the girls' car."

I arch a brow, surprised Ella would want to share a ride with Sid, but maybe Mav is trying to force their closeness. "Sid will want Rain with her." Even as I say it, I know it's not a good idea. She'll be stressed the entire drive. Wanting to feed him, to make sure he's breathing, staring in the mirror on the back of the seat so she can see him.

Mav cocks his head, letting me think this through. Then he says, "If he needs to eat, I'll feed him." He lifts the duffel bag I thought might have weapons or drugs or fuck-knows-what in it and adds, "Bottles in here." A grin pulls at the corner of his mouth.

Despite his threat to me last night, for this one second, things feel okay between us.

I snort, shaking my head and kissing my son as he stares up at me with enormous blue eyes, just like mine. "All right."

"How long will we be there?" he asks, the amusement gone from his voice. There's something in his question that makes me think he knows I'm hiding shit from him, as if last night in his words it wasn't obvious enough.

It's not like we haven't had multi-night parties at Liber before, but this is different. The building will serve as a fortress now, not a frat house.

I keep my gaze on my son. His smooth skin, cute nose that reminds me of my wife's, his squishiness. I want to protect him from the fucking world. I want to move far away from here sometimes, never let my uncles get another look at him.

But that would mean leaving my brothers, and I know they'll always have my back. Besides, there is no place in the world I would be beyond the 6's or RC's reach. Even

this is temporary, until Boaz calms down after he discovers what I've done.

"A couple of nights." I think of Finn and wonder if I'll find out where he is now. And when I do, what then? Do I adopt him? But Sid doesn't even know Julie is dead, and she's barely hanging in there as it is, adjusting to the life of a parent. She's struggling. We both are.

I don't know what to do.

Before I can say anything else though, someone else slips through the doorway and I look up, watching as Mav moves over for Brooklin.

There's a tension between them, I can feel it in the air. It's evident too in the way Brook takes two steps to the right, putting distance between herself and her brother, but she also shoots me a scathing look, so maybe she's just in a bitchy mood.

She's wearing black leather pants, a white crop top, her bleached blonde hair pushed back with pink clips. They look like opposites in their clothes, Maverick like a felon and her an off-duty model. But their hair, their bone structure, their eyes and lean frames... they're the same. And they hold grudges in a similar manner too.

For a moment, they stare at one another, a Valentino bag in Brooklin's manicured hand, gum in her mouth and sunglasses pushed up over her head.

Mav's jaw clenches and she just chomps on her gum.

Then Maverick says, "You gonna be okay with her?" I know he means Ella and I'm sure his sister does too.

Brooklin scoffs, a small sound. "I can handle your toy."

"Yo, Brooklin, come with us!" Ezra's voice booms from Cain's car, happiness in his words, tempering the anger rising from Mav at Brooklin's snark.

She shakes her head, the only indication she gives that she hears Ez, but she doesn't look away from Maverick.

"Watch yourself." He growls the words, and I see his tattooed knuckles have blanched as he holds the duffel bag.

I think about him beating Leon last night. Brooklin only knows we're on the run, but she doesn't know what her brother did to three bodies on this street only hours ago. She might take Mav's warning more seriously if she did.

She smiles like a cat. "I think I've given you more than you deserve. I can say what the fuck I want. Besides, what more could you possibly do to me, Mayhem?"

I don't know what she means by giving him more than he deserves. She avoids him as much as possible. Regardless, I don't say anything and instead I sway with Rain in my arms as he starts to fuss, apparently bored with gripping my finger.

Neither of the Astors look my way.

I bring Rain over my shoulder, patting his back, and he quiets.

"You have to let this go, you know." Mav has lost none of the growl in his words, but his voice is quieter. "We're all here now." He lifts his arms, the duffel bag too. "You're home."

Brooklin's eyes narrow into blue slits and she leans forward, tightening her grip on her gray bag. "Don't talk to me about *home*." Her tone is vicious, getting up in Mav's space. "And I don't have to let *shit* go, Maverick. You should be grateful I'm here at all. You should kneel for me, for the warning I gave you. You and your toy should be fucking *thankful* I tolerate either of you in any way."

Warning? I don't ask though. Not right now.

Maverick steps closer, and Brooklin tilts her head back to take him in. She's not short, but he's still taller than her. "Don't talk about her like that. She can ride with us."

I tense, because Sid will not like that, but I don't say anything. Brooklin does it for me.

"I don't think she wants to ride with you." Brooklin's smile returns. "You're not very good at picking up on signals, but she's been avoiding you all morning. *She'll ride with me.*" Then she turns on her heel, ignores me

completely and blows a kiss to Rain before her heels click on the steps.

“Sid is going to wanna drive.” I call over my shoulder as she darts to her Jeep.

As it unlocks and she pulls open the driver’s door, she shrugs one shoulder. “I’m just getting something from the front.” Then she climbs in and leans over, toward the glove compartment.

I bite the inside of my cheek, wondering what it is, kind of not wanting to know, but before I can think more about it, Mav speaks.

“I don’t know if I should let Ella near her.”

I slowly turn, still rubbing circles on Rain’s back. Mav is staring at his sister.

“You scared she can’t handle us? If she doesn’t survive the drive, she won’t last a night at Liber.”

His glacial gaze comes to me. “Yeah, and if you keep talking about her, you might not last another night either.” Then he walks past me, down the steps and toward my BMW. Pausing a second, he twists around to look over his shoulder at me. “I don’t feel comfortable with Rain and Sevryn together in the car. And he’s not sitting near my girl. Who the fuck is he riding with?”

I shrug, kissing Rain’s head. “He’ll be in my trunk.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sid". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large loop at the beginning and a long, thin tail that extends upwards and to the right.

I merge onto the highway and stay in the slow lane as Cain's Camaro roars past me in the right one. He lays on the horn as he goes by, and I see Ezra stick his tattooed middle finger up from the front window. But then Cain drops his speed as I pass him in confusion, only to see him cut over behind me, like he's following me, just like Atlas and Sevryn are in the Range behind him. Atlas convinced Lucifer to let Sevryn ride with him instead of the fucking trunk of the BMW.

Rolling my eyes, I flick on my turn signal and with Cain on my ass, I get behind my husband's BMW. Both of ours are blacked-out and I can't see shit through his back window, but it feels good being behind him, and I like looking at his license plate.

Mortem.

Cryptic, just like him. He drives ten over, but carefully, like he should since he's got Rain in his car. And Mayhem too, of course, but I feel he's a lot like my husband. Indestructible. Rain is fragile though. Innocent. It overwhelms me sometimes, the way I feel about keeping him safe. What I'd do to make sure he stays that way. More than what I did last night, even.

Raindrops splatter on my windshield, just a few, and my stomach tightens, thinking of the long drive in a storm. Panic unfurls inside of my gut, traveling down to my legs and my ankles feel almost numb. I know it's anxiety; since Rain was born, I've experienced enough of it to understand.

It doesn't make the feeling go away though.

I tighten my grip on the wheel, feeling my fingers start to sweat, and I relish in the cool A/C blasting from the car fans. It's October, but it's North Carolina and hot enough I can get away with the coldness even in my ripped black shorts and oversized tank.

"Is it supposed to storm the whole way?" Brooklin asks from the passenger seat, chomping on her gum between words. She's got her arms crossed and she's slouched a

little, looking every inch an incognito celebrity, flawless and beautiful.

Before I can respond, Ella does from the backseat, just behind Brooklin. "It'll clear up in half an hour." Her voice is low, and when I look in the rear view, I see she's staring at the phone in her hand. Probably checking the weather, but who fucking knows with her. After last night, maybe we should've made some peace, being on the same team, and seeing all the ways Mav would go to bat for her, but we haven't yet. I do feel a little guilty though about never responding to her texts. I just... I find it so hard to connect with her.

Her red hair is pulled up in a messy bun, tendrils around her freckled face, and she's got on black jeans, a white tank, and red boots.

I dart my eyes to the road, following Lucifer through a curve in the highway. Traffic is light and I'm grateful. I'm not fond of driving on interstates, and I already feel weird with the other girls. I don't even know how we ended up together, but I think the boys wanted to protect us. And maybe Lucifer wanted me to enjoy the ride too, and that meant separating me from Rain, so I don't become paranoid. I guess I wouldn't want Ella riding with my husband and son without me, and Brooklin wouldn't want to be stuffed into the Camaro with Cain and Ezra or ride with Atlas and Sevryn, but still.

It's weird.

"What's up with you and my brother?" Brooklin asks the cold question, staring out the window, and she could be talking to either me or Ella, but since Maverick is my brother too and *nothing* is up with us, not anymore, I think she's addressing Ella. I'm kind of surprised, after what went down last night. It seemed like Mayhem and Ella were solid, but I know how easy it is to pick up a fight again in this world.

I shift my foot on the gas as the rain picks up and I flick on my windshield wipers. The nervousness eats at me. Despite what Lucifer said, this feels a lot like running away. I think I'd rather stay and fight.

"What do you mean?" Ella sits up in the back, flipping her phone over on her thigh, her green eyes on the back of Brooklin's seat.

Brooklin shakes her head and I imagine she's rolling her eyes. "You acted weird around him back there. Like you're scared or something." She says it without flinching, no mercy or beating around the bush. It's one thing I like about her, despite our jagged past.

"Does he hurt you?" It's another straightforward question with no indication Brooklin cares either way what the answer is.

I think of Ella and Lucifer after Noctem. I'm clutching the wheel so tightly I'm surprised it doesn't snap in half. I don't even know why I'm mad at this moment, except for maybe the fact Ella isn't answering Brooklin. Dragging this out like Maverick is some kind of abuser. As if he didn't just defend her with his life last night.

I see in the mirror she lifts her chin and stares at the back of Brooklin's head as she finally answers.

"What are you really asking me?" There's no meekness in her tone now.

Brooklin laughs and the eerie part is it sounds genuine. When she was with Jeremiah, she fell under his spell. She seemed more submissive, and I can't blame her. Jeremiah is always the alpha, any room he's in. But now, free from everyone, cut off from her family, she's fierce.

She's like Maverick.

She twists around in her seat and stares at Ella. I glance once more in the rear view as the rain keeps falling and my wipers automatically speed up while I hold Lucifer's taillights through the storm.

Ella sits up straighter, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m asking you if he *hurts* you. You flinched around him today when you couldn’t avoid him, and it’s obvious he’s upset with you. So, did you shrink because he hurts you?”

I don’t know where Brooklin is going with this, and I don’t say a word, letting them fight it out.

Silence stretches.

Brooklin speaks again. “Or is it because you’re hiding something from him?”

My pulse picks up in my chest, anxiety over the storm and this line of questioning and Ella’s potential secrets and where we’re headed all crashing around me. I refuse to look at Ella again.

Seconds pass. Brooklin doesn’t turn back around in her seat. Brake lights glow in the haze of the rain, and I slow down as we come to a stop, reaching traffic at Raleigh’s intersections.

When the car is stopped and I’m a safe distance behind my brother and my son and my husband, the A/C still running and eating up the condensation on the windshield, Ella finally answers Brooklin.

“You don’t know him anymore and you never knew me at all.” The leather of my seats creak as she leans forward, inches from Brooklin. “Get the fuck out of my face.”

I expect Brooklin to attack her. Maybe a slap, maybe lunging through the seats. They’re nose-to-nose, and reluctantly impressing me, I see in my rear view Ella doesn’t back down at all. But instead of any of that, slowly, Brooklin straightens in her own seat, turning to stare out the windshield at the brake lights in front of us. Then she says, not looking at anyone so I don’t know who she’s talking to, “I can’t stand him right now, but if anyone fucks over my brother, there’s going to be fucking problems.”

Act Two



And as softly thou art sleeping
To thee shall I come creeping
And thy life's blood drain away.

Heinrich August Ossenfelder, *Der Vampir*

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XXXVII

Serena

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

LIBER

“WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?”

I smile at her. Sid Malikova is aggressive and her eyes flash as she stares at the folded papers I’m offering her in a darkened corner of *Liber*.

Free, in Latin, or *book*. They could be the same, I suppose. Monday always lost herself in books when she wasn’t someone our parents—particularly our fathers—wanted to lose themselves in.

I know better though. Lucifer wished to come here for protection. To be *free* of Boaz. There is no such thing in our world. Criminals are such for a reason. They cross every line. They shoot through every boundary. And when they have no fear of the law—because they own the law—God help whoever they set in their sights.

Sid will not get away. Her husband might survive, because of the blood in his veins. But this girl's life span may be incredibly short. If I do as I'm told, it will end within days.

I am here for her son. Because the sound of crying infants keeps me up at night. Because someone—a girl with blue eyes and golden skin—soothed my crying once upon a time.

I may not be able to help *Sid*, but I could help her son.

"Does it matter?" I counter, leaning against the wall. I sweep my eyes down the corridor of the fourth floor. It's empty here, this place she whispered to me I should meet her at as everyone unloaded their bags. Even still, I know we will not have much time before her husband stalks around this mansion, looking for her.

I clench the papers in my fist, wrinkling them. Her throat rolls as she swallows, darting gray eyes toward the information she seeks but doesn't want to grasp. Not yet.

Her hands circle into fists at her side, and she blows a stray strand of hair from her face as she cuts her gaze back to me. "Yes." It's a snarl, the single word. "Who are you speaking to? How? You don't have a phone. You haven't left our house except—"

"To go to Sanctum," I finish for her, a small smile playing on my lips. I slip one hand into the pocket of my gray jeans, shrugging a shoulder. "Do you want it or not? We do not have all night."

Her eyes narrow into slits as she lifts her chin, like it'll bring her closer to my height.

Impossible. All the same, she steps toward me and I catch her scent, like lavender.

"Tell me where it came from."

"No." I straighten from the wall, dropping my hand by my side. If she doesn't want it, that is her problem. I will do the best I can to watch over Rain Malikov, until I cannot

anymore. I turn away from her, intending to head to my next meeting inside these walls.

But in the span of half a second, her fingers latch around my wrist, jerking me back toward her.

The force of her grip is surprisingly strong.

I freeze, the feel of her hand on me unwelcome and uncomfortable. I grind my teeth, staring into the darkness of the hall.

“Is it something I can fix? Right now?” she whispers, her fingers grinding against the bones of my wrist.

I almost laugh, but I swallow it down. “No.”

“Then why should I read it?”

I think of the photo and dread caresses my chest. I do not trust the man I have made a deal with. Adam Medici is not someone to be respected, but I did not have a choice and there is a possibility I will become just like the person who took the photo printed on the page in my hand.

I close my eyes and bite the inside of my cheek to the point of pain. It’s a sharp reminder. *Cave adsum*. I am here.

For now... *I am here*.

And I answer her question, the sharp prick pulsing in my cheek. “To understand who is truly your enemy, and who could be an ally.”

“Where did you go?” Atlas leans back in the pool chair, arms behind his head. The air is thick with the scent of chlorine, dark windows lining the entirety of the pool room, giving a view of the forest surrounding Liber. But he isn’t focused on *that* view.

His gaze tracks Ella Christian across the Olympic-sized swimming pool, sitting on Mayhem’s lap. He’s not touching her though, and he looks annoyed, his lips pressed together and eyes on the water as she whispers something in his ear. He’s in swim trunks but she’s fully dressed.

There is a gun by his hip.

It is an interesting sight.

“Did you warn her?” I ask, keeping my voice low. Music pulses from hidden speakers though, drowning any chance someone will overhear us.

“Trap” by SAINT JHN.

Atlas curls his mouth into a semblance of a smile, but it sends a chill down my spine, despite the fact I’m not in a swimsuit. My blue shoes are planted on the concrete floor as I sit on the side of the black pool chair, arms crossed.

I hug myself tighter as Atlas speaks.

“I tried,” he says carefully, gaze still on Ella as he pushes his hand into the pocket of his pink swim trunks, pulling out an amber bottle with a dropper. He unscrews it, not bothering to hide his movements—despite the fact the men called Cain and Ezra are here too, with one girl each, in the shallow end of the pool—then lifts the dropper to his tongue, parting his mouth, his sharp canines visible.

It’s sensual, the way the viscous liquid glistens along his tongue and his eyes cut to mine. “Remember that, when you start thinking I’m the bad guy, Sevryn.” He closes his mouth, swallowing the drug and screwing the top back on the bottle. He pockets it, his eyes fluttering closed briefly. “*I tried,*” he repeats, gaze flashing as he trains it on Ella once more.

When I turn my head, Maverick is staring right back at him, and this time, his tattooed hand is on the gun, finger tapping the trigger, Ella dangerously perched on his lap.

XXXVIII



MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

L I B E R

“WHAT’S WRONG?” My arms are around his neck, my lips close to his ear.

He doesn’t touch me though, his hand cradled around his gun instead. Silence stretches between us while the sounds of splashing water and bass-heavy music infiltrates the background. Mav’s leather scent is mixed with the smells of the pool, and it’s a heady combination.

I dip my nose to the crook of his neck, inhaling, my lips hovering over his bare skin. Since last night, we’ve exchanged few words. We took our stuff up to his suite here at Liber, the very same place we first met. I had hoped being back here would romanticize the time we’re spending together, even if it’s in hiding.

But this isn’t the movies.

He only seems more on edge since we've arrived, and he won't speak to me but in one or two word answers. I kind of wish he'd roll a joint. At least if he's high, he isn't so tense.

"Go upstairs." His voice is cold.

The rejection stings, my cheeks growing hot as I pull away from him, but my arms are still looped around his neck. His pale blue eyes don't cut to me and I watch a muscle in his jaw jump.

I take in his tattooed throat, pouty lips, pulled upwards at each corner naturally, he's so fucking hot. But desire for him mingles with feelings of worthlessness. I don't know how things went so wrong, but it seemed as if, last night, he wasn't just hurting someone who wanted to hurt me.

It was like he was attacking something else too. Something he can't get out of his head.

"Why?" I whisper, hating the fact I'm pouting, but I want him to touch me. Look at me. *Be with me*. Lucifer and Sid aren't down here, neither is Rain or Brooklin, and I wanted to relish in these stolen moments without them.

"Do as I say." His long lashes curve upward, thick and dark, framing the lightness of his irises, the whites of his eyes.

I massage my thumbs over the sides of his throat, and all at once, he moves. His free hand comes to my wrist, circling tight as he stills me, his devilish gaze finally cutting to mine. But suddenly I don't want to be underneath his scrutiny.

His nostrils flare, eyes widening. "Did you hear me?" he asks calmly, his fingertips pressing into my skin.

"Mavy," I whisper, a lump growing in my throat. I don't understand if this is about what happened between us last night. Is he really still angry that I was upset over the fact he didn't want to hold me? "What's wrong?"

He doesn't answer with words. Not at first. Instead, he brings up the gun he's holding, beside my hip. My ass on

his lap, my legs off to the side, feet dangling from the pool chair.

He caresses the curve of my thigh, over my jeans, but the barrel is aimed at my muscle. If he pulled the trigger—and his finger is on it—it would do a lot of damage.

My heart stammers inside my chest, beats uneven and frightened.

I hold my breath, my tongue pushed to the roof of my mouth as he caresses me with the weapon.

“Get off me. And *go upstairs.*”



I almost get lost in Liber.

It isn't hard to do. A tall, square mansion made of stone, like a modern-day castle, I could wander around it for hours and if things weren't so bad between Maverick and me, I could even enjoy it.

On these upper levels, I can't hear the music I left pulsing downstairs.

Sevryn was sitting in a chair by Atlas there too, the two of them talking together. I felt their eyes on me when Maverick told me to leave, but I ignored them both. I still don't know what Atlas wanted to warn me about, and last night—early this morning—I never texted him back to find out. I want to keep my distance with Mavy's growing temper.

Still, it would be nice to have a friend here. Someone who actually *wants* me. I try to hold my humiliation in. I try to reason with myself. Maybe he's on edge about what we're hiding from here. Something is up with him and Lucifer too, and maybe he's finally catching onto the secrets between us.

I can only dream.

Walking down a dark hallway, floor panel lights the only thing illuminating the way, I take a turn only to nearly collide with a small shadow.

I shoot my hands out to defend myself and catch my balance, my heart hammering hard inside my chest.

"Fuck!" A familiar voice curses the word as something white spills between us, sliding and scattering along the dark floors.

I step back, dropping my hands as I blink in the darkness, my eyes still adjusting to the low level of light. But I realize it's papers fluttering to the ground, one coming to rest against the wall, curled up on the edge.

Digging in my brows, I look up and find silver eyes staring at me.

A chill graces my lower back, where my shirt has risen up a little above my jeans. Sucking in a breath, I turn my head to look over my shoulder for some reason, like Sid and I are being watched, but only darkness peers back at me.

When I look her way once more, Sid is gathering up the papers with haste, squatting down and retrieving the two or three pages, stacking them together again.

What the fuck?

It's absolutely silent on this hall and I straighten, hands by my sides. Sid folds the papers over quickly, and she looks as if she might walk right past me without another word, but when she takes a step, I mirror it, blocking her exit.

Her shoulders tense, the papers clutched in one hand as she raises her chin to stare up at me.

I take a deep breath, my heart knocking hard in my chest as I blink, focusing on her standing in a white, ripped tank that trails down to her knees, covering what I assume is her black bikini. She has her arms folded across her chest now, her hair pinned back with bat wing clips as her silver eyes shoot daggers my way.

“Move.” One word, and she utters it with such disdain.

I glance past her, seeing an exit doorway I assume leads to the stairwell, a mirror of the one I came up on and maybe she stalked up that one. But what are those papers? Who was she talking to? Lucifer? This isn't the hallway his room is in. We're one floor above that.

The scent of bleach lingers on this floor, like it was just recently cleaned, but I have no idea what it's used for.

I bring my gaze back to Sid, more confused now than I was before.

“What do you want?” she snaps, her eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing?” I counter, truly curious.

“Nothing that concerns you.” Her words have bite, and my anger starts to rise, matching hers. I think I could take her scrawny ass. So what, she shot someone last night? I think I kind of *want* to fight her. Maybe it would make both of us feel better. “Why are you up here?”

Because my boyfriend—your brother—ordered me to go away. Because everyone in this house actually hates me, besides maybe Atlas, and even that, I'm not so sure about. I don't say any of that, of course, because confiding in Sid is impossible. She's so guarded, her very demeanor is like spiked armor.

“Why are *you*?” I ask instead. I dart my gaze to the crumpled papers in her fist. “And what is that?” It's not as if she's actually going to answer anything I ask, so I might as well press on.

She doesn't speak for long seconds, and I think about just walking off. I kind of want to retreat, but a bigger part of me really does want to know what she's holding and what she's doing. Besides, despite her shitty attitude now, she wasn't so bad on the ride here. I mean, she didn't say a word to me, but still.

When I drag my gaze back to her, I see her lips are pressed together in a pout, but she's staring at me in a strange way. Her brows are furrowed, her lean jaw

clenched, and yet... it doesn't feel like animosity she's exuding anymore. More like she's sizing me up.

But maybe she's just thinking about fighting me too.

"What do you know about my husband that I don't?" Her words come out cold and clinical, like she doesn't care what the answer is, but the question shocks me all the same.

"Everyone has to prove their worth, Ella, and you haven't bled for us yet." Lucifer's words snake through my brain.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, but I don't let my gaze drop from Sid. She'd see it as a weakness. Worse, maybe she would read the lie I'm about to tell. "I don't know what you're talking about." All at once, I wish I hadn't asked her any questions and had just moved when she told me to.

"Oh, come on." She scoffs, glancing up at the high ceiling as if in exasperation. "You fucked him after Noctem, maybe you got closer still while I was gone—"

"No, we didn't, all he cared about was you—"

"Tell me what you know about him." Her glacial gaze is back on me.

I turn to glance over my shoulder, into the darkened hallway, thinking maybe I should just leave. I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to accidentally spill out my secrets. And after everything that's happened in the past twenty-four hours, I just feel... exhausted.

But then she says, "I imagine your childhood sucked, huh?"

I freeze, still looking away, but I don't retreat, either.

"It seems like all of ours did. Like we gravitate together because of it, the pain. The betrayal from people who were supposed to be there for us more than anyone in the world. It's the worst kind of hurt to any child."

I bite my bottom lip, then close my eyes. I try not to think of Mom, her boyfriends, Shane.

“When I imagine Rain, caught up in any of that...” The steel in her voice wavers.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, thrown by her confession, to me, of all people. I know she killed last night to protect Lucifer. I know she’d do the same for Rain. Worse, probably.

“It makes me feel absolutely fucking murderous.”

I pop open my eyes and turn my head because her voice is so much closer, despite the fact it’s a low growl.

She’s a foot from me, staring up at me with quicksilver eyes, her pupils big, almost blotting out the color.

“I would never hurt—”

“I’m not talking about *you*, Ella,” she whispers, her arms still folded over her chest in defiance or protection or anger. “Didn’t you pay attention last night? Something is *happening* to our boys.”

I swallow, feeling a prick of warmth with the fact she referred to them as *ours*. I always feel like she thinks she has a different sort of claim on Mavy, a *greater* hold. And sometimes I believe... she’s right.

“Something is happening to my husband, and that means Rain isn’t far behind the danger. They were too close last night. If you know anything at all, I want to hear it.” She searches my gaze, then adds, “*Please*.” And from Sid Malikova, it doesn’t sound like a plea at all.

I want to tell her about my meeting with Lucifer. The horrors I’ve endured at his command. I want to confess, but I know I can’t. It’s not just me joining the family that’s at stake.

It’s the very thing Sid is worried about.

“I don’t... I don’t know anything,” I manage to get out, looking her dead in the eye as I do. I shake my head once. “Mavy almost never tells me anything. He keeps me in the fucking dark. I barely know why everything went down the way it did last night.” I’m surprised the real, hidden anger breaks through my voice, and Sid blinks, like she’s

surprised too. “Why are you asking me this though?” I nod toward the papers crumpled in her fist. “Did you find something? What do you think is going on?”

I think she won’t tell me. She drops her gaze and backs up a step, as if she’s deflating. Her shoulders curve inward and she looks defeated. I don’t know why, but I feel a flickering guilt that I should just *tell her*.

But before I can get us all into more darkness, she asks, “What do you know about Samson?”

I think of Atlas outside my window last night, or early this morning. The urgency in his texts. My breath catches in my throat. *What did he find out? Who was at The Madilyn?*

“Nothing,” I tell her honestly. “Except he died and no one knows why.”

She sighs, and when she speaks again, it’s like it’s a memorization of something she’s read. Even her eyes flicker closed, as if she’s reading the words from inside her brain. “Samson Savage was known in his small circle for raging conspiracy theories and rants about the government, politics, police.” She pops open her eyes and searches mine, taking a step back and leaning against the wall opposite me. I realize for the first time she’s in bare feet. I wonder where she told Lucifer she was going when she slipped away from him. I wonder why she came *here*.

“His social media accounts were shut down when he was first declared missing, but I found... something—the same place I found that out—that has reposted some of his stuff.”

She glances down at the folded papers in her fist. I follow her gaze and see her wedding rings, a black diamond and a black band lined with smaller diamonds.

Slowly, she unfolds her arms and, with one last glance at the papers, she holds them out to me. All I can see is the white pages and printed ink on the other side, but I can’t make out anything else.

Holding my breath, I reach for them, taking them gingerly in my hands as she lets go.

With one last glance at her, I unfold the sheets.

It's like a photocopy of a newspaper, in black and white.

I see the words *Alexandria Cult* splashed across the first page. It's like a tabloid, something not to be taken seriously judging by the quick flash of headlines I scan my eyes over.

*Hamilton Sr. Embraces Fifth New Bride
Medici Murders?!*

*Mysterious Renovations Downtown At Suicide Site of Mob
Boss*

I shuffle the papers to the second page, and it looks like screenshots of a social media account, the different shots stacked on top of each other to fit multiple ones on the page. No news headlines, just grainy photos of psychedelic art and sprawling captions, unpunctuated.

"There's a lot of things in there I immediately dismissed. Stuff about lizard people..." She glances at me and I tear my eyes away from the second page, smiling a little as I meet her gaze while she gives me a knowing look. "Robots controlling the world. But there was a dark photo he posted, something... strange. It looked like it was from the perspective of a person in the middle of a lake, on a boat or something. And there was an island, maybe? A few docks, well-maintained from what I could see. Then just... woods. Except at the very top of the photo, there were white columns, the start of some sort of giant house." She stops, staring at the papers. "It's the next one."

Her lips are pursed, like she's biting her cheek, trying to figure out how to continue.

I turn the pages again, and I see the one she's talking about. It's the only post on the page, and it describes exactly what she said. A square photo of a lake, a glimpse of the point of a small boat, and at the top of the photo, past the docks and the inky lake, there are four large columns, presumably holding up a home. I drop my eyes to the username, *SamsonSavage*, then read the caption at the same time Sid says the word verbatim.

"Where the children go to die." She whispers those words.

My fingers feel shaky, holding onto the pages as I drop my gaze further and she describes exactly what I'm reading.

"There's a ton of comments there on the post. You see, people asking where he is, if he's okay, who lives on the island." After I read those very comments, I look up.

Sid closes her eyes, and I watch her throat bob as she swallows.

I feel strangely elated she's sharing all of this with me, but fear and confusion spike through my body too. *Where the children go to die?* What had Natalie's little brother been up to? What did he know? And did he know it because of... *Atlas?*

Who was at The Madilyn?

Sid doesn't say anything else, so I ask the first question that comes to mind. "Who gave you this?" I gesture toward her with the papers. "When?" She hadn't seemed strange in the car, like she was carrying *this* heavy of a secret.

She slowly blinks her eyes open, her gaze on the pages. "I told Lucifer I wanted to check on Rain." She carefully doesn't answer the question at all, but she adds, "I also found my phone works well here on this floor, when it doesn't often everywhere else."

Like they throttle the service. Prevent people from having perfectly working phones while they're here.

I draw my shoulders in, turning to look at the pages, my index finger flicking under the one of the house, but I don't turn it yet. "But who gave these to you?"

"I can't tell you that."

Goosebumps erupt on my arms. I want to press her, but she's already confided so much in me when she never has before. I decide to drop it.

"When are they from?" I nod toward them. "The newspaper one? How does it fit in?"

She laughs, but it's bitter. "Decades ago." She nods her head to my hands. "Look at the last page."

I realize I haven't really *wanted* to look at the last page as thoughts of Atlas and his warnings and who might have been at The Madilyn swirl inside my head. But gingerly, with Sid's command, I turn the page, the paper smooth beneath my fingers. There's a photocopy of what looks like the classified section of *Alexandria Cult*, judging by the title running across the top of the page. There are black and white photos of older model cars for sale that might have been new at the time, even a handful of fuzzy kittens complete with a photo.

I'm about to ask what I'm looking for, but there, at the bottom and to the right, someone has circled an entry in marker. The circle is scanned too, done before the page was printed. I quickly read it, see it's something about a job offer at a luxury hotel called *Liar's Island*. No location is given, and I don't see a web address either. Just a phone number that may or may not be in service.

The listing doesn't make sense to me.

I lift my gaze to Sid. "Liar's Island?"

She arches a brow. "I searched for it online. After the first three pages of results, there's a website with a long, convoluted URL, no mention of the island but somehow it shows up in the search anyway. I clicked the link. It opens a blank screen, asking for a password."

I crinkle the pages in my fingers a little, waiting for her to continue.

She swallows hard, like she doesn't want to say her next words. "It was all of *their* names, in order from oldest to youngest." She closes her eyes, smiling a little but it seems sad. "I had to try it a few times to get it right. I'm only sure of Lucifer's birthday. But his didn't work at the end. It was a different birthdate to complete the password. Took me like, fifty tries to guess it, I'm surprised the system didn't kick me out." She takes a shaky breath in. I've never seen her look so discomposed. "August seventh," she whispers.

My stomach tightens.

"It's Rain's birthday."

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XXXIX



MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

LIBER

“I’LL CONFRONT HIM WITH YOU.” I say it quickly after I’ve handed the pages to her and she’s folded them back up, gripping them tightly in her hand. “Right now, if you want to.” I imagine she won’t want Rain to be away from her anymore tonight, and she probably doesn’t want to *be here*, either. I understand we need to lie low for a few days, but there has to be many more hideouts the boys have access to. Some place where she didn’t stumble over this eerie information.

I have so many questions and I’m sure she has more. About Atlas and Natalie and Samson and the Unsaint’s involvement in Liar’s Island. And what *is* the island?

Who gave Sid these papers?

But surprising me, she shakes her head, only once, drumming her bitten, bare nails along her lean biceps.

“No,” she says, staring up at me. “Right now, he’s focused on guarding us from Mikhail. That cannot become secondary. Besides, it’s not like he’d let me leave with Rain.” She gives me a weak smile. “He won’t let me leave at all.”

I feel a surge of indignation flash through me. What does she mean, *won’t let her*? But I can’t get too carried away with my hypocrisy. If Mavy gave me an order, I’d at least pretend to follow it.

Even so... “You’re going to act like you didn’t see any of this?” I press, shrugging. “After what you did last night, don’t you think you’ve earned a right to know what’s going on around us?”

She gives me a cool smile. “I’ve also earned a moment to relax. To get my bearings. If we’re stuck here, we might as well enjoy it.” She clears her throat then, looking more somber. “Anyway, I know the two of you—Atlas, I mean—are kind of... friends?” She asks it as a question but doesn’t stop to let me answer. “If you find out anything while we’re here, forced together, can you just...” She trails off. Then she clears her throat and says, “I’m sorry I never replied to your texts. I just... I’m having a hard time.” She swallows, then shakes her head quickly, her eyes meeting mine like she needs to prove she’s still strong. “I’m fine now.” It’s such an odd thing to say. And such a lie. “I’m good.”

I think about my unanswered texts to her and this half-apology for them. The ways she’s acted like she loathed me.

But maybe because I’m desperate for a friend and maybe because I’m dying to fit in and maybe too, because I admire her for what she did last night, I say quickly, “I’ll tell you. If I find out anything at all, I’ll let you know. But are you sure you don’t want to discuss this with Lucifer now?” I’m careful not to let my voice crack on his name. “What if Rain is some sort of target? What if he’s in danger?”

She gives me another one of her ghostly, haunted smiles. Then she steps around me, like she's going to walk away. "My husband and your boyfriend and the rest of them own this house. He's safe here."

This is probably true, but I still feel a prickle of unease thinking of letting this go so soon.

"Sometimes I think it's better to take the upper hand quietly until you're sure you can act on it." Her gray eyes bore into mine, like she's trying to force me to understand.

I can only nod slowly back, like it makes sense. And maybe, in a twisted way, it does. Nothing in this cult is logical or straightforward, but I do know for a fact Lucifer wouldn't leave his son alone if he didn't think he was absolutely safe.

"I have to go back downstairs. I already looked in on Rain, he's good with Brooklin." It's interesting, the way she says this almost like it's an excuse for something or an explanation. Like maybe she thinks I think she's a bad mom. "I'll see you around." Then she passes me by, and I turn to watch her walk to the door at the end of the hallway. She slips through it without another word or a glance back.

After a moment spent staring after her, I contemplate going to Mavy and confessing everything. But his words by the pool come back to me.

Get off me and go upstairs.

I don't know why he was being such a dick but I don't think now is the time to bring up more stressful cult secrets with him. So instead, I continue down the hallway, lost in thought. Maybe if I figure something out on my own, he'll actually listen to me instead of blowing me off.

Lucifer is hiding something, because I'm sharing it with him. And there's a reason those three men were after him last night. He disobeyed an order from RC, but what?

Atlas is keeping things on the low too, and now he's brought all of the Unsaints a mysterious connection to his

girlfriend's brother's body. He also has The Madilyn, and this place is called Liber. Then there's Sanctum. The Unsaints have a tendency to give strange names to places, so it's not out of the realm of possibility they own Liar's Island.

Samson could have truly seen something he shouldn't. Who owns the website his old posts are stored on?

Sid is on to Lucifer, even if she doesn't know what, exactly, she's got. And she wants to keep her suspicions a secret from him to gain the "upper hand," as she called it.

Sevryn's arrival is timely, coming with all these other mysteries unraveling—and he potentially knows exactly what's going on—and Rival's Claw is timely too, with Lucifer's uncle sweeping into Alexandria.

Cain knows mine and Atlas's secret, but I don't know whose side he's on.

Ezra is cozying up with Brooklin, who loves Maverick but also kind of hates him. She seems to think there's a snake among us, but does she know how many?

Is Mavy the only blameless one here?

Also... Where the hell is Jeremiah Rain?

I realize I've reached the end of the hallway at the same time I see an archway to my left. I pick my head up, trying to focus on the present and where I'm going when I frown into the gloom beyond.

Placing my hand along the cool awning, I take a step inside, my burgundy boots squeaking on the polished, dark tiles beneath my feet. Obviously, they have someone come clean this place.

Inhaling, I catch the scent of bleach.

A bathroom?

I walk inside, following a maze of walls, like in some public restrooms at fancy restaurants Mav has taken me to. Then I'm looking at a circular, dark couch around a small, squat table—tissues and a wire basket of condoms set atop it.

I almost laugh, wondering how many people know this is here and whose idea it was to set it up. Maverick has never worn a condom with me.

But I watched him wear one with that other girl.

I feel bile at the back of my throat, but I swallow it down, shoving the memory aside.

I glance at the three stalls, black doors half open, three rows of white sinks across from them, mirrors above each one. Turning, I catch sight of my own reflection in a floor-length mirror along the wall across from the couch.

There are slight circles under my eyes, and a few strands of hair slipped free from my French braid. It would be a good style to wear swimming but clearly Maverick doesn't want to do that with me.

I cross my arms over my chest, a chill down my spine, thinking of his cold tone. The way we left things last night, after what he did for me. Would he want me to tell him everything I just learned, no matter the tension between us? Or would he only push me away again if I tried?

Then I hear heels clacking against tile and I jump, stepping back further into the cavernous bathroom, lit softly with pale purple lights.

My heart races as my fingers come to my throat. This hall was silent. Then again, there is a basket full of condoms, so someone must know it's here. Still, the tall, lean girl with the bleached-blonde pixie cut and bright blue eyes who walks through isn't at all who I expected.

Brooklin Astor.

She stops dead when she sees me.

The tension that was between us in the car seems to expand, almost to the point of bursting.

I drop my gaze to avoid hers and my eyes trail over her outfit. She's got on black, leather pants, straight legged that hit just above the navy-blue heels strapped twice around her ankles. Wearing a white crop top showing a narrow waist, golden skin, she has the same complexion as

her brother. Over her shirt is a distressed jean jacket, big hoop earrings in her ears, and more studded along her cartilage.

Just like I noticed in Sid's car, I see what Atlas saw in her.

Jeremiah too.

She's stunning.

"I thought you were babysitting," I blurt out, noticing Rain isn't with her and wondering if Sid decided to take him downstairs after all.

Her perfectly arched brows pull together as she lifts her chin. Her short hair shows off the lean lines of her face and her sculpted cheekbones. Her and Maverick are genetically blessed.

"And I thought you were here as my brother's pet. Or are you two still fighting?"

I bristle with those words. I know there's a deep animosity between them, and we aren't friends. She probably thinks of me as an enemy, actually, but I didn't expect her to be so... rude. And I thought after I stood up to her in the car, she'd leave me alone.

I guess not.

"That's none of your fucking business." I feel nervous saying the words, but I get them out all the same.

She smiles a little, but before she can say anything else, I ask, "Where's Rain?"

That's important to know, especially considering what Sid just told me.

As my mind works in overdrive, I wonder if she ever speaks to Atlas. If things are as strained between them as they are with her and her brother, and me, by extension. It surprises me she's forged some kind of relationship with Sid. Or maybe it's not Sid. Maybe she simply takes satisfaction in becoming friends with Jeremiah's worst enemy.

She starts walking again, ignoring me as she strides straight for the mirror above the middle sink. Examining her reflection, a slight frown pulls on her pink lips as she does. I wonder what imperfections she thinks she sees.

“Sleeping,” she finally answers me, dismissively. I glance at the maze of walls leading out into the hallway.

“Shouldn’t you be...watching him?” I don’t know anything about babies, but he’s only a couple of months old.

Where the children go to die.

The words echo inside my head.

She sighs loudly, turning to stare at me, her hands on her hips, her abs flexing with the movement. Then she shakes her head, one manicured hand coming to the collar of her jacket as she pulls it aside. I see something clipped onto the neckline of her white top. Like a... walkie talkie, but smaller and sleeker.

She releases her jacket, and it’s covered again. “Baby monitor,” she says as if I’m stupid, arching one brow.

My face feels hot. “Oh.” I avert my eyes, running one hand over my bare arm. “Sorry, I—”

“I see,” she says, murmuring those words almost to herself. I lift my gaze, confused. Gesturing toward me with dainty fingers, swirling one in my general direction, she adds, “*This* is why he’s still fascinated with her.”

Excuse me? I feel the flush in my cheeks extend down to my neck as I hug my body tighter and force myself to hold eye contact even though I just want to sink beneath the tiles and disappear. “What?” I manage to croak out, nerves zipping through my veins as my pulse thunders in my chest. “What are you—”

“Sid.” She says her name with distaste, like it pains her to do so, even though she didn’t seem to mind her in the car. But I already knew who she was talking about and hearing her confirm it makes me feel sick. She drops her hand, shrugging narrow shoulders. “My brother. Lucifer.”

She pauses, her slender throat bobbing as she flicks her gaze to the floor for half a second before it's back on mine. "*Jeremiah.*" There's a world of hurt beneath *his* name. "They all adore her, don't they?" I actually hear empathy in her words, and it confuses me, but despite what olive branch she may be trying to extend beneath her bitchy remarks, I just feel angrier.

"Maverick isn't *fascinated* with her." I try to keep the spite out of my words, but I know I'm failing. "She's...his sister."

At that, Brooklin laughs, a tinkling sort of sound. Everything about her is delicate, but there's so much anger and bitterness in her words, and she's Mavy's *sister*; I don't underestimate her.

"So am I," she says, sniffing as she shakes her head. "Trust me. He's never once looked at me like he looks at her." She wrinkles her nose, like the very idea makes her feel sick.

She's not the only one.

I square my shoulders and stiffen my spine. "We're together," I say, wanting to defend him, even though I know what look she's talking about. "I know you two have some stuff you need to work out, but he's not in love with Sid. He's—"

She takes a few steps toward me, heels clicking on the tile, silencing my retort.

It takes everything in me not to back up, but I don't, forcing myself to stay planted exactly where I am. When she's inches from me and I can smell the sweet scent of her perfume and see the fact it looks as if she has zero pores in her face, she crosses one arm over her chest, propping her elbow in her opposite hand.

I feel more nervous here with this confrontation than I did in Sid's car. Frankly, I kind of wish Sid was with me right now.

“*Stuff* we need to work out?” She repeats my words, her blue eyes searching mine. A shade darker than Maverick’s, they’re just as beautiful as his. “Do you really think you’re cut out for this life, Ella?”

I don’t know what to say. She’s too close to me, poking at my insecurities. I don’t want to hear the way she’s going to answer her own question, but I can’t get any words out, so she keeps going.

“Jeremiah Rain isn’t a fucking picnic.” She steps even closer, and I have to tilt my head up to meet her gaze. “You think my brother is bad? You have no fucking idea.”

I wonder what Jeremiah did to her.

Does she mean he hurt her? Is that why she asked me if Maverick hurts me? Or does she mean something else?

“But in some ways,” she continues, her eyes flicking along my body, and it’s almost as if she can see the long-faded bruises on the back of my thighs, even though I know it’s impossible. I feel naked under her gaze as it slowly travels back up to meet mine. “I think Maverick is worse. He left me with the Order of Rain for *years*.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat, wondering where she’s going with this.

“Because loyalty means more to him than *anything* else.” Lowering herself so she’s at my level, her eyes inches from mine, she keeps going. “I don’t mean to be a bitch,” *but you are*, “but if you aren’t sure about this, about him, in any way... just save him the heartache, and leave him.”

Surprise jolts through me. I take a shaky breath in. “I love him.” It’s the one truth I can hold onto.

Her eyes soften and she straightens, taking one step back. She studies me for a moment, unspeaking.

Then she says, “Sometimes love isn’t enough. Not for this life. Not to be with one of *them*. And if you ever want to leave, I could help you.” She lifts a brow, keeping her eyes on mine. “Just say the word, and I could get you out.”

“*What?*” I think of Atlas’s warning, that I should run. His eerie verbal history of RC yesterday and the things they do to people without anything to their name. *Are you the crazy one, Ella? Or am I?* “I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to leave *him*. I don’t care what it takes. I *love* him.” It’s like she doesn’t understand the meaning of the word, and maybe with a life like hers, it’s impossible to comprehend. Or maybe it simply means nothing in these shadows.

She spikes her fingers through her hair and shakes her head. There’s something in her face, the way her brows pull together, her lips turned down. Like she’s sad as she stares at me, or she’s pitying me. “I loved him too, and you see what happened to us.”

I stagger half a step backward, as if her words physically harmed me. As if she reached into my brain and pulled out my fears. *That he’ll leave me.*

She doesn’t even blink at my reaction. “Anyway, I have to get back to Rain. Just... Have a good night.” She walks past me, leaving me confused.

I don’t turn to watch her go, my heart racing and mind spinning.

My phone vibrates in my jacket pocket, and I pull it out, for something to do with my hands, something to occupy my mind.

I have two texts, from two different people.

Mavy: I’ll be up soonnnnn.

I think he must be drunk or high, considering the typo. My heart leaps to my throat.

Without replying, I open the other text.

From Atlas.

Him: I think you should come down to the pool. There’s something you’re going to want to see.



MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

L I B E R

THE SCENT of chlorine and marijuana tangles in my nose as I walk through the gym of Liber and out into the warm, heated room of the inground pool. Beyond the glass panes surrounding it, there's dark forest and night.

And when my eyes snag on Maverick, I wish I was out in those woods.

My breath catches in my throat, sweat pooling under my arms from the temperature and the way my blood heats, watching my boyfriend.

He's at the deep end, more than a few people crowded around him laughing and drinking with black plastic cups in hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cain and Ezra sitting on the steps of the shallow end, girls between their laps.

But I don't pay attention to them.

Instead, I'm watching Maverick's hands grip the ledge of the pool, his tattooed back to me, red marks and crusted over wounds—that I didn't know about—through his enormous Unsainted tattoo, and right in front of him, pressed against the wall of the pool, looking up at him with a drunken smile on her face, is Sid.

She just went from concerned, possible friend, to incestuous bitch again real quick.

It probably has something to do with that black cup clutched between both of her hands. Her dark hair is slick down to her shoulders, away from her face. There's a smudge of eyeliner beneath one eye, but even still, with her high-rise black, mesh bikini, she looks good.

And Maverick's half-naked body is inches away from hers.

My hands curl into fists at my side, and I don't move my gaze from them until I hear someone beside me, an arm brushing my shoulder. I know who it is even before he speaks because I smell him. Mint. Clean.

The opposite of what I'm looking at right now.

"They look good, huh?"

I stiffen at his words and think about Samson. Liar's Island. Last night at The Madilyn. I say nothing except, "Where's Lucifer?"

Atlas laughs, a light sound.

I can't drag my gaze away from Maverick. He dips his head down, and Sid is staring up at him with something like wonder. It's only then I realize how she's able to keep afloat in eight feet of water.

Her legs are wrapped around Mav's waist, under the surface.

My stomach lurches. The room seems to spin around me. Her back is to the wall, but her pelvis is tilted upward, because it's the only way she can stay up while she drinks from her fucking cup.

"Not out here," Atlas says, like he's stating the obvious.

"Then where is he?" My voice is hushed, rising up at the ends, and I feel Atlas shift beside me.

His arm comes around my shoulders.

I jump, spinning to face him, but he doesn't let me go. Instead, his mouth comes to my ear. "We could find out."

Heat rushes through me, and I don't know if it's from his touch, or Sid's legs tangled around Maverick's waist or what.

I shake my head, attempting to push him off.

Brooklin's words echo in my mind. *I loved him too, and you see what happened to us.*

Atlas doesn't budge. "Hey," he says quietly, dipping his head so his brow is to mine. My heart thumps too fast in my chest. If Maverick would just *look. Up.* He'd see. He'd fucking *know.*

But he doesn't look up. And after everything he did for me last night, *he's choosing* her? It doesn't matter her and I seemingly made up over those fucking pages. He doesn't know that. And fuck her for being like this, but *fuck him* for always putting her first and pushing me away.

When Atlas speaks, I taste the mint of his breath. "You wanna pay him back?" His dark eyes dip to my mouth. "We could go find Lucifer..." His gaze comes back up. "Or we could go find a room."

My body is stiff, hands by my sides.

I want to shove him away and jump in that fucking pool. I want to drag Sid out by her hair.

But I don't move.

Can't move.

"Why are they doing this?" The words are whispered. "Is she...drunk or something?"

Atlas presses a soft kiss to my cheek. Is anyone paying attention? Does anyone care? Is this just...my life now? "Don't be naïve, Ella. Of course she's drunk. He is too. But aren't we our true selves when we're fucked up?"

I don't know. I don't really get very drunk anymore. And if I did, would I be clinging to Atlas? Would I be vomiting up all of our secrets? Am I a hypocrite?

But I'm doing this for our own good, not because I want to fuck Atlas.

"Come on." Slowly, I force myself to look at Atlas instead of *them*. "Unless *you're* going to do something about it," he says the words like they're laughable, "let's go, all right?"

I swallow the tight knot in my throat. *Just look up, Mavy. Just look up.*

But he doesn't.

He doesn't fucking look up, or I'd have heard him by now. Wouldn't I? Wouldn't he care? *Wouldn't he?*

Still... Fuck Atlas too. Fuck everyone for discounting me.

I shrug out from under Atlas's grip and march to the deep end, standing only *inches* from Sid and her brother.

I want to kick her head in.

I don't move.

It takes the quiet hush of everyone else for him to notice me. My pulse is hammering so hard inside my eardrums, I'm not even sure I'll hear myself speak when he *finally* loses the smile on his face and lifts his head to stare up at me with glassy blue eyes, water dripping down the sharp planes of his face.

His fingers tighten on the ledge of the pool, caging Sid to the wall.

She doesn't look at me, but a small giggle leaves her lips. She's obviously drunk, but I don't fucking care. She finds out the things she did, then she does *this?*

Fuck her.

"This why you wanted me to go upstairs?" I jerk my chin as I stare at Maverick, indicating his fucking sister.

He slants his head, leaning in closer to Sid, his lips inches from her mouth, his eyes never leaving mine as she laughs again, a drunken sound. "I didn't tell you to come back down."

Are you fucking kidding me? I clench my hands into fists at my side, taking a deep breath in through my nose. The urge to lash out, to hurt one of them, it grows inside my skin. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snap. “What the fuck are you doing? Why are you being like this?” I see red blur my vision as he stares at me and the urge to vomit up more words, to lose all control, it’s so strong my stomach aches, keeping it in. But I don’t want to look more desperate than I already do, so I bite my tongue so hard a sharp pain lights up along the side of it.

Maverick huffs a laugh with his mouth closed, still too near Sid’s, who refuses to look up at me, her legs wrapped around my boyfriend.

“I don’t want to see you right now,” he finally says, speaking slowly. As he blinks, I notice his eyes are rimmed with red. He’s drunk or high or both, but that’s no excuse. He certainly wouldn’t accept it as one from me. He nods toward the gym, the exit of the pool. “Go to our room.”

I clack my teeth together as I stare at him, but I feel so small with everyone’s eyes on me and the silence throughout the pool room, aside from the gentle thud of bass. “Why?” It’s a broken question. Hoarse. I hate that it shows my weakness, but I want to curl up in his arms. I want things to be okay. I don’t know what I did to upset him so much. “Why are you doing this?”

His tattooed fingers flex against the cement ledge. “Go,” he says, a touch above a whisper. That’s all he gives me.

One fucking word.

Pressure builds behind my eyes. I glance at Sid’s shiny, slick hair. I want to grab it. I want to push her down in the pool and drown her. Why did I think we were starting to become some kind of fucking team?

Why did I even offer to help her? She’s a fucking bitch.

I wait seconds, maybe a minute. I hope Maverick changes his mind. But all he does is stare at me.

The urge to run, to hide, it overwhelms me.

I turn away, looking down at the ground as I dart through the gym door, the cold air a relief against my sweaty body. And when Atlas appears beside me, slinging his arm around my shoulder as we weave our way through Liber, I don't shrug him off.

And when he offers me a pill, I don't hesitate to take it.



It doesn't take long to find Lucifer, even though we aren't truly looking for him. Atlas and I trail up the stairs in silence, all the way to the third floor, away from the music and drinking and the bullshit, and when we take two steps down the darkened hall, Lucifer Malikov appears from the darkness like a ghost, his phone in hand, the screen lighting up his pale face.

Sensing us, he lowers his phone.

Beside me, I feel Atlas stiffen, like tension snapping into his body. I narrow my eyes, ready to blurt out what the fuck is happening with Mavy and Sid at the pool, but before I can open my mouth, Lucifer speaks, his raspy voice overriding my thoughts.

"This is cute."

My heart thumps hard in my chest, but anger is still coursing through me and the drug in my system lends me bravery. Or maybe it's all in my head, but either way, I can't stop my next words. "You're such an asshole."

Lucifer smiles at me, but it isn't a nice thing. "And you still haven't learned your place, have you?" I don't know exactly what he's talking about, but I can guess.

I clench my hands into fists. I want to say a few things about *Rain*, about what I found with Sid, but some misplaced sense of girl code keeps me quiet.

“Don’t be fooled by last night, Ella. Maverick has always been a murderer. What he did for you was nothing special. And he will *always* put his nephew first. So you might as well get used to second place.” His words drive through my heart.

I grind my teeth together, but tears sting the back of my eyes. *You are loathsome.* And with everything that happened today, I can’t stay quiet this time. “Do you think you’d still be in first if I told him about us? About what you’re making me do?” It feels good, the confession, bursting it out, especially in front of Atlas, who says nothing.

But Lucifer doesn’t look at all mad or surprised. Instead he smiles and says, “He’d be on his knees *thanking* me for it.” There’s a purr in his words. Before I can snarl back at him, he shifts his gaze. “What happened to Samson, Atlas?” He steps closer, pocketing his phone. Dressed all in black, his demon blue eyes seem to glow in the dark. The skeleton bandana around his throat is so familiar to me, I almost skip right over it when I take him in.

I listen now, trying not to imagine Mavy and Sid, because this somehow seems more serious. Atlas wouldn’t talk to me about this, and I want to know things. Maybe now I *won’t* tell Sid, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to solve the mystery.

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” Lucifer continues, his voice a low purr. “But you had help, didn’t you? Tell me who was there.”

Atlas doesn’t move. His hands are by his side, grazing his hips.

Lucifer’s saying *Atlas* killed Samson? I immediately dismiss it. That makes zero sense, just like the past twenty-four hours.

Suddenly, Lucifer’s eyes cut to me. I feel pinned by his gaze, the intensity in it. He looks bloodthirsty. “Why are

you," he tilts his head, looking toward Atlas for a second, "with *him*?"

There's silence between the three of us. I don't know what to say. *I hate you*. It's in my brain, but the words don't come out.

He steps closer. I catch the scent of pine. Cigarettes. I remember how he tasted, in my mouth. I remember how he tried to hurt me, be too rough with me, but Mav wouldn't let him.

Slowly, he leans down to crowd my space, hands on his thighs. "You're not very smart are you?" His lip curls with a snarl as he looks me up and down, and I want to shrink in on myself. *You are ruining me*, I want to scream. *You are ruining my life*. "You should only follow orders from those with enough power to give them."

My heart is beating too fast in my chest. I can't even open my mouth. I don't know what he's talking about, but I know he won't explain his cryptic, cult speech.

Slowly, he rises back to his full height, sweeping his gaze over both me and Atlas.

"Have fun tonight," he says, smirking. "But if you're not careful, Ella, you're going to end up buried too."

"Watch your son," I blurt out, unable to stop myself. Unwilling to let him have the last word. And maybe I do care more than I let on, because I think it would hurt me too, if something happened to Rain, if only because I know it would destroy Maverick.

Lucifer's eyes flash, danger in them, but I don't stop talking. "Pay attention to him, because he isn't safe."

Atlas shifts on his feet beside me.

Lucifer smiles coldly. "I know exactly where my son is. Just how *safe* he is. Don't try to play mind games with me, Ella. I've been doing it for far longer than you."



“What was that?”

Atlas doesn't look up from his phone as he sits, and now he has a hood pulled over his hat, on the right way for once, from a hoodie he snatched out of his closet when we walked in here a minute ago.

“What was what?” I see him try to fight his smile though, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip as he types with one hand. His other is curling and unfurling from a fist and back on the sleek wooden table in his room at Liber.

It's in a different hallway than Luce and Mavy's rooms.

North wing. It's a testament to the amount of money these boys have that there are directional wings.

And islands.

Places where children *go to die*.

I lean against Atlas's locked door, knocking my head back on the wood as I sweep my gaze up to the high ceilings. I think of Lucifer stalking off. My phone hasn't buzzed in my pocket again, which means Mav is fighting with Luce, or they're all fucking each other.

“Who was at The Madilyn?”

Atlas is silent.

“What did you want to warn me about? You can tell me now, you know. What was so fucking important.”

More quiet.

“What happened to Samson? Why did Lucifer ask you about him?”

He looks up, but only for half a second, before he's back on his phone. He doesn't answer me.

“What the fuck is happening?” There's a whine to my voice I can't quite hold back.

He smiles a little but doesn't look at me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I take a deep breath and close my eyes as I inhale his scent in this room. He's so fucking *clean*, for such a dirty boy. I shiver, thinking of his fingers in his mouth, with my saliva on them. It replays in my head, over and over, but I push it back. "Don't play stupid with me."

There's a tense silence. I don't breathe, and I don't open my eyes.

I hear the thud of his phone being set against the table. The chair legs scraping over hardwood.

His footsteps.

I feel him when he's close. When he stops. When his hands come to either side of my head.

I keep my eyes closed. My throat is bared to him, but I don't care.

My heart disagrees and my pulse is almost painful. Still, I keep my arms over my chest.

"Don't be what?" he whispers. I feel his breath on my neck.

"Stupid." I sound braver than I feel.

His lips press against the hollow of my throat. "My dad used to call me that. My mom too." His mouth grazes my skin with every word.

My mom did too.

Stupid. Worthless. Piece of shit. Fat ass. *Bitch*.

Maverick calls me the last one sometimes when we're fucking. A sense of unease twists in my gut as I realize why I like to hear it.

Atlas runs his bottom lip up the column of my throat. My lips part reflexively, the slightest moan leaving them.

Atlas's body is closer to mine. I can feel his heat.

"You keep fucking with me," Atlas says, his fingertips coming to my face and gently guiding my chin down. "You keep tempting me, just by being you. I know why he likes you. Why he killed for you."

I open my eyes. The darkest of blue with flecks of brown meet mine.

He runs his thumb over my bottom lip, pulling it out and exposing my teeth.

“You’re just so much fucking *fun* to toy with. Turn around Ella. Let me play with you.”

“No.” Nervousness skitters in my veins and my pulse flies. I shake my head, turning out of his grip. But he lets me, and it doesn’t make me feel any better. I know now when the 6 men surrender battles, it’s only so they can win the war. Sure enough, his hands plant beside my head again. “You can’t do this. We cannot do this. He’s here. I want to know what’s going on. I want to know about The Madilyn, your stupid warning, about Samson, about Natalie, about Rival’s Claw and...and we *can’t*—”

“Turn around, Ella.”

I shake my head and hug my arms tighter to my chest. “No.”

“Do you want me to force you? Is that what he does?”

“Atlas. No. Tell me what you know—”

“Do you think I’m your fucking dog and you just command me to sit and lay down and roll over whenever the fuck you—”

“Back up.”

He slams his fist on the door beside my head. I flinch when I see the anger flash in his eyes. “You’re just like her.”

Her? His mom? Is that—

“You’re just like Natalie. Are all whores the same? Does everyone think they can fucking order me around?” He laughs, and it causes cold to fill my veins. “But you don’t know what’s happened to Natalie, do you, *pretty girl*?”

My lungs squeeze at his mocking, oxygen constricted.

He runs his mouth over my cheek, leaving chills in the wake of his warmth. His lips come to my ear, and I’m

shivering, his body pinning me against the wall. “You don’t know where she is right now.”

I push at his chest, but he doesn’t budge. My eyes are squeezed closed, and I’m starting to regret...everything. Mainly, underestimating this man in front of me. Always so soft, so kind, but increasingly more demonic, as time has gone on.

The devil hides his evil in a smile. I should’ve known all along.

“She’s probably naked,” he says, warm breath causing the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. “Covered in blood.” He presses further up against me, and I feel how turned on he is. My fingers flex against his hoodie, gripping the fabric. “Freezing cold.” He seems to relish the words. The way he describes Natalie’s discomfort. “She’s probably shaking, *terrified*.” He grows harder with every sentence, his chest crushing me to the door. It’s like a horror movie he’s painting inside my mind.

My breaths come in broken pants as he shoves his thigh between both of mine.

I gasp, and he laughs, biting the lobe of my ear. I’m hanging onto his every word at the exact same time I want to *run*, just like he told me to do, weeks ago.

“They won’t be nice to her, Ella.”

My throat feels tight. Is it true, what he’s saying about Natalie? Where is she? What’s happening to her? Who is *they*? Is *she* at Liar’s Island?

Vividly, my mind flashes back to the movie I watched with Maverick. *A Death at Shadow Villa*, directed by the man from West Virginia. Arlo Estere. I imagine the girl dying in the aisle, the men silent all around her.

Is that going to happen to me? To Sid? Is it what’s happening to Natalie?

They won’t be nice to her, Ella.

“But at least she won’t be *dead*.” He snarls the words in my ear, then dips his head to the crook of my neck, biting at

my shoulder blade softly. He licks where he bit me, grinding his knee between my thighs.

My nipples draw into tight points.

“A life for a life.” He sucks the skin on my neck, and I know it’s going to leave a mark. “But I’m not sure she’ll prefer living, where she’s at. Then again, she was always so fucked up.”

I think about the drugs he’s been giving me. I feel a little sick. And before we saw Lucifer, he passed me another. My mind is hazy, and paranoia seeps under my skin.

“You’re not so different. She is beautifully naive too. I see some of her in you.” He licks me again, the cool air filtering in where his warm tongue was. “And right now, just like I did with her...” He bites me harder, a whimper leaving my mouth as I try to push him away again. “I want to be *in you*.”

I shove him. *Hard*.

His hands come to his sides as my fight cuts his words off and he pulls back but doesn’t stumble. He’s surprised, his mouth open, eyes wide. He swipes a hand over his hood, knocking it back, showing me the word etched in pink on his hat.

Amator Mortis, in Gothic letters. Lover of death. Mavy taught me that in his poetry.

“I’m not Natalie.” My words are shaky, my palms still held up to keep him away. “I don’t even know what is happening with you two but I’m not her. You knew what this was. You knew what it wouldn’t be.”

His hands are by his sides again, and his face is expressionless. I wrap my arms back around my chest, averting my gaze.

“Why are we here?” I feel small, and my voice reflects it. “What’s going on? What happened to her brother? What did you want to tell me last night?” I ask without looking at him. I don’t know what’s going on inside his head. I

stupidly assumed he was the safest of all of them. “Did Samson know something? Real? Something he saw?”

Now the cherry red pill he gave me in the darkened hallway has me wondering, and my mind is... lifting. I feel myself rising higher and higher, and it's hard to explain, because I'm standing right here.

“Look at you, brave girl. Catching onto all our secrets,” he says with venom. “But they have nothing to do with me and you. I just assumed since you followed me up to my room, you wanted to do more than ask stupid questions.”

I snap my gaze up to meet his. *You told me to come here you stupid fucker.* “Fuck you.” I turn on my heel and dart my hand out to reach for the door, flipping the lock.

He grabs my wrist and spins me back around, holding tight enough for the bones to rub together.

He still has that same eerily calm expression on his face. “Fuck me?” he repeats, like this is a game. “Fuck. *Me?*” He steps closer and I try to yank my wrist from his grip, but he pins my arm back against the wall, then does the same to my other arm, keeping me still. “Do you think you're going to live happily ever after with *him?*”

“You don't care.” I don't say the words petulantly. I mean them. This isn't a Sid, Lucifer, and Jeremiah love triangle. I wanted a manufactured one, but I knew I'd never fall in love with Atlas and whatever he's using me for, it isn't love either. I like him, and I care about him, and maybe I could love him as a friend. But anything more than that? My heart belongs to Maverick. Isn't *he* why I'm doing all of these things?

Atlas smiles. It's not a nice thing. “What if I started to? What if I wanted you?”

“You don't.” I keep my voice even.

“Look at me.”

I inhale through my nose, feeling hot and flushed. I should've gotten into that fucking pool with Maverick, despite what he said. He's so secure in his position, so sure

no one will fuck with me because of him, even when he's not around, that he left me alone. I shouldn't have followed Atlas. I shouldn't have come here.

I pick my head up, meeting Atlas's dark gaze.

His fingers flex tighter around my wrists as he ducks his chin so we're eye to eye.

"You hate yourself, don't you?"

A protest is on the tip of my tongue, but he shakes his head. Just once.

"Maverick wants control. He always has. It fucking kills him that Lucifer is Dominus." Atlas tilts his head. "*He. Hates. It.*" He enunciates each word clearly, hissing them out. I don't believe him, but his venom is real. "Then you come along. Red fucking riding hood, Ella." A smile curves his lips as my temper rises. "And you were so. Fucking. Easy to manipulate." His words are against my mouth. I can taste the pain he's trying to cut me with.

But what I don't know is... "Why are you being like this? This isn't you. What happened to you? What happened to Natalie? Where is she? Who was there last night? What did you want to tell me?"

"And you let him control you. And use you. And you let him fuck around with Sid, and you—"

"I didn't. I didn't *let*—"

"Did *nothing to stop him.*" His laugh is jagged on my lips, and it silences my protests. His hands come to my hair, fingers spearing through the strands, against my scalp as he stares at me. "You didn't put up a fight. Just now. You might have whined and fucking complained, but what did you really *do*, Little Red? You saw Lucifer, then you didn't even have the guts to tell him what happened, huh?"

"Where. Is. *Natalie?*" I ignore all of his other questions, all of his taunts.

He exhales a ragged breath, his lips touching mine. "She's okay, baby. Don't worry about her. *Worry about you.*"

My heart skips a beat in my chest, and I feel frozen.

“Worry about what’s going on right now, downstairs, in the same building we’re in.”

In my head, I see Maverick, Sid, and Lucifer, and how easy they are with one another. How much they love each other. And Rain, and...

“Would you ever hurt Rain?” Atlas asks suddenly, like he’s reading my mind.

I feel too hot. Too sweaty. I press my palms to the door at my back. “What—”

“You ever think about what it would be like if he didn’t exist? If he wasn’t permanently tying Sid to Maverick?”

I can hear my pulse in my ears. I shake my head, but Atlas presses his lips to mine, his body against my own. I feel his cock against my stomach, and I suck in a breath, terrified to move. Terrified I want... whatever this sick fucking moment is, with all these things he’s pulling from my brain.

“You can tell me the truth, Ella.”

“No,” I whisper, imagining Rain’s head of dark hair. How scared Sid seemed in the hallway. How much I wanted to help her, seeing her vulnerability. But then I think about Maverick looking at her like he’s in love with her. Her legs wrapped around him in the pool. I think about her lips around his dick, and him coming all over her face and—

“Don’t you want to end it? I could make him disappear for you. *Just say the word, baby.*”

Where the children go to die.

“No,” I say again, trying to stop the thought stumbling around my head. My emotions, my mind, none of it has made sense lately. *Nothing* is making sense.

Atlas kisses me again, smiling as he does when I don’t kiss him back. His erection is so thick and hard and hot against me, and I dig my nails into the wood of the door at my back, to stop myself from reaching for him even as he puts his thigh between mine.

I gasp, and his eyes light up. “Feel good?”

“N-no.”

He shifts his thigh up and down between my legs, and I'm *aching*. “Feels even better when it's forbidden, doesn't it, Ella?” He tilts his head, running his tongue over his top lip. But he's so close to me, I feel the warmth over my own lips too. “You can pretend I forced you. You can pretend you hate this. Or...” He trails off, pulling back slightly, and I suck down air, trying to breathe, to *think*. “You can open your mouth, and I can make you forget. You can experience it, and you can *forget it*.”

He drops one hand from my hair, reaching into his back pocket. He pulls out a bottle, and I think, in this moment, about the ways he's taught me to fight. Instincts. Reflexes, like when he threw a knife at my head.

But the bottle... it's strange, and it throws me off. It has a stopper. There's a seal on it in red, the glass itself amber, but there are no letters there. He grins at me. “Let me drug you.”

Drug me.

I frown. “Drug me?”

He rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Yeah, technically, he has been drugging me, I guess, but it's such a weird word to use when I've been consensually taking those pills. *Klonopin*. They help me...relax. They helped my pain. Except I haven't felt so relaxed lately, have I? I've felt kind of crazy. A little insane.

A lot tired. Suddenly, I'm hyper focused on that bottle. I have no idea what I'm looking at. I don't know much about drugs, just weed, because Mav smokes so much of it, and Xanax, because I've taken some here and there.

“I've had such a shitty few weeks,” Atlas says softly, using both hands to twist the cap off the bottle. “You have too, huh?” His eyes lift to mine, but I can't stop staring at the stopper of the bottle. The blood red label with no words.

I meet Atlas's gaze while he unscrews the stopper, squeezing it to suck whatever liquid is inside up into it.

"Give me consent. Right now. Tell me you don't want to pay Maverick back, just a little? He's doing some really fucking *obscene* things right now in the pool with a girl you hate. A girl who can't even be *fucked* enough to send you a simple text back."

"How do you know that?" I snap, my fingers drifting to my throat as the words fly from my lips. "How do you know she didn't text me back?" My secret shame, out loud.

Atlas lifts his brows, smiling. But his words are a dark whisper. "*I know everything, baby.*" He drops his gaze to the stopper. "I need you. I need this." His eyes drag back up to mine. "You can just lie there. You can pretend you hate *every. Fucking. Second of it.*"

My heart pounds so fast in my chest, but my mind feels a little loopy. I'm holding onto my senses, but just barely. The consent happens now, or it doesn't happen. And if it doesn't, he's going to do it anyway, and...

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Maybe it wasn't what it looked like," I protest weakly, thinking of Maverick and Sid. "Maybe—"

"Don't be stupid. Stop being naïve." He snaps the words out like he's personally offended about my desires to distort the truth. This is all personal to him, but it has nothing to do with Lucifer or Sid or Maverick.

"What did you want to tell me last night? What happened with Natalie?" I manage to gasp out, flicking my gaze to the stopper in his hand, the bottle between his strong fingers. "Where is she?"

His eyes lock on mine. "She's in hell." He enunciates each word carefully. "It was either her, or Samson."

A life for a life.

Liar's Island.

My mind is spinning. I don't know what to do or say or... "Did you kill him? Was it...*you*?" Horror spreads and grows

and pulses in my brain.

He doesn't answer me.

"Liar's Island." I gasp it out. I can't hold it back anymore. "Is she there? Was Samson ever there? Did he see it? What *is* it?"

He stares at me, and a shadow crosses his face.

My stomach churns. "You killed him because he saw it. Because it was true, what he posted. What he said. It's where children go to die." I sound crazy, even to myself, and I *loathe* that. But I can't stop talking and I hate the fact Atlas doesn't look at all surprised I know this. "You left Natalie there. Didn't you?"

He says nothing at all.

My voice sounds frantic and unlike my own when I screech out, "*Didn't you?*"

His gaze flicks up and down my body. "I'm not answering any more of your questions." He seems a little deranged, and for the first time, I notice his pupils are blown. It's the way he tilts his head, and his gaze catches in the low lights.

He's...on something. Why? Is he afraid? Is he running? What is he hiding? Is it like what I'm keeping a secret too?

He steps closer, lifting the glass dropper up to my mouth. I can't see the color of the liquid, because the glass is amber. "Now, open your pretty fucking mouth, and say *yes.*"

"I need to go." I gasp the words out and turn around, reaching for the door, but Atlas fists my hair, dragging me up against his chest. The pain sears in my scalp, and I open my mouth to scream, but Atlas is holding the dropper to my lips, and I taste something sickly sweet. It reminds me of the fair Mom would sometimes bring me to, hoping to steal food or pick up men. It's like...cotton candy but made of sharp chemicals.

"You suddenly don't trust me?" he sneers in my ear, panic setting in. "You don't wanna keep our secrets?"

He's an actual fucking psycho.

He is literally psychotic.

His whispers to me ring in my head, about different versions of foreplay. Is this his? Drugging girls? My chest heaves as I keep my lips pursed together.

"I'm not going to hurt you." His words are quiet, and his tone has shifted. From unhinged to... something with more feeling.

The tension doesn't leave my body, but his voice now is like a bizarre balm.

"I won't hurt you," he says again. "Just give me this, Ella. It doesn't have to mean anything, but I can promise you, right now, Maverick is fucking *someone* who isn't you."

My stomach burns. I think of last night. Even beyond the murder, the violence, I think of Maverick putting his arm around me at the end of it all, in front of Lucifer and Sid. How, in that little moment, I felt so big to him.

But then tonight, he tells me to go away, then I find him with *her*, both of them betraying me. I think about him fucking Chelsea. My chains rattling on the bed. The way he taunted me by saying he'd fuck her in the ass too. How, afterward, he expected me to just take it. He didn't expect me to retaliate.

Are you only his puppet?

I grit my teeth, imagining my mom's hands against my face. Her shackling me up so she could go out and get high. The men she brought into my life. The food she didn't. I think of being hungry and lonely and scared and starving for more than nutrients.

Attention. Love. Hugs. Soft touches.

I got none of it. I *get* none of it.

"That's it," Atlas says against my ear. "Remember how it stings, all the ways he's made you feel small."

Tears burn behind my eyes, my cheek pressed to the smooth wood of the door.

"I won't, Ella. I promise, tonight, you're all I see."

Butterflies gasp in my belly with his words. I wish I wasn't so easily pleased. I wish I could fight him off, stay angry with him, scared of him. But he's turning my emotions like a tuning fork.

"Say yes. Open your mouth. Think about how good it would feel, just to get something over on him... for once." He presses his lips to the spot just under my ear. "I won't tell him. You don't have to be ashamed. Just once. Just now. *I need you, and he doesn't.* Just. Say. Yes."

My mind is lifting higher still. Like it's rising to the ceiling. Like my head is a balloon, my thoughts are nothing but air. But I try to hold on. "What is it? The... island? *Please, tell me what it is.*"

I feel his breath on my skin. He is quiet for a moment, but he doesn't move. Then he says, "It's not what you think."

"Kids? Are they there? Do they get hurt? Are they... murdered?"

He kisses me again, just above my neck. "You care more than they know, don't you, baby?"

More than *who* knows? The words are screeching inside my head, but it's like my tongue is too heavy to speak them.

"They don't get hurt. No one is hurt on the island."

The island. It's real. It's true. Samson saw it.

His mouth is open when he kisses me again, saliva cooling along my neck. "Be a good girl for me, say yes, and I'll tell you everything you want to know afterward."

I don't believe you. *You're lying. You are the liar.*

He nudges his nose beneath my ear. I can tell how much he wants me right now. It's like the heat from his body is seeping into mine. "He's not going to look for you. Not for a long, long time. He's...preoccupied, Ella. *Say yes.*"

In my mind, all the times Mavy seems to have chosen *her* over *me* run on repeat. Tonight. At Ignis. But the phone call, when he called her while I was waiting for him, when I

was seconds away from being dragged into darkness, it's the one that hurts the most.

And Lucifer, telling me he's been a murderer for a long time. Maybe last night didn't mean to me what it meant to him.

"When this is over, you promise you'll tell me everything?" Because even with all of those thoughts in my head, despite the fact it feels as if Sid stabbed me in the back, I *do* want Rain safe. Maverick would die if something happened to him.

"Everything," Atlas swears. "I'll answer *all* of your questions. Just please. *Give me this.*"

And so I say, "Yes." I whisper it, and I repeat it, louder still. "Yes."

Atlas laughs against my ear, my body shivering beneath him. "Good girl. Open your mouth."

I do, and a second later, the sickly sweet, thick liquid is on my tongue.

"Swallow," he whispers, moving his hands from me for a moment, but I just rest against the door. I assume he put the bottle down somewhere, because a second later, his hands are on my hips and he's spinning me around, then pushing me gently back against the door.

His fingers come to the button of my jeans, and he flicks them open like he's done it a million times before even though this is the first, for us. He leans into me, his hand between us, cupping me between my thighs as his lips find mine.

"Kiss me." It's a command, and I part my lips, letting him lick along the bottom one, my hands plastered to the door at my back.

XLI



MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

LIBER

“JUST HOW DRUNK ARE YOU, ANGEL?” Maverick’s voice is light, despite what he said to Ella. It’s the lightest I’ve heard it since...well, I try not to think about that belt around my throat too often. Raven Park seems like a different time, another life. We’ve all aged in secrets and sorrows since then.

A giggle leaves my lips, and I know that means I’m fucked up. Lucifer had me taking shots in the kitchen, going toe-to-toe with Ezra, who is sitting on the ledge of the deep end somewhere beside me. My husband wanted me to loosen up, to stop “worrying so fucking much.” And after what I saw upstairs, the only way that could happen was through alcohol.

I hear Ezra laugh, a deeper sound than Mav’s. “She’s fucked up.”

I turn my head and tilt my chin to meet Ezra's dark green eyes. He's smiling at me, flashing straight white teeth. He brings his cup up to his lips, and my eyes drop to his chest. He's shirtless, droplets of water dripping down his dark, ripped skin. My thighs clench together, around Mav, who is holding me up, and he smacks the water, splashing it on my face.

I throw my head back and laugh harder, my elbows propped up on the cement ledge of the pool.

"Don't look at him like that and don't squeeze me, you sick fuck," Mav says, and Ezra only laughs harder.

I hear a girl shriek from the shallow end. I have no idea who all is here, but I know my son is safe, on the fourth floor with Brooklin, and I can swipe up my phone from the pool chair closest to me and check in on him and her anytime I want.

But the alcohol helped me relax, just like Lucifer wanted it to.

Except he's not here right now. He had a call, he said. Something he had to do. Then he promised he'd check in on Rain again. This is my first time drinking anything since he was born, and my mind keeps flickering to him even as I try to forget everything for just this one night. Tomorrow, I'll confront Lucifer about Liar's Island. Ask him how Sevryn would know any of this. Tomorrow, tomorrow, *tomorrow*.

Mav grabs me from under my arms, sliding me down into the heated water, my elbows slipping from the ledge.

Panic seizes me as I claw at his arms, feeling the flex of hard muscle beneath his tight skin. I'm a good swimmer but I'm buzzing, and my limbs feel sluggish. "Hey, don't let me—"

"Chill," he says, his baby blue eyes connecting with mine as he holds me in the water, my legs slipped from around his waist.

Maybe that's why he moved us. Maybe we were making a spectacle of ourselves.

“I’ve got you, all right, Angel?” He sinks down in the water, holding me with one arm around my shoulders, swimming us to the middle of the pool, where my toes graze the bottom.

Ezra slips into the water, ducking his head as he swims like an athlete to where we are. I’m on my feet, but Mav’s hand is still on my waist, and soon, Ezra’s arm touches mine, the three of us forming some kind of drunken circle in the water.

“Why did you say that to Ella?” I hiccup after I ask, covering my mouth with the back of my hand. Everything around me kind of blurs. The dim purple lights, the pulsing bass of music coming from hidden speakers. The people talking and laughing and drinking. I have a weird pang of missing Lucifer. Of feeling unsteady without him.

Maverick turns his head. I see his jaw clench and his fingertips dig deep into my waist. “We’re not talking about her, Sid.”

I think of her upstairs. How willing she was to help me. But I wonder if it was all born from guilt of some kind. I can’t help feeling as if something is going on with her and Lucifer, maybe some secret they’re sharing, the way he avoids her eyes when we’re together. But she was nice to me up there. I should return the favor. Even still, my mouth disagrees and I kind of loathe myself even as I ask, “Why don’t you just break up with her? If you’re going to talk to her like that?”

“Did you not hear what I said? Why don’t you just shut the fuck up?” Maverick glares at me. “Or do you not recall what I did for her last night?”

“But you’re here right now, with me instead. You embarrassed her. Sometimes I wonder if you even love her.”

Maverick doesn’t say anything to that. He just stares at me like he wants to murder me.

Ezra groans at my side, then he slips his arm around my shoulders. We're all pressed together, slippery and wet and too close in the water. "Why you gotta do that, Sid?"

I turn to look up at him, and I'm thinking about his mom and the kidnapping and all that shit and all I can blurt out is, "What happened to your mom? Did RC find out?"

It's Maverick's turn to groan. "You're too drunk," he says. "Not fun drunk. Meddling, annoying as shit drunk."

I smile despite the look that crosses Ezra's face. He glances above me a moment, then he just shakes his head and says, "Don't worry about it."

I blink, leaning into him. "Fine."

"Fine," he mimics me, his full lips curving up into a smile. He's fucking hot, and with the stark muscles around his chest visible, his clavicle, the strong column of his throat, and those long, black lashes, I kinda wanna reach up and touch his face but— "Don't give me that look, Lilith." He calls me by Lucifer's nickname for me and it makes me suck in air, holding it tight in my chest, the same feeling I had when Cain did it. "You're one girl I *cannot* fuck with." He scrubs his hand over his face, his arm still around me, and Maverick slides his palm up my side, until his arm is over me too, and we really are a small circle, alone here in the water.

"No," Mav says quietly. "You can't. You've already got one of my sisters."

My pulse quickens as I turn my head to look up at him. Always there. Always watching over me. *My angel, just as much as I'm his.* His eyes are red, a little unfocused, and I know we're all fucked up, but I kind of don't care. His gaze dips to my mouth, and Ezra grabs my face, gently, but he steers me to look at him all the same.

"Yeah, and don't make me make it two. She's off limits for you."

Maverick scoffs. "I don't want her like that. That's all for Luce, anyway."

I think of Lucifer. Demon blue eyes. Hands and teeth all over me. *My husband*. I clear my throat as Ezra's thumb comes over my bottom lip, tugging it down a little. I'm overshadowed by both of them, tiny in the wake of them, but I feel strong, and safe. And yet, I also ache for Lucifer.

These men are his brothers.

Maybe he was okay with sharing me before, at Ignis, but again? I don't think so.

"Where is Sevryn?" I ask, trying to divert my own focus from the warmth in my low belly. He disappeared after he gave me the papers.

Ezra doesn't drop his hand or move his finger from my bottom lip. His eyes stay on my mouth when he speaks. "If he's smart, he's hiding upstairs. Maybe Atlas showed him where he'd be safe."

I glance at the blue water between my hips and Ezra's abs. "Why do you think he's really staying with us? Why is he here?"

"Fuck, Angel, you don't ask Lucifer these questions?" Mav asks, his fingertips dancing along the back of my neck, but there's true annoyance in his words.

I lift my head to look up at him. "Shut up. You think he actually answers me?"

He squeezes the back of my neck. "Watch your fucking mouth." But he's smiling as he speaks. "Sevryn's being inducted into a cult, so he's gotta learn."

"But why? How often do you have initiates? Why is he here... all of a sudden? And why does he leave on Halloween? Is he spying on us? Is this some strange test?" *Did he ever go to Liar's Island?*

Maverick studies me for a while.

My face burns under his gaze, and Ezra's body pressed up against mine. Someone screams a playful sound in the background of what's happening between the three of us, but I ignore all of it as Mav looks at me.

“He’s kinda hot.” The words tumble out of my mouth without warning, and I’m grinning, laughing at myself so hard my cheeks hurt.

Ezra sighs. “You are such a whore.” But he hugs me closer to his chest with the words, and they don’t hurt.

Maverick’s eyes though, they’re narrowed on me.

I can’t look away. It’s like I’m trapped when he looks at me like this, like he can see through all the flippant remarks and flirty gestures I make to protect myself.

“Don’t touch him.” Maverick speaks quietly, dipping his head so he’s right in front of my face. “Don’t, Sid.”

I don’t say anything, but I guess he just... knows me.

“He’s off limits.”

“Because Lucifer will kill him?” I smirk as I ask the question.

He arches a brow, the tattoo beside his eye rising up as he does. “He’s gonna kill me and Ez too, when he walks out those gym doors.” He doesn’t look toward them, but my stomach swoops, imagining my husband seeing *this*. I like it though. *I like when he’s fucking jealous.* “But no.” He smiles, dimples flashing in his tan skin. “Because I will.”

Ezra laughs. “How about don’t fuck ‘em because you’re related?”

I can’t stop my stupid smile as I place my hand on Ezra’s broad chest. “But *we’re* not.”

He narrows his eyes. “Don’t tempt me, baby girl.”

I swallow the knot of lust in my throat.

Ezra clears his, gently circling my wrist and pulling my hand off him.

“Why was our dad such a whore?” I mutter, lifting my gaze to Maverick.

A shadow crosses his face. “Fuck him.”

“Why do you always have to be the main fucking attraction at the goddamn circus?” Lucifer’s growly voice follows the sharp *splash* behind me.

His fingers come to my arm, yanking me backward, away from Ezra and Mav. He wraps his arm around my chest, holding me close, his other hand coming to my hip, clamping tight around my skin under the water.

Ezra and Maverick look up, watching him with matching smirks on their faces. "You leave the toys lying around..." Ezra lifts one shoulder in a lazy shrug. "Well, they're gonna get played with."

"She's not a fucking toy. She's a *prize*." Lucifer's lips dip down to my ear. "I'm tired of your shit, you know that?"

I roll my eyes, watching Maverick watching us. "You're always tired of me."

"That's not what I said." Lucifer's rasp has razor-sharp butterflies flipping in my belly. So does his arm banded over my breasts, covering me from everyone else. "I'm tired of the games you play. You want me to be jealous?"

Yes. I don't say anything.

"I want to kill both of them, and I want to fuck you in their blood, you get that?"

I clench my teeth together to stop from smiling. But he grabs my face, turning my head so I'm looking up at him.

His blue eyes are livid on mine. "We're getting out of the fucking pool." He's gripping my mouth so hard, my lips press together.

"I like it in here," I say, my words slurred from the way he's holding me, and maybe the alcohol in my system too.

Ezra laughs, and Lucifer lifts his gaze to his. "You keep laughing, I'll *kill* your fucking mom, all right?"

Ezra stops laughing.

Lucifer dips his eyes to mine. "*Now*." Then he releases my face, grabs my wrist, and starts dragging me toward the stairs on the shallow end. I glance at Maverick, smiling a little, but he's not. He shakes his head once, as if he's warning me, which kind of pisses me off.

But I go with Lucifer, the two of us cutting through the water. People part for us, staring, laughing behind their

fingers. One girl is obnoxiously loud as she giggles and points at us, and Lucifer stops when his fingers close along the metal railing that bisects the steps of the pool.

He twists his head, turning to stare at her. I don't even know why she's here, if we're *hiding*, but I guess the Unsaints do like their distractions.

Her laughter dies off, and it seems like silence echoes around the pool room. I can't even hear the music as I look from Lucifer, to the girl with dark brown hair piled into a bun, and back again.

"You can get the fuck out of my house." He looks up, and I see a guy with a gun on his hip, dressed all in black—a guard—nod once, and walk to the edge of the pool.

"*Shit.*" One of the girl's friends whispers the word, but I don't see what happens next because Lucifer is picking me up, one hand under my knee, the other around my shoulders as he cradles me to his bare chest, water slicing down both of us.

I wrap my arms around his neck, indifferent to people looking at us as I stare up at him.

He glances at me, and I know he fights it, but there's the smallest smirk on his pretty mouth. He shakes his head once, his eyes flicking upward, toward the gym. "You're gonna be the fucking death of me, Lilith."

"Is Rain okay?" I ask the question because my phone is still at the pool.

Lucifer leans against the couch in the small lounge-like room he took us to, cigarette between his lips, his blue eyes on mine. I've got his hoodie on, only my bikini on my lower half as I sit across from him, but on the floor, a low table between us.

I reach for the shot he poured me. There're bottles of liquor and mixers on the table, and the lighting is purple

here. It dances over Lucifer's cheekbones, and he looks so hot, I have to cross my legs and squeeze my thighs together so I don't jump over the table to get to him.

He pulls the cigarette from his lips, tipping his chin up and exhaling through his nose. I rake my gaze over the column of his throat, the blue vein there beneath his skeleton bandana.

My fingers curl tighter around the shot and I take it, no longer feeling the burn. I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth as I set the glass down.

"Yeah, he's good, baby." Lucifer tips his chin to stare at me once more, and it almost feels like the first night we met all over again, except I don't want to die tonight. Tingles run through me even as my head spins from the alcohol.

I reach for the half-empty bottle of vodka, but Lucifer shakes his head, then pushes a sealed water bottle toward me.

I grasp it between my fingers and the cool plastic feels good against my skin. I lean back on the couch behind me, Lucifer's hoodie pulled down below my ass so the marble floor is a little cushioned beneath me.

I crack the seal on the water bottle and tip it up to my lips.

"You think I'll ever be any good at this?" he whispers as I drink, the plastic crinkling beneath my fingers.

Frowning, I lower the bottle to my lap, pressing it against the hoodie so it doesn't touch my skin. "At what, baby?"

I hear the door creak open, music thudding from the pool room, and when I glance over, I watch Maverick walk in, pushing his head through his white hoodie as he pulls it on, his hair wet. He's still in his swim trunks. Black, with a single blue skull on one thigh.

"Being a dad." Lucifer's words catch my attention as Mav smirks at me and the door closes behind him, the

sounds of the party muted with it.

Maverick comes closer, and my eyes find my husband's.

"You're a really good dad," I whisper, and I mean it, even as I sway a little as Maverick comes to take a seat beside me, earning a glare from my husband.

Mav bends his knees, nudging me with his shoulder. The scent of him—chlorine from the pool, leather, marijuana—it's comforting as I turn to look at him, smiling a little.

"Tell him." My words are kind of slurred. I think of the papers I tucked away upstairs, Samson's photos and posts. The ways I meant what I told Ella. Lucifer would never let anything happen to Rain. It's why all of that talk can wait until tomorrow. "Tell him he's a good dad."

Maverick's baby blue eyes seem to search mine and I feel a yearning under my skin for him to speak before Lucifer doubts himself, but I hold on tight to my water bottle and fight it.

"You're the best dad any of us have ever had, that's for fucking sure." He turns to look at his brother as he says it.

Lucifer's head is still tipped back, the cigarette pinched between his index finger and his thumb, but he stares at Maverick, and I see his lips twitch, not like he's going to smile. "I'm not sure that's any better." He swallows, then pulls from the cigarette.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You know you're good." Maverick's words are serious. He turns to look at me, baby blue eyes on mine. "Take a shot with me."

"You don't even like to drink."

"I do tonight." He leans over, pulling another shot glass next to my used one, then he tips vodka all the way to the top, some seeping off the sides. He pushes mine toward me, extends his legs under the table as he grabs his between tattooed fingers.

He turns to me and I pluck mine up, spilling vodka everywhere, but I don't care.

"Cheers. To Lucifer being a good dad." He smirks.

“And my wife being a fucking MILF,” Lucifer adds, even though he isn’t drinking at all.

I almost snort through my nose, but I just tap my shot glass to Mayhem’s and together, we drink. It actually tastes good, which is probably a bad sign.

“Where’s Ella?” I ask quietly for the second time tonight, my words slurred. I set my glass down as he does, and he pours me another, Lucifer watching us carefully.

“Stop.”

“No,” I protest, feeling brave and talkative now that I’m buzzing. “What’s going on with you two?”

Maverick stares down at the table. I remember how he lost himself last night, his fists flying. The blaze from the car warms across my mind. “I should have never brought her into this life. She would’ve found someone far better than this.”

My throat feels tight with his answer. I don’t know what to say, but before I can think of anything, he speaks again.

“God, she’s so fucking jealous of you.” The words seem to come from nowhere, then again, watching Maverick toast me once more, vodka spilling everywhere, I guess we’re just that fucked up. He shoots the alcohol back, and I follow.

I glance at Lucifer, lazy trails of smoke swirling around him as he keeps his eyes on us.

“She thinks since Rain was born, you and I have only gotten closer.” Maverick sets his glass down, but he’s so drunk, it falls over, rolling until it clinks against the bottle of vodka.

He slouches down, then wraps his arm around me, pulling me to him. Everything is a little wavy around me, and I let my eyes flutter closed, but I hold on tight to my shot glass.

“She says I look at you like...”

I hold my breath, knowing Lucifer is watching.

Mav drops his mouth to my ear, and the little hairs along the back of my neck stand on end as he speaks. "Like I want to fuck you." He articulates each word carefully.

Lucifer doesn't say anything. I crack open one eye and see his demon blues staring back at me.

My stomach swoops as Maverick cuddles me closer, until I'm half on him, one leg wrapped over his.

"What do you tell her?" My voice sounds raw. My mind is spinning, but I don't stop staring at my husband.

Maverick is quiet a long moment. I watch Lucifer pull his phone from his pants pocket. He does something on the screen, and music starts to play in here before he puts his phone back, eyes never leaving mine. "3 AM" by Kamiyada+. We listen to this song together a lot.

"I deny it." The words from Mav sound rough as he pulls back, staring down at me with glassy eyes. I have one hand on his chest, the other holding my glass, and he puts his palm on my bare thigh.

My nipples tighten, my heart racing.

I feel Lucifer glaring.

"Is it a lie?" I shouldn't press. I should leave it alone. Whatever is between Maverick and I, it's been there since the beginning. He was always watching me, and not just when we met as adults.

Before that... as my... *angel*. Obviously, we had no idea what we were to each other, not really, or we wouldn't have... done what we did. But we weren't officially introduced until that night on Lover's Death, and the year after, and it can be sick and disturbing, but we didn't grow up knowing we are... what we are, to each other.

"No." I hear him swallow, his eyes still on mine. Despite his denial, there's something he isn't saying. I don't really think it has anything to do with *me*, so much as with *her*.

"Why are you with her?" I don't ask the question with bite. I don't want to be with him instead. Aside from the very obvious reason why we can't, we aren't in love with

one another. There's a closeness, maybe coming from sharing fucked-up childhoods because of the same person. Maybe our souls latched onto each other. But no matter how much I tried to run, I never got Lucifer out of my head.

If Jeremiah couldn't sway me, Maverick never could. I will never leave Lucifer again. Jeremiah will never come back. I don't let myself think of it now though. It still hurts.

"I don't know." Maverick answers with regret. It's thick in his words, each one slow. "I adore her. She is the reprieve I need. I'm in love with her, and I want to protect her from everything, but the only way I can do that is by leaving her. And I can't let her go."

I hike my leg up higher around his, so his knee is between my thighs. I glance at Lucifer. His mouth closed, smoke trails from his nostrils. A twisted smile pulls on his lips, and he slips something else from his pocket.

I'm distracted from what it is when Maverick makes a strangled noise, then whispers my name. "*Sid.*"

I twist in his arms, resting my head against his chest as I bury myself in his scent. "I know why else you're with her." My lips are smushed against his hoodie, his arms pulled close around me, hands resting on my low spine.

He laughs, the boyish sound I love. One full of deceit because Maverick is a demon too. But he doesn't let those around him burn. Doesn't let anything wicked touch us, as much as he can shield us. And he's conflicted with Ella because it's *him* putting her in the line of fire. At least with me, it isn't his choice. "Why's that, Angel?"

"She sees it." I'm barely whispering the words, but I tilt my head up, my chin pressed against his chest.

He dips his head, his eyes meeting mine. Such a pale blue. A fucking angel, if there ever was one among us. Angels can be demons too. That's usually how they start out. "Sees what?"

"Dark and light. You're both. Protector and tormentor." Surprising me, he doesn't smile, so I keep talking, speaking

only for him as my husband pushes liquor bottles aside while he moves closer to the table. "She needs control to feel love. You need to be controlling to give it. You punish her if she gets out of line." A small smirk pulls at his lips, a brow lifting, but I keep talking. "But you'd do anything for her, and it makes her feel safe. You'd do anything for us too, and she knows it, and it kind of...eats at her."

His smile falters. "I will always protect her but I will never *not* look out for you too. I don't care how anyone feels about it." There's an anger beneath his words.

I press closer to him. "I know." I mean it. "But she's never had anyone to call her own. Not her mother, no dad, moving as much as they did, no friends." I don't know why I'm defending her. But maybe it's because of how eager she was to help me. To help Rain. And I *know* she loves Maverick. No one would put up with the shit we deal with, being women among the 6, if there wasn't love there. Money, prestige, luxury. Sure, they're all wins, and for a poor girl from a trailer park, it could be the good life.

But I know better.

It isn't.

"She isn't mad you love us." *Maybe, a little*, but I don't say that. "She's scared we're going to take you away from her." My mind goes to my husband. To *Ella*. Ophelia. Julie. Even Finn. Maverick, sometimes. All the women who stare at Lucifer like he's Satan's gift to earth.

Jealousy. It comes to life inside my veins. I think of Nikita, even, pre-burnt corpse. Coke. Drugs. All the things that could wreck my marriage.

Mav must see something spark in my face. Or maybe it's more like a shadow. He presses a kiss to my forehead, and I love the feel of it.

"She's right." Lucifer's throaty voice.

Both Mav and I pull back, but we still hold onto each other.

My mouth goes dry when I see what he's holding. A rolled up hundred, a line of coke on the black table, amongst all the bottles of liquor, soda, water.

"Now that we've got it out of the way, all the ways Ella loves you and you her, you two fucking sit there and watch me get high." His words are cold, and my pulse beats too fast in my chest.

"Bro." The word is slurred from Mav, and I'm seeing double of Luce and the coke and how he's leaning down, pushing the hundred up his nose. "Don't—"

But it's too late. Lucifer sniffs, turning his head and making the white line disappear. He drops the hundred, leaning back into the couch, his chin tilted up, a smile on his lips. "God, I missed that shit." Then his eyes come back to me. "Get your sexy ass over here, baby girl."

Maverick stands, unsteady, then he leans down and before I can say or do anything, he scoops me up, my world tilting.

"Put her the fuck down," Lucifer says, his voice rough.

Maverick laughs, but he's walking toward his brother, and slowly, he sets me in his lap. I wrap my arms around Lucifer's neck, knowing I should be more upset about the coke, but I'm so drunk, my whole fucking face is numb.

Maverick stares at Lucifer, his lips inches from my husband's. "Give me the rest."

"You sit over there, and you put your hands on my wife, you think you can tell me what the fuck to do? I don't think so." Even with his words, Lucifer holds me close to his chest, and I bury my face against him.

"I love you," I mutter, the words floating. "I don't love him like I love you." I know I'm not making much sense, but it's true. It's so true. "You're my whole life too." I repeat those words he spoke to me, so sweet.

There's a pause. Then Mav says, "Don't fuck this up. Give me the rest."

"You love me, baby girl?" Lucifer's voice is low.

“Yes.” I smile against his chest. “Yes.”

“Good. Now fuck off, Maverick, so I can fuck my—”

Lucifer’s body jolts, and my eyes pop open as I pick my head up, feeling woozy. Maverick is gripping Lucifer’s face, hard in his hand.

“You can fuck your wife with all that blow in your system, but right now, *you’re giving me the rest of it.*”

“You weren’t so concerned about me while you were over there touching her—”

Maverick tips his chin up. A second passes, their faces so close together. Then Mav tilts his head, running his bottom lip over Lucifer’s. Lucifer’s mouth opens and Mav scrapes his teeth against his lips.

“*Please,*” he whispers, the word slurred.

Slowly, as Maverick loosens his grip, Lucifer turns to me. “What should I do, baby girl? Or are you too fucked up to decide?”

“Give it to him.” My heart is pounding so fucking hard, watching them kiss. “*Give it to him.*”

Lucifer’s lips tip into a smile, but he nods, then, keeping one arm around my back, he pushes his hand into his pocket and pulls out a baggie. I don’t know where he got it, and right now, I don’t ask as he slaps it into Maverick’s hand.

Maverick nods, but before he can move, Lucifer is twisting his body, pushing me to the floor.

I gasp as he widens my knees, then pushes down his sweats, his swim trunks underneath. He fists his hard cock, pushing into me without words after he shoves my swimsuit aside, his forearm coming beside my head, his other hand to my brow.

“You too drunk for me to fuck you?” he whispers, stretching me as he pumps his hips, his breath over my lips. His pupils are wide, and I should feel sad, but I wrap my arms around him, arching my own hips up, fucking him back.

“It’s how we started, isn’t it?” I smile up at him. “I’m never too drunk for you.”

His mouth slants over mine. He bites my bottom lip, and I hold him tighter as I feel a hand on my knee, widening me more.

My core heats, and Lucifer fucks me hard, kissing me, sucking on my tongue.

“Never, huh? I can fuck you anytime I want? Even with Maverick watching?”

I think for a second it’s Maverick’s fingers dancing over my knee and my body shivers.

“Anytime you want,” I repeat, holding on tight to my husband, balling my hands into his shirt, feeling the muscles in his back flex. “I’m all yours.”

He grips my jaw, turning my head and sucking on my neck.

Phantom fingers dance higher up my thigh and I suck in a breath, tightening around Lucifer’s cock.

“Yeah,” my husband whispers in my ear. “*You are.*” Then he plants both hands beside my body and the fingers along my knee disappear. When Lucifer pulls back, sliding onto his belly, dipping his head between my thighs, I blink in the room.

No one is there.

Maverick is gone.

Lucifer pulls my bikini aside with his teeth, holds it there with one hand, the other keeping me spread for him as his eyes meet mine. His tongue dances over my clit, then he opens his mouth wide, tasting all of me.

A whimper leaves my lips as my fingers twist in his hair, my back arching off the floor.

“You’re never going to be *his* again.” He speaks the words against my clit, his warm breath causing me to tremble as I lower my eyes to his. “You’re never going to be *Jere-fucking-miah’s.*” There’s venom in his words as my body tenses. I don’t know why he brings J up now, except

maybe... I wouldn't be surprised if Jeremiah threatened him never to do coke again. My heart kind of aches, thinking of it. "I will drag you to hell myself if I have to so we're never apart. We rule it together, and *no one* is beside us." Then he thrusts his tongue into my hole, and I grip his curls tighter, my eyes closed and visions of Lucifer and I watching hell burn around us dancing through my head.

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MONDAY, OCTOBER 15
LIBER

HIS TONGUE SLIPS into my mouth, and he tastes so *good*. But Maverick tastes better, and the drug must not be working its way through my system enough yet because regret seizes me like a fist.

“No,” I whisper, my hands coming to his chest, pushing him away even as he crowds me against the door. “This is wrong,” I say over his lips. “We can’t do this.”

He doesn’t move at first, staring down at me as his chest heaves beneath my palms. For one wild, corrupted second, I wonder if he’ll force me.

I wonder if he’s even worse than what I’ve seen him slowly start to become. Maybe he only just recently slipped up the mask for me instead of showing his true face.

His arms cage me in, his hand no longer down my pants, and his eyes trap me beneath his gaze like he’s deciding at

this moment how far he wants to take this. But I know Atlas, don't I? Pieces of him, anyway. He isn't as dark as his brothers, not truly, *is he?*

But as he studies me, I find I don't know the answer to that question at all.

"Atlas," I whisper, staring up at him. "We can't do this."

"Aren't you doing enough behind his back?" He jerks his chin. "What's this one more thing matter? Or you don't think I've done enough for you?" His words are a low snarl.

"Stop." I whisper it with venom, masking my fear. "*Now.*"

He smiles, a wicked thing. But then he nods slowly and says, "Sure." He slides his palms along the door, a screeching sound that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. Even still, he backs up. One step. Two. His hands are by his sides and although I can see his erection straining against his sweats, he keeps walking backward, giving me room to breathe.

To think.

When he's far enough away, I stagger forward with my pants still undone, wanting to sit down somewhere. To collapse into a ball and feel all these emotions threatening to burst inside of me.

Why did Mavy push me away? Why is he so comfortable with Sid but he doesn't feel the same with me? What can I do to change it? How can I make him see all that I would give up for him? All I already have?

My shoulder collides with the wall as my feet nearly trip over themselves and panic sets in for a wild second as my palms crash against the dark walls to keep myself upright. I slowly realize it's whatever Atlas "drugged" me with, and it's making my movements strange and sluggish. Like walking alone is trying to survive an obstacle course of sinking sand beneath my feet.

I close my eyes—aware Atlas is watching me carefully—and try to orient my brain. *I'm standing upright. I'm okay.*

I'm okay.

But when I blink open my eyes, attempting to squash my panic, Atlas is *right there*.

His hands come to my shoulders, his grip gentle as he steers my body, pushing me against the wall carefully. "Hey," he whispers, dipping his chin, his eyes locked on mine. "You're okay. Just breathe."

I realize his pupils look strange, and with the drug in my system, kind of like they're pulsing. Black dances along brown-blue.

A giggle escapes my lips, but I bite my bottom one, because I don't think I should be laughing right now. The gap between what I'm thinking and what my body decides to do is growing wider, deeper.

He strokes his fingers over my arms, smiling. "You good?" he whispers, turning into the boy I first spoke to at Rain's birthday party. The boy I saw kindness in. Someone to befriend me.

"What did you give me?" Speaking is like chewing cotton candy. The words seem to evaporate on my tongue.

He slants his head, his mouth close to mine. "Doesn't it feel good?"

I laugh again, and I think that's answer enough as his eyes warm, lighting up in the darkness of his room.

"Yeah," he whispers, his breath on my lips. "It feels good to be free, doesn't it, Ella?" He brushes his mouth over mine, a whisper of a kiss, and I try to find the tension, the regret, the denial on the tip of my tongue. But all that escapes me is a startled breath. He does the motion again, lips ghosting against mine. "It feels fun to not give a fuck, huh? And that's not so easy, for people like you and me. The problem is we care too much." His tongue is warm against the divot above my upper lip. "But you can care for me too."

I shake my head which is a mistake, because the walls seem to tilt, flexing like they're breathing around me.

“Atlas, I can’t. I *love* him.” I sound pathetic to my own ears. The drug hasn’t taken away my inhibitions completely, but I have to keep saying it anyway. I have to get him to understand. “I love him so much.” A whine, a childlike sound, my lips brushing Atlas’s.

“What does love have to do with escape? Your secrets stay in this room, like all the rest between us.” He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, gently, and I try to turn my head, but he bites down harder. My heart lurches in my chest. He’s manipulating me again, and some part of me wants him. Some base level of lust. He’s hot, and sometimes, he’s kind. He’s been a shelter, a rock. If it wouldn’t hurt Maverick, I would. *I would.*

And maybe more than that, if it was Mavy in a situation like this, *he would.*

“No, don’t look away from me, baby,” Atlas says quietly, licking my bottom lip. “Remember where Maverick is right now. Remember the girl he’s touching, because it isn’t you —”

Before he can finish the words, stabbing me in the heart, there’s a noise from outside the door, only feet from us.

Our eyes lock at the sound of the loud thud, startling us both to the point we freeze, my breath catching in a rush. Atlas’s pupils are expanding, blotting out the color of his irises. I don’t know if it’s because he’s horrified, or if the drugs are fucking with us both.

Another thud jolts me back to reality, pulls me from falling into what’s happening to his eyes right now.

My mouth goes dry as I slowly turn my head toward the door. My knees are shaky, and Atlas doesn’t release his grip on my shoulders, his body pressed to mine.

For a second, there’s nothing else. No other sound. For a wild moment, I wonder if we imagined it. A shared hallucination.

Then it comes back with a vengeance, a *splintering*, as the door knocks open, barely hanging onto its hinges when

it slaps the wall, a gust of cold air filtering in from the hallway.

A startled, breathy scream leaves my lips, my hands coming to cover my mouth of their own accord as my knees bend and I slide down a little on the wall, even with Atlas holding onto me.

Out of the darkness, from the shadows, Maverick walks in, filling up the doorway. He's in a white hoodie, black pants, black boots, slivers of wood scattered over the floor from where he kicked the door in.

My stomach lurches, like I might vomit. I press my fingertips tighter to my mouth, silencing myself, my thighs squeezing together so I don't pee.

It doesn't matter nothing happened. Not really. Atlas is holding onto me, cornering me with his body, and we're alone in his room. Plus my pants are unbuttoned, unzipped. *Shit.*

And I remember Mavy's warning, from before. About what he would do to me if I fucked him over. "*I don't want to say. You don't want to know.*" I recall the way he traced his fingers over my teeth, pressing against them. Fear is thick in the haze of my brain. For me, for Atlas too.

Maverick stares at me. Only me. We're clothed, and maybe that will count for something. The room seems to spin, and I don't know if it's because I'm *high*, or horrified.

My lungs squeeze as Maverick's wide lips flicker into a strange smile. He walks in through the door, then slams it closed behind him.

It shuts, but it's crooked on its hinges.

The scene reminds me of my old home. My life with mom. The slanted screen door that never hung right. The bizarre memory is temporary though, and when I blink, I'm not back there anymore.

Atlas's fingers flex against my skin, but he doesn't release me. He doesn't step back.

My body is hot and cold at once, my hands still covering my mouth. I don't know what to do. What to say.

But Maverick takes away all the indecision for me when he asks, so calmly, "Why did you stop?"

"Maverick." I whisper his name, dragging my fingertips down, toward my throat. I want Atlas to move but I don't dare look at him, like it'll be the wrong move if I do. I shake my head frantically, as if Mavy will understand what I'm thinking, he'll see nothing happened. "It's not... I didn't... We didn't do anything—"

"Oh?" He glances at Atlas, dropping his gaze. I follow it and I see the bulge in Atlas's pants, how much he wants me. Mavy flicks his pale blue eyes back to mine. "But his dick is so hard for you, pretty girl. Why would you let that go to waste?"

I hate the way the question sounds so genuine, like he's actually curious. "We didn't do anything," I repeat myself. "Nothing happened. You... You told me to go upstairs, and you *humiliated* me—"

"What did I tell you about humiliation, Ella?" His voice is a poisonous caress, so gentle and calm. He nods toward Atlas. "Go on. I want to see what you two were going to do up here all alone."

Atlas seems to catch his breath. Face his fear. Because he just *laughs*, like this is some kind of twisted family reunion and he's welcoming Maverick to the party. "I can keep going, if you want." Atlas doesn't sound nervous at all.

My eyes jump from him—staring at me—to Mavy, doing the same.

"Don't look so frightened," Maverick says, still smiling as he crosses his arms over his chest, like he has zero plans to go anywhere anytime soon. But there's something about his words. They're not quite clear. A little...slurred.

He steps closer, and I can see it in his eyes, bleary and ringed with shadows, worse than they were even at the

pool. He's so fucking high he almost stumbles into the bed, but he stops inches from it, staring at me.

"I killed for you. I'm not going to *kill you*." His nostrils flare as his smile widens, like he doesn't at all mean what he said. "Besides, it's not like this is my first time sharing you." His lips curl higher but his voice drops lower. "*Keep going. I want to see him touch you.*"

"No you don't," I counter, but it sounds weak. "You don't really... You wouldn't want someone else to touch me again. You don't want this."

He flashes white teeth as Atlas's fingers tighten around my shoulders. "But I do. And you give me what I want, don't you? *Exactly* what I fucking want. And right now, tonight, I want to see him make you come. Maybe once it's over with, it'll keep you two away from each other."

My heart palpitates, terror pricking at my drugged mind. "We were never... It's not like that—"

"Stop talking, Ella." He cuts his gaze to Atlas. "Go ahead, make her do anything you want." Another serpentine smile as he drums his tattooed fingers over his biceps. His blond hair is disheveled, dried kind of wavy from the pool. He looks so beautiful, but frightening too, in white. "I own her, I'll lease her out to you for tonight, as long as you treat her like a little whore."

Warmth flushes between my thighs the same way it does across my face, down my chest, up my arms. "Mavy—"

"*Shut the fuck up, Ella.*" He snaps his gaze to me, some of his calm slipping a little, but he doesn't raise his voice as his eyes widen. "You let him touch you, however the fuck he wants, or I'll throw you out *tonight*."

I shake my head. "You don't really want it. You're drunk." It's a lame excuse, because I'm fucked up too, we all are, and since when has that ever mattered to the Unsaints? "You don't want this." I say it again anyway, like if I keep repeating it, I'll dig into the part of Maverick I

want tonight. The part that's possessive and loves me so much it feels like a collar around my neck.

But that piece of him seems gone. His grin only curves higher. "Go ahead, Atlas." He slowly reaches behind him, one hand dropped by his side. Then he pulls out a gun from the waistband of his pants, his finger on the trigger.

The tension is thick in the room, making it hard to breathe. Atlas's grip tightens along my skin. I think even *he* is nervous now.

"*Taste her.*" Maverick keeps the gun by his side, but his finger doesn't leave the trigger. "Pay me back for the night I beat the fuck out of you for touching my little sister, you piece of shit."

"You're gonna regret those words." Atlas speaks calmly, braver than I would be if I were him. He turns to me, dipping his head and inhaling along the column of my throat as Maverick watches. His teeth prick against my neck, and I suck in air.

Mavy only smiles back at me as I stare at him over Atlas's shoulder.

"You're going to wish you'd let me knock Brooklin up and raise her baby so I could never put my hands all over your girl." Atlas pulls back, only to wrap both of his hands around my throat and squeeze.

Spots pop in front of my eyes as I slump further against the wall, my hands flying to his wrists. I try to remember my lessons, how to escape, and I know I should shoot for his face, or knee him in the groin, but my mind is moving slowly and part of me feels like this isn't real.

This can't be happening.

But before I can do more than dig my nails into Atlas's wrists as he smiles at me, Maverick closes the space between us and holds the gun to the crown of Atlas's head.

"Let go of her and get on your fucking knees."

Atlas's grip loosens, but he's still looking at me when he asks, "You sure you wanna watch this, Mav?"

I glance at the gun, the rectangular top body, the matte black color, Maverick's inked finger on the trigger. I know he's in control of himself, usually, but sometimes...he isn't. My chest heaves between me and Atlas and slowly I bring my gaze back to his.

Maverick laughs a little, a disturbing sound. He hikes up his elbow, the gun against Atlas's hat. "We're not negotiating." He leans in close, his lips caressing over Atlas's ear. "*Get on your fucking knees.*"

"Mavy—"

"Shut up, Ella." He doesn't look at me.

Atlas raises his hands up then, like in surrender. I watch the muscles in his biceps flex. A smirk hooks his mouth. "I think you should ask her for consent, don't you?" His voice slithers in the darkness of the room, the red lights pulsating faster as my high climbs.

I stare at Maverick. At his full lips, pressed together. His lean jawline. His throat, moving as he swallows, the ink there rolling too.

He takes a deep breath because I can see his chest expand beneath his white hoodie. For a second, crimson flashes in my brain, imprinting on the fabric. I blink, and it's clean again.

He taps the gun against Atlas's head. "Would you do anything for me, pretty girl?" he whispers, not looking at me. "Anything in the world?"

My mind flashes back to Emily Cemetery. On my knees in the chapel. The sting. The fire. Pain like I've never known. "Yes." It's true. I would.

Maverick's lips are inches from Atlas's ear. "That's her consent."

A knot forms in my throat, but when Atlas reaches for me, his fingers beneath my shirt, slipping down into the waistband of my jeans, I don't tell him to stop anymore.

I don't think I really wanted to. If Maverick got to have Ignis, I can have this.

My stomach muscles jump as Atlas leans in closer. He doesn't seem at all disturbed by the gun aimed at his head. At Maverick looming behind him.

But my eyes stay on my boyfriend as Atlas grabs between my thighs, then drags his finger over my clit, still not touching me skin-on-skin.

A soft moan leaves my lips, my hands fisted at my sides as I watch Maverick from beneath heavy lids.

"You are *so* wet," Atlas whispers into my mouth. His lips brush over mine, once, twice. Mav's jaw jumps, but he doesn't move.

"*Kiss me.*" Atlas does what he asks of me, and at first, I don't return it. I'm frozen, my knees feeling weak as I stare into Mav's baby blue eyes, lined with red.

But when he only curves a brow, as if to ask me what the fuck I'm doing, why I'm waiting, I lean in toward Atlas.

He smiles against my mouth, then our lips are moving together as one.

It feels like...*relief.*

And more than that, it doesn't feel like it does with Maverick. Here, with Atlas, it's like we're equals.

Elation bursts under my skin, something forbidden tempting me further and deeper into a hell I know I might regret when this night is over, no matter that Mav is "forcing" Atlas at gunpoint.

Atlas keeps rubbing over my clit, but through my underwear, and it almost feels better this way. Like we don't have much time. Like these stolen, drugged moments are so fleeting, we don't have the opportunity to remove our clothes.

His hand comes to my throat, knocking my head against the wall softly as I move my arms up and dig my fingertips into the back of his neck, all while keeping my eyes on Mav.

Atlas bites down on my bottom lip, rolling it out, just as he slips one finger beneath my underwear, but only for a

second, just teasing me with his cold fingers on my bare skin.

A moan leaves my lips and he laughs against my mouth, both of us *panting*. Even Maverick's chest is rising and falling faster than I've ever seen it.

"So *needy*, Ella." Atlas's eyes lock on mine as I dart my gaze to him, his pupils like saucers. I feel like mine could be too. Like I'm seeing *more*. Like... my eyes have grown bigger, somehow. The walls seem to shimmer behind him, tinged with red lights. "I like that about you," he whispers, swiping his thumb beneath my soaked underwear again, but only teasing me with it, then grinding his fingertips against my clit, over the cotton. "Always so fucking *desperate* for *anything*."

I whimper as my cheeks flush hot, darting a shy glance to Mav, but I like how he speaks to me. His fingers tighten on my throat, tilting my chin up. He dives his head down, angling it so his hat doesn't hit against me, and he's biting my neck.

Pleasure swells inside of me, and I *achingly* want him.

Besides, he hasn't done what Mav said yet.

He hasn't gotten on his knees for me.

"Finger me," I whisper, begging, feeling out of my head now. "Please." I suck in a breath as he trails two fingers over my slit, pushing up against my hole, but still with the underwear between us. Like he's stuffing the cotton *inside* me. *Oh my God*.

"Yeah? Like this?" he teases, speaking against my throat, his fingertips pressed sharply on my jawline.

I widen my thighs and he laughs, then nips me again as my arms tighten around his neck and I look at Maverick, who's smile is smug. Atlas moves his hand from me, but only to shove down my jeans with the heel of his hand, to get better access. My pants slip to my hips.

Atlas touches me again, moving faster and pushing further inside me, burying more cotton in my pussy,

fingering me with the barrier between us, and it feels so *good*. There's something illicit about it too, besides the obvious. Like I'm so dirty he doesn't want to *really* touch me.

"You want me to be mean to you? Or nice? Which version do you want of me tonight?"

I don't hesitate to say it, what I'm used to. What I want. And I keep my gaze locked with Mavy's when I say, "*Mean.*" The word is barely a pant from my lips.

The smile slowly falters from Maverick's face, but he keeps the gun trained at Atlas's brain, unmoving.

Atlas laughs, still pushing my underwear into me. "God, you're soaking through it, you dirty little bitch."

A vein ticks in Mav's neck, but he doesn't speak.

The words feel good, familiar. I clench my muscles and Atlas licks a line up my throat.

"Yeah? You like to be treated like shit, huh?" He pulls back, gazing down at me, his lips swollen from kissing on my neck. He doesn't acknowledge Mav at all. "You are fucking *pathetic*." He keeps pumping two of his fingers inside of me, his thumb circling my clit, all overtop my underwear. "A gorgeous little whore." He laughs, and it's so light, it's a mindfuck with the words he speaks. "Weak and dirty and sloppy and just a tight little hole for me to use, huh, baby?" He doesn't release my throat as he works me over, driving me closer and closer. I stand on my tiptoes, angling my hips, wanting more of him as I stare into my boyfriend's eyes.

Atlas scoffs, shaking his head as he looks down at what he's doing to me. "You are disgusting."

With both of their eyes on me, Atlas touching me, Mav pretending to force him, *I'm so close, so close, so close*.

His eyes drag up to mine, and he tilts my head, yanking it to the side like I'm just a doll for him to play with. "But goddamn, if you aren't fucking hot like this. A messy little slut."

Then, without warning, he releases me, and just like Maverick told him to initially, *he drops down to his knees.*

Maverick blinks, his nostrils flare as he steps back, still aiming the gun to Atlas with one hand, but he's not holding it directly to his head anymore.

My lips are parted as I try to breathe, to get his attention, but Mav's eyes are glued to Atlas kneeling.

Atlas has still got his hand between my thighs, but he uses his other to spread them wider, twisting one painfully away from the other.

He pulls his fingers from inside of me, then grabs my pussy.

I yelp, looking down, and he shakes his head, looking up at me from under the brim of his hat. "Cover your mouth, Ella."

I swallow thickly, but I do as he said, covering my mouth with one hand.

He breathes a laugh, and I feel it on my inner thigh, my body wound up tight, desperate for release. "Both hands. Whores need two to keep their screams in."

My stomach drops, and I lift both hands tight to my mouth as I raise my eyes to Mav. His eyes are wide, his mouth narrowed, but he's staring at the back of Atlas's head.

"Tighter," Atlas says, and I dig my fingers into my cheekbones.

He shakes his head, pinching my pussy lips through my panties. "*Tighter.*"

Mav sucks in a breath, his teeth clenched.

I do as Atlas commands, hurting myself as hard as I'm gripping my face. Everything is throbbing with light in here, and I hear a song that I recognize. "GauzeValley" by KAMAARA. It's like it suddenly got loud, but I don't know if anything really changed. I don't know if it was playing all along.

“There you go,” Atlas whispers, and his eyes are so vivid, the dark ring of brown and blue around his blown pupil.

His jawline is sharp as he stares up at me, his lips curved into a smile. He moves his hands from me and I almost whimper with the loss of him, but I watch as he reaches for the brim of his hat.

My knees feel weak.

Keeping his gaze locked on mine, he spins his hat around so it's backward, and I see his blond curls.

“You don't deserve this,” he whispers, leaning in close to me, his nose pressed to the fabric of my underwear. His hands come to my thighs, squeezing, and he runs his nose up my slit, then stares right at me. “But I want to taste just how fucking pathetic you are.”

Without another word, he nudges his nose against the edge of my underwear, and he's pressing his tongue flat to my slit, parting my lips.

His mouth is so *warm*, and his face is perfect between my thighs. I moan and it's loud, even beneath both of my hands clamped over my mouth.

His eyes stay on mine as he drops his nose again, circling it over my bare clit, using one of his hands to hold back my underwear. “Hmmm,” he groans, like this feels good to him too. He drags his hand up my thigh, then taunts my hole with two fingers, all while licking at my clit, watching me. Then he lifts one of my legs up, pulling my jeans off my ankle and my boot hits the floor as it falls, my calf over his shoulder, foot dangling behind his back. I have to slump against the wall to keep myself upright, but the repositioning exposes me more to him, and my breaths turn to shallow pants as I moan.

I feel dizzy and high and desperate, all at once.

He plays with my entrance, and when he speaks, I feel it against my pussy. “*Beg me, little bitch.*”

I keep my hands over my mouth as he toys with me, my eyes drifting to Maverick.

When I don't speak, giving into Atlas's command, Mav raises the gun.

He aims it at me. Between my eyes.

A cold smile graces his lips.

I know he would never really shoot me, his finger is no longer on the trigger and it's all for play, it's all a *game*, but the fear causes my lust to rise.

"You heard him," Mav whispers. "*Beg him, little bitch.*" He repeats the words with a cruel sort of humor.

A gasp leaves my lips. "Please, Atlas."

Atlas nips at my clit. "Do better," he says against me. "Suck less."

Lust goes haywire under my fucking skin. *Suck less?* God, why is that hot? "Please," I moan again as he teases me with two fingers, flicking my clit with his tongue. "I need it. *I need you, so much.*" But I'm staring at Mav as I plead, and he gives me the smallest of nods, as if to tell me I did the right thing.

Atlas pushes into me then, no more teasing, all the way to his knuckles, twisting and turning inside my wet pussy. He sucks on my clit, then licks, then scrapes his teeth against me, all while he finger fucks me hard enough to hit my head against the wall, my nails digging into my cheeks to stop from screaming.

Then I'm there. *I'm there.*

Rising, rising, rising. I can't keep my hands on my mouth as my belly pools with warmth, my thighs shaking. I reach for his shoulders, gripping him tight to steady myself, and he doesn't stop me. Instead, he pushes another finger in, so he has three inside of me as he fingers me, still teasing my clit. Then he presses his tongue flat, licking all of me, his own fingers too, before he's using his nose to circle my clit.

“Atlas,” I whisper. “Atlas, *Atlas*.” His name gets louder, and I feel the muscles in his shoulders flex beneath my fingers, under my calf. My eyes are closed, but color pops behind my lids, and I’m sagging against the wall as I gush all over his fingers, and he sucks my clit until the feeling has crested and the name leaving my lips isn’t his anymore.

“*Mavy, Mavy, Mavy—*”

A hand comes to my throat, yanking me from the wall, my leg sliding from his shoulder.

My eyes fly open as I grip his upper arms tight, his lips glistening with me, backward hat still on as he shoves me back, back, back, and I’m trying not to trip over my jeans, still on one ankle, and my heart is beating a mile a fucking minute. We go further into the darkness as Maverick follows slowly, the gun still aimed, and I see red lights strung up around Atlas’s room as he presses his thumb to the hollow of my throat, his eyes narrowed on mine. A bedroom flares open past the short hallway, then he shoves me backward, and I fall, landing on a soft bed.

“I’m *not* him,” he snarls as I lean up on my elbows, trying to breathe. To think. My underwear is all askew, one boot still on. I dart my gaze to Maverick, but he just watches, staring between my thighs, completely silent. The arm he’s holding the gun with is steady. He isn’t shaking like I seem to be all over.

Atlas leans down, grabbing my ankles, then he props them on his strong thigh, pulling off my shoe, then my socks, running his fingers over the arch of my soles. It feels so good, I groan, and everything is *moving* in this room, even though it’s not...really.

Right?

I don’t know anymore.

He strips off my jeans, tossing them on the floor alongside my shoes and socks. Then he parts my knees, stepping between my thighs, my ass at the edge of the bed.

“Atlas—”

“You’re not done. You need to take care of me now, baby.”

My lips are parted, my breath leaving me in pants. I fist the soft, burgundy sheets. I notice there’s a painting on the wall behind him, over Mav’s head, something dark, like the entrance of a cathedral in the night. The wallpaper is red, a damask pattern.

He steps closer, hands still gripping my knees.

“*Sit up.*” The words are vicious, and his eyes are night dark. I don’t see any more of the soft boy I thought I knew, just the monster he’s been slowly turning into. Blond curls loop into soft circles over his brows, and his lips are plush and more red than pink from working me over, and even still he is diabolical.

I sit up slowly and he releases me only to take off his hoodie, then pull his shirt off one handed, dropping it to the floor.

Maverick tilts his head, carefully observing, like he’s watching a film he’s going to write a critique of.

A gasp leaves my lips, taking in Atlas’s clear skin, defined abs, the Unsainted brand across his chest, firm and muscular and fucking *beautiful*. But I see other things too.

Two dark red, raised scars over his abdomen, on either side of his hips.

“Put your mouth on me,” he says, eyes locked on mine when I stare back up at him.

I’m still breathing fast, my chest tight. I look up at Maverick. “We can’t—”

A shot goes off before I realize my boyfriend moved. A loud crack in the darkness of the room.

I jump, a gasp leaving my lips as I dive my head into Atlas’s abdomen, sheltering myself, and even Atlas startles, wrapping his arms around me, like he’ll protect me.

My shoulders rise and fall, as fast as I’m breathing, and as I slowly pull back, I scan Atlas for injuries, then look

down at myself, as if I expect to see a hole somewhere through my body. Blood bubbling slowly from a wound.

“Don’t be fucking stupid, Ella. I would never shoot *you*. I thought we talked about this too. Atlas, keep going.” Maverick jerks his chin to his brother, the gun dangling lazily from his fingers again when I raise my eyes to him, standing closer now, training the gun on Atlas’s spine.

I don’t know where he shot. Somewhere in the room. But not us. *Not yet*.

“*Put your goddamn mouth on me,*” Atlas snarls, an edge of panic in his words. Now he’s fucking afraid.

Not wanting to hear the pop of the gun again, my ears still ringing from the shot and panic and lust blossoming in my veins, I reach my fingers to the waistband of Atlas’s pants.

He slaps at me though. My hand, away from him as he grabs my wrist and pins it to my side, his abs flexed as he looks down his nose at me.

“No. Put your mouth on me, just like this.” He glances down at his erection, tenting beneath his sweats.

I swallow, my throat feeling fuzzy, and I dart my gaze to Mavy, but he shakes his head once, like a warning.

An overwhelming feeling of dread shoots through my system, like I’m going to die, but I lean in anyway as Atlas keeps his grip on my wrist. Despite my fear, I try to throw myself into it, to forget everything happening around me, to let the drugs bring me high again. This feels like a dream in some ways, like any moment I’ll wake up, curled safely next to my very calm, very unarmed, sober boyfriend.

But for now, my other hand comes tentatively to Atlas’s skin, and I feel how soft it is, but how hard his muscles are beneath. His abs jump, and I brush my finger over one of his scars, but I don’t ask about it. I don’t think I could speak right now if I wanted to.

My mouth is open, and I run it along his erection, the soft fabric of his sweats uncomfortable and cottony against

my tongue, but I do as he says anyway, my cheeks burning, knowing Mavy is watching. It feels different, pleasuring Atlas instead of the other way around.

When it was reversed, I didn't have to do anything but experience it.

Now though, it's like when Mav ordered me to ride Lucifer, and we know how that turned out for Lucifer and me.

Atlas releases my wrist, groaning as he fists his hand in my hair, pressing me closer to his cock. It's like he's trying to suffocate me against him, but he loosens up when I squirm, and I gulp down air.

What do you think about that, Maverick? Do you like watching someone else hurt me now that you're mad? Does it turn you on when someone else treats me the way you do?

Looking up, I meet Atlas's gaze, a smile curved on his lips.

"You think you deserve to put your nasty little mouth on my dick, with your boyfriend watching? You've deepthroated him too. What makes you think you should have us both?"

"I don't," I whisper, and I mean it. *"I don't."*

Maverick laughs from behind Atlas, but I don't dare look at him. "You might not deserve it because you're a pretty little whore, but you're going to take his dick anyway, aren't you? Your loyalty means you listen, right?"

I see spots pop in my vision, but I nod twice, practically pouting, like whatever viscous liquid Atlas put on my tongue has me flying again in this dark, red-lit room, all because of Maverick's subtle demands.

Your loyalty means you listen.

Atlas glances down, pushing at the hem of his sweats and his black boxer briefs until his cock comes free, and...

Wow.

I stare at it, inches from my face, inhaling his clean scent. It's thick, and long, *ready for me*. Despite Mavy's presence, it's so perfect, I want to...

"Tell him," Mav whispers. "Tell him what you want." He's a foot or so from us, but he sounds so much closer when he reads my mind.

"I want you to fuck me." The words come out hoarse, and there is some tiny, distant corner of my brain telling me this is bad, even if—and maybe *because*—Maverick is letting it happen. But the rest of me is *alive*. *Buzzing*. I feel like I'm finally... *rolling*. Maybe even more than that, I know Maverick won't actually let it get that far. He'll step in. He won't allow someone else to use me again... will he?

Atlas grins, gripping my hair tighter in his fist. "If you're going to fuck me, you're gonna do it like a whore."

Saliva pools at the corners of my mouth. I don't know what he means, but before I can say that, he turns his head, locking eyes with Maverick over his shoulder.

My heart feels like it skips a beat. *He wouldn't, would he?*

I look at my boyfriend too, and see he's smiling at me.

The breath leaves me in a rush as my body tenses, my nails scraping against Atlas's scar. Baby blue eyes connect with mine.

He smiles, a cocky smirk.

I shift my gaze to Atlas, and find he's staring back at me. "Lie back, Ella. Don't move. From right now until I say, you're just a fuck doll, okay?"

My chest heaves, but I don't speak.

He gently taps the side of my face, like a slap, but it doesn't hurt. "Answer me."

I glance at Maverick again. He curves a brow, like he's waiting for me to obey.

"But...why?" My heart is nearly bursting as I stare at him, sure he'll stop this.

Mavy tilts his head. "It's okay," he whispers, no longer smiling. "I need you to be someone I can't respect tonight."

The whole entire room is spinning. My *world*. I have the sudden urge to cry. What does this mean for the morning? What happens then?

"*Lie back,*" Atlas commands me, and somehow, his controlling tone is easier for me to obey now, when I'm feeling lost.

I can do nothing but what he said, and I drop my hands to my sides as Atlas releases his grip on my hair.

He steps back, glancing at me. "Take off your shirt."

Swallowing hard, I cross my arms over my chest and do just that, my breasts cold as the air hits them, my nipples drawing into sharp points. I set my shirt down beside me, crossing my arms over my chest. Atlas smirks at me then looks over at Maverick. "See? She can still be shy for you."

My face grows hot, and so does the need between my thighs. It's like I can feel my pulse there. Like I'm *floating, floating, floating*. Drugged, Atlas said.

I think he meant it. And his next words are for me.

"Prop your feet up on the bed, bend your knees."

I move slowly, but I listen to everything he says like I couldn't disobey if I wanted to. Like his commands are a lifeline to being okay again.

"Let us see you." Atlas still stares at Maverick.

I widen my knees.

"Grab your ankles."

I do, feeling the sharp bones beneath my fingers as I wait, the air hitting my nipples, my wet, spent pussy.

In the back of my mind, that nudging grows stronger. *Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea. In the morning, he'll hate you.*

But the *other* feeling is louder. *It feels so good. Give in. He told you to.*

"Will she bite?" Atlas's voice is soft as he speaks to Maverick.

Maverick just laughs, a dark, wicked thing as Atlas's eyes come back to mine.

"If you ask her nicely."

Atlas steps closer, his gaze coming to mine. "I'm not asking her for anything nice." He nods his head. "Wider," he commands me, staring into my eyes.

I widen my knees, completely exposed to him.

Atlas grins. "Such a good girl," he says softly. Then he's pushing down his sweats with the heel of his hand as he pulls out his cock again, stroking himself. He steps between my thighs, positioning his dick at my entrance. His hand comes to my pussy lip and he tugs on it, letting it go to humiliate me.

"God, look at this," he says, his voice thick with lust as Maverick comes closer, his hand still gripping the gun, his shoulder brushing Atlas's as they stare down at me.

Atlas gently slaps the inside of my thigh, then my pussy, and before I can yelp, he's pushing his cock into my soaking wet hole.

My back arches off the bed, and I grip my ankles tighter, my chin lifted, my eyes nearly rolling back into my head as Atlas fills me up, stretching me as he pushes in, hitting deep.

"Good job, little cunt," he whispers, but I hear the groan hidden in his words, and it turns me on more, knowing I'm affecting him like this.

But when I blink, my eyes are glued to Maverick.

My heart thumps painfully in my chest, waiting for him to intervene. To stop me. And for a second, I think he will. A pained look crosses his face, his brows pulling together, the inverted cross shifting on his face.

But when I open my mouth to say his name, he brings the gun up to the curve of my cheekbone, stroking the side of my face and silencing me with his actions alone. "Shh, shh," he whispers, staring down at where Atlas is inside of

me, moving his hips. I feel the cold barrel along my jawline. "Don't say a word, pretty girl."

I feel tingling in my fingers, wrapped around my ankles. I hear my breathing, like a rustling sound, but I don't speak. I couldn't even if I knew what to say.

Atlas fucks me for a few seconds, pressing his thumb to my clit and pulling up, which stretches me tighter around him.

Then he pulls out.

I gasp, dipping my chin.

"See how she needs to be filled again?" he whispers, his eyes on me, but he's talking to Maverick. "She's sloppy and messy and gaping for you." He slaps the inside of my thigh and I tense as he moves to the side, stroking his cock. I shift my gaze to Mav, who is still holding the gun to my cheekbone.

His blue eyes are on mine as he pushes down his pants with the heel of his hand, gripping his hard cock. Then he comes closer, and all at once, his body is all over mine. He's leaning over me, between my thighs, his chest to my breasts, one hand planted beside my head, the one with the gun in it. He's nothing like Atlas's detachment as he sweeps his tongue over the seam of my lips. I taste marijuana and liquor and I moan into his mouth. He smiles, his eyes on mine.

"You needed this, didn't you? You wanted to feel how she felt?" He's got his hand on his cock, stroking himself, and his knuckles graze my pussy.

I know who he means by *she*.

My skin feels like it's sunburned, but I don't speak.

I feel the bed shift, then the barrel of the gun is pointed at my ear. "*Answer me, Ella.*"

"Yes," my voice is ragged, barely mine as my hands come to his shoulders, smoothing over the planes of his back, like I can remember us this way, feeling the grooves of his scars and wounds.

“You sure about that?” His eyes drop to my mouth, and he smells good, familiar. *Like love, but broken.*

I nod once, my heart trying to beat itself out of my ribcage.

He leans back, glancing down between us, his lips parted just slightly.

I see his cock, so close to me. *So mine.* But will I still be his, when we’re done?

Fear causes me to clench, but desire is louder, stronger, *wetter.*

“She’s desperate for you, Mav.”

I widen my thighs without even thinking.

Maverick gives me a crooked grin, the gun near my head. “If I slap her, she’s even tighter.” Then he closes his eyes, and his hand—empty now, he set the gun down—comes to my cheek. I wince, tightening, but he’s gentle about it and doesn’t slap me. Instead, he covers my face, like he doesn’t want to see me. There’s a pain in my chest from what he’s doing, but a second later, I feel his tip stretching me, and I gasp, lurching again off the bed as he pushes in, further, and further.

I shift my hips up as he sinks all the way inside me with a low groan, so familiar to me.

His fingertips come to my eyelids, ensuring they’re closed. “Mavy,” I whisper, desperate to see him. “Please look at me.” My fingers are on his shoulders, gripping him tight to me.

He leans down close, putting more pressure on my pussy, and he whispers in my ear as he places his hands on either side of me, no longer covering my face. “This feels different this time, doesn’t it?” I don’t know exactly what he means, but I think I know.

Different than when he played with me with Ezra. Than when he shared me with Lucifer. Maybe because I’m friends with Atlas now, or maybe because he’s just tired of

sharing. I want to tell him we could stop, that he's the one making it happen, but I can't seem to get the words out.

Then a second later, he's biting my cheek, fucking me harder, in and out, in and out, I'm moving on the bed, my tits bouncing.

A sharp *slap* comes across my left one and I snap my eyes open, seeing Atlas as he grabs what he just slapped.

"God, you are the perfect doll," Atlas whispers as Mavy keeps fucking me, his breaths against my ear. Atlas slaps my breast again and I whimper.

Maverick, without stopping his pace, reaches his fingers for Atlas's throat and digs them in against his neck, drawing him in close and whispering in his ear. "You hit her again, you're leaving this room in a body bag." He releases Atlas, then pushes him away so he stumbles.

But Maverick buries his head in the crook of my neck without looking at me, like he's disgusted. Even so, he feels good, his back muscles flexing beneath my fingertips as the sensation of being full rises up to my tummy. "It feels different, but you're always gonna be mine," he whispers against my skin. "You can't escape that. *Me*, no matter how big of a whore you are, Ella. I own you," he thrusts into me again, a whimper leaving my mouth. "I'll fucking ruin you before I let you leave me."

I want to tell him I don't want to. I want him to understand no matter what it takes, I always want to be his.

But all at once too soon, he stops, then his eyes flash as he tweaks my nipple. "Your turn," he says, jerking his chin toward Atlas. A low groan leaves his throat but he pulls out all the same.

I gasp with the loss of him, wanting him back. *Hold me. Come back.*

But Atlas steps between my thighs, and he's relentless as he pushes into me, pulling up my clit again, stretching me as him and Maverick both watch him fuck me.

“You’re going to be so used, Maverick will never want anything to do with you again after tonight,” Atlas says, evil satisfaction in his words.

I stare up at my boyfriend and watch a dimple flash in his beautiful face, but he doesn’t dispute Atlas’s words, and his bleary eyes jerk at my heart. “Tell me it isn’t true,” I whisper, even as my brain tries to float into the night and the pain of Atlas’s words draws me closer to the edge of orgasm, all over again.

As Atlas pulls out, Mav pushes in, lifting up my knee, pressing it toward my chest to hit at a deeper angle. A moan tears from my lips, unwilling, and he doesn’t answer me. Until he does. “Of course it isn’t fucking true. Don’t be a dumb bitch, Ella.” And it’s cruel, but from him, it’s a comfortable sort of chaos.

Then they’re taking turns stroke for fucking stroke, bending my knees, lifting my legs over their shoulders, and it feels so perversely good. My mind sails away, and I lean up on my elbows, my fingertips gliding along the mattress, and Atlas slaps my thigh for it, but doesn’t make me lie back down.

I watch their cocks take turns inside of me, pushing in, all the way, then pulling out, air hitting my open hole, only to be replaced with the next one. Maverick is animalistic in how he fucks me, staring at my pussy, and I know tonight, he doesn’t even see me as a person. I’m just something for him to use.

Maybe that’s what I’ve always been, and I hate the way it makes me wetter, like all I want to do is please him.

Oh my God.

“I’m close,” Atlas groans as he pushes in me, and he glances up at Maverick, beside him, they’re shoulder to shoulder. “We could try to both fit...” Atlas turns to me, pinching my pussy lips close around his dick. “But I think it would ruin you.” He grins at me.

I shake my head slowly. “N-no—”

Atlas grabs my face. "What was that?"

Maverick reaches out his arm, snatching up the gun from the bed. Slowly, carefully, he presses it to the side of Atlas's head, just under the brim of his hat, Mav's finger on the trigger.

Atlas freezes, his cock still inside of me.

"Back up," Mavy whispers.

"Okay," Atlas concedes, loosening his grip on my face.

"Okay." His voice is hoarse. He pulls out of me.

"Don't move," Maverick whispers, the gun still to Atlas's temple.

But in a second, everything changes.

Maverick easily pushes back into me, his body curling over mine, and he's holding the gun under my chin, his eyes inches from my own, one hand planted on the mattress beside my head.

My legs are wide, my inner thighs stretching as his hard chest collides with my breasts, and he's pushing on my knee now, widening me painfully as his hips work, thrusting into me over and over again. "Kiss me while I come inside your useless pussy," he whispers, gun still under my chin. His nostrils flare, his eyes look wet. "Fucking *kiss me, Ella.*"

And I do it, gun and all.

I grab the back of his neck with both hands and kiss him, hearing him groan. "Don't," I whisper. "Don't hurt me —"

"Shut up," he speaks into my mouth.

I do.

And I let him come inside of me, filling me up with warmth, and he's groaning my name, his fingers snarling in my hair as he finishes, jerking my head back.

His lips are parted but he isn't kissing me anymore after he's done, his brow rested on mine, gun between us. Slowly, so slowly, he pulls back, sliding the gun possessively

down my sternum, over each of my tits, then lower, over my stomach, to my pussy, where he's still deep inside me.

He pulls up on the hood of my clit with the barrel of the gun.

My body starts to shake.

I hear the sounds of Atlas jerking himself off, and Maverick asks, "Do you want to come inside her too?"

"No," I say in a rush, my fingers clenched in the sheets. "Mavy, look at me. *No.*" I'm on birth control but it isn't one hundred percent effective, and I don't want children with anyone else in the world. If I have them, they're going to be Mavy's.

Maverick toys with my clit, using the gun, rotating his hips. I see my name on his abs and I can't stop trembling.

"Come touch her," he says, ignoring me.

Atlas moves closer, gripping the inside of my thigh with one hand, his eyes on my pussy, the gun, Maverick inside of me.

"You wanna finish fucking her up?" Maverick asks, turning his head so slowly. His lips are inches from Atlas's.

Atlas looks at him, his head slanted as his eyes dip to Mav's mouth.

"You didn't just bring her here to fuck her. What else do you want, huh?" Maverick thrusts his hips and I moan, my fingers clammy on the sheets. He continues circling me with the gun. My belly rises and falls in fear, lust, panic.

I hear Atlas's low breaths, panting, but he doesn't answer Mavy.

"There you go," Maverick whispers. "So close. You can come inside her, if I can kill her afterward."

Atlas's throat rolls.

He glances at me.

"Maverick," I whisper. "Please stop."

But he doesn't. "So tell me how badly you want it." He slides the gun up, pressing it to my womb, *aiming* at me.

Atlas doesn't stop stroking himself. He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Tell me you wanna fill her up with your cum too. We could fuck around and share a kid." Maverick laughs, but it sounds sad.

"No," I hiss. I'm still up on my elbows, and I lift my foot, trying to push at Maverick's thigh. "No, I don't want him to —"

"Shut up, Ella." Maverick's voice rises in volume. "*Say it, Atlas.*"

Atlas's chest heaves. His shoulders rise and fall frantically. It's like he's battling something within himself as he stares at Maverick, getting closer to coming. A guttural sound leaves his lips and he whispers, "*I can't,*" the moment before his warmth is on my thigh, hot and wet. "*I can't do it.*"

Another groan as he bows his head, a sound like a sob leaving his lips.

Maverick pulls out of me, then holds the gun by his side as Atlas finishes all over me.

My heart is stuttering inside my chest as I fist the sheets, lost in how illicit and messy and good and *confused* I feel.

Maverick laughs, slapping softly at my hole, then slipping a finger inside, deep. He brings it out, smearing it along Atlas's cum, then reaches over me, bringing his finger to my mouth.

"Suck us off you, Ella."

I'm vividly reminded of last night—was it only last night?—and I don't argue this time. I do as he says while Atlas's eyes glisten in the darkened room.

I open my mouth, tasting the sweet earth of me, and the salty tang of them.

Atlas is already pulling up his pants, raking a hand through his hair and turning away from me, but Maverick

pulls his finger from my mouth and trails it down to my cunt. He squeezes my lips, dropping his gaze to my pussy.

“God, you’re a wreck. So puffy and messy and *full*.” He shakes his head, like he hates what he’s saying. “I never thought I’d see you like this. I thought that shit was all Sid’s problem.”

He flips the gun in his hand, then turns his back to me, pulling up his pants too. He starts to walk toward the door without another word.

I scramble to sit up and the room seems to spin around me. “Wait,” I call out, so faintly. “*Wait*.” He never leaves me like this. He has to cuddle me. He has to kiss me. He has to tell me tonight was a game and it’s all over now.

He has to *care* for me now.

He stops, his back muscles tense, the gun gripped tight in his hand. But he doesn’t turn around.

“Don’t leave me,” I whisper, suddenly terrified he’ll never come back. And with his parting words about Sid, it’s like I finally realize what he’s tried to tell me all along. He doesn’t want me to be like her. He wants me because I’m not her. Or... I wasn’t.

There’s a moment of silence. Then, “I think you’re in better hands with him than me tonight,” before he walks out, closing the door quietly behind him.

XLIII

Haverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16

LIBER

I SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT her, but I can't go back now.

The look on her face when she was begging me not to leave her, when she wanted me to stay, probably to carry her out of Atlas's room like I *should've* done... It's like a dagger to the fucking heart.

But she was fucking around with him before I found her.

Still, it's hard to hold onto the anger toward her because maybe I deserve it. In fact, I *know* I do. I tied her to a bed once and made her watch me fuck Chelsea with no warning, all for flirting with a boy who was probably her only fucking friend. Then I took her away from him, from her mother, from any scraps of her old life.

I deserve far worse than what she did.

Besides, it was me who blew her off. Me who told her to leave. Me who was all over Sid in a pool and while it wasn't

what it looked like, I can understand it looked bad, particularly for a girl who thinks I'm actually in love with my fucking sister.

How long has this been going on?

Even knowing I deserve it, it's one of the only questions inside my head. Is it why Atlas texted her late that night, asking for "photos of Rain?" They've developed their own secret fucking code? Or was this the first time? All the things I should have demanded answers to, but at the heart of it, the thing that matters most to me is Ella's well-being. If Atlas was doing something to hurt her behind my back, he would have had no problems coming inside her.

It's a weird, fucked-up marker of loyalty, but it's one I believe in, nevertheless.

When daylight comes, I'll ask the other questions. *Did you fuck him before tonight? Do you love him? How did it start?*

They didn't act like they'd been together before. She doesn't seem to love him.

But what if she does?

What if?

I glance at my phone as I head up the darkened stairwell to the fourth floor. No texts from her, no phone calls. Maybe part of me wants her to beg me again. Humiliation, I told her. I love to see her that way, because it's a vulnerable side. It's something I can control. Something I can stop, if I choose. Take away all her embarrassment. I told her before that I like seeing her that way—humiliated. But it goes deeper than that. I like stopping it too. Knowing I have that power, to soothe her fears.

Beg me again to come back, baby.

But there's nothing on my phone, and she didn't follow me. Every step forward feels like a step away from our bond, but I can't bring myself to turn around.

I tighten my fingers around my phone and push open the double doors at the top of the stairs, stepping onto a quiet,

empty hallway. The doors thud closed at my back and I lean against them, closing my eyes for a moment. Everything seems to spin inside my head, the alcohol and marijuana a blurry combination beneath my skin. My chest rises and falls softly but despite the calmness of my lungs, there's a war going on inside my head.

I feel my fist going into the man's face. Bones don't concede initially, but after several more hits, they break beneath my knuckles. Blood sprays on my temple, warm and sticky and the result I'm craving. When his eyelashes are matted with crimson, his face nothing but swollen flesh and bloody demarcations separating nostrils from cheek cavities from lips, I stop. But in my mind, I see him holding a gun to Ella's head, forcing me to make an impossible choice. Stop my natural reflexes to save her no matter the cost, or let her be led like a sheep to fucking slaughter?

Isn't that the choice I fucked up with Malachi too? It was either kill him, or let him be killed by a death of a thousand cuts. By our nanny's twisted sort of playtime, games of locked closets and porn enacted behind closed doors. I didn't know what I was choosing when I pushed him, but ignorance won't bring him back from the dead.

And what did I choose when Brooklin was underneath Atlas?

I knew what would happen to her. It's why I wanted to kill Atlas. Because no matter what I said, no matter how I pleaded with my dad, he wouldn't let Brooklin's punishment go. And I knew that with every hit to Atlas's head, every contact with his body, I was apologizing to my sister in the only way I knew how.

Violence.

But last night, Ella wanted something besides the depraved. "*Hold me,*" she asked. It's not as if I don't do that. It isn't like I *can't*. I've held her so much, I know the exact weight of her in my arms. But after what I did with the men and the car... I couldn't flip the switch for her, like

she's done for me so many times. I couldn't come down from the high and loathing and triumph of murdering someone to prove my love to her.

I know words. I know emotions. Poetry, books, the things I feel when I think of all the people I've let down. It's not as if I can't get in touch with those things. The problem is I *drown* in them. I fucking *choke* on them, and sometimes... I need to fucking breathe.

I slam my fist on the door at my back, savoring the sharp contact with my knuckles, but then it feels so immature. It feels like Lucifer at his worst, and I love him. I would do *anything* for my best friend. But I watched his entire world collapse and how it pulled down everyone around him, including me, even if he didn't see it. Even if he can never be fucked enough to look out for me the way I care for him. It's the role I've taken, and it's one I could shrug off, but I haven't. Not yet.

Not even for her.

And the truth is, despite the fact I killed for her and despite the fact I'd do it again and again *and again*, that was far easier than letting her in. Much simpler than having to strip off the armor I wear to keep everyone around me protected. The armor that protects me too. I let Sid see past it because I don't have to be her sole protector. She isn't my fucking responsibility. Ella can't peek behind the curtain. She can't ever doubt the fact I will always look out for her, no matter what it costs me.

Slowly, I sink down to the floor, my back sliding against the doors. I set my phone down and bow my head, elbows on my knees, face in my palms. A slow, small scream of frustration tears into my hands, but then I bite down on my back teeth to keep it from erupting. To keep all these thoughts of things going on around us—the threat to Ella if I don't ensure Lucifer follows orders, which I failed at with Esther; Brooklin's avoidance; Rain's potential endangerment; Samson's body; Julie's; Finn's whereabouts

—from exploding into an exasperation that would bring down this building.

I turned Ella away last night because I couldn't face myself without the high walls of a murderer, and now I've left her with someone who I know can be soft. What he did, breaking down without finishing inside of her, it's proof of that.

What kind of sick and twisted shit have I dragged you into, baby?

She would be better off at that fucking trailer.

I think, sometimes, everyone in my life would be better off if *I* wasn't there.

Malachi, for one, would be alive.

Maybe Mom would have been better then. Maybe she would have loved us more. Maybe Dad would have been more forgiving toward Brooklin, and she wouldn't have felt unloved most of her life.

The pressure grows behind my eyes and I flex my fingers against them, pressing back on the sockets. *I won't give in. I won't give in. I won't—*

"Where's Ella?"

I snap my head up, dropping my hand to the waistband of my pants, my fingers circling around the grip of my gun. But when I blink, it's Brooklin standing before me, her arms crossed as she glares down at me.

I splay my fingers wide, leaving the gun where it is, and bring my arms to drape over my knees, hands dangling as my pulse still jumps around in my chest from being startled by my sister.

I glance behind her, swallowing hard, but see nothing but dark floors and low lighting in the high ceilings, doors scattered around the corridor. We used to use this floor for parties that usually ended in orgies.

There's a bathroom on this floor with a fuckload of condoms for that purpose. But now we don't do that shit as much, and this floor is being used to protect Rain. We've

got guards on the ground, outside Liber, but up here, we've got the protection of subterfuge. Even *I* don't know what room he's in. Only Sid, Lucifer, and Brooklin do.

I bring my gaze back to her, taking in her gray pajama pants, white crop top. She's in fuzzy socks too. Maybe I woke her up with all my sulking over here.

"Where's Rain?" I counter her question with a question.

She rolls her eyes. "His baby monitor is in my pocket and I just left his room. He's sleeping." She cocks a brow. "So where's Ella?"

I think about admitting what happened, to my sister. Maybe breaking down a wall of my own to get her to burst through hers. But I know tonight is not the night we'll have a heart-to-heart. I can't handle it right now. Besides, considering who I left Ella with, I'm sure Brooklin wouldn't be very empathetic to me.

So, I just lie. "Sleeping, just like Rain."

A small smirk flits across Brooklin's face.

I lean my head back against the door again, closing my eyes, savoring these fleeting seconds I have with my sister before she remembers all the ways she got fucked up because of me and our family, and she stalks off.

"Have you talked to Lucifer? About what I told you?" The question is straightforward, to the point. She doesn't want to waste time shooting the shit with me, that's for sure.

I scoff, shaking my head. "In case you haven't noticed, we've got a lot going on right now, Brook. It's been the last thing on my mind."

"The fact your little girlfriend might be in some kind of danger by the hands of your best friend is the *last* thing on your mind?" Sharper words.

I shake my head once without looking at her, then stretch out my legs, letting my hands fall to my lap. *If you only knew what I just let my little girlfriend do, Sis...*

“You said Mom was tried and tested. She survived, didn’t she? And the more I thought it through, the more I realized it’s not that bad, even if it *is* happening, right? If Lucifer is giving her little lessons on the low about joining our world, isn’t that a *good* thing? I want her fully *in*.” I haven’t put *that* much thought into it, but I just can’t see Ella and Lucifer working together at all. And if it’s *Atlas* who is testing her, he isn’t going to flex her loyalty to the point of breaking, because he didn’t even when I held a gun to her and told him to.

There’s silence to greet my words. Slowly, I pry open my eyes. I have to blink a few times because I’m still feeling the effects of all those fucking shots I took tonight. Or last night, as it is, now that we’ve somehow fucked our way into Tuesday.

Brooklin’s blue eyes seem to glow in the hall. “You are an idiot,” she seethes. “You think he’s giving her little *lessons*? Do you not know your own brotherhood?” She brings two fingers to her temple, massaging just above her nose, then she exhales, takes a step back, and slides down against the wall adjacent to the door I’m propped up against.

Her knees come to her chest, her arms wrapped around her shins as she hugs herself. She stares at the floor, and for the first time in a long time, I see a less aggressive version of Brooklin. A more vulnerable part of her comes through in her posture, like she’s exposing some of her own nerves.

I’ve never forgotten it was *her* who distracted the 6 enough to ensure Sid escaped Sacrificium with Jeremiah. Her and her smoke bombs. “*Hello, Daddy.*” Those words echo in my head, crawling a chill down my spine.

She is the reason Sid got away. Lucifer might have killed his dad, but would we have been able to murder all of our parents before they subdued us? I’m not so sure.

The memory contrasts sharply with the smallest evidence of exhaustion I see now on Brooklin's perfect face. Smudges beneath her eyes, little lines around her cheeks, like she isn't hydrated or hasn't slept in too long.

"Brook," I whisper, wanting to touch her. Hug her, kiss her forehead, tell her I'm so sorry. I want to start over. I want my sister back. And if that means entertaining this idea that someone is *trying* Ella that I don't know about, I will. "What do you think is going on?"

Her plush lips curve upward, but she shakes her head. "If you don't think there's anything," she concedes, "maybe there isn't. I just wonder what hell Mom endured to become one of them."

I know what hell she endured to stay that way. I think of my dad towering over her. The dealings he had with thirteen-year-old girls.

But Mom kept that secret. She wasn't a victim. She was just as responsible as he was. Some base part of me hates to think it, but she *deserved* to die.

My gut clenches, and I wonder if Brooklin was better off on the streets than where she could have ended up, in bed with older, preying men like Sid was.

But I push those thoughts aside and think of Ella, instead. Something *is* off with her and not just the fucking bizarre threesome we just had.

There's the weird text from Atlas—who I shouldn't have left her alone with, but I meant what I said when I did—all of her workouts, her strange sleep schedule. But when would she be alone with Atlas aside from tonight? Or Lucifer? The times wouldn't work out. There are very few chances they'd have to be together without me or Sid knowing about it. Atlas has skipped out on some Council meetings, sure, but I know Lucifer has recently been checking the cameras on the street as an extra security precaution. He'd *know* if someone was...

Checking the camera on the streets.

Did *he* see what happened to me, with Father Tomas? If so, why wouldn't he say anything?

A prickle of unease is sharp along my skin, like something beneath my fingernail.

Brooklin's eyes come to mine and a frown graces her lips. "What?" she whispers.

But maybe he didn't see it. It's not like he goes over the footage all the time. Only if the guards insist there's something he should see, I'm pretty sure. I mean, this is a thing I let *him* deal with.

He didn't see it. He certainly would have asked me if he did, considering it happened so close to where Rain was sleeping.

"Nothing," I answer my sister, holding her gaze.

"How often do you miss him?" she whispers, not looking away from me. There's a tingling sensation in my chest with her question, with the change of subject like she's just been *dying* to ask, because I know who it is she's talking about. "How often do you remember his eyes? His smile?" Her throat rolls. "His laugh?" A small one of her own escapes her lips, but it's tinged with the thickest grief as her eyes shine.

I fold my arms over my chest, clasping onto my forearms, like I can hold back the agony that way. "Brooklin." It's the only thing I can say. *Don't. Please don't.*

She smiles sadly at me, her eyes wide as she blinks. "I can't get it out of my head. I don't think I'd know him, if I saw him today. If he was alive, somehow—"

"He's not, Brook," I cut her off, because I can't bear to go down this magical line of thinking. "He's dead—"

"If he made it, and I saw him on the street, at a party, in a grocery store..." Her chest rises, rises, *rises*. Tears stream down from the corners of her eyes, but she doesn't wipe at them. "I wouldn't recognize him. I wouldn't know him for who he was. I barely remember him, some days. Do you know that? It's like holding onto a... a ghost." She

almost chokes on the word, closing her eyes tight as I watch her heartache glisten on her cheekbones. "It's like I forget, once, there were three of us in that house."

My breaths are shallow as I watch her cry silently. I want to get up. I want to hold her. But if she pushed me away, I couldn't take it.

I don't move, but everything she says, it's the same for me.

I barely remember you, buddy. I can't grasp onto the exact color of your eyes. The shade of your skin. The way your hair would turn brighter in the sun. I have nearly forgotten you, and it kills me.

But at the same time... *I am so glad you are not in this life. I am so fucking grateful your death means you don't live in this.*

I don't speak that out loud to Brooklin.

She doesn't say anything else to me.

And for long moments, we sit in silent mourning until my phone buzzes at my side and I see Lucifer has texted me.

Luce: Come down. It's our only night of freedom, lover boy.

And I hate him for those last two words because they aren't his own. They're stolen from me, and he wants to fuck with my heart. Maybe he wants to keep the leash he has on my emotions tight, even as we grow apart in some ways.

But all the same, I know I need to go back to Ella, the one who really has a chokehold on everything I am now.

XLIV



LIBER

I WAKE *up on the floor.*

My entire body aches. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, and even my teeth feel dry. I don't know if that's a possibility, but when I part my lips, I taste iron, and I think they're cracked.

Even still, I feel something wet on my face, and as I push up, my palms against a hard floor, I realize saliva is dripping down from my mouth. I swallow, the motion painful in my throat. Sitting after I spin around, I massage my neck, my body stiff.

Blinking in the darkness, I don't know where I am, or what day it is, or time, or...anything. I just feel nauseatingly tired, and the last thing I remember is... is...

"We can't hide here forever."

I flinch, scooting against a wall in the dark, my heart racing hard. I can't see anything, I'm scared to move, but... "Atlas?" My voice is hoarse, shaky too, threaded with nerves.

The last thing I remember...he... "You... you drugged me." I gasp on the last word, making myself small against the wall, backing up as far as I can, turning my head right, to left, and back again. Where is he?

All I remember is Maverick walking out, then Atlas giving me a drink after I used the bathroom, as I cried and I didn't want it but he said I needed to stay hydrated and... and...

"He's looking for you." Atlas's words seem to come from the night itself.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of spearmint Atlas seems to drag along with him wherever he goes. "What did you do to me?" The words come out broken. Why did I not follow Maverick? Why didn't I run for him? Why am I so fucking stupid?

Silence answers me.

Then a light flicks on.

A soft glow floods the room, and the first thing I see is Atlas, sitting in a chair set in the corner of the room, his high-top sneakers flat on the floor, elbows on his knees, palms together. His hat is on backward, eyes on me in the dim light from the salt lamp beside him, on the floor.

With wild eyes, I scan the room.

It's plain. Big. Airy, with high ceilings, but nothing in it, save for the chair Atlas is on like a throne, and a door to my left, at the end of a hallway. "Where am I?"

Atlas smiles. It's eerie, how even though his smiles aren't warm, they look that way. As if he's mastered every human emotion by repeated imitation, and he can fake anything.

"Cain and I saved you. He helped me bring you in here."

My teeth grind together, a cold sweat breaking out over my neck. "You fucking drugged me. Where are we? Why are we—"

"I wanted to keep you safe, Ella. Remember how I tried to warn you? Remember how I wanted to tell you? Do you remember, someone at The Madilyn? Or do you only ever think about Maverick's dick?"

I blink at him, confused. "I don't understand. This isn't your room. What did you want to warn me about? Why did you bring me here?" My questions rise in pitch, higher and higher as my panic climbs.

Atlas closes his eyes, a shadow crossing his face. "I fucked up."

My heart sinks. "What? How did you—"

"I tried to do the right thing, Ella." His voice is low, his words soft, and they scare me more. "I tried to help you fight, you know? I tried to warn you. And no one knows about this room, save for me and Cain. We found it once at the same time, when we were younger. He was grieving and I was running. I saved you by bringing you here. But it doesn't matter. They'll still find you, and it'll be worse, when they do."

Chills crawl down my spine. I sit up straighter, my palms on the floor on either side of my hips. "Atlas. What are you talking about?" Does he know the other things I've done? Does he know?

"I needed help too." It could sound like an admission, but it doesn't. There's nothing vulnerable in it at all. It's selfish, if anything. "Last night, I needed you too."

"Why?"

He slowly opens his eyes. "You're not the only one hurting."

I grasp at straws. "What happened with Natalie?"

He laughs. "Nothing as bad as what's going to happen to you."

Fear steals the words from my mouth.

Glancing at the ceiling, he says, "We broke up, you know? But that didn't mean I could let her go."

I try to breathe. In. Out. In. Out. "Is she...okay?" I think I see a shadow flicker across his face again, then it's gone. I could have imagined it, but the sense of unease I've started to feel, being this close to him without anyone having my back or even knowing where I am, starts to grow. Was it Natalie at The Madilyn? "She's okay, isn't she?" I rephrase the question, suddenly needing him to reassure me.

"No."

My breath catches in my throat. Of course I expected him to lie. But... is this the truth? "What do you mean?" I keep the quaver out of my words, and I attribute that to living with someone like Maverick Astor.

He shrugs, and his voice is the same hair-raising whisper it was when he grabbed me at his house and put his fingers in my mouth. "Do you really want to know?"

My spine crawls, and I wrap my arms around my shins.

"Do you really want to know, Ella? Or would you rather stay in the dark?" He levels my gaze, his chin dipped. His eyes pierce my own, and I want to leave. But I don't even know where the fuck we are.

"Where are we, Atlas? What are you doing to me? Why am I here? Why did you drug me, before tonight even? You told me it was a painkiller. But you have harder drugs. You told me... Why did you—"

"You're safe, for now," he says softly, still staring at me, his expression blank.

My breath catches and I suddenly feel very cold. "I want to find Mavy."

He doesn't move from the high-backed chair, his head cocked, a lock of blond hair falling from beneath his hat. "Yeah?" He keeps his tone level, but there's a taunting look in his eye, and I know, I'm not going to be able to leave here so easily. "They're after you, Ella."

"The drugs you've given me..."

"They're not what you think they are."

"What have you done to me?" I swallow the lump in my throat. "What the fuck have you done?" I hate the fact I'm whispering the words. I hate that I dig my nails into my shins and start to rock, but I can't seem to stop as I stare at him, the only light from the lamp at his feet.

With my question, he leans forward, his elbows on his thighs and fingers laced together beneath his chin. "Are you ready for that truth?"

"Yes," I tell him, my heart picking up speed. "I want to know. You promised me answers."

"They don't trust you."

"Who is they?"

He tilts his head. "The 6."

It hurts to hear, but it's not something I didn't already know. "And?"

He smiles, dimples flashing, but it doesn't reassure me. With the shadows cast over his face, I feel only cold chilling my bones. "And they want to."

I doubt that. I chew the inside of my cheek, wishing to be home. Come find me, Mavy. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But I try to keep calm. I try to hold my own until Atlas leaves and I can run back to Maverick's room. "Yeah? How do they plan to do that? Another...ceremony?" It's what I've been doing, right? What Lucifer commanded me to do? Or is it something...different?

He laughs, his canines exposed as he does. "Something like that," he says after a moment, still staring at me. "They were going to wait, you know. I had until Halloween. But then my dad came to The Madilyn, and he said I needed to hurry. He said I had to do it now. I tried to warn you to stay away from me, but you just let him fuck you and leave you on the floor."

My skin crawls. I don't know what he's talking about. He had until Halloween? His dad was there, last night, or the night before? Why?

"They're going to pick you apart." He keeps talking, his voice smooth. "And look inside."

The anxiety in my brain causes the hairs to lift from my scalp. It's a tangible fear, and I grit my teeth together to ensure they don't chatter.

"If they like what they see..." He leans back in his chair, and his smile is gone, even though I'm sure his next words are the punchline coming. He drops his hands to his laps and turns his head. I see his sharp jawline and the muscles working along it. "They'll put you back together again. If I can convince them."

"What happened to Natalie, Atlas?" I ask the question because he's angry about this. That means something, doesn't it? It has to mean... something happened to her. Something always happens to the girls who get too close to the 6, right? Ria... She was kept in the basement of my house. She was almost shot by Mavy's dad.

Atlas slowly turns to face me again, a darkness flickering across his features that freaks me out, but he says nothing.

I pick my head up, every instinct in my body telling me to bolt. "Did they do something to her?" The words seem to scrape out of my mouth, like I'm not sure I want an answer. Like I know I should shut up, but I won't. I don't. "Did the 6 find her...lacking?"

Atlas's face is expressionless, but no less eerie. My pulse gallops in my chest. "Why would you ask me that?" His tone is neutral, but it's pretty clear something happened to her. I think of her that night at Liber. Another time, at a bar, where we all were together, Sid pushing her drinks to me.

Shortly after, Jeremiah was there.

I wonder what Atlas thinks of Jeremiah. The subject seems safer than Natalie, so I just blurt it out, the words vomiting out of my mouth before I can really think it through, my mind tripping over the drugs in my system, maybe the ones I've been taking all this time. "Where's Jeremiah Rain?"

Atlas arches a brow, but I can tell he's grateful for the change of subject too. "Excuse me?" he asks anyway.

I shake my head, annoyed with myself. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know why I followed him anymore. It seemed like a good idea, in the heat of the moment. Things always do then... until I realize how stupid I am. And I got that realization too late last night, when Maverick walked away from me.

"Never mind," I mutter, resting my cheek against my knees, exposed through the rips in my jeans. Mav went with me to get this. I don't even like being in the mall by myself. He said we could order them online. Have a shopper take my measurements, and go that way. But... He wanted to take me out, he claimed. And he told me these make my ass look good. They do, I guess. I should be with him right now. I should've fought for him in that pool and I should've run after him when he left me.

"You want to know where Jeremiah Rain is?" Atlas repeats, amusement in his voice. It's weird, because no one, including me, can say his first name without his last.

"No," I say.

Atlas laughs. "Do you have a crush on him too, Ella?"

I open my mouth and my eyes, ready to snap out a retort. I don't have a crush on him. So what he kissed me? He was using me to get to Sid, which is what everyone seems to do, really. He's no better or no worse. I'm not even sure I dislike him. Maybe if Sid chose him, she'd be out of my fucking hair. But I know better. I know Lucifer would kill for her, even if he broke her while he did it.

But just as the words come to my throat, something like fuck off on the tip of my tongue, a scream pierces the air.

I sit up straighter, stretching out my legs, ready to get to my feet as my heart slams between my ribcage. Atlas is already on his feet, his hand going to his back. I see it a second later, the black gun in his hand, pulled from the

back of his pants. Something about gun safety and stupidity runs through my mind, but I ignore it.

"What was that?" I whisper instead.

Atlas takes a few steps, glancing toward the hallway that leads to the door as he offers me his hand. "Get up," he says, a cold command laced through his voice.

I take his outstretched hand and when he's yanked me to my feet, he spins me around, wrapping an arm around my chest, my back to his front, the gun aimed toward the ceiling. I can feel his heart racing against the thin material of my shirt, his fingers curled just to the side of my breast. But he's perfectly still, every muscle coiled tight in his body.

Several long seconds pass. There's nothing again but the sound of my pulse in my ears.

"What was that?" I ask again.

Atlas still says nothing, and he doesn't move.

I take a breath, catching his clean scent and the musk of his sweat.

"We're in Liber, right?"

"Yes," he says, his breath fanning across my neck, my hair over one shoulder.

"But no one knows where we are?" All the things I wanted to ask about come out at the worst moment.

"No one." His lips brush my skin.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I grip his forearm, banded across my chest, with both hands. "Then who—"

It shatters the silence again, louder this time. A single, high-pitched scream. I jump, holding tighter to Atlas as I back into his lean form.

My eyes find only darkness and a door, but the scream isn't inside.

Not yet...

"What is it?"

Atlas presses the barrel of the gun to my lips. My blood runs cold, and I want to scream, but I can't even breathe. I look down, at the glistening black, and my knees feel weak. Atlas tightens his hold on me, like he knows. Like he's trying to hold me up, even though it's his weapon that's freaking me the fuck out. "Be quiet, Ella."

I inhale. Exhale. I can't look away from the gun.

Finally, after a moment of my silence, he bends his elbow and aims it back up at the ceiling. I close my eyes, praying for Mav.

"Someone is fucking with us," Atlas finally says.

"But that would mean someone knows we're here." My words are whispered, my eyes still closed.

"Yes," he agrees, his mouth too close to my skin, just at the base of my neck. "Someone knows we're here."

But why are they screaming? He said this place was safe. Atlas would know who gets to come and go, him and Cain, if he's not lying to me.

Which means...

I try to spin around, anger momentarily replacing my fear. "You—"

He presses the gun to the side of my temple.

I don't move.

I don't breathe.

The cool steel has me frozen, his arm still banded around my body. His fingers brush the skin of my hip, my shirt riding up.

"I tried to warn you, Ella."

I don't dare move an inch, but I want to press my thighs together. I want to run. I want to move. "When?" I whisper, breathing hard. "When did you ever warn me?"

"Little Red Riding Hood. I tried to tell you last night. My dad wanted to push everything up. I don't know why. But he wants you six feet under."

I can't suck in air fast enough. I'm hyperventilating, and my limbs are tingling. "But you were helping me fight. You

were...”

He digs his fingers in deeper, and he doesn't move the gun from my head. "Do you know what the word scelus means, Ella?" I feel his breath on my lips, trembling as I stare up at him.

The scream sounds again.

My knees shake.

"No." I don't know how I form the word. I shake my head, and he digs in the gun harder. I manage, somehow, to speak again. "No, Atlas, I don't—"

"Evil." He brushes his lips over mine. "Deed."

My heart gallops too hard in my chest.

"Betrayal, Ella." He smiles, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth. "It means," he says, biting down softly, then releasing me. "You cannot be trusted. It means there's some place you need to go."

"Liar's Island." I gasp it out. "Are you going to...take me? Is it near here? Is it close to Liber? Is the island—"

"Liar's Island is a safe place. Edith Van Damme owns the island. You won't get to go there, I'm afraid."

My chest tightens. Edith Van Damme. Elijah's wife. Why would she own the island? Where the children go to die? Why would she kill them? But Atlas said it's safe.

"No," Atlas continues as my lips tremble, trying to think of what to ask, what to say to save my own life. He promised he'd tell me everything, but I didn't know it would be like this. "Have you ever heard of Shadow Villa, Ella?"

I wake up on the bed. Prying open heavy eyes, the dream or memory or hallucination is enough to get me moving, despite the fact I feel utterly *spent*. Red lights line the room, and I know it's Atlas's.

I scan every inch of the space I can see.

Nothing.

I don't see him.

"*Are you the crazy one, Ella? Or am I?*" Those words linger in my head.

I reach a shaky hand out, feeling under the cool side of my pillow, and relief nearly makes me cry out loud at the feel of my phone. I pull it out, blinking rapidly as I unlock my screen.

Mavy: Where THE FUCK are you?

Dread is heavy in my gut, and I exit out of my messages, seeing I have thirteen missed calls, all from Maverick. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I start to call him back, but he's calling me again. It's three in the morning. Tuesday. Fuck. How long have we been apart? How long has he been looking for me?

But you left me.

I spin around, casting my eyes around the darkness. I don't see anything. Anyone. I don't hear anything as I answer the phone, holding it to my ear.

"H-hello?" My voice is scratchy, and I hear Maverick curse under his breath.

It sounds like relief. But the next second, I know that's not quite it when he says, "Where the fuck are you?" His tone is cool and calm, and it freaks me out.

I think about Atlas.

The drink he gave me. And the dream... *Was it a dream?* It's already retreating now, shadowy, out of my grasp. It's all bleary.

"Ella." Maverick's cold word brings me back to this moment as I scramble to my feet, but everything spins, even in darkness, and I feel lightheaded as I back up, and up, and up, my spine against the wall. "I need you, right now, *right fucking now*, to tell me where you are."

The words are on the tip of my tongue. *Atlas's room.* But if I say that, if he thinks I've been in here the whole time... oh, shit, if I say that, he's going to hate me.

But wait. No. He *left me in here*.

I shake off my exhaustion, and I take a step toward what I think is the door out of here. I feel sick, vertigo setting in. Another step. Another. My feet are bare, but my pants are on, my top, and a... hoodie. I glance at it, but I keep walking, even as I think I might fall and twist my ankle, the way I'm unstable and unsteady, in more ways than one.

"I'm..." I trail off, my voice cracking as I reach for the door handle, and relief floods through me when I grab onto it. I pull it down and open the door, slipping into the cold hallway beyond Atlas's room. Soft blue lights are lit along the panels in the floor here, and I head toward the right, to what I know is a staircase that will lead down to the main level. From there, inside my head, I map out the way: I'll walk past the pool, the gym, the living room, and I'll find the stairs going up to Mav and Luce's level. "I'm at the pool," I say, hoping to God *he's* not at the pool. "Why did you leave me?" It comes as a weak afterthought, but I'm too disoriented to be strong. To bite back.

I reach my arm out to push open the double door at the end of the hallway, the one leading to the stairs that go down, when I see something on my arm, my hoodie sleeve shoved up to the crease of my elbow.

My blood runs cold, and my hand slips from keeping the door open. It thuds shut, and I realize Maverick isn't saying anything on the other end of the line.

I can barely breathe, staring at the scrawl on my inner forearm.

My heart races, tachycardic.

It's in silver marker. *Conatus sum*.

"I'm coming to you," I blurt out, worried about Maverick's silence, but I need more time. I need time to look this up, and I need to get off the phone to do that, and I need to scrub it off of my skin and—

"No. *I'm* coming to *you*." Then the call ends, and I gasp, stumbling through the door, racing down the stairs as I try

to type on my phone with one hand, the unfamiliar words on my arm.

What did you do to me, Atlas?

My fingers are shaky, and I close my other hand along the banister of the stairs, the corridor eerily quiet as I take the steps two at a time, my screen jostling in my hand.

I get the first word typed in, but I have to glance at my inner forearm to remember the second. It's like I'm forgetting everything.

I type that word as I hit the landing for the main level, pushing the lever of the door and running through, the sound of music flooding to my ears, the scent of chlorine and marijuana heavy down here. I'm nervous that when I get to the pool, Sid and Lucifer will be there, and I don't want to see them.

I need to scrub this off my skin. I can't tell Maverick what happened with Atlas unless I want to cough up all my secrets, and I'm not ready to give them up yet. I'm not finished with what I'm supposed to do, and I won't jeopardize everyone for the sake of confiding in a boyfriend who left me after our threesome last night.

I press enter on my phone, searching the translation as I walk through the kitchen, drinks and cups scattered all along the black marble counters, on the floor. My feet stick to the tile, but I ignore it all, including the girl whose thighs Cain is standing in between. But his dark eyes come to mine as I walk by, and I stumble, glancing at my screen and seeing the translation come up at the same time I meet Cain's gaze again.

I tried.

I tried? What does that even mean?

"I could've told you," Cain says as the girl kisses his broad shoulders, his shirt off. "You can't trust that boy. He's losing his fucking mind right now. Keep your mouth shut though, and you'll be all right."

Atlas.

He's talking about Atlas.

He helped move me, Atlas claimed. But where to? And why did I wake up back in Atlas's room?

What the hell is happening to me?

"Where have you fucking been?" Maverick's voice calls my attention, and I quickly yank down the sleeve of my hoodie even as I know Cain sees it. He smiles, but turns back to the girl, his hands raking up her thighs, under her skirt.

Maverick grabs my wrist, pulling my phone from my hand. The screen has dimmed, and he doesn't know my passcode. But he doesn't bother looking. He shoves the phone into the pocket of his sweats, his brows pulled together, but his eyes are red, and I can tell he's high.

Where have you been all this time, while I was...while I was...

"Keep your mouth shut." Cain's words ring in my head. I clench my teeth together.

Behind Maverick, I see Lucifer, holding Sid's hand and she's not wearing a shirt over her fucking bikini. My eyes find her flat stomach, a line down the center the only evidence of her past pregnancy. A tiger stripe, I heard Lucifer call it before.

Her hair is slicked back, a ring of eyeliner beneath her lower lash line, and Lucifer is in his swimming trunks too, his black hair dripping water, his abs and scars pretty impressive. He did that for her.

He did that for her.

And I glance down at Maverick's hand on my wrist.

Her name.

All for her.

I want to scream.

But he killed for you.

Then he walked out on you and let Atlas drug you.

What the fuck is going on?

“You were getting high with them?” I snarl, unease and panic and anger growing and raging inside of me. It feels like I’m going to burst soon. I’m going to fucking blow up.

I notice Sid is holding a nearly empty bottle of Russian vodka in her hand, short nails tapping the glass.

“He can do what he wants,” Sid says, dragging Lucifer to stand beside Maverick, the three of them facing me.

Mav hasn’t let go of my wrist.

He’s breathing hard, thankfully wearing his shirt, but with Sid’s bare arm so close to him, and her nipples hard, and I can see so much of her body and—

“I mean, he didn’t ask your permission to *initiate me*, did he, Ella?” Her words are full of venom. I’m thrown off, despite the fact the last time I saw her she was all over my boyfriend. Because *before that*, it felt like we had made some kind of truce.

“I thought...” I stare at her with wide eyes as I say it. “With the papers and the—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” There’s something in Sid’s gaze, beyond the blariness of alcohol. Like she’s *warning* me.

“Baby girl, you’re drunk.” Lucifer pulls the bottle of vodka from Sid’s hand, but she doesn’t release it. Instead, she grips it with both hands, frowning at him.

“Give. It. Back.” She *is* drunk, and I have to bite back my smile as Lucifer’s eyes narrow. They were all ganging up on me, but now she’s pissed him off.

He only has one hand on the bottle, the other by his side, his veins strain against his forearms as he refuses to give in to his wife. “I want to do what I want.” Her words are slurred, and she sounds petulant. She sounds...kind of like me.

I glance at Maverick, and he’s still staring at me. Behind us, the girl Cain is between moans.

My blood warms, but I think I need to tell Maverick about Atlas. About the words on my arm. *I tried*. Where is

Atlas? Is Rain safe? *Where's Sevryn?*

Confessions risk vomiting up my secrets though, and if Rain is endangered because of it, Maverick would never forgive me.

Lucifer uses Sid's grip on the bottle to haul her closer, her bare feet slipping on the tiles. "You're going to do what I say, baby girl, because right now, you're acting like an idiot."

Sid snatches the bottle back with a strength I didn't think her capable of, and before Lucifer can get it back from her, she spins to face me, hurling the bottle right at me.

Duck.

I hear Atlas's word in my head, and I squat down, the bottle sailing over me and crashing onto the floor, bursting into pieces.

I start to stand again as silence rings out in the kitchen, music still thudding from the pool beyond the gym, but between us all, there's an eerie quiet.

Then Maverick drops my hand.

He turns to Sid, and without warning, he wraps his fingers around her throat and shoves her against the black fridge in the kitchen, not gently.

"What the fuck was that?" he snarls.

There's silence in the room. Even Cain's partner for the night has the decency to be quiet, and Cain himself doesn't say a word as I see him out of the corner of my eye, looking from me, to Maverick, then to...

"Wow."

Lucifer. That's all he says. Then he's moving toward Mav, his fingers still wrapped tight on Sid's throat. But she doesn't need her husband's help. She brings her hand to her mesh bikini top, and pretty fast for a drunk girl, she's got a tiny knife between her fingers, the blade springing free.

It's a switchblade.

She licks her lips as her eyes lock on Mav's and even Lucifer slows down. I'm holding my breath and I realize I don't know what I want to happen. Sid is dangling the black and purple hilt of the dark blade between her fingers dangerously, swinging it toward Mav, but it swings back too, to her chest.

She laughs, then hiccups, and I hate the look she has in her eyes right now. She hasn't looked at her husband once. Instead, her pupils are wide and she looks like she wants to fuck Mav.

But maybe she's just tired of being saved.

Maybe she's known all along what I just now realized.

This life is a prison.

But the next words out of her mouth don't sound like she's trying to save herself or assert her independence.

"Do you like your fingers wrapped around my throat, Maverick?" Her eyes are hooded as she peers up at him through long lashes, and I wonder if they smoked together.

My teeth hurt, I'm clenching my jaw so hard. My mind is still numb from whatever Atlas gave me. Something is wrong with him, and I don't know if I can speak about it, but I need help, and I need to talk to Maverick, alone, and he wasn't even looking for me at first. He was with her.

Them.

And...what? She just threw a glass bottle at my head and he's still touching her.

"Shut up, Sid," I snarl, unable to stop myself.

"Baby girl," Lucifer adds, but he doesn't move, two feet from the both of them.

Her glazed eyes find him as she smiles, still dangling the knife carelessly between her fingers, ignoring me completely.

"You like it too, don't you?" Her tone is seductive, but her words are so slurred. Like they're not hers at all. "Baby, come kiss me." She's practically moaning, and I see Lucifer's jaw jump.

“Maverick,” he says, never taking his eyes from his wife. “Let go of her.”

Mav snorts. “Not until she apologizes.”

I’m still unsteady, and my mouth is dry, and I feel drained, but Lucifer, Sid, Cain, his girl, and Mavy’s eyes come to me.

I don’t like it, not least of all because I know Sid fucking Rain Malikov whatever the hell her actual name is won’t ever say sorry to me.

And when I meet her wide, silver eyes, she’s smiling. “She sucked my husband’s dick.”

My eyes dart to Mav’s tattooed fingers around her throat. Her name on his hand.

I can feel my blood pressure shoot up. I don’t have time for this. I need to talk to Mav, but I don’t know what I’m going to say, and this girl fight doesn’t matter to me right now, so I just say it. Exactly what I’m thinking. “And you know who sucked *Maverick’s*?” She narrows her eyes as I speak. “*Your husband.*”

She lunges from the fridge, dropping her knife by her side, but Mav slams her back at the exact same time Lucifer is in my face, staring down at me.

“Maverick,” he says as he looks at me. “You’ve got about two seconds to let her go before I fuck up your girl.”

His demon eyes are locked on mine, and the way he looks at me, like I’m nothing, it doesn’t crush me.

It enrages me. The three of them are so caught up in themselves, so wrapped up in their bullshit, incestual drama, they don’t even realize something very *evil* is happening here, from one of the two Unsaints not currently in this room.

“Fuck. *You.*” I shove Lucifer’s bare chest, my hands slipping along the hard muscle from the pool water still running in rivulets down his body. Yeah, he’s gotten stronger and more built, but he didn’t expect me to fight back.

No one ever does.

He stumbles a few steps backward, but my rage is like a live wire under my skin. I shove him again, and again, leaving red marks from my palms on his pale skin.

“You don’t wanna do this,” he says, his words low as his eyes flash.

“Fuck you,” I say again, balling my hand into a fist like Atlas taught me and aiming straight for his dick. I don’t think he anticipated me going there, and he hunches his body, but his hands cover his abs and the scars over them, like he thought I wouldn’t have the nerve to hit him in the balls. I do though, and he swears under his breath, stumbling another step back. “Fuck you and fuck *her*.” I don’t think I need to point out which her I’m referring to. I raise my fist again, Lucifer’s pale face even more ashen, but he grabs my wrist hard enough my bones ache. I lift my other hand, and he snatches that one too. I don’t care. I stand on my tiptoes to get in his face. “I hope to God your son doesn’t grow up to be anything like either of you—”

I hear a loud scream from my back, then nails are digging into my throat, jerking me backward. My feet slip on the wet floor, and Lucifer’s eyes are wide as he stares at Sid behind me.

“Don’t talk about my fucking son.” She hisses those words as she yanks my hair to spin me around, and the room moves in circles, vertigo keeping me unbalanced again. I want to tell Mav I was drugged, and Atlas is doing fuck-knows-what and maybe someone should actually check on the son in question here, but I see the flash of a blade as Sid lunges for me and I can’t say anything.

I catch her arm, thanks to Atlas’s training, and use it to drive her backward. She’s tiny, and uncoordinated because she’s fucked up, so it doesn’t take much to shove her against the island in the center of the kitchen.

She’s still trying to knife me, but her movements are so sloppy, I don’t even know how she got out of Mav’s grip in

the first place. Maybe he let her go so he could get to me. I can only dream, I guess, because now I don't hear either of them behind me.

It's just me. And her.

She's been nothing but a bitch to me since she *left her husband for his worst enemy*, and yeah, I fucked up in her eyes, but it was all for Maverick. What does she even do for Lucifer? What has she ever done besides break his heart? She hasn't told him what she found, then she betrayed me by flirting with Maverick right after I promised I'd help her.

I slide my hand up her arm, yanking the black and purple hilt out of her slippery fingers. She's screaming at me, the words bouncing off of me because I've been called far worse.

I lift my knee and drive it into her pelvis, and with only a scrap of black fabric to protect her, I know it hurt. She stops screaming, her eyes watering as she hisses between her teeth, doubling over, her hands covering her groin.

I copy Mav's movement, circling her throat with my fingers, and I don't think this time she's so turned on. Her nails come to my forearm, scratching me, but I hold the tip of the blade to her low belly, above the scar of her J, and she stills.

Everything seems quiet.

I don't even hear music anymore.

I press the point a little deeper, and part of my exhausted brain is surprised Lucifer isn't stepping in, but I take advantage of it.

"You wanna say you're sorry now?" I ask her quietly.

She doesn't speak for a moment, and I wonder if she learned these silent pauses from her asshole of a husband.

I don't let the exhaustion catch up to me. I don't think about Atlas or Cain or all the other secrets I've been told to keep. Right now, it's just me. And Sid Malikova.

After a long stretch of silence, her hands still wrapped around my arm at her throat, she says, "You think you're

better than me?" Her voice is low, and she doesn't look away from me.

I push the blade a little deeper and she doesn't make a sound, but I see the moment I make her bleed. It's only enough to nick her, but her pupils go round, like she's shocked I had the nerve.

"You think you have something over me because you never left him?" She keeps talking, and I press my thumb to the hollow of her throat, so her next words are hoarse. "Because you've catered to his every fucking whim, and you stood by his side even while his cock was in my mouth?"

My heart aches with those words. I was there. I watched it all. He kissed me afterward. He fucked me. Like... like it was nothing. Like I shouldn't be mad. I followed his lead. I did everything he wanted me to when he briefly explained it to me in the kitchen before the ceremony. And he still doesn't look at me like he looks at her. He still walked out on me to find her.

"You're a fucking pawn just like I am." Her voice breaks, eyeliner running in rivulets down her cheeks. "Just like... they are." She doesn't look at them, but I know who she's talking about. Her throat moves beneath my hand as she swallows. "Just like Rain is."

My own throat feels tight, thick with emotion. It catches me off guard, her love for her son in the midst of this fight. It's not that I didn't think she loved him, especially after the way she looked so haunted earlier with the papers, but Malikov and Rain love is so growly and threatening and punches to the face or knives to the chest. It isn't ever soft and kind and, like in this moment, vulnerable.

I feel myself softening. And just as I start to move the blade from her abdomen, crimson streaming down into her bikini, something shatters behind me, hands fist in my hair, and I'm jerked to my feet as the knife in my fingers clatters to the floor. I slump over though, unable to stand on my

own with the sudden change in position. It probably looks like Lucifer hit me, even though he didn't.

"Lucifer!" Sid yells his name, and I know it's him, but just as he yanks my hair to pull me back, my body forced upright, he releases me, and I spin around, spots popping in front of my eyes as Maverick tackles Lucifer to the ground, his head thudding on the tile floor.

After that, everything is a blur on the kitchen floor.

"You dumb motherfucker." Maverick's fist collides with Luce's nose, and Sid is swiping up the knife from the ground as blood spurts down Luce's face. But he really has been working out and just as Sid gets to Mav, knife in hand, Lucifer flips them, so he's on top, holding Mav's hands over his head, Maverick's chest heaving beneath his white T and blood spills from Lucifer's nose in patters, crimson dots exploding along the fabric.

Lucifer releases one of Mav's wrist, and Maverick shoots for his throat. I turn to Cain, only to find Cain is gone. *Jesus.*

Diving toward Lucifer, I'm on his back for half a second before Sid drags me off, then she's on top of me, brandishing the knife as blood trails from her own wound.

It doesn't take much to wrap my legs around her skinny ass and flip too. When I do, I catch the knife just as it slices through the fabric of my hoodie. If it's grazed me, I don't even feel it. Instead, I'm raising it up, like I'm going to plunge it into her pretty face, match the scar she has over her brow from Lucifer's knife.

But maybe that's exactly what she's imagining, because she shakes her head, muttering, "No, no, no," so quietly beneath her breath I barely hear her. And before I can react, someone is pulling me off, my head collides with the tile, the knife is plucked from my fingers, and it's Lucifer on top of me.

His hand is planted squarely against my chest, the knife held to my throat as his demon blue eyes seem black, the

way his pupils swallow them whole. He isn't high, I don't think. He's just horrifyingly angry. Maybe both.

"Do you have a fucking death wish?" His nose touches mine and I smell the gum on his breath. He hasn't been smoking. Or drinking. He's completely sober and willing to kill me, for hurting his girl. The lights recessed in the kitchen ceiling are bright, and I blink, gripping his shoulders. His blood drips onto my mouth, warm and coppery. I suck in a breath and the iron warmth spills down my throat.

He smiles and under normal circumstances, I find Lucifer stupidly hot, but right now, he just looks terrifying.

My temple is throbbing, and for some reason the backs of my thighs ache, and all I want is for this to end.

I am never coming back here. Fucking. Ever.

Lucifer forces my chin to lift with the flat side of the blade. I'm looking down my nose even as I stare up at him.

"If you ever touch my wife again..." With one deft movement, he flips the blade, the sharp side just on the underside of where my chin connects to my throat. "If you ever make Lilith bleed again..." He twitches his hand, a subtle movement, enough to slice into my skin, a sting causing me to gasp as his mouth curves into a wicked smile. His nose is still dripping blood, all over my lips, and I rub them together, the slick liquid coating my mouth like a balm. "If you *ever* talk about my fucking son again..."

He leans down closer, his mouth over my own. I feel his chest pressed to mine, the rise and fall of it, weight crushes down on me.

"I will—"

A loud, brash laugh cuts him off. Then a voice says, "You're not gonna do shit." Lucifer is jerked off of me by Mavy, and I don't waste time as I sit up.

Maverick releases Lucifer, who finds his feet, but just when I think it's all over, Sid slumped into a counter, clearly too fucking intoxicated to want to fight anymore,

Maverick cocks his fist back, and launches it into Lucifer's face.

Lucifer's head spins as Sid cries out, and I see blood spray from Lucifer's mouth.

"Stay the fuck away from Ella, and keep your goddamn wife far from her too." He jerks Lucifer's chin so he's forced to face him. "I put up with a lot of fucking bullshit for the *both* of you. *You fucking owe me.*"

Then he drops his hand and turns away from him, and I see blood on his knuckles as Mav's baby blue eyes come to mine.

Lucifer spits on the ground, twirling the knife between his fingers. "She's a fucking cunt," he says with venom. "I might owe you, but I don't owe her *shit.*"

Maverick grinds his teeth but ignores him as he stalks toward me. Lucifer picks Sid up, one arm going under her knees, the other around her back as he cradles her to his chest.

Maverick offers me his hand.

I can't tell what he's thinking when he looks at me, but I know he's taking in the blood on my face. His best friend's blood.

I grab his hand and he hauls me to my feet. I expect a fight, but surprising me, he presses me to his side and says, "Let's go."

XLV

Maverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16
LIBER

I HATE the sight of his blood on her face.

Just like I fucking hated Nikita's man touching her, putting a gun to her head. And after I did what I did to all of them, I hated myself too. With Atlas, it felt like reclaiming the moment. Controlling it in a way I could.

But I shouldn't have left her.

I lock the door behind us, gripping her hand as I lead her into the bathroom, everything dark tile with royal blue accents.

When I turn to her, crushing her fingers with mine, she's got one hand on her throat, and I see where Lucifer cut her.

Blood roars in my ears, and I desperately want to go down the hall and pay him back for marring her skin, but I think I've done enough of that. I think I've paid far too

much fucking attention to Lucifer and his bullshit, all while Ella just stood by, waiting for me.

Well, I'm here now.

I think of Sid hurling that bottle, a party trick I've heard she likes to do, and Ella ducking fast enough to fucking impress the shit out of me.

Desire is like a punch to the gut, and suddenly, I don't give a fuck about the blood on her mouth, streaking down her chin, along her throat. Lucifer's and hers, it was pissing me off, but now, with her being right here, all mine, it kind of turns me on.

Her chest is heaving, black hoodie still on that I guess she got from our closet, but I can make out the rise and fall of her breasts regardless.

Fuck, I love you.

But whatever I'm feeling, whatever I'm thinking, it doesn't seem like we're on the same page, because she yanks her hand from mine, crossing both arms over her chest, letting the thin stream of blood drip into the edges of her hoodie.

"I need to clean up." Her words are resolute, her nose in the air as she glares at me. It's a dismissal, those words. She wants to clean up *without me*.

I run a hand through my hair, glancing at myself in the gilded royal blue mirror beside us. I have blood on my hand, my eyes are red, and Lucifer didn't just mark *Ella* in crimson. I drop my hand to the edge of my shirt, tugging it away from my body as I take in the red stain.

"Okay," I say, still looking at my brother's blood. "Clean up."

She doesn't speak, and when I ball the fabric of my shirt in my fist and meet her gaze, I see defiance.

"I want to clean up, alone."

The adrenaline starts to fade, everything we just went through dimming into the background of my mind, and I realize why all of this shit started in the first place.

It's almost four in the fucking morning.

I couldn't find her after I spoke with Brooklin.

I looked all over the fucking place for her, including going back to Atlas's fucking room. Neither of them were there.

"Where the fuck were you?"

Her freckled face is tinged with pink, but she doesn't drop my gaze. "Where were *you*?" she counters, baring her teeth. "You walked out on me. You fuck me with a gun to Atlas's head, then you turn it on *me*, and *you*. *Walked. Out.*"

I chew the inside of my cheek, shaking my head. Then the words come out, barely more than a whisper. "Did you go with Atlas, somewhere else?" Obviously, I checked our room too, and she wasn't fucking here.

But if she went with him elsewhere, after what we did... Did he do what he couldn't when I held the gun to her?

Her pink skin turns red. It feels like an answer enough as a weight presses down on my chest, making it hard to fucking breathe. "No."

I take a step toward her, and she takes a step back, her bare feet slipping a second and squeaking on the midnight black tile. "When did you start fucking lying to me, pretty girl?"

She hugs herself tighter. "I'm not lying."

"Where did you go, then?"

"I came up here."

I smile, but my jaw aches from clamping my teeth together. It takes me a second to get the word out. "Yeah?"

She looks confused, her brows pulling together as she rears back. "Yes," she says through gritted teeth.

"When was that?"

Her face pales, but she says nothing.

"Where did you go with him? Some place I couldn't find you two, huh? Did you fuck him again, Ella?"

She shakes her head, her skin ashen.

“Did you ride his dick? Did you want it all over again when I wasn’t watching, huh?”

She’s silent.

My mind spins.

I start to think about when Atlas began to be late to Council.

Since... since I saw him and Ella in the basement together at Rain’s party. My vision swims, and I have to blink to clear it, anger making it very fucking hard to breathe. A rush of adrenaline floods every cell in my body, and I want to hurt her. I want to fucking scream.

But you forced them to fuck. You made it happen. You orchestrated all of it, then you walked out. What did you think would happen, you fucking idiot?

You can’t save anyone. You only fuck them up.

“Answer me, Ella.” All these thoughts grow louder in my brain. It’s true, I did set it up, but I walked in on them first. And if Ella fucked him without me, if she cheated on me...

She’s shaking her head.

“Answer me, now.”

She swallows hard, but doesn’t speak.

“Fucking answer me, goddammit!” I slam my fist on the counter and she doesn’t even blink.

She straightens, in fact, like my outburst gives her composure in some twisted give and take. And as blood drips across her skin, she says, *“You left me.”*

Our eyes burn into one another.

I regret it. *I regret so much of my entire fucking life.* I hate this, feeling like I’m falling apart. This is Lucifer’s thing. *I don’t fucking do this.*

I can’t.

I cannot be that person. I have to... I have to stay strong.

“Did you know I pay *both* of our cell phone bills?” I ask her quietly, staring at the tile beneath my feet, because I don’t want to look at her. My jaw ticks, my head screaming

at me to fucking destroy something. To slam my fist on the counter again.

“Yes. I—”

“Did you know, if I wanted to, I could look at every fucking text you send?” I try not to see it in my head. What she might have texted him and deleted. What they talk about, without me. It occurs to me then this is only a fraction of what Lucifer felt, and I suddenly feel for him all over again.

Her hand comes to the counter as she steadies herself, but I still can't look her in the eye. She doesn't fucking speak.

“And do you know how fucking *hurt* I would be if I knew you were fucking with one of my brothers behind my back? What did I walk in on earlier, huh? Would you have let him have you if I didn't make it happen? How often do you two text each other?”

Another second of silence. Then she explodes. “I. Am not. *Fucking*. Texting him!” She screams the words and I actually flinch. “I'm not fucking *calling* him, like you do with Sid!” I snap my head up then, and we both take a step toward each other, like we're opposite fucking ends of a magnet. She cannot be serious. “I'm not talking to them every fucking day like you do with her, and she comes over with her baby, *your* baby—”

I slam my fist on the counter, leaning in toward her. I know my thoughts are muddled because I drank too much and smoked too much but I don't care. I wanna fucking fight. “*My* baby?” I can barely control the tremor in my voice. “*My fucking baby?*”

She doesn't back down, standing on her tiptoes instead to get closer to my fucking level. “He could be yours,” she says, her voice strong. “*You fucked her, you said it yourself.*”

I flex my jaw, narrowing my eyes. “You don't fucking get it, do you?”

“Get *what?*” she spits back, even her ears are going red, she’s so fucking mad. So. Fucking. Delusional.

“You don’t get what *family* fucking *means* to me, Ella. That’s what. You. Don’t. *Get it.*”

She looks like I hit her, blinking and pulling back, her lips pressed together like she’s trying not to cry. “I do get it. I know you love her and—”

“This isn’t about her.”

“And I know you two have some sick bond that I don’t understand, and I don’t get and maybe I never will—”

“This is *not* about her, Ella.” How can she not fucking see that?

“And you two share something we won’t ever share, and I know you don’t regret fucking her because you did it again right in front of my *fucking face*—”

“And you *liked it.*” I reach for her, fisting the collar of her hoodie as I yank her easily toward me, my forehead hitting hers. She darts her hands out, grabbing onto my biceps. “You hate it, because *you fucking liked watching it, didn’t you?* I saw you, Ella. The entire fucking time Sid was on her back and she was becoming *one of us*, I watched you.” Her breath is on my lips, and it’s sickly sweet, despite the blood marring her skin.

She digs her nails into my skin. “So, it was easy for you? Watching me swallow down Lucifer’s cum because hey, at least I was doing it *with you?* It was *easy?* It was easy tonight too, wasn’t it? It was easy for you to walk away after you and Atlas both used me? Just like with Lucifer, so fucking simple for you, huh? So *easy.*”

“Seemed pretty fucking *easy* for you.”

I think she’s broken my skin, the way her nails dig in even deeper. “I never said it was easy. It was hard to watch you let him suck you off. The entire *thing* was hard, and weird, and...” She lets her eyes flutter closed, only for one second, and in that second, I realize I never once thought about how it felt for her to watch Lucifer with me, like that.

“I was scared,” she finally continues, looking me dead in the eye. “I wanted to do whatever you wanted me to do. I wanted to...” Her voice breaks, but she doesn’t look away. “To make you happy. To prove I could handle it. Handle *you*. Because you chose me, and I wanted to make sure I was... *worthy*.”

I think about that moment, after Noctem. I never told her I was jealous. I never told her not only did I feel overprotective, not only did I not let Lucifer be fucking rough, it kinda tore me a part a little. But I just... I was coming down from a fucking trip and my brother was falling apart and I... I didn’t know what else to do. It doesn’t seem to make a whole lot of fucking sense from the outside, I guess, but when you’re raised like I was, it seems perfectly fucking logical. *Sex heals*. Sid said that to me once. At first, it seemed like a bunch of fucking bullshit. Her way of justifying being a whore. But maybe she was right.

I guess the opposite could be true too. *Sex can fuck you up*. And tonight, when I wasn’t watching Atlas fuck her to save anything at all, when I was just doing it because... because I don’t even know anymore... I think I fucked us all up. And yeah, she was alone with him, but I had sent her away, didn’t I? In front of Sid, I belittled her.

I messed up.

I lock eyes with Ella, both of us breathing hard. I don’t let go of her hoodie, bunched in my fist.

I cup the back of her neck with my other hand, my thumb on the side of her throat. And I try to tell her the truth in the only way I can. “If you ever so much as look at Lucifer the wrong way, I’d probably gut him, Ella. If you ever fucked with someone behind my back, I’d kill them.”

Her mouth drops open.

I run my thumb up and down her neck and she shivers.

“It wasn’t easy. I was fucked up. *He* was fucked up. It wasn’t easy watching him hurt, either. But you...*you were*

so fucking beautiful."

She doesn't say anything at all. Like she's... fucking stunned.

"I know you did that *for me*. It wasn't fucking easy, Ella." I tilt my head, my lips brushing hers, the copper tang of Lucifer's blood blooming on my mouth. "Being with *you* isn't easy for me."

I see her throat roll as she swallows.

"But I know it's not easy for you, either. I know it's bizarre and fucked up and I'm sorry. I should've never dragged you into it and some days..."

She takes a deep breath, like steeling herself against what I'm going to say next.

I let my eyes flutter closed. "Some days I wish I could take it back, because you deserve better."

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XLVI



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16

LIBER

“I WANT TO SEE HER.” I hate the way my voice bends and breaks around those words. It only feeds into what my father truly believes, anyway. *I’m a coward.*

Silence on the other end of the line. Then, “Soon.” The word is cold and clipped and surprises me, because I expected a verbal admonishment, or for him to hang up. But before I can revel in the shock, Dad speaks again. “I assume she’s still alive?”

I lift my gaze from where I’m sitting on the floor. Sevryn is occupying a black, wing-backed chair, his gray eyes on mine. His tattooed hands are clasped in his lap, and he’s got this feverish look in his eyes like he wants to eat me alive. Not out of anger. But some kind of hunger. The top two buttons of his white shirt are undone, and I see the tattoos on one side of his chest. One side only.

Absentmindedly, I reach for the edge of my hat.

The hunger grows in Sevryn's young face. His lips part and I see the muscles beneath his shirt rise. Fall. He doesn't want to eat *me*. It's the answers on the other end of the line he's starving for.

I can relate. Now we both have a chokehold on girls inside of a haunted city. At least mine is. I don't know who Sevryn is waiting for, or where she is.

Sevryn doesn't know though, what I'm supposed to do with Ella. What I have to finish for us to get what we want. He understands my job is related to her, but he thinks I'm only supposed to test her loyalty. *Scelus* is just that. A test to find out if those from the outside are worthy.

But my dad has already decided Ella isn't.

Even so, Sevryn thinks she's only going to get left by Maverick if she fails. He has no idea I'm the one manipulating her into disloyalty in the first place, to try and make it easier for me to kill her.

"It would be too obvious," I growl the words to my dad. "I can't here." Which is exactly what he told me to do at The Madilyn. He said it was urgent, for reasons he didn't decide to give me. And I know the "she" he's referring to.

It isn't my girl, or Sevryn's fantasy.

And when I knock my head back against the wall and feel the clock ticking down, it isn't Natalie's deep brown eyes I find inside my mind.

It's Ella's green ones. Pale skin. Dark red hair. Submissive, obedient, she could take it all. Then I see Maverick, demanding I finish inside of her. He was fucked up. Red eyes, nervous energy. Fucked up, but despite what we did, in that moment, he was testing me. He knows something is up, but he doesn't know what, and he wanted to see if I'd truly hurt her and him by risking getting her knocked up. No matter what happened, he *needed* her. And he needed me to refuse.

I did, but he still walked away.

Cain helped me after that, just like he helped her when he snuck inside their house to grab his shirt back before we left for Liber, so Ella wouldn't suffer Maverick's wrath for something beyond her control. Then he helped me carry her to the only room in Liber hidden from the rest of my brothers.

Is that brotherhood, or something else?

Are we playing this game correctly? Are we passing the tests? I yank my hat off, letting my scalp breathe as I toss the hat to the floor and massage my temple with two fingers, all under Sevryn's gaze.

He has to go back to his room before five in the morning. We've got about ten minutes. Rain gets up early, and Lucifer will check in on him. They're on the same floor now, and I'm sure Luce will bring Rain down to let Sid sleep.

Now Sid might trust Sevryn a little though, the way I overheard her and Ella's conversation in the hallway.

Sevryn detests lying. He wants to help. After he found out Sid shot someone for Lucifer, for Rain, he admires her a little.

I should hate him for exposing more to the girls, but I can't find it in me to do it.

"You're going to wait, aren't you?" I croak out the words to my dad. I think of Natalie. Opening my eyes to meet Sevryn's, I think of his ghost girl. Who knows if she's still alive? If he saw her breathing before he came to Sanctum for his initiation, she was probably kept unharmed only as an incentive for him. The 6 see a bond and they exploit it, before they fucking rip it to shreds. When I look at Sevryn, I know that so well now.

Images flash behind my eyes. Lucifer. A red rope. A circle. Dirt in his nails. An inhuman scream. The kind a person makes when they're on the brink of death.

What will happen to us this year?

“You had the opportunity, and you didn’t take it.” My dad’s voice is brittle, like ice. “I came to The Madilyn to tell you I needed this sped the fuck up, or did you miss all of that? Did you know Lucifer was speaking to Elijah late last night, begging him to protect you all from RC?”

I clench my teeth and think of seeing Lucifer in the darkened hallway after I manipulated Ella into coming with me upstairs. Luce had his phone in hand. But what he asked me... *How does he know what I did with Samson? Has Elijah found out Edith’s part in it all?*

“Which means I’ve paid very close attention to *everything* that’s gone on inside that *secure* mansion of yours and your friends.”

Blood rushes to my head as I think of my *father* seeing or knowing what I did with Ella. I glance at Sevryn and find his eyes are wide as he stares at me.

“You could have killed her. When Cain was making a girl scream and you were presumably alone with her inside a room, when you took that marker to her skin to start it, *you could have finished it.*”

Scelus. I told Ella part of the truth. The rest is that Lucifer is in charge of it, and it has nothing to do with me at all. Except for the fact I know, before Luce, that the 6 want Ella dead.

“Natalie is set to start shooting another film at the Villa. And you know how Arlo gets so *into* his takes.”

My spine crawls, hearing the director’s name. He’s known for his pseudo-snuff films. *Real enough to haunt you.*

If something happened to Natalie on set, Arlo Estere would get away with it. And my father has Arlo under his thumb, considering he maintains the house Arlo loves to shoot at.

“Do not miss another opportunity, Atlas.”

Then I hear it. The click. Dead silence.

I drop my cellphone to the floor with a clatter and Sevryn shoots up from his chair. “Well?” His accented voice

is a bark. “What is it?”

I bury my head in my fucking hands. *I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.*

“When?” Sevryn continues. “When is she free? When do I get who I was promised?”

I laugh out loud, a deranged sound buried in my palms, but it silences Sevryn. Shaking my head, without looking up at him, I give him the only answer I have. “When I can uphold my end of the bargain.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sevryn". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping initial 'S' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'n'.

Alone in my room at this fucking house, *Liber*, I pluck up the scissors from my nightstand. I asked him for it. *Atlas*. We aren't friends. I don't have any of those. But we have a bond neither of us asked for when Adam Medici plucked me away from the orphanage and set us both on the same side. Maybe he knows what I wanted to do, and maybe he just no longer cares.

I close my eyes and think about what happened only hours ago. Atlas snuck me to a secret room so he could call his father. So he could ask for forgiveness, in his own way, because I guess he did not do what he was supposed to.

I understand it. When I pulled Sid from her bed, when I took her prints the night before we met, I did not want to. I

regret it, but offering the papers to her that Edith gave to me, it was my apology. And I am supposed to murder her, but I am not so sure I can. And I do not know now where that leaves me.

I take a breath in through my nose.

I hear the girl I want reassuring me.

Out through my mouth.

"Everything is okay. Everything is fine."

In.

"Here, hide in here with me. They're only fighting. It's okay."

Out.

I lean back against my bed, sitting on the floor, staring at the nook with bay windows surrounding it. Midnight stares back at me.

The scissors tremble in my hand.

I swallow down the bile in my throat as I swim in a fog of memories I cannot hold onto. My body shivers. I imagine running up a staircase. Someone was chasing me, but it wasn't *her*.

There was a balcony. Hands pressed to my spine.

Then my life changed.

I caught a glimpse behind the curtain, and I didn't rip it down. I suffocated in it instead.

My throat feels tight.

My chest rises. Falls.

What happened, in between? *Who* was chasing me, and why can't I remember them?

But the girl with blonde hair, blue eyes, she was an angel for me.

Then I had a life spent buried in dirty sheets and covered in semen that was rarely mine.

I lift my hips, shoving down my sweats and my boxer briefs, and I splay the scissors and bring the edge to my inner thigh. It's covered in tattoos, like the rest of my leg. A castle, bats, a casket. I dig the tip in, and my body tenses,

but I stare at my pale skin and imagine Moscow. The orphanage.

I don't remember the plane, but I must have flown on one. I grew up in America, didn't I?

Adam Medici promised me.

I keep digging in the blade of the splayed scissors, despite the pain. Despite the way I clench my teeth as I carve blood from the castle, beneath a bat's wing.

My stomach rolls, and I feel sick. Not from the pain, but the mess. *The fucking mess.* Every house they sent me to, every place they promised a loving home, I was covered in a *mess.*

It was like I didn't exist for them. I was not a foster child. I was not a gift. *I was a piece of furniture. A thing to be used.*

I wasn't really *there.*

Cave adsum. A phrase I found one day in a book. *Cave adsum.*

Beware, I am fucking here.

I don't notice the man in the darkness until he speaks. I have been at Shadow Villa for an entire day now, flown from Moscow to the States.

I do not know why, but Monday flew with me. She is busy though, somewhere in this big house. I am waiting in a living room.

"Sevryn Otto Astor." My name sounds like a curse from his lips.

I turn my head, and watch as turquoise eyes appear from the shadows, attached to a tall man in a suit. He cocks his head as he studies me.

I shift nervously on the red velvet couch.

"What do you know of the Unsaints?" There seems to be a mocking when he says the word, but I know of them. I

know of them well, because Mora has been schooling me this week.

The chosen ones. The highest order beneath the 6, and they rank far above anyone in the organization, save for the headquarters in Moscow. Rival's Claw. They own the orphanage, Madame Mora told me. They are important. I must do this job well. And I get something in return, she told me.

I will be paid, and not only in money.

"I'm familiar," I say. I turn to face the man fully, scanning his body for weapons. I see nothing but I'm sure there's something buried beneath his suit.

The man tilts his head, studying me. "Do you remember your sister?"

Sister.

It sounds true. Is this the girl I dream of?

I flick my tongue along my bottom lip, narrowing my eyes. "Yes." Blonde hair. Blue eyes.

"I have work for you."

"What if I don't want to take it?"

The man laughs, and it causes goosebumps to prick along my arms, under my dress shirt. "You will," he says, his eyes flashing. "I'm Adam Medici."

The name vaguely registers as one Mora told me, but it doesn't mean much to me.

"And the Unsaints need a spy."

When I drop the scissors, blood streaking down my thigh, toward my flaccid cock, I'm shaking all over. I bury my head in my hands, letting the blood sully me, and I can only hope Adam Medici meant what he promised me.

My sister.

XLVII

Lucifer

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16

LIBER

I FLICK THE LIGHTER, inhaling as I pinch the cigarette between my index finger and thumb. The nicotine fills my lungs and I push my lighter into the pocket of my sweats, leaning against my locked car in the night.

Liber is silent and I can't see a single light coming from inside the fortress as my guards prowl around, rifles slung over their chests, forests surrounding us.

It was my idea to drag everyone out here after the fight last night and spending the day avoiding one another, but now I'm not even so sure what the fuck there is to say.

Cain is silent, like Ezra.

And Atlas... he's currently holding a staring contest with Maverick.

I think of how Atlas held my gaze the night we found Samson's body. I think about how no one has mentioned

him again. No one seems to have answers on what happened to him. But last night, Elijah had a guess.

I asked Atlas when I saw him with Ella in the corridor. Of course he didn't answer. But now, I glance at Atlas as he leans against his Range—Sevryn inside it, who looked so hungover when we walked out here I thought he might puke—and I think about bringing that little corpse up again.

Cain is leaning against his Camaro across from me, and Ezra is next to him, arms folded over his chest. Something with a heavy bass is thumping from inside the ZL1.

"Tell me where you were last night, Atlas."

Atlas adjusts the backward hat on his head as he looks at Maverick. "You mean after we were fucking Ella?"

I freeze, my breath caught in my lungs. *What the fuck?* I think of seeing Atlas and Ella and realize I don't need to confess that to Maverick after all. What the fuck was he thinking?

Cain is the first one to react, with a laugh, and he pushes his hands into the pockets of his wool coat as he shakes his head, grinning. "You need to stop sharing her before she forgets who she really belongs to," he says coolly.

Maverick dips his chin as he darts his eyes to Cain. "Yeah? And *you* need to stop putting your nose where it doesn't fucking belong before I pay Alivia a visit." We all have our skeleton bandanas on, and he pulls at his now, twisting his fingers in it. I'm surprised he's wearing it because he's stopped since his parents were killed. Still, he doesn't have a joint between his fingers, so I assume him playing with his bandana is a preoccupation for his hands. Or maybe he's just trying not to swing at Cain.

"Chill," Ezra says from beside Cain, who only smiles wickedly at Mav. "He's right. Stop treating her like a toy if you want her to be respected by everyone outside of us. Get your head on straight."

Maverick whips his head to Ezra, pushing away from the G-wagon we own and keep at Liber. “Says the alcoholic, fucking my goddamn sister—”

“Don’t talk about Brooklin,” Ezra says, a growl in his words. It surprises me because I assumed they were just fucking. But he’s suddenly sounding overprotective.

Maverick steps closer and he’s got his back muscles coiled into knots, the way he’s all tense now. “*Don’t talk about Brooklin?*” he repeats the words, his voice low.

Ezra snorts. I can’t see him right now, because Maverick is blocking my view and it’s dark out, only the dull orange lamplight above us giving anything to see by, but I hear the disdain in Ezra’s words when he says, “You heard what the fuck I said.”

“Say it for me one more time.”

Cain laughs. “Don’t make a fool out of yourself,” he says, his dark eyes on Mav.

I glance at Atlas and see he’s watching everything go down. I could let it go, but that was a pretty bold question he asked Mav, even if it did go down. There are some things we just shouldn’t fucking speak about. Not all our dirty little habits need to be aired out in the open like this.

But again, I think of him and Ella walking down the hallway. Was it Atlas dragging her into the shadows on that video? Why were he and Cain walking to her house on a separate night?

I assumed this all was part of what *I’ve* been asked to do with Ella, or else Ella was fucking Mav over and that’s my answer on her loyalty, but now I’m not so sure.

I inhale again from my cigarette, and on the exhale, smoke clouding from my mouth, I say, “You’re awfully fucking quiet over there, now, Atlas.”

Slowly, Maverick turns around, taking the tension down between him and Ezra. There’s a lot of shit to unpack there, but this isn’t a goddamn therapy session. If it was, Mav and I might actually talk about the giant fight we got

into last night. As it is, we're deciding to pretend it didn't happen. Besides, Ella's little knife wound went through the J on Sid's hip, so that solves one of my problems.

Maverick's eyes go to Atlas.

Atlas just shrugs. "Just listening to where this was gonna go."

Maverick regards him carefully, that inverted cross on his face pulling down. "How often you text my girl, huh?"

Atlas smiles. "Why don't you ask her that?"

I lean against the BMW, glancing up at the moon. I told Sid I wouldn't be out here long, and I want to fucking mean it. They need to get their shit sorted. My girl isn't talking to anyone else, and I no longer have these fucking problems. It took us a long damn time to get here, but now I am, and I don't care for this bullshit drama. The fight last night was enough. I'm suddenly just... done with it.

If it weren't for Elijah's orders, I wouldn't care if Cain and Atlas went to Ella and Mav's house. I wouldn't give a fuck she was speaking with someone in the shadows of their home while Maverick called my fucking wife.

In some ways, maybe I think it's what Maverick deserves. But now it's my problem, since Ortus is coming.

"Because I'm asking *you*." Maverick steps closer to Atlas, and Atlas straightens, dropping his hands by his side. He's not scared, no matter how young and innocent he looks.

"You worried she's not happy with you?" There's a rawness to Atlas's words, and again, I think of Natalie's brother. "You think I fucked her better than you did last night? Is that why you're feeling so self-conscious—"

Maverick fucking shoves him against his own car, pinning him there with one hand and grabbing his throat with the other. "Where's Natalie, huh? She know about her dead fucking brother?"

Cain sighs, and I watch Atlas carefully, trying to gauge his reaction. Did he tell her?

Atlas smirks, which surprises me. And a second later, I hear the snick of a blade.

Just like my fucking wife with the switchblade, I wonder if he got that trick from her.

“Back up off me, Mav.”

Maverick doesn't let him go, instead, he steps closer to the knife.

I think that's a bad idea, but I don't say a word. This is their fucking fight. He can lose it how he wants to.

“Nah. Answer my question. Does. Natalie. *Know?*” I know he's asking because he wants to know the answers to the same questions in my head. Who killed him, and why? And he probably wants to know if it was the same person who came for Julie. The same person who had video of Sid and Ella.

Elijah doesn't seem to think so, not after his call last night.

Thinking of Julie though, my stomach twists into knots, knowing I haven't done enough to find out if Esther followed my orders. I haven't done enough to find Finn again. I haven't even told any of this to Sid.

Atlas smiles. They stay in their standoff as he says, “Does she know I put a bullet in her brother's head, is that what you're asking?”

I dip my chin. Cain whistles under his breath. Even Ezra sucks in air.

“No,” Atlas continues, that same smile on his face. “She doesn't fucking know.”

Maverick is stunned. I can see it in the way he drops his hands from Atlas, stepping back. He swipes the back of his hand over his mouth, averting his gaze a second before he looks at me for the first time all night, then Atlas. “You did what now?”

Atlas lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “We all have jobs to do.” He sounds so fucking casual about it. He was the one who thought we should put a stop to the sex trafficking the

6 allegedly dabble in. *He* was the one of us who was supposed to have a goddamn heart.

“You still fucking her?” Cain asks, a genuine curiosity lining his words.

Now, something dark clouds over Atlas’s face. For some reason, as I exhale smoke through my nose then drop the butt of the cigarette to the ground, stepping on it, I raise my gaze to Sevryn, in the back of Atlas’s Range Rover, he just automatically climbed in there when we walked out of Liber.

The windows are down, so we can keep a fucking eye on him.

And Sevryn looks... pissed, staring at the back of Atlas’s head.

I push off from my car, coming closer, my boots scuffing the gravel lot. Cain has the music turned down, and I feel all of my brothers’ eyes on me. I might have fucked up this past year. I was off my game. Sid was running, and I couldn’t have that shit. She was trying to rip my heart to pieces by fucking Jeremiah Rain, but now, she’s in a house I own. She’s got *my* baby in her arms. She’s fucking mine, and with Lilith beside me, I can run this hell like I once did.

So, everyone looks to me as I step past Maverick, knocking his shoulder with mine and moving him out of my fucking way.

I stand head-to-head with Atlas, and he loses the smile that had been lingering on his face alongside that shadow. Dipping my chin, I ask him, “Where is she?” in a low voice, barely more than a whisper. I keep an eye on Sevryn too, waiting for both of their reactions.

Atlas doesn’t so much as blink.

Sevryn though, I see his jaw jump, the scar along his cheekbone seeming to flash under the moonlight with the movement.

“I don’t know,” Atlas says.

And I know he's fucking lying. Because as he speaks the words, he looks up, just a little, and to the left. It's not a big, obvious gesture, but on that second word, he looked away, for half a second, maybe less.

"You don't know?" I repeat, still quiet.

He's got the blade in his hand, but it's lowered at his side. I run this shit. He's not gonna fucking touch me. "I think that's what I said."

I smile at him, then run my tongue over my bottom lip, searching his eyes. It's deadly quiet, and I feel all of my brothers behind me. I step closer, until our bodies are only inches apart. I'm in his fucking face, and I can smell spearmint on him. I'm sure he's got the full scent of the cigarette I just smoked in his nose right now too, the way his nostrils flare, his dark eyes narrowed into slits.

"You're not hiding her at The Madilyn, are you?"

He can't hide his surprise at that question, and it makes me feel like I just hit him in the face, the satisfaction he gave me.

My brothers might've counted me out this past year. They might've thought I lost my fucking mind, and they're not exactly wrong. Between the coke and the crying and cutting myself at Liber and all the shit I did to Sid, I lost my step.

But I didn't let it all fall to shit.

I know everything about the brotherhood.

It seems Atlas thought he had kept that one thing a secret, but you can't buy a house—abandoned or not—without Elijah knowing about it, therefore, in turn, without me knowing, now that I'm going through *Ortus*.

Atlas is completely still. His facial muscles have just gone slack, his lips parted slightly as he leans against his Range.

"Yeah," I tell him, coming even closer. If I was so inclined, I could bite his full bottom lip. I drop my eyes to his mouth, then drag them back up. "Don't fucking lie to

me again.” I tilt my head, and our breath mingles. I’m feeling edgy again, without the coke I scored from the same guy who repaired my car *just in case*, and it’s gonna be another long few months to get past the feeling, but for now, I let it out on Atlas. “Where. The fuck. *Is Natalie?*”

I see it, out of the corner of my eye. Sevryn shifted in the backseat.

Atlas shuffles his feet, glancing down at the minimal space between us. I see his throat roll as he swallows, and I imagine slitting it for his disobedience. I won’t though. I wouldn’t kill him unless he fucked with *my* family, because at the end of the day, he still is that.

Familia.

He shakes his head, looking past me again. “I don’t know,” he repeats.

You are a terrible fucking liar.

We just stay that way for a moment, him staring past me, me imagining beating him fucking senseless to get the truth out of him.

But I think about what I would do to protect Sid. More than lie, I’d rip *anyone* limb from fucking limb. Besides, someone has answers for me, and he’s sitting in Atlas’s backseat right now.

I step back.

I feel the tension crack.

I jerk my chin toward Sevryn, who is watching me carefully. “Let’s go inside,” I say. And without another word to anyone, I head toward Liber.

XLVIII

Maverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16
LIBER

I SIT in the darkness of a G-wagon we keep at Liber, behind the wheel. I watch in the rear-view as Atlas, Ezra, and Cain disappear into the front door, guards alert on either side of it as they do.

I bring the joint to my lips, inhaling the tangy, earthy smoke, then I slouch down and exhale, turning my head toward the cracked window, cool, mid-October air streaming in as clouds of marijuana flow out. "THE SOUND" by The Plot in You plays through the speakers, the bass thudding softly. I close my eyes and imagine Ella last night, Lucifer on top of her. Sid throwing a bottle at her head.

The way she ducked so fucking fast.

I pull from the joint again, wanting to drift off into a fucking haze, but so many questions knot inside my mind, I

can't quite lift off, no matter how fast I smoke.

"You mean after we were fucking Ella?"

I clamp down on my back teeth, toss the roach out the window, then grab another pre-rolled joint from the case inside my bomber jacket. I snatch up the blue lighter from the console, and as I'm sparking up, I see a glint of something red approach the passenger door.

I unlock the doors and toss down the lighter as Ella climbs into the car, not saying a word.

She's dressed in white sweats and a white T-shirt, her arms crossed over her chest like she's cold, red hair tumbling in waves past her breasts.

The scent of vanilla fills the cabin of the car, even riding over the marijuana's tang.

"You come here to lecture me?" I ask quietly, pulling from my joint as she stares straight ahead. We've avoided one another most of the day. I woke up alone and found her in the kitchen, but she wasn't eating. Just sitting at the island staring at nothing.

She doesn't answer and I take another hit, turning my head and exhaling through my nose. I let my eyes close and none of that familiar anger crawls into my veins. I don't know if it's the weed or her, maybe a combination of both. For the first time in a long time, I don't want to fight anymore. I want to apologize again. I want to tell her I never want to share her again. It's eating at me. It was different, last night, and I should not have walked the fuck away. That was the stupid, cowardly thing to do.

But even with my newfound sense of ease, I can't help but ask it once more. "Where did you two go last night, Ella?"

Atlas killed his girlfriend's brother. It tumbles inside my head, my chest growing tight and heavy, like an elephant is sitting on it. If he'd do *that*, what wouldn't he do? And why was Sevryn in *his* car? And why did they both disappear when I was with Sid and Lucifer and Ez?

Ella still doesn't respond.

I take another pull, keeping my eyes shut. Maybe I don't want to know tonight.

A soft cotton blanket seems to rest over my shoulders. I want to fight it, rip off the metaphor, but for a second, I let myself sink under.

"Can I try it?"

My eyes snap open, the blanket long gone.

I turn my head to find Ella's green eyes locked on the joint in my hand. Sitting up straighter, I angle my body towards hers and arch a brow. "What?"

She nods her head, indicating the joint. "I want to get high too." Her voice is strong, if a little hoarse from fighting last night, staying up so late this morning.

I shake my head once though. "I'm not giving you drugs, pretty girl."

She smiles a little, white teeth flashing. "It's barely drugs. It's weed, Mavy."

Hearing her nickname for me brings back some of the warmth I was losing myself in. "Yeah, but you can get addicted all the same." I know it to be true, in the way I can't seem to handle anything—myself included—without it.

She laughs, the sound more like a giggle and I adore it. Something loosens inside my chest. "Just once. Just tonight," she pleads.

I lift my eyes to hers as she leans in toward the console.

"Just with you," she whispers. There's a double meaning there that I want to grab onto.

Still, I don't want to say yes. I meant what I said. I don't want to give her drugs. I don't mind watching her drink though, and last night was shit and maybe we could just *be* together. Without all the drama and the hiding out and the things I'm keeping from her to make her safe, like Mikhail's visit to me on our street.

Maybe she could get high in my lap, and I could kiss her neck and lose myself inside what she's always been to be. My escape. *Only mine. No one else is allowed to lose themselves in you. Not even my brothers.*

I widen my knees, placing one hand on my thigh. "Come here." I already moved the seat back when I first got in here, and there's plenty of room for her to climb over.

I bring the joint to my lips as she watches me, inhaling as the cherry glows bright between us.

She smiles again, her freckles stark against her pale skin. Then she moves, shifting over the console and awkwardly maneuvering herself to my side, laughing nervously as she does.

She turns her body, so her ass is on my lap, her back to my chest. Slouching down, I can see over her shoulder, her fingers gripping the bottom of the steering wheel.

Her weight and warmth and scent are welcome. A balm. I move one arm and wrap it around her chest, my fingers on her T-shirt, right over her belly.

She lifts a hand to reach for the joint, carefully held in front of her face, but I say, "No," and immediately, she drops her hand.

Every time she listens to me, it's like my heart is going to beat right out of my fucking chest. It's a high, better than any weed. And I forget all of last night. I forget everything with her obedience.

Pinching the joint between my thumb and forefinger, I bring it up to her mouth, watching her part her lips carefully.

"Listen," I tell her, dipping my chin so my mouth is by her ear. Her body tenses up against me, her ass over my growing cock. "Don't slobber on it, okay? It's not my dick."

She giggles, pressing further into me, her slender fingers tightening on the wheel. "Okay, okay," she says, something like a shyness in her words.

I lift the joint closer, and she leans her head forward, her lips around it.

I dig my fingers into her belly and kiss the tip of her ear. "Inhale, baby."

She does, and I see the cherry glow bright in the darkness. And brighter. And brighter still until I realize she isn't breathing and she's swallowing way too much fucking smoke.

"All right, that's enough, that's enough," I chide her, pulling the joint away. "Now, turn toward me and exhale."

She looks over her shoulder, her lips pressed together, her eyes dipping to my mouth, then back up as she stares at me. There's a nervousness about her, the way she can't stop blinking, her eyes watering. Finally, she exhales, coughing as she does, right in my face, but for some reason, it's kinda hot as the smoke enters my lungs when I breathe in too.

Her chest heaves as she coughs more, a hand coming to her mouth and her stomach muscles tensing beneath my fingers. But I dab out the joint on the console, drop it into the cup holder and laces my fingers through hers, pulling them from her mouth.

I lean in close, angling my head and brushing my lips with her own, some smoke still snaking its way from her lungs.

I inhale it as her coughs subside, her eyes growing bleary and red.

"How was it?" I ask her, speaking over her mouth.

"I can't breathe," she chokes out, but she laughs too.

I smile, brushing my bottom lip over her top one. "Yeah, but you like it when you can't breathe, huh?"

Her skin turns pink as she arches her back against me, her fingers holding tight to the steering wheel. Her eyes are dipped down to my mouth and I can see every one of her thick, dark lashes. They contrast with her auburn

brows. She's so fucking gorgeous, I can't keep my hands off her.

I bring my fingers to her chin, gripping her jaw as I kiss her once, softly. Then I slide my other hand up under her shirt, dipping down into her leggings, beneath the hem of her underwear. Her stomach muscles jump, but she moans into my mouth when my fingers find her wetness.

"How you feeling?" I ask her, toying lazily with her clit, my dick rock hard beneath her. I want to erase last night. I want to erase anyone else I ever let touch her, and even the people I didn't.

She licks my bottom lip, her breaths shallow pants against my mouth. "I'm always good with you, Mavy."

I bite at her mouth, clenching my teeth around her so she yelps at the same time I dive my fingers lower, then push two into her tight hole. Her knees widen as she presses her ass against me, and I groan into her mouth.

"Yeah?" I whisper, my fingers so far inside her I'm hitting my last knuckle. "Then you weren't so good last night, huh?"

She stiffens, her eyes fluttering closed, shallow pants hitting my mouth, as close as we are. I grip her face tight, digging my fingertips in just below her jawline. "Look at me, gorgeous."

Reluctantly, after a moment's pause while I finger fuck her slow, she opens her eyes.

I feel her swallow beneath my grip on her jaw. "Where were you?" I ask it softly, running my mouth over hers again, nearly getting lost in how tight and wet she is around my fingers.

"You left me," she whispers, like it's an answer.

"I shouldn't have," I admit, and it's hard to say it, but she needs to hear it. Even so, it doesn't give me what I'm looking for. "*Where were you, baby?*"

Her eyes are only an inch from mine. She can't dodge the question this time. "I don't want to talk about—"

"Don't fucking lie to me." I manage to push another finger inside and feel her walls flex and expand around me.

She whimpers but her knees go wider, hanging off the edge of my seat, one bumping into the door, the other hitting the console inside the car. It smells like pussy and marijuana in here, and if it weren't for the fact she isn't answering me, I'd already be fucking her across the back seat.

"I don't know," she says, rushing the words out. She can't turn away from me because I'm holding her face, but she tries, and I jerk her right back as her eyes snap closed, like she doesn't want to look at me. "I don't know," she whispers again. "I was... drunk and I took something, a pill, and—"

"You *took* something? You fucking *took* something?" I stretch my fingers inside of her, not willing to stop touching her just yet. "Who gave it to you?" I squeeze her lips, pressing them open and her eyes find mine again, a beautiful green lined with red and the start of tears. "Did you take it before or after we fucked?" Horror fills my head. If she wasn't completely sober and I made her do all of that shit... *Fuck*.

I run my thumb over her full bottom lip when she doesn't immediately answer me, regret close to suffocating my lungs. "You know no matter what you do, what you did..." I line my nose up with hers. "*You* are mine. The one I'll go to bat for, the one I'll fucking swing for." A flash of what Sid and I did to Pammie explodes in my mind. I did that for Lucifer, but I would do *so much worse* for this girl in my lap. I already have. "Or have you forgotten already?"

"Do you regret that? Doing it for me?" she whispers.

I don't, but it kind of fucked with my head. Thinking of everything I've dragged Ella into. It messed me up. It still does. It's why I was fucking mean when we fucked later, and I just left her there, on the floor. It's why I chose to get in the pool with Sid and Lucifer, then stay there when

Lucifer left. It's probably why I was fucking so close to Sid when I should have been following Ella, and that was all before the mistake I made with Atlas.

I *hate* all the danger I've brought to my girl.

But still... "No," I answer her question. "Not at all."

"Can we forget it, then? Just for right now? Can we just forget our fights and..." She takes a deep breath and I want to agree with her, but then it's like she flies into some kind of strange rage. "*You* were all over Sid in the pool last night and *you* wanted me and Atlas to *fuck*, then *you* left me, and you were with her and I just want to *forget it!*" She almost screams the last words, trying to get off of me, attempting to turn around.

I hold on tight, just under her chin, my fingers splayed over the top of her throat. But I pull my hand from between her thighs, only to lift it and push her shoulder back, so she's angled more toward me, a few inches between us. I can smell her from my fingers and every physical part of me wants to do just what she said.

Forget it.

But my heart is beating too fast inside my chest, my stomach is tangled into knots. Because she's trying to distract me from what she just said.

I slide my hand up from her shoulder, both around her throat now, angling her chin up. "Who gave you a pill?" I ask it slowly, carefully. "Did you take it before I fucked you?"

Her eyes dart around the interior of the Mercedes, like she can find some secret escape. But my hands are quite literally at her throat and I'm not letting go.

I lean in close, our eyes level. "Answer me. Say his name." I know it wasn't Sid and she's the only other girl here at Liber right now since Cain's fuck for the night went home this morning and Lucifer kicked Ezra's out last night.

My blood pressure rises inside my veins. The weight of my world—of Ella's innocence and the ways I might have

failed to protect her last night because I walked the fuck away—it rests like a casket on my chest.

She licks her bottom lip, her brows pulling together. Then she just whispers, “Before. And it was... *Atlas*.” The answer guts me, but there’s something about what she’s saying, something inside of it is a lie.

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XLIX

Lucifer

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16

L I B E R

“WHAT WAS IT LIKE? Growing up under your uncles?”

I know it's him. None of my brothers sound like he does. It grates under my skin, his voice. A reminder of ghosts in my past. Of Mikhail and the Malikov name and all the things I don't want to be. The urge to carve off every piece of me that's just like my father is always strong. But I'd have to break my ribs and extract my heart to get it done. We're too much alike, and for Lilith, for Rain... I hate that.

I pull from the cigarette, watching the cherry glow bright as my eyes zone in on the darkness of the woods surrounding Liber, beyond the gazebo I'm under. For a brief moment, I miss my own home with an ache that catches me off guard. We have gardens there now. A fountain. Things I thought would make our house a home. Truthfully, I think Rain did that, all on his own.

I tap out the ash on the glass tray beside my chair, leaning back as I exhale through my nose, sitting around an unlit fire in one of Liber's many backyard alcoves, there's a single cement wall attached to the canopy of the gazebo.

This is what I wanted, him to come to me right here. I went inside and needed to check in on my wife and son, and I told him to bring his ass here in fifteen minutes.

Now he's somewhere behind me, I've got what I wanted, and I'm not so sure I like how it's going. Seems to be the story of my fucking life.

"Did you..." Sevryn's words are strained. He's swallowing down an emotion, like he's been taught to do his entire life. I know he's somewhere close behind me, because with the roar of the fountain just past the fire pit, I can still hear him clearly.

I don't want to though.

I don't want him to say another fucking word. I'm supposed to question him about Natalie and the secrets Atlas is keeping. Not be fucking questioned.

I take another pull, closing my eyes as I do. My hood is over my head. Even after what I assumed I'd do with him, after the walk inside, I just wanted to be alone. Not think. Truthfully, I wouldn't mind an escape in white lines again. It would be so easy. My fingers tighten in the pocket of my hoodie, around my lighter.

It's my mood swinging, dipping angry and low, but I can't fucking help it.

"I don't know what to do with all this space." Sevryn doesn't shut up. "I do not even mind when you force me into my room. It's too much. I keep waiting for someone to... *need* me."

I don't want to think about what he means by that. My temper starts to fray. I don't know why he's talking now, except maybe it's all eating at him, since he's alone all the time. Or maybe he's fucking deflecting.

My phone is in the pocket of my pants. I can grab it and score in five minutes flat. I can drive to pick it up and have someone cover for me so Sid isn't on my ass. I can—

"I don't want to do this. I'm not hiding anything. I don't want to be here just as much as you don't want me to be. Mikhail said... he said I have to stay here now and learn from you and the rest of them, but I don't want to—"

I'm on my feet before I can take another breath. The cigarette snaps between my fingers and I drop it as I spin around to face Sevryn. I brush my hood back and the cool air does nothing for my hot temper.

It's the first time he's talking to me about any of this shit.

"It doesn't matter what you fucking want."

He's staring at me, hands by his sides, that stupid fucking zip-up jacket unzipped with nothing beneath. Low slung sweatpants, I can see his tattoos disappear into them. All blue Chucks, a helpless expression on his face with his brows lifted and mouth slightly parted. The fairy lights strung up under the covered patio illuminate the scar on his cheekbone. The red circle around his throat.

"You get that don't you?" I let my eyes roam over his chest, but I don't see it. "Are you branded? From anyone? Anything?"

He looks down, cupping the back of his neck with his hand. I clench my teeth, and I'm pretty sure I know what he's going to say before he says it.

"Your uncle—"

"Stop calling him that."

He drops his hand and shakes his head, but he still doesn't look up. "Boaz." He clears his throat. "He wants me to have your... tattoo."

Not a fucking chance. And I thought this shit ended at Halloween. So, is it Elijah lying to me, or Mikhail lying to him? "Why?"

“I’m here.” He shrugs, looking up at me, helpless and lost and I hate him for it. “I’m living with you and—”

“That’s not going to last.”

“I could help with Rain and—”

“Don’t speak my son’s name to me.” I don’t care if he was guarding him before Liber. I don’t fucking care.

“Did anyone ever fuck you so hard against your will, you couldn’t feel *anything*, Lucifer?” He says my name like he’s done it dozens of times. I wonder what Mikhail told him about me. Did he speak of me as a prodigal son, or nephew, as it were? Or did he speak of me with the same venom my father used to hit me with? “I can’t...” He smacks the side of his head, and I don’t even blink.

I’ve seen this before. Self-destruction. We’re intimately acquainted.

“I can’t get it out of my fucking head.” His voice breaks and he hits himself again because he’s not supposed to feel it. Anything. And certainly not this. Grief. “And all this space and free time, it’s just...” He makes a strangled sound, then buries his head in his hands. His shoulders move, shaking, but he doesn’t make another sound.

I grab the lighter from my pocket and run my thumb over the dented ridge. Over and over again. Sparking up. Going out.

I watch Sevryn cry. I think about my son inside Liber. My wife. All the ways I have to be on guard for them. Constantly. It’s the entire reason we’re here, because I disobeyed one single fucking order, and someone will retaliate.

Then I step toward this boy who was made into a man before he should’ve been. He doesn’t look up.

“What do you know about Natalie and about Atlas?” I ask him slowly, refusing to give him comfort. To fall into his pitiful trap.

He buries his face in his hands and shakes his head, a sob leaving his lips, muffled by his fingers. “I don’t know

anything. I don't—"

I shove him against the wall of the gazebo, my hand on his chest as he drops his own to his side, eyes wide and wet.

I lean down, getting in his fucking face. "You told my wife there's no escape for Rain. You told her he's a pawn. *You are too, aren't you?*"

His lips press together but it's not anger. It's only to stop them from trembling as he sniffles. "N-no. I don't know anything—"

I lift my hand and smack it against his temple, his head hitting the cement wall. He winces, his face going pale, the red line tattooed around his throat so stark, but he doesn't say a word. I grab his hair in my fingers, pressing him against the wall. Then I lift the lighter, flicking it on right beside his eye. I see his pupil constrict and I notice his irises look strange. More blue than gray, but the lighter goes out and I focus on his brain instead of his appearance.

"Are you reporting back to Mikhail?" I whisper, my voice soft. I've checked his room, his belongings. He doesn't have a phone, but there are always ways.

"No," he whispers. "I'm just doing what I'm told."

That doesn't make me feel any better.

I tangle my fingers tighter in his hair, jerking his head back as I stare down at him. "You fuck with my family, and remember what I said about the lake?"

He nods frantically and I'm overcome with a desire to get inside. To see my kid, my wife. I drop my hold on him and step back.

An anguished sob leaves his lips. "How do you sleep? With what they did to you? How you grew up? *How do you sleep?*"

I walk past him without another glance. He doesn't know what I've gone through, exactly, but he knows enough about the 6 and RC to understand it was hell too.

“I don’t have anything to give you.” It’s the most honest thing I could say to him.

When I walk inside the dark mansion from a side entrance, it’s silent. I push the door closed and it locks automatically. I need to unlock it, because Sevryn doesn’t have a key, but I need a second.

I sag against the wall in the narrow corridor, burying my head in my hands, the cold plastic of the lighter pressing against my skin. My eyes screw up tight, my chest squeezes, but I won’t fucking do it. I can’t.

I have to stop being so fucking pathetic. So fucking scared. I cannot let all these fucking emotions show, because someone has to be in control. When I wasn’t, Lilith ran, and I can’t. I need her. Rain needs her. I need them both.

But it’s all there. Those haunting memories that have started to infect my mind since I first laid eyes on Mikhail fucking Malikov at the initiation ceremony.

The rope. The fucking darkness. Dirt under my nails. My throat was sore from crying, and I got hit for that. Every sound I made, a blinding pain. I saw fucking stars.

My dad... he wasn’t... *anything*.

He wasn’t fucking anything for me.

Why did you hate me so fucking much? I wasn’t a bad kid. I didn’t get into trouble until I was older, and I kept all of your fucking secrets and I did everything you told me to and... is that it? You thought I was a fucking pussy because I followed orders? Is that it? Is that why?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I want to slap my hands over my eyes, but I don’t. I can’t. I’m not that person. I’m not that man anymore.

I’m stronger. Sid loves me. Rain loves me so much. I’m responsible for them both. I cannot break down just because a fucking stranger with my wife’s eyes starts to talk about his own horror. Why do I even care? I don’t give a single fuck about him. He is disposable.

Everything blurs. It's raw against my throat. My head. There's something warm down my face. I feel a little sick, like I'm going to vomit, and bile rises up to the back of my tongue and I need to get on my hands and knees, but this thing is too tight on my throat...

Shadow Villa. Why are we in this hell?

Help. I need help. Dad. My dad. I need help. Help, help, help. Warmth down my thigh. Help.

I need help, I need—

"Lucifer? Baby?"

I gasp, backing up and hitting my head on the door. I keep my hands by my sides, curled into fists so hard my knuckles ache but I won't hurt her again.

"You're right here. You're right here, okay?" Sid is staring up at me, but she's stepped back. She's not close. Her hands are no longer on me, and I know why. I know she's scared of how I might react, and I hate myself for that shit.

But I deserve it.

I take a deep breath, and it feels like gasping. *"Lilith."*

She comes half a step closer. Her eyes seem to soften. No longer wary, but she still doesn't touch me. I think of the knife to her head. The scar over her brow.

I'm so fucking sorry.

I don't say it because I don't want her to have to comfort me. Instead, I just say, "Why are you down here? Is Rainy asleep?"

Sid cocks her head, like she's surprised, but slowly, she nods. "I followed you, after checking on him with Brooklin. I just wanted to make sure... you were okay."

I want to hold her. "Come here."

She glances past me, and I don't know if she knows Sevryn is locked out there or not, but I don't fucking care. I just want her.

She steps closer, and I hook my arm around her neck, pressing her to me, my other hand coming to her hip,

slipping under her sleepshirt.

I bury my face in her hair. She smells so good. Like Rain, and lavender. Like innocence, and love.

“What’s going on, baby?” she asks me, her fingertips gliding through my curls as she cuddles close to my chest. Her words are against my heart. “Talk to me, Lucifer.”

I don’t want to. I’m supposed to be talking to Sevryn. I’m supposed to handle Atlas’s shit. Something is up with him I don’t know about. With Cain. *Ella*.

But Lilith brushes her fingers over my neck. “You can tell me anything. I’m not going to leave you, baby.”

My chest feels so tight. Like it might fucking burst.

I wrap both arms around her hips, holding her even tighter, dropping my head lower, to the crook of her neck, which is a long way down, but god, I love how she feels in my arms. So small but strong and *mine*. *All. Fucking. Mine*.

“You’re not?” I ask her, speaking against her bare skin.

She shivers in my arms, but she steps closer, still playing with the hair at the base of my neck. “No.” It sounds real. It sounds *true*. “I’m right here. I’m always *right here*.” She presses a kiss to my heart, over my hoodie, our words muffled because we’re buried in each other. “Tell me anything.” It sounds like a plea. “Tell me everything.”

I think of the rope. The dirt. The circle. Vague memories that keep intruding inside my brain. The place. *Shadow Villa*.

I can’t get it out, and I wish I could. I wish she could too. I wish we could come clean, vomit up our nightmares to make way for better dreams.

But I can’t speak, and I’m thinking of Sevryn, and where he came from. *Moscow*, they said. I think they’re lying too. At the very least, I’m not getting the entire story.

I think everyone is a fucking liar.

But not Sid. *Not my wife*.

So I just give her a truth. “I can’t,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Right now...I can’t.”

And she gives me her own honesty back. "I know." And she does. "But just stay right here until the wave passes, okay?"

I swallow the knot in my throat, gripping her tighter. Right now, it's just me and her. It's just us, burning in our own hell. Tomorrow, we'll rule over it again. Tomorrow, we'll take our places back on the throne.

But tonight, we're just two devils drowning.

"Okay, baby girl."

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L Maverick

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16
LIBER

“THERE ARE OTHER THINGS, *Mavy. There are more important things.*”

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I lead Ella toward Liber. Everything she told me—and not just about Atlas—is at the forefront of my mind. My anger at Sid grows with every step I fucking take. Ella kept a secret for her then my girl finds me and my sister in the pool together? No wonder she was so hurt. And besides that, Sid should’ve fucking known better. She should’ve told Lucifer, at the very least. And who the fuck told her? Why is she protecting them?

And Atlas giving Ella drugs... yeah, that’s a fucking problem for me. Not to mention the fact maybe I wouldn’t

have acted like a total dick last night with the gun if I knew Ella was *on fucking drugs*.

Cold wind drifts over my neck as I tug Ella to a stop, shoving my free hand into my pocket. I'll have a lot of shit to deal with inside this mansion but when I see Father Tomas's name on the screen of my phone, I hold Ella's green gaze and answer the call.

It's nearly midnight. He must have something important to fucking say.

"What?" I hiss, darting my gaze to the guards on either side of the door ahead. More, up on the edges of the roof, walking with rifles in hand, barely visible beneath the sliver of moon.

"Maverick." Tomas whispers my name.

Unease has my teeth clenching together. I tighten my fingers around both my phone and Ella's hand as she looks at me beneath worried brows.

"Listen to me," the priest continues. "You need to *run*. All of you. *Now*."

A shudder dips through me, and I turn to glance over my shoulder at the meandering driveway leading away from Liber. "Why?" I ask through gritted teeth.

Tomas's breath causes static to fill the line. Even so, I don't pull the phone away from my ear. "Boaz is coming, and he's bringing the police."

I don't believe him for the span of a second. The fucking *cops*? I'm not surprised Mikhail would have control over them, but why would he want to involve them with us? Except... it's payback, isn't it? For Lucifer leaving Esther alive. Helping Finn escape. Killing his men. It's fucking revenge in the worst way. We can't start shooting cops because yeah, sure, we'll get away with it, but it makes everything incredibly fucking messy. So Mikhail brings them here and we have no choice but to fucking surrender. It's not the same as firing on one of our own.

And what is Mikhail going to do to me, for not obeying his command to ensure Lucifer follows orders?

"Fuck!" I curse under my breath, still staring out at the rolling, dark lawn of Liber. I think I hear phantom sirens in the air, but I hope it's only my high mind playing tricks on me.

Ella's fingers tighten in mine as I close my eyes, chest heaving. I need to talk to Lucifer about what his wife is hiding from him and I need to fuck Atlas up for giving Ella drugs. But first I have to ensure we're all safe enough to let that showdown happen.

"Leave," Tomas says again, his voice low. "Now, Mav. You don't have much time." Then, without another word, he ends the goddamn call.



"Elijah has lost control over RC," Lucifer hisses from the driver's seat.

"Breathe Into Me" by Red plays way too loudly in his car, but I don't bother reaching to turn it down, considering all the shit we've got going on. The volume keeps me amped up.

Behind us, on the dark, dirt road leading away from Liber, Sid is driving her car, Cain is in the passenger seat with a gun, and Rain and Ella are in the back. Sid refused to let Rain ride here with Lucifer and me. I think I know why. It's the same reason I wanted Ella in that car. My brother and I both are willing to sacrifice ourselves and this car to protect them. It would let them get away, giving them seconds at the least.

Behind them, Atlas follows in the G-Wagon, as a diversion, instead of taking his Range Rover. Ezra and

Brooklin are in there with him.

Sevryn is in the BMW's trunk. Lucifer was merciless when he tied his wrists and ankles and tossed him in there with duct tape over his mouth.

I think it's a bad move, alienating and mistreating someone we don't trust but who has to live with Luce. However, I didn't exactly have time to get into a philosophical argument with my brother over it.

Lucifer glances in the rear-view, his jaw locked, just before we all put on our signals and turn onto a paved road, but an empty one nevertheless, placing distance between us and Liber.

It took us only minutes to pack up and get the fuck out of there. I didn't mention the drugs to Atlas, or Sid's secrets to Luce. Not yet. Besides, I think the confrontation might be better where we're going. If we get away—and we haven't seen any police lights yet, not to mention the fact our guards are in an armored car following Atlas—then no one will fuck with us where we end up.

Pluvia is a functioning hotel in Queen View, a bigger city than Alexandria, an hour from Liber. Elijah knows we own it, but it's all us, not him or any of my other uncles. We use it for mafioso members coming to do business with us, so we can keep an eye on them. Otherwise, it stays empty. And tonight, only the staff and guards are there. It has the cover of being downtown, in the midst of thousands of other people. A showdown there with the cops would risk Mikhail's own secrecy. It would crawl all over the news.

Even he isn't that brash.

I don't think.

"Did Elijah ever have control?" I finally counter to Luce, about RC. Lucifer said he asked him last night to protect us while we stayed at Liber to let Boaz cool down.

Clearly that didn't work out.

"RC ranks higher but Elijah has history in this state, no matter RC's fucking headquarters in Wilmington. Mikhail

doesn't spend enough time here to get that leverage. But —"

"But Mikhail has deeper pockets, and he can corrupt cops easier because of it." Not just in wealth. Connections, favors, threats. Elijah doesn't want to push the police force of Alexandria too hard because sometimes, they're not just enemies. They're tentative allies. And we have to live alongside one another. Mikhail can drop bombs and leave, never dealing with the wreckage in the aftermath.

"He needs to get the fuck out of here," Lucifer hisses beneath his breath, his gaze rising to check in on his family again, behind us. I glance in the side view mirror, wanting to ensure Ella is safe too. I wish I was with her. So many things I always have to fucking brush aside for her, because of who I work for and what I do.

"He will, after he's done testing you, right?" I ask Luce, bouncing my knee as I turn to look at him. Because clearly Mikhail is here to check in on us Unsaints.

Lucifer tightens his grip on the wheel, other hand over the shifter. But he doesn't say a word. I'm considering telling him about Mikhail's threats to me, because I'm not so sure the consequences matter now. We're fucked as it is, running from RC until we can figure out what the fuck to do about Esther and Finn and the three fuckers I burned in the Town Car, but just as I open my mouth to come clean, Lucifer speaks instead, cutting me off.

"Fuck."

I twist around in my seat, grabbing the Glock from between my thighs, finger darting to the trigger. Dread is heavy in my stomach, my heart racing painfully inside my chest.

I see blue lights, way back, but glowing along the night sky. If they wanted to get closer without making their presence known, they would've kept their lights off. But I don't think it's because they're fucking stupid.

I think it's because there's going to be far more of *them* than there are of *us*.

Lucifer smacks his hand on the steering wheel. I know what he feels right now. My eyes are on Sid's BMW behind us, and I can't really see her or Ella or Cain or my nephew, but knowing they're there is almost enough to drive me into panic mode. Almost enough to cause me to lose my fucking shit because only blind terror flashes in my mind. The desire to protect, to throw myself at them, to jump out of the car to keep them all safe.

It's what Lucifer is feeling now, and as much as I love Rain, I know the feelings he has toward him, as his child, are far more intense.

I take a deep breath. I keep my grip on the gun.

We have to make it into the city limits of Queen View. If we do that, we'll make a fucking mess skidding through traffic and Mikhail will call off his dogs because cults shouldn't end up in the press.

I glance over my shoulder, through the windshield. Still nothing but darkness ahead with stars dotting the sky, the moon a crescent which makes me think of Ella, but I've gotta stop that because I need to think *ahead*.

We're still half an hour from Queen View.

Too far to have a showdown now.

I scan the trees, the forest lining the road. "We need to turn," I speak quickly and quietly, but angle my head so my mouth is by Lucifer's ear. The music is still loud, and I don't want to turn it down because I think in some bizarre way, it helps my brother think. "All of us, and fast. No signals." I know this should be a given, but when you're paranoid, it's easy to mess up.

Still, Sid will have seen the glow of the police lights, and so will Atlas and the guards.

If the guards are smart, if they're truly *with us*, they'll keep going straight and lead the cops away from us for a

short while. It might not be enough, but every second we can get will help.

Lucifer nods once. He doesn't argue with me for once in our lives, his eyes jumping from the mirror to the road and back.

"Focus on the asphalt," I whisper, holding my gun up, ready to shoot at these fucking cops if I have to. It might be messy, but if it's me or my family, the choice is so fucking easy. "You want Sid to do the same. Focus on the turn. That's what matters. Only the turn."

I hear him swallow as the song changes.

"My Old Ways" by The Plot in You.

Neither of us turn it down.

I turn back, my arm over the back of his seat as I do, staring into the night. The blue glow is getting brighter, but they're climbing up the hill we just went down. We could do it, if we go quickly.

My pulse thuds inside my temples. My chest feels tight. I flex my fingers against the leather of the back of Lucifer's seat, trying not to see the BMW behind me, holding everyone who matters to me inside of it.

I won't look.

I have to focus, just like I told Lucifer.

But he needs to fucking turn.

The panic builds. I know there's got to be side roads he's already missed, and we don't have time to use GPS and dialing out on our cellphones is risky. Having them at all is a fucking risk right now but I'm not disposing of mine until I have to. I left the burner at home because it seemed like all bets were off at that point.

Turn, Lucifer. Fucking. Turn.

I clamp my teeth together to stop from saying it. I trust him, don't I? *I trust you. Make the fucking turn.*

The blue glows brighter, swarming and growing from the fog dancing just above our heads, casting the light more intensely in the night.

Turn, goddammit.

I take a breath in through my nose. I'm about to dig a hole through his seat back and scream at him when I finally feel the car yank to the left, only to swerve dangerously to the right.

The pavement changes to dirt under his low-profile tires, but I don't breathe just yet. The rear fishtails a little, the ride bumpy, my head nearly touches the headliner of his fucking car. I don't care about any of that. I'm used to discomfort. My eyes are only glued to Sid's car as I hold my breath, and just as her headlights swing behind us, she cuts them, driving in fucking darkness.

Behind her, Atlas does the same.

It's nothing but night at our backs, and I know they're having to use Lucifer's lights to see. I close my eyes tight a second, my nervous system on pins and fucking needles as I bow my head, holding the side of the gun to my temple to catch my breath.

"They're okay," Lucifer whispers, his voice as comforting as he can probably make it. "They can see with my lights."

I swallow the lump in my throat as we bump along the road. I don't dare look ahead because I'm not sure I want to see where we're headed to. But I slowly blink open my eyes and continue taking in what little I can see of Sid and Atlas's vehicles.

Behind them there's nothing.

The guards understood the fucking assignment.

If they live, they'll need a raise and probably a hug or some shit. And for that matter, so will Tomas. He didn't have to tell me any of this, but he just earned my trust in ways he probably can't even imagine.

Lucifer doesn't slow down, and neither does my sister or Atlas. We keep together, and after a moment, driving down a hill, I see it.

The blue lights.

But they're passing the road.

They don't even fucking hesitate.

Relief surges through me, warm in the wake of my cold fear. A smile curves my lips despite the fact we're not out of the literal or metaphorical woods yet.

The cops keep going and I marvel over just how many of them there are and how we just fucking avoided them, at least for these minutes.

Fuck you, motherfuckers.

A nervous, shaky laugh leaves me, and after a few more minutes, when Sid and Atlas flick on their lights, I finally feel comfortable enough turning back around in my seat.

There's nothing but dark woods ahead, on either side of the narrow road, but so far, I don't see any dead end signs, so that's gotta count for something. Lucifer's face is white—a shade paler than his usual complexion—but he's got a steady grip on the wheel and he's glancing at the map on his center console, a furrow between his brow as he figures out how to get us to Pluvia another way.

I want to fucking hug him, maybe even kiss his pretty mouth, but I keep my feelings in check as we keep driving in silence, only the music filling the cabin of the car.

For a moment, on the same side for once, I almost forgot when we get to this hotel, we're going to have a fucking reckoning.

LI Maverick

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17
PLUVIA

ON THE TOP floor of the parking garage outside of Pluvia, I stare at my brother.

We rarely visit this place. We rake in the money, house members of the mafia, set up liaisons with dealers and thieves alike, but *this* is a place for emergencies. Jeremiah fucking Rain isn't the only one with an interest in hotels. But I don't think we've ever used it for something like this before. It's only been a general idea, like a fire escape plan the family never practices.

Our cars are parked haphazardly on the empty top floor of the garage, the sun will start to rise in only a few hours, and we all need sleep. But with the adrenaline shooting through our bloodstream, no one is getting rest anytime soon.

There's Lucifer's BMW, Sid's, and the G-wagon Atlas copped. We haven't heard from the guards. I called Tomas and told him to come by. He won't be allowed in without express permission from the guards of the empty hotel, and I'd rather have him here than on the outside, where he could be compromised.

Besides, after this little rendezvous, I'm going to need him.

No one is allowed entrance here until we leave.

The stars are barely visible over our head, Queen View being a bigger city than Alexandria and giving off more pollution. The sounds of traffic—horns, engines gunning, the screech of brakes—it all drifts from down below. That's our safety net tonight, but the reason we're up here is entirely different. Separate from Mikhail chasing after our asses.

I cross my arms, glancing toward Sid, in the circle of where I stand with her, Ella, Brooklin—who didn't want to leave Rain—and Lucifer.

Rain is in his carseat in the M5, just behind Lucifer, his window rolled all the way down so Luce can sneak peeks at his sleeping son. He managed to nap through all of this shit.

Cain, Ezra, and Atlas are doing rounds in the hotel and discussing shit on a secure line with Elijah, and monitoring Sevryn who was not very happy he'd been bouncing around a trunk again.

I told my brothers I had some shit to handle, and my eyes lingered on Atlas when I left him in the conference room.

He's got his coming too.

But for now...

"What the fuck is it you needed to say to me that you couldn't say in the car?" Lucifer asks. He's much calmer than he was before he made that turn, and he kissed the shit out of Sid when we all parked up here after I suggested

it. But I don't think he's going to be kissing her when I divulge what Ella told me. His hands are in the pocket of his hoodie as he glares at me.

Sid is beside him, her head cocked as she levels a glare at Ella.

My girl has on a white hoodie, her red locks whipping around as the wind picks up. Her arms are crossed, but she glares right back at Sid.

Brooklin is in heels and jeans, a leather jacket over a black T-shirt. She rolls her eyes. "I need my fucking beauty rest and so does Rain." She darts a glance at me from beside me; her, Ella, and myself facing off with the Malikovs. "Whatever the fuck this is about, spit it out."

"Sid knows," I respond, jerking my chin toward her. "Don't you, Angel?"

Her gray eyes cut to mine.

Lucifer slowly turns to stare at her now.

Thankfully, she doesn't deny shit, probably no doubt ready to be done with this long ass day already too. But what she snarls doesn't make me feel any better than a denial would have. "It was Ella who ratted me out, so why don't you let her explain it all?" She turns toward my girl, her dark hair scattered in her eyes. "Go ahead, Ella. You wanna fucking lead this shit show? You think you've got what it takes? Tell them, then. Tell them everything."

Ella swallows, and I turn to look at her as she lifts her chin, nervous, but refusing to back down from Sid.

Lucifer is still staring at his wife though. "Why didn't you come to me with this?" he asks quietly, realizing she knows something he doesn't.

Sid glances at him, wetting her bottom lip, suddenly looking apprehensive. "After last night, it didn't seem like the right time. And because you're hiding shit from me," she finally says.

Lucifer doesn't react at all.

I laugh, the sound biting through the night as everyone turns to glare at me. "This is great, really." I shrug my shoulders, hands in the pockets of my black bomber jacket as I glance around at all of us. "Each one of us keeping secrets, fucking each other over, putting our goddamn families in danger." There's a bite to my words I can't hide behind twisted humor. "While we're in the middle of a *fucking* war with Mikhail Lazar-Clone Malikov circling around my *fucking* nephew, we're just keeping our mouths shut on shit that might *save each other's fucking lives, huh?*"

Lucifer smiles, dimples flashing in the night. He takes a step closer, toward the center of the circle, toward *me*. "Don't be so self-righteous, Maverick." His gaze slides to Ella. "Have you beat your plaything's secrets out of *her* yet?"

"Liar's Island!" Ella hisses the words, coming to stand next to me, all of us taking a step toward each other except Brooklin, who is a foot or so behind me. Ella's green eyes dart from Lucifer to Sid and back again, her jaw clenched. "What is it? Where is it? Why did Samson take a photo of it and post it was where the children went to *die*? Is that why he's dead? Did Atlas have to...kill him? To keep some kind of... Some kind of fucking pedophile island a secret?" Ella continues, her words frantic as she looks around the circle, her eyes lastly landing on Lucifer. "This is important," she says, the same words she spoke to me when I wanted to fucking kill Atlas. She told me there was more she was keeping from me, and she thought it was urgent and maybe I could help. "This means something, Lucifer. So stop deflecting and answer the question."

Part of me thought her confession was a diversion from her own indiscretions with taking pills from Atlas, and that confrontation is still forthcoming. But then she told me everything, including the fact *Sid* wanted to keep this secret, the same fucking night Sid attacked her. No wonder

she went off in search of drugs from Atlas. She's been fucked over and fucked around by too many of my family.

"*Pedophile* island?" Lucifer repeats, his words cold. "What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

"She showed me in the hallway at *your* mansion," Ella snaps back, her fingers pointed in Lucifer's direction. I wonder if she's thinking of her mom. If she assumes Sid got those papers I haven't seen yet from somewhere inside Liber. If she's thinking of all the ways Kim used her own daughter to get her next fix. "Why? *What is it?*"

"There's a newspaper clipping," Sid finally speaks up in a less-than-antagonistic tone, her voice matching Lucifer's chill. "A link to a website. It requires a password to enter, and it's all of your names." She darts her eyes to me as chills crawl down my spine. "And... Rain's birthday."

Lucifer straightens, rearing back a little like he's been struck.

My mouth goes dry as I glance behind him, seeing my nephew's sleeping face in his rear-facing car seat. "And Shadow Villa," I whisper quietly, thinking I should have paid more attention to that, but now we're exposing all these creepy places, I need to bring it up. "It's the only thing I could find on RC anywhere. We went there before." I remember my father hitting me when he told me not to open a certain door. The way Lucifer was so withdrawn.

Now, he stares at his wife, like he's seeing someone he doesn't know.

"The site is how I found Samson's deleted posts. There's one in a rowboat, taken of an island, a house... Liar's Island," Sid finishes, her eyes searching Lucifer, trying to find something there. Something that tells her this isn't as bad as it looks, and that he didn't know about it.

I sure as fuck didn't know, and I have no idea how Sid found any of this out.

"Where are the papers?" Lucifer asks quietly, coldly.

Sid swallows. "In the hotel. In my... bag."

Lucifer nods once. All we have is Sid and Ella's word to go on, but that's enough. It's time we started including them in shit. It's time we started *believing* them.

"What happened at these places?" I whisper, still staring at Lucifer, wondering if he remembers more than I can. "Shadow Villa, Liar's Island, what happened?"

"Is it sex trafficking? Is it some kind of resort for pedophiles? Is it—" Sid starts.

"Liar's Island isn't for pedophiles." At the sound of Brooklin's low tone, my pulse jumps. I almost forgot she was here.

Turning my head, I watch as she stalks over to join us, her red-bottomed heels clicking on the pavement. She looks up at me, her eyes wide and wet. "It's a refuge," she whispers. "Aunt Edith owns the island."

Aunt Edith. Elijah's wife.

The kidnapping... Was I wrong about Jeremiah all along? Wrong that it was some way to distract us and let him escape? Was it an inside job, to teach Elijah a lesson? That his wife couldn't harbor... "A refuge for *who*?" I press, turning to stare at my sister with narrowed eyes.

My knees suddenly feel weak though, the longer she gazes at me. She blinks once, twice, her mascara starting to streak at the inner corners of her blue eyes. I think back to her asking me about Malachi. About all the things I can't remember about him. About the fact, as she said, there were once three of us in that house.

"I went there once," she says, her voice cracking. "Mom and Dad sent me to Shadow Villa too." Her entire body shudders as she closes her eyes.

I feel dizzy, like I might faint.

It's the first time I've seen my sister look weak since we got her back from Jeremiah.

"I don't remember it all. Flashes of things, really." She swallows, her breaths shallow as her chest heaves beneath

her leather jacket. "I was in a church, on a floor. There were... cameras."

My stomach turns.

"I was clothed," she whispers, like it's a consolation. "But men were all around me and I was being... *filmed*."

A Death at Shadow Villa.

Slowly, I turn to look at Ella.

Her face has gone completely white, her lips parted as she stares at my sister.

"I was choking. I was dying, but Edith came in." She squeezes her eyes shut tight. "Everything is a blur after that, but I remember being sick on the rowboat. Coming to the house. There were children there and they were so happy." Her eyes flick open, landing on mine. "Happier than we were. Than Malachi, even." A strangled sob comes from her mouth.

I stagger a step back, my mind reeling as the entire world seems to spin around me.

"When Dad kicked me out..." She straightens, her shoulders tense and none of the trembling words come from her now. "Edith tried to take me back there, but Dad threatened Ezra and... Jeremiah ended up being a decent place to land." She lets her eyes close again, but her mouth is set in a line.

"This clip." It's Ella who speaks, her voice a hushed, fast whisper. "This clip... can someone look at it?" I turn to her, seeing her hold up her cell phone, a paused video across her screen. "It's the movie we watched, Mavy," she says, turning her bright green eyes to me. "But you didn't finish it. And... what Brooklin said, there's something similar."

Brooklin coughs, clearing her throat, but it's Lucifer who crosses the circle, pulling the phone from Ella's outstretched hand. His face is expressionless, but maybe he wants to save Brooklin the pain of watching anything that could trigger her. And I *know* he wants to do the same for his wife.

He presses play as haunting music floods from the speakers.

A chill laces its way around my neck, seeming to choke me.

Lucifer's gaze flicks up to Brooklin, that same stoic expression on his face. "It's exactly what you described," he says, emotionless. He drops his gaze back to the screen.

The music rises and rises, and we all huddle closer, Sid tucked away behind Lucifer, staring at the car, at her son. Ella's shoulder brushes my arm, and Brooklin keeps her eyes closed.

Only Lucifer can see the screen, his pale face lit blue by it.

His eyes dilate, and that's the sole sign he's affected by anything he's watching.

Until his nostrils flare, just once, and he slowly lifts his eyes to mine, the music fading away to nothing.

"The woman dying..." He glances at Ella, and I know Ella saw this scene and I didn't, because I had to leave to meet up with the 6. "It's my mother."

LII



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17

PLUVIA

“LAMIA.” He whispers her name, his back to me as he stares out into Queen View, his fingertips pressed to the windowsill of our temporary bedroom. Rain is sleeping in a gilded crib beside our bed, only feet behind me.

Sevryn, Atlas, Cain, Ezra, Mav, Ella—they’re elsewhere in this penthouse, enough to host an entire criminal family. Like us. Seven rooms, an enormous living room and open plan dining room separating them, a study, more bathrooms than we could ever hope to use. A fucking foyer with a chandelier, the first thing I noticed when we came in.

Everything is lined in silver or gold, including in our room, even the floor-to-ceiling drapes pushed to the side of the large bay window of the penthouse. Flickering city lights and traffic trails down below. Like us, not everyone is sleeping tonight.

But the only person I care about in this moment, aside from my son, is my husband.

Lucifer bows his head, his shoulders tense beneath his black T-shirt.

My heart clenches inside my chest. I don't recall my own mother, my real one. I remember the same of Jeremiah's mother. I didn't grow up with a woman on my side. I didn't grow up with *anyone* on my side.

Neither did my husband, and now he knows what he's suspected all along.

Lamia didn't die in a car wreck.

They killed her.

And he watched it, unwittingly, on film.

The 6—or someone—authorized that tape. Lamia Malikova wasn't an actress. Her death made a profit, and it was lauded as spectacular acting, despite the fact her name was never listed in the credits, and if it had been, no one would have ever heard from her again.

There's something creepy happening at Shadow Villa, but I know we can't go there right now. Not tonight, when we're cooped up to hide from Mikhail fucking Malikov. It is incredible to me how you can hate the name of the blood that runs through someone you love most veins.

My fingers flutter to my throat. I should have told Lucifer about the papers Sevryn gave me sooner, but I'm glad it's out now. I just wish we could have known it would lead to... this. Maybe then I would have never told him at all though. I would have done anything to shield him from that truth.

I step closer to him, staring up at his head of dark, curly hair. I want to reach for him, but I'm not sure that's what he wants. I don't know what to do right now. Our marriage has never been full of comfort, and even though I long to give it to him, I don't know how because my life has never had it. We are very good at baring our teeth. Exposing our souls though, that's a thing we never got much practice in.

“Luce,” I whisper. “Baby.”

He keeps his head bowed but after only a second of silence, he whispers, so quietly, “Come here, Lilith.”

I step to him, relief flooding through me that he’s telling me what he needs, because I can’t decipher it. Not right now.

He turns, throwing his arm around me and dragging me to his side. He sits on the windowsill, pulling me along with him, so I’m straddling his lap, my hands cupping the smooth planes of his handsome face, my thumbs grazing his lips as his arms band around my low back.

He stares up at me in the darkness while our son sleeps behind me.

His eyes are shining. But surprising me, he says nothing about his mother. Instead, what comes out is, “You did so well tonight.”

My knees are grinding into the wood of the windowsill and it’s a little uncomfortable, but right now, I don’t fucking care. Those words, that compliment from my very own devil, it means the world to me.

I smile at him even as tears prick behind my eyes.

“You driving that car, fucking whipping it right behind me...” He trails off, blue irises lighting up as he grins at me, dimples flashing in his pale face. I know he’s probably trying to stop from thinking of his mother. Of what happened to her. Or maybe he’s attempting to take back his life, the reins, to protect *me*, so the same fate doesn’t befall me. Whatever reason, with this handsome smile on his face, making him look years younger, I’m eating that shit up. His hands trail down from my hips around to my ass as he squeezes hard. I dip my chin, my arms around his neck, our temples pressed together. “That was fucking sexy, Sid Malikova.” He enunciates my proper name carefully, the lingering wisps of the Russian accent he gained from his father curling in the letters.

I grind my hips against him, feeling how hard he is.

“You saved us,” I whisper. “You knew what to do.” I tilt my head, my lips brushing his. “You protected your family.” And it’s fucking *hot*.

But his lips turn into a frown, his eyes fluttering closed even as he holds me tighter. Slowly, he exhales a breath. Then, “No, Maverick did,” he whispers. “He knew what to do.”

I tangle my fingers in the curls just above the nape of his neck. “But *you* did it.”

He swallows hard, then his eyes flick open to mine. “Who gave you that information, Sid? The papers?” I showed them to him when we got back to this room after he spoke to Maverick alone for a few minutes. He didn’t go to the website. He took my word on that. I don’t think he wanted to see the sickening evidence in his face about his son’s birthday being key to open up a buried website with an online history of a dead boy.

I knew he would get to this though. I just wanted to delay it a little longer, because he’s not going to like the answer.

But I tell him the truth anyway, because I feel so connected to him right now, I would do anything for him. And maybe because despite everything happening around us, this feels like family. It’s something I’ve never had, not really, and I don’t want to let it go with more lies.

“Sevryn,” I whisper. “And I don’t know where he got them,” I rush to explain. “He wouldn’t tell me, baby.”

Lucifer nods once, closing his eyes again. And all he says is, “Okay.”

But I know before the day is over with, he’ll be torturing Sevryn to get an answer out of him too.

LIII

Maverick

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 17

PLUVIA

"I DON'T WANT HIM HERE."

I stay silent, staring at the wall in the hotel room that's linked to the girls and Rain's. I press my fingertips together, my head bowed as I sit at the small round desk in the room, the scent of a luxury suite usually one to calm my nerves, but not tonight.

In my head, I think of Brooklin being surrounded by wolves my own parents sent her to, and that was before they set her on the streets. I think of what she said, about Liar's Island, the kids there being happier than Malachi.

I think of pushing him.

His scream as he fell.

"I don't want him—"

"He's on the way. He's the reason we got our asses saved."

"I won't allow the concierge to let him in." Lucifer paces somewhere beside me, and I know he's thinking of his mother. Of all the things he couldn't do to save her. Maybe he's remembering why he was at that house too. Shadow Villa.

Acid City has too many fucking secrets and the only one the 6 cared to gut was one which didn't even matter. Julie and Finn.

"I'll be in the basement." It comes out like a whisper, my eyes blurring. I think of Atlas feeding Ella pills or powder or whatever the fuck he's given her. All the things she didn't say in our rendezvous, but after tonight, I don't have the energy to pry them out of her and I know it's a mistake. I know I'm fucking up.

And what did Lucifer ask me? "Have you beat your plaything's secrets out of her yet?"

"He cannot come here Maverick—"

A scream leaves my throat. It's a snarl, a cry, something jagged and raw. I slam my fist on the table and it jumps. I'm grateful for the thick walls, the way the girls won't hear me. But I look up at Lucifer, my chest heaving, short nails digging into my palms as I keep my fist on the fucking table.

"For once," I whisper, pressure building behind my eyes. "For once, let me have a fucking moment, okay? For fucking once in our goddamn lives, let it be me."

Lucifer's hands are in his hair, his blue eyes locked on mine. "That was my mom, you know? That was my fucking mom!" He's screaming the words, his voice hysterical. "They killed her. They murdered her for a snuff film, to get her out of the way, and when I find Arlo Estere, I am going to—"

"My mother is dead too." I snap it out, and I hate myself for the callousness, but I can't be here for him right now. Not anymore. There's too much in my head, because it was my sister who was lying on that floor like Lucifer's mom.

My fucking sister. "My mother is dead, and my father, and my sisters' lives are ruined and I'm doing the same to Ella and I've done it to Ria. I need this."

Lucifer drops his hands. His shoulders curve. "What will he do for you?" he finally asks, his voice hoarse. "What will he do for you that I can't?"

I shake my head once, staring down at my hand. Malachi's name along the side of it. Sid's too. I imagine Ella's, how it should be more prominent. How she should be more seen. And all I say is, "Let me have it. When it's over, we'll regroup. Elijah is fortifying this place, and Mikhail can't get in. He won't risk it. But I have to think, and Tomas is the only way I can."

I kneel in the early morning hours, my hands on my thighs, eyes closed. I hear Father Tomas circling around me. The whispers of the tails from the whip gliding along the concrete of the basement are loud in my ears. So is the sound of my pulse, rapidly thrumming through my head. Sweat beads along my bare back, the cement hard against my knees even with my sweats on.

"We could talk about this." Father Tomas's voice is low, and intimately familiar. I've known him since I was a child. But until Mikhail kidnapped me, I assumed we kept this secret between us. I've seen Elijah look at me when I shift in my chair at Council though, pressing the wounds of my back against my seat. He probably knows.

I can't really find it in me to care. Tomas potentially saved our fucking lives, no matter what he's about to wreck me with.

Lucifer didn't want him here and he doesn't even know about his connection to Mikhail. But we have guards surrounding Pluvia and it's not as if I'm letting Father Tomas *leave* after he's done. Not until we all do.

Things aren't fixed with my brother or with Sid, after the fight. Despite coming together for a brief moment, we aren't feeling any warmth toward one another and I know Lucifer is probably upset I'm letting him grieve what happened to his mother on his own, but that's what Sid is for. He needs to turn to her.

Just like I should be turning to Ella. *Hypocrite.*

But I can't face her. It means I have to ask about the drugs, I have to dive into the rabbit hole, I need to apologize again, and maybe Brooklin was right, about her being tested, and I just... *I need to clear my head with pain, then I can work through everything else.*

For now, I meant what I told Ella after the fight with Sid and Lucifer.

She deserves better. I can't blame her for being friendly with Atlas. Taking drugs from him. I can't blame her for anything, and I almost wish she did not exist in my life.

I almost hope she escapes to something far fucking better than me.

Brooklin's lack of replies to any of the private questions I had for her about Liar's Island or Shadow Villa tell me exactly what I need to know. *I am fucked up, and everyone too close to me ends up exactly the same.*

I don't answer Father Tomas. But inside my head, Malachi is running, running, *running* to that balcony. Inside my head, my father is screaming, screaming, *screaming*. And my mother...

I tiptoe around the corner of their room.

I heard something, from down the hall.

Brooklin is gone, away for a ballet camp.

Malachi is sleeping. I checked there first.

It was a strangled sound, abruptly cut off.

My palms are pressed to the wall, and I blink, my mouth going dry as I see it. My mother is on the floor, and Dad is pacing, running his fingers through his hair.

There's blood on Mom's mouth as she brings her thumb to her lips, her eyes red, her face pale. I lift my eyes to Dad, still pacing, his hands on his hips as he hangs his head.

"I'm sorry." Those words come from Mom as she struggles to sit up. "Maddox, I'm so sorry." She swallows, trying to push to her feet, her silk robe untied, falling open.

I look at the ground, my heart thundering in my head. Dad is bigger than me. Stronger than me. What can I do? But I feel like a coward even as I think it, my face heating and my heart drumming hard in my chest.

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to let it go—"

"What Lazar and I do with anyone is not your fucking business, do you understand? There is nothing to let go. It has nothing to do with you. After all the lies I've swallowed for you..." My dad rounds on Mom, inches between them. I stare at their feet, Dad still in dress shoes, Mom's bare. "After your fucking betrayal... I could kill him and I wouldn't feel a thing. Do you understand?"

She's swaying a little.

I watch a drop of blood plink to the hardwoods.

I want to throw up. I want to scream.

"I understand," Mom whispers, so weak, her voice like I've never heard it before. "But those girls... they're... they're Brooklin's age."

I feel dizzy. My sister is thirteen. I rest my head against the wall, trying to stay on my feet.

I hear the hardwoods creak. A gasp from my mother.

I don't look.

"They are whores. Brooklin is my. Daughter."

Mom is silent.

"No one touches Brooklin. She's safe." Dad's voice drops low, and despite what I think I'm hearing, his

reassurances... reassure me too. "She's safe, Liz. No one will touch her, okay?"

Mom swallows a sob. "Okay." Her words are a whisper. "Okay."

No one touches Brooklin.

No one touches Brooklin.

I swing my fist into Atlas's face, his head against the glistening steel of the merry-go-round. Bears and unicorns and shadowy creatures surround us. My cheek throbs where Atlas hit me too, but when I swing again, I hear something crunch, and a shriek like I've heard from Mom pierces the air as his head snaps to the side.

I raise my fist again, but he's not fighting anymore, lying half-on the merry-go-round as I loom over him.

He's motionless as Cain's arms band around me, yanking me back.

No one touches Brooklin, no one touches Brooklin, no one touches Brooklin.

"I don't want the whip."

The whispers from the tail stop and I clench my teeth. Father Tomas is behind me. "What?" he asks, confusion threaded through the word.

"I don't. Want. The whip." I force the words out, my eyes still closed.

Father Tomas says nothing.

"Kick me. Hit me." A smile curves my lips as Tomas stays silent. *"Anything. Anywhere. Nothing is off limits. The door to this place is locked and you have plenty of room."* I open my eyes, seeing the dim lights of Pluvia's basement as I turn to look over my shoulder into Tomas's eyes. Most people would have revulsion on their face with my words,

but instead, the whip hanging limply in his hand, his eyes fucking *gleam*. A mild-mannered priest, it's how he appears even now in his clerical robes, but his cheeks flush pink, and I know he's *dying* for this. "Don't worry, I won't fight back." I could kill him if I wanted. But I don't fucking want to. "And I know you're a sadist, so come on." I jerk my chin. "*Hurt me.*"

I turn away from him, because I don't think he could ever let loose on me if he's staring right at my face. I bow my head, total surrender, because all I want at this moment is damage.

Seconds pass.

And he says, "What about Ella?" There's a fervor in his voice, and I feel my pulse race hard in my ribcage, telling me this is a bad idea. I'll have questions to answer from her.

But I deserve this.

"She's sleeping twenty-five floors up." Another Benadryl and this time, I'm the one who gave it to her. She needs to rest. Everything else can wait until I get my fucking head on straight. "Stop wasting time."

And he doesn't, after that. He kicks my spine first, a tentative gesture that feels like nothing. I laugh out loud, taunting him, myself, wanting him to find it in him. That primal need to *fuck shit up*. Some of us are born with it, and it never goes away. It's not about age or maturity. It's a dark curtain in our brains, and we can only keep it closed so long before the nastiness spills out, spiders crawling up our skin in the night, devouring us whole.

He kicks me again, his shoe flat on my lower back, more a stomp than a kick. It steals my breath for a second, but I just laugh once more. He's got more than this. I know he's fucked up. I know he wants to snap something.

Snap. Me.

"If you can't do it with your bare hands, grab a tool. There are some along the back wall." I shrug just as his fist

collides with the side of my head, angling my neck to the side for a second. The blow feels deep, like a resounding ache, and my ears ring, but it's still not enough.

I hear him walking away.

I smile to myself.

Then a jarring, vivid pain lights up along the center of my back, right over my fucking spine. A cry leaves my lips, completely involuntary. The ache is vibrating, an echo of the connection between the steel of the hammer and my body.

Before I can say anything else, he's in front of me, kicking me in the solar plexus, hard, and knocking me onto my back, which is still reverberating with pain.

He kicks my inner thigh, pushing it open, and I know where the next blow is going to land because every muscle in my body tenses up, but it doesn't stop the groan from leaving my lips as his foot connects with my dick.

My hands fly to my groin to cover myself, but a second later, the hammer smashes against the top of my wrist and that searing pain causes me to jerk my hands close to my chest as I lie on my back and this time, *he's fucking laughing*.

He kicks me between the legs again, something my father used to do to me when I didn't listen or I asked questions or I tried to stand up for Mom, to the point I stopped doing the latter. I never did again. I let her take the beatings instead of me because I was a fucking coward. And now someone is fucking with Ella and I can't fix it because I'm not any better and I'm *still* that same coward who let Brooklin's world get all fucked up. I'm still the same man who couldn't protect either of my sisters. Who let Lucifer fuck around with coke and I just laughed when he did his first line when we weren't even teenagers yet, because it was an escape and he deserved it and we all needed it and I looked away when Ezra would get so fucking hammered he'd pass out in the middle of a party. I

helped him to his bed but I didn't say anything the first time, the fifth time, the hundredth fucking time.

The pain overwhelms me, coming in a wave as Father Tomas drops the hammer on my knee and my entire body jolts but he's straddling me, hitting my fucking face, my pulse still throbbing between my legs from where he kicked me.

Every blow takes something from me, and I lift my hands up to stop him but he grabs my wrists together, forcing them back to the cement as he slaps me, the least bad thing he's done.

I keep my eyes closed, my body doubled up, tense, but he's on top of my chest and I can't move and my legs feel useless with the sharp ache in my dick and he's slapping me again and again and again and my hand is aching, the one he took the hammer to and I wonder if he broke one of my fingers and I'm thinking I'm useless and I deserve this and every person I've let down would smile at me right now. At this.

He slaps me again, and again, fire on my face, throbbing throughout my body, my teeth tight together as I try to breathe and breathe and *breathe*.

Tears form behind my eyes. *Fucking coward.*

He's not making a sound, but the two words echo in my brain anyway, just like someone is speaking them to me.

Fucking. Coward.

A strangled groan leaves me, my nostrils flaring as Tomas hits just above my brow, and something hot and wet and shameful spills down from the corner of my eyes, streaking over my face and I wish it was blood but it's worse. It's cowardice, and I try to fight Tomas's hold on my hands to shield myself, but he puts his weight on my wrists and a scream leaves my throat but Tomas doesn't stop because he gets high on my humiliation, and I can't blame him.

I deserve it.

My throat burns as another scream leaves me and he hits me with a closed fist, and it feels like my brain fucking rattles inside my skull and I know he might've fucked me up for good as my ears ring and everything is wavy in my mind because I hear something.

Something I shouldn't.

Footsteps.

A door thudding closed.

"Mavy?" A voice like a light. A name that represents a version of me I'm not right now. *I'm not what you need, pretty girl.*

My chest tightens, my body alive with so much pain, it's almost euphoric in the worst fucking way. I taste iron on my lips, and I hear it again, and it's louder now, closer somehow because my brain has been broken and now I'm completely fucked up.

"Mavy!"

Tomas doesn't stop, lost in blood lust, and I try to open my eyes, but my lids feel swollen and everything fucking hurts and—

I hear something steel scrape against cement. A strangled cry. "Get off him!"

Then the body beating mine seems to jolt and a scream is leaving someone's mouth that isn't mine. The weight on my chest goes to one side.

"Ella, stop—"

"*Get the fuck off him.*" She's screaming over his words, and the weight of Tomas's body lifts from mine completely and I turn on my side, curling up into a ball, squeezing my thighs together to protect my groin, cradling my hand to my chest, unable to open my eyes because everything fucking *hurts*. And I think I've left my head to find a better place to be.

"He *told* me to—"

"Get. Out." There's a fierceness in the words that makes me proud, and I must be in Heaven now.

“Ella.” The way he says her name, like he *knows* her, claws under my awareness, but I can’t hold onto the oddity. “It wasn’t what it—”

“*Get out, get out, get. Out!*” She snarls the words in a way I’ve never heard her speak before.

There are footsteps.

A door slams.

Something drops, clattering with a loud, resounding *thud*. The hammer.

Is it over?

God, I think it’s over.

Someone is running to me. A shadow falls over me, and I try my best to open my eyes, but everything is raw, everything is heavy. I blink, and I think blood blurs my vision.

Red hair.

Pale skin.

Green eyes.

Fingertips reaching but scared to touch me.

She’s on her knees.

“Mavy,” she whispers. “Maverick.” My full name, it’s said with fear and hopelessness. Then she’s doing something I can’t make out as my eyes close, and I hear her speak again a second later. “Come down to the basement,” she says, talking fast. “*Please.*”



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18

Pluvia

“How long?” Lucifer’s raspy voice sinks under my skin. His back is to me as I lie in bed and he stands by the bay of windows of the largest suite. The penthouse, usually reserved for mob bosses, but maybe we are that now. He has his hands in his pockets. Black hoodie, black pants, skeleton bandana. Same Lucifer as only hours ago, but things feel different right now. He’s the leader of all of us, and yet I feel I’ve spent most of my life taking care of him. Propping him up.

Now, I’m in bed, high as fuck thanks to edibles Ella called in from Queen View that a guard went to pick up, and he’s babysitting *me*.

The memories of last night—early morning? I don’t know anymore—are fuzzy. Ella kicking Father Tomas out, her calling Sid, the Malikovs coming down while Brooklin and Ezra watched Rain sleep, Cain standing guard outside of the bedroom door. We’re all here in the penthouse, Tomas too, I presume—if Luce didn’t order him killed—and it’s like we’re just waiting for Mikhail to burst through the fucking doors and doing nothing about it.

And Lucifer is questioning *me*.

Probably for the best though, because I’m not exactly sober right now.

I flick my gaze to the high ceilings, the chandelier in silver overhead. The covers are pulled over my body, and I don’t have a shirt on. My wrist is wrapped up, but it isn’t broken. Tomas must’ve held back. Bruises are forming and

staining my skin, along my inner thighs, higher up. One eye is swollen but not completely shut, and there are blotchy purple marks on my cheekbones, and one black bruise on my spine.

Nothing hurts right now though. A smile curves my lips. "Doesn't matter." I glance at my brother, standing behind the couch on the far side of the room. Darkness filters in from the window, but it's a lighter shade. It's almost been twenty-four hours since he found me and called in a private doctor.

I see tension ridge along his shoulders.

He laughs, but it's a throaty, dark sound. "Don't fuck with me. *How. Long?*" He still doesn't look at me. The drapes are pulled open, and he's staring at the thin tendrils of sunrise starting their climb over the city down below.

I close my eyes, one hand on my abdomen. I want to laugh too. I want to dismiss his question. But all I can manage is, "A long time."

There's silence after that for a while. Then the creak of hardwoods. I smell him, pine and nicotine, before I see him. But I force my eyes to open just as he sits on the side of the bed, feet on the floor, his hips close to mine. He's got his head bowed, black curls tumbling just over his closed eyes. Hands still in his pockets. He looks like a fallen angel. He looks like his name.

My heart twists inside my chest.

He doesn't say anything, but after a moment, he slips one hand free and reaches for me, circling his cold fingers around my uninjured wrist, holding onto me tightly, eyes still closed.

Silence is full of meaning between us.

I let my eyes shut too.

We sit there together for a long time.

"Where is Ella?" I manage to croak out, because it's the only thing that matters to me now. She wouldn't leave my side until I begged her to because she was staring at me

with a worry I've never seen before. Something haunted in her eyes. I never meant for her to find me there. I never wanted her to see just how broken I am. But maybe that's our problem, hiding our cracks and creating deeper ones.

Lucifer is quiet until he says, "Probably murdering Father Tomas right now. She wanted to speak to him alone after you dismissed her, so they're in the study."

My heart leaps to my throat. I had Lucifer track him down after he escaped the basement, but this is not okay. "I don't want him anywhere near her, understand?" I spring open my eyes and find he's staring back at me, watching me carefully. "Get him *away* from her."

He squeezes my wrist once, then he nods. "Okay," he says simply.

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LIV

Lucifer

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18

PLUVIA

“SCELUS.” Elijah settles back into his chair, behind his desk. “Do you know what that means?” His forearms rest on the black wood, fingers curled gently into fists as he looks up at me.

I rake a hand through my hair, wanting to get back to Sid. Rain is only days old. But this is what we agreed to, me and my wife. I’m here to change things. I don’t know how, I don’t have any fucking plan, but Maverick put it in my face, all the things that might be happening to kids around the world that the 6 have their hands in. I would like to bury my head in the sand, if only to keep my family safe. But I’ve never truly been one to hide and my wife gets what she wants.

“Evil deed,” I answer Elijah as I easily translate the Latin. I drop my hand by my side as I glance over his

shoulder, looking at the darkness of his lawn. I don't often go to his home, but it's beautiful, the fountains and white marble along his expansive back deck. He has a fence as we all do, but the high iron bars are concealed by thick shrubs. I'll have to plant some of those. "What of it?" I cut my gaze back to him, bringing my fingers to the seat back of the red leather chair in front of me. Elijah's office is made of mahogany and dark red, and it suits him. Bookshelves line the walls at his back. Old texts, some without names on the spine.

"It's a ceremony you've likely never heard of."

I roll my eyes, biting back on the groan threatening to rise up from my throat. I certainly have not heard of it, nor do I particularly want to right now. I know about Ortus, that was the precursor to this conversation. Why he dragged me here in the late evening hours on Sunday. "Fantastic," I mutter under my breath, leaning into the chair and flexing my hips, stretching my back. Feeding Rain slumped against a pillow in the middle of the night isn't great for my spine.

At least I don't have any dreams of my father anymore. Maybe because I don't sleep enough to dream at all.

Elijah gives me a bitter smile, lifting his hands and clasping them together. I avoid looking at the 6 ring on his finger. It reminds me too much of my father and that makes me feel a little murderous toward my current Dominus.

"Most of the women in the 6 have gone through some version or another of it."

I tense, fingertips digging into the leather as I straighten to my full height. "No," I whisper, not letting him explain it to me. I clench my teeth as he cocks a brow. "She's been through enough." I snarl the words. I have a gun tucked into the back of my black jeans. I will put a bullet through his temple if this is about my wife. "Do you hear me?" I speak quietly, the words clawing their way up my throat. "She has suffered her entire fucking life. No." I drop my

hands from his chair. "If that's what it takes for Ortus, I don't want the rise—"

"Stop talking, Lucifer." His tone is clipped but volume low.

I smile at him, but I don't speak. He can explain it to me, but if it's about Sid, I'm walking away. I'm done.

He tilts his head, his gaze never leaving mine. "Ella Christian."

I go completely still, my eyes wide. What the fuck?

"Sid has been fully vetted. She has your child, after all. If someone did not want her with you, she would simply cease to exist."

I grind my molars together, my nostrils flaring.

"However, Ella has proven nothing, and it is very clear Maverick wants her by his side." He inclines his head, toward my hand. I know what he's gesturing at. Coagula. Elijah has an X on his palm too. "She could be a liability. Her mother is no one, she does not know her father, and she has nothing to lose."

I think of my brother. How I would do anything for him, and how he's always proven the same to me.

"Why aren't you telling him this?"

Elijah smiles. "Because you will be ascending, and he cannot verify his girlfriend himself. That must come from you. Which is where we get to Scelus."

Evil deed. I try to make this make some sort of sense inside my head, but I get nothing. Does he want me to fuck Ella? I could save us this entire conversation if he'd just say that; I already have fucked her. And if this is about Ignis, that can't happen until next year, in May, so I'm not sure why the fuck I'm still here.

But before I can say anything, Elijah continues to speak.

"Evil deed, wickedness, sin." All translations of scelus. He shrugs one shoulder, dress shirt pulling tight over his broad shoulders. "You have to verify she has none inside of

her. In other words, you need to test her loyalty, alongside teaching her the ways of the 6."

I open my mouth to protest automatically. I have a newborn. I have a wife. What's the point of being at the head of a wealthy organization like ours if I can't take time to spend with my family when I wish to? I'm not mentoring Ella. Fuck that. I already have enough trouble just looking at her. No.

Someone else can do that shit.

But before I can say any of that, Elijah speaks again.

"You can pawn one of those tasks off to someone else if you find anyone so charitable. But you must test her yourself. Check for weaknesses."

"How the fuck do I do that? You want me to proposition myself to her?" I snort. "I've already been there and done that—"

"Shut up, Lucifer." Elijah rolls his eyes and cringes a little, like sharing is distasteful. I guess I can see his point now because I will never share Sid again in my fucking life. "I'm aware of your...closeness with your brother."

I smirk at him. Good.

"No, it's best if you do this from a distance. Watch her, maybe." He leans back in his chair, hands coming to his lap. "You'll figure it out. As Ortus continues, you keep an eye on her. If you find any reason to doubt her loyalty, she's out."

I cannot imagine Ella being disloyal to Maverick. For all the things I dislike about her, that is her fiercest attribute. She truly loves him, and she follows in his shadow like a scared little kitten. She doesn't take a breath without his permission.

But even still, I know we all keep secrets under our floorboards. Ella has to have a few. If I were the reason she was ripped away from Mav though, he would never forgive me, so I have to get very clear on what the fuck Elijah is talking about here.

“What do you mean when you say out?”

Elijah stares at me for several seconds. Then he just says, “She dies.”

Well that can’t fucking happen. Not if I want Maverick in my life, which I do. Forever.

Elijah continues to speak as if he didn’t just drop a bomb on me. “In exchange for following the protocols of Ortus, including this one, I’ll give you something you want, and I don’t just mean your ascension, although that is plenty and you’d do best to remember it.”

I want to lift my middle finger to him, but I resist. Just barely, all of my fingers twitching.

“I will give you the very files you need to ruin someone’s life, and save the lives of foster children being... mishandled, in the system.”

Cold washes over me. It’s hard to breathe. I know I need to ask so many questions, but all I can think about is Sid, and thankfully, Elijah continues to talk where I can’t.

“They conduct business at a property someone in the 6 owns.”

I narrow my eyes.

“It isn’t mine,” Elijah whispers, turning to stare past me, like he’s looking into his mistakes. “And I’m too cowardly to risk my own brotherhood over it.”

“If Adam Medici comes to Pluvia, do not let him enter.” Elijah speaks quietly through the phone as I leave Mav’s bedroom, my back to the door. “He’s making deals with Boaz under the table. Something is going on between the two of them and as of now, I don’t trust him.”

I recall the conversation with Dominus about Ortus. Ella. I passed on the barest information to her with threats and coercion, but I let Adam fucking Medici take over the training aspect. Feeding her information, that was his job. I

assumed when I saw Atlas wandering around Corpus, wandering around *her*; his father had pawned off the task to him. He offered, the very night Elijah had given me the task, and Elijah agreed with a single nod and not another word.

Now, with Elijah's words, agitation courses through me. "We can't start a war with RC," I whisper quietly in the darkened hallway, one hand clenched into a fist at my side. "Particularly if one of you has turned into a fucking rat."

Elijah says nothing for several seconds and I pull my phone from my ear, checking if we're disconnected. But he's still there, silent on the other line. I jam the phone back against my cheek and open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off with his own words.

"The war is already here."

I frown, feeling a heaviness in my limbs. I can't fight any kind of gang war right now. Maverick is down, Rain is here, Sid too. We have to organize, and right now, we're holed up in a hotel we can't leave just yet. I thought we'd bide our time until Boaz calmed the fuck down over the fact I didn't kill Esther. But if there's something *more* happening, that's a big fucking problem. I want to have a confrontation over the 6 about my mom, the film, what the fuck is happening at Shadow Villa and what the fuck happened to *me* there, but I want to do that in person. If I have to fight alongside the 6 while I keep all of that in, it's going to fuck with me.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask softly. "I thought RC is checking up on me to approve my rise. Why the fuck do I need to have anything to do with Mikhail if he isn't doing any of that—"

"He kidnapped my *wife* and I cannot publicly go against him just yet unless I want to risk Edith and Ezra's safety."

Oh shit. I don't speak, the cool rage in Elijah's voice not lost on me. We assumed it was Jeremiah Rain, for a chance for him to escape, or someone connected with the Order.

But why would Mikhail bother with something like that if he has access to Elijah and Edith both? And does that mean RC lied from the start, about why they were here?

“Her and Cyra,” Cain’s mother, “have attempted to counteract the bullshit running deep in members of government in the States, and big businessmen who can buy *anything* or *anyone* with their bottomless accounts and immunity.”

Cyra Bonavich. I remember Cain mentioning Boaz had come to Nox to speak to Callum. Were those threats he was whispering too?

But... “What do you mean? Counteract? Counteract *what*, exactly?” I stare down the hallway, wanting to walk through the living room, past the dining room and foyer, to my wife. But I stay where I am, Maverick to my back. I’m supposed to be separating Tomas and Ella right now, but that shit can wait. “And how long have you known this? Did they come clean to you? What about Julie?” I drop my voice to a whisper. “Finn? Samson?” Atlas said he killed him, but why? For fucking *what*? Did Adam have a hand in that too? Because when I was at Liber, Elijah had his own suspicions on Samson’s murderer, and now I’m wondering if *that’s* truly why RC is looking into Edith.

“Boaz can’t erase us,” Elijah says quietly. “But he can make life very difficult for all of us, including *you*. It’s why my hands have always been tied on bringing down the things I abhor in this world, at least what the 6 touch of it. Edith and Cyra didn’t care. Remember what I told you? About Edith’s involvement with Samson? She admitted to me she ensured Atlas killed him. It was a task given to him by Adam, but Edith needed it done too.”

My mouth goes dry.

I blink rapidly in the hallway, stepping back, my spine to the door as I sag a little against it.

“Atlas introduced Natalie to a cult-like director, pardon the term, and she brought Samson up with her to Acid City.

He was a nosy kid and he found a place he shouldn't have."
Liar's Island.

I don't speak, my head fucking spinning.

"He assumed it was the opposite of what it was." Elijah is speaking in vague terms because he doesn't know that I'm aware of all of this shit. I stay silent and let him keep going. "Edith had to sacrifice the one, for the many. To keep children safe, like your wife wishes to do."

My heart pumps violently inside my chest.

"She made it look like an act of RC." I can hear his smile through the phone.

The whips. The silver scrawled on Samson's corpse. *Silentium.* Silence. I almost want to laugh at Edith's gall, but all of this means a bunch of shit falling on me, so I don't fucking laugh.

"But Boaz was well-aware he hadn't sanctioned the murder, and yet it served a purpose. Samson knew too much." Knew about Shadow Villa, he doesn't say. "So Boaz let it go. However, he intended to convince Cyra and Edith to give up their sanctuary." The island. Elijah pauses, taking a shaky breath in. "He promised not to lay a hand on them, so long as neither of them went public with what they were doing. But that didn't mean RC would leave it alone. He's been putting pressure on me and Callum both to force our wives to relinquish their property. The kidnapping was only a small taste of what *could* happen. Edith, however, doesn't give in so easily. She's like your wife, in that way."

I don't smile or feel any warmth with the words and I don't reveal my hand yet, how much I know about Liar's Island and the curls of memories shifting in my mind over Shadow Villa. "And Julie? You gonna tell me that was your wife too, *Dominus?*" Because that will be a big fucking problem for me, no matter what kind of vigilante shit Edith is up to.

I think I hear a high-pitched noise across the penthouse and I start to walk, straightening from Mav's door. My pulse flies in my chest, reasoning with myself it was probably Rain waking up for a feeding. But it's like there's cotton in my ears, the way panic spears through me as my footsteps fall on the soft, plush runner cutting down the hallway. I pass the living room and glance into the foyer at the closed double doors lined in gold. Nothing is there but shadows as Elijah continues speaking and I strain my ears, trying to *hear*.

"Julie wasn't my wife's doing," Elijah is saying, which I suspected as much. But he sighs, and I tense even as I continue walking through the darkened living room, making a right turn down another corridor, passing where I know Ezra and Brooklin are sleeping, then Cain's room.

Finally, at the end, I dart my hand out for the golden handle of my temporary room, and I pull down, then push open the door, holding my breath as I step into darkness, the scent of lavender bright in the room.

It uncoils something inside my chest, but I blink my eyes all the same, adjusting to the blackness of the room as I dart my gaze to my son's golden crib, beside the king bed, where I see my wife's sleeping form, curled on her side how she always sleeps.

Relief threads through me but I step inside the room on silent steps, the phone still pressed to my ear as I tiptoe to the crib.

Sid would wake up if someone came in here, wouldn't she?

But she's not now, is she?

The city lights drift through a sliver in the thick curtains of the room as I come to stand over my son's little bed.

And Elijah is still talking as my ears start to ring. "But it wasn't RC, either. They stay in the shadows as long as possible before they strike."

I feel sick. Spots pop in front of my eyes and I sway a little on my feet even as I reach for the gun stowed in the back of my pants, my fingers curling around the handle.

Panic engulfs me. A feeling I've never known. Not like this. I'm breathing hard, my knees tremble, and it's as if I'm paralyzed even though I'm standing upright.

"Kameron Toussaint murdered Julie and sent Finn to live with Esther. It was *her* who ordered the older woman to stay there with the child."

Kameron Toussaint? The first name is vaguely familiar, but I have no idea who the fuck this person is.

And I don't care.

It doesn't fucking matter to me.

My chest heaves even though it doesn't feel as if I'm breathing.

"Kameron is the woman who has Jeremiah Rain held as a hostage right now. She's the leader of Cruor, who has power even over RC. She has, it seems, risen from the dead. A true *Lazarus*."

I drop the phone.

I don't care about Jeremiah fucking Rain. I don't give a *fuck* about Kameron. I don't know what he means, rising from the dead.

I do not fucking care at all.

The only thing that comes out of my mouth, a gasping sound, like I'm choking, is my son's name.

"*Rain!*"



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18

PLUVIA

HIS BOOT IS *flat against my spine. My cheek is pressed to the floor of the chapel inside Emily Cemetery. My thighs clench involuntarily, so I can hold back my pee. The pressure builds in my bladder and my nostrils flare rapidly, in and out as I try to gulp down air. It's Sunday, the boys are at Sanctum, Sid is safe inside her house, and I... I am in hell.*

A small laugh leaves his lips, curling with arrogance. "This looks like it's a familiar position to you."

My skin crawls, spiders down my shoulder blades. My palms are pressed to the dusty hardwoods too, but I couldn't push up even if I tried. I'm not in much pain, not yet, but it's the fear that crawls inside of me, making my body tremble on the floor.

I close my eyes tight and pray for Mavy, knowing he won't come.

"Lucifer told you why you're to meet me here, didn't he?"

I clench my teeth, trying to gather my nerves. Yes. Lucifer told me to be fully inducted into the Unsaints, to be welcomed by the 6, I had to go through an initiation process, very different from Ignis, he told me with a wry smile.

But I guess I don't speak quickly enough, because this man's boot crunches against the lower part of my spine, along my sacrum.

I cry out, a wretched, weak sound as my eyes flash open and tears prick behind my eyes.

"When I ask you a question, you answer. I'm sure Maverick Astor taught you at least that?" A lightness to his words that tries to hide his evil.

I nod once, my chin sliding along the floor of the chapel. I see beneath the pews, dust and dirt and decay. It smells of things locked away in here. Dank and musky.

The man's foot shifts up my spine, toward my shoulder blades, then he's stepping on the back of my head. I snap my eyes closed once more, sucking on the inside of my cheeks to keep from sobbing.

Be strong. You can do this. Sid probably had to do something similar. You can survive, for him. You can.

He pushes his weight against the side of my skull. It feels like my temple will explode. Stars pop behind my lids, pressure building and growing and expanding, my nails digging into the floor, bending backward, flexing under the fear of my panic.

"If you do not come when you are summoned, it will not only be your life at risk." He bears down harder, a jagged hiss escaping my lips as he covers my ear with the sole of his shoe. I can barely hear him when he speaks next, over the pain and my pulse pounding beneath his boot.

“Exsanguinate. Do you know the meaning of the word, Ms. Christian?”

Snot drips down my nose as I try to breathe through the pain. He applies more pressure the longer I go without answering, the side of my face aching against the floorboards, the other side aching beneath his boot.

“No,” I whisper. I feel stupid, foolish, useless. Maverick has humiliated me a thousand times over, and it has never felt like this because there was love beneath it. “N-no, I don’t.” I say it again when he doesn’t let up. It feels like my ears will pop, like my eardrum will explode.

I push my palms against the floorboards, wanting to buck up, but he only laughs, decreasing the pressure and saying curtly, “Back on the floor.”

I drop down, relief spearing me with a warmth when he slides his boot down to the back of my neck. At least I can hear.

But as he flexes his toes, causing pressure at the top of my spine, I hear something crunch.

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood so I do not cry out.

“Of course you don’t know,” he croons. “You are nothing. A stupid, brainless girl. It’s what he likes about you, you know? That he could set you on fire and you would simply stand there and burn.”

Tears streak down my hot cheeks.

He isn’t wrong, and I loathe that about myself.

He removes his foot but I don’t draw in a breath of relief. The next second, he is kneeling beside me, his hand on the back of my neck, lips by my ear. “If you do not obey, you will be responsible for every ounce of blood drained from Rain Malikov’s body. His little corpse will grace Lucifer’s doorstep, and it will be your name carved into his skin. Then you can watch as I peel the flesh from Maverick’s bones, while he is still alive.”

Without another word, Adam Medici stands to his feet and walks away, leaving me lying on the floor.

I launch myself at him.

I can't stop it. It won't leave my head, Father Tomas looming over Maverick. The way my boyfriend's body jolted. How my heart nearly shredded to pieces at the sight of him broken, on the floor. The anger that blazed through me.

I can't get it out.

My fingers come to his neck, circling tight as he stumbles back into the pale green walls of the study in the penthouse.

His hands come to my wrist, trying to deflect me, but I lift my knee, driving it into his groin.

Before he lost his fucking mind, Atlas was teaching me how to fight. He offered the night of Rain's birthday party, and by that time, my sessions had already begun. I needed to know I could fight back, if I had to. If my life depended on it.

If it depended on Rain, I would keep the secret until it all stopped. November, Lucifer had guessed, but he offered me nothing else. And I would swallow everything that happened to me inside Emily Cemetery all the way to my fucking grave if it meant protecting the little boy who means the world to my boyfriend.

But I knew I should get in shape. Learn to defend myself. And Atlas was the key. He had prescription painkillers—so I thought—and that helped solve two of my problems. I still do not know what I've truly been taking, why things have been so shaky inside my head, but right now, in this small, circular study of Pluvia, none of that matters.

What matters is Father Tomas's skin beneath my fingernails wound around his neck. I dig in deep as he doubles over, his face coming toward mine. The scent of

him, like incense, fills my nose, and I swing my leg back to knee him again, but he rears his head and his temple collides with mine, bursting stars in my eyes.

My hold loosens around his throat and I hear Atlas's phantom voice whispering inside my ear. "*Get away when you can't gain ground.*"

I back up, moving quickly on light steps. My thighs and back are healed now, and I can put distance between us easily. My hip bumps a square table behind me but without looking, I skirt around it easily, hands up in a defensive gesture as Tomas's palms come to his knees and he bows his dark head of hair, breathing in shakily

Pink blooms on his temple, where he struck me with it, and he's in black clerical robes, a Leviathan cross hanging in bronze around his neck.

I put my spine to the door of the study, sweeping my eyes over the space. It's mostly empty save for the small table and three chairs crowded around it. Dark wooden floors, wainscoting along the green walls. The only light is a faint glow overhead.

It smells of cleaners in here and I briefly wonder if the last occupants murdered someone in this room. I think maybe I might do the same to Tomas, now.

"How fucking *dare you?*" I shriek it, feeling each syllable claw its way up my windpipe, vomiting out of my mouth. I am shaky with rage, imagining Maverick on his knees, feeling guilt over what happened to Lucifer's mother, to Brooklin, to everyone he couldn't save. He has the weight of the world on his shoulders because beneath his sinister facade, he cares the most.

How dare Tomas take advantage of that?

I know Maverick sees him, and after my first session at Emily Chapel, I could understand why. Adam orchestrated the meetings but the priest filled them. Tomas kept the wounds lower on my back, using a cane instead of a whip

most of the time, and there was a certain perverse satisfaction in taking the pain.

But sometimes, I felt like vomiting. Sometimes Tomas became overzealous. Once, I thought he ruined my kidneys, the way I peed blood. And still, I kept the secret. For Maverick, for Rain, for Lucifer too, even though he had sent me to that hell.

“How dare you do that to him?” I’m breathing hard, my hair damp around my face. In red leggings and a baggy white shirt, my feet in burgundy boots, I feel so hot, I want to rip my clothes. But mainly, I want to shred Tomas to pieces. “You took a... you took a fucking *hammer* to his *spine!*” I see red, just imagining how Mavy’s back looked. My ears ring with rage as Tomas slowly lifts up his head, his dark eyes on me, thick brows pulled close together. There’s stubble on his face, and even when he’s beat me so badly I could barely stand, he’s always had a strange kindness about his countenance.

Not now though.

Right now, his shoulders moving as he breathes hard, he looks as if he wants to murder me. I don’t know why Adam Medici gave my punishments to Tomas, but even the priest never made me feel the fear Adam did, his boot pressing against my skull.

But in this moment, I see the true sadist coming forth. Not just a part of him who likes to punish others, it’s the entire thing. His skeleton is formed from bones of cruelty, and right now, I want to snap every single one of them.

“He told me to,” he snarls, his lips twisting with rage as he stands, hands by his sides, black robes coming to his wrists. He points a finger at me from across the room and my fury spikes. “*He told me to.*”

I shake my head, hands now fisted at my sides. “I don’t care what he said to you. I do not fucking care. *You used a hammer!*” I yell it again, slamming my fist against the door

at my back. The noise is loud and I don't care, at least, not until Tomas's lips twist into a smile.

"Careful," he whispers. "You aren't finished yet. If you let them know what's going on between us," I *loathe* how he speaks those words, "Rain *will* die. Medici does not play around."

A lump forms in my throat. I know he's referring to Adam, but I think of Atlas, growing up with a man like that. It amazed me how different his son was. But it seems he wasn't so different after all.

I think of the words he scrawled in silver marker on my skin. Latin for *I tried*. I haven't been able to ask him what the fuck that was about, and part of me doesn't want to know.

He drugged me, and I didn't tell Maverick it was against my will. He's already wanting to kill him for my consent over the pills. I wanted us to get past *this*, being forced here to Pluvia, before any of those confrontations began.

"What do you get from him, huh?" I jerk my chin to the priest. "What do you get from Adam, being his little toy to order around?"

Tomas's dark eyes spark bright. His gaze drops over my body. "*You*," he says simply. "I was given an order, I obey, and *you* fall into my lap. Every time I'm finished with you, I go home and get off, thinking of the sounds you made."

Nausea works its way up my gut.

"The same with Maverick," he whispers. "It's always been that way, since he was a boy. He used to bruise so much easier then, but *you* still do."

I want to scream at the top of my fucking lungs. I am shaking all over.

"Now come here, Ella, and let's have our final session." He smiles at me, placing his hands behind his back, waiting for me to obey.

I laugh. It sounds wicked and unnerving, even to my own ears. "No," I whisper, tucking a lock of hair behind my

ear. “No. You’re stuck here, you can’t tell my secrets to anyone, so Rain will be safe. I’m going to tell Maverick *everything*, and—”

“You will sentence that child to death.” His cold tone cuts me off. “It doesn’t matter if Maverick kills me in this very room. They will know you could not stay loyal, and they will punish Rain for it.”

I don’t believe him. Not fully, anyhow. Do I think there will be consequences? Of course. It’s why I’ve kept the secrets all this time. That, and the fact Lucifer told me to do this. To follow every order Adam Medici gave me. I *trusted* Lucifer. But I don’t think even he knows exactly what Adam has sentenced me to.

The desire to snap this man’s neck grows, but I know, no matter my training, his size could potentially overcome me. I won’t be stupid. Not like everyone thinks I am. I reach for the handle of the door at my back, smiling at him.

“Fuck you.”

But before I turn, he’s moving.

I have to flick the lock on the door, and as I pull it open, his palm comes crashing over my head, sealing the door shut.

His fingers curl in my hair, jerking my neck back, one hand coming to my throat and jamming into the very front of it, knocking the breath from my lungs.

“One more time, Ella. Maybe this time, I’ll cum on your flayed spine. Maverick can’t save you now. I made sure of it.”

LVI

Maverick

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18
PLUVIA

CITY LIGHTS PIERCE the darkness of my bedroom and for a moment, my one good eye heavy with sleep, I can't remember where I am.

Then the sound that must have woken me starts up again.

A mewling, sniffling sound. *Rain?*

Slowly, every muscle aching as my head feels like it's split in two, I struggle to sit up, not glancing down at the bandages along my abdomen or the bruises that I know are burning hot and tender on my thighs.

My back aches, like my spine is exposed, but as the soft sound continues, I turn my head toward Ella's side of our temporary bed. She came in here, right? At some point? My memory is fuzzy, hazed with edibles and the sleep my body needs to heal but... *She came in here, didn't she?*

The bed is empty though.

I glance at the clock on her nightstand. It's 6:06—in the morning obviously—judging by the purpling sky of Queen View I see from the drapes being thrown open in this room.

And if *Ella* came in here, she would've closed them. She knows how I like to sleep, and she's always said she likes what I like.

I lick my dry, cracked lips, dread curdling in my gut.

Where are you, pretty girl?

Just as I fling the covers off, the soft crying sound drops low. Guttural. A fully adult human made that noise, or an animal, but it is nothing Rain could do.

No.

I stand, blinding pain coursing through every muscle in my body, every vein. The edges of my vision turn to black as I throw out a hand and grasp the headboard, breathing hard, my knees weak.

Bile burns up my throat and I know I *should* sit back down. Get a hold of myself before I step through that door and find the source of the noise—lower now, I can't even hear it over the pain screaming inside my ears—but I'm not going to.

Not until I find Ella.

I take a struggling breath, blinking my working eye over and over to clear my vision faster. Then I snatch open the drawer on my nightstand and pull my gun from it, but I don't place my finger over the trigger. Fear haunts me, I'm not in control right now, and if I accidentally fired this and shot someone I shouldn't...

Maybe the noise was nothing.

The washer or dryer, because there's one in the penthouse. Maybe the dishwasher, because Ella would certainly run that and she's probably in the kitchen right now.

But I don't put the gun away and I don't stop moving on slow, faltering steps toward the door opposite my bed. My

bare feet connect with the cold hardwoods, and I glance down, grateful I'm in basketball shorts, but I would have no problem walking out of this room naked to find my girl.

The noise kicks up again.

It clenches around my heart, the way it sounds like a cry for help. I think I hear it, even, a jagged whisper.

"Help me, Mavy. Help."

I bite my bottom lip to keep from responding. It could be a trick, some deceit, and I won't know until I open the white door ahead of me.

I keep moving, blood pounding in my ears.

And above the noise, there's something else too.

The sound of footsteps. Hurrying though, not hiding. Multiple ones. My chest heaves, every expansion painful, every inhale torturous, but I compartmentalize the pain and I keep moving.

A low hiss outside of my bedroom, like someone sucking in air.

Panic fills my veins. *I'm running after Malachi, and I push him, and I save him, and I kill him.*

My fingers come to the heavy silver knob.

I twist it open, cool air gushing against my exposed body, small motion lights flickered on in the wide hallway with gilded golden walls.

A crowd of people, most of their backs to me.

I notice Atlas, Cain, Ezra, all looking *down, down, down.* At something I can't see.

I can't see it.

The sniffing sound. A strangled sob.

"Mavy, help me."

I'm going to pass out, but I fight through it, gun in hand as I shove Atlas out of my way, pushing him into Cain but I don't care.

And there she is.

Crumpled on the floor, *there she is.*

She's on her knees, but bowed over, a white T-shirt of mine over her body, long red hair down her back, damp with what might be sweat. Her arms are wrapped around her knees, her cheek pressed to the golden runner of carpet cutting over the dark hardwoods.

Her face is ashen, almost yellow. Discolored.

There's a puddle of something that looks like bile by her mouth, strings of it sticking to her lips.

My brothers back up, plenty of space for all of us in the corridor. They give me room to take in the worst thing I've ever seen in my life. The most heartbreaking sight in a lifetime of horror.

"Mavy," she whispers, a trembling to her words, but it's like she's trying to be so brave. "Mavy."

Her lips look blue, a contrast to the yellow tone of her skin.

I sink to my knees. I couldn't stay standing even if I wanted to. The gun drops from my hand, clunking softly and harmlessly on the carpet, but even if it had gone off, as long as it didn't hit her, I don't think I'd care.

"Ella." I breathe out her name. I lift my hands, drawing them close to her, but I'm scared to touch her. I don't understand. I don't know what's wrong.

Her hips are arched in the air, like some twisted child's pose, and it takes me a second to realize she isn't wearing any shorts, or if she is, they show off almost every inch of her lower half, not covered by my T-shirt.

Pale skin. Freckles.

And...

"Maverick. Check her back." It's Cain's voice, frozen with fury. I've never heard him speak so coldly before.

"No, Mavy," Ella whispers. "No, no. It's okay. I'm okay. It's not the first time. I'm okay." She tries to plant one palm on the floor. She attempts to push up, but the muscles in her arm give out and she drops back down, cheek to the floor, her elbow bent, and fingers splayed over the runner.

My mind goes blank for a second... or two, three; I'm not sure what time is anymore. Fuzzy fear builds in my bloodstream, leaving me feeling dizzy, like I'm going to pass out, even though I'm on my knees. It's hard to breathe, the walls of my lungs sticking to one another as I take in shallow gulps of oxygen. *I don't understand.*

It's not anger that blooms in my chest, my fingers reaching for the hem of her shirt, clenching in the soft fabric, damp from her sweat.

It's a fear I've never known, like my stomach has dropped away.

She tries to wiggle from me, arching her back toward Cain, who is standing opposite me in this circle, the wall at his back. The high ceilings should give us plenty of air to breathe, but it's like...I can't.

"Ella," I whisper as she squirms. "Stop fighting me." I try to make it sound like a command. So she'll think everything is okay. So she'll stay calm. I try to assume our roles, so I can figure out what's happening, but my voice breaks all the same.

Slowly, as she protests weakly, I lift up the shirt, pulling it back, and back, and back. I see her underwear, a beautiful dark green, stretched over her round ass, and for a split second, reality cuts in. *Why am I showing my brothers so much of her body?* I want to tell everyone to leave.

But something glitches in my brain.

Something dark and black and red and fire.

And the only thing that comes out is, "Who. Fucking. *Hit you?*" I try to stay upright, but it's like I collapse, trying to collect myself.

I close my eyes, leaning over and resting my forehead against the back of her skull, catching her scent as she trembles. Usually, it soothes my soul. But right now, it does nothing but flash crimson against the back of my eyelids.

Then I see it again, even with my eyes closed.

Black and red bruises on the back of her fucking thighs. Like someone *beat* her. I've been whipped before. *A lot*. I've had my blood spilled on the fucking garage floor. I've been *surrounded* by it, and I've taken so many lashings, the scars will never heal on my back.

I know what it looks like.

This wasn't that.

And I just got beaten too. I just got my shit *wrecked*.

It looked more like that.

I've used a belt on her before, both of us agreeing to it. I've hit her too. A thing *she* requests.

But nothing I've ever done to her has left a mark like the ones on the backs of her thighs. *Ever*.

She doesn't answer me, but she's not trying to get away.

She's perfectly still. I slide my fingers to her neck, and I can feel her pulse racing beneath my arm over her back.

"Ella." There's a pounding in my ears, an edgy, twitchy feeling in my fingers. The scent of bile is acrid, flooding my nostrils. *What happened? I don't... Nothing makes sense.*

If Atlas hurt her... *I'm going to fucking kill him. Has this been it all along?* I'm aware he's standing in this circle. I am very fucking aware, and I don't look at him right now.

"Who?" I whisper, my voice cracked. I swallow the tightness in my throat as she stays silent, her back rising and falling beneath my arm. "Give me a name." It comes out like a plea. At the same time, I twist my head and whisper, "Call a *fucking* doctor, *now*."

"Already did," Ezra whispers, his voice jagged. "The same one who saw you. He's staying on the first floor." *Thank fuck no one let him leave after he treated me.*

I rest my temple over Ella again and play back her words. *"It's not the first time."*

What does she mean? What the fuck is she talking about? This had to have happened inside this penthouse, how could it have occurred anywhere else?

I would have known.

I would have, right?

How did I not know?

I know what my dad did to Sid when we left for Noctem. I know what Lazar Malikov did at Sacrificium. I know about Jeremiah's origins, and how the Forgues kept him in that fucking cage. All those times I've been away for Council, for work with the 6, raids and murders and bullshit in the night, I've left her alone, trusting in the guards vetted by *all of us*.

But someone got their hands on her because I left her alone. I thought I took her away from hell. Turns out, I just sent her to another level.

And I've been worrying over Sid and Lucifer and Rain and turning my eye away from my own fucking home. I've been thinking drugs were the problem between us, that Atlas gave her something before our threesome and I'd have to beat him again for that.

But this... *This is something else.*

"Ella. Who fucking touched you?" It feels like blood is drowning my chest cavity, like I can't fucking breathe.

"It's not what you think." She whispers those words, but they sound like a bomb detonating to my ears as she trembles on the floor.

My entire body is tense, my limbs *aching* at how tightly coiled they are. My lips pull back, curling into a snarl, and slowly, so fucking slowly, I straighten, pulling away from her, but I don't let go of my hold on the back of her neck.

Her eyes flutter closed as I ask, "It's not what I *think*?"

It's deathly quiet up here.

I hear *nothing*. Not even the sound of my own breathing. All I can imagine in my head is Atlas's neck snapping beneath my hands, and how good *that* would sound.

"Mavy," she whispers, her voice hoarse, her body going limp. "Let me explain."

Let. Me. Explain.

She cannot be fucking serious.

My hands are shaky, as angry as I am, but if I don't handle this correctly, she won't tell me anything. She freezes, from fear. I massage her neck, forcing myself not to look at what's happened to her.

Instead, I stare at her perfect face. *"Explain." Because I don't understand, baby.*

"I did it," she whispers, her eyes still closed.

My heart skips a beat. I want it to be true, but I know it isn't.

Still, I can't help but hold onto a shred of delusional hope when I ask, "What?" It's the only thing I can think to say. My brain is fucking broken. It was one thing, thinking someone else had hurt her. The solution to that is simple. *They fucking die.* But if she did it... What then? And why?

Do I want you to lie? Do I want to know?

My mind flickers to Lucifer. I don't know where he is right now, I don't know how everyone else heard Ella out here, but there are things I'm keeping from my best friend too. Like the kidnapping from Corpus, when Mikhail insisted I *make* Lucifer obey commands. And the meeting with Elijah, before any of that, to protect Rain at all costs. That was my job. *Protect your nephew, no matter what.*

What secret things has Lucifer hidden from me? If it has anything to do with *this...* I will bury him beside Samson.

I watch Ella's pale throat bob, her lashes splayed over her cheekbones. "I..." She takes a deep breath. "You hurt yourself too."

I feel as if she hit me with those words. I drop my hand from her neck, my fingers curled tightly into fists as I sink back on my calves. "That's different." The excuse falls lamely on my own ears, especially as my body is still devastatingly sore from the last time he beat me, only a day ago.

The last time he beat me...

"Why?" she murmurs.

I swallow down all those thoughts of Malachi, the reason I first let Tomas touch me, but I always found another one. I push back the memory of fucking over Ella with Chelsea. How she cut me afterward, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly fucking enough. Maybe seeing her with that fucker in the bar was adequate punishment, but I don't think so. I've always known I don't deserve good things. And I definitely don't deserve *Ella*. Good and bad, she's the mix of both I've always wanted. *But I don't deserve her.*

"Why?" I repeat her question back to her, and I'm suddenly wishing I was lying on the floor too. It's like I can feel all the old wounds along my back. The scars on my spine. "I needed to..."

"A release, right?" Her lips have strings of bile attached to them.

"I don't believe you." I push aside everything. The memories. The guilt. The *anger*. I try to hold onto facts. The back of my girl's legs are a wreck, she's lying in a puddle on the floor. And she's telling me *she* hit herself. "Don't fucking lie to me." I crawl forward on my knees, dropping down to my palms as I try to get my face closer to hers.

Her entire body is trembling again. "Mavy, I'll be okay —"

"*Don't fucking lie to me!*" I snap the words out and I hate the fact I'm yelling, but she's not fucking listening and... and...

"The rest of her," Cain snarls, his words vicious. "While you're wasting time, I'm going to look at the rest of her." I glance at him as he steps forward, sinking to his knees too. He slowly reaches for her shirt and my eyes connect with his.

He's asking me for permission.

"He needs to see, Mav," Atlas whispers from somewhere behind me. I want to fucking gut him, but I just nod at Cain as Atlas keeps talking. "To know how bad it is."

“How long will it take?” I whisper over my shoulder, not to anyone in particular, seeing only vague glimpses of the darkened hallway leading to the living room, then the foyer, the entrance. “For the doctor? How fucking long?”

“He’s coming,” Atlas replies, trying to placate me. “He just has to take the elevator up.” But there’s a confusion in his words, and somewhere in the dark recesses of my brain, I understand why. *How fucking long does it take to ride an elevator up in an empty hotel?*

Aside from that eerie thought, blotting it out, anxiety gnaws at me because I don’t quite understand what exactly is wrong with Ella, beneath her skin. What’s happened to her organs and why she’s throwing up, but I know the doctor needs to fucking *hurry*.

Cain lifts up her shirt, revealing the curve of her lower spine over her underwear.

Yellow and blue and black and red and bleeding under her skin.

I feel dizzy. I shift on my knees, tracing my fingers lightly over the marks as Cain holds back her shirt. Some purple and nearly black on the edges, with shades of green in the center, dipping down into the waistband of her underwear... either fingers or a whip or...

“Ella.” Her name catches in my throat. “Who?” My voice breaks, and I hate it. I hate that I’m on my knees and not fixing this for her. Not *doing something* to protect her. Like I couldn’t with Brooklin running to Jeremiah. Or Malachi running from...

I hang my head, the grief rendering me powerless for a moment, my fingers still pressed lightly above Ella’s bruises.

Why do I always fucking fail everyone around me? Is this my penance for a past life? What did I do when I was a kid, before Malachi, before everything, to deserve this. Much. Fucking. Shit?

What did Ella do to deserve it?

“Mavy,” she whispers, and I press my forehead to her low back, breathing in the clean scent of her and the vanilla she seems to be made of. “I’ll be okay.”

I brush my thumbs over her bare skin and feel her shiver. I keep my touch light, away from the heat of her marks. *They’re fucking hot.* Like there’s a war under her skin, trying to knit and heal what someone fucked up.

“I’ll be okay,” she whispers again, like she’s reassuring me.

And maybe she thinks she will.

Because...because...

Because you leave marks too.

I want to throw up with that thought. It’s different, isn’t it? *It’s different. She wants them. She likes mine, doesn’t she?* Where do you draw the line between play and abuse? Is there one, if your partner wants all the bullshit you want to give? Am I taking advantage of her? Nearly six years older with far more life experience, have I fucked this all up?

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

Sorry.

She’s sorry.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” I speak against her spine. “But I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

I’m going to find out who did this to you, pretty girl.

Just fucking wait.

But I think I already know. I think I know, and I don’t want to, because it was me who did it. It was me who invited him here, when Lucifer told me not to.

“What can he do for you that I can’t?”

I straighten, staring at Ella’s back as Cain massages his big hands over the top of her spine, attempting to settle her. My eyes take in the pain. The trauma.

This, Luce. He can do this.

“It’s not the first time.”

Did I know this all along? Something was off with her, yeah, I knew that. *I knew it, and I ignored it, because it was easier for me to have her distracted.*

My temper is rising, and my head starts to hurt.

But Ella whispers again, her eyes wide and watery as she holds my gaze, her cheek still pressed to the floor. "Find Rain, please." It's the quietest plea. The softest and sweetest. "I'll be okay." I realize she's been feeding me lies for *this*. Her green irises are startling as they flash on me. "*Find. Rain.*"

My pulse starts to thrash inside my ears.

I lift my eyes to Cain's dark ones, his hands still relieving Ella's pain in the only way he can.

"Where is he?" I manage to choke out. "Luce? Sid?"

Cain's lips are pressed together, and he doesn't answer me. Does he not know? What the fuck is going on? Why is everyone even *here*? I'm glad they are, but how did they know? Did they hear her?

"Brooklin?" I turn to look at Ezra, who is staring at his phone as he types something out and I like to assume it's the doctor he's reaching out to.

Ezra's eyes flick to mine. "She's in her room," he says. "Lucifer and Sid ran out into the hall, which is why we woke up. But Atlas saw Ella was here," he jerks his chin, "and..."

Lucifer and Sid ran out into the hall.

"We sent guards after them." That's Atlas.

I cut my gaze to his. His blue-brown eyes are wide, but he's staring at Ella, beneath me.

I want to murder him, thinking of him drugging her before we all had sex. I didn't catch the signs. I didn't fucking know, because I was drowning in jealousy, and I made myself do it anyway.

My jaw feels tight when I speak to him. "You and me have a lot to talk about when this is over," I whisper, "and if you had anything to do with this," I cock my head to my

girl, my hands still around the back of her neck, “I’m going to rip Natalie apart while she’s still alive—”

Before I can finish the threat, gunshots erupt around us from toward the living room, rapid-fire, more than one weapon.

I don’t think. I grab my own gun, swiping it up from the floor, at the same time I throw my body over Ella. Atlas, Cain, and Ezra fan out around us, guns drawn as they turn toward the entranceway to the living room, a few feet down the wide hallway, sparks lighting up in the darkness as bullets spray. We didn’t plan for this—whatever it is—but this is what we were born to do in these moments of suspense. Put our bullshit aside and protect each other, like family.

I dip my head to the back of Ella’s neck as she trembles beneath me but wisely doesn’t make a sound. I’m worried she’s going to black out though, and I’ll probably need her to move soon. “I’m going to take care of you. Keep breathing—”

The gunshots ricochet in the suite again.

“*Lights!*” Ezra hisses and a second later, it’s Atlas who moves to throw off the switch.

We’re surrounded in darkness, and I have no idea who was shooting or whom they were aiming at.

I hold my breath, my arm around Ella’s shoulders. Her breathing is loud, dying sounds. My pulse races, my jaw clenched. I want to spring to my feet. I want to carry her to the fucking doctor myself. I want to tell whoever the fuck breached our security and broke into the penthouse that this is a medical fucking emergency and war should cease until I get her out.

But we don’t live by a fucking code.

Our enemies have even less of one.

The frustration mounts inside of me, the questions too, and I flex my finger against the trigger, just fucking waiting.

But in the silence, a single sound slices through all of my thoughts.

A baby's cry, a high-pitched shriek.

A wail.

Chills explode along the back of my neck, an ache in all of my limbs for not running *to* Rain.

There's a soft, wicked laughter after that.

A strangled sob, and if I had to guess, on the sound alone, I think it's Sid.

My heart feels as if it's being cleaved in two.

Ella whimpers at my side.

I hear her heaving, then vomiting, and the acrid scent fills my nose, a reminder of her injuries.

Pressure builds behind my eyes, but I swallow the knot in my throat, keeping my arm around her and pressing my lips to her temple. I want to tell her without words I'll save her. I want to tell her I'm sorry.

I'm so fucking sorry.

But I don't speak, and footsteps sound on the hardwoods, creaking closer toward the entranceway into the hall.

"Yes, keep going." The familiar voice chills my entire body as I go perfectly still and even Ella tenses beneath me. "A few more steps; let us gather the family together." Mikhail Malikov, *Boaz*, issues light commands as the footfalls grow closer and I see shadows in the darkness, entering the hallway. Dark shapes retreating toward me, toward *us*, and that's what it looks like. A retreat. My finger taps the trigger, but I don't aim my weapon, because I'm pretty fucking sure it's Lucifer's tall, lean shadow I'm looking at, a familiar, shorter one beside him.

I'm gulping down air, waiting seconds in silence as my brother and his wife come closer, and other bodies enter the corridor, filling it. When Lucifer is so close I catch the scent of him, the lights flicker back on, blinding after the contrast of darkness.

I lift my head higher, blinking and clearing my vision, and the first thing that forms a full shape and details is Lucifer's back. He has a gun in his hand, by his side, and Sid is next to him, her shoulder brushing his arm.

In her hand dangles a Glock too.

He's wearing the all black clothing he was when he left my room, and Sid is in black shorts and a baggy shirt, trailing down to her hips. She's barefoot.

I can't see their facial expressions, the way they're turned away from me, but I see both of their fingers on their respective triggers, and I watch a muscle in Sid's calf jump, like she's tensing. She's close enough I could reach out and grab her. I can see her shoulders move as she breathes rapidly, but I don't lift a hand toward her.

Beside me, Ezra's shoulder brushes mine, and I know Cain and Atlas are at my back, behind Ella.

Swallowing down air, I cut my gaze above Sid's head as I slowly rise to my feet, stepping in front of Ella, my arm bumping Ezra's as he moves with me and I'm close enough to Lucifer, I can see each individual dark curl grazing his lean neck.

But it's not him I stare at it. Instead, Mikhail Malikov's blue eyes pierce mine. He is facing us, standing beside the entranceway to the living room, a few feet from Lucifer and Sid.

There's a pounding sensation in my ears, and not only at his presence.

But at what's in his arms.

His torso covered with a green leather jacket.

He has a gun in his hand, the barrel pressed to Rain's little mouth. My nephew is sucking on the tip of it, like he would a bottle or a pacifier, his tiny fingers sliding along the matte black of the barrel.

I feel as if I've been sucker punched. I take a step back, careful not to disturb Ella, who is silent on the floor.

There are two men behind Mikhail, dressed head-to-toe in black, their faces covered, guns in hand, wrists crossed at their waist.

Mikhail smiles, dipping his eyes for a moment at Rain, who has his own eyes closed, his fingers flexing along the gun, his lips pursed and a crease between his tiny brows. He's in his lavender sleep sack, and I know he was taken from his crib.

I glance at Sid and see she is visibly shaking, from head to toe, gun by her side. Lucifer is perfectly still, his shoulders tense. They must have chased after Rain and maybe Mikhail and his men forced them back inside with the gunfire, then with his soft commands, once they realized he had Rain in his arms.

"You thought you could hide from me, Lucifer?" Mikhail flicks his blue gaze to my brother, smiling a little as he cradles Rain to his chest. "You thought you could disobey and...*hide*? Kill three of my men and *run*?"

For once, with his son's life on the line, Lucifer doesn't have a comeback.

I feel as if I'm going to explode.

I drop my eyes to Ella just behind my feet, and see her eyes are shut, her mouth open, bile trickling onto the floor. Her skin is ashen. I stare at her long enough to ensure she's breathing, and she is, but I don't know for how much longer.

I'm going to save you, I promise, pretty girl.

Ezra says nothing at my side, neither does Cain and Atlas, at my back. I assume Brooklin is where Ezra said she was, and Sevryn is locked in his room, and Tomas is...

I don't want to think about Tomas right now.

One thing at a time. Survive the next step, then move to the next one.

"All I wanted was your loyalty. Your obedience. I know blood means nothing to you," Mikhail snarls the words, no longer smiling, still allowing Rain to suck on the tip of the

gun. "I know you murdered my brother without remorse, but it does mean something *to me*." He cocks his head, staring at Lucifer. "I will not harm your child, you know. It would remove any leverage I have over you, it seems."

Sid is still trembling, and I hear her sharp inhale at Mikhail's words. She wants to believe them. She wants to believe *him*.

Mikhail flicks his gaze to her, a small smile on his lips, then he looks at Lucifer again. "But I did need you to understand you must face your fuck-ups like a man, yes?"

Lucifer doesn't move. I'm not even sure he's breathing. Neither am I, for that matter.

Slowly, Mikhail pulls the gun from Rain's mouth, and I feel warm relief spreading through my body. He lowers the weapon by his side, holstering it, but then he lifts his thumb to Rain's lips and circles them, smiling and humming as he does.

Lucifer's shoulders flex and Sid can't bite back a low moan from her throat. It doesn't stop Mikhail though, from pushing his thumb into Rain's mouth, letting him try to nurse from it.

Mikhail's gaze flicks up to Lucifer. "He is very beautiful. I see some of Lamia in him."

My stomach churns.

Lucifer doesn't move.

Mikhail shifts his focus, and it takes me a moment to realize he's staring at Ella, or what he can see of her, on the floor. "Did you know, Maverick, it was Lucifer who led her to this state?"

My throat grows dry, my breath rushing up and out of my mouth. I flex my fingers around my gun to ensure I'm still holding it, but I don't look away from Mikhail.

Lucifer doesn't deny his words, but I'm not an idiot. I wasn't born into a cult yesterday. I've lived through this shit my entire life. Lies and deceit.

I don't believe Mikhail, and I say nothing.

“*Scelus*,” Mikhail whispers. “He was in charge of her acceptance, and this is how he chose to bond her to us.” A smile flickers on his lips.

My body starts to shake, just like my sister’s, a vibrating sensation I can’t still no matter how I try to tense up my limbs.

“But that is not the worst of your brothers’ sins.” Mikhail’s eyes come to someone behind me, and I think I know it’s Atlas when he says, “This one is supposed to murder her.”

I see red flash behind my eyes.

I don’t move as Mikhail traces Rain’s lips again, pressing on his small mouth, his fingers clutching at Boaz’s wrists.

“Of course, after tonight, that will not be necessary, but you should know you are in bed with wolves.”

Atlas doesn’t deny it.

Lucifer doesn’t add to it.

My heart starts to shatter.

I don’t look at Ella.

I don’t want to see how far gone she is. I need Mikhail out of here, I need the doctor—who I can only hope is still alive, yet I assume his absence is on Mikhail’s orders somehow—but until Rain is safe, I know that won’t happen.

Focus on the next step.

And as I repeat it to myself, over and over, looking for the loophole, the plot twist, ignoring the accusations Mikhail is throwing like bombs my way, I see a shadow behind his guards, creeping from the other end of the hall, near Atlas’s room.

I don’t focus on it.

I can’t, because then the guards themselves will look.

And I saw enough of the shadow to know he might help.

Sevryn, with a lamp in his hand, turned upside down, held like a bat.

I refuse to look at him. I pray to Satan my sister, my brothers, they won't either. The dim light overhead doesn't reach Sevryn, and he can continue to move in shadows and secrecy toward us.

"Now, I will need Ella to come with me, of course. If you are a good boy, Maverick, you may get her back. She has upheld her end of the bargain. But if you refuse..." He glances down at Rain, then pulls his thumb from his mouth. Instead, he circles the space between his thumb and forefinger over Rain's neck, beneath the chubbiness of his chin.

Rain flails his arms, staring up almost stoically at his tormentor.

Mikhail's eyes flash to mine. "If you refuse, you will no longer find yourself an uncle." A smile curves his lips, and he flicks his gaze somewhere behind me. "Besides, Ophelia here would like to take a little revenge for the death of her brother. But even she will choose Lucifer and his son over your toy, Maverick."

I tense up, my nostrils flaring as Lucifer spins around, turning to stare past me. I can see the whites of his eyes, the demonic blue of his irises, the fear etched onto his face.

Sid doesn't take her gaze off her son.

I feel exposed and I wouldn't believe Mikhail, just like I don't want to believe anything he's said, but when I turn my head, past Cain's massive form, still kneeling beside Ella, still touching her, I see blonde hair.

Green eyes.

Dressed uncharacteristically all in black, smudges of makeup beneath her eyes.

A gun in her hand, aimed at my girl.

Ophelia, her bottom lip trembling.

She is pale, scared, and I don't know what she knows or how Mikhail coerced her here, or even why, but I know she doesn't want to be here.

Lucifer says, “O,” with a jagged sound, and I think I know what he means by it, and I hate him for it.

Because he means to offer up Ella without a fight, to get back his son.

I hate him but I can’t fault him. I can’t kill him over it.

I can’t save her.

I can’t save you.

I hate everything.

Ophelia’s hand trembles as she aims the gun poorly at Ella, but more at Cain, because Cain, I realize, is shielding my girl with his own body.

Atlas turns then, stepping in front of Cain, his back to Ella. He lifts his gun, aiming at Ophelia’s head, his arm muscles flexed beneath his pink T-shirt.

Mikhail laughs. “Would you like to tell Maverick about your secret rendezvous with Ella Christian, Atlas? Would you like to confess why you defend her now?”

I think of Sevryn even as I stare at the back of Atlas’s head.

Hurry the fuck up.

“No? Pity.” Mikhail sighs. “I have things to do. Ella, *get the fuck up.*”

I glance down at my girl.

She doesn’t move.

She isn’t conscious.

I tighten my fingers around the gun and turn to face Mikhail once more.

Lucifer is looking at him too. At his son.

“She can’t get up,” I whisper, hating the way the words are weak. I swallow the knot in my throat. “She isn’t a threat to you. She isn’t—”

Mikhail tightens his fingers around Rain’s throat.

Rain makes a little cooing sound, his eyes widening, as if he is perturbed by the events going on around him.

Sid doesn’t breathe, but she is still shaking, trembling all over.

"Then drag her to me, or I will break his fucking neck."

"Maverick." Lucifer hisses my name.

I fucking hate you.

Sevryn comes closer, but he's still several feet away, and there's only one of him and two guards to eliminate before he can get to Rain.

"Now, or I'll shoot her." It's Ophelia's shaky voice. She has something on the line, more than a vendetta, but I don't know what it is. *I'm going to kill you, bitch.*

"Mayhem." Sid's strained voice.

She is staring at her son.

She turns to look at me, her gray eyes wide. Imploring. I could count the lashes on her lids, the way she's so close to me. *"Please."* It's barely a word at all. "We'll get her back. I promise."

Mikhail squeezes tighter.

Rain's brow furrows, his skin turning from pale olive to pink. He starts to jerk his fists, kicking his feet in the sleep sack, like he's going to start crying.

"Goddammit, Maverick, now!" Lucifer explodes, whirling on me.

But before I can move, before I can *think*, someone shifts behind me.

I turn to see Cain with Ella in his arms, like she's a child. He cradles her to his chest. His dark eyes lock on mine. I take a step toward him, brandishing the gun, but he shakes his head once.

"Mav," he whispers, like he's trying to say so much more in that one word. *Maverick, we'll get her back. She will live. I promise. I'll help you.*

But he doesn't say that, and I need to hear it. I can't let him step by me with my girl limp in his arms. I can't.

I can't.

She's kept things from me, but for a reason, and I think the reason is the very boy she's being traded for.

I open my mouth to tell Cain to go fuck himself when a thud resounds in the silence, then a shot goes off.

A scream rips from someone's mouth as I jump in front of Ella, trying to shield her body when I spin around because I don't think Ophelia is brave enough to pull the trigger of the fucking gun.

I watch Sevryn drop the lamp, one of the guards face down on the floor as Sevryn snatches up the gun, aiming at Mikhail as he leaps over the prone guard, but the other guard is pointing his own weapon at Rain, and Mikhail's fingers are still around his throat.

Sevryn's chest rises and falls, heavy and fast as he backs up toward us, his eyes drifting to me for one moment when he glances over his shoulder. I notice with startling clarity his irises are not gray.

They're blue.

My heart drops, and I don't know why, I'm not sure what the fuck is going on until Mikhail says, "I will not ask again."

And Cain shoulders past me.

I don't think.

I jump on him, dropping my weapon. I want to get to Ella. I cannot let her be taken. I won't.

Cain staggers under my attack as my fingers come to his throat, my chest to his back, but Lucifer shifts his position so he's behind me and he hooks his arm around my neck, hauling me backward. I elbow him, a growl leaving my lips, but Cain gets away, and Sid is running to Rain, shoving Sevryn aside.

Ella is given to the guard at the same time Sid clasps onto Rain's body, her gun out of her hands now, I know she dropped it to grab for him. And before Lucifer can aim properly at Mikhail's head—he's going to kill him for what he did to his son *and* he's going to get Ella back—his own gun between his fingers, arm still around my neck, there's a clattering sound at the entranceway to the living room,

leading into this hallway, startling us all and smoke begins to fill the corridor immediately, blurring my eyes and blocking my vision of Ella.

I don't care.

I dive away from Lucifer, toward where Ella last was. My hands reach blindly as footsteps thud, shots ring out, making my ears hurt, my body flinch, but I'm still running into the gray smoke, coughing as I cover my forearm over my mouth, trying to keep breathing.

Ella, Ella, Ella.

No. You can't have her. *You fucking can't.* I don't feel the pain in my body, I don't feel anything and I haven't since I saw her on the floor in the hall.

I have damned her entire life.

She might die thinking I gave her up.

She might die believing we aren't her family, and we are. *We fucking are.*

I'm running so fast in a short distance, aiming for the living room—the place Mikhail could escape with Ella—but I can't see, and when I collide with someone, my hands around their throat, shoving them into the wall, I think it's Mikhail and I'm squeezing so hard I'm going to kill him, but the voice that hits my ears isn't Boaz's.

"Maverick." It's my sister. *"Maverick."* Her fingers scratch at my arms. *"Maverick, stop."* Brooklin's voice, choked.

I blink through the smoke as Brook slumps against the wall when I loosen my hold. I catch her blue eyes at the same time my mind hooks backward, to Sacrificium. Sanctum. A smoke bomb.

"Hello, Daddy."

Brooklin, helping Sid escape with J.

Did she... "What did you do?" I gasp it. I turn from her, intending to tear off after Ella again into the darkened living room, but Brooklin grabs my wrist, jerking me backward, further into the hall, and I would fight her, but

bullets spray, ricocheting from the entrance. They're covering their tracks, ensuring we don't follow.

Brooklin keeps pulling me, pulling me, past my room, as bullets lodge into walls and the ceiling overhead, drywall raining down, but we're past the archway and they can't reach us.

I see Lucifer, Sid, huddled over Rain, gasping near the end of the hallway.

Cain, Ezra, Atlas, standing further down the hall, in the direction Sevryn came from, are staring at me.

I turn to my brother again. Past him, Ophelia is on the floor, her hands over her head behind Sid, Lucifer, and Rain, no gun in her reach, just a mass of blonde hair and black clothes as she sobs even though she has no fucking reason to cry except for the fact that... She's going to die, and I think I'm going to be the one to fucking kill her.

Brooklin grabs my biceps, shaking me in the dim light of the expansive hallway, a gilded painting beside her head. A red brick house. A home.

Something we never had.

Something I wanted with Ella.

But Ella is—

I turn from Brooklin, snatching the gun I dropped up from the floor and stepping back toward the opposite wall as I aim at her with both hands.

I level with her head. I want to pull the fucking trigger. My hand shakes, my chest is heaving. I've never wanted anything more than the way I want to murder my own sister, right now, in this moment. Lucifer would have killed Mikhail and we would have Ella back if it wasn't for my sister.

Ella, on her knees... It flashes inside my head. Yellow bile, red welts, blackened flesh. My precious, beautiful girl. She did the best she could. She tried her damndest to belong.

Brooklin made it harder for her all while she manipulated me with that fucking phone call.

Did she make it all up? Why? For what purpose?

My finger is against the trigger. Brooklin doesn't move, her eyes wide on me. She doesn't hold up her hands, either, to defend herself. And further down the hall, Lucifer doesn't say a word to stop me. Neither does Sid. On my other side, Cain, Ezra, they're also silent.

Atlas too.

Ophelia is crying but no one fucking cares.

"Do it," Brooklin goads me, her blue eyes shining. She's in a pink T-shirt and black shorts. Her blonde hair is sticking up all over the place, but her eyes are clear, like she's fully awake. "I know you can't stand me. It's why you let me go. It's how I found Jeremiah. You never came for me. You would have gone through hell for *Sid*, but you never *came for me!*" It's a low scream. A violent sort of pain.

I caress the trigger. My arm isn't shaking anymore. The beat of my heart feels as if it nearly slams through my chest, but my feet are firmly planted. Brooklin's temple is in my line of sight.

"And when did you introduce me to *Sevryn*, Maverick?"

I don't know where he is now, and I don't care. I bite down on my back teeth. The penthouse doesn't exist for me anymore. Ella is out there waiting for me. Thinking I don't love her. Thinking once again, I'm putting everyone before her.

"When did you even bother to mention him? When did you decide it would be a good idea for me to know what the *fuck* is going on with you?"

She takes a step closer.

I lift the gun higher, to remind her it's here.

She stops.

I stare at the smooth skin between her brows. I remember loving her so fiercely. I would have died for her. I

almost killed Atlas because I knew I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop what our dad would do. And I wanted someone to pay.

Because no one touches Brooklin.

No one touches Brooklin.

"They asked me what you wanted. Who you would choose." She steps closer. "I went to find Elijah. To ask him about our mother's test after I found the papers. To *help* Ella." Her voice is hoarse.

I don't blink.

Another step.

"I found Mikhail at Sanctum instead, and he asked me who you wanted."

I swallow down saliva, feel the way it coats the dryness of my throat.

"They are fucking horrible people, but everyone around us, since we were born, they've always been that haven't they, Mav?" She drops her voice to a whisper. Takes another step.

I flex my fingers around the grip of the gun.

Another step.

She presses her temple to the barrel, her eyes on mine, hands by her sides. She's scared—because everyone is—to die. Her chest heaves, her pulse jumps in the long column of her throat.

"No one has been good. But they asked. And I knew the answer."

An animalistic noise leaves my lips. A roar, a scream, I don't know, but I turn my head and spit on the floor before I stare at her again. "What are you talking about?" I don't want to ask because I know she's buying time. I know she's only goading me. But I can't help it. If this is the end of us, I have to hear her last words. "What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

She angles her head, ensuring the barrel digs into her skin. "They asked me," she whispers, her mouth likely gone

dry with terror, the way her words sound cracked. “Who you would choose.”

My nostrils flare, I can feel my abs flex and concave as I breathe. It’s the only way I know I’m doing it.

“And I told them.”

Her eyes are locked onto mine as she leans her body into the gun, like she’s daring me. “I told them you would choose Malachi, if you could, over Ella. I told them he haunted you. *Infected* you. And I told them you would do anything to have a chance to ask him for forgiveness.”

“Malachi is dead, Brook.” I say it instantly. I don’t even think about it. My stomach drops because I think my sister is unwell. If she fucked me over intentionally, she should die. But what if something is wrong inside her brain? “He... I pushed him. *He’s dead.*”

Brooklin smiles. “No,” she whispers.

And another voice, to my right, where Lucifer is with his family, digs into my brain. He must have been behind the Malikovs, hiding in fucking plain sight. “I felt every bone in my body break when you pushed me.”

“The 6 always count women out,” Brooklin whispers. “It’s no wonder we do too.”

I turn my head to Sevryn’s blue eyes. He’s stepping forward now, blocking my view of Ophelia, coming past my brother and his family, who let him walk toward me.

My skin crawls.

“He isn’t related to Sid at all,” Brooklin whispers. “He is the product of Elizabeth Astor and Adam Medici.”

Cain swears under his breath to my left.

No one else speaks.

My mind spins.

Brooklin’s temple is still pressed to my gun, and I want to pull the fucking trigger.

“Atlas was promised Natalie’s protection, only if he forfeited Ella’s life for it.” Brooklin keeps talking and I swing my gaze to hers.

“No,” I whisper. *I left her alone in a room with him. I fucking left her. I walked out. I’m so fucking sorry.* “How do you know any of that?”

“I put it together.” Her eyes shine. “I know how the 6 work. I know how revenge works too. Atlas gets your girl for what you did to him and gets to save his own and prove his worth to his father. And when Mikhail asked who you would choose, I knew the answer. And Sevryn, he was promised something too, to live among us.”

Sevryn laughs, a jagged sound, as he stops a few feet from me, less between him and the Malikovs.

I don’t move.

I keep the gun and my gaze trained on Brooklin as Sevryn speaks.

And Sevryn whispers so softly, *“Brooklin.”*

All at once, we turn to each other. Lucifer and Sid, huddled around Rain, are looking at *me*. Blood seems to rush from my head, rendering me unsteady.

I stagger backward into the wall, the gun in hand.

I think of being brought in for questioning. Attacked on the street. Tomas’s words to me. I thought *they* were the enemy, I thought *he* did this, but now I’m not so sure. And I was tasked with watching over Rain. Doing *anything* to keep him safe. That’s what Elijah wanted from me. He said things were dangerous. He said I had to be Rain and Sid’s angel.

But what did he tell my brothers to do?

In Lucifer’s wide blue eyes, I see the same thing. Realization.

We realize it was never the 6.

It was always us against ourselves.

I cut my gaze to Atlas, behind me. He denies nothing as he stares at me. He says nothing, the gun hanging limply in his hand.

The greatest betrayal. The worst sort of pain.

A moment of perfect stillness, disloyalty loud in the silence.

“I forgot it for a long time, but being around you, I remember now. *You* pushed me from that balcony, I felt the crack of every bone that broke in my body.” Sevryn breaks the quiet.

The hairs all over my body stand on end. I don’t know what’s real anymore as I drag my gaze to Sevryn’s.

His blue eyes look liquid. “But Maddox Astor never wanted me. He would’ve beat me to death himself if he could have, and he tried as you might remember, *many fucking times.*”

Pressure builds behind my eyes.

“Brooklin was the only light in my childhood. *You* were overbearing, hot tempered, you were cowardly because you. Fucking. *Pushed. Me.*” Sevryn’s teeth flash as he says the words. “After I was born, it was only Lazar’s aversion to calling unnecessary attention in the news that kept me alive.”

Lucifer shifts his feet on the creaking hardwoods, his hands holding onto his wife’s shoulders, just beyond Sevryn.

“But when *you* pushed me over that balcony, it was the perfect opportunity to fake my death, for your father to send me to Moscow, to be...*used.*” Sevryn’s gaze slowly rakes the room until he turns slightly, and it lands on Lucifer. A smile pulls on his lips. “Your father used me too. My own uncle.” From this angle, I can see his smile widens. “And Edith tried to get me on her side. She gave me the papers, the ones I showed Sid. She explained to me what she has been trying to do. But *she* didn’t help me when I was forced away.”

Lucifer goes paler than unusual. I can’t breathe. Sid says nothing, her lips parted, but she’s motionless, Rain protected in her arms. Even Ophelia has her head up, her face ashen, but wisely, she does not speak.

“*They* offered me my sister. They offered me *hope*. All I had to do was spy on you and your precious fucking family.” Sevryn tilts his head as he stares at Lucifer. “Did you know I dragged your wife from your bed one night, before her and I officially met?”

A low growl comes from Lucifer’s throat. It sounds inhuman.

“I slipped her from her sheets and held her in my arms. I took her thumbprints to give to Boaz in case they ever needed them. I thought it was only *right*, after all the things your family had taken *from me*. She thought it was a dream, and it’s funny, because she’s the one who hated me most, at first. But *you*, you wanted to trust me, didn’t you?”

My skin crawls. Lucifer is still.

“But one night while you were smoking outside, looking over that video you’re obsessed with of Ella being dragged into the dark by Father Tomas, I wrapped my fingers around Sid’s pretty little throat, and I kissed her head as I stole her prints.” Sevryn’s eyes shift to me when he faces me again. “And I crept into your home too, while you were away. I spied on your precious girl before you ever met me.” He smiles so big. “She is truly perfect, you know that? Always looking for you, thinking about you, worried over you.”

“You just said it,” I hiss, confirmation of what I didn’t want to believe. “You just said it was *Father Tomas*.” I don’t know what he means by being dragged in the dark or Lucifer’s video, but he knows something. He knows who did *this* to her. “You knew, and you said nothing.”

Sevryn shakes his head once. “Not until tonight. I didn’t know where she was going. What was happening.” He flicks his gaze to Lucifer, stepping back toward the wall so he can more easily see both of us, his brows lifting. “But you did, didn’t you?”

The rush of my pulse rings inside my ears as I turn to Luce, but I don’t move the gun from Brooklin’s temple.

Sevryn smiles. “You were the one who sent her to Tomas, weren’t you?”

Another second of quiet.

“And Atlas, *my brother...*” Sevryn laughs as he looks toward me, past me, to Atlas. “You *must* have guessed yourself? But while I changed my mind—I couldn’t murder Sid, after the bravery she showed—you didn’t decide if you would keep Ella alive yet, did you, Atlas?”

It’s like my heart has stopped beating.

“I didn’t know you were...” Atlas’s voice is a hoarse whisper to my right. “I didn’t know you were... *Malachi.*”

Sevryn sighs. There is real sadness in his tone when he says, “Neither did I. Not until Brooklin.”

I don’t know who to trust. I don’t know what’s happening. I want to wake up. I want to pretend this is a nightmare and when I wake up, *she’ll* be in my arms and I will never let anything or anyone get to her again.

But I blink.

I slam my fist into my thigh, over my bruises.

And it hurts.

This is not a dream.

Another second passes.

Then the chaos begins.

Lucifer moves in a blur, and I hear a crunch as he hits Sevryn—*Malachi?*—knocking him back against the wall. He hits him again, and again, and I’m trying to breathe as I keep the gun on Brooklin.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lucifer must have hit Sevryn so hard, he crumpled to the floor, unmoving, and I stare at my sister.

What have you done to us?

I see her breaths are more shallow. Her lips are trembling. She’s barely breathing at all as she stares into my eyes.

“The smoke,” I whisper as Lucifer handles Sevryn. “You... You let them escape with her.”

“You wanted Malachi back.” She startles as Lucifer hits him again, but she doesn’t tell him to stop. That bond isn’t there anymore. He is a person we no longer know. “You wanted him, didn’t you? It ate you alive. You wanted to beg him for forgiveness. You hated yourself for pushing him. I wanted you to get the chance to love again. You could find another girl. You could—”

“You let them escape, when they threatened my son.” Lucifer’s voice. “You let them take Ella, when I could have saved her.”

The smallest measure of relief fills my veins, hearing confirmation he would have. “I could have *kept her here and killed him.*”

I see him rise, out of the corner of my eye, from hitting Sevryn, blood on his knuckles.

My arms are shaky, heavy, from aiming at my sister.

I want to squeeze the fucking trigger. I have to deal with Atlas, and Lucifer, and I have to find Ella, but I want to end Brooklin’s life. She let Ella escape. She *let her* get away.

A scream leaves my lips and I raise the gun to the ceiling, firing one shot after another after a-fucking-nother.

Over and over again I squeeze the trigger, hating everyone, everything.

I hate everything.

Someone is calling my name. Someone is screaming at me. Someone is screaming, period, but it isn’t until my throat is raw that I stop the snarl leaving my lips and I slump against the wall, gun down by my side, plaster falling from the ceiling, bullet holes above my head.

My heart is racing, my brain is aching, my entire body hurts, and Brooklin is heaving, dry heaves, like she’s going to vomit.

Lucifer though, he’s suddenly in my line of vision.

He’s standing in front of me, with a gun in his bloodied hand, his back to me. And he says, “You can’t do it? I don’t

have that fucking problem.” He aims and pulls the trigger, never blinking as he fires directly into Brooklin.

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LVII

*The director on the
cusp of humanity*

ARLO ESTERE IS a big name in cinema. A director “on the cusp of humanity,” as critics describe him, who is making murder big business.

Filming in the shadows of Virginia, he has earned himself cult status as a shadowy cameraman who captures such life-like visions of death, he’s spurned police investigations on sets, and questions about his backers. Who produces films where erotic asphyxiation isn’t the climax, but the opening shot? And where does he find his talented cast?

But so far, nothing illegal has been found on his sets. He’s simply a visionary.

He has a unique point of view to some of his films, throwing the viewer in as the murderer. A common

tactic for pornography not utilized in most mainstream cinema.

His casts are dotted with little-known stars, sometimes—strangely—never credited at all, presumably due to some underhanded deal. As for his producers? They have refused every media request for an interview, as far as we're able to tell. Even this one.

But Arlo has been known to slide into the spotlight, spotted at red carpet events with big businessmen and mysterious financiers. And he was once quoted as saying, "There is scripted death, then there is the agony of truly dying. Which, do you think, films better?"

He's a man you might want to stay away from, but his movies are worth watching. *If you can stomach "Red Rooms."*

-Acid City Daily

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LIKE GRIM DEATH *continues with part two.*

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Also, to my husband, because he'll read this and search for himself. Hi, you're hot. Bye.

And even though my children will hopefully never read this, I love you all more than life. Everything is for you.

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About KV

KV Rose writes dark romance and does little else. You can find her nearly everywhere on social media at AuthorKVRose.

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