

ALEX KING

UNHOLY TRINITY
BOOK TWO

THESE
ABSOLVED
MONSTERS

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EPILOGUE

Blurb

Seven minutes in Heaven... enough to create Hell.

MIRA

He was my best friend's brother.

I was the third unofficial Draven child they didn't ask for.

Burton Draven was off limits in more ways than forbidden could spell.

One night stuck together at a Halloween carnival turned into a match that wouldn't go out no matter how hard you blew.

That kiss of death sealed my fate when he made it his life mission to destroy me for it.

Losing my scholarship, paying penance for his blackmail, making sure no one dared to touch me and watching from a distance to make sure I stayed miserable.

Until I got my own revenge...

Now the torture was really about to begin.

BURTON

She was my sister's best friend.

Mira Eckland was beneath me, yet when she kissed me, something inside kicked up into a hellfire I couldn't ignore.

I wanted more of what I couldn't have without ruining the one person's trust I cared about. My baby sister was the last person I cared about in this world.

I was a man on fire—angry I couldn't have her and hellbent on ruining her for anyone else.

Retaliation was easy when she stopped trying to fight back against the money and power protecting me. After she gave up, I watched her destroy herself.

Until I found out she was to blame...

Now that fire burning inside me was going to create her own personal hell.

Dedication

To all the girls who played it safe but ended up loving playing with matches anyways.

Trigger Warning ---

I'm not going to be the author that gives you a list of triggers neatly running down the page before you dive in. Half of them will ruin the story and the other half just aren't as good when you anticipate them.

This is dark romance (all typical triggers apply) and then some.

This is full of smut and there is no fade to black found within these pages.

This is about a psycho meeting a bookworm who had nothing better to do but flirt with a knife and end up liking it.

This is exactly how two little sickos find each other's demons instead of salvation.

Each book will be darker and more fucked up; at least that's what I'm thinking, so if you dive in, make sure you can swim.

PROLOGUE

MIRA

Burton Draven was the bane of my existence.

He was unavoidable too.

His sister, Emma Draven, was my best friend, and our friendship was toxic in ways that made me the third child the Dravens never had.

After all the memories faded, all I knew were the Dravens.

Those memories you hold on to, but no matter how hard you try, they somehow slip away, frying at the edges and having you try too hard to remember the memory in its entirety.

Before Burton became the bane of my existence, he was the stepbrother I didn't ask for and who didn't want me around the same amount.

Secretive, cold, vicious and spoiled rotten were all words I used to describe him when boys asked me what my connection was to Burton. We went to the same school, lived in the same house, and the atmosphere changed drastically if we were near each other.

He was always my protector until high school... when being around his cruelty started to make my panties wet and the protection came paired with a relentless attitude.

That was when being around him felt like a privilege instead of a crime against his smugness.

When Emma asked me to muster up a date for the Halloween Carnival Trinity had every year, I didn't even attempt to make an excuse like I always did. My goal wasn't to avoid all the replacements I knew wouldn't live up to him.

Homework.

Extra credit.

Being a good girl because it makes life easier.

Whatever sounded more significant than fun and was plausible.

Saying I was planning to stay home to catch up on Netflix was unbelievable when you considered my type A personality and valedictorian expectations only put into place by myself.

Every day for a week, Emma briefed me on a status update on if I had found a date. This didn't feel all that weird when my mom was a military fighter pilot and my dad was a drill sergeant, literally.

Apple didn't fall from the poisoned tree, did it?

I was a product of their personalities, of their demanding careers that always seemed more relevant than being parents.

The Dravens stopped asking about my parents when they realized the truth of it. I was an orphan, not because my parents didn't care but because they cared enough to save the world. Me included. Although the long-distance relationship I had with them and the painful truth we were strangers made it difficult to comprehend.

I had heroes for parents and a villainous heart that wanted to be the only one they cared about saving.

The Halloween Carnival was a staple of Trinity, coming every year and lasting two nights before it vanished into thin air. It always felt like a living dream, here and gone before you could blink your eyes.

Lights, the smell of candy corn, everyone on edge waiting to be frightened, and the crisp air just cold enough to send chills down your spine.

While holding up the Red Riding Hood outfit against my body in the mirror, Emma popped out of the fitting room in this ethereal number of lingerie. This would send her brother to a jail cell once he was done beating everyone up looking at her with any sinful intent.

"Let me guess... a sexy angel?" I was filled to the brim with sarcasm. Every girl old enough would don lingerie and put something sexy on top of it to call it a costume.

I take Halloween a little more seriously. Enough to not be cold or think about being sexually assaulted by a stranger.

Emma was a blonde bombshell with long legs, a body she didn't have to work for, and so spoiled she didn't even realize how lucky she was anymore.

The Dravens were respected enough to make life comfortable for them. And their generosity with me? That was just political points to them.

Burton's dad was mayor of Trinity before he passed away and somehow that legacy lived on its own. Once Burton and Emma were older, their mom ran, swept the race without having to try, and had been the longest unopposed mayor yet.

"I'm a sexy goddess. Tell me you aren't actually intending to wear the blue plaid dress complete with the ruffles." Her long, tanned legs strutted over to me. My custom was still in my grasp.

Holding the hanger up to my face, she removed the mini dress that resembled a picnic table leaving the iconic red cloak. "Better. Now, we need..." She trailed off as she fluttered around the shop, trying to dress me like her own personal doll.

Coming back to the mirror, she handed me a black satin corset, a black skirt not long enough to cover anything, and fishnets. "I've never heard of someone with killer curves being so shy. You really have to work on that, Mira."

My hips had curves, a nice ass that wasn't flat, and a bubble butt that was naughty enough to grab if anyone had the courage. I was cursed with a flat chest and smoldering eyes that said the wrong thing to the opposite sex almost always.

That was when they even made eye contact. Thankfully, all eyes were normally on Emma when she was around.

It was the most effective way to hide—in her shadow.

After examining herself in the mirror next to mine, she smiled before examining herself in the mirror next to mine.

That was when I noticed it, the small bruises on the outside of her thigh, sprinkled there and sticking out on her flawless exterior. I was staring when she finally rolled her eyes, before I could speak. Twisting away from the mirror, her voice was casual. “Sex bruises.”

I was still a virgin who wouldn't have known the difference between a real bruise and a passionate bruise.

Dropping our things on the countertop, a woman in a vampire outfit checked on us when I reached for my money. It was the one thing that came every month instead of letters or phone calls—money to make sure I took care of myself.

That I was a burden but never too much to the Dravens.

Emma pushed my cash away when she wiggled her plastic card in front of us like it was the holy grail. “I think my mom would want to pay for this for us, don't you think so? She would want us to be teenagers and not grow up so fast. Worry about finances and money before we need to.”

That was her mother's catch phrase to us, *don't grow up too fast*, and the reason we had no boundaries. Our expectations were far worse.

Our faces became soft and innocent before we both laughed harder than we intended. We both knew Emma wasn't innocent and the cruelty she could conjure was cut from the same cloth as Burton.

The Dravens were ruthless when they needed to be.

Burton and Emma were Irish twins, putting them in the same grade, and the sheer embarrassment of that was something neither of them forgot.

I was always the peacekeeper in everything even when I knew Burton was only trying to protect us. He was always listening, waiting, looking for trouble he could control.

I never saw him lose control.

Burton rarely got too drunk but he drank. Burton never got too high but he smoked when baseball wasn't in season. Burton fucked but never fell in love.

He was always on the verge of breaking down but never did.

Once we climbed into the car, I noticed more small bruises behind her neck. These bruises ran down her arms as she got comfortable behind the wheel of her white Jeep. “More sex bruises?”

With her hands still on the wheel, she sat back enough to show me exactly how pissed off I had made her. Her tight features became thin and sharp as she held my attention. “Yes, Mira, from having sex. Something you wouldn’t be jealous of if you just said yes to anyone who asked already.”

Boys did ask but I couldn’t say yes, knowing my pussy was owned by the one man who never staked a claim. I couldn’t tell her I was damn near saving myself for Burton, her brother.

Somehow, being a virgin was crucial in my long game of doing absolutely nothing to make him notice me in the ways I wanted.

I wasn’t dumb. I had caught Burton in the act a few times, which wasn’t difficult to do when he was hellbent on not bringing girls home. The pool, his car, the Halloween Carnival last year... Everywhere but a bed must have been his motto.

Staying a virgin, for him, was all I had to offer.

The bruises on Emma seemed out of place. Why would she want sex to hurt enough to leave bruises?

It worried me that she was lying for her piece-of-shit boyfriend who used her for money, reputation, and respect. He was a leech one couldn’t get rid of.

BURTON

Halloween was the only holiday that mattered.

Everyone was being themselves and calling it a costume because it was most likely the ugly parts of themselves they didn't accept the rest of the year.

One night a year, I could be covered in blood and people wouldn't bother to double take. My monstrous habits would blend in.

I was a monster hiding under all that anger and privilege.

Exactly how I wanted it to be.

Being ruthless had a piercing strength to it, a smooth high that carried me through the bullshit that was life.

Responsibility to take care of everyone around me held me hostage even before my dad died.

My mom was a secret alcoholic who drank herself to sleep.

My sister was always finding trouble to get wrapped up in.

Before my father died, I was his punch bag.

Everyone had bad habits and I was responsible for making sure those habits didn't turn into vices that killed them.

Well... except my father. His carnality of beating me until I threw up blood didn't kill him ... it only made me angry enough to do the job myself.

On Halloween, I didn't have to protect anyone. For one night, I lived solely for my own bad habits, forcing everybody else to deal with their own problems.

Just one night.

Tomorrow, I could go back to covering their shame.

Emma was in the hallway, pushed into a corner with her brute of a fucking boyfriend acting more like a handler than anything else. He was protective in the wrong ways, overbearing, controlling, and all of it reminded me of myself too much to voice any concern out loud.

I watched from my locker, keeping a close eye on his hand clamped around the sensitive skin above her elbow. He spoke low enough for me not to hear.

When surrounded by people with shameful habits, it's impossible to be much of anything. Too much only sends them fleeing in the direction you don't want.

Emma was a prime example of how my two cents were worth shit to her. Offering it unsolicited only made her beg for more of whatever I was criticizing.

With my dad dead, that pressure to protect them seemed more restrictive and frustrating in ways that made killing seem to have a much bigger point. If I could just keep getting blood on my hands, everything would be okay.

We all have bad habits.

Mira walked past me, slow enough for me to take notice the way I knew she wanted. She was always trying to subtly get my attention without trying hard enough to be called desperate.

We both knew that's what she was.

"Stray! Get over here," I shouted after her when she stopped dead in her tracks for a solid minute before circling back.

Letting the lockers hold her balance, she lifted her brows in anticipation. "It's senior year. When can we drop the nickname?"

"When you stop being a fucking *stray* and stop living in my house." I smiled, letting my teeth show.

Mira was my sister's best friend, starving for my dick and willing to eat up whatever attention I gave her instead. Her parents were in the military and close enough to mine to drop her off at our doorstep.

Apparently.

I had no memories of them in it, let alone feelings to fake towards them.

No one ever mentioned it, just pretended she was there all along.

No part of me accepted her as some stepsibling, and calling her Stray served as her reminder.

“What’s going on with them?” I jutted out my chin in their direction while crossing my arms.

Mira rolled her eyes and exhaled in a dramatic way. “What isn’t wrong with them? We skipped class to get Halloween costumes. Of course, he freaked at how skimpy it was and she freaked out that he was trying to control her wild ways. It turned into screaming in the parking lot. Barely made it out alive.”

My sister’s boyfriend was too much... of everything.

“He knows the deal. She cries even one tear and I’ll break his fucking face.” My voice didn’t waver. It was steady as a heartbeat because I meant it.

Looking to my right, I caught Mira smiling at me, watching me like some statue she was admiring. Most girls stare but when Mira did it, it felt different, as if she saw underneath all the hostile energy covering up my own monsters.

Unlike my mom and sister, I kept mine well hidden.

She looked away when I caught her, taking all that damn approval of the monster with her. “Emma isn’t the kind of girl who cries over nothing. I’ve seen her break her wrist and not even flinch.”

She didn’t see her flinch, but I did.

She stumbles over her words, the confidence she had in piles suddenly dwindling and tripping up red flags the longer she waits for an answer.

I had suspicions that her shitty boyfriend was responsible. I had no proof, only the fact that forcing her to end things would only entice her to embrace trouble. This would leave her with more bruises than a broken heart.

Slamming my locker shut, I rolled over on my shoulder, facing Mira, my personal Stray. I studied her reaction for any signs she knew my sister was being abused without saying a word.

I let my eyes troll her body, looking at all her imperfections I found captivating.

The bridge of her nose was too thin, leaving the end of her nose looking upturned. Her tits were non-existent unless her nipples got hard enough to make it interesting, and her mouth always looked judgemental in a thin line across her face.

Mira was the girl who gave you nothing. She could deaden her existence until you thought you were talking to a ghost of someone who used to be living.

It was a talent I admired.

Every flare of rage, emotion, and pent-up frustration was worn like a comfortable hoodie, torn and frayed at the seams for everyone to see. Just unfriendly enough to make sure people leave me alone.

People left Mira alone too but only because I made it clear that she was off-limits.

She was already living in my house. I didn't want any drama at my door either.

Breaking the silence, I asked her, "Would you kill to save a life?"

Her thin lips turned just enough before she bit down on it.

I already had taken two lives and nothing would make me feel guilty for it. One resulted from practice, and the other was inevitable.

I gave my father fair warning. I always threatened him through tears, screaming I would get him back when I was too young to understand it. Then I got old enough to take it without even making a sound. After a while, it becomes tedious to hide bruises, and then I hit back.

There was something about Mira I couldn't figure out. She was always watching, observing, and catching me in

compromising situations.

The acceptance lingering in her eyes made me hate her even more. I didn't need acceptance or forgiveness. I was a monster and proud of it.

Finally giving her face permission to look disgusted the way she should. "Why would I ever do that?"

I conquered her space, leaning so far into her I could smell the body spray and see her chest cave in wildly before expanding again. In a low voice, I whispered between us, "You never know what life will force you to do when you're backed against a wall."

As I moved along with her, her body and eyes followed until she was ironically standing against the lockers. Holding firm to the metal, I smoothed my hand up the cold, letting my face get close enough to almost trip into her.

There was so much depth to Mira it felt like fighting your way out of a plastic bag to take in a deep breath.

Hitting the locker with a closed fist, I watched closely for any fear. Unflinching, she pushed her face up to mine. "You don't scare me, Burton."

I wanted to tell her exactly how much she should fear me, but instead I stalked off, leaving her there with her cagey breath and hopeful eyes.

MIRA

Burton was sandpaper grating my stubborn heart that was determined to win, conquer, and prove to the world that I had an attitude for a reason.

The emotionally unavailable tone protected me from the hailstorm of pain I knew people were capable of spewing out. Once you realize that the people who brought you into the world aren't going to stick around, what is stopping anyone else?

Nothing.

Burton was proof that people are temporary and I needed to accept that. I needed to stop hoping his family loved me as much as I loved them, trauma and all.

We camped out in Emma's room, getting ready with so much expertise, you would have thought it was something serious.

Emma was in a bra and a thong, dancing around her room without a care in the world, wearing her sex bruises like badges of honor. "Why are you wearing a robe? Take it off and dance with me."

There was always a good time when you were with Emma. Not far behind was trouble. Almost always.

Leading guys on in those random bars on the outside of town. She sped through the mountains with a beer in her hand. She also experimented with drugs, causing fights because she wanted people to hate her enough to save her. I just never understood where this came from.

I had my own room in the Draven house, but she would almost always crawl into my bed, reeking of disobedience, or beg me to stay in bed. She hated being alone at home.

Letting the robe slip off my shoulders in the mirror, I looked for a second at my long, awkward body I called my own. Unlike Emma who used her body like a weapon of mass destruction...

Catching movement outside the cracked door I made sure not to make any sudden movements.

Without any confirmation it was Burton, I let myself hope it was when I swayed my hips slightly from side to side to the melodic undertones coming through the speaker. Only two sad girls with monsters as pets could dance to sad music.

Emma was lost in herself, swaying and spinning, while I watched myself dance in the mirror. Slowly letting the straps of my bra fall down my shoulder, I felt dangerous for once.

I wanted to be dangerous the way the Dravens felt.

Unclipping the bra carefully, I held the cups to my chest and heard a deep swallow that didn't blend with the music. Letting my bra fall further down my chest, I kept swaying to the music, lifting my arms and dragging them down myself.

My panties were wet enough to be uncomfortable. Slipping the band down my ass, I let them fall to my ankle before I kicked them aside.

Nearly humming against the ache of my clit, I stood there, letting Burton watch me dance naked and wet for him.

Finally giving in and looking over my shoulder, I looked for him standing in the cracked doorway, but it was empty.

Suddenly embarrassed by my nakedness and insecure with his gaze on me, I reached for my robe again. Turning my attention to my costume, I pulled the fishnet thigh highs on.

“Who were you thinking of, dirty girl?” Emma tossed the other fishnet at me, and my cheeks burned bright red.

“No one. I don't have any crushes. I didn't even find a date for tonight. Third wheeling it again.”

Emma shimmied into her costume, making sure her white push-up bra, which she had decorated herself, was keeping her tits pristine. She popped an eyebrow. “Burton is going solo too. You know, he never brings anyone around. At least you won't be alone-alone.”

It was hilarious that her brother hated me, yet I kept trying to get his attention.

Walking downstairs, I felt almost naked in lingerie and a cape. Mrs. Draven, who kept insisting I call her Donna, was sitting by the fire with a glass of red wine as big as a small bottle. I knew she drank, but something about it always made me feel sorry for her. I pitied her after her husband died, forcing her to drink alone.

“You girls look fantastic. What I would give for an ass like these.” She bit the air in a playful way that told me she was already a glass in.

She let her long fingers grasp around my wrist like a plea for help behind her laughter.

Emma hadn't had the privilege of cleaning up her mom from the floor, putting the alcohol away and dragging her to bed before anyone noticed she had passed out somewhere else. We had a special bond we never spoke of.

Rolling her eyes at her mother, Emma turned her attention to the phone in her hands. “Aiden is here. We gotta go.”

She hadn't paid much attention to her mother since their father died. The same night I was dumped on their doorstep.

I hid in the shadows, trying not to be seen as a replacement, failing to live up to his legend. I was a refugee, seeking shelter, not looking for a family.

No one ever spoke of that night again.

Emma avoided her feelings for mind-numbing trouble. If it was dangerous, frowned upon, illegal, or had a rush attached to it, you didn't have to bet; she would do it. Just to prove she could.

Maybe to prove she wasn't dead inside the way she felt like she was.

Grabbing my wrist, she pulled me along, her mother's nails scraping against my skin and her elbows resting on the back of the couch as she watched us leave. I gave her a soft smile, hoping she wouldn't get too drunk, at least not enough to throw up again.

Although I wanted to believe she only required someone to smile in her direction, these family secrets left you forgetting how to smile altogether.

Trying to remember the last time I smiled for the hell of it was eating up all my attention when I slipped into the back of Aiden's black Jeep. I pulled the hood of my cape over my French braid.

It only took Aiden and Emma the stop sign two streets over to start arguing. It was nothing revolutionary. They would rage and regret as they puked and rallied.

Everything was toxic with them.

They didn't even notice I had hopped out of the Jeep when I made my way over to the ticket booth. Handing over my money, I held out my wrist for the red band the girl secured tightly around it that gave me access to everything. Nothing was off-limits.

It was senior year and I was determined to make tonight count. Whatever that meant.

Something worth remembering.

Anything.

The horror-filled carnival felt like a breath of fresh air as I watched the characters creep out girls in outfits smaller than mine, the smell of popcorn and candy corn in the air, and the sounds of screams coming from their infamous haunted house.

Inhaling it all in with my eyes closed, I jumped at Emma lacing her fingers with mine. "I'm not doing that creepy-ass haunted house until Burton is here."

The queue was the most frustrating part of tonight. It was a grueling hour wait for twenty minutes of adrenaline pumping fear, but oh-so worth it.

Having parents unafraid of everything somehow got passed down to me. I chased fear to know if it existed inside me.

More often than not, it was excitement, adrenaline, and fun. Most people look away from the horrors.

Burton's deep voice cascaded through the air before his strong cologne hit. "What, no one can have a good time unless I'm here?"

He already thought he was some kind of wolf and we were sheep. Suddenly, my costume only ate right into the palm of his hand. I was playing the part he wanted — an innocent girl wandering through the woods avoiding the big bad wolf. Only when she discovered that the wolf was wearing sheep's clothing did she let the huntsman vanquish the monsters for her.

I do my own vanquishing.

It was the first rule of being an orphan — fight your battles because there's no one else around to.

Keeping my eyes down I was trying to keep a low profile, I wanted to focus on the carnival, not a war with Burton or the abusive relationship Emma had.

Our other friend, Maude, and her darling boyfriend, Effrain, strolled up with their arms around each other like lovesick teenagers. The pit of my stomach felt more empty than before when I realized no part of me was full. I was always starving, always chasing feelings to fill me up.

Burton's demonic friends, Vane and Thatcher, lurked in the background where he would normally be with them, but here, he was with us. His suspicions about his sister's relationship had him hanging out with us mere peasants.

Dragging me behind herself, Emma shouted that the house of mirrors was free. Ironic, we came here all dressed up for her to find another shiny surface to gaze at her flawless features.

Instead of saying the insult on the tip of my tongue, I let my stale small smile live on my lips as I breathed in.

Burton's voice spoke above the buzz of excitement. "Why don't we separate the men from the boys? What do you say, Aiden? Mirrors are child's play. Let's see what you're made of."

Aiden was wearing his letterman jacket and the iconic smirk that always landed him in hot water. Turning around, he

closed the gap between them, face-to-face, and the anger wafted off of them. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

I believed him when he stood toe-to-toe with the monster I knew as Burton when I swallowed down nothing but the awkwardness in the air.

“Haunted house it is. I heard it’s a real blood bath.” His venomous voice scraped at my morale, barely hanging on by a thread already.

Living with the Dravens, seeing the extent of his wrath, the damage of picking sides of which Draven you think is right — whatever it was, I rushed to Burton’s side in a poor and public attempt to keep them tame.

“Don’t do this, Burton,” I begged him to unravel his fists, and the veins in his arms looked like they would rupture.

I regretted it as soon as his eyes pierced into my soul, pinning me in place, and the embarrassment of everyone watching making my breath rattle.

Inhaling hard, I knew I had slid right in front of Aiden, as enemy number one.

Emma tried to break the tension when she wrapped her arm around Aiden’s and dragged him towards the line. Burton’s vengeful laugh stopped her dead in her tracks. “I know the secret way through the back. It’s faster than waiting in line.”

Despite my desire to trail behind, get lost, and enjoy the night before his imminent retaliation, we followed his lead.

“Mira. Let’s go.” He refused to keep walking ahead of me, making everyone wait until I caught up. I felt my stomach turn as embarrassment crawled through my body.

I kept up with his pace, examining his features too beautiful to hate, but I still wanted to choke all that prettiness from him. Leaving every last bit of him the monster I should have feared but didn’t.

BURTON

Mira was dressed in practically nothing but a red velvet cape, dusting the dirty old camp grounds that had transformed into a haunted pumpkin patch. She had the hood pulled up to hide among everyone but was blind to the fact that I couldn't take my eyes off her.

She wedged herself in between me and my issues so easily that I was determined to make her feel seen all night as punishment.

The exact way I knew would make her uncomfortable. Like the way my eyes recognized every curve and the way her skin blushed pink when I embarrassed her enough to tug at my mouth.

After I had peeled back the fence where it was weak, I watched everyone slip through, telling them to proceed to the red side door of the haunted house.

Mira studied the broken fence with hesitation when I yanked her hips back, forcing her ass into my crotch. Pulling down the hood, I let my lips touch the shell of her ear before lowering my voice enough for only her to hear. "Trying to get my attention by dressing like a whore? What a go-getter. Perfect marks like always."

I dug my fingertips into her skin, dragging them up her legs and holding her there until I got what I wanted... those soothing fucking insults only Mira could deliver.

Mira had a gift for making me feel more like a man than a monster.

She delivered insults that showed me the man beneath the monster existed and had self-esteem problems.

No one ever touched me that deeply and it spoke directly to my cock.

Every hateful word.

“Would it have been better if I dressed like an angel in just as minimal clothing?” She was off her game after I made her the center of attention, her skin crawling with discomfort.

“I don’t fuck angels. Isn’t that what you want, Mira? Show me what I’m missing? Get me hard enough to forget you’re just a stray we took in?”

She might have been a stray, but I had been jacking off to her in the shower for longer than I was willing to admit.

There was nothing about her that stood out, yet I knew whatever fucked-up shit was hiding under her surface had me by the balls.

I felt her body tense, her will to fight me bubble up, when her small hands curled into fists. “I’m not a stray.”

Nothing bothered her. Only that I called her a stray.

“Oh, come on, Mira, you can make it hurt more than that.” Licking her jaw up to her ear, I exhaled over where I licked, making her shudder against me. “Be a good girl and hurt me the way you always wanted to.”

I was almost begging when she straightened her spine enough to push me away. “What the hell is wrong with you? My virginity is worth a lot more than some casual fuck against a fence with a brute. I saved your ass back there. You were going to rip his head off. You’re asking to get caught making a scene like that.”

I learned a few things that night:

1. Mira was a virgin.
2. Mira would bury a body with me.
3. And it didn’t have to be insulting for it to hurt.

Knowing her virginity was intact was enough to make me angry if I weren’t reaping those rewards and turned on enough to make her bleed out right here, until her purity had been dissolved.

Before I could get my hands around her again, she stomped her way down to the building. The balding grass

looked worn and worse for wear as we walked, looking for our friends and the entrance no one knew existed.

Every year, I slipped inside the horror house and watched from the shadows. Watching the panic and survival bubble to the surface, I studied the fear.

Everyone except Mira.

She always looked like she had found heaven instead of hell. Damn near skipping through the rooms with a smile on her face.

Every year, I followed her, sticking to the darkness and letting my monster stake some claim to her. It didn't matter if I was perpetually unavailable, off-limits, or that she was my sister's best friend — my monster knew I wasn't ever expecting to find someone who smiled back the way she did at the malevolent.

My stray.

My counterpart. If she told me why she was so comfortable in the confines of evil.

“I don't get caught,” I barked from behind her as I caught up in a few long strides. She was trying to pull the door open but it looked more like wrestling with the handle, grunting in anger and calling it names.

“I caught you.”

She exhaled in a labored way that only made my eyes drop to the cleavage and push-up bra she never wore. Swiping my tongue over my bottom lip, I squinted at her while I yanked the sticky door open. “When did you catch me, Stray?”

Slipping through the door, Mira disappeared into the darkness, and I paused letting her get just enough farther to make this interesting.

We ended up in a long hallway, filled with barn stalls on either side of us and our friends nowhere in sight. There was hay scattered under my sneakers, the smell of a farm lingered in the air, and we were no longer in Trinity.

We were on a slaughter farm that was only going to end up killing the parts keeping us apart.

We were in a nightmare, but I felt at ease.

“I saw you the night your father died. I know what you are, what you did.” She was walking backward, her legs glowing against the dim lights, and the jump scares rolling off her shoulder behind her as a group passed the room altogether.

Not bothering to whisper, I let her confession flirt with my monster, seeing me the way others only saw prestige.

“You don’t know what you saw.” I knew better than to confess anything.

Catching up to her, I was finally close enough to push up against her. I saw firsthand how well she fit against my chest when she stopped short before leaving the room.

She whispered the words like a secret into the air, “I saw you hold the pillow over his face until he stopped fighting it. I’m not afraid of you, Burton.”

Her hair smelled like roses, intoxicating me.

“You should be, Stray.”

Twisting around, she faced me, her hands balancing above my forearms, not afraid of me but afraid to touch me. I didn’t balance her; I called her a thorn in my side, but I had sharp edges.

Her face was filled with sympathy I didn’t ask for, staring up at me with her cat-like eyes. “Everyone is capable of being forgiven, redeemed, whatever you want to call it. You don’t have to keep acting like the villain here.”

“I don’t want to be forgiven. I have no regrets. I’m not morally gray. I’m pitch fucking black, Mira.”

My hands dropped by our sides to mold against her hips as she stopped breathing.

The pain of a dry swallow only made her more intoxicating when I realized I wasn’t trying to scare her. Instead, I was trying to make her see the monster in me better.

She had glimpses, tastes of cruelty, licks of untamed torture in the insulting ways I knew exactly how to ruin her day. But she never saw my monster like this... unfiltered.

My hands grabbed at her hips even more recklessly, dragging her closer to me.

Her hands pressed against my chest so lightly I wasn't sure what she meant until she spoke. "We should find the others."

Mira was always safe, controlled, an attenuated version of herself.

She didn't act without thinking, didn't create trouble, and didn't give herself enough credit when every set of eyes followed us through the carnival.

Mira wasn't the girl who noticed herself.

I grabbed her wrist, yanking her back until she collided with every muscle. Letting my hand anchor around her jaw like a vise, I held her face there, forcing her to look at me. "You aren't going anywhere. Not until I get what I want."

"What do you want, Burton? Haven't you taken enough?"

Her voice wrestled through all the conflicting feelings, some dampening her panties while others were only letting my bad name live up to its reputation.

My head dipped into her space, circling around her lips, close enough to be considered diplomatic. It was the only diplomacy she would get from me. "Your virginity. That's what I want, Mira."

She felt her body shudder as the wild confusion struck her all at once.

My fingers raked through her satin hair, yanking her head back enough to send her steady breathing for a loop. "Call it my Halloween tradition, Stray. It's not Halloween without some blood."

"Who says I'm a virgin?" Mira's sudden discomfort turned into cold, sharp steel when she relaxed into my hold on her.

Tugging her hair, I forced her head back, paying close attention to the smile creeping over her mouth.

“Pulling my hair in a dark room isn’t going to scare me, Burton. I’ve seen real monsters. You’re just a bully with a rotten attitude and too much privilege.”

Her degrading words stroked every inch of my cock like I deserved nothing better and nothing less than her honesty.

“Be a good girl and say it again, but slower,” I dared her to toy with my reserve. One more insult and I would kneel down and lick up the mess between her thighs.

Pulling on the thin ribbon holding her cloak around her neck closed, watching it fall to the ground around us before her hands pushed on my shoulders without any directions.

Mira would be the only person on this earth I’d allow to order me around. This was already problematic when I was willing to kneel for her sharp tongue.

Getting on my knees, I let my hands smooth up her exposed legs. Pressing my mouth into her crotch, I kissed her panties so lightly I felt her shake like the virgin I knew she was.

Her fear was trapped under hostility, but it was there for a good reason. She knew I wasn’t going to lick her and not expect a favor. Something she wasn’t sure if I deserved, if she could willingly give me.

The blood my Halloween tradition requires.

Soaking through her panties, I could taste exactly how excited she was for me when she whimpered another insult that sounded more like a lie. “I’ve had better.”

The words barely slipped out of her mouth but spurred me on better than any foreplay I had experienced.

I wanted to earn her respect and it fueled my every movement.

My pointer finger crept under the seam of her reasonable panties and yanked them enough, exposing all of her to my mouth. Without hesitation, I let my tongue sink between her

folds, not tasting her but swallowing her whole and letting my tongue sink into her flavor.

My tongue lapped over her wetness until she was nearly curled around me to ride my mouth. Letting the absence of me sink in, I whispered against the inside of her thigh, “You’re deadly, Stray.”

Coating my lips again, I felt her shake against my tongue, her legs going weak and her moans draining out every scream around us. I stood, licking my lips for her to see that servitude wasn’t actually a chore.

If she degraded me, I could praise her the way she should be praised.

“We both know the only thing you’ve had before is your fingers when you think no one can hear you. We’ve come together more times than I can count. You didn’t even know it.” Sitting back on my knees, I could feel the embarrassment rise through her when her hands pushed at me to stand up straighter.

I wasn’t done praising her when I lifted her leg over my shoulder, pulled her back, and continued to kiss from her ankle to her inner thigh.

Her breathy, exhausted voice echoed in the air as I kissed her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

Pressing my lips together, I carefully blew on the trail of kisses left behind before I responded. “The walls aren’t soundproof, Mira. I can hear your muffled moans while you finger yourself because you’re too scared to ask me to fuck you. Aren’t you tired of being a sane good girl?”

Pushing her hands into my shoulders, she pushed me back, trying to take her legs back instead of giving herself a backbone. “You don’t know me. You chalked me up to a stray your family took in. I was an annoyance, a freeloader, another person you have to carefully move around to keep the dark parts of you safe. I know what you think of me. I’m not some good little girl who’s going to beg you to stop, Burton. I’m gonna beg you to keep going.”

Mira wanted to be seen and she didn't even realize I had been watching her the whole time. I had been practicing restraint and called her stray to keep myself in check.

I didn't care what she was: sane, crazy, right, or evil — none of that mattered as long as she saw me too.

Kneeling down in front of me, our knees knocking and her eyes full of so much honesty, it almost hurt to maintain eye contact.

There was no way around the nickname, but she was always the most dangerous thing in my life. She was looking right at my monster and telling me to go fuck myself if I didn't think she had monsters lurking under her bed too.

Never underestimate people. Especially those who were strangers to fear.

MIRA

The way his pouty lips begged me to degrade him and please him at the same time felt exhilarating.

I knew what people thought of me, and I was ultimately okay with it because I was blending in until Burton forced me to be seen. Escaping his sight was the equivalent of asking for a get out of hell free card. Impossible.

Once people noticed you existed, it was nearly impossible to take it back.

People like Burton didn't notice anyone quietly either.

No, people like Burton had to call your virginity a sacrifice, start rumors to avoid getting too bored, and had so many secrets it made sense he had all the power.

It was almost like he was angry. He let his eyes skim over me, chalking me up to the annoyance he knew best. Until I was begging him to not stop and my clit screaming for more against his tongue.

Dropping back down, straddling his lap, the insecurity I should have felt seemed to be missing from the moment while the screams flourished around us. The ground was cold against my knees and hay stuck to my shins in a way that didn't feel pretty. It felt rushed and messy the way I avoided it my whole life. Yet the thrill of it and the darkness engulfing us only heightened our senses. It felt like we were the only two people on earth.

Burton's hands fell by his side like he suddenly needed permission, access granted, consent.

"Don't act like a gentleman. We're past earning it..." My words felt flat as he continued to stay still, so still it teased my aching clit more, when I realized what we were doing. We were missing pieces, finally fitting together the way we needed.

I liked the unusual praise; he needed the honesty of insults.

“We both know the kind of plague we’re suffering is forever, Mira. Might as well suffer together.” Without any warning, his hands yanked me onto his lap until our chests collided. His stiff cock against my panties made me want to scream.

While we suffered, hid, and ran from the darkness in ways that kept us forever anonymous, two wrongs wouldn’t make a right.

My monsters were far worse than his. He just didn’t know it yet.

Falling for Burton Draven was my suicide mission. Let our monsters fall in love? That was a plague for everyone else to suffer while our misery ran loose.

Burton’s hands slid up either side of my rib cage, so light it felt like kisses when his hands cupped the ruffled material around my breasts. The small, almost worthless bra I had on revealed how hard my nipples became at his touch.

Another scream erupted behind us when my head jerked over my shoulder, scanning the dark for any movement. “What if we get caught?”

I had my own monsters, but I always had a 4.1 GPA, a full ride to Trinity College, and every hope of leaving this place behind.

Burton didn’t care when his fingers peeled down the custom with the cup of my bra with it. Closing his mouth around my nipple I felt my breath hitch in my throat.

Another jump scare sounded closer than last time when his mouth kissed the sensitive space below my ear. “Do you want me to stop, Mira? Or keep going?”

Throwing my words back in my face I stood up, arms to my chest like it mattered when everything was so dark your eyes barely adjusted. With my hands outstretched, I grabbed his hoodie, which was still on, and rubbed my hands over his muscles in hiding.

“I didn’t say stop. I said I’m not an exhibitionist.”

Walking back toward the exit from where we snuck in, quietly escaping, Burton's arms wrapped around me and dragged me back. Trapping me.

I could feel exactly how hard he was through the rough material of his jeans scraping at the back of my legs.

His hot breath against my ear almost made me jump when he whispered, "We're not leaving, Mira. We're just finding some privacy among the horror."

Arms still around my waist, he dragged me along with him so effortlessly I felt like a privilege instead of my usual burden.

Pushing me down until my ass felt the straw under me, I realized we were in a stall, my ass perched on a stack of hay, and we weren't alone. The curtain beside us opened up and a man in overalls holding a bloody pitchfork came clearly into view with his glow-in-the-dark paint.

"Do you mind? I have a virgin to sacrifice." None of the lights had to be on to know Burton's glare was burning right through him.

"Dude, you can't be in here. This is an active zone."

I had to avoid laughing at his mediocre warning when I pushed my face into Burton's abs.

It took more than that to have us running in the other direction.

Curiosity didn't die down when my hands snuck under his hoodie and shirt, smoothing up his smooth skin, feeling every ridged muscle taunt to its limit.

My nails dragged down his skin on the way down to his belt. Marking something this handsome felt wildly good, and I finally understood his need to destroy people daily. A small whimper escaped my mouth. "Burton."

I felt him tense, pushing the kid interrupting us, and dropping his voice down to pissed off. "Do you think I care? Get out. Now. Don't make me hurt you."

The last part sounded genuine. He didn't want to hurt him, but my mind spun because no one asked him to.

Burton's answer to everything was violence, yet he always pleaded for mercy before resorting to it.

Only, no one listened.

Undoing his jeans, starting with the button, then zipper, I didn't wait for the vacant space or Burton to actually hurt our intruder. It was dark enough to stay hidden and we happened to be pros at it.

Cupping my face, he pulled my eyes up to his. Even in the dark, his emerald eyes seemed to shine. Ignoring everything else, he whispered, "Make it hurt, Mira."

"I'm gonna have to tell the manager. You can't fuck in the middle of..." His threat trailed off as we ignored him, and the gust of air following the curtain was all we needed to know we were alone again.

Taking a long swallow, I tore down his jeans and underwear enough to watch all of him fall out right before me. Every inch of him was hard and smooth all at the same time.

My mouth watered imagining the taste and how to make it hurt the way he wanted.

Wrapping my hand around him, I forced myself to insult him before I let him fuck my throat the way I knew he was dying to.

Tugging his pants down over his thighs even more, I bit my lip under my teeth, letting them sink in. I examined exactly how much marble he was made of. The dim lights had my eyes scattering when I noticed the scars lined up perfectly along the inside of his thigh.

Hidden enough to conceal their meaning but not enough to stop me from seeing more of his monster.

Burton had sliced four perfectly placed lines along his thigh, purposely marring his otherwise flawless body.

My eyebrows furrowed and my throat seemed to close enough to keep me silent.

His thumb dragged my chin up again, eyes locked on mine. “I can handle the pain, Mira. I’ve never been fragile.”

He wasn’t fragile, but he was broken.

Hurting him didn’t come easy. The idea of it coming from me and paired with an orgasm made it easier.

“Did you get sad and weak like the rest of us? So weak you had to bleed like I’m going to... all over your cock?” The words came more naturally than I meant them to. This was because I maintained eye contact and opened my mouth wide enough to accommodate him.

I could taste the sweet precum collected at his crown the moment he shoved himself inside my mouth and hummed around the sensation.

Working my tongue over his length, I opened my mouth wider, swallowing him down in small doses because he was too much to take at once.

“You’re deadly, Mira. Sent to kill me. Put me out of my misery once and for all. Be a good girl and make it hurt.”

Closing my lips around him even tighter I let my teeth sink into him. Dragging along his length in a slow tease His hands finally found the top of my head, petting me and groaning in these violent ways that made me think I might kill him... slowly.

Reaching down between us, I felt his hand search for the opening between my legs as I leaned back and forced my knees apart as much as I could. I nearly jumped at the pads of his fingertips, feeling my aching clit immediately.

Leaning down to shove his finger inside my mouth when I took another breath letting out a moan with his cock still in my hand.

“Fuck, Mira. Just like that. Always a good girl. Taste your poison.”

Burton was praising me and none of it felt embarrassing or not deserved. I let it make me feel invincible until it wore off.

Until he wore off.

Pulling off his cock, I opened my mouth wide and looked up at him. His fingers were coated with my arousal before he put them into my mouth for me to taste myself.

With his hand under my chin, he watched me close my mouth around the taste, watching so closely it made me ache even more. “Now let me taste you, Mira. Spit in my mouth.”

Kneeling down in front of me for the second time, he waited for me to spit into his mouth. Yanking my panties down my legs, he tucked them in his pocket.

He wanted insults, not praise, not compliance or obedience. He wanted to be hurt.

“What do we say?” The taste of myself still lingered under my tongue while I waited for him to erupt in anger, but instead, he leaned forward and smiled before he said the magic word.

“Pretty please.”

Collecting every ounce of moisture in my mouth, I spit into his and watched him swallow me down as if he had tasted honey.

Standing back up, his hands hooked under my knees and dragged my bare ass against the hay bale until I was rocking on the edge. “I’m going to fuck you, Mira. And you aren’t going to say no, you aren’t going to ask me to stop, you aren’t going to cry or plead. You’re going to let me take your virginity exactly how I want to. Like the good girl we both know you are.”

That same lump in my throat had to get swallowed down again when Burton’s body crept between my legs and his hand came to my entrance. I took a vow of silence in that second, not even letting him hear my breathing because everything I had been taught was to brace for pain.

That bleeding always comes with pain.

Yet all of me felt eerily at ease knowing Burton lived in pain, and how he was praising me felt like a promise to make sure I felt none.

Stretching me with every thrust from his hips, I felt my clit scream. Scream for more until I came all over him.

Losing my virginity was a slow torture that was worth it.

“Look at me, Mira. Stay with me. It won’t hurt forever.” His whispered words against my cheek felt like a white flag in our games of insults, dirty looks, and hatred.

Burton Draven was going to hurt forever, white flag or not.

My hands closed around the hoodie he was still wearing, pulling him closer until our bodies crashed into each other and my face was buried in the material. “Isn’t that what you like? Seeing people in pain?”

The sharp pain of his cock hit parts of me that were untouched, too deep and too far inside me. My fists closed even tighter when he did the most unexpected: showing me his well-hidden humanity.

His husky voice tried to smooth out his words as much as he could while coming undone. “People. Not you. I’m the only person who is ever going to hurt you. I don’t need to hurt an angel like you to prove I’m already going to hell.”

I relaxed when I felt my legs close around his body when I heard those words on his pouty lips.

Burton’s hands were planted on either side of me, digging into the hay and leaning toward me to keep us from falling over.

I was clinging to him like the fallen angel I was, wings burned off by reckless behavior even he didn’t know about. Burton was my monster, raised by hell and breathing hellfire, but somehow, he felt like he could be mine.

A moan slipped from my mouth into his neck when his hands wrapped around me again, clutching my ass and pulling me back onto his cock. “That’s it, good girl, chase it. You’re almost there.”

He knew my body better than I did. It was hard not to touch myself when he walked around the house shirtless and shameless about it.

“Burton...” I kept moaning his name, while my head spun and my legs shook around him.

The curbed frustration mounted and crashed around me when I shoved my hips forward enough to chase every inch of his cock inside me while I came.

Trembling, I felt a single tear crawl down my cheek when his finger swiped at it. His hand worked over himself using me as lube to finish himself off.

The relief I felt from him made me cry, a relief that felt like it could cure every part of me that was lonely forever.

His teeth found the muscle in my shoulder, biting down, while he groaned into his orgasm splashing between my legs and marking my thighs. “Like I said, dangerous.”

Pulling away from me I could already feel the heat between us cooling down. His frozen heart having nothing to do with it.. All it took was a moment before things felt normal again.

All the respect, the praise and the insults, all the ways he made me cry with his dick inside me had passed. Right before my eyes, it disappeared as if it had never happened.

“Come on. Before anyone notices us missing.” His cold words made it more clear that I was still his enemy for knowing too much.

As soon as my virginity was lost, I knew Burton would find some spiteful way of turning a moment I cherished into depriving.

That was what he did.

That was who he was.

And I was a stray.

BURTON

Mira was struck by the idea that letting her virginity bleed down my cock meant something more than just that. She was blabbing to her idiot friends, gushing to my sister, and wearing the confidence to look at me the way she was in the hallway.

Like she had seen my monster and wasn't afraid like everyone else.

Like she had seen my scars and thought they were beautiful instead of pitiful.

People were talking.

My sister was silently taking notes every time my fists clenched and my mood shifted to match my anger. Examining my breakdown and enjoying every second of it.

My sister only liked what amused her and discarded the rest.

Mira included.

Mira was an alibi when she needed one, a one-woman rescue on nights she was bored and the person she couldn't avoid, so instead she made her part of her fan club.

Only Mira wasn't cheering her on as hard as her other followers.

Her inability to blend in while wearing the glow I gave her was a problem.

I worked too hard to get to this place, a level of respect that felt unthreatened until I fucked her.

Any attempts to turn people off gradually faded into coy smiles, whispers, rumors, and humanizing me.

After years of making my skin tough enough to feel callous without touching me, Mira proved to the world I could be soft.

Soft for her.

I was a lot of things for her, all the things I planned on keeping private, trapped inside like a prisoner. The way my

father taught me to keep everything inside, hidden like the well-placed bruises he would leave.

I was a master at hiding because he forced me to be.

She was forcing me to be seen and I didn't like being forced to do anything.

Waiting by my sister's locker, I tapped my boot against the shiny floor. I was trying to bend time to my will as I had talked everyone else into bending for me. The bell finally rang through the hallway when Emma nearly bounced down the hall with her petty friends, iced coffee, and cheer outfit so short it made me cringe.

She shot me a side-eye when she breezed by me, squinting down at my location and avoiding me as she passed.

Standing in front of her locker, she nearly ripped the lock off and hit my arm with the metal door. "I'm not talking to you. You've been benched. Our sister, Burton, seriously?"

The student body got to her before I could. She already knew I fucked Mira and wasn't even chalking it up to rumors and giving me the benefit of the doubt.

It was easy for me to smooth out her scowl with my voice. "No one benches the MVP," I said. "We need to talk. Family business. You need to drop Mira. She's a goddamn stray and nothing else. I'm not having our freeloader tell the school I popped her cherry when I can have anyone I want. Why would I fuck our fake sister?"

I didn't want to use that word. It had my throat closing up.

Mira was a stray.

Mira was my sister's best friend.

That was all she was, but I needed her to believe me when I claimed to be disgusted by the truth. Using the word sister was inevitable.

Rolling her eyes, Emma twisted toward me, leaning against the locker, and her jaw locked into place. "Don't lump me in with the rest of the population falling for your charm. I'm not stupid."

Sighing, I squinted right back. She was at least two feet shorter than me and still trying to prove the runt of the litter could be as dangerous.

“I’m not asking, Emma. Drop her or you’ll force my hand.”

“Admit you fucked my best friend and I’ll drop it. Hell, I might even defend you.”

Her smile felt like blackmail before I even admitted anything. Runt of the litter but cocky enough to know how to use it to her advantage.

Crossing my arms, I fixed my eyes on the lockers across from us. “She knows things about me that can’t leave our white picket fence. Mom could lose everything and you know exactly what that’ll do to her... again.”

My sister wasn’t immune to the abuse of wearing our last name.

She felt the pressure it came with, the way it forced you to keep secrets you didn’t want to, and the way it trained your mind to damage control every part of your life that wasn’t spotless.

If her boyfriend was hitting her, she would cover for him out of habit. We were trained to suffer and smile through it.

Our mother was a raging alcoholic... Rage and regret were more like it. She would drink, yell, hurt anyone between her and the bottle to regret it later. She normally fell asleep with a drink close by and a pile of tissues.

Emma suffered her wrath, and I suffered my father’s heavy fucking hand.

We were fluent in blackmail, experts in throwing insults and ruining the people trying to fix us.

Mira had been living among us and was about to learn the hardest lesson of the Draven household...

“Mira knows how to keep a secret.” Her voice was defensive and sharp, trying to guilt me.

“The way she kept your secret?” Moving in on my sister, I pushed her hair off her neck, exposing a bruise she tried to cover up but the rush job left it peeking through the makeup. “Who do you think told me that one? Such a good friend...”

Mira was a kind person, but I was changing the narrative to save face.

My face.

My reputation.

Her survival.

Leaving Emma scrambling to open her locker and reapply the makeup that wasn't working, I smiled to myself knowing I had won the argument. The stray might live with us, but she was being expelled from her immunity.

The school was literally buzzing about the party tonight. The baseball team always threw the savage ragers, and I had to pretend to give a shit since I was captain.

The cafeteria was filled with hands reaching out to touch me, as though I was some trophy with a transferable win.

It made no sense, but I endured it because unlike Vane and Thatcher, by proxy, I was upholding our humanity.

Moving toward the back table where Vane had his boots kicked up on the chair next to him. Making it clear to everyone else that he was taken by his demons. The perfect do not disturb sign. I kicked Thatcher's chair, shaking him violently awake.

He never slept so he would always crash everywhere he shouldn't, like school, in the parking lot or at parties.

Thatcher was haunted by shit more twisted and dark than Vane and I put together. It made me sufficiently uncomfortable to know how deep that well was. My pity wasn't going to stop the internal bleeding.

Nothing would.

We all had to live with our flaws.

“Party tonight at the old hospital,” I announced, knowing they would come up with excuses.

Vane ignored me in favor of whistling for Skyler to come over like a well-trained pet. My eyes widened and my head shook from side to side in disgust.

I didn’t understand his effectuation with compliance.

I wanted to be degraded. I wanted someone to step on my balls and yell profanities in my ear. I expected Mira to tell me I was a sorry substitute for her own hand while she rode my cock like a professional.

I wanted to feel small because the entire world expected too much of me.

I wasn’t trained to hide the way Thatcher and Vane did so well even though I wanted to. They killed their feelings and buried them before ever getting their hands dirty with sins.

“Rent is due soon and I need the cash. I’ll be there,” Thatcher agreed without me twisting his arm or sliding him a crispy hundred-dollar bill and it was shocking. Still not as shocking as him busting his ass to sell whatever drugs he could get his hands on to make rent.

Thatcher kicked the chair under the table, forcing Vane’s legs to fall off when Skyler perched her ass on the table, waiting for instructions quietly.

“Fuck you. I’ll be there. Someone has to be the voice of reason.”

We were all unlikely friends but what we had in common was bigger than cliques and stereotypes. We leaned on each other to stay sane.

A hand tapped my shoulder with enough hate to have me straighten my spine and mentally catalog my last few fucks if it was a disgruntled customer.

Most girls fucked me hoping they’d be the cure.

My cure wasn’t in overdramatic moans and a pussy so wet it dulled the senses.

There was no cure but after seeing virgin blood on the crown of my own cock, I felt something I hadn't in a long time: hope.

Turning around, I kept running through names: Ginger, Dallas, Katee, Emma, Nadeen, Kaitlyn, Christopher. I found myself face-to-face with my hopeful cure, Mira. Only, she didn't look like she was in the mood to cure anything.

Her expression was clearly a combination of search and destroy.

"I knew you hated me, but this? You damn well know I didn't lie about last night. I was a virgin, Burton."

Mira had her arms crossed, eyes welling up, and her jaw crooked, trying to hold in every tear until she could put me in my place and escape.

Forcing myself to keep playing the part, I swung my legs over until I was sitting in the chair backward. My forearms lazily pressed into the top of the rigid plastic. "What makes you think you're such a prized possession that being a virgin would make you fuckable?"

She was wearing my hoodie I gave her after she left her red velvet cape behind. The one I went back for, to have a memory of a version of me that wasn't fighting and fucking everything until I was this lonely.

Her hands disappeared into the sleeves, fists closing around the material that engulfed her body, and her lips sucked into her mouth when the first tear fell. "I thought last night changed things... I thought you were... I was..."

Stumbling over her words I finally noticed the entire cafeteria staring back at our public disagreement. Every pair of eyes was on us, waiting to see who won the power struggle.

I knew I had to break her, and my monster begged me not to. My monster wanted to keep her all to himself. Caging up those whispered pleas, I stood, casually leaning into the table and pushing my foot into the chair.

"You thought what, Mira? Was your pussy going to save me? Was your wetness going to be at my baptism?" I said it

loud enough to draw even more attention.

I survived by not hiding, not blending in.

Straightening myself, I closed the gap between us. Careful not to touch her, I leaned down into her space, letting myself enjoy her one last time. This was the last time she would let me take her in, in all the ways that mattered.

“Nothing can save you, Burton Draven. You’re pure fucking evil.” Mira broke off the swear like she had the balls to back it up when she locked her wet eyes on me.

She meant every word and it hurt more than any punch my father delivered.

Towering over her, I dropped my head to her ear. “You better have a compelling reason for wanting to save me because it’s going to take a lot more than some public shame to save me when I’m not broken. I’m just the kind of evil that makes a girl as deadly as you cry.”

CHAPTER ONE

BURTON

Freshman Year | Trinity College

Legacy.

Purebred.

Respect.

It all meant the same bullshit and that very brand of bullshit was called power. The second my spotless shoes stepped foot on campus, I was under even more pressure to be flawless.

Ironic, considering I was far from a saint and on the other end of holy.

Graduating right behind Mira Eckland with a stellar GPA, enough scholarship money to send half my class to school for free, and leaving athletic records behind still wasn't enough. I was a Draven; nothing was enough to relieve the pressure of my own name.

My only relief was organized into thin lines on the inside of my thighs.

Scars Mira saw up close and personal, looking my monster in the eyes and not flinching. This was exactly why I was trying to avoid her, convince my sister she was problematic, and failing all at the same time.

Mira was my first failure.

And that would be my only failure.

Staying in a frat house wasn't ideal for someone with bad habits like I had, but I had no choice. Especially when my sister spent the entire summer either drunk or high.

We both found dangerous ways to escape, but only hers was considered an embarrassment.

Dropping the last box from the truck inside the small living room of their dorm, I watched Mira and my sister buzz around before staking claim to their bedrooms. No amount of manipulation worked on my sister. They were still thick as thieves even after I told her Mira had betrayed her trust.

I tried all summer to exile Stray from the protection our name gave her.

It was impossible to separate them, because together, they made a whole person, and together, my sister could hide behind the daughter our mother wanted instead.

Mira didn't have to earn the love she got from our mother the way we did.

I could hear my sister in the hallway introducing herself to everyone while Mira continued to close herself off like she deserved the loneliness. The past year I had watched her so carefully I could see her punishing herself.

But for what?

What did the virtuous Mira have to be guilty about?

Whatever it was, it would send me over the fucking edge because guilt is bred from deception and lies.

Vane and Thatcher got enlisted to help move them into the dorms, because hiding my monster was easier around a demon and a savage.

The guys headed back out to the truck parked outside before my mom who took a business call, leaving me alone with the one person I was trying to get exiled from.

From the main room of their suite, I watched my sister's face fall into sadness. She socialized in the hallway, stalling there with her mouth falling into a frown, as she watched our mom pay more attention to her phone. Emma almost begged for her attention, praise, hell, even pity if it meant Mom seeing her.

I never cared enough to give up the way my sister was going to eventually learn to. I knew better than to devote

myself to please others when those people were as crooked as you.

Mira was placing picture frames on her dresser when I snuck into her room.

My monster wasn't willing to fuck anyone else after having a taste of her, and she knew better than to let anyone else inside her but me.

Standing behind her and letting my hands smooth down the front of her thighs, her bare legs exposed in those shorts, I took advantage of being alone. "We can break in your bed, christen it the right way."

"Aren't you tired of hiding it? Acting like we despise each other? Muting our moans because we are never truly alone?" She didn't even have the courage to turn around and say it to my face. Instead, she placed down the photo of her parents.

The ones who left her safely with us and called once a year to make sure she was still breathing.

Real heroes.

"We've talked about this. Coming out doesn't change the fact that you grew up with us, lived with us, and that makes me the bad guy for not picking someone else instead of my stepsister. We both know it could send my mom over the edge. She's been doing so much better, Mira. Do you want us to be the reason she falls off the wagon?"

Twisting around her cat-like eyes looked up at me with so much conflict dusting her irises I almost felt sorry for the way I always spoke in fluent manipulation.

"Compromise. We could tell your sister. She's my best friend, Burton, and I can't keep dodging her setting me up without looking like I have sworn off all men."

This wasn't the first time I had heard about my sister purposely pissing me off by setting her up with losers I would threaten until they dropped any interest.

She was trying to draw out the truth by forcing me to react.

“You have sworn off all dick, except mine.” I smiled around my own confidence.

Dropping my mouth down to her neck, I nibbled on the sensitive parts of her while her annoyance increased. “Burton. I’m serious. Maybe we need to take a break, meet people, stop being trapped, stop hiding, even.”

Trapped?

Hiding?

Is that what she thought we were doing?

Our monsters were fucking while the rest of us fought to survive the fucked-up lives we had.

She was desperate for family; I was desperate to take a deep breath.

“One last time, Stray. Make it hurt worse than that did.”

Stepping back until my calves hit the plastic mattress, I fell backward onto the hard surface. I watched her creep back over to me after closing the door behind her.

Unbuttoning her shorts, I watched her shake her hips, letting them fall to the ground before she straddled me.

Wrapping her fist around my shirt, she leaned down until I could feel her breathing on me. “Do you want me to be fucked by someone else, Burton? Do you want to watch him fuck my throat until I gag? Do you want him inside me?”

Her insults were aimed at my need to control everything around me and were a direct hit, enough to shake my anger loose.

Pushing her down to the bare mattress, my hands on either side of her head and a wickedly adorable smile across her face, I felt my chest tighten enough to speed up my heart at the thought of anyone but me carving out her pussy to compliment me.

“Hurts, right?” Her arms around my neck dropped and her hips bucking for me to be inside her.

Sitting back, I unbuttoned my jeans while she withered for me. Taking my time, I pushed my boxer briefs down my hips enough to show off the prominent V.

Leaning back over her, I whispered, “Hurt enough to get my cock hard. What’s my good girl planning to do about that?”

She was practically moaning already when her smile collapsed and her pussy chased my cock still in my underwear.

Letting myself fall out between her legs, I pushed my underwear down my hips even more while she bit her lip. She was used to keeping quiet when I sneaked into her room while everyone was sleeping.

“Fuck me in a way that ruins me for anyone else, Burton. Destroy me the way you’ve wanted to since I showed up.”

Those were the only words I needed to hear before I forced my head between her legs and felt her stretch enough to accommodate every inch of me.

I wanted to ruin her. Sometimes, I wanted to kill her to preserve our memories before anything ruined them. I even plotted it out, but my monster wouldn’t let me.

My monster was pure evil, but I was something uglier. The human part of me was worse than any monster under her bed.

“I’m going to be the worst thing ever inside you, and you’re gonna come all over me like a good girl.”

Every time she muffled a scream, my hips slammed into hers with perfect bouts of pain and pleasure. Ruining her the way she asked, I made sure every inch of me took up every inch of her, deeper than ever before to leave a lasting memory.

My head jerked to the side mid-rhythm when we heard a door swing open without any warning. I didn’t even hear footsteps when my mother and sister stood there, looking at us in horror.

Mira was clawing at me mid-silent scream while I fucked her into the abused mattress.

The clear disappointment scattered across my mother's perfectly Botoxed face. My sister's mouth nearly hit the ground when I forced myself to look away. Mira was nearly hiding under me when I shouted, "Can we get some fucking privacy?"

Paying attention only to Mira, I whispered into her skin, "Don't look at them. Look at me." I could see panic attacking her features and the arousal was nearly murdered between us when her gaze adjusted.

"Burton Anthony Draven. Outside. Now." I was eighteen, but that didn't stop my mother from using my full name, and that burden I carried? Well, now it was about to get heavier.

"Can I put my fucking pants on or do you want to see your boy all grown up on top of this?" Sarcasm and hate filled the space between the words.

Finally, leaving the room, I let myself stare at Mira before she pushed me off of her in favor of her clothes. Buttoning her shorts, she stood in front of her dresser and uncapped a medicine bottle I had never seen before.

Dry swallowing the pill, the way I wanted her to swallow me, I felt the jealousy prompt my immediate investigation.

As I buttoned my own jeans, I made my way back to her. Picking up an orange bottle, I read the label: Xanax, 3 mg. "What are these for?"

Ripping the bottle from my hand, embarrassment replaced the anger on her face. "Nothing. They're for my anxiety and stress. It's nothing. I don't have to run everything by you when you're the one who doesn't want to be my boyfriend."

Boyfriend?

I wanted to be her monster, her poison, her ultimate demise, and everything unholy tainting her otherwise virtuous girl act. I wanted to be so much more than her fucking boyfriend.

"How come I've never seen these before, Mira?"

I stood still, forcing her to move around me if she wanted to escape.

This was guilt, the way she freaked and hid the bottle like it would erase me seeing it altogether.

“We all have our escapes, Burton. At least mine don’t leave evidence.”

“That almost got me hard, Stray. Now let’s get our story straight. It was a mistake that will never happen again. Just act like a Draven for once.”

Every time Mira remotely did anything to get banished as our stray, she would erupt in a fit of tears, shove her face into my mom, and beg forgiveness. Dravens don’t beg and we sure as hell don’t ask to be forgiven. You take your licks and move on.

CHAPTER TWO

MIRA

Burton knew my secret and I knew his.

He cuts the pain away and I dull mine down.

That wasn't the extent of my monster though... I wished it was that simple, that easy, but it was so much worse.

Angry enough to feel like I was solely to blame for getting caught red-handed and getting a taste of my own medicine as his silence.

I was being scolded by every Draven and the warmth of my fake family suddenly felt more lonely than ever.

Even Emma couldn't look at me without squinting her eyes and wondering what was wrong with me to let Burton Draven take up every void I had, including my heart and the space between my thighs.

Burton made it clear there was no side to choose when he told his mother I was a mistake, a slut asking for it. He was merely a victim of that. All the blame shifted to me and all his mother's disappointment seemed to as well.

Burton emerged unscathed.

In my ignorance, I punished myself by denying all comforts I had been foolish enough to enjoy and have been given because of their proximity. Out of embarrassment, I stopped returning Mrs. Draven's calls and texts, I drifted away from Emma as much as I could while keeping my promise to keep her safe. Burton had exiled me all on his own.

I became the stray Burton always called me.

The orphan I knew I was but couldn't feel with the Dravens dulling the ache.

But I made Mrs. Draven a promise to keep my eye on Emma at college, and I planned to keep that promise.

Despite what happened, I couldn't physically take losing them all at once so I held on to the one I could — Emma.

Bad behavior is a Band-Aid for the real pain living inside, trying to crawl its way out, and we bargain with ourselves to just let enough of it out to keep the monsters trapped.

I skipped bargaining and headed right for guilt. At least that's how it felt whenever Emma dragged me to a frat party. I'd get drunk within the first hour, sloppy by the second, and a total embarrassment by the third. She was pissing all over her good name and the promise I was trying to keep to her mother.

Promises were like loyalty. Unbreakable once you had me committed.

After countless times of dragging her home, I realized it was only getting more difficult, and this would be my entire life as her keeper unless I did something about it.

She was forcing my hand in the most awful ways.

She couldn't ask for help when she was busy dancing on tables and letting herself be gangbanged by assholes who wished for her kind of privilege.

Emma Draven was slowly being replaced by her monsters and it was my responsibility to make sure the Dravens didn't suffer her loss too.

My mother couldn't lose a husband and my sister.

I needed a way to make her be more willing to be dragged home and the Xanax I was sneaking her in high school wasn't doing it anymore. That was foreplay for the alcohol and joints she was polluting her body with now.

Like every Friday night, she was standing in front of her mirror looking at her skirt that rivaled her panties and her fresh face because she slept off every hangover the way no one else could by skipping class. She knew she was untouchable and it made her envied instead of hated.

“Can we skip tonight? Just stay in and order pizza the way we used to?” I pleaded with her from the couch between our bedrooms in our suite.

Laughing off my attempt to get out of being her plus-one, she smiled before looking over her shoulder at me. “You aren’t going to want to miss this one... It’s at Burton’s frat.”

She knew I hadn’t spoken to Burton since she caught us in a compromising position, not even a singular text or awkward run-in. He was avoiding me, and it was working.

I was starved for any amount of him. Selfishly starved for any excuse to bump into him since classes started. Swallowing that harsh reality for months, I gave in quicker than I wanted to.

“That’s what I thought. Wear the green one. He likes green.” She applied another layer of chapstick and nudged her head towards the dress hanging over the couch arm.

Snatching the dress that looked more like shapewear, I pushed my sweats when the sound of a ziplock popping open drew my eyes up. I watched her take the small ziplock from her bag and carefully extract a pill before placing it on her tongue.

When did Emma chase harder drugs without even realizing I built her tolerance?

The bag of pills wasn’t amateur and the fearlessness on her face meant she had done this pill before. More pills, more than I was already giving her.

“For once, stop being a good girl. My family loves you more than they like me and our last name is better than a *get out of jail free* card. We’re in college. When else are we supposed to fuck up? Unless you penciled it in for after college but before your career and husband?” She looked at me like I owed her a glimpse at exactly how corrupt I was because of how much her family loved me without me earning it.

Plucking at my conscience, I let myself do something bad to please my monster.

The guilt was almost unbearable, sitting on my shoulder, weighing me down and forcing me to take more of what I was force-feeding her... Xanax, four mg, daily.

Now I had topped off my dose with some unknown, unmarked drug to damage me instead of medicate me.

Stepping out of the cab, I looked up at the frat house standing with all its prestige on the outside, hiding every ounce of vile frat boy on the inside. Burton's frat was notorious for ragers, date rape and no consequences.

All the things his sister loved. It would be a nightmare to drag her home and I was already dredging it.

Dragging me inside, I inhaled a big breath before exhaling. The party was in full force with the music too loud to have a conversation and the room seemed fumigated by the smell of cheap booze.

It wasn't until Emma handed me a solo cup I suddenly felt out of place when every pair of eyes skimmed up and down me.

Pressing her lips to the shell of my ear, she whispered, "Soak it up, baby. You're the perfect remedy for these assholes..."

My face twisted toward her, pushing our features so close it felt wicked as I scrunched up my brows wondering how I was a remedy for anything.

A devious smile spread across her lips. "Exactly what they want but can't have. The ultimate teaser, darling."

I never meant to be a tease. I only ever wanted one person's attention and losing it after having it felt like a cruel twist of fate.

"Don't look now... It's the family's prize possession."

My head snapped in the other direction and all the nerves I had seemed to shake at my bones until I felt like I was rattling inside. Burton walked through the crowd holding a cup in his hand and the other hand greeting people drooling over him the exact same way I was.

As he walked over to us, he took the cup from my hand, finishing the one he had and dropping the cup inside the now

empty cup. “Always so willing to babysit our needs, isn’t that right, Stray?”

We had sex for an entire summer and he chalked up my existence as a submissive orphan begging for his approval.

Burton forgot that we exchanged secrets.

Standing in front of him, I took my cup from his hands and made sure my eyes locked with his. “Do you want me to babysit those cuts too?”

Getting away with ruining my favorite memories wasn’t going to be another thing she got away with.

Pushing past his body that towered over most people and every tense muscle that contributed to him being made of marble seemed almost too easy before he grabbed my arm.

His back pressed against me he brought his voice down, a scary depth that made my spine crawl. “Watch yourself, Mira. You’re in my house now.”

“I can handle haunted houses and monsters... or was that not clear?” I shot back without any fear of repercussions. I was all too willing to blame drugs, a steady dose of Xanax, and alcohol I hadn’t even tasted yet for the newly found fearlessness.

“You want the privilege of my last name to keep you from really feeling like the abandoned fucking orphan you are? Then make sure nothing happens to my sister. Keep being her damn keeper, not mine.”

His words cut like a well-sharpened knife and there was nothing that felt right. I still couldn’t wrap my head around Burton dragging a blade across his smooth skin.

Losing Emma, I moved around the party, hiding in plain sight and watching Burton being praised by every woman there tonight. I was determined to not be one of them, determined to humiliate him the way he desired.

The way he was forcing me to feel right now.

The extent of Emma’s partying was much worse than I thought when I rounded the corner to a seemingly, much

quieter study with the door cracked only enough to hear voices. Emma's voice was unmistakable when I peered in, watching her snort up a line from the armrest of the couch and chase it with vodka.

She was double dosing, making her an easy target for all the predators in the room.

I wanted to wean her off Xanax and now that guilt felt a few pounds heavier, knowing I was the one thing she wasn't accounted for because she had no idea I had been slipping it to her.

Burton's words echoed in my mind, bullying me to let her fend for herself for once to prove I wasn't anyone's keeper. Closing the door behind me, carefully and quietly, I moved on like I had seen nothing and felt the numbness kick in.

Proving Burton wrong felt better than any amount of Xanax did when the guilt faded into a whisper of a weight. Dancing and swaying to the electronic beat that drowned out every other sound, I felt changed.

I was myself, an Eckland instead of trying to be worthy of a name that wasn't mine.

I was my own family.

I was a stray and an orphan but for good reason, not because I was unwanted, but because my parents knew I was strong enough to survive on my own.

All that confidence was stolen from my spine when the whispers around me turned into alarming expressions, scared hands grasping on to each other, and then the music stopped, but my heart didn't.

Instead, it seemed to pound even harder.

Usually, these whispers led to Burton's sister and not in a flattering way. As I followed the whispers, crowds, and trail of people outside those closed doors to the study, I pushed through the shoulders until I saw Emma.

She was on the floor, shaking and seizing, a chalk white substance around her mouth and her top torn in a way that

made my stomach drop.

Rushing to her side, all that guilt I had danced off fell over me like a ton of bricks and forced me to drop to my knees beside her. Holding her hand, I tried to will her to be okay but that didn't work when Burton shouted at the crowd. He tried to catch it all firsthand, only to recount it inaccurately later.

Kneeling down next to me, he looked at his sister shaking my hand and squeezing hers hard enough to hurt. "I told you to make sure nothing happened to her. Lay her on her side. Keep her alive or I will make sure you'll die with her."

That was a loaded question that demanded I explain how evil my monster was. That wasn't something I was ready for. Not with him. Not now.

The rejection of losing his family seemed all too real to hide under a false sense of confidence from dropping him down a peg. All of it was washing away as quickly as it came on as I stayed silent, choosing to not respond.

Being ready for rejection, losing what little family I had in the Dravens, wasn't something you could ever be ready for. The downfall of good girl to monster wasn't one my anxiety could handle without spiraling like Emma was.

Making sure she didn't swallow her own tongue I tried to remember the protocol for something like this even though I never learned one.

Her teeth chattered, her body so tense she felt like stone and her violent movements were almost too difficult to contain. My voice broke around the plea when I begged him to call 911. I was seeing double, my head spinning and the drugs were kicking in.

Slamming the doors closed on the onlookers, he dropped his phone to the ground, the ringing coming through the speaker loud and clear. Someone answered, but it wasn't an operator as I expected.

No, it was a familiar voice I couldn't quite place.

"Are you at the party? I need you downstairs. Now. It's an emergency."

The gruff voice on the other end sounded sleepy. “What kind of emergency?”

“It’s Emma. She took something. She’s having a seizure.”

Thatcher Throne.

Resident dealer.

Resident bad boy.

He was filling my Xanax under the table and no one knew that either. He was good at keeping secrets, better than anyone, but his loyalty was to Burton over me.

This sick kind of loyalty made me feel even more alone.

He nearly choked me when the silence seemed much longer than it was after hanging up the phone due to his anger.

Emma was all Burton had.

His dad would beat him until he had fractures and bruises to keep the rest of his family from ever taking any punishment.

He took punishment for everyone.

“She needs a hospital, Burton. She’s overdosing,” I said it out loud. I had half admitted the truth of the situation, not sure if he understood exactly how much she had taken.

Xanax included.

Call an ambulance, the cops, campus security should have all come before Burton dialed Thatcher as an option, but I was raised by Dravens’ rules. Rule One: No authorities unless necessary.

The Dravens were political beasts and handled everything like a well-kept secret. It was impressive, really.

Lying on the floor with Emma’s head in my lap, she finally stopped seizing when I stroked her hair. I felt responsible for every bad omen in her life because before me, everything was manageable.

She felt seen by her mother before I came along.

She did not measure up to my own personal standards.

She was wild and free, and it was adored instead of shamed.

Then I was dropped on their doorstep, giving them every reason to question her behavior.

I was the villain in her story, but she didn't have the heart to tell me. Instead she kept me close, used me as a shield, an alibi when she needed one, and in return, I kept my mouth shut because I knew she wouldn't have vices if I didn't give them to her. Like right now.

Emma Draven had overdosed.

I failed her when I was the only one truly seeing her.

CHAPTER THREE

BURTON

Calling Thatcher was a long shot. One I had to take if I wanted to keep my sister alive. Even though I wasn't sure what her death would mean.

We hadn't been close in years, and every horrible family secret I kept so well hidden from her while I was beating up her bullies bubbled to my surface.

Emma was all I had left chaining me to Trinity, to our family, to the responsibility I carried.

Exactly as I suspected, Thatcher was at the party, helping people die a little, in less dramatic ways than we would have preferred to use.

Dropping to his knees beside us, I watched him take out a nasal aspirator that looked like it was for allergies. Not overods. I knew whatever he was doing was measured, the exact right dosage to bring her back to life.

"Wait, what is that? What are you giving her?" Mira was crying through her words, protecting my sister in the way we all should have instead of giving her more freedom.

Thatcher's face pushed up toward Mira, examining her reaction, staring at her like he was trying to decide if she was friend or foe. His eyes were so blue it was impossible to count all the shades of watercolor blurring together. "Narcan. It's going to save her life. It's just a nasal spray."

Thatcher's voice was soothing for someone who seemed to know nothing about happiness.

From what I knew, his life was sadness, unfortunate events, criminally misjudged moments. Thatcher was only heartless when it came to women, that much was the only clear thing about him.

Gigi had stolen it and never given the damn thing back, making him a tin man. He wouldn't even drown his sorrows in

the comfort of pussy because he was saving all of himself for her.

“You don’t overdose while taking drugs for the first time. She must have been doing it for a while but I wasn’t the one selling,” Thatcher said and I cringed at his words.

Emma breathed, coughing around the aftereffect of dosing herself to death on a dirty floor I knew was used the night prior for an orgy. Looking around the room, she found me first as I stood over us with my arms folded and my face stuck in this twisted torture.

“We’ll talk about this after. Get her out of here, Thatcher. Now.” I made the command and everyone around became submissive immediately.

Helping her up, Thatcher’s arm held on to her waist, and she whimpered. It was clearly a slurred sorry while her fingers laced around his black hoodie as he pushed through people watching with their cellphones in the air.

Still watching them leave, Mira’s voice broke and cracked next to me. “I-I’m... don’t be mad at me, Burton. I’m sorry.”

Leading her out of the room, Thatcher looked over his shoulder to make sure my sister was out of earshot. Mira knew I had choice words for her based on my tight jaw and the fact that I was about to make a bloodbath.

Waiting until the door closed behind him and the sirens wailed in the background, I finally turned on my heel facing my new enemy. “How the fuck did this happen, Mira?”

She swallowed hard and got up enough to place her ass on the couch with her face in her hands instead of answering me. Dragging the back of her hand across her face, she collected the tears best she could, leaving her skin still damp.

Closing the gap between us, I stood in front of her to force her heart to race, pound even, and I could feel all of her tense.

“When did you start taking Xanax exactly? No, better yet, when did my sister start taking them right along with you? I can put two and two together.”

I was looking for blame and came up empty when she finally looked up at me. Her eyes were dilated, even more round and alluring as the picture became clear.

Mira was high yet my sister was the one overdosing.

Mira was the one with the half-empty bottle of Xanax.

Mira was to blame even if I didn't want it to be true.

Emma didn't so much as take Advil for cramps, let alone the holy grail of pharmaceuticals. I was piecing together the truth in ways I could see she hoped that she wouldn't need to fill in the blanks. She wanted the blame without the hassle of the extra guilt.

Mira's lower lip trembled, and my teeth clattered uncomfortably. "It was innocent, Burton. You and your mom dropped your broken sister in my lap like a babysitter the second I arrived. Neither of you cared about her so I did what I had to in order to keep her safe."

Turning off every weakness I had for her, letting everything turn cold between us. "What did you have to do? Spit it out before I choke it out of you."

"The parties got out of hand, fucking strangers, dancing on bars, anything she could do to get your attention. All I did was slip her half a bar, to calm down and let me take her home."

"All you did?"

Nearly branding her with my voice, "What you forced me to do when you stopped taking care of her."

"Right, when I started looking out for you instead?"

She shivered the way I recognized fear when I wrapped my hand around her biceps, tightening in a way that felt like a noose around her neck instead. The door latched as I slammed my hand against it, flicking the lock to ensure our privacy.

"All you had to do to earn your keep was keep my sister safe. Now you have to face the consequences."

I could hear her swallow when I flicked the lights back off, only the light machine in the corner lighting up the room

enough to see expressions and silhouettes.

Forcing her to sit on the couch when I pushed her shoulder down, I moved across the room effortlessly to the bookshelf where we had many trophies and vases. Toying with a trophy, I snapped the bottom of a cheap stand, opened the bottom, and fished out a straight blade I hid there.

I couldn't hide my vices in my room and getting caught with a straight blade would only bring more shame to our disgraced name.

“You're too beautiful when you cry. How is choking on my cock until that mascara is running down your face a punishment when I like it so much?” Walking over to Mira, exactly where I left her, I placed the blade between my lips and leaned down enough to let our foreheads collide.

Dulling my sharp voice down, smoothing out my edges, I watched Mira cry up close. She knew this would hurt the way she deserved. Only it would be a relief for me.

She didn't ask what she had coming. She just sat there obediently, waiting for me to give her licks.

Always so resilient.

Always mocking me for never being weak.

Caressing her face, I forced her to look at me with the blade between my lips and my free hand working to get my jeans undone. Pushing my jeans down with my boxer briefs, I felt my cock pulse against the air remembering this was the exact way she looked the monster in the eye that Halloween night.

Leaning down, I stroked myself, wrapping my hand around my own cock until I felt myself harden enough to make it painful for me too.

Pushing my mouth to hers, blade still between mine, I carefully nudged her mouth until her lips tasted the cruel metal. My hand held her face still as I pulled away, leaving the weapon behind.

Mira Eckland was about to drag that straight blade across my thigh to create another neat cut as her punishment.

Pushing my leg out, I watched her eyes examine my inner thigh where all the pain of being a monster lived right on my skin.

Stuttering her words, she held the blade so carefully it made the whole thing seem precious. “I can’t do that, Burton.”

I waited for her hand to rest in the air. I felt her shaking and tears running down her cheeks, making it nearly impossible to see how neat the line should be.

Letting my hand guide her, I whispered, “Be my good girl, Mira. Make it hurt the way it does on the inside. Absolve my monster. Admit you’re dangerous the way I always knew. Tarnish me.”

Slipping off the couch onto her knees, she moved closer until the blade was scraping my skin without any real pressure, not enough to leave a mark behind the way she had on other parts of me.

“Burton,” she pleaded with my monster as her hand trembled in this delicate way she always wore because I forced her to.

Every time I called her a stray, I was reminding her she needed to earn her place, earn our name and loyalty.

I forced her to be scared the Dravens would abandon her as her parents did.

Really, I wanted her to earn everything she could from me but instead my monster salivated from afar, out of reach, enough to drive me mad.

I hadn’t cried since I was ten, an accomplishment I had put before a lot of the trophies and wet panties I had conquered. A streak that had ended when I felt a thick tear cascade down the bridge of my nose threatening to fall from my nose on to her sad expression.

“Don’t pity me, beautiful. I don’t like how that looks on you. Destroying me is the only thing you ever need to be

wearing on this pretty face.”

Smiling at me like the praise was all she needed to soak up those tears from falling and inflict the pain I was looking for.

Drawing her attention to the inside of my leg, her touch was enough to thaw the cold I usually wore. In the way I expected Mira to, she dragged the straight blade diagonally across my taut skin, scarring me like she was playing a game with my emotions.

As Mira chased the praise, she degraded me enough to make me to feel the pain I had learned to cover up.

The pressure of the blade burned, forcing me to take a deep breath and hold it until I felt another warm sensation of blood blooming from the wound.

My monster demanded blood, even my own.

Having Mira holding the straight blade felt like another demand forming... something else my monster could use against me.

Mira cut deeper than a knife and felt a lot more toxic.

“Is that what you wanted? To feel as insignificant as these cuts? Do you feel ruined now?” Looking up at me from her knees, I had to contain every urge to fuck her on that piss- and cum-stained couch that saw more bad habits than most people.

“No. You’re still looking at me like I matter. Like I’m some kind of god instead of a monster that guilted you into holding the knife.”

Pushing herself upright, she stood toe-to-toe with me, crossing her arms carefully and holding the weapon like a grenade instead. “You were a god to me. Now you’re just full of cracks in that shiny surface. You keep ignoring your feelings because you like the pain more than being loved. Was I just a means to an end? An easy lay because you knew how much I wanted you?”

Mira had delivered those words like a permanent scar over my chest. Her degrading words felt like I could replay them

and they'd never lose that edgy touch that hurt the right amount to keep me from slicing at myself.

Tonight was a punishment for her.

A consequence to her actions.

The exact evil to push her away before something terrible happened.

In my mind, I had enough responsibility, enough legacy to keep hidden — even from her — to justify forcing her to do the unthinkable.

Mira was a good girl, and I proved she wasn't even close. Enough for her to believe me and run from it.

Leaning into her body that still stood inches away from mine, I pulled up my pants, buttoning them as I let my lips attack her ear. "I was never a god, Mira. I was always something dragged up from Hell and I just proved it to you."

She was chasing me, the parts of me lurking under all the bad, and hoping our abandoned fucking parts somehow fit together.

Dropping my voice to a whisper, adding fear so easily it felt wicked, I inhaled her before I spoke. One last time. "Run. While you can."

CHAPTER FOUR

MIRA

I wanted to stand my ground, stand still enough that he wouldn't notice me chipping away at his anger, but I didn't.

I ran as soon as he told me to. I kept running until my legs felt weak, my chest pounded, and the sweat coating the back of my neck felt uncomfortable. I turned away from Burton the way he expected me to, and I hated myself for it.

I deserved it.

Yet I couldn't bear to cut him again, so I ran.

He was broken, but I couldn't let him break me too.

CHAPTER FIVE

BURTON

Mira was the only person able to break me and having that weapon exist in the world wasn't something I could live with.

Mira Eckland needed to be erased; yet I couldn't bring myself to kill her. Only punish her.

Punishing her was almost too easy.

Punishing her was like cutting without effort.

Making my way through the leftover chaos my sister's overdose caused, I ignored the idiots still trying to pick up where the party broke.

It could have been any sloppy drunk, any reckless stranger, anyone looking to be numb and fall over the edge into never feeling again.

Not everyone comes back the way my sister did. A Draven through and through. Enough to not die an embarrassing death.

Kicking the door open to my room, I slammed it shut. Maybe because I could. Maybe because no one would notice. Maybe because the inside of my thigh burned but not as badly as the thing in my chest.

You couldn't be me and carry around a fucking heart.

I needed to stay cold, sharp, unforgiving. None of that beats the rhythm of *her* name.

Yet it was.

My room was neat, everything in its place, minimal and stark the way I liked it. It was void of any personality or grit. It was almost like that bubblegum-flavored medicine you took as a kid, too good to be true.

My room was a ruse, along with every perfectionist bone in my body.

Sitting down on the edge of my bed my phone buzzed against my leg while I toed my shoes off before lining them up

symmetrically. The group chat was insufferable as usual, only slightly entertaining.

VANE: Retaliation? Don't even think about it. We have a pact.

THATCHER: No one would miss him.

Finally bringing myself to respond, I exhaled before typing, **I know exactly who to blame and they'll get what's coming.**

As I exited the messages marked with those pesky dots that let you know someone was typing, I accessed the school's website and saw the page used as a bulletin board by students. Tutors, job listings, free stuff, even stuff for sale.

Making a fake account was easy. All you needed was the minimum of human existence. I typed in Mira's name.

Her precious virginity was my revenge and I was giving it back to her.

Using words like virgin, desperate, praise appreciated but not required, slut on demand, willing to do anything, wasn't enough. Opening the photos on my phone, I attached one of the artist nudes she had sent me over the summer.

Mira Eckland was going to turn rotten.

I didn't flinch when I hit publish on the post that would be sent out campus wide, her virginity being offered up among the old couches and thirsty students looking to score extra brownie points for sharing their knowledge with those less intelligent.

Smirking at the post glaring me in the face, I pulled my shirt over my head and kicked my feet up on the bed. I laid back against the wall where a headboard should be. Our frat house was filled with trophies, relics of douchebags, and old money while our rooms were opulent. They were making it clear we needed to earn our place here and until we did, we could consider this a part of the hazing process.

Hazing was the least of my problems. I had a bloodthirst to keep covering up and a streak I didn't plan on breaking.

Keeping the guys in the dark was a bigger issue now that we were on the same campus, in close quarters and sharing classes.

Baseball was my only excuse now.

After some high or drunk idiot shared the post online even more than it already was, word would spread like wildfire and the real revenge would start.

Mira refused to let my mother pay her college tuition. She studied her ass off until she was almost considered a social outcast and racked up enough scholarships to pay her own way. It was admirable, but it gave me a clear weakness.

I knew scholarships depended on behavior and grades. They were banking on you being a success, not an advertisement for bad behavior.

One whiff of this and she was likely to lose every way to stay enrolled at Trinity without begging for help. She was going to be at my mercy. She was pliable to my every desire, and right now, I needed her to blend in so much I'd forget she existed.

The moment I opened my email, I typed the dean's address into the send box before copying the link to the ad for her virginity. I typed out my concern for the morals of campus, for the donation this school sees every year, and for how disappointed my mother would be. The tone of the email screamed power when all I kept hearing was Mira's voice screaming in my name instead.

Hitting send, I sealed our fate.

CHAPTER SIX

MIRA

The fallout of that night seemed to reverberate through campus even weeks later, but it wasn't until the official notice arrived in my inbox summoning me to the dean's office.

It wasn't any less frightening that it was Vane Wolfgang's dad, it was more frightening if anything. The Wolfgangs had this air about them that made you avert eye contact and your shoulders would round, hoping to not be seen.

Vane's dad used to be our principal in high school and continued his reign over us at Trinity when he accepted the position after an accidental death left the chair open.

It was public knowledge that the professors were pissed that they were all passed up.

I sat there in the hallway, picking at my nails while my bag lay at my feet and my mind fixed on what I was missing in class. The scholarships I had under my belt depended on my grade point average staying pristine, and I couldn't afford to miss a beat.

Men in suits shuffled into the office to my right as I sat there, letting my nerves erupt inside my chest.

At last, a woman opened another door right in front of me with a small smile and waved me inside. The offices were a catacomb of rooms that connected when she ushered me through until I was standing at the end of a long table. The table was lined with men in suits and Dean Wolfgang at the head of the table.

His voice was aggressive in every way as I sat down, my cheeks already blushing and my palms sweating. "It's come to our attention that you may have violated the student conduct agreement when you started attending Trinity, Ms. Eckland."

The folder sitting in front of me sat untouched until he nodded his head, demanding I open the folder without actually saying it.

Holding it open, I glanced over the sheet of paper, unoccupied by an explanation.

It was an ad posted on Trinity's bulletin board called Extra Credit. My mouth became slack enough to let my lips stop holding on to each other and my heart sunk down into my stomach when I realized my name was attached.

According to the headline, a virgin was in need of defiling.

I could feel all the hateful words crawl up my throat, lodging there and taking up space for my lungs to take a big exhale. I was suffocating and no one even noticed.

“There are other ways to attract attention, Mira. This violates every code of conduct we have in place to keep students safe. There will be consequences...” His voice seemed to fade out when my ears rang and suffocation set in even more.

I became distracted by all the ways I couldn't pay for school, didn't have a family to run to or even any comfort with me other than a toxic crush on a guy who preferred to see me suffer.

I had no one.

Another gentleman spoke up. “There have to be repercussions for your actions, Miss Eckland. We've already tried to contact your parents concerning this.”

They had no idea my parents were off fighting wars, not my own personal battles.

They had no idea I was adopted by the Draven family.

Standing up, I forced my eyes off the sheet of paper that offered up something my tormentor had taken from me. Something he took countless times over the summer, nearly ruining me and bruising me to his liking.

“I didn't post this. This is insanity. Who would post something like this?” I tried to keep my voice steady, but I could feel it wavering in the air like it carried a tune.

Dean Wolfgang sliced right through my defense. “Enough, Mira. It has your student ID, your name, and your personal

information. Who else would have that kind of information?”

I wanted to shout his name, curse him, damn him to hell, but no one was inclined to believe me. We didn't make sense to other people. He was perfect and I was just average.

Burton Draven was the bane of my existence.

Enough to punish me and keep his good name spotless.

I stood there, slowly letting my fingertips eat the paper into a crumpled mess and biting my own tongue.

“We have no choice but to rescind the scholarship money. We can help you find other funding options. This doesn't mean you need to withdraw from attending Trinity, it just means you will be under probation.” Dean Wolfgang eyed me up and down like he had seen the sensitive parts of me I held dearest.

The photo in the ad had been redacted as I kept balling my fist until it was so wrinkled it was unrecognizable. The whole campus had seen me naked, even the dean.

“Am I dismissed?” The rage burned under my skin, and I knew I had to escape before my whole body went up in flames and pushed me to do something drastic.

My anger was something I avoided making eye contact with and right now they were all holding mirrors.

Dean shook his head, his mouth tight and his eyebrows downturned with disappointment. “Dismissed, Mira. I'm looking forward to hearing about how you intend to fix this.”

I left his insult sitting there in my place when I darted for the door, escaping the heavy air and letting the summer heat only make the flames worse.

Standing there with the ad balled up so small I could close my fist completely, I wanted to storm Burton's frat, yell at him until the degradation turned into another straight line marring his flawless fucking skin, but I restrained myself.

The way I always did.

The way I knew I had to.

Taking a big inhale, I felt my chest tighten as I held it in, not letting myself exhale until the anger simmered down to bearable.

Clamping my eyelids shut, I took the last step off the pedestal where Dean Wolfgang's office sat on at the edge of campus when on the way down, a shoulder slammed right into my own.

“People normally walk with their eyes open, not closed. Fucking freshman.” The voice wasn't ringing any bells and the insult was only fanning my flames.

“I am a freshman and you're also a fucking asshole.” I smiled with my eyes and let my thin lips suddenly puff up in a smirk before I turned on my heel. Walking away from the brazen asshole wearing a suit on campus like he had something to prove.

All he was proving was that he was stuck up enough to iron his pants despite the chip on his shoulder.

I had enough with guys who thought they were invincible, cruel enough to snuff out any kindness and especially guys like Burton who never suffered a single consequence.

Skipping the rest of my classes, I slowed down, strolling through campus at a speed I was unfamiliar with — slow. I was so used to working at an unbearable pace I saw everything in a blur of accomplishments and success. Nothing else even registered.

I was painfully aware of my surroundings now.

The recognizable sound of dress shoes creeping up behind me forced me to look over my shoulder when the same asshole was chasing after me. Well, maybe not as much as walking with intention and aiming all that directly at me.

“Did you just call me an asshole?” He had glass blue eyes and a strong jaw that made me want to strike a hand against his cheek to see if he flinched.

I felt lighter when I twisted the ball of my foot to face him. Burton thought he was destroying me when in reality, he was

freeing me from the shackles that kept me striving to be perfect.

“If the shoe fits...” Looking down at his brown oxfords, I let the corners of my mouth tease some laughter sitting in my chest.

Standing there with his bag slung over his shoulder, leather and worn in like it was a relic instead of useful. His eyes were so overwhelming it felt like all the sass in my voice was fading into self. His brown hair was cut short but outshined completely when his wide smile showed up.

I had to stand my ground, letting my arms fold over my chest. I had to examine him like the wolf he was in sheep’s clothing.

The wolf remained nameless when he spared me in a way others refused. “Coming from the girl who is offering up her pussy online. I’ll be the asshole if you’re the slut...”

The way the word slut rolled off his tongue made my thighs press together so tightly that I felt the warmth of my own skin feel like a taste of relief.

That was all he had to say for me to make me want to comply, something I never did with Burton.

My tongue swiped the inside of my lip before I bit down on it, keeping myself from blindly saying yes because I had watched his sister. Always biting off more than she could chew and requiring rescue at every turn.

I didn’t want to be the girl who needed saving. I wanted to be the girl who needed salvation.

“You saw that, huh?” I said while looking down and letting my arms fold over my chest tighter like the modesty that ad didn’t have. The light blue sundress wasn’t doing anything to shout the message that I wasn’t actually up for auction.

The light material was so thin my nipples hardening only worsened with every bit of friction.

Tilting his head to the side, he gestured for me to walk with him. Matching his pace, he strutted over to the coffee cart

parked in the walkway. “Two coffees. One black with two sugars and one...” Looking at me up and down, he almost snorted before he continued. “...and one vanilla.”

Scoffing, I let the back of my hand collide with his bicep outlined so nicely he could have been naked.

“We both know you didn’t post it. So who did, Mira?” He knew my name without even bothering to allude to it or even offering up his in exchange.

The shock stormed my body like a wet dream pooling between my thighs. He saw me, he knew my name, and the way his voice sounded out the syllables made it seem erotic.

When Burton said my name, it felt like punishment. This was all about pleasure.

“You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

As his fingers lingered and the space between us shrank, I pressed the small vanilla coffee into my hand. The tawny umber color of his skin felt even warmer and more inviting than the rest of him. All but those eyes. They felt like the only warning sign because they were so disjointed.

“Jameson Kendrick.”

Jameson Kendrick.

I mulled the name over in my mouth, trying to make it taste horrible, but not better than the way my mouth watered to taste other parts of him.

His cologne was expensive, maybe even intoxicating, when I took a shallow inhale and relaxed even more into his touch.

“Thanks for the coffee. I owe you one.”

Jameson didn’t step back when his hand dropped from mine, lingering in front of me and wearing a smile that seemed too perfect to exist. No one smiled that wide, I kept thinking to myself, only truly happy people.

It was contagious in ways that had never reached me before. My life was pitch black before that smile punched

holes in the darkness.

“I’m liable to hold you to it.”

Taking a pen out of his jacket pocket, he plucked the coffee cup with our school’s logo on it and scratched the pen across it.

Watching his big hands hold it so delicately only made me more enamored when he handed it back with his number scrawled on the side. “I told you, I’m holding you to it, Mira. Don’t auction off more of yourself in the meantime.”

Adjusting his bag over his shoulder, he walked backward until I was far enough out of view he could pivot before he fell over. I was positive James was the guy that didn’t fall, trip, or even find himself in situations like mine.

He looked every bit as calculated, planned, and entitled as the Dravens.

With no real destination since I was skipping class it didn’t take long for someone to mark me their prey. A douchebag wearing Burton’s frat house letters asked me about my virginity long forgotten. “I got what you wanted, baby. I love virgins. They always look scared and too shy to say no.”

As I licked my lips and grasped his crotch fearlessly, I felt the second stage of grief hit me. I had nothing to mourn except my pride.

The anger masked almost everything else when I stood there realizing the entire campus had seen me naked and read those vile words begging someone to fuck me.

I hadn’t cried since my parents left me to save the world, but there I was, in my short sundress with tiny blue flowers stamped all over, my nipples still pushing against the thin material like razorblades and my eyes leaking into themselves.

Through the lament, I could see him hiding among them. I stared down Burton something fierce, yet he didn’t even flinch. He was used to the pain and my side eye didn’t faze him one bit.

I kept his secrets, I worshiped him, and he ruined my life.

Burton Draven was going to pay one day. He was about to get paid for thinking I didn't know how to rival a Draven, maybe not today or tomorrow.

For the first time in my life, I owned my last name, letting it hug me until it hurt. Until I remembered that I wasn't the girl everyone thought... and it was time Burton met the real me I kept hidden under all that beauty everyone saw.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BURTON

Sophomore Year | Trinity College

Jameson Kendrick was a cheap knock off compared to the real thing when I watched Mira flirt shamelessly with him.

I could almost feel the wetness from here when he finally touched her.

The whole campus saw the desperate ad and didn't think twice about someone else posting it. All they cared about was seeing someone fall from grace and that was what was happening.

Mira Eckland, who had remained undamaged, was falling from grace.

Falling right into the depths of hell.

I wanted her damaged enough to not be good enough for anyone else.

Yet here was Jameson acting like the vulture he was. Always picking up the discarded pieces, the second-best, and the runners-up.

He didn't live in Trinity, yet his ego still wafted two towns over to slap me in the face.

Competing with him became vicious until we were here, together, on the same team and trying to own the same campus.

Pushing the door open to the locker room, I was already feeding into the monster living inside me. I was imagining all the ways I could break him and watch it all fade into nothing. The monster inside me wanted to drain him of every drop to prove anyone who thought they were better than me ended up in the ground.

My enemy was standing at his locker in a towel, droplets of water falling from his hair and that permanently stuck to his face.

Walking right up to his locker, I could feel my monster crawling up my spine, taking over the way he normally only did on Halloween.

The one night I refused to hide.

The one night I required a blood sacrifice.

Slamming the locker door on his hand, I watched him fold over, his back rounded from the sudden pain, and his eyes wide in shock. I watched him pry his hand from the wooden door's grasp, nursing it against his chest, before he turned his attention to me.

"You fucking piece of shit," he snarled the words at me like it was going to replace his fist.

I had single-handedly ruined his baseball career. No one returned from an injury like that.

Not even Jameson.

Maybe I loathed him for other reasons than flirting with Mira. Maybe I hated how he didn't hide his red flag past and how he still refused to hide the ugly parts of himself. Meanwhile I mutilated mine and called them toxic character traits.

When I slumped my shoulder into the locker next to his, my grimace had taken over my face. "Go near her again and I'll break your face next."

I watched his face turn from excruciating pain to anger like a flash in a pan. Sudden as lightning but as sharp as the glass fragments it left behind.

"Only makes me want her more."

"You don't know who you're messing with."

A smile crept over his full lips, the brawny tone of his skin shimmered in the dim overhead lights, eyebrows crinkled, and his fist was so tight I could see his knuckles turning white on his good hand. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know exactly who you are... a cheap version of me from another town with the same mommy and daddy issues."

Pushing my face into his, I was determined to explain my monster, all the sharp teeth and body count behind me. “Like I said, go near her again and I’ll break more of you. I don’t care who your daddy was. He’s behind bars while you enjoy the lap of luxury.”

Pivoting on my feet, I twisted away from him, leaving him behind me and pushing the locker room door open aggressively enough to let it slam against the wall.

I had to fight every urge to not kill him where he stood. I wanted to cover my hands with his insides and smear them across my face.

I wanted to wear my enemy like a badge of fucking honor.

Skipping practice felt like a cardinal sin but there was no way to contain myself for the two hours I would be limited to his presence. Instead, I texted Thatcher and Vane to meet me at the diner for some quality time.

The only time we willingly spent together was to go over any plans for future kills, not to actually maintain any friendship. Maybe I was incapable of connecting with anyone except Mira.

They had seen my monster more than once and yet I was still avoiding them.

The campus was crawling with students between classes. Girls tried to catch my attention as I walked by and guys puffed out their chests to see if I would bow down to them as a beta. It was a cesspool of bullshit hierarchy here and I had zero patience for it.

The bell reverberated through the air when I crossed the threshold of the diner decked out in a 50’s aesthetic, complete with cheesy vinyl covered booths and checkered titles. While the neon was trying to give me a headache, nothing could ruin the pleasure of putting Jameson in his place.

Until a tall blonde caught my eye.

Leaning into the counter, her round ass nearly broke the seams of her jeans without a boyfriend in sight.

I wouldn't care if his arm was draped around her waist. If I wanted it, then I got it.

By the time I reached the counter, I was almost dizzy from the perfume that circled my crotch. I opened my mouth to speak when my sister's disgusted look fell upon me like a crown.

"No, thank you on the lecture."

My body revolted, suddenly less straight and confident. We hadn't spoken of that night freshman year. We both avoided it as if the memory alone would traumatize us more.

That was until she wouldn't look directly at me, keeping her profile strong and her hands gripping the edge of the counter. Emma was hiding something. Something I should be the last person to see.

Latching my hand on her face, I forced her to look at me, her blonde hair swaying against the momentum of jarring her features in my direction.

There it was, staring back at me, a deep purple bruise, overwhelming her eye.

My sister overdosed freshman year and now she was a walking punching bag. A small dose of freedom later...

"Who the fuck did that, Emma?" My voice was loud and unapologetic in a way that made her cave in on herself. Embarrassed by me, no doubt.

Mira came through the swinging pink door, holding a tray of food instead of my sister confessing.

So this was how she was still enrolled at Trinity.

I could feel her eyes following me when she dropped off food for a savage bunch of guys basically salivating over her averageness. In college, that was gold, an easy lie with too much self-doubt to ask questions after.

Distracted, I turned my attention back to my sister still trying to rub the bruise away. "It's none of your business. It was an accident."

“Accidents are for losers who can afford to mess up. You can’t afford to mess up wearing our last name, Emma.”

Tucking in her bottom lip and holding it back as tears sprinted down her face. “Fuck you, Burton. We all can’t be as perfect as you.”

Without arguing, she scampered off to the back of the restaurant where the bathroom sign sat on the wall. I wasn’t used to Emma breaking down so easily: no retorts, no justifying her actions, no excuses.

Embarrassment and shame were probably the only things that didn’t flatter her figure.

Go figure.

Letting her out of my grasp, I twisted around, leaning back into the counter, and crossing my ankles while I watched Mira buzz around helping people. She was always willing to help others, but never herself.

Always such a fucking sacrifice.

Her virginity was more for me than for herself.

Waiting until she was safely behind the counter, I blocked the only exit where the counter was cut and could be lifted up. She was forced to notice me now.

“How long did you know about that too? Let me guess, another secret you’re keeping from me until I have to clean it all up.”

Mira was standing a foot away, looking down at her notebook and pretending not to see me, but I saw her eyes shift direction, looking up from her pad instead of at me.

“You can’t ignore me forever. Family dinners are gonna be awkward.”

Zero emotion on her face as she stared at me. “Order something or leave.”

Leaning into my elbows, I felt like a kid rewarded with a sweet treat for exemplary behavior when I leaned into the

counter as my sister did. Mira had every Draven wrapped around her finger and I couldn't figure out why.

“Chocolate milkshake. Why didn't you tell me someone was hurting her?”

Buzzing around making a milkshake, she didn't bother responding when she dumped the ingredients into the industrial blender that sounded like you were next to an airplane with the windows down.

Dropping the tin mixer down, she threw a straw inside as quickly as an arrow.

Right to my heart.

“Why? Because you care so much? After freshman year, I thought you were busy ruining people's lives and shit.”

With a sweet as fuck smile that was the most genuine thing Mira ever did, she stood there only for a second before disappearing behind that swinging door.

Jumping over the counter, I abandoned her milkshake that might as well have been poisoned by her hatred. Pushing the door open, I saw the path split into two. One direction was pitch-black and the other was a kitchen that produced sweltering heat.

If I knew Mira at all, she preferred darkness.

I let my fingertips run along the wall, over the objects I couldn't see while my eyes adjusted to the darkness. It wasn't until the toe of my shoe hit the metal that I stopped walking and could hear her breathing.

Exasperated and swallowing a snack of air, I didn't need to look to see that her chest was raging. Controlled, the way she was used to.

“Haven't you done enough? When is it enough?” The defeat in her voice was almost too much to bear to hear out loud even in the dark.

“When you stop crying sad fucking tears. When you start crying angry ones. That's the only way you survive me, this, us.”

I didn't even realize I was shouting until everything felt too quiet after.

I should have walked away right there, let her cry in the dark alone, but my mouth watered thinking about tasting her tears.

Slowly stepping forward, I let my hands feel the air, feel for Mira, and without trying, I caught her wrist. Pulling her, she bumped into my chest with a thunderous thud. Smoothing down her body, I found the curve of her hips until my hands grasped on to her ass.

Digging my fingers into her jeans, I pushed her even more into me. Letting my head drop, I let my lips find her ear hidden in her hair. "Talk to him again and I'll give you another reason to cry."

My one hand smoothed up the back of her neck, racking through her soft hair and holding her head back in a punishing grip. Dragging my tongue along her cheek, I tasted those salty tears, letting my cheeks tingle and my dick stir.

Even broken and sad, Mira was still my fucking downfall.

We knew she wouldn't be able to handle me until she was angry enough to let her tears blaze trails instead.

Tears of anger.

We were pressed together so tightly that when I stepped forward, she automatically moved backward. Then I felt her shoulders hit the wall, startling her and shaking her bones. "Talk to who?"

I couldn't tell in the dark if she was playing stupid or actually forgot the way Jameson was chasing after her like the prey she was.

We were both villains, our own brand of monsters, and chasing after Mira had turned into our latest competition.

"Jameson Kendrick."

That anger I wanted her to feel bubbled up into tenseness covering her once relaxed body. "Are you joking? You almost got me kicked out of Trinity. I know that stupid ad was you,

Burton. Real creative, but you gave up the right when you hit publish.”

Good, get angry.

“Tell me how much of a piece of shit I am. You know how much it turns me on,” I whispered the words into the shell of her ear and kept our chests touching, leaving no room for an escape.

She drove her knee into my inner thigh, skimming the parts of me coming alive. Having folded over, my hand slipped down the wall while she escaped being wedged between me and the wall.

“Fuck you.” like venom I absorbed all the hatred in her voice.

“Do you even know who Jameson Kendrick is? Who he really is, Mira?” My hand gripped the inside of my thigh, exactly where the cuts were, before I cupped my own balls. Nursing the ache away, I leaned against the wall until I slid down it and fell on my own ass.

Practically at her mercy was the way I wanted to be.

“Can’t be any worse than you.”

Resting my elbow on my bent knee, I let the back of my head kiss the baron wall. “Might want to ask him for yourself.”

I didn’t have to see in the dark when I pictured Mira with her arms crossed over her chest and those eyes wild with demands. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She found herself in the exact place she didn’t want to be in: out of control, being hunted, and questioning her loyalty.

Psycho recognized psycho.

Jameson was as twisted as I was and she was preparing to use him as a shelter from me.

Standing up with a smirk on my face that I couldn’t get rid of, I felt my way through each small step until I found her wrist, our shoulders bumping, when I did a full stop. “You

wanted to be responsible for Emma. You claimed I gave up protecting her, so don't let anything happen to my sister, Stray."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MIRA

Emma disappeared with her black eye before I could even chase after her. I was too busy juggling trays, textbooks sitting under the countertop hidden for when it was quiet enough to study and trying to not draw any attention to myself.

I couldn't get kicked out of Trinity.

Trinity was my only way to independence. No need for the protection and kindness of the Draven family.

No checks in the mail from my parents in place of them actually being here.

I would be independent enough to stand on my own and not need anyone ever again.

Even Burton Draven.

Texting Emma was useless. She never answered the phone, especially after the accident freshman year. That accident changed things. Suddenly, she felt invincible after escaping death by the skin of her teeth.

Without Thatcher knowing his way around a terrible high, we could have lost her and instead of Burton being the Draven that broke me, it would be another Draven, Emma.

The black eye was a new level of testing exactly how invincible she was. A high-induced faulty decision. Like I said, bad behavior was rarely planned out.

The diner was painfully slow until closing time rolled around. My stack of flash cards had enough space for them to spread out, breathe and live with me like my social life was absent.

Burton's taunting echoed in my head like a sour mantra. He didn't have to try; he was blessed with the opposite problem of allowing everything good to happen to himself instead.

Angel, the owner of the diner, pushed open the swinging door and held onto its edge so only his head popped out. "I'm headed out. Don't forget to lock up."

He still didn't trust me, rightfully so when the conditions of me being hired presented themselves.

I was a wild card who needed a way to keep paying for my education. Angel was the last on my list when I stomped my way around the campus, hoping someone would take pity on me. Angel didn't even ask if I was guilty like the others. He simply threw me an apron and asked me if I could start on the spot.

It wasn't until after he saw the way everyone was looking at me with their judgmental eyes and a few catcalls later that he wondered how I showed up looking for mercy.

I could see it all over his face, trying to piece together a puzzle he hadn't even seen the box of first.

Popping his head back out of the doorway I nearly choked on my milkshake, "Don't forget the new girl starts tomorrow."

New girl.

It was a help but until she was independent, it was only more on my plate. I could handle it as long as I kept taking my little helpers. Pushing my hand into my bag sitting on the counter, I reached for the pill bottle filled with Xanax I told myself I would stop taking after high school.

I was trying to convince myself I didn't need them, yet I was still trying to figure out how to get more hours in the day, sleep less, and still maintain a 4.5 GPA.

I was spread thin with the waitressing balancing on top of everything else. Thanks to Burton who wasn't going to stress about a single assignment.

Gathering my flashcards, I snapped the rubber band around them and pulled out my calendar. Two papers, studying, reviewing tutoring notes, and sleep were still on the list and it was now eleven at night.

In a desperate well of despair, I typed out Thatcher's name until it populated a contact.

Me: I need something different this time. I need to stay awake longer.

I could feel my body almost swaying with tiredness as I stood up watching those three dots curate a response.

Thatcher: You sure after freshman year?

He must have been joking — freshman year was a piece of cake compared to my schedule now but I knew he meant because of the overdose with Emma. We were always glued together, as if her erratic behavior and my perfectionism were interchangeable.

We were both destructive and full of secrets. That was our only trait in common.

Almost impossible to see those lines when we were both bleeding into each other.

It was the Draven way, guilty by association and to keep your loyalty. I felt forever compelled to protect her when no one else would. The Dravens invented trauma bonding and we perpetuated it.

Me: Yes. I'm not Emma, I know self-control.

Thatcher: I'll meet you outside your dorm in twenty.

I was still living in a suite with Emma, different from our freshman dorm that held so much hostility and bad memories. It was only a short walk from Angel's Diner after I collected my things and shoved my key into the large lock on the outside door.

With the neon lights off, it almost looked sad inside, void of any conversations or the jukebox playing in the background, almost like the demons had taken over.

That's what we were — demons pretending to be angels waiting for the lights to go out so we could stop hiding.

I wasn't going to bother to go inside and melt into my bed to come back down when Thatcher summoned me. Instead, I

dropped my bag and sat on the steps that led to my dorm, waiting.

The night chill had me wrapping myself in my sweater, pulling the extra around me and holding it there while I examined the ground.

A loud roar in the distance grabbed my attention when I saw headlights coming toward me. Thatcher didn't drive in high school, always getting rides from Vane or Burton instead or riding his bike when he could.

I guessed, riding a bike in college wasn't scoring him any points with the female population.

The car rolled up on the sidewalk. I leaned back like it would save me from the rage of an alcoholic who had partied a little too hard this time. It wasn't until a pair of unlaced, floppy boots hit the pavement that I exhaled.

Thatcher.

I smiled thinking of what his entrance music would be in my tired mind. I could physically hear pills rattling, metal clanking together and this visceral anger that always floated around Thatcher like a stormy rain cloud out of formation.

Stopping in front of me, he looked at me with his eyebrows pinched and his eyes full of judgment I didn't need. "Are you drunk or something?"

"Or something."

Tossing me the orange pill bottle without a label I caught it in my hands. Holding on for dear life like the addict I wasn't and never wanted to be I nearly stopped breathing

"Is that against Draven family rules?" His voice was sandpaper in every way, grating the vulnerable parts of me without permission.

Thatcher had it rough so it made it hard to complain about things like privilege of any kind.

Standing up, I felt the drowsiness hit all at once like when you drink enough to fall over but don't feel it until you stand. I

must have seemed drunk to him, my eyes barely open and my body already asleep.

“Good thing I’m not a Draven,” I snapped.

Snickering to himself, he pivoted, heading back to his car parked on the sidewalk like it was normal. Stopping at his car door, he leaned into the top, elbows bent before he looked at me. “Could be a nobody, which is worse?”

“I am a nobody.” I said it so unapologetically that it felt true.

The harsh realization that even my own last name meant nothing. Not even to me anymore.

I wasn’t an Eckland or a Draven, I was just Mira and my own monsters hadn’t even decided how bad that was.

Not bothering to wait for some segway into a deeper conversation, I turned my back on Thatcher with his pills in hand. He hadn’t even asked me for my tip money, and right now, I couldn’t stop my legs from carrying me to bed.

“Those aren’t free, ya know! You owe me!”

The only debts I had were to my monster sabotaging me with every pill inside this bottle.

I didn’t want to be this person who chased perfection, but I had no choice. Everything inside me chased it and my monster did everything in its power to wait until I was weak enough to tear down all the hard work.

Burton didn’t have to ruin me, all he had to do was wait for it.

Before I even got inside, I dry swallowed one of the pills. I hoped whatever it was would wake me up in a few hours so I could get more done. All I needed was a power nap, at least that’s all I was admitting to.

The pill slipped down almost too easily when I pushed my key into our door and felt the change in the air. Suddenly it was hard to breathe and my heart thumped into a surge of adrenaline against everything my body already felt.

Emma was sitting there on the couch, crying and holding a napkin to her lips.

The sight of her broken in ways I had never seen was horrifying when all that adrenaline shifted into anger. Hot, steaming anger that wanted to rip her piece-of-shit boyfriend to shreds.

She didn't even have to confess for me to know exactly who did this to her. It was the same person was feeding her all the pills and pot.

Rounding the couch, I sat down next to her and pulled her hand away from her face to analyze the damage he did to her once perfect features I still envied. Her black eye was almost too hard to look at and the cut sitting over her lush lips stung my soul.

Emma was my family, found or blood, it didn't matter.

"He did this, didn't he?" I asked her with tears trying to flood my vision and hers crawling down her cheeks.

Shaking her head, I wanted to be angry at her. I wanted to place every ounce of blame on him until it crushed him, but troubled boys like him didn't care about the consequences. They broke hearts and stepped on the pieces.

I wanted her to tell me why she was with him still, how this happened, how someone as fierce as her was letting someone snuff her out so easily, but all I could do was pull her into a tight embrace.

Before letting her go, I whispered into her strawberry-scented hair, "Stay here and keep the door locked. Do not let him in here."

The urge to meet deadlines that would keep me until the wee hours of the morning told me to get up and shove my phone into my back pocket before I left.

My monster stirred inside of me, waking up at the thought of being so angry I wanted to wreck everything around me and make the wrong decisions. I was at the mercy of everything wrong with me until I could satisfy those urges, the ones that made the perfectionist in me look like an understatement.

When it came to these urges, it was more than perfect. It gave them time to be calculated, sharp, devious, and non-repetitive. That was the part of me that didn't have to be perfect...

CHAPTER NINE

MIRA

After letting the pills and adrenaline dance inside me enough to keep me moving, I didn't even bother changing.

I wasn't running on fumes; I was running on something a lot more dangerous.

All I knew was that he hung out at some frat house on Greek Row. He was two years ahead of us and wasn't ever seen on campus getting reprimanded for anything. It was a ghost I was willing to chase into the night until the outcome satisfied me.

Greek Row was on the other side of campus when I texted another lifeline in a fit of desperation. Only this time, it was Burton, another quarter of the Unholy Trinity, and the bane of my existence.

Me: I need your help. It starts with a ride, no questions asked and no following me.

Figuring this would pique his interest, I held my phone out, hoping that he would text me immediately like he too didn't have a life. We both knew he could keep up appearances and play the part, which was enough to strangle his darker side.

I didn't have the same skill set.

Still looking down at my phone, I was almost willing him to text me when a voice in the darkness spoke my name before I could see it. "Mira? Is that you?"

The voice was soft like satin and I recognized it before I could attach the face in my mind when Jameson appeared under a dim light on the path too yellow to be useful.

Coming closer, he stopped, tugging his earbuds out of his ears and jogging at a pace the way they always tell you to cool down after a run. "What are you doing out here so late?"

Pushing my phone into my back pocket, the idea flirted at the corners of my mouth. “I could ask you the same thing.” I let my voice hush into a flirty tone.

I didn’t need Burton anyway.

“I go running at night when the campus is quiet. Clear my head. What are you doing out this late? Walking around in the dark for fun?” His eyes were a clear blue that acted like a flashlight in the dark, a beacon of light.

Biting my own lip, I was trying not to let my eyes skate over the tight black shirt sticking to the sweat and outlining every muscle he had. The cast was immediately apparent when I touched the rough plaster. “What happened to you?”

I was already comfortable with the protective emotion right now even if it wasn’t earned.

Scuffing his lips, he smiled wider. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Want some company wherever you’re headed? Back to the dorms?”

Leaving my hand on his cast, I took a step closer, leaving only a few inches between us. “Actually, I need a ride to Greek Row. I have something I have to handle...” I didn’t want to outright ask when I pulled my lips into themselves and held them there like a well-oiled machine that knew how to be helpless.

Squinting at me, examining me, he pushed the tentacle of hair behind my ear while the tension seemed to swell.

Whispering his words, he almost made them sound dirty and erotic instead. “I can give you a ride but not if you’re meeting some guy.”

Jameson wasn’t anyone to me, but someone I would bump into on campus. He had zero claim or ownership over me, yet all I wanted was to obey him at that moment. The tone of his voice made me want to be a good girl.

Burton’s voice made demands I wanted to purposely disobey.

Shaking my head from side to side, my mouth dropped open without getting the words out. Struggling to make sense, I tried again. “No other guy but there’re conditions. You can’t ask questions and you can’t follow me. Deal?”

His smile took up most of his face when it grew even bigger, his fingers still trickling down my jaw and dragging over my collarbones under the thin material of my shirt. His touch made my breath hitch enough to make me choke down a dry swallow.

“Deal. Let’s go.”

Taking my hand in his, I followed him back the way I came when he took big steps I had to keep up with. His car sat in the dark corner of the student parking lot outside the dorm room, pristine and expensive, the same way he came off.

Untouchable.

Reserved.

Unattainable.

“Get in, gorgeous. We have a mission to complete.” I never needed the praise but earning his gave me butterflies.

Jameson sat behind the wheel and pressed the red button that made the car come to life not waiting for me to settle into the passenger seat. I had lived in this world of excess for long enough to not let them see how impressed I was, not until they earned it.

The arm sporting the cast rested on the console between us, useless and bulky. “That sucks. How long do you have to have it on?”

“Until the broken bones heal. Accident in the locker room. Egos are more deadly than a fast ball hit.”

I was starting to wonder if everything made him smile when even an injury like that didn’t produce a frown. Would my dark side make him smile too?

“Wait, you’re on the baseball team?”

Speeding off, I could feel the car fishtail as his eyes were fixed on me instead of the road. His eyes faded into offended slants. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that like I’m not athletic because I’m smart.”

Juggling more than one stereotype was hard enough without it being the most popular ones.

Without asking, I could already piece it together. Burton was on the baseball team too which made it clear he knew him by the way his eyes nearly tried to set me on fire when he saw us together that first time.

Burton was capable of hurting people for a lot less. I wasn’t trying to flatter myself into thinking I meant anything to Burton. I was collateral damage in a bigger scheme of destroying anyone he saw as an enemy.

I knew his secrets, the ugly ones.

Burton’s insults were suddenly bold, underlined and italic in the forefront of my mind. Jameson was like him somehow and he was using it as a dagger to any hope of falling for someone else thinking it would be different.

He wanted me to suffer at his hands, no one else.

The music was a soft whisper, barely audible, when I turned as much as I could in my seat to face him.

Greek Row was always a party and tonight was no different when the people on the sidewalks took over my attention.

Jameson’s head fell against the headrest when he dropped his speed down to nothing, letting the car nearly roll through the street instead. “Which house first?”

“No asking questions, remember? Just drop me at the end. I’m looking for someone. I’m sure he’ll be at the party.” His eyes drew me in like a well thought-out plan to take me hostage and it was working.

The car came to a stop parking along the sidewalk, and idling until I could escape. I didn’t want to, but Emma needed protecting and Burton wasn’t doing that job anymore. He

made his threat clear that more ruining would come my way if anything happened to her.

“Who are you looking for? Maybe I can help. I am a teaching assistant, you know.”

“He’s a piece of shit who doesn’t even show up to class regularly. He hurt my best friend. “He has to pay for that.” My confession slipped from my mouth as if I had immunity to something as violent as the law.

He leaned into me with interest instead of looking mortified, disgusted even.

“Aaron. Aaron Thomas.”

The features I was obsessed with seemed to spark even more when he smiled at me. “He’s in my fraternity. He’s supposed to be home. He’s our sober brother tonight.”

My mouth fell open in shock. Fate was forcing our proximity and showing me that things didn’t have to be some warzone. It could be easy if you just let yourself accept it.

Not wasting a second, he looked through his phone before dropping it in his lap and letting the phone ring over the speaker instead. His words slurred into made-up words when he was under the influence.

“Are you home sober, brother?” The way he said it made it seem like he had power others didn’t, demanding an answer that pleased him.

Aaron was the sober companion for the entire frat making the answer simple yet the line was quiet.

The slurred words were hard to make out when suddenly his tone became more clear with a large exhale. “Not having fun? I’m more sober — high. It’s just pot, Mom.”

Hanging up with no warning, he found my eyes. “Am I aiding and abiding yet?”

His lips were so close to mine I could smell the sweet sweat and coffee-stained breath that only made my panties more wet. I wanted to let him follow me into the dark, but that part of me was so off limits it felt criminal.

“You still can’t follow me. Which frat is yours?” Starting his car again, he turned his attention to the road and headed what seemed like away from Greek Row until he pulled into a parking lot behind a huge house.

Letting the car stall, he leaned back, disappointed I wasn’t letting him tag along. I realized I was making the same mistake I did with Burton. I was hiding who I was in fear those dark parts couldn’t be loved, that their existence inside me was the reason people left.

Pointing to the house with his damaged hand, only the tips showing, he gave me the layout. “Go inside the back door. It’ll let you into the kitchen. Continue straight until you end up in the living room. The staircase to the left leads to the upstairs rooms. His room is the second door to the right. You can’t miss it.”

Giving him a small smile, I got out of the car, but before I did, I looked over my shoulder at Jameson sitting there so comfortably it made the anger seem not as relevant anymore.

“Give him hell, kid.”

Blowing up my smile even more, I left Jameson behind where he belonged.

The house was quiet, almost too quiet, when I stepped carefully between each break in the wall, trying not to be seen. When I finally made my way up the stairs, I tiptoed until one of the photos caught my eye, a familiar face staring back at me.

Burton.

This was Burton’s fraternity too.

The shock was almost too much to bear when it stopped me dead in my tracks. Burton was sleeping in the same house as his sister’s abuser.

I didn’t have the time to stop and wonder if he knew and let it happen or simply didn’t know. Either way, neither of us could count on him anymore.

Standing in front of his door, I could hear the TV playing loudly and the cough coming from his chest, no doubt from a thick inhale of pot. When I twisted the door handle open, I wasn't surprised to see the disaster of the room: clothes everywhere, an unmade bed, posters unsticking, and the smell of rotting food wafting in the face upon entry.

It was uncomfortable standing there, but I had unfinished business.

He was hurting what little family I had left and he deserved the same pain.

My monster raged with excitement when I grabbed a trophy off the dresser and faked a cough to get his attention.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The lazy parts of his voice rested on the surface like a surfer looking for the next wave. This was Upstate New York with more country clubs than beaches.

“Emma Draven.” That was all I needed to say to get my point across.

Staring right at me, he pulled the joint from his lips and exhaled into the air like an insult if the smoke could even float over from the distance between us. “What did that bitch say now? Always running her mouth, someone had to tell her how to keep it closed.”

A devilish smirk crossed his lips, and all that anger stirred again. Enflamed and angry enough to do something stupid.

Stepping toward him with the trophy in my hand, he stood up so quickly it made my balance spin off-center. I didn't react quick enough when his hands grasped onto my arms. The panic swiped over me instead of my monster taking over the way I was used to.

Fighting for the upper hand, we fought our way into the hallway, clashing, grabbing, and struggling. His hand struck my face with enough force I fell to my knees in front of him, defeated and at his feet, probably as Emma had been before.

The sharp pain vibrated through my jaw while I nursed the ache with a soft touch, hoping he wouldn't strike again before I could get up.

Pulling me up by the arm, he dragged me to the edge of the landing. "Bitches like you need to learn their place in this world," he growled the words into the air while I tensed up even more at every word that fell off his tongue.

I was waiting for him to push me down the stairs when his cocky attitude left a flaw in his design, an opening, a weakness for me to exploit.

Reaching up, I dug my nails into the skin of his forearm, forcing him to let me go before he could do any real damage. The struggle became fast hands, skin slapping, and his strength unmatched as we both attempted to latch on to each other.

With a quick push, I watched him tumble down the stairs until his head caught the last step.

The sound his skull made was so dense it made my shoulders creep up to my ears when it pierced my ear drums. I wanted to crawl out of my own skin to let my monster enjoy this moment while I avoided it.

That's when Jameson rounded the corner. My eyes were drawn to the extra person in the room instantly. I stepped into my darkness where my monster was smiling on the inside, knowing we drew blood this time.

The first time.

Even if it was an accident.

It would set a new standard I would have to uphold now. For my sanity, for the darkness to stay hidden.

"Jameson." I was hoping to play the victim when he waved me down the stairs, closer.

"I'll get his head, grab his feet. We have to be quick before anyone gets home." Squatting down next to his body, his fingers pressed into his neck, looking for a pulse before his face came so close to the body I swear I saw him enjoying this moment too.

He didn't flinch or cringe. He was calm as could be and it was unnerving.

Grabbing the feet, I lifted with him, moving with Jameson and letting him lead us back through the kitchen and down into the cellar. It was full of cobwebs and even sported a dirt floor instead of cement, but I ignored every part of me begging to know who he was exactly.

This didn't seem like the first time he had been around a dead body...

Stopping in front of old school furnish that was way too big to be legal, he dropped the body like he was dropping something into the trash.

"Jameson, it was an accident, I swear." My voice trembled but not from fear or playing the victim for his sake but from the rush of relief I felt.

Satisfaction.

Jameson looked at me with his head tilted, studying me, stepping over the body before standing in front of me. "I'm so happy I found you, Mira. You never have to explain to me."

CHAPTER TEN

MIRA

His words enveloped me in his arms before he did.

All that acceptance felt unearned when my face was buried in his still damp shirt. I needed an explanation. I needed the struggle, the power plays to explain why he was hugging me like a long-lost lover.

Jameson was easy when I was used to everything only being hard.

Being built to withstand hardship around someone who was nothing but a luxury sure didn't feel like a blessing. It felt like a strong clutch of paranoia. One that wasn't going to let you go until you paid the price.

A price I learned to stop paying if I stopped trusting anyone.

Almost tripping over the body lying behind him, I pushed myself away from him. Every part of my face felt twisted up in confusion I couldn't figure out. "What do you mean? Burton said—"

Cutting myself off, I swallowed the words I couldn't say. I couldn't dare say Burton Draven warned me about you and demanded to know his truth in the same sentence.

"Burton Draven? And what did he say about me, Mira? That I'm bad for you? That I wouldn't understand what you need?"

The room might as well have spun on its side; the shift in energy was so cunningly quick I could barely keep up. Taking a cautionary step back, I let the paranoia bite me in the ass again when the back of my foot hit something, shaking me under the skin and stopping me from putting any more distance between us.

Ravenously, Jameson kept stepping forward, slowly enough to feel like he was hunting me instead of catching me

when he stared into my eyes with so much focus I felt pinned down.

“Burton Draven is weak, too weak to handle you the way I can.”

My shoulders relaxed, dropping down, and the tension fading into pure adrenaline coursing through me. My heart was still thumping out of control when my mouth fell open, but no words would come out.

Burton didn't want me to find an escape from his torture. Pushing a wedge between me and anyone willing to save me was all part of his plan to keep me miserable.

“He said that you're just like him... that I don't know you and that's dangerous.” I said the words level enough to convince him, but I could still feel my face trying to look for clues all over him.

His hand caressed down the side of my face, his fingers tickling my skin enough to send chills skating down my spine and my eyes wanting to close. I wanted to soak up the touch I had been fantasizing about since I met him, the same fantasies that helped me stop thinking about Burton when my hand was between my legs.

Forcing my eyes to stay open, stay present while I lived in reality instead, his lips came dangerously close to mine. “Am I dangerous? Enough to not run away when there's a body behind us. I'm not going to pretend I know Burton Draven beyond a proper competitor, Mira. You have to decide who I am but I'm not going to be compared.”

His lips moved so slightly when he talked that it felt like an invitation to kiss him when his words provided this gut punch that easily ruined every wet dream I was having.

He admitted to being dangerous.

He saw me pushing someone down the stairs.

He called Burton a proper competitor when no one played with Burton Draven.

I should have run. I should have saved myself, but I was a glutton for punishment when I stood there rooted to that basement pinned against a table. His glassy eyes dared me to come out victorious.

Every part of me that liked to be perfect was humming, thrilled to chase the challenge, when his lips brushed against mine before cocking his head enough to look over his shoulder. Inhaling the strong scent Jameson carried with his confidence, I bit my lip hard enough to punish myself.

“I’m not comparing...” I mumbled my words.

That was exactly what was wrong with love. I was comparing how intoxicated he was to Burton.

Love was about survival because it was always bound to hurt somehow.

Catching my chin with his fingers, he pulled my eyes up to his in this fervent hold he had on me. It felt like a chokehold around my neck without him even touching me.

“That will be the last time you lie to me, Mira.”

Jameson detected little white lies with such precision when no one else had and it burned my cheeks into a scarlet red embarrassment.

I almost wanted to let a simple sorry slip from my mouth but instead I kept quiet long enough for him to fill the silence. “We’re past lying to each other now. You don’t have to hide from me.”

Stirring came from behind Jameson when our mouths were about to collide and it made me jump back onto the table top. My hands grasped around his herculean biceps and my nails dug into his skin as I looked around his body at Emma’s boyfriend waking up.

He wasn’t dead, and I didn’t kill him.

I should have been relieved but all of me was heartbroken that my own darkness rejected my sudden commitment to being bad when my life fell apart.

It seemed like the universe was forcing me to repent, demanding I wear angel wings and be the good girl everyone thought I was.

My monster living inside me groaned at the missed calculated chance to be free when Jameson whispered, “Go with it,” before kissing me so passionately I didn’t care about what side I landed on.

Good or bad, we were all trying to survive. None of that was living when you were too busy running.

From everything.

Even the thing trying to save me... Love.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BURTON

Mira was dancing with the devil and my monster was jealous.

Jameson had become her savior after her life fell apart, swooping in and sweeping up the broken pieces. Nothing had pissed me off more than the arrogance of thinking he could just fix what I broke.

I hadn't even been this angry when my dad broke my nose and had spent two days popping pain killers and ditching school to cover it up.

After I got back, I had to start a bullshit rumor someone had got a cheap shot. In reality, I was dragged down to our basement by my hair and used as a punching bag because my dad hated his life.

No one tells you love has too many forms to count. Some are downright evil while others seem too good to be true.

No one tells you that monsters can fall in love as people do.

No one tells you that this love promises to destroy you.

The form it takes when you don't even notice it until it's too late.

That's the love that fucks you up enough to do crazy things...

Things that made the monster inside me beg for freedom other than one night a year on Halloween.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BURTON

Junior Year | Trinity College

Mira should not have survived my brutality, yet she was thriving. With or without the reminder of me permanently afflicting her life.

Sitting at the table filled with small sandwiches and tea cluttering the space, I slumped down, not bothering to maintain appearances for anyone's sake anymore. My monster had grown tired of pretending to be some statue of marble, perfection, stone-cold relentlessness.

I wanted to be exactly who I was: depraved and dangerous.

All the pleasantries my dad physically beat into me every time I brought home a B instead of an A. I said something smart at dinner or my tie wasn't tight enough around my neck to create a noose, I earned more bruises.

Until I stopped fighting back.

Until I finally surrendered.

Until I created so many happy places in my mind I thought heaven was imaginary because nothing would live up to the places I had been when his ring would clash against my bones.

Even after I was free from him, I still upheld every pernicious value he had in his warped idea of family.

I was still his prisoner.

Loosening the tie even more until it was crude, I sat back watching my mother smile the way she was taught, from ear to ear, still wearing his favorite lipstick. She was still Mayor of Trinity and still trying to keep our name stain free with every ounce of attention she gave people.

Everyone around her fawned over her like she was Christ. Only they didn't know about her sleeping her way to the bottom of the bottle every night.

My monster saw her for who she was.

Just like me.

Calculated. Deceiving. Manipulative. Angry...

I always thought my dad loathed my existence because I challenged his legacy, but it was a transferable hatred he had for my mother. She wasn't his equal, she was superior to him. Her monstrous parts screamed louder than his ego and nothing destroyed him more than a blow to his precious ego.

We were cut from the same cloth, her and I, and it drove him mad enough to put me in my place.

My sister came scurrying in like the disaster she was. She was holding too much and trying to put her heels on at the same time. Everything about her appearance screamed that our mother no doubt had sent over for today's photo op. No amount of drinking the night prior would ruin a perfect moment for our mother to remind people she was unbreakable.

In the past, I thought all that motivated her, but now I saw the cracks a lot more clearly.

As long as she kept her hands off me, I didn't care what motivated her. I wasn't ever going to be someone's punching bag again.

Emma slipped into the seat next to me at the table, trying so hard to be unseen and avoid the reprimanding from our mother she knew was coming.

Without even dropping eye contact, my mother's voice hummed with so many undertones of disapproval it felt like a slap instead of a catchy tune her voice normally carried. "Emma. Late again."

Pulling the small lace gloves over her hand, I watched her squirm under the attention, something she never did. Normally the limelight was something she thrived under but the person sitting across from me wasn't the same girl I knew as Emma Draven.

Letting my eyes soak up the stranger, I noticed things like the bruises on her neck and the way they trickled down her

forearms.

All the ways Mira tried to tell me Emma was in trouble seemed so much heavier now that I was seeing the proof firsthand.

As my eyes scanned every patch of skin for signs of abuse, I noticed she was fidgeting. She was picking at her nails, and trying to cover up any marks he left behind. It was no use; the damage was done and my blood was boiling thinking my sister was a punching bag in any sense of the word.

All the aches I had ever felt bubbled to the surface, painfully sitting on my bones like PTSD.

As she emerged with chunky equipment hung around her neck, directing us like models, every ounce of her artistic abilities fell on deaf ears while our mother ate up curating winning moments for her run at senate instead of simply just mayor.

Our mother would put every skeleton in our closet at risk to chase more power than she had.

Power didn't stop our kind of monster, only fed them.

“This is very impressive. Let's get closer to each other.” The photographer kept encouraging us, even though neither of us moved on from our sullen states.

“Emma, a word, go outside.” I barked my words like a command and waited for her to get up. I couldn't sit there pretending to be normal when I knew better. Mira was right; something was wrong with Emma.

She was the only person I had left as my family. I would not lose her to some asshole with anger management problems that made my demons laugh.

Heading for the door the atmosphere changed instantly when the two dark clouds she called children stepped out. Looking over my shoulder, I saw my mother fit perfectly into her mask with no visible seams.

I envied the way she hid the ugly parts.

Emma rifled through her small bag with her hands shaking and void of any confidence that used to punch you in the face. I couldn't help but keep quiet, watching her, examining her.

Frustrated, she exhaled a heavy breath and opened the small opening more before I heard the rattle I knew all too well. Pills. Pushing down on the cap, she twisted it in front of me, swallowing a handful and leaning back into the pending high.

With little thought, I slapped the bottle of relief right out of her hands. I let the cap fly off the grooves and the pills blended into the busy pattern on the carpet. Dropping to her knees I felt a vile bile crawl up my esophagus that made my stomach turn.

Mira was right and I didn't listen.

Emma was tarnishing our good name in ways I would never have guessed.

The only family I had left was crumbling in front of me.

Letting the tip of my sneaker press down into a pill she was reaching for, she crumbled into an embarrassing junkie, eyes leaking and her hands frantic to collect the pills. I always used to admire the way my sister turned rules and expectations on their head but now I was ashamed of how far she was willing to run ... from me.

I would have protected her if I wasn't so caught up in Mira.

I could have saved her from becoming the person who cried over lost highs.

“Go home. I'll make something up.”

Her mascara was running down her face when she looked up at me, eyes soaked in tears and her lips trembling. “You can't say anything, Burton, please.”

Like a plastic bag blowing in the wind, caught against my calf, I could feel my sister grappling at my legs trying to gain any sympathy, but the more I thought about it, I knew it was so much bigger than me pitying her. Our mother was announcing

her campaign to run on a national platform where her competitors would look for any reason to take out the competition.

Including her dysfunctional children and dead husband.

The Draven name was now less prestigious with all intent on exposing the monsters my mother hid so well. I had more to lose than either of them, and I wasn't willing to give up the fact that I had picked my senior year kill... Emma's deadbeat fucking boyfriend.

I had waited three years to make sure our hands stayed relatively clean and no one was taking that away from me.

I played nice... enough.

"Clean yourself up, it's embarrassing." Disgusted with the tone my voice took, I knew I had to serve up some tough love. She needed this to be the only lesson she learned before our lives became the Cleavers.

On display and ready to be judged.

Turning away from her, the disgust sitting in the pit of my stomach quickly turned sour, angry, when I left her there trying to live with herself. I needed somewhere to put all that failure, that anger, when I realized Mira was as much to blame as myself.

She was her best friend and roommate, yet stood by, watching even more closely than I could. Her failure to inform me meant she knew enough to stop it herself.

Stepping over the threshold from the safe hallway I was in the bullpen where all hell broke loose and my mother's team buzzing to find the perfect photos, I could feel every pair of eyes trying to penetrate my soul. "Mom, I have practice and Emma has cello lessons."

Getting close enough to move through the crowd, I leaned down enough to kiss her forehead before I committed to leaving.

A harsh sound snapped through the air when I realized the photographer had cemented in stone the role I would play: a

doting son, far from who I was.

Killing my monster was the only part of myself I didn't want to kill. It was my version of an imaginary friend I refused to let go of.

Security and shit.

My mother's political team fawned over her and the image I served up on a silver platter when I was out of the way. I couldn't get my feet to move fast enough when I finally made it to the elevator, punching the number repeatedly until the small chime through the air forced the doors open.

Inside the dark elevator, I tugged at the knot of my tie, forcing it to loosen and hang like a noose before it got the job done. That was what her political career would be: my execution.

I did have practice but not for another hour, giving me time to get my ass to the batting cages and work out some of the anger I wasn't allowed to take out in the ways I wanted to.

Now I had to calculate every move, think even more steps ahead and control the searing hot anger that corrupted my soul in check. The anger belonged to my monster and he was a son of a bitch I couldn't control.

Halloween was the one night I could unleash the beast. I let the anger run wild until I collected the blood like a trophy. My collection stained me in the worst ways, the scars any addict has.

My sister's boyfriend had made my shit list, an easy target for our senior year kill. Now I needed my own secret victim that Vane or Thatcher wouldn't know about.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BURTON

Behind the wheel of my car, I had every intention of making it to practice, but when I ended up at the diner, my chest unwound from the tightened state it was in.

Sitting back against the luxury leather, the finer things in life, something I never care about. Mira didn't even know how much she was driving me crazy by forcing my ass out of the car. She was walking towards the door, hoping to get a glimpse of her.

It was blasphemy when the bells on the door rang, and I could feel my monster trembling like it was a cross and holy water.

Walking over to the counter, I noticed the diner was short of a certain waitress with a shit attitude, tight ass that sat high up, legs for days and features I called average but were unique.

Everything about Mira was plagiarized to prey on my weaknesses. Everything about Mira was a definite way to bring me to my knees and some part of me liked her being the only person who could kill me.

It was poetic when I wanted to kill everything else but her.

She was my seven minutes in heaven; I was her ticket to hell.

Her sidekick that had her own issues with Vane was buzzing around with a pen sticking out of her hair and a tray stapled under her arm. Slipping behind the counter effortlessly, I stood there waiting for her to notice me when she didn't.

Clearing my throat, I understood why Vane took a liking to her. She was immune to our privileged asses and our stark fucking black hearts.

“Can you use your words like a big boy?”

Right away, my eyebrows wrinkled like my shirt. “Where is Mira?”

“I don’t think she wants to talk to you.” Slapping down a torn piece of order paper from her pad in front of me, she fished a pen out of her apron. “Leave a message.”

“It’s really cute how you think you’re protecting her. She works every Tuesday. Where is she?”

Standing there, I braced my hands against the countertop and leaned in, blatantly ignoring the archaic way she expected me to leave a message. Putting my arms over the paper, I leaned in even deeper, attacking her space, while she refilled the straws.

“The Unholy Trinity. That’s the nickname you guys have, right? Yeah, I’m not serving up the one person who had my back to a pack of demons.” She moved down the counter, the space between us expanding and my veiled attempt at threatening her suddenly stupid.

Slamming my hand down on the counter, it rattled under my palm, and tickling my muscles. “Might work on Vane but I’m a different breed of fucking monster. Tell me where Mira is.”

The way my voice rumbled was enough to snatch everyone’s attention from their own insignificant conversations.

Feeling their eyes on me, I stood there. “Now.”

Finally standing up straight, she crossed her arms, examining me before responding, “She’s in the back. Jameson, her boyfriend, visits her on break.”

There was no hiding the way her features turned up, all suddenly sly and mischievous.

Mira had a boyfriend.

Jameson.

My enemy was a friend of my enemy.

Without permission, I hauled ass, rounding the long counter with the 50’s barstools and the cutout flipped up. After sneaking behind the threshold, I heard Holmes protest, and

Angel frying burgers shouted for me to leave the kitchen as I pushed forward.

I kept going until the open kitchen space offered up an alternative route, a narrow hallway so dimly lit it looked like somewhere I would do bad things.

Mira was nowhere to be found when I stopped in front of the glowing red exit sign clinging to the wall above the door. In a moment of frustration, I pushed the door open, letting it slam against the building, exposing a single car purring.

I stood there, studying the back window not more than six feet in front of me, idling and humming while the window fogged up.

My hands curled into tight fists, so hard I could feel anger pumping through my knuckles.

Mira's naked shoulders mocked me when I saw Jameson's body collide with hers, their mouths chasing each other and their hands almost grabbing at every inhale. Plucking them from the air, I listened to hear the moans that still haunted me when my eyes closed.

Unable to hear them again, I didn't tell myself to get closer when I realized I was standing right next to his sports car in front of the blind spot windows, still trying to hear those moans.

Finally hearing her choppy exhale, I almost smiled when that moan turned into his name... Jameson. Ruining every fantasy, I punched through the window, putting a hole in their arousal.

Waiting long enough to see Mira's face warp into pure shame was enough. I turned on my heel and headed for the exit door I had come out of. The monster inside me was crawling at my skin, begging me to break his neck and claim Mira the way I wanted to, but I was practicing control.

Control was a requirement of my last name.

I couldn't afford to lose it now that my mom had brought a gun to our knife party. Rogue shooters outweighed the rest of us.

I didn't expect Mira to shuffle out of the car, racing to pull her shirt down over the lacey bra taunting me. "What are you even doing here? Come to see the fallout of your blackmail? Make sure I'm not still a problem?"

Her cheeks were still flushed when I looked over my shoulder, ignoring her shouting and yanking at the sticking back door.

The darkness seemed even more stark, void of the daylight I was bathing in a second ago. Taking a deep breath in, I let my chest expand before I exhaled the anger still rising.

My fingers had been dented and my knuckles had turned white. Driving my fist into the metal locker, I felt the cheap metal cave and the door opened like a traitor.

"The great Burton Draven has nothing to say?" Mira wasn't chasing me... she was chasing my monster. Poking that part of me with her stick.

Turning around quickly, I stood in front of her, our faces pushed together only after I bent down to meet the difference in our height. Not able to shake the heat crawling over my skin, I wanted to yell until she could hear nothing else anymore, but I knew better. Our audience was only a hallway away.

"What do you want me to say, Mira? You want me to be mad that you're fucking some loose in the back of his car on break?"

My eyes had adjusted to the dark already, her mouth collapsing in disappointment I didn't know what to do with.

"You didn't answer me. Why are you here?"

"Get Emma under control before the competition makes her the family fuckup. We're all being watched now, Mira, even you."

It was only a matter of time before my mother's team used her good deed of taking Mira in, raising her with a silver spoon and college fund, to their advantage.

“That’s all you have to say to me? After everything? No apology, no closure. Were we just a mistake?”

Mira was everything but a mistake.

She was another part of me that grew wild, refused to die and put down roots. Another part of me I was forced to control.

The strain in her voice was still sitting on my chest long after she stopped speaking. “I’m not going to be the guy you want me to be. I’m not going to make moving on easy. Surviving me shouldn’t be easy.”

Stepping forward, my hands grazed her hips, pushing her back into the lockers and trying to breathe amidst the heavy air wedged between us.

Her throat swallowed down nothing, especially me with the taste of him probably still lingering on her lips. “It never had to be like that... survival. We could have thrived, but you never let us.”

She was right, I sabotaged us, and I was still doing it. I was stuck in this fucked up cycle of vicious feeding the wicked, one I couldn’t stop without admitting who I really was.

I was prepared to even say the words out loud. A cold-blooded killer, that was who I was.

That was the disappointment and rejection that felt too similar to failure, something I couldn’t live with.

“You ran once, Mira, keep going until I’m nothing but a memory in the sea of college mistakes. Let Jameson make you happy.” Letting my head drop, I inhaled her perfume on her neck.

Mira reached out, her hands fisting the material of my shirt and trying to pull me closer, but I stayed planted, just enough space between us to keep me from erasing what she was just doing with him.

“I don’t want to run, Burton.”

“Don’t make me prove it. Don’t.” I was almost begging her to let me keep him caged up, hidden.

Tugging on my shirt enough to fall into her, our bodies colliding, and our mouths somehow finding each other in the dark.

Forcing myself to pull away enough to not give in, the door opened again. Jameson. “Babe? I told you I would give you five before I came in.”

There was no respect, no love lost, no way I would cover up exactly how much her body begged for mine. It didn’t matter how he was trying to satisfy her; it was an ache only I could cure.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Jameson bellowed from the door. As tall as me, packed with lean muscle and a bad attitude.

He had a chip on his shoulder; I had an unlimited bank account.

Mira spoke, defended herself mawkishly, when I gave her a scold that shut her up. “This doesn’t concern you. You can get back to fucking when I’m done with her.”

I was never going to be done with her...

Jameson’s hand landed on my shoulder, a prelude to what was coming, when she mouthed a plea. *Please*.

Clamping my eyes down, I tried to reason with the monster, but it was no use. Jameson wanted to fight, and I had zero flight in me. Twisting toward him, I yanked his button down, pulling him closer and showing him exactly where he stood... second place, like always.

There was no need for words, insults, or petty shit. Wickedness knew wickedness. Without saying it, we both knew we had things to hide.

Driving him against the wall, we struggled, both wanting the upper hand when my fist caught his lip. Shoving me back, his fingers nursed the cut that bled the way all head trauma did.

The smeared blood on my knuckles made me grin like a little kid too happy to realize the world was full of bad shit.

Swiping my tongue over my own knuckles, I tasted him, the blood, adding it to my collection without it being Halloween. One taste and I wanted more.

Driving right into him, I wrestled him to the ground, and pounded my fists into him like I needed to.

Mira was shouting for me to stop, pleading, and I could hear the shaking in her voice but none of that mattered. I wanted to hurt him until it stopped hurting inside me.

His body weakened and he stopped fighting when I finally stood up, standing over him and admiring my work. He wasn't dead but I could pretend, fill the void, for now.

Full of surprise, Mira's tiny fists pounded against my shoulder as the flood gate of tears streamed down her face. Making out the words was too difficult with the ringing in my ears from the rush. Catching her chin, I pulled her face up, whispering between us, one more blow to deliver. "Try avoiding being your mom and not letting him knock you up. Whose door would you drop the bastard on?"

I knew Mira better than that, but I needed her to keep running from me. I needed to keep hiding. I needed her to remember the pain and survive it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MIRA

Senior Year | Trinity College

Expectations had a fucked-up way of limiting our thinking, boxing up any surprises or creativity because we were expecting every move.

I never set expectations before Jameson. I never had enough stability to want to anticipate the next move from anyone.

We were all semi-permanent to each other, secrets keeping us from being written into stone. We were easily buffed out.

Being with Jameson still hit me as a shock when I woke up in his bed, tucked safely in the crook of his arm. I would listen to his light snores I had come to love. He was the most unsound sleeper I had ever met, tossing and turning, haunted in his dreams so much that he would scream out most nights.

I should have wondered why his bed had leather cuffs dangling from chains bolted right into his headboard, but instead of asking questions, I simply took pleasure in having somewhere safe to land. Somewhere that wasn't my dorm room.

Ever since we got to campus, Emma only seemed to get more troubled with each year, returning from Trinity with more reasons to set her life on fire.

First the experimenting, next upping the ante, and then the accelerant was her deadbeat boyfriend who showed her exactly how toxic things could get. I tried to protect her the best I could, but she was resenting every parameter I set, becoming even more hellbent on breaking the rules.

Finally, Jameson convinced me to pack a bag and live with him in his off campus loft that was above an art gallery.

The only time I went back was for more stuff, laundry, making sure Emma was alive...

Burton made sure I never forgot how much her safety was on my shoulders and the ramifications would be worse than ripping away my scholarship.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and I had to force myself to roll out of the comfort of Jameson to reach it. Swiping up the screen, I saw three missed calls from Miss Draven, probably hoping to pick my brain about her children now that she barely had time to be a mom.

I couldn't blame her. She lost her husband; her daughter was slipping away, and Burton was never here to begin with. She found love at the bottom of the bottle but now she was sober, forced to be unless she was willing to see that secret put on display.

I was her dirty little secret. I was pretending to have their name, to be a part of their family. No one asked questions after Miss Draven publicly claimed I was hers as much as Emma and Burton.

Now I had no choice but to play the part she forced me into. I just wish I had more loyalty to the parents who dropped me on their doorstep, the heroes saving the world.

Yanking at the sheets, I got one free when I spun around until it was wrapped around my body. Tiptoeing into the bathroom across the loft, I closed the door so quietly I stopped breathing to make sure I wouldn't wake him.

Sitting on the ledge of the tub, I let the phone ring until I heard her warm voice serenade my eardrums. "Honey! How are you? Did I call you too early? I wanted to go over the details for tonight."

As my mind raced through my planner, I could not retrieve any information.

My silence gave me away when she continued, "Mr. Draven. The anniversary of his passing. I want all of us to be together tonight. We need each other on this hard day."

I felt immodestly stupid, letting my fingernails dig into the outside of my thigh and nibbling my own lip. "Of course, I'm so sorry. Will it be at the house?"

“No, dear, it’s at the club. I reserved a private area for us all. Will you be bringing anyone special?”

Miss Draven knew about Jameson but not in detail. She reserved her expectations for Burton and me to work it out.

That would never happen.

Not now.

Not ever.

He ruined my life in ways I wouldn’t ever forget, no matter how far I ran.

After she told me all the details, I declined to bring Jameson with me mentally. I wasn’t even going to extend the invite. Neither of us were ready to be permanent with each other.

He was willing to hide a body with me and part of me always wondered why. A wall was still standing, waiting for the shoe to drop.

Hanging up with Miss Draven, I opened the door just enough to peer out at Jameson sleeping in nothing, the sheet barely covering every ab he worked hard to perfect. His skin was this cinnamon color that glowed against the stark white bedding. His mouth sat so pouty against his sharp jaw, creating a contrast no one could understand.

A darkness to his sullen features.

The perfect trap that spoke to every woman’s need to fix broken things. Only he wasn’t broken, he was sharpened.

Looking down at my messages, I couldn’t stop staring at the chat with Burton. The months that had gone by since our last text message were screaming for me to just move on. Pieces of me wondered if I could ever get over it.

Neither of us had tried to reach out or even talk since that day he caught me in the back seat with Jameson, doing things I had only done with Burton.

It felt dirty being with Jameson, and that left my skin irritated. No matter how much Jameson kept proving it was

safe to fall.

My head told me it was sensible, but my heart kept working on that wall that Burton laid the foundation for. I couldn't just fall backward into Jameson, I needed him to push him, as Burton did by forcing me to keep his secrets.

Sneaking back into bed, I reached over him, disabling the alarm and pulling his arm over my waist while I tucked my body into his. His chest felt like an open flame against my bare back when I felt him stirring behind me. "Who was that?"

Even when he was sleeping, he was as sharp as jagged edge steel.

Making my voice a whisper, I said, "Mrs. Draven. She just likes to check in with her favorite charity case." I didn't even know why I said that when she had been only nice to me. I had no reason to be critical of our relationship, but something about never meeting Jameson's parents was probably one of them.

He spoke little of his parents and after the six-month mark, it made me wonder about what Burton said, that the brand of evil called for further investigation. I asked him for myself.

You don't feel butterflies when you see red flags. You feel like you got shot before the race and you're too busy trying to win.

"I assume you'll be playing the part of the perfect daughter again tonight. Since Emma Draven can't seem to."

The icy tone of his voice wasn't lost on me when I twisted toward him, my hands on his chest and my lips trying to smile. This was a point of contention in our relationship, the Dravens and I pretending to be one.

"It's just dinner, Jameson. I would invite you, but I know how much you don't like them."

It wouldn't be the point of weakness between us if he told me why he hated them so much but that was the only other red flag about Jameson Kendrick. The past was something he didn't want bleeding into our present or future.

“I have my reasons. Reasons that you don’t need to get twisted up in. They’re all the same, the Dravens, bleeding everyone dry and making sure there’s no competition.”

Perception was a bigger bitch than Mrs. Draven when crossed.

I could understand why he kept his life so private since I felt and looked like an orphan even though I wasn’t.

Try explaining that to the guy who liked Jameson, who walked this Earth with no expectations or standards set by the ones who gave him life. Mine were saving the world and I couldn’t even save Burton.

Being an orphan felt better than being a failure.

“Someday you’ll tell me what happened between you and Burton, right?”

Jameson tossed his legs to the side of the bed, abandoning me there in his warmth, and his bare back taunting me to touch him the way I knew I shouldn’t. Not now. “Mira, I’m not in the business of preserving memories. When you’re ready to destroy them, I’ll be here, ready to do that for you. When you’re ready to let him go.”

“We haven’t... I haven’t even spoken to him,” I protested, starting an argument that I knew I couldn’t win on a lie.

We hadn’t spoken, but I wanted to. I had typed out so many texts and deleted them before I could hit send.

Burton wasn’t the forgiving type, and I wasn’t the forgetting kind. We were a match made in hell but some part of me hung on to the heaven we once had.

His back was still toward me. “Don’t. Don’t lie to me. We do enough of that, don’t we?”

I laid back down again, letting myself sink into the pillows and contemplating how I had lied already when I came up short.

My hand barely brushing his shoulder before he stood up stark naked. “I’ve never lied to you, Jameson.”

He finally showed me his eyes, standing in front of me, naked but not vulnerable. “We started on a lie, love. You had every intention of killing him for wronging your friend and I had every intention of helping you hide the body; instead of admitting it, we danced around it until it shaped a well thought-out lie.”

Swallowing the guilt, I felt my throat bob, pulling the sheet up my chest and making up for the ways he didn't feel vulnerable. “I-I wasn't going to hurt him. It was an accident.”

Leaning forward into the bed, fists loose and knuckles bearing the weight, when he pushed forward enough to send a chill down my spine. “Don't lie to me, Mira. It's embarrassing if you think I don't know the difference by now. The way your body tenses and you struggle to even say the words, your whole body is rejecting it. When you can finally admit it, you can finally be the Eckland you were born to be instead of pretending to be perfect among the living dead family.”

Without his lips touching mine, I inhaled the hard truth he spoke right into my mouth before he walked away like nothing had happened.

A few moments later, I heard the shower kick in and the water instantly calmed my body down.

That was the whole problem. I wasn't a hero like my parents, and I wasn't devious like the Dravens. I belonged nowhere, and I didn't know how to be okay with that yet.

Pushing the sheet off my body, I stood up and headed for the shower, tiptoeing against the cold floor and quietly pulling the shower door open. Sneaking into the shower, I watched Jameson's muscles stretch with every motion as his hands worked shampoo into his hair.

The scar on his back was enough to intimidate the confidence I built up on the way over here. My eyes ran along the scar that tracked down his spine, embossed and disrupting his golden color.

“You're right. I pushed him and I meant to.” My voice didn't crack or shake the way I expected when I confessed to

what I did last year. I thought I would be a puddle of emotion, yet the weight lifted from my shoulders and my spine could finally iron out.

Turning around, the water running down his head and chest he stood there, looking at me until his lush mouth opened. “Atta girl. I’ve been waiting for you to say that for months.”

Pulling me into his chest, the searing hot water burned me instantly. It was hellfire and the gates had opened; my heart felt torn between two kinds of monsters.

“Now I can tell you everything. Now I know you’re truly the same as me.”

Jameson’s hands held onto my face, cupping it so tightly I felt breakable when his lips pressed to mine, and I felt like I was drowning in a memory. Everything about his touch sent me right back to that night last year when he was all too willing to help me bury a body.

Burton was trying to warn me they were the same kind of monsters when I refused to see it, exactly how comfortable Jameson was with murder in the first degree.

Despite being torn, my heart had a type... and it wasn’t watered down in order to be labeled a bad boy. No, my type had blood on their hands.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MIRA

Standing in the lobby of the restaurant waiting for the Dravens made me feel like I was a teenager again, at his mercy. Again. I was fiddling with my hands, swaying back and forth and trying not to be in anyone's way.

I was always trying to hide because I never felt good enough to be a part of their world, the privilege and admiration that seemed to fall into their laps. It was easy to keep my head down in the books and do well, earn my place.

The host at the podium kept glancing over at me like I was making him nervous, refusing to sit.

“Miss? Miss?” I heard him call my name, but I continued to ignore him. Looking out the window, I searched for the unmarked black SUVs that the Dravens were accustomed to driving.

Finally, one pulled along the sidewalk of the bistro restaurant in town, not even a few miles from campus, and I could finally exhale properly. After holding my breath since Main Street before crossing the old railroad tracks, I felt like my chest was going to explode. I was on the verge of suffocating to make sure no one mistook me for a Draven.

Eckland.

I whispered my own name to myself trying not to forget the way I did freshman year when I let luxury stomp out things like loyalty, honesty, and morals.

Like Burton, to have this, you needed to give up far more than you bargained for.

Burton sat next to me, pretending not to notice me and it hurt more than I was willing to admit.

Shoulder to shoulder with my enemy-turned-lover and now my enemy again, I sat there quietly listening to his mom talk

about the campaign for which she'd be leaving Trinity tomorrow. This was her send-off dinner and I had zero context.

“Burton, Mira, get an ETA on Emma. I want her here before dessert.” Her voice was chilling and you could hear the pent-up rage just waiting for Emma.

Pulling my bag out of my purse, I had every intention of making it look like I was texting Emma when in reality I was going to text Jameson instead. I was barely living in our shared dorm anymore and shacking up with my boyfriend who felt as safe as a pocket knife.

Some days, he felt like a warm blanket, redemption, but most days, it felt like he was hiding something.

My desire to know what it was outweighed almost every other instinct I had.

Leaning over into my space, Burton's gaze bore into me like a heat seeking missile. “Texting your lover? Not like you to blatantly defy Mommy.”

I wanted to punch him in the ribs, watch him keel over and writhe in discomfort, but instead, I smiled. I made eye contact with him, letting my grin grow and my hand under the table clutch around his knee. “I still bite, Burton.”

“Just not as hard.”

“Want to prove that theory?” I retorted, digging my nails into his cigar pants even more.

Smothered in blithe I watched Burton lean even more into me when his head tilted just enough to let his lips catch my ear. “Make it hurt, baby.”

Those were the words he said when I became his Halloween victim that year. The same night my virginity became his personal bloodbath.

My body broke out in a scarlet red fire that felt feverish. Suddenly, I felt like I was standing in a pit of hellfire, and he was watching me burn. Enjoying it, even.

Emma stumbled in, taking all the attention, and halting the conversation to a dead silence. Her mother was the first to

speak when she invited Emma to sit at the table across from us, where her seat went empty.

Everyone's eyes followed her to her seat, watching her messy hair and her dress look not up to the standards of her last name. Emma looked like she had rolled out of bed in every way, an embarrassment to her mother in the worst way because now she wasn't a housewife; Miss Dravens was running for governor now and Emma was a liability.

Her daughter was sitting in a folder on a campaign manager's desk for the other side as ammunition and we all knew it.

"Thanks for waking me up." Her snide remark seared my already burning flesh. Only with guilt instead of shame.

"It's five o'clock... I didn't know you were asleep this early."

"You wouldn't know, would you? You come home in the middle of the night for more clothes. Jameson has spit on our family name and you're rewarding him by giving him the best blow jobs of his life?"

Swallowing back more accelerant I felt myself go up in flames in front of everyone. I tried to form any sentence I could, but my whole body screamed to run instead, far and long until no one around me knew the Draven name.

Standing up abruptly, I felt the chair crash to the floor behind me which only caused everyone else in the restaurant to look in my direction. I could feel the shame crawling up my legs, twisting around my spine and all the fight I had turning into flight all too quickly.

Fleeing dinner, I gave Mrs. Draven a look of regret before I headed for the exit. Emma made it clear I should be everyone's enemy — not just Burton's — and I couldn't argue.

She was right.

I was letting my mouth do the best work on Jameson, deep throating him until it ruined the taste of Burton.

Trying to move on felt like an illness I had to constantly explain to people, hoping they understood. The Dravens weren't people you could put behind you.

I walked far enough away to comfortably call Jameson for a ride back. I knew I would have to admit he was right about them, this dinner, being a glutton for punishment. I listened to the ringing, waiting for him to pick up, when Burton's shadow loomed on the pavement.

Twisting around, I hoped it was anyone else, even a mugger, anyone but Burton, but I knew better.

"What do you want, Burton? Wasn't that enough entertainment for you?" I could feel the tension in my face buckling my features down.

"You want the rescue or not?"

"Even a rescue can sound insulting. Growing, I see." I tucked my phone under my folded arms and faced him.

Taking a few steps toward me I followed suit, stepping back until I stepped up on the curb. Even more in the shadows dusk was creating. Without permission, his hands reached out for me but only grasped onto air instead, realizing I wasn't his to touch anymore.

"Didn't you hear your sister in there? I'm giving the family enemy my best work." I filled the silence with the degradation he normally requested, letting us switch roles.

His hands made tight fists at his sides, his knuckles turning white and his jaw ticking. "Until you cut him as deeply as me, it's just foreplay, Mira."

Jumping off the curb that only stood a few inches off the ground I landed right in front of him. I switched my eyes up to make up the height difference. "Maybe I have cut him as deep as I cut you... Maybe he doesn't consider foreplay a game."

"Foreplay is always a game, Mira." His husky voice, lathered in seduction, was hard to resist when I could feel how hot his breath was. "One... last... game... before we graduate and have to be adults."

It sounded like we were both dredging being orphans with no excuse for our failures anymore.

“What kind of game?” I asked him, biting the inside of my cheek and my clit fluttering between my legs for the wrong guy.

“At the old mansion. Tomorrow night. One last game before we graduate. Put our mark on this town.”

I mocked his enthusiasm. “You mean a scar.”

His arm laced around me felt wrong, wrong in ways I noticed and let happen. Burton was a well-curated drug that only got me high and losing yourself was understandable when you were trying to break an addiction.

We stood there with our chests together and the intoxication around us making it hard to breath. Listening to his heart thud against his chest, I let myself feel safe in a way I hadn't in a while.

“Come on, I'll take you home,” he offered before I was ready to detach from him. Already pulling away, I felt the absence of his warmth instantly against the summer night without a jacket over my dress.

Taking my hand, I let him drag me behind him towards his truck, the monstrous thing it was.

“You're scared to let me drop you off because if he sees, it'll be hell to pay?” He opened the door and forced me back into hiding behind it. His body collided with mine and his hands on my waist felt like they belonged there.

Shaking my head back and forth, I tried to avoid deciding if that was true.

Burton would not wait for me to confirm, instead his head dipped low enough to hover over my own mouth. “I'm the hell you're already paying. Me.”

His hand drifted down my body, cupping my ass, and pressing against me enough to feel how hard the chase made him. Not any chase, chasing me, the one person who made him fight for it.

“Then why doesn’t it feel like hell?”

“Wait for it...” he whispered before his lips caught mine and pulled away only enough to speak in a low voice. “It always hurts eventually.”

Letting his mouth cover mine, I pried open my lips and broke every moral I had left when my tongue wrestled with Burton’s. He was right; he did hurt but not enough to make me stop.

His arms tensed when I felt him lift me up, placing me on the cool leather seat with the door being our only shield from onlookers. Burton’s hands got lost under my dress, pushing the material up my legs and my breath hitched into soft moans.

“Burton,” I gasped at his touch when his fingers hooked into my panties.

His lips covered mine, silencing any doubt I had, and he knew it.

Dragging my panties down far enough to feel bound, I was trapped when he climbed inside the truck, body pinning me down and my underwear embarrassingly wet. I was wet without Burton trying. I was wet by the wrong guy, the wrong evil, and the wrong monster.

“Burton. Wait, just wait...” My voice shook along with my hands and legs, trying to grasp any poise I had left. “We can’t do this. I can’t...”

Pushing up on his hands, he looked down at me like I had hurt him in the worst way, more than ever before. “Jameson finally told you, didn’t he? Finally found the one guy you can actually replace me with.”

I must have looked at him confused when the tension seemed to drain from his body when he sat back against the bench seat. Dropping my legs on top of his, I tried not to let that temperament get the best of me that he was bringing up Jameson.

“He always loved to play the fucking angel.”

Slipping down the bench seat, forgoing the posture he was expected to keep, I sat back against the door, giving our bodies space in case I didn't like what was coming.

“No dramatics. I know you guys hate each other. I just never understood why he didn't even go to our school.”

Glaring at me without twisting himself in my direction I felt stop it stop.my heart. “You always hate the person most like you. It's a black mirror, a dark reflection and the hardest pill to swallow.”

I pulled my knees into a hug and crossed my ankles to cover my exposed pussy waiting for more.

Driving a hand through his hair, messing it up and disrupting the perfect strands combed back, I admired him more this way. Messy. Real. Unapologetic. More than the vicious cruelty he hid behind.

“His dad is the Sweetheart Killer.”

I felt my jaw relax as the words landed between us. Jameson was parentless but by choice.

His dad was the infamous Sweetheart Killer from the 90s. I was too young to follow along with the case, but I knew more about it than the average person did. Therapist turned murderer when he killed all the nurses supposed to take care of his blind wife.

All I knew was that his father was sitting on a life sentence with no option for parole.

“Don't look so shocked, baby. You have a type and it's stained with blood.”

I didn't move an inch and forced myself to take shallow breaths to keep breathing. I was in love with the guy who put a pillow over his own father's face and slept with Jameson sporting DNA darker than I knew.

“That doesn't make him like you.” My tone was as defensive as I felt.

Burton laughed maniacally, letting all control fade when his hand slapped the top of his own thigh. “Oh, baby girl. You

really don't know you're sleeping with the devil.”

“And what does that make you, Burton?” I asked him, already knowing what that made him when his hands pressed into the leather, stalking toward me until his hands wrapped around my ankles. Jerking my legs forward, he wedged himself between my legs.

“You're a monster.”

His face was so close to mine I felt my heavy breath flirt with his mouth when his lips collided with mine. At first, his kiss was soft, gentle even, but that quickly grew into the hunger we both had for each other.

We both craved the destruction only we could provide.

Opening my mouth, I felt his body hover over mine even more, his hands pressing into the door around me, and the distinct outline of his cock straining to get free.

“Burton,” I whimpered when his mouth kissed down my neck and his hips dug into mine in this needy way.

“Don't tell me to stop. You forced me to watch him touch you.”

I couldn't help but swallow hard enough to hear it in my eardrums. My arms were wrapped around his neck, keeping him close, when his hands moved to unzip his pants once more. “I'm not going to stop, and you aren't going to tell me no. I don't care what that makes me, Mira.”

I was withholding consent. I was writhing under him and holding my breath, hoping it would somehow help.

My panties were on the seat, abandoned, soaking wet and a trophy of my betrayal when I knew I was with Jameson.

Focusing on my panties, I felt my hips bucked against Burton's tip bullying my clit. I was desperate to feel him hurt me the way I knew it would when I left his truck and returned to life as we knew it.

“Don't go silent on me, Mira.” His face against mine, I felt his jaw move while he whispered around a grunt as he filled me. “It already hurts, just make it worse.”

I didn't know what to say when his hips thrust into mine. The door handle was imprinting my lower back, and I was so wet I could feel myself staining his leather under me. So, I did what I knew how to do... lie.

"I-I don't love you..." I felt tears well up in my eyes and my focus on my panties blurred into a smear of colors.

That didn't stop Burton when his thrusts only became more brutal and punishing. "I don't need you to love me, baby. I need you to keep reminding me that I'm a monster."

I was lying through my teeth; he needed me to condemn him from love to confirm the loneliness.

Every inch of him stretched me, forcing me to accommodate him, while my legs tangled around his. Greedily taking more space than I had, I felt the pressure mount as my pussy grew even wetter, dripping down my own ass.

I didn't want to think of Jameson as my eyes threatened to leak, but we were both chasing the pain in this.

Sex wasn't like this with him. It was almost controlled where I didn't understand what he wanted, so most of the time I ended up lying there like a stranger, and when it was over? It always felt like a one-night stand.

I figured we needed time to explore each other's likes and dislikes but even now he was hard to read.

Burton's hand unlatched from the car door and found my throat. Holding my head against the window, I felt the cold through my hair and realized his truck windows were all fogged up, enough to not see the outside world anymore.

"Stop thinking about him," he ordered.

"I said I don't love you." I nearly gritted my teeth while pushing the words out.

Angrily, his face was on top of mine, his eyes such a dark emerald you could see the flecks of gold shine through easier. "I didn't ask you to fucking love me, Mira. I told you to stop thinking about him with my cock buried inside you."

Caught on a moan, I tripped on my words. "I-I'm not..."

Burton's hand closed around my throat so tightly I almost wished that I could die at his hands instead of some unknown reason when I'm older. With my legs open, pussy wrapped around him and his hand on my throat kept me quiet.

"Don't lie to me, baby. We can do a lot of things to each other, but that's not one of them."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BURTON

Mira's legs were wrapped around me so tightly you would have thought I belonged between her long legs, yet I could see his name stamped across her face.

She was already basking in the pain when the pleasure wasn't over.

Letting my mouth close around her pebbled nipple neatly pushing against the fabric of her dress, I bit down hard enough to make her yell. I could feel her body jolt under me, and it only spurred me on.

Mira tasted like a bad idea with all the good intentions. Even through the fabric.

I could feel her pussy hug even tighter around every inch while I jerked against the newly imposed constraint, wanting to spill all of my good parts into her. Mira had a way of wanting me to be better, but I knew I didn't deserve it.

Rather than letting go of the pain, I forced her to keep hurting me.

Peppering her neck with sloppy kisses, I kept thrusting, picking up the pace and grinding my hips into her thighs until my body tensed unnaturally. Stilling my body, I felt Mira unravel under me when I dropped my hold on her neck. Letting my arm wrap around her waist, I lifted her hips, sitting back on my heels and my hips moving agonizingly slow through her orgasm.

"Say it, baby. Say it to me. Let me come inside you." My voice seemed to beg the way I never did.

I wanted to empty myself inside her and watch our orgasms drip out together like nothing Jameson did would erase this. Mira was mine despite anything else. Mine to destroy and hurt so no one would want her.

Mine.

Shaking, I barely heard her whisper when she whimpered into the crook of my neck still riding the high of me. “Come inside me. I need it.”

That was all I needed when the last jerk of my cock forced my body to stop moving. Every inch of me felt like I was burning alive, being absolved and too sensitive to touch. Letting my head fall, I held onto her hips. I used both hands to make sure all of me was spilling between her legs the way I wanted.

She knew I loved her without saying it. She knew I loved her without validation and that was the scariest part — it stood on its own, with or without me, my heart was in her hands.

“Crush it, baby. Crush my heart the way you want right now.” The high of me was wearing off and shame was rolling over her muscles that were trying to tense all over again. “I’m the monster who made you cheat on Jameson. It’s okay, baby, I’m your monster to blame.”

Her hands pushed against my chest hard enough to force me to regain my balance when I was shoved by the warmth of her body.

Snorting to myself, I let the grin she hated work over my mouth, waiting for the invisible cut, the fresh new wound I would make a cut for later when I hated myself enough to pick up a straight blade.

I always hated myself. It was almost charming now, if anyone knew.

“I fucking hate you. I’m always going to be the fucking sharp edge you cut yourself with. I’m never going to be anything else.” Her voice cracked and broke in the middle. Her eyes welled up and I could almost feel the pain. It was so tangible.

“And I’m always going to be the better version of your sick little boyfriend. At least I have the balls to be the killer I know I am. I’m not just walking around pretending to be some angel.” Adjusting myself, I zipped my pants back up and

laughed to myself. “You two are a real match made in hell. Both pretend to be what you aren’t.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Mira was struggling to get her dress down and using her panties to clean up the mess we made between her thighs. Mentally made a reminder to snatch those up later.

Her face in disgusted torment as I entered her space. “Exactly how it sounds, baby. You pretend to be so innocent, but really, you’re dripping in sin... literally. You like hurting me, why is that?”

No one can enjoy inflicting pain and not be fucked up somehow.

Even perfect Mira.

With the address in hand, I slipped the napkin into her hand from my back pocket. “If you’re brave enough to find out why, meet me there tomorrow at midnight.”

She crumpled it up in her hand, glaring at me before twisting enough to jerk at the door handle enough to pry it open.=I was distracted by the alarm blaring off with me still behind the wheel when the entire restaurant filled with judgment on the other side of the large windows.

Scrambling for my keys, I silenced the sound, and Mira vanished. There was no point in running after her now. I got the cut I was looking for and she got to pretend everything was all right.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MIRA

Burton Draven would never be anything but the bane of my existence, created for me to suffer at the hands of him.

I was never meant to be anything but his masochist.

Walking back to Jameson's felt like a well-deserved punishment when my feet ached from the heels, and I had to hug myself to stay warm. When I finally used the spare key Jameson had given me, it felt tarnished as I stood in the hallway, unsure if I should knock since I had barged through the first line of defense, the keypad demanding access.

As I was about to knock, the door swung open and Jameson Kendrick was standing in front of me, dressed up the way he always was. It seemed like he was trying to please everyone else with his three-piece suit and briefcase.

Immediately smoothing down my dress with my palms and trying to fix my hair, I knew I had looked like a victim of something.

Nothing but poor judgment and letting a monster defile me.

To Jameson, I looked like a victim and that felt better than the truth. He didn't deserve the heartbreak over someone I would never be with.

Avoiding saying anything, I simply let him help me into the bath. I let his arms wrap around me and the warm water soothe all the cuts he left on my body emotionally.

I felt like an open wound full of guilt and shame. I wanted to crawl into myself and let the world forget me, no longer a Draven by proxy or Eckland by birth.

Just no one.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MIRA

Things returned to normal even though I wasn't ready for them to. I was a background character in the play of my life, catatonically moving through my classes and on autopilot at the diner.

The whole night, Holmes had been fiddling with some invites in-between waiting for orders.

I pretended not to care someone had taken pity on her the way I wouldn't let people with me. I knew we were outcasts, stuck working in this diner and serving the ones who helped get us here.

The brutes who played sports and spoke to women like we were therapy for their dicks, only with the talking. Their version of therapy was deep throating and pretending not to have mommy issues.

Carefully working around the note, I read it, an invitation to some networking mixer. Unimpressed, I let myself mock it silently in my head until I read the address.

It knocked the wind out of me.

I knew the address, everyone did. The abandoned mansion tugged behind the mile-long driveway was an eyesore as much as it was a reminder of the pain of Burton's deeply disturbed friend — Vane Wolfgang.

He was infamous for all the wrong reasons: a mouth that seemed to leave people desolate, breaking the rules enough to be guilty before trial, and his mom's slow death to cancer didn't help him reform any.

Vane Wolfgang was famous for all the wrong reasons and Holmes didn't even realize that was his house.

I forced myself to not say anything, letting people make their own mistakes. The last time I tried to stop someone from

making irredeemable mistakes, I ended up crushing Xanax into her drink and dragging her home unwillingly.

Refusing to become as infamous as Vane, I continued filling the napkins silently.

Holmes almost always needed to fill the silence; it was like the negative noise in her head would get too loud if she didn't snuff it out. "Why aren't you going again? You have the perfect GPA."

"Not into human sacrifice," I quipped, while grabbing the rag hanging from my apron to wipe down the wet rings.

It was our last shift; we were on the verge of graduating and the new hires were tripping under our feet waiting for us to leave. They were eager to make their mark on campus and this was the easiest way. The diner was the hub of everything, secrets and lies.

Working here gave you the insider's edition, wanted or not. I knew secrets I didn't ask for.

"It's not going to be like that. It's going to be cocktails, little appetizers, CEO types trying to recruit us. I need my foot in the door with another publishing house ASAP..." Holmes was desperate to find somewhere she belonged, even if it was the first invite.

Lying, I told her I had received one too. Technically, I did, but my message was more verbal, and the napkin sported Burton's signature with the same address. It wasn't difficult to guess that Thatcher must have invited someone too.

The only girl I knew about was Gigi, the quiet artist who wore overalls in high school and sat alone at lunch because everyone assumed she was a narc. Trinity's finest: the police and her brother were aspiring to follow in their father's footsteps.

Trouble stalked Thatcher, making it clear why they couldn't work together.

The Unholy Trinity didn't pick who they loved that much, and it was clear growing up around them. They were our first

victims, falling prey to the unhinged love only the wretched could provide.

We were the true villains in this story.

Unapologetically taking their hearts and refusing to give them back.

“Mira?” Holmes’s hip swung into mine, trying to shake the seriousness from my face as I got lost in my own thoughts.

Ordering us two strawberry milkshakes became a ritual, our own bad girls club ritual.

Leaning against the countertop, I took a big inhale, holding it in my chest and letting it hurt before I exhaled. Once I realized how similar we were, loving our destitute men, I let the words inside my head actually come out. “I don’t want any ties to Trinity, and I’m not gonna owe anyone for my success. I’m gonna make it on my own even after Burton blackballed me.”

“Blackballed you?” Her eyes widened as if she had heard a juicy secret.

“Every club, every society, every award, every kind of accolade you could get. I’m graduating here with nothing but my GPA. I’m nobody because Burton made sure I stayed that way. Overlooked. A stray dog searching for his next meal.”

Holmes was never going to guess the ways Burton had ruined my life so I let her mull over it over. “That invitation honestly means nothing to me. Even if it is real, I don’t need to be the joke in the room.”

It was real and the Unholy Trinity was behind whatever it was. That meant nothing good would come out of that mixer.

Maybe they finally realized they all had someone to blame for the hole in their chest closing up.

Maybe they finally unburdened themselves of us.

Maybe the bad girls club would be over before we even got to have our first meeting.

Not staying close to Holmes, I tucked my apron under the counter in the cardboard box full of extras. With a last glance around the place, my eyes stopped on the corner booth in the back, always empty, only ever occupied by them.

A small smile threatened to unfold on my face when I leaned back into the swinging door and mentally said goodbye to my jail cell Burton put me in.

As I stood in the parking lot, searching for my keys, I noticed the fading light from one streetlamp that was glowing with a warm yellow hue. It was on the verge of not illuminating anything when I finally found my keys. I pressed the unlock button and the lights flickered on enough to see a figure appear in front of me.

Tensing up, I could feel my shoulders kissing my earlobes and my spine so stacked it felt immobile. My hands flew up as I held my keys like a knife when the fear subsided enough to reveal Burton.

“I could have killed you!”

Burton’s throaty laugh came from the bottom of me and cascaded until his knuckles muffled his mouth. “You? You wouldn’t hurt anyone... but me... unless I asked.”

Coming closer, I held out my hands, shoving into him, but he did not move. Not even a gentle sway to his equilibrium. “Haven’t you done enough to me? I don’t need a murder charge added to the list.”

Forcing my arms to fold, his chest bullied me to put them down so he could get closer. “It’s never going to be enough. Not until Jameson can taste me on you. He’s the last thing standing in our way.”

“Our way?” I scoffed at the words like an insult.

“Tell me he ate that pussy after I was done with you. Tell me he liked the way we tasted between these legs. You’re the perfect poison for my enemy, Mira.” His voice was a brawny whisper when his hand dropped down to graze my exposed legs in my jean shorts.

The heatwave was still going strong and yet I regretted wearing shorts now.

“That’s what I am to you? Bait for your enemy?” I felt life drain from my face, replaced by hot anger.

I was fucking bait between two monsters trying to prove who had the worst bite.

His hands tried to reach for my waist when I took a big step back. “You think you’re bait? I came inside you and you think you’re bait?”

I didn’t expect my eyes to well up when I lost focus of his figure and all the cut edges he was made of. I wanted to push him away, so far away I didn’t have to run. I didn’t want to run away when I finally had reasons to stay put, with Jameson on the edge of being my own adult.

“Is that why you did that? Some sick, twisted way of getting over on your enemy?”

His voice rose, to match mine without me realizing it until I heard him. “You’re a weapon, Mira, for everyone! No one can survive you. You destroy everyone around you and watch us suffer while you go untouched. Isn’t that right, baby? Tell me you feel bad for fucking me. Tell me I’m wrong.” He paused dramatically like I would have had an answer when I didn’t. “And you think you’re fucking bait? You’re a well thought-out fucking cause of death.”

My voice rattled and my lips trembled. “Fuck you, Burton.”

“You already did, babe.” Puckering his lips, he kissed the air in a snide way. “Get in the damn car before I drag you.”

Hot streams of tears rolled down my face and down my neck when I felt my ability to breathe become harder. I felt exhausted and useless, both colliding until my bones ached to rest. Giving in to Burton, I rushed to his truck, yanking the door open and slamming it shut before he could even make it to the driver’s side.

I thought he was to blame for my entire existence. Burton Draven, the tormentor, the monster, but now I saw it for what

it was. I was a well-planned cause of death.

Maybe my parents saw it too. Maybe I pushed them away as I controlled everyone else around me. Maybe I was high off the control, high enough to believe that I could determine exactly how they hurt me.

I was as self-inflicting as Burton was.

Only instead of blades, I was using people.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BURTON

I was a monster, there was no doubt about that, but Mira was a black widow.

Those black widows had ways to lure you in, ways to make you ignore the warning signs until it was too late.

We couldn't have been more right for each other.

Tonight was the night we had been planning since high school. We got our hands dirty and then put ourselves on ice. Well, that was what we agreed to, and I tried my hardest to be a team player. I worked better alone, and the desire to own their death without sharing became a form of addiction.

One I wasn't willing to give up.

Not for anyone.

Not even my black widow.

Sitting behind the wheel, I looked over at Mira, watching her cry softly while staring out the window. It broke a piece of me, but it was a truth she needed to hear, another step closer to being what she already was — mine.

I needed to annihilate everything holding us back: my last name, Jameson, being here on campus where I forced her into isolation, and my sister's addiction reminding her of failure. Burning the world down around us wasn't an option but killing everything stopping us from being together was.

"Vanes, right? The old, abandoned mansion? I saw Holmes's fancy invite." Mira didn't even bother to look at me and it almost felt as painful as a fresh cut.

"They have scores to settle. I don't. I'm killing two birds with one stone. You deserve to know the truth. My truth."

That's what tonight was for me, harsh truths. The kind backed up with fists to my sister's drug dealing boyfriend's face. This was for robbing her of a fairytale but more

importantly, it was a way to tell Mira the truth we had danced around for years.

She saw me the night. The same night I pushed the pillow into my father's face until he tensed so much he stopped moving. Until the struggling stopped and only his leg twitched and I could feel him fading. Mira saw me and kept it a secret; she had earned the right to know exactly who I was.

"I already know the truth: you killed your dad. I saw you. I don't need more truth."

"That's not the whole truth, Mira."

I let my foot press down on the gas, going through backroads at ninety and still not getting her attention. Black widows had no reason to fear anything. "My father had a few drinks that night, smoking his cigar, making jokes about how you weren't his daughter... I could fucking smell the hunger in him. Talking about how tight your pussy must be, how no one would have to know, he could just sneak up to your room and take what he was owed for taking you in."

Her head twisted; eyes fixed on the shifter, and her mouth fell open at the confession.

I learned to live with the punishment and ruthlessness of my father. I grew up enough to threaten him right back and invite him to fight me. I had no intentions of killing him until he undermined every single way I was working up the strength to be vulnerable with Mira.

Protecting her became a priority.

"Burton..." Shaking her head back and forth like she was trying to wrap her mind around it, she added no other words to my name.

"No need to thank me for saving you. That night, I met the monster because of you. That was the night I decided I couldn't love you, so I loved violence instead."

Pulling onto the dirt road not even a few miles from the diner the pebbles seemed to crunch like bones breaking did under my tires. This was our playground tonight, the

abandoned house that only the brave used as a spot to hook up. We didn't plan to leave any evidence anyway.

Pulling off the road, the grass slowed me down almost instantly, barely only creeping now. Switching my headlights off, I peered up toward the house to see Vane's muscle car finished with chrome details parked next to the fountain.

Vane was hellbent on getting revenge.

Thatcher was hiding in the woods behind the mansion where the big shed was. All the discarded items lived there. I could see why it felt like home.

Getting out of the car, I slammed the door shut and heard his cries drown out in the wide-open space. I didn't even need the bandana crumpled up in his mouth. No one could hear him out here.

Rounding the tree, I found him exactly where I left him, tied up and sweating through a detox he didn't ask for. I snatched Emma's boyfriend from the local bar after he had enough drinks to not see straight. I was sure he was mixing his own substance when he passed in my backseat, thinking I was his ride home.

It was easy getting him out here and letting him sober up enough for the beating to hurt the way I wanted.

There was no relief coursing through his body now. He had been tied up out here for three days without food and water, on the verge of death, and in need of a little push.

Mira slipped out of the truck, rounding it, and immediately jumped back when she saw him begging at my feet. "Burton, what are you doing?"

Tilting my head, I found Mira's eyes in the dark, full of worry instead of fear. "What needs to be done."

Slowly eating the space between us, her hand still on the bed of my truck, she moved closer. Still a safe distance away, she nearly whispered like someone might overhear, "You can't do this. It's fucking murder, Burton. Murder."

His victim was still begging while his eyes were flooded with emotions when Burton paused. “And I’m a murder, baby.”

When she watched, her worry turned into disappointment quickly, and her eyes fell to the ground. Letting the summer night swallow her whole and letting the moonlight highlight her chest. Her long, smooth legs seemed to go on forever in those cut-off shorts.

Her hair parted in the middle was so severe it felt dangerous. Her perky tits felt inviting without a bra under her tank top that dipped just low enough for you to see cleavage.

I watched sweat glisten along her collarbones when I pushed him back with my boot, shoving him against the large tree behind him. “Shut the fuck up. I can’t think with all your whining.”

No, I couldn’t think with Mira watching.

“What if you get caught?” Mira came to life when she stood up taller, taking a few more steps toward me and not flinching.

My stupid grin took over my face as I stood there thinking about how my monster wanted to hurt him when she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me. “We both agree he deserves this, but we can’t get caught.”

Squatting down, I cut the zip ties with a pocket knife, snipping at his skin with no care at all when the frantic energy emanated from his scared, frail body. His eyes darted around for an escape when we stood in a field with grass that tickled your legs from not being mowed.

Pulling the gag out first, he rushed to undo the ties around his ankle. I pushed him back, cutting it off and standing up like I was simply letting him go. I liked the chase too much to let him be an easy kill.

“Burton. He’s about to run.” Sidestepping me, she tried to reach for him when I grabbed at the back of her arm, holding her back from succeeding.

“Let him go. I don’t kill because it’s easy, Mira. I kill because it takes patience, commitment, and you can’t cut corners. It’s all or nothing.” My sister’s boyfriend had nowhere to go. He could make it to the house, but I would not let it happen.

Fingering the latch, the bed of my truck dropped down, displaying bats and rifles. I hadn’t chosen a method, not like Vane had, but I trusted my bat. My whole life, I played baseball, and now my bat was a cross I had to bear, the only thing normal about me in a pile of grotesque.

Letting the bat drop to my side before I tossed it over my shoulder, I kept my eyes on him, tracking his chaotic movements. Who knew how long he had been high, probably most of his life, and now he was trying to figure out how to do anything sober.

Leaving Mira there, next to my truck, I chased him until I tackled him to the ground. Dropping my bat beside us, I held his throat down, crushing him and watching him claw at my arms to get free.

My knuckles ached and cracked under the force of hitting him.

The blood seemed to dry almost instantly on my hot skin when his face was nearly caved in. I could still hear him wheezing, struggling to live even though he didn’t deserve to.

Holding back, I let him get a few hits in, let him pick up my heavy metal bat and strike me. I liked the pain, the fight, the chase. I ate it whole and fed it to my monster.

I could hear the grass across her legs when she whisper-shouted my name, looking for us in the dark. Raising my hand, I relaxed into his punishment, absorbing every hit, when Mira got close enough to gasp.

Pushing him off me, he quickly recovered, wrapping his arm around my neck and choking me enough to silence me.

Mira was covered in panic when she rushed to get her phone from her back pocket. I tried to shake my head, tried to

tell her that's how you get caught, tried to derail her from pressing those three numbers that could ruin us.

9-1-1.

She saw him winning instead of me asking for it the way I was. Mira was still trying to save me, and it might cost us a lot more than our lives.

“This is 911. What is your emergency?”

His arm around my neck formed a perfect chokehold when the distraction let him gain the upper hand enough to make me worry like she did. Watching her stare at me while mouthing a silent apology before kneeling down just enough to steal my keys to my truck. Mira planned to steal my truck while she panicked to report someone trying to kill me,

She was dangerous in more ways than I knew.

Emma's boyfriend wasn't concerned about her. He only wanted revenge on me for forcing him to get sober.

They always say the first step is admitting the problem. Clearly, he wasn't ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MIRA

Trials

I always thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was saving him — again — only this time, I had sealed his fate.

So much that I couldn't even bring myself to show up to court, sit in those pews and listen to the defense destroy Burton. Despite all the money and power his family had, the entire town was discussing how they were about to receive what they deserved.

Most people were shouting for the death penalty online.

Usually, people would spray paint, use toilet paper, or break eggs to show where their loyalty lay, but not with them.

I kept my mouth shut and used my real last name — Eckland — for the first time since Burton's family took me in. I went into hiding like I was guilty. Wasn't I, though? I was ready to kill the guy who got Emma hooked on drugs without blinking an eye. I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Burton while he collected spit in his mouth and spat on him.

I was as guilty as Burton. Only I fled before the handcuffs came out.

After that night, we exchanged exactly three text messages for the whole year. I didn't want to be the distraction; I didn't want my name splashed across headlines as an accomplice and I sure as hell wasn't going by Draven for similar reasons.

As I walked into a local bar filled with soft leathers, dark woods, and sensual lighting, I hoped to forget that today was the trial. I wanted to block myself in, put blinders on, and hear nothing even though that was impossible.

I could hear the small TV hanging over the bar covering the trail as I leaned over the bar top, letting it pull me in. The

whole country was waiting for the verdict with bated fucking breath while I hoped they locked them all up.

I called the cops and that alone was enough to earn me a spot in their victims' list.

I had nothing on my list of things to do after finally escaping the glowing endorsement the Draven name gave me. It wasn't even mine, but I stood in the warmth for years, letting it keep me unaccountable.

Now I was interning for an architect I admired. All the ways I grew up seemed impossible to defend when I would be the reason the Unholy Trinity ended up behind bars.

The bartender finally paid attention when he took my order of two vodka sodas. Letting myself pay attention for only a minute, I bit my lip, nibbling at it, while the reporter left my heart beating in my ears.

“Thatcher Throne, mastermind behind the Trinity attempted murder resulting in three injured, has been sentenced to prison.”

My heart fell to the pit of my stomach, leaving my chest unbearably empty and my hands shaking.

“Burton Draven, son of Senator Draven, will be required to do a year's probation. Vane Wolfgang will suffer the same fate as his friend. More news to come as the fallout of their victims comes to light.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket of my jeans, sending a message straight to my ass when I begrudgingly yanked it out and read the name I was avoiding.

Burton Draven.

Burton: Meet me outside. Now. Come alone.

Without even touching the letters on the touch screen, I looked around me wondering if Jameson was fucking with me or if I was so drunk I imagined it. The two drinks were for Jameson who was supposed to be here by now.

Recently, being late has become normal, sending my brain into a frenzy compared to the controlled version I knew better.

Lately he had been keeping work a secret, dragging himself to bed after I had committed myself to my pillow, and asking questions? He would pretend not to hear them until I picked a fight but even then, the answers were tangled in ways to calm me down.

All of them big fucking lies.

I couldn't say anything because my ugly truth was still buried deep enough to cause trauma.

The truth meant I had to come clean too and I wasn't ready to.

Dropping a twenty-dollar bill on the bar top, I made my way to the door, carefully pushing it open. I peered around the edges trying to see bad news coming when a hooded figure pinched the back of my arm.

Dragging me down the alleyway, into the darkness, I held my breath wondering what kind of trap it was.

Pushing me against the cold bricks, my chest deflating and coming alive again so quickly it felt like punishment enough. The hooded figure stood tall, and his muscles contoured in the designer brand hoodie that I knew had to belong to Burton.

The whole world hated him for wearing Versace to his trial and not showing an ounce of sympathy while they paid their lawyers to do nothing about it.

It was almost too much trouble for them to argue their case when they mostly stayed silent while chipping away at the other side.

Lifting his head, I unclenched my fists when I saw those emerald eyes piercing down to the soft parts of me, stabbing me like it was only bad timing.

“What are you doing here?”

“I'm a free man, didn't you hear? No thanks to you.” His voice was cold and thick, no room for argument, even though I didn't have one.

I was guilty in the worst ways.

“Calling the cops, Mira? I had him. I didn’t need you to help me that way.”

Letting my tongue swipe over my dry lips, I felt it get stuck against my own coarseness. “He was hurting you. You needed help. What did you expect me to do, Burton?”

“To pick up the bat, Mira. Anything but what you did.”

“You really think killing him is the answer?” I asked, knowing all too well that I had decided that it was. He was a bad person, he deserved to die, and I made it that simple.

“As much as you killed all the Draven inside you to become a nobody, isn’t that right, Eckland?” The harshness of his voice seemed to explode all over me when his hands pressed against the wall behind me. I was suddenly caged in.

I could smell his intoxicating cologne and the way his eyes shined in the dark, a beacon for me to come back.

I avoided making eye contact altogether.

Those emeralds were everything toxic and malicious that could break a heart. The worst part? He knew it.

He knew exactly how to let his eyes soften, exactly how to let his head drop, but his eyes would become predatory. His jaw would tense just enough to make his cheekbones feel dangerous.

Burton was a predator; he was a cold-blooded killer with no remorse.

But I wasn’t prey.

Caged between his arms, I felt out of control, the one thing I hated when I pushed my hands against his chest and tried to move someone made of stone.

“I can’t just kill someone. I’m not like you.” My voice whispered yet it felt like a scream.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both. Both, Burton.”

That smirk ran wild across his face, spreading like a flood, when he responded. “You can pretend all you want, baby. I saw you that night — not a single ounce of fear. You wanted to hurt him just as much as I did, you just didn’t want to suffer the consequences. You better hope no one finds out that you’re the cop caller.”

He didn’t have to expand; my mind was creating worst-case scenarios like that night I acted without thinking when I pushed someone down the stairs.

I wanted all the thrills without any of the risk.

“You’re the only one who knows,” I snapped back, lifting my chin and challenging him the way no one else dared to.

His lips colliding with my neck sparked a heat that traveled down my body as his head dipped and his body closed in on mine. “And you better hope I don’t tell either.”

He was threatening the life that took me a year to build after that night, a life I was proud of and one no one helped me achieve.

Twisting my gaze, I stared at him like he was the one person I could hate on this earth, and it would change nothing. “Or what?”

His lips found the shell of my ear, moving just enough to tickle when he spoke. “Or I’m going to make sure Jameson knows exactly who you are. Not an Eckland or Draven, but the sad little girl who summoned a monster and didn’t care how much I violated you.”

That was the only threat that wiped the smug expression off my face.

Jameson.

“We’ve told each other everything. He even knows about you and your monster.”

Lie.

Another lie.

Still close enough to make my mouth water, I tried to make my voice cut deep enough to remember who made the imperfect line on his inner thigh, because we were imperfect.

“Too bad he doesn’t know I’m the person you think about while he’s fucking you.” His voice deafened me, still me, had me holding my breath at the truth I never dared to speak out loud.

It wasn’t that I was thinking about Burton, but rather torture. This was supposed to be relief. How much pain was never a part of the animalistic sex Jameson required but it made me think I was broken, too broken for him for wanting something he couldn’t give me.

Maybe broken people are only meant to be with broken people.

Maybe I was the girl who summoned a monster and couldn’t take it back.

Maybe I was the bitch about to break Jameson’s heart because it wasn’t the right shade of black.

Burton Draven had been a permanent stain on my life and those days were over. I had doused myself in bleach and no number of threats changed that — I was determined to send Burton back to hell without so much as a kiss goodbye.

“Fuck you. You think you can show up after three text messages over a year and demand I throw away my life because you’ve been deemed innocent?”

When he pushed himself back enough to look me in the eye, I watched his casual demeanor turn demonic like a switch flipped behind his eyes. “You tried to forget how much you’re a Draven, just like me. You wanted to start over with Jameson, the poor man’s version of me. You want all of the heartache without the heartbreak. I’m never going to promise not to hurt you.”

I looked at him like he had broken every promise he had given me to keep me safe and to never break my heart even though he never made those promises. I made them up in my head when I refused to believe he was as bad as I knew.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and waited for him to continue when his eyes filled to the brim with unthread tears. I had never seen Burton cry. “I can’t promise never to hurt you. We’re going to hurt each other because that’s how survivors keep surviving, inflicting pain before anyone else can. I can promise you I’m not going anywhere. I can promise you it won’t be boring. I can promise you that secrets won’t exist. I’m a monster, but I’m also the guy that loves you, Mira.”

Burton Draven didn’t recognize weaknesses. He didn’t willingly give you his love and he sure as hell didn’t cry with anyone watching.

My lips felt dry enough to never move again when I looked at him, the confession wedged between us, and my heart beating so slowly I couldn’t mistake it for butterflies. It was a sense of calm only he gave me.

His hands dropped from the wall, his palms smoothing down my ass and pulling me into his body.

Having to choose between my new life and the one I wanted to live felt impossible. Survivors inflicted pain before the other person. This would be our life together, a well-executed game of chess.

A war.

Seven minutes in heaven but a lifetime of hell to pay.

Whimpering through the tears I didn’t realize were falling from my own lashes, I felt the hot thick tear trail down my skin. “I-I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Pushing past him, I left him there in the alleyway before I could see his heartbreak, and I ran the way I always did.

I tried to save him, but now I hate him because no one could understand the dark parts of us that bled into our everyday lives.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MIRA

It had been six agonizing years since that night in the alleyway with Mira. The truth of our conversation weighed on my life in a paralyzing way that kept me stagnant.

Not actually but emotionally I was still standing in that field, looking up at someone who I trusted calling the cops.

She knew it wasn't going to help, it wasn't going to save me or rescue my victim of that night — it was only damning me back to hell.

Or until that gavel collided with that old oak wood platform and declared me innocent by some judge.

Now I could make her existence hell for trying to send me back.

I knew my mother, my sister and all the family dinners I was avoiding eventually came up. As her son who had held up the family name the way she wanted, I was bound to be my mother's pride.

I was hurting Mira in these micro-cuts with the rumors, headlines, and bullshit telephone games. I was playing 162 games a year, rehabbing an image I didn't care was broken by fucking new women every night. After spending enough money to prove I was above the letter of the law, I became known as the most unattainable bachelor in the city.

It made it hard to ignore me.

It was the form of payback I preferred while she lived her modest life.

The woman next to me remained nameless, arranged the same way all my hookups were, through some agency for the rich. They would take my emails and make sure that escorts showed up when I needed them.

Willing, that was my only requirement.

Her hand crept up my thigh paired with a soft smile that let me know exactly how willing she was.

I had to grow more accustomed to less violent sex, not leaving a mark on their model faces and keeping mine hidden so they wouldn't ask any questions.

I had perfectly curated my image to be a rich, successful, professional baseball player, not a sob story for people to pity. I was a punching bag most of my childhood and I wasn't about to be something else for other people now.

"You'll know when I want you to touch me." I pushed her hand off my thigh and looked back at the red light. I was risking not turning green when my foot pushed down on the gas.

For a moment, I clamped my eyes and sped through the busy four-way. I slipped through everyone without so much as screaming or yelling from their windows.

Fuck.

Every time I was gambling with my life, somehow, I was always spared.

Always slipping through death's grip.

I was constantly looking for ways to die, and every time, I would be saved.

Someone wanted me to survive the heartbreak of Mira, something I never agreed to do.

Something I refused to survive simply because I was over-surviving unless it meant torturing Mira with my existence.

Her perfect manicure was digging into her palms as she clutched the door with a death grip and white knuckles. "Relax, I know what I'm doing."

It was true. I was an expert at walking that line between pain and pleasure, life and death, torture and relief. The Barbie doll next to me was shaken up, but she would live to see tomorrow.

Maybe now she won't assume it.

That's how I left most women, too afraid to be the same person they were before I got my hands on them.

Speeding through every light, I pulled up to the curb in an expensive car I didn't give a shit about. I was wearing a black button-down that only made me seem even more irresistible. The gold chain around my neck screamed profanity for me even with my World Series rings hanging from the thick chain.

Mira made me into the monster she described, down to the bones and up to the features that women found attractive.

Monster.

Predator.

Yet I was still the teenager who wished for more pain because at least I knew how to handle it.

Leaving my keys in the ignition, I rounded the car and opened the door for the woman whose name still escaped me.

Wrapping my arm around her back, I let my hand drop down her hip, keeping her close. "Remind me of your name."

"Ophelia."

Easy enough to remember yet I didn't want to commit it to memory unless it belonged to Mira.

"Just smile, nod, and don't offer your opinion. I'll make it worth it after dinner, sweetheart." My words erased the small smile that begged me to flirt back.

I could feel her soft curves stiffen, her back straightening, and all that sensual energy simply fading into nothing. This was when she realized I was turned on by something completely different. Her normal tricks wouldn't work on me.

"So... just look nice?" She glided forward, her fur coat hanging onto one shoulder and her long legs even more endless as she created some distance. Looking over her shoulder, I saw the twinkle in her eyes. "It's what I'm hired to do. Just tell me who we're making jealous, big boy."

My monster turned her on and it felt wrong.

I caught up to her long strides and stopped at the podium, throwing my arm around her neck. There, a hostess displayed so much cleavage I wondered why my mother chose this restaurant. Conservative, reserved, polished, and well-mannered didn't come to restaurants with dim lighting and private bathrooms that invited you to fuck between dinner and dessert.

I gave the hostess my last name trying to put a value on myself with her eyes dragging me down my body when I realized I was already deemed just enough out of reach for her to want me. Her head tilted just enough to silently tell me to meet her in the bathroom if I would risk it.

Showing us to the private room tucked in the back of the restaurant with all the ivy crawling the walls I knew the curved booth wrapped in a lush material was the reason my mother looked irritated. I could tell by the way she was sitting on the edge refusing to touch anything. She had her wrists and ankles crossed like it would give her a disease she didn't earn.

Ophelia, my paid plus-one, sat down all too quickly when I offered her my hand and forced her to stand up again. "Don't do anything I don't tell you to."

Shivers coursed down my spine at the control I had in my hands, paid in full.

Gaining a waiter's attention while he juggled a tray of drinks, I spoke loud enough for my mother to hear. I was still trying to win her approval, make Mommy happy when I had outgrown the expectations she had for me.

"Get us another table with chairs. My mom doesn't scoot." My voice was gruff and demanding in the way that got me what I wanted.

With so much fear in his eyes, he snapped into action, rushing to deliver the drinks and accommodate my request.

Not much time passed when an older gentleman in a suit appeared at my side, apologizing and ushering us to the balcony. My head was on a swivel trying to see Mira come through the door even though she had avoided family dinners

for years now. I had it on good authority that I was attending tonight which is the only reason I didn't blow it off myself.

My mother got up, interrupting me without a word of thanks. I was used to it, yet every time she overlooked me, I felt that same old anger bubble up inside of me.

Waste of time.

Again.

Following behind my mother, my sister bumped into me playfully, forcing me to break my hold on my date. "Your mask is slipping," she almost sang her words.

Emma was clean, but she was still using in different ways now. Rather than using drugs, she preferred a partner who abused her, someone who threw punches with their words and abused her badly enough to make her seem like someone in a drug-induced haze.

"Your bitch is showing."

She looked at me, pursing her lips and mocking my insult with a sizzling sound. "It's nice, isn't it? Just like old times."

Emma had overcome, her sass and wit coming back full force, making up for the absence.

Still not letting myself smile, I bit down on my grin and pulled out the seat next to my sister for my date, letting her be the buffer.

I didn't want to sit down; I didn't want to relax or shake off the nerves. I wanted to swallow them whole and watch them destroy me until Mira arrived and was forced to sit across from me.

Finally sitting down, I ignored the conversation and watched the only opening to the balcony with the door open and waiters pouring in and out, doting on us. Trying to dull the body ache, I ordered two neat vodkas with no ice or shit added to them.

It wasn't until I heard her voice that my spine seemed to straighten. My hand found my date's under the table, forcing

her hand to lay on my thigh the way I begrudged her for doing in the car. No one was looking then.

Coming alive, I let myself engage, adding my opinion to some mundane topic and trying my hardest not to look at Mira when she walked across the threshold. Peeking out of the corner of my eye, I saw her in the forest green dress, slit up to her thigh and boots that didn't match.

She was all soft until you saw the shiny Doc Martens reminding me exactly how tough she was.

Not taking my eyes off her, I let them follow her to the table. I could hear her swallowing down the lump in her throat before she sat down across from me. "Mira, long time, no see."

For the first time in years, I saw her look up at me and my heart stopped as I tried to accomplish everything on my own.

"Burton." She matched my friendliness without the history.

My mother sliced through the tension with a simple remark. "Will Jameson be joining us tonight?"

Jameson? Jameson Kendrick?

Suddenly, my sister was edging out Mira for earning tonight's punishment. Emma had neglected to tell me Jameson was still a staple in Mira's life like a cancer she couldn't kick.

Waiting for her answer, I watched her glance over at me before speaking. "No, he's working late tonight. He sends his apologies. I'll make sure to bring home some dessert."

Her fingers toyed with a piece of her hair and her tongue swiped along her lips in a taunting way.

Mira was rubbing it in that Jameson stuck after all these years and I was just the loser she left in the alleyway. I was the person who taught her to run and now I couldn't be mad about it.

All these years of torturing her in the distance only made the monster more desperate to get her back. Before I eventually got caught, before I trusted the wrong person, before killing wasn't enough to fill the hole she left.

“Not everyone can go pro. Guess that’s the benefit of failing to succeed — cake.”

Mira smiled at me and the whole table disappeared. The tension swelled and our eyes locked. “I don’t think he considers me a constellation prize for failing to go pro. Do you think I’m a second prize trophy?”

Her fingers let go of her hair and trailed down the low-cut dress, over her own breasts. Swallowing the lump in my throat that kept me from saying what I wanted to.

Remembering exactly how our passion used to manipulate pain itself. Something I missed now that I was renting my merchandise and refusing to own anyone.

“You like I rigged the game and still lost. How is it that I’m not going to prison, yet I feel like a slave for you?” The world faded away with Mira in front of me and the words came out as smoothly as I thought them. There was no hitch in my voice when I spoke the truth she wanted to avoid.

Pausing, letting herself absorb my words, she shook off the arousal of fighting with someone who she considered equal before turning toward my mother. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to use the ladies room.”

The weight of our history didn’t leave with her when she stood up and walked away from me for the last time.

I was determined to make it the last time Mira Eckland walked away from me and the last time she used the last name Eckland like a fucking insult.

“Sit down, Burton. Now.” My mother’s voice cascaded through the air like the command it was.

I wanted to stay rooted, I wanted to not give Mira the satisfaction, but I couldn’t. She was mine and we already wasted enough time pretending she wasn’t.

Pushing my chair out enough to scream against the floor, I stood, forcing my date to unlatch. Looking at my mother’s disapproval, I waited for the insult that always came next. Normally I watched safely from the sidelines as my sister took the abuse.

“Sit. Down. Mira doesn’t need to be tangled up in your schemes. You aren’t children anymore, Burton.”

Every muscle strained against the seams of my fitted dress shirt, threatening to rip the fabric altogether when I let my mother see my monster. My eyes dug into her perfect demeanor enough to leave her shifting in her seat.

“I have abided by your fucking rules my entire life and look where it got me. I’m still begging for your approval because Daddy hit too hard.” I pressed my hands, leaning into the table like a savage foaming at the mouth to say all the hurtful things I wanted to.

Her eyebrows dipped in the center, and her eyes widened, but none of her body language followed. She simply sat there, regal even, at the head of the table, waiting for me to be done with my tantrum.

“Burton Draven, you’ve embarrassed yourself enough. Sit down.”

“Order a few more drinks and we’ll see who’s embarrassing, Mom.” The word mom seemed to trigger her. Hell, sometimes it would sober her up enough to carry herself to bed, but most of the time, it was a trigger.

The word didn’t feel right because it meant she could love someone else without the demands and standards she continually put on us.

Even after I killed her husband, nothing changed. It didn’t save us, it condemned us. We had a new warden whom we called mom.

I saw her face turning scarlet red in anger and her lips pursed. Leaving her there with all those feelings, all too sober, I followed Mira inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BURTON

The bathrooms were exactly how I pictured, all the allure and all the mystery that invited you to sin. The music poured through loud enough to stomp out sane thoughts, any moral compass or ways you'd talk yourself out of misbehaving.

Trying to regain my composure, I stood there, outside the unisex bathroom, trying to play it all over in my head. Even though Mira never followed the rules of conversation, let alone any other rules.

She was determined to defy everything, even me.

Pushing the door open, I let my balance shake when I realized the door wasn't locked or even closed all the way. As soon as I walked into the bathroom that sported black countertops, black glitter filled walls and elegant gold fixtures, I saw Mira playing with her lashes.

"I'm finally happy."

She had grown, showing me exactly how much she could make it hurt without me asking.

I didn't stop ambling over to her until I was standing right behind her, watching her eyes stare at my reflection and cursing my name in her head. "You're content."

"If content means satisfied, then yes, I'm satisfied. More than you ever gave me." Dropping her hand down from pretending to fix anything wrong with her makeup, she leaned into her hands more, her honey-colored eyes begging me to stir all the hues together.

"I gave you the wildest orgasms of your life."

Finally letting my hands reach out, I grasped at her hips and let her ass brush against my crotch. Mira only made it worse by pushing back into me.

I felt like a teenager all over again, thrilled by the sense of touch alone.

Pressing my chest into her back, I felt her tense against me, yet her ass was painfully grinding into my crotch. We couldn't resist each other, our bodies reacting, yet the argument was growing around us.

"I cheated on Jameson with you! It was the biggest mistake of my life." Twisting around enough to face me, every muscle tense in her face.

My hands fingered the material of her dress up into my palms, fisting it until it was revealing her black panties. I didn't care what was haunting her as long as it was me.

Pressing my lips right below her ear, I whispered like it was a secret. "Cheated on him? No, baby girl, you cheated on me with him. I'm end game, not some cheap knock off."

"I fucking hate you. I couldn't ever be with someone like you," she snapped back.

Tugging at the sides of her panties, dragging them down her long legs enough to feel my cock jerk against the zipper in my dress pants. Not to get free, to get inside Mira before she hated me for another second.

"Someone like me or someone who lets you be you?" I asked, watching her body lean back into her hands before she jumped up on the counter with her panties acting like bindings. Tugging her panties all the way off, I tucked them into my back pocket, saving them for later when she remembered to hate me again. "Don't kid yourself, baby, you're as wicked as me. I saw how much you wanted to kill him."

Her body stopped fighting me, right along with her mouth when her back arched, and I fit between her legs like a lost puzzle piece.

Rushing to get my zipper down, I pushed my pants past my own ass. I let myself fall out between her legs, slapping her thigh into releasing that stifled whimper she was holding on to. She was practically shaking, waiting for me to fill up the void she knew was my fault.

Our bodies collided right along with our mouths when my tip needed no guidance in slipping inside her.

I had been dreaming of her body, memorizing each curve and sound she made for me. I wasn't letting myself forget one inch of her.

“Just say it, Mira, admit it.” I was already breathing heavily, trying to wring out the tension in my muscles while I took it slow, for her sake.

Her voice whispered against my neck, “Admit what, Burton? You have all my omissions already.”

Not the one I needed.

Not the one that made her guilty as I was.

Not the one wedged between us while she told herself she was a saint, and I was a monstrous mistake.

Our lips kept missing each other, full of friction instead, letting my chopping breath pour into her skin. “No, Mira, the one thing you refused to admit. You're just like me. You're just as fucked up.”

Her once relaxed body seemed to turn to stone with my demands.

Still thrusting between her legs, I felt every inch of me being crushed in the vise of her pussy, begging me to spill inside her. Her head fell back, trying to bite down the moans, when she spoke between whimpers. “I'm just as fucked up as you. Happy, Burton? You were able to corrupt me, after all, the exact way you threatened to.”

My hips became punishing, bruising her thighs with how hard I was driving myself inside her. Reaching a depth I had refused to touch because I could never take it back, I let my mouth nibble at her neck.

I could feel her whimpers mixed with the cry for mercy when I had none.

She was ruined when I found her, dropped on our doorstep and an orphan my mother needed to slap Draven on. Now she was comfortable blaming me for the descent down to hell.

I was the villain in her story, the big bad monster, and she was simply the innocent that fell for it.

My cock jerked against her walls, the tightness almost strangling the orgasm from me when I spilled every drop of me inside her.

“I didn’t threaten to ruin you... I challenged you and you liked it. You wanted to be ruined, to stop having to survive. You wanted to call me home and you know it.” My voice cracked and caved between the huskiness of my voice while I emptied myself inside her.

It would be hard to outrun me now, carrying my spawn bred right from our hell.

“Burton?” Her voice went soft, and I could feel all the tenderness suddenly. “It’s not nice to come before a woman.”

All the sharp edges paired with the crimson lipstick that hadn’t smudged one bit was intoxicating as she still hurt me the way I always asked her to. Only this time, it hurt more than normal because I knew whatever kind of happy ending two fucked up individuals like us could have would not start here or now. She would run, and I would haunt her like prey.

Dragging Mira back to hell was never the plan, I wanted to take what hell our life was and make it a home, make it as heavenly as two sinners could get.

Letting myself wilt between her legs, I rested my forehead on her shoulder before mumbling a response, “Not the point. You’ll never outrun me. Even your body was begging me to catch you.”

“Shut up before you ruin the high.”

I knew she had come the second I spilled into her, her walls choking me for every drop. Mira was drenched in me, hating me, yet enjoying every second of it.

Peppering her neck with soft kisses, I let myself be happy, basking in it.

I heard her phone buzz in her clutch discarded on the countertop when the tension got too thick to ignore. Suddenly, the moment seemed blown away when her body nearly pushed me over to reach for her clutch.

Pulling my pants up, I tried to focus on my belt when my gaze lifted enough to watch her attention sink right into her screen. Forcing myself to watch her, I saw the smile tug at her mouth in every upward direction as she typed a response.

“Let me guess...” I didn’t even finish my words. The words were falling on deaf ears anyway.

I looked over the edge of the phone in her hands, confirming it was Jameson she was talking to and letting the anger flare up all over again.

The anger I couldn’t ever get rid of.

The anger that drove me to hurt people in ways I couldn’t hurt myself and survive.

“Gonna lie to him again? Pretend you were violated and forced to come all over me?” My chest pushed against her cellphone in her hands, and I was demanding she make eye contact with me. To pick me.

Her fingers stopped touching the screen and she stilled. “That’s why we could never work. We would destroy each other without even having to try. Just like that, every day until we die.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“We’re survivors, remember? We’ll just keep surviving instead of living. I want to live, Burton.” Sweet like honey, she pushed her palm against my chest and forced me to step out of her way. Moving around me, she yanked on the door we never locked and left me there with my dick in my hand.

Regaining my composure, I tried to put my mask back in place, letting it sit right over the features that made me seem cold and arrogant. The mask was just me playing along, leaning into the darkness even though I knew better. Under all the calculated intentions, I was just weak.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BURTON

Following Mira back to the table, I tried not to let her words echo in my head about her wanting to live, not just survive, but it felt impossible.

It hurt worse than any insult, any blade, any fuck that didn't even touch the ache she always left behind.

Mira could have survived me, yet she didn't want to. She wanted to live out some fantasy where Jameson was the less evil version of me, one she didn't have to outrun.

I took my time getting back to the table, stopping at the bar for the drink I never touched when the night shifted into something crisper and colder. Lifting my head from the ground, I stopped dead in my tracks, like I had hit a wall when I faced Jameson Kendrick standing at Mira's side.

I never wanted to admit it but looking at his smug expression was like looking into a mirror, only whatever demons sat on his shoulders were much more devious.

Killers recognized killers. We didn't even have to know each other but we recognized the sick hunger someone carried with them like a loaded gun. It sat on your hip, waiting to be used and weighing on you until you caved.

That was a thirst you couldn't bury under any amount of charm. I knew better.

My mother stood up with her glass in her hand, tapping the side with her knife and getting our attention without having to try. There were only a handful of us: my sister, her new boyfriend, my paid date, my mother's right and left hands, Mira, and now Jameson Kendrick.

I watched Jameson's arm wrap around Mira's waist, pulling her into his embrace and waiting for my mother to make her announcement. "Mira, darling, I couldn't be more proud of you and all you've overcome. You have truly made the Draven name proud... even if it is the name that we forced

on you. Allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your engagement. I expect you to let me use my checkbook.”

My heart wasn't something I felt often, yet in this moment, it felt like a thousand-pound chain tethering me to this moment.

All the noise seemed to dull down, mute, and become quiet enough to let me hear my heart beat against the bones in my chest. I felt bile crawl up my throat and my hands clenched into tight weapons.

“You're getting married to *him*?” The harsh tone of my voice wasn't lost when I realized whatever happened in the bathroom was a pity fuck. A goodbye.

“Don't sound so disgusted.”

My mother quickly chimed in, “Burton Theodore Burton. Sit down right now. How dare you speak to Mira that way? Jameson is worthy, I give my blessing.”

“You gave him your blessing? Are you fucking kidding me? Do you even know who he is?”

Jameson looked over his shoulder at me, following me with his beady eyes to my seat next to the blonde who wasn't making anyone jealous. The entire plan was ruined now. Mira was making sure all my years of hurting her with headlines were paid back in full.

“Burton, I don't know what has gotten into you. Jameson asked me for her hand in marriage weeks ago over lunch. He has always been a worthy competitor. I thought this would make you happy to know someone so wonderful is going to take care of her.” My mother sat, ushering Jameson to join us when I glanced at my sister.

Instead of finding support, she smirked at me like I had it coming instead.

Even she was happy for them.

“Son of an infamous serial killer doesn't run your re-election plans, Mother?” I bit off the words so hard I felt my jaw crack under the pressure.

“Allegedly.” Jameson’s conceited eyes seemed to glow against the sheet of black the sky was.

He would make sure we all knew it was circumstantial, but he was forgetting I read papers. I read everything I could when it came to my enemy, and I knew he ratted his own dad out. Unlike the world, I had no pity for him, seeing it as the manifestation of his evil.

Evil enough to rat out your dad.

Evil enough to become like him.

Evil enough to not know the difference.

“Shut the fuck up, Jameson. This is between us.” I didn’t even mean to lean into the table, challenging him to something worse until he left Mira’s side to match me.

Smiling casually, he looked down before he looked directly at me. “Funny coming from someone like you. Are you ready to have this conversation now? In front of everyone?”

Mira had told him things I kept secret from the world. She must have told him I had blood on my hands and now he was using it against me.

Like the arrogant asshole I was, I gestured for my date to get up without saying a word. Unfortunately, she followed directions well, which was the problem for paying it. I needed pushback, someone who would fight me every step of the way like Mira.

Standing up, she wrapped her arm around mine, every tense muscle straining against her soft skin. Suddenly the quiet model seemed to speak louder in that moment than her skimpy dress. “Burton, can we leave? You don’t need the stress with your game tomorrow. He’s clearly deranged, practically foaming at the mouth.”

Dragging my eyes off Mira’s soon-to-be husband, I watched her high-strung body only get worse as my date touched me.

Straightening my spine, I pushed back into my heels, letting my knuckles flood with color again. Wrapping my arm around her neck, I pulled her into me and basked in the idea of her being jealous.

Turning all my attention to my date, I leaned into her, my lips caressing hers with so much tenderness I had never used. The one part of me Mira never earned and never stopped running long enough to see.

“You’re right, babe. Let’s get out of here,” I whispered to Ophelia even though I knew they could hear me. Walking around the edge of the table, I stopped near Jameson, shoulder-to-shoulder with him. “She still tastes like raw honey, doesn’t she?” Licking my lips, letting anger waft over Jameson like a bad mood strife, before I walked away.

I would not let Mira reduce me to a nightmare to protect her fantasy life.

Once we got to the car, I opened the door for Ophelia. I watched her get in and the dress riding up so high on her legs I could see exactly how round her ass was from this angle.

Once she was safely inside, I stopped playing the part of someone who cared one ounce about it. I knew the balcony overlooked the street, giving everyone a perfect city view but also a view of me down here. I couldn’t let Mira see she simply meant nothing even if she did.

Mira started a war and now every torturous thing I did had to be to annihilate for her to win.

Exactly the excuse she always used to avoid giving in to me: we would destroy each other and still survive it. This time, surviving wasn’t an option. It was to the death for her blindsiding me.

Sitting behind the wheel, I sat back against the buttery leather trying to count blessings instead of sins when Ophelia lifted her ass, that dress riding up dangerously high again, and shimmied out of her panties.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a keepsake. I know you fucked her in the bathroom.”

Turning my head toward her, I let my car purr and idle while I let her shock me, something that rarely happened.

“Don’t look so surprised, I can still taste her on your lips. I’m paid for, what we do is completely up to you.”

“What if I want you to help me hide a body?” I always meant to be blunt, but my words came out sharp too.

Resting her head against the headrest, letting it fall to one side, she smiled. “I would hope you tip well if I’m not getting to come tonight.”

Ophelia’s voice was lathered in seduction like second nature, and I wanted to swallow the way it tickled my dick. “I know a place we can go.”

It was the only place actually. It was a playground for the twisted and it would cost you a small fortune to become a member. Only after you received the exclusive invite, that is.

I pushed my foot down on the pedal, ignoring traffic, and sped through the cars, knowing I had a death wish. I should have filled her in when her hand latched on to my thigh in sheer panic.

“Speed isn’t my least favorite weapon. Only gets worse from here, babe.”

Her fingers digging into my dress pants seemed to ease up and she leaned over the center console dividing us. Her mouth closed over my ear, kissing and licking my skin until I exhaled in a way I hadn’t for years.

Relief.

Relaxation.

The car seemed to slow, dragging itself to the club we knew as Torture Garden at a more reasonable speed now. “It’s not about how fast you get there, it’s about getting there.”

Her hand slipped from the inside of my thigh to the bulge growing against my boxer briefs still stained with Mira’s pussy.

I would be lying if I didn't like the cruelty of having Ophelia paw at me while Mira still covered my cock up in a commitment I wanted to break.

No matter what happened to us, how much time passed, I always felt hers. No amount of hate, fucks, or hate fucking changed that.

Her hand squeezed my cock ravenously, her plump lips flirting with my ear while I weaved through cars. Wedged between classic brown stones, hidden in plain sight, sat the strikingly black bricks.

Maybe that was why I liked it so much. It was staring everyone in the face and yet you had to have the right pair of eyes to see it.

Members only.

The same way Holmes dubbed us a kill club after the moment she heard too much. Kill Club stuck more than the Unholy Trinity we were saddled with throughout high school and the first year of college. Reputation was everything and ours was tarnished.

Parking along the curb, I forced Ophelia off me before getting out and rounding the car. Yanking at the door I waited for her pale legs that matched her colorless silver hair to emerge. Offering my hand, I couldn't wait for the words to roll off my tongue. "Welcome to the Torture Garden."

She smiled politely, letting me lead while she followed up the steep stairs to the front door painted a royal purple, so deep it drew you in.

The door creaked open, displaying a big man in a black turtleneck and covered in gold jewelry stopping us from entering. Unbuttoning my sleeves, I folded up the material until you could see a patch of skin void of any blemishes until his wand waved over it. Suddenly a tattoo appeared, more like a birthmark from hell. All the monsters and demons got them on their way up from hell.

We all had to blend in, be unseen, and let our kinks just breed more trauma.

I was sick of hiding, being obedient, and making the Draven agenda my own. I wanted to misbehave and slaughter enough people to feel satisfied.

The bodyguard asked nothing of Ophelia when he greeted her by name, stepping aside like she was precious merchandise. She simply let her free hand smooth down his arm. Tugging her hand, her body falling into mine while I mimicked jealousy.

It was a pastime to mimic all the emotions I was supposed to have. I lacked range but not depth. No one was as bad as Vane Wolfgang; he was devoid of even how to fake it. He was stone cold in different ways.

I was made; he was born into this life.

Skipping the bar, I headed straight upstairs, finding a private room with no tassel hanging from the hook. Since I didn't like following the rules, I simply put something more personal on the line instead of their system of kinks.

Fishing into my button-down shirt, I pulled out the thin chain with the pin her father was awarded along with the medal of honor. She wore it every day, never taking it off, and then one day, it was absent from her neck.

She thought she had lost it the night I killed my father. When I ran from our back door, I hurled fresh air into my lungs, trying to catch my breath. I had no idea she was watching until her necklace caught the light.

Mira's necklace nearly blinded me.

In her hurry to get away from me, her necklace must have caught on to something. I found it lying on the ground abandoned.

Since then, it has been mine. The same way she was.

I hung it from the hook before I closed the door behind me, letting her keep my perversions and kinks hidden.

Ophelia crossed the threshold, and my hand was around her neck quicker than she could beg for mercy I didn't have. Slamming her body against the wall right beside the door, I

closed it with more force than needed. “You’re so fucking obedient. You’re so willing to do whatever gets me off. How far are you willing to go?”

“You wrote the check, you tell me.” Her devious smile grew like wildfire across her face while my hand held her against the wall.

“I’m not like other guys... I’m satisfied with a decent fuck and a sloppy kiss goodnight. I want something that’s easy to take and hard to ask for.”

“Then take it.” Her mouth barely moved, and I was still convincing myself she didn’t just offer herself up like a sacrifice to a monster.

Pulling the straps down on her dress, comfortable wearing my grip as a necklace, I watched the shiny material fall to the floor, leaving only her ashen skin to contrast with her rosy, pink nipples.

My free hand caressed her breast, rolling the hard nipple between my fingers and letting my mouth get close enough to taste the expensive pricetag on her. “Punch me.”

Her smile grew, showing her teeth, her hands working to unbutton my shirt.

Worth. Every penny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BURTON

I had been waking up in places I didn't remember falling asleep in. It was all a part of my downfall, heartache, whatever the fuck you want to call it.

I was nursing a fucking broken heart and gluing it back together one sick fuck at a time.

Waking up to the smell of sex and sweat wasn't a replacement for breakfast, but all of it was worth it if Mira was scrolling through the internet and my tarnished reputation was splattered across most websites as the latest gossip.

All the ways I was proving to her I could force myself to not care.

All the ways I was replacing her with bad behavior.

Ophelia's arm was draped across me lazily when I turned over, reaching for my phone, and reading a text message from the last person I would ever expect.

Jameson: Meet me here.

The here was paired with a pin drop for a location I didn't bother looking too closely. I didn't plan on meeting him, not for any reason. It had been two months' worth of silence, publishing displays of anger, and me sending Mira dead roses to her job every Friday.

Jameson was the other guy Mira was fucking and playing house with. I was the end game; too bad she didn't accept that already.

Me: I'm good, Red Ribbon.

My nickname for Jameson never wore off. He was always going to be a red ribbon, a second place loser.

We played professional baseball on opposing teams almost our entire lives, and when he did not go pro, no one knew where he fell. No one knew what he had picked up instead.

Jameson: For Mira.

That was all he had to say to motivate me. Her name.

Throwing my legs off the bed, I pushed myself upright and let Ophelia's hand fall off me with a dull thud. Looking around the room, I suddenly realized I had fallen asleep at the club again, for the fourth time this week.

This was the only place that my monster was in control. This was the only place I wanted to be at, wallowing in self-pity and punishing myself for it later.

Ophelia learned quickly what I liked and didn't... I could never tell if she was okay with inflicting pain, or simply did it because the tip was written in by her the next day after I left.

Sometimes, she would bring friends.

Sometimes, she would take the pain instead of handing it out.

Sometimes, we would drink so much that the fucking wasn't as sick as it should have been.

Rolling my shoulder, I felt the tugging, a patch of tampered with skin, and felt the burn mark on the other side of my shoulder. It still stung when I remembered how I got it.

I forced Ophelia to hold a lighter to my skin until the metal irritated her own skin. Dropping it with a whince I watched her reject the pleasure in the pain. I inhaled around it, holding it in my chest and letting my monster grow crueler.

Smiling at the wound, I stood up, dropping my phone on the nightstand and dragging my underwear up my legs. Every muscle was sore, stretched out and tense as I reached my arms above my head.

My training schedule was every day we didn't have a game and sometimes even on game days. I was taking ice baths every night, adding a chill to the hellfire inside me, and then fucking every demonic trait I had to the forefront.

Ophelia stirred behind me in the cute way she did, one I had grown accustomed to. She would whimper these little

noises like she was pissed off that she couldn't just sleep forever.

Even when she talked in her sleep, I found it hard to mind. It looked like she was dreaming up nightmares with blurred words and chaotic movements.

Sometimes, I would throw my arms around her and hold her against my chest until she stopped fighting me. I felt obligated to give her something she needed back for all the times she so willingly let me abuse her.

“Burton?” She said my name like satin wasn't a fabric but sound.

“I gotta go. Practice, training, all that shit.”

“Am I seeing you tonight? You know my boss is going to start wondering who is booking me so often. Might earn yourself more perks here.”

Perks. The only perk I was looking for was a way to kill without getting caught. Instead, I had to settle for killing myself.

“Is there a perk to slaughtering someone and disposing of the body?” I turned around, balled up fists digging into the sheets and her face closing in on mine.

Instead of being disgusted, she simply looked at me and let her head tilt like the answer to all my woes would show up. The answer to why I was so fucked up had to appear for her.

One I never had.

I was a summoned monster from the pits of hell by a lonely girl who needed someone as fucked up as her.

She needed protection, so I killed anyone who tried to touch her.

That was me.

Who was I without her? A monster.

“There are perks to everything. Haven't you met Jameson yet? He normally holds a VIP party and closes the club down. A meet and greet for the highest paying members.” She sat

back on her heels on the edge of the bed, stark naked with zero care that the chill in the air was hardening her nipples into tight buds.

Letting my hand reach out, I cupped her breast in my hand, massaging her and playing with her nipples as her mouth widened into a smile.

The name drew my attention from her distractions. I was daydreaming about bashing someone's face with a baseball bat that weighed more than a few pounds instead of hearing her.

“Jameson who?”

“Kendrick, I think. He's some trust fund kid with some pretty bad kinks. That's why he created this place. Weren't you at the opening last year?”

“There was an opening? I got some cryptic emails that piqued my interest. I was sold when I heard it was a playground for the twisted. The way the Unholy Trinity got invited was less formal than most. We were the real kind of fucked-up this place bred, not just play-to-watch types.”

Slapping her hand casually against my chest, she laughed at the thought of me being pure evil.

“I'm the cold-blooded kind, babe,” I said unapologetically. “We don't need openings, tours, or some lunatic owner trying to sell us something we do every single day.”

I had now told her I was bad news and she' refused to believe me.

“You always say that. I haven't seen it...” She hopped off the bed, collecting her lingerie off the floor and pushing her arms through the robe that barely covered her ass.

Rushing up behind her, I wrapped my arm around her neck until my muscles bullied her throat in a tight hold. Standing almost a foot taller than her, I let my husky voice drop into a whisper. “Don't make me kill you, Ophelia, just because you refuse to take my secret seriously.”

Instead of panicking, her body stilled, and her nails dug into my forearm aggressively. Letting my arm tighten, I felt

her body lift onto the balls of her feet trying to find relief.

Finally, I let my arm relax and I carefully let her weight fall back onto the ground. “Don’t test me. You’ve only seen my monster in small doses.”

“Don’t damage the merchandise.” She purred like it was a dare to leave my mark on her even though she was the one controlling the pain.

“I’ll text you.” Pressing my lips to the side of her face, I let my big hand hold her face still until I let her go. Leaving her standing there in the same room we were always vandalizing, I stepped into my discarded jeans and picked up my phone before heading out the door.

I almost felt bad letting her fall for me and pretending the monster instead of me was imaginary.

Not bad enough when I let the door close behind me and scrubbing her perfect dick-sucking lips from my memory.

Making a stop at my loft, I grabbed a quick shower to scrub the rest of Ophelia off and grabbed extra clothes for after the game. I then into a gym bag sitting at the foot of my bed on the lounge when I heard footsteps against the wood floor outside my bedroom.

The paranoia was all too real after you had been caught red-handed, thrown in handcuffs and put on trial for a murder you didn’t actually commit.

Bending at the waist, I let my fingers feel under the bed for my favorite bat, the one I kept out of sight because seeing it every day only taunted my monster to do more than hurt me.

Feeling the cold steel and the little dent in the surface, I quietly grabbed it. Standing up straight, I looked out of my bedroom door, hinging over the threshold and praying for an intruder.

Any reason to kill someone in some justified way I wouldn’t have to pay for later.

Moving down the hallway, I slowly and carefully looked in each unused space for signs of a break-in. The den, library,

and spare bedroom all came up empty when I pivoted on my feet and heard her voice.

“Looking for someone?” Mira was sitting in the dark in the hallway chair set up next to a small table, covered in the shadows, but no amount of darkness would hide her voice. I couldn’t find that bitchy tone in the dark without a flashlight.

Trying to bite down on the surprise of her sitting in my apartment had my jaw ticking into a type of anger that felt uncontrollable. “What are you doing here? How did you get in here?”

“You’re my monster, remember?”

She paused like it was an acceptable answer before forcing more words out; only these seemed even messier. Her voice was dripping in a psychotic break. “Who is she, Burton?”

Swallowing the truth about Ophelia, I wondered how she knew about her at all other than the night of her engagement announcement, the family dinner from hell. I had contained most of our escapades to the club, keeping her nameless and faceless in the eyes of the media.

Still staying quiet, I reached out for the switch on the wall before pressing it, illuminating the hallway enough to see her wearing a black hoodie, tight black skinny jeans and her hair in her face. She was unhinged, sitting there looking at me like I was responsible.

“What is that place? You go in and disappear for hours. Is it with her? Did she fall for you?” Her voice tripped over syllables and hitched when she asked about Ophelia loving me.

Looking down, I dropped the bat to my side with a sigh of relief even though there wasn’t any. “I could have killed you, Mira. You can’t just sneak into my place when you want to. Where does Jameson think you are?”

Mira was rocking herself so slowly it was hard to see unless you knew her. She was a self-inflicted wound too; she was willing to hurt herself if it meant taking the pain away.

Someone her absent parents left her with instead of a trust fund.

Carefully kneeling down in front of her, I let my grip on my bat go completely. Touching her knees carefully, she flinched out of my touch. Shifting in her seat until she wasn't forced to look at me. "Mira, when was the last time you took your medication?"

There was no other way to ask, and Xanax was visibly needed. Not having any was a bigger problem I knew I would have to solve along with changing my locks.

"I can't. I'm pregnant, Burton."

Her complexion went pale, her eyes were a sea of nightmares so dark I couldn't see her honey irises anymore, and the way her lips trembled made the ache in my chest feel sharper.

"Pregnant?"

I hadn't even stopped to consider what that meant when I pulled her body into my arms, against my chest, and a flood gate opened. Her body shook with each sob and my still wet hair dripped onto her hoodie like the storm we were in.

It was a bad day ahead for us, with hell, monsters, a cold-blooded cry to kill or be killed, the storm, the abuse we asked for, all of it. Good ones weren't in our cards.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MIRA

Burton was holding me so tight it felt like a hug. I couldn't remember the last time someone hugged me.

He always felt like heaven and hell collided, a perfect mix of foreign and home at the same time.

His old, worn-in hoodie developed thumb holes where the seams finally gave out and the baggy material almost felt like a blanket instead. Yet I could still feel his warmth right through it.

I wanted to speak, but I didn't know what to say. I was pregnant and I didn't even know who the father was.

Jameson, the person who always accepted me but wouldn't let me accept him.

Burton, my monster.

Stuck between them both, I had no choice but to ride this out, keeping it to myself that I was confused as ever. I loved them even though I knew I couldn't have them both.

I felt like I was cheating on Burton even though we weren't together. Him pointing it out like an insult was just ironic.

I clung to Burton, wrapping my arms around his neck and letting his strength carry me with him.

It felt like nothing could ever keep us apart, and in this moment, that felt like the truest thing. At least that was what I needed right now — him. My monster. He was the only person to see me at my weakest, my loneliest, the moments where the bad parts of me won with no runner-ups.

My fingers touched his thumbs as they wiped away the tears covering my face wordlessly as his hands pulled away just enough from my exhausted body.

I felt like I would pass out, faint, collapse to the floor and not be able to get up.

I was sure he could feel me going limp when he picked me up in his arms, carrying me in his arms into his bedroom and not stopping at the bed. Instead, he carried me into the ensuite bathroom, placing me down on the marble floor while his hands pulled on the arms of his hoodie.

Trinity's baseball champion hoodie from high school.

One he gave me because I was cold, and I pretended not to remember so I wouldn't have to give it back.

Catatonicly, I stood there swaying with every motion, my mouth open but no motivation to speak and my limbs pliable. Unzipping my jeans next, he discarded every article of clothing on my body until I was standing there in my underwear.

When I carefully drew my arms together, I was pricked by the cold air. I covered myself up and tried to avoid the cold. Still squatting down in front of me, his hands smoothed up my bare legs up to my hips, stopping when he stared at my still flat stomach.

His eyes seemed to get less clear, less emerald, and submerged in tears I knew he would never let fall.

Leaning forward, his mouth kissed my skin so lightly it felt like a tickle right next to my belly button. Pausing, he repeated the action on the opposite side before he stood up and reached into the large standing shower. He twisted the water into spraying out and the heat folding into the bathroom air.

Looking up, I avoided making eye contact, holding back my own tears and holding my breath like it would help.

"Burton," I said his name, hoping to tell him the truth, but nothing came out other than his name.

In a hushed tone, he pressed his chest against mine, leaving me with no space between us. "Shhh. Don't say anything. Just get in the shower, I'll be right behind you."

Burton guided me into the shower, making it hard to argue when he opened the shower door so politely and even waited for me to stand under the shower head.

Letting my hand swipe against the fogging glass, I watched him leave the bathroom in his towel. Standing at the edge of his bed, phone in his hands, I tried to hear him over the water trickling on the shower floor, but it was no use, he wasn't speaking loud enough.

Leaving the shower, I stepped out, following his voice until I stood at the threshold of the bathroom and his room. I stood there carefully as the water drained down my body into a puddle at my feet.

"I don't give a fuck what you have to do to get it. She is fucking broken." Burton's voice was pure hostility in a whisper-shout. "Xanax, perks, morphine — whatever the fuck she can take."

My throat felt swollen and dry, and my teeth felt funny.

Finally noticing me, he rushed over, removing the towel from his waist and placing it around my shoulders like a robe before telling the person on the other end he had to go. Tossing his phone into the plush surface of his bed, he turned his attention to me.

"I told you to stay in the shower. I was right behind you." His arm hung around my neck, pushing me forward until I was sitting on the edge of his bed, in front of a naked version of Burton.

Every inch of him was sculpted and refined with so much attention it felt sinful to look. Reaching out and touching him must have been considered a cardinal sin, something that would scar you for life.

All I wanted to do was touch him.

All I wanted to do was wish it was his.

All I wanted was to forget how much we hurt each other and just start over with our truths.

He killed his dad for me, and I called the cops, both of us trying to protect each other. Both of us were trying to save each other instead of simply falling into the corruption he always warned me about.

I was ready to sacrifice the wings he thought I had and be only the person who left despair in my wake.

“Will you kiss me?”

His lips seemed to toy with mine before he deepened the kiss and let his tongue snake into my mouth. Pushing me back onto his bed, he lorded over me, his fists boxing me in and his tongue fucking mine instead of wrestling.

I felt his body find his way between my legs and our breath halted for a few beats when my chest heaved at losing air.

“Burton,” I whimpered while my head spun, and I felt dizzy under him.

Pulling away, he pushed himself up, holding all the weight in his fists and making eye contact again. “Mira, just breathe. You don’t need that shit. You just need to listen to my voice and breathe.”

Listening to him, I felt my head turn off in a way I had never felt, and my body went limp in a way I couldn’t control anymore. His bed felt so comfortable it was hard to focus anymore.

Peppering my face with small kisses, I felt my mouth beg to smile, but it took too much energy hold it in place before my eyes closed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MIRA

The hunger pains cramping up the muscles in my stomach woke me up to a pitch-black room that smelled like expensive cologne and the bed was too comfortable to be my own.

Sitting up against the headboard, I felt around the bed and nightstand, looking for clues for how long I had been asleep. It was a pointless answer, but it could shift the focus from kissing Burton.

Again.

When I felt for any clothing item, my eyes adjusted to the total darkness enough for me to see the door rimmed in light trying to come through. Finding his hoodie I was wearing over here, I quickly pulled it over my head before struggling to get out of his bed.

Gradually twisting the knob, I peered out of the doorway as he did when I showed up in his house. I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep watching from the shadows.

I had been shamelessly keeping tabs on Burton. I had alerts, websites saved, and when I saw him with the leggy blonde, I felt compelled to know more.

Jealousy hadn't been a factor between us. It was impossible when Burton refused to fuck the same girl twice in high school. Now, we were adults and the same leggy blonde had shown up in multiple photos.

I felt paralyzed by jealousy. Another monster I created.

That was when I followed him, watching from afar until he would slip behind that black door and my voyeurism ended.

My life became this cycle of sleeping, eating, throwing up nothing, and Burton seemed to magnify it with his cruelty. The leggy blonde was a direct hit in our battleship board game. He was using her to force me to admit that being engaged to Jameson was a mistake.

Now it was too late to admit it.

The hallway was empty when I saw the lights downstairs. The wire banister topped with unsmoothed stone could hide nothing when their voices carried upstairs. Looking over the edge, I saw Thatcher pinching a joint between his lips, sprawled out over Burton's couch while he stared out at the view with a drink in his hand, and Vane perched on the armrest of the couch with his arms folded.

The infamous Unholy Trinity.

Nothing good ever came of them all being in the same room. It was bad luck three times over.

Sitting at the top of the stairs, I listened to them talk, carefully eating up every word.

"I'm going to kill him. I'm not asking permission." Burton spoke.

Vane chimed in after a labored exhale, "Do you ever? I know you've been killing without telling us. I saw the two-way mirror."

Killing without telling them... suddenly I was listening even closer, teetering on the edge of the floating stairs.

Burton turned around with a glare consuming his soft features. "This won't be like those mercy fucking killings where they have no family or friends who will miss them. This is going to be messy and violent in ways that might have people asking questions."

Full of malice I nearly fell down the stairs.

Thatcher exhaled all the smoke caught in his lungs. "I'm not doing more time for you, asshole."

"I'm not the one who fucked that up for us. I didn't get my kill either.

"He's still preying on the weak and drugging them every time they feel strong enough to leave him."

Emma's college boyfriend.

“And who fucked that up for us, exactly?” Vane’s punishing voice ran right over Burton’s ego.

I called the cops. Me. I had no idea that sticky night was something more than Burton feeding his monster. I had no idea they were all in on something much bigger.

“Keep your fucking voice down. Mira is upstairs resting.” Burton sat down in a modern chair that looked less comfortable and more artistic. “Jameson Kendrick is the only logical answer.”

Burton was lying but protecting me seemed too easy of a response. Nothing was easy or simple with him.

I had a complete breakdown and he was conspiring to kill Jameson.

Easy wasn’t our adjective, messy was.

“Upstairs resting? Isn’t she engaged to Jameson?” Vane’s voice still reeked of pride and confidence when he picked apart his lies.

I watched Burton stand up, challenging Vane to do the same when they ended up face-to-face, both pretending their shades of black were a competition.

Husky and bleak, he made every word feel final. “I’m going to kill him either way. I don’t care if he called the cops on us or not. He’s going to die for thinking he can use her against me. No one gets between Mira and me. Do you get that?”

Standing up, I walked down the stairs on unstable legs in Burton’s hoodie. I held onto the banister the entire way down. I knew they would be surprised to see me, wondering how much I had heard and if I would protect Jameson.

He was innocent in this, caught in a game between Burton and I, and I couldn’t let him be another victim. I was a black widow killing any relationship that could be genuine, and he was next. Targeted by a room of serial killers I thought were just malicious instead of violent.

Stopping at the foot of the stairs, I felt more vulnerable than ever knowing how responsible I was for the monster staring back at me. Not Burton but the reflection of his spotless floor-to-ceiling windows.

With a shaking voice, I said, “I called the cops...”

Thatcher’s head craned over the sofa’s arm with the joint hanging onto his lip for dear life. Vane’s eyes became weapons, staring at me like I had declared a death wish. Despite Burton’s clear reaction, I felt his disappointment slam me in the face.

“I panicked. I thought Burton was going to get hurt. I had no idea you two were there... doing the same thing...” I continued to sputter and talk through the raw feelings I had turned off so long ago it felt overwhelming.

Burton pushed through Vane to stand in front of me like he knew what was coming next. I could barely keep my legs from collapsing in on themselves, let alone expect a room of executioners.

“Is this what it always comes down to, Vane? Don’t make me kill Holmes.”

As I looked up at him with wide eyes and such a sense of shock, I felt adrenaline coursing through me all over again. With my mouth dropping open, I couldn’t find the right words to say.

Vane stood there, letting the distance between us and them feel punishing enough. “She’s not off limits unless she’s yours, Burton. Sounds like she’s Jameson Kendrick’s to me.”

Thatcher nearly fell off the couch, catching himself and preserving his weed when he popped up, taking a seat on the arm of the couch and crossing his legs like he was about to meditate instead of adding anything. “Actually, I went to jail because of that bitch. I don’t care who she belongs to. In fact, Burton, you didn’t respect shit when you shoved every inch down Holmes’s throat until she gagged as punishment for the same reason. Guess double-teaming her was just for fun now that she’s been made innocent by Mira.”

“You did what?” Still staring at Burton, I felt sick to my stomach. Holmes was my friend. She was his friend’s girlfriend and now wife raising their newborn.

Burton was as vile as they came.

He didn’t care who he hurt as long as everyone was as miserable as him.

Suddenly my decision to come clean and protect Jameson felt right. Everything about Jameson felt right.

I spent so much time comparing their darkness, I never considered what shade of black I could see in. Burton proved that the shade of onyx was pitch black, hopeless, and devastating.

He fucked Holmes even though he knew I called the cops. He fucked Holmes to hurt me and that’s what it did.

Hurt.

I wanted to run, hide even, but I knew he wouldn’t ever stop. The pain became a part of our relationship, outshining the good parts completely. Without it, we both acted out, had tantrums, expected the other to shout out uncle in defeat before we could concede.

Without the pain of each other, we forgot what love was supposed to feel like. All I knew, for sure, was that it shouldn’t feel like the shattered pieces of glass sitting in my chest where my heart used to be.

“Was she worth it? Was it worth to betray me like that?” I asked calmly, even though I felt a storm inside of me.

Burton’s emerald eyes were lighter, less havoc and more shameful. “It wasn’t like that. I was protecting you. Someone had to take the blame.”

“First Holmes, then Jameson. You’re really good at blaming everyone but yourself, aren’t you? You’re the reason I was there at all. You forced me to watch you attempt to kill someone you hated, and when I got scared you were losing, I did what I had to. I didn’t blame anyone for my actions.” I

stepped back out of his reach, wrapping my arms around myself.

“We all play our parts, Mira. You played the good little girl, the indestructible, the third Draven, the orphan, and finally the woman who thinks she’s not like the people standing in this room. You were going to watch me slaughter him and let me fuck you covered in his blood, weren’t you?”

“Your mask is slipping; I can see the asshole showing through,” I spat.

He was always so calculated, yet he was making up excuses and stumbling around the truth. Pointing all his fingers back at me, showing all the ways I would hide.

Gasping at his hand around my neck I let my fingernails scratch at his skin and dig into the perfect complexation. His hand only tightened, holding me in place and watching my ability to breathe become harder.

“The quicker you admit it takes a monster to summon one from hell, the easier this will be. I’m not asking permission to be the fucked-up person I know I am. I’m not asking permission to kill Jameson. I’m not asking to know who’s the father. Of course my mask is slipping. Do you expect it to stay in place when you’re involved?” The rasp in his voice could have matched a furious heartbeat.

Like him, I prided myself on being perfect. Anything less than perfect was a burden for the Dravens. I had nowhere else to go but the warzone my parents lived in.

I wanted to choke out my words, but his grip around my throat seemed to crush my motivation.

My nails were leaving marks when Thatcher rescued me the way he always seemed to do when I needed it. “Hey, why don’t we just take a breather? Do you really want to kill her?”

Burton’s voice was effortless when he responded to Thatcher but looked at me. “I’m not going to kill her; I’m going to break her. Think of my hand as a permanent necklace with my initials.”

Shaking my head vigorously as much as I could, I agreed to be his.

I wasn't agreeing with the side of me that was as punishing as his, not yet at least. I knew it was there, but I was still trying to paralyze it with Xanax, dull it down with the normalcy of Jameson.

Finally letting his hand drop from my neck, I coughed up enough old, dirty air to sound like a lifelong smoker. Bending at the waist, I let my hand grasp the neck of the hoodie. It still felt like his hand was around me, holding me hostage.

“See what happens when you try to avoid being mine again, Mira. We can always carve my name into your ass like Vane did to Holmes.”

Shifting my eyes up, I found Vane in the room smirking like it wasn't the worst thing he ever did.

“I'm engaged to Jameson,” I barely got the words out before coughing more. Glutton for punishment.

“For. Now. You're going to help me bury him once and for all. I'm tired of him trying to beat me.”

I could tell by the way his jaw ticked that he knew something he wasn't saying with an audience. Now I was chomping at the bit to know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MIRA

Burton didn't force me to go home the way I thought he would when the guys left.

Starting the fire, he poured himself another drink before heading to the kitchen. From the dark corner, he pulled out a blender, strawberry ice cream, milk, and whipped cream, and proceeded to whip up a milkshake.

"I can feel you staring, Mira."

"You drink milkshakes?" I asked him while I shuffled through memories looking for anything but water and hard liquor but came up empty.

Pouring the thick pink shake into a tall glass and putting whip cream on top, he carried it over to me. I hesitated to take it from him, holding it at the same level as his own cock, clearly outlined in his heather gray sweatpants.

Heather gray, how ironic when he was a much darker shade of morally corrupt.

"Pregnant, right? No alcohol for you. Best you're gonna get."

Taking the milkshake from his hand, I sat back on the couch, letting it swallow me whole while my lips closed around the straw stabbing through the cloud of sugar on top.

"Your lips would look better wrapped around me."

"Are you saying you taste better than a milkshake?" I asked, knowing the answer already. Burton was a taste you savored because he tasted like winning first place when you could make someone like him crumble in front of you.

His hand grabbed the outline of his cock, squeezing himself and showing me the thick tip pushing through the fabric of his sweats. "Give me a lick, baby. See for yourself."

Sucking down the shake, I got lost in the memories it gave me of college, working the diner, the way everything seemed

easier even though it was more complicated.

“What am I supposed to do, go crawl back into Jameson’s bed until you decide to kill him for no reason at all?”

I bounced against the momentum waiting for his response. “It’s not for no reason. He thought he could use you against me. You’re going to keep doing what you do best — pretend.”

“Is there a reason?” I asked, remembering how the wheels behind his eyes turned and I knew he knew something I didn’t.

Shifting in his seat uncomfortably, he shot back the hard liquor I could almost feel burn on the way down.

“That woman you were asking about?” He paused like he was waiting for me to break through again. “Jameson Kendrick is her pimp. She works at Torture Garden. We all got invited, even Holmes, last year.”

Assessing my face for deceit, I sat there controlling every crease I could. Every feature and every expression willing myself to look numb. Not even an emotion, but blank and numb.

“Jameson works in some stuffy office building in the financial district.”

At this point, left seemed right and right seemed left. I wasn’t even sure who I was anymore.

“Have you been there? Has he shown you? Why would he keep this from you? What’s he hiding?” Burton was asking rapid fire questions all too quickly for me to answer without my head spinning.

Placing the shake down, I shot up, feeling my chest pound against the anxiety he was kicking up. I had gone years without a panic attack. Life got quiet and simple which made bearing the anxiety easy enough.

Even the need to control every little thing seemed to dull down to manageable.

My chest was barely sucking in a decent breath when my chest caved in as quickly as it expanded. I could feel the panic reach my eyes when my fingers laced around the top of the

hoodie, pulling it down off my neck even though it wasn't touching my throat.

I could barely breathe when Burton stood up in front of me, his hands touching my face and his mouth moving, but I couldn't hear him. I could almost feel the worry in his eyes when he left me standing there, rushing to the kitchen island and fingering the cap on a pill bottle that was black instead of orange.

It had thorns creating a circle on an upside cross on the label like you knew whatever inside was an evil you had to choose.

Walking over to me hurriedly, he showed me a pill between his fingers before his mouth moved silently again.

Pushing the pill past my lips, his hand covered my mouth, forcing my breathing to become even more labored while I refused to swallow. My nails clawed at him again, struggling to get free and spit out whatever he tried to poison me with.

Fear pumped the sound back into my world, muffled and straining to make out the words. "It's low grade. It's safe to take while pregnant. It's just for anxiety, Mira."

Burton wasn't the person who believed in anxiety. He was the person who thought everyone had the strength to hide it, beat it, make it their bitch.

He turned his into trauma, a sharp blade and self-inflicting harm instead of letting it be his bully but not all of us had to survive the way he did.

I survived until it felt like dying, like right now when it was hard to breathe and my body wanted to physically call it quits. When surviving seemed like the longest match and no winners were being called.

Swallowing the pill against the palm of his hand still covering my mouth, I blinked at the bitterness without any water. Squinting my eyes up, I nearly begged for a drink without making a single sound.

Sucking down my milkshake, I felt the lump in my throat smooth down when I plopped down on the couch behind me.

“He’s always been full of secrets. He said his dad got him the job, that it was going to finally be what he worked so hard for and that there was no competing again. Jameson doesn’t talk about work much. I thought working the night shift was paying his dues.”

“He’s running a very elite sex club, Mira. The membership is half a mil. He’s not exactly a lucky here.”

Pimp.

Sex club.

Like a product, Burton fucked prostitutes that Jameson owned.

All that clarity I thought I had on Burton being the evil I couldn’t love seemed a lot less gray now. Suddenly everyone’s morals were in question — even mine.

The little bit of Jameson I had a grasp on felt like a lie and the diamond hanging from my finger suddenly felt like a sacrifice I never met to be.

“Has he killed someone?” My voice rattled through the thick air between us when Burton finally slumped down in the armchair with his drink pressed to his lips.

He chuckled to himself before answering, “We almost killed each other. A few times. We both had this need to win even if we were on the same team. Pushing became punching and when fighting wasn’t enough, it became near death experiences. We both refused to die so we just settled for hating each other.”

“But has he killed someone? You said evil recognizes evil. You’re the one who keeps bringing up his dad like it’s some puzzle I have to solve.”

“I know what happened in college. At my frat. He was high but not high enough to forget about you pushing him down the stairs. I took a wild guess and blamed Jameson. Once things got serious with Jameson, I second guessed myself, how deep your black little heart goes. I knew you had to be there at the mansion. I needed to know if you were standing in front of me the whole time and I didn’t see it...”

He knew about that night.

He knew I had this badness inside me that wanted to kill the people who complicated things, who stole control from me like it was nothing.

He knew I was like him.

“Were you testing me?” I raised my voice in anger and let it consume me.

“You failed, Mira. You called the cops. You tapped out.”

My eyebrows tensed and wrinkled. “You were testing me to see if I was a cold-blooded killer like you? Does it make it easier or harder that I failed your little test?”

I didn’t understand if I was mad because I failed a test or mad because the urge to kill was still lingering on me like a bad scent. Either way, I felt fucked over.

Burton scoffed, letting out a labored exhale. “Right now? Harder. It would be so much easier if you just agreed to the plan, gather the information I need, make him happy until he doesn’t see it coming when I kill him. The only father our kid is going to know is me, Mira. I promise you that. With or without your help.”

“I hate you.”

Standing up, he made his way over to me, leaning down and speaking over me. “Good, it’s the only way for me to survive. Do it enough and you’ll finally love me.”

The distraction, the stray tears, the anxiety still vibrating inside my chest seemed to all clash at once. The exhaustion I suddenly felt seemed to keep taking over completely, making my head fill with fog and my limbs feel heavy.

“What was that pill you gave me again?”

I could hear myself fading out when my knees gave away in time for Burton to catch me. “I have to make sure you’re still keeping my secret, Mira.”

His words were distorted and in slow motion, but I knew he had given me something to sleep it off. Burton Draven

would keep me hostage the way he promised to when he called his hand a leash. Disobeying him only meant something worse, scaring me as his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MIRA

I felt constantly dirty, smeared in the mud of hiding at Burton's for a few days, while he convinced himself I would keep the same secret I had been keeping since the night his father died.

The secret that would ruin his life.

The perfect piece of blackmail.

That was my one exit strategy, even though I preferred the haunted interior of his mind.

I was trying my hardest to be normal, act as if nothing had changed when in reality everything had turned upside down.

Burton had a skill for giving you enough information without telling the truth. Instead, it danced around the truth, taunting you. He never gave me a clear answer if he knew Jameson had the same blood on his hands.

I tried to tell myself I didn't want to know even though every time I looked at Jameson, I was dreaming up fantasies of how he would do it. Every time he opened a jar, every time he cut vegetables, every time he shaved or took his shirt off, I saw the predator in him come out in glimpses.

Stabbing, strangling, and drawing blood without any confirmation.

Burton was determined to keep me hostage if I didn't agree to be his spy. Honestly, it was an even exchange since he knew I was pregnant.

Possibly with his child.

I wasn't letting my phone out of my sight waiting for Burton texted me some white flag, a surrender. Kneeling over the porcelain toilet bowl, I looked down at the water with my cheeks pricking up into a mouth full of saliva. I had my phone clutched in one hand.

I had been checking my phone every fifteen minutes since I left the comfort of Burton's loft that rivaled most homes in the suburbs.

As sick as I was over it, my phone had become embedded in my skin, never leaving my side, with a sense of shame causing me to hide him. I even changed his contact to Monster and pretended he was an intern at the company I was assigned to coach.

Suddenly, the life I built without the Draven name was no longer deserved. Instead, it was full of guilt and shame the way my life was before.

Every time things went right, I did what I wasn't supposed to. I sabotaged myself, ran away, controlled people until it left them no choice but to cut ties.

I was the black widow.

Burton called me that once after freshman year when I had helped his sister overdose and single-handedly ended our relationship. Black widow, a spider that ate happy endings and boyfriends for breakfast.

I didn't feel all that intimidating with my head stuck in the toilet.

Thankfully, Jameson was a deep sleeper; wrinkles pressed into his face and he woke up without a dreamless daze surrounding him. It made me envy how well he slept like nothing ever bothered him, like he had no monsters stalking him in the night.

It made me think he was immune to my self-sabotage.

It made me think that it meant something more than the feelings I had ignored for years that I had for Burton.

Burton was the monster I summoned; hunting for my soul to take.

If I didn't give it to him first.

"You okay?" Jameson's voice came from behind me and made me jump. The adrenaline of getting caught almost made my phone slip out of my hand right into the toilet water.

Swatting my hand behind me, I tried to get him to leave before my mouth watered up again, right before I hurled up all the anxiety I was giving myself. “Go away. Don’t watch.”

Without looking, I saw how he stifled his own laugh with his arms crossed. “You think throwing up in front of me is the worst thing to ever happen to me?”

His father being behind bars for killing countless nurses was or maybe the fact that I had no idea who the father of my baby was.

Twisting my head over my shoulder, I stared at him, despising him for the secrets he was keeping. “I want to bring you lunch later. It’ll get me out of the house. Hopefully, my body will understand I’m not near a toilet and stop wanting to throw up.”

Like a dog with a bone, I chewed on all the skeletons in his closet. There were too many to count.

Rolling off the doorframe his boxers low on his hips and his taut muscles slender in a way that didn’t try too hard. His skin always seemed to shimmer and glow without trying against the light. The scars on his body told stories he refused to tell, the way his broad shoulders seemed to protect me even if I wasn’t always letting him.

He was made of concrete instead of stone, all the imperfections forcing you to marvel more.

“You aren’t feeling well, you should be in bed. Not bringing me lunch. I’ll have my assistant do that.” Breezing into the kitchen, he slammed the cabinet door closed and produced an espresso cup before twisting the knobs on the coffee maker.

Feeling my legs buckle under me, I sat down on the bar stool and laid my arms along the cold marble trying to recover. Letting my head follow suit, I let my cheek touch the cold surface and goosebumps spread across my arms instantly.

“Assistant? Burton mentioned meeting someone you work with. He never said anything about you being such a boss.”

His name was balsamy in this house, neither of us ever said it out loud.

Still not turning around or facing me, he continued to watch his espresso pour into the tiny cup. “You’d love her. She’s fantastic.”

He must have seen the slight jealousy spread across my face when his side smile grew. Leaning into the island across from me, he found my face buried in my own arm. “Are you... jealous?”

Not as jealous as I was when Burton admitted to fucking Holmes or hearing he fucked the prostitutes Jameson was the boss of.

“I’m not... jealous. I’m curious. You make everything feel secret. I’m your fiancée and people know more about you than I do.”

“You want to know so you can compare the black smudging of our souls? I’ve compared it to the myth that Burton is my entire life, Mira. I don’t expect my fiancée to have a go at it either.”

Jameson had a talent for making people feel bad with little words and little effort.

Suddenly the guilt he served up on a silver platter ate straight through my nausea and into my now racing heart.

I could feel the cold pinch my cheek, making only one side of my face red, as I spoke through the numbness. “I’m not comparing. I’m asking you to share your life with me just as this ring symbolizes. I expect my husband to be able to answer simple questions like where you work, do you visit your father in jail, why does Burton piss you off so much.”

“I told you I managed a club. Very high-end, very expensive membership. I don’t visit my dad because he’s a murderer. He forced me to put my mom in a home just so I could go to college and forced me to go into hiding. Burton Draven... he’s a smug piece of shit. Someone has to put him in his place. He doesn’t own the world despite what they brainwashed you into thinking.”

“They? The Dravens? They took me in when they didn’t have to. I owe them a lot more than I have to give.”

“That’s your problem, Mira. You don’t owe anyone anything.” Stepping around the island, Jameson landed right beside me, forcing me to twist around in my seat and face him.

“I want to go to the club,” I said it with a straight face, full of cold edges and confidence.

I was determined to see it in person, for myself

“It’s not for the faint of heart. It’s hell turned upside down and heaven is only found at the bottom of a bottle. It’s not for someone like you...”

My eyes shifted down into slants, angry ones, and my voice was like a whip. “Like me?”

“Someone who grew up like you, with the comfort of the Draven name. Must have been nice.”

His words were molten and burned through every weakness.

“My last name isn’t Draven, it’s Eckland, and growing up with strangers for family wasn’t nice at all. My parents were off fighting a war while I had to win the battle every day without them. I had to be perfect so they wouldn’t kick me out. I had to make myself fit their box, check off all the right personality traits to survive their standards, and their monstrous vices. I had to become a survivor.” I had never said any of that out loud before and it felt cathartic to let every truth seep out of me like sweating out the fever.

Ambling to the kitchen island, I was safely behind, Jameson set down the cup and braced his hands against the marble. “Then why are you still surviving instead of living, Mira?”

There was no rebuttal, no comeback, no snappy fucking retort that could hurt him back because it was the truth.

Once you became a survivor, you forgot how to stop. It became a vicious cycle of hurting people before they hurt you, controlling everything you can, and the worst part was you’d

forget all the good things while focusing on the worst-case scenarios.

“Because I’m not convinced I deserve to... You were there, I pushed him down the stairs. What if I’m a villain in my story? What do villains get at the end besides death and disappointment?”

Rounding the countertop, Jameson stood in front of me, his hands reaching cupping my face, forcing me to look up at him. A frown etched into his perfect complexion. “We have fun, baby, that’s what villains do.”

His mouth got so close to mine I could nearly taste the espresso on his lips. “Are you a villain too?”

“The worst kind. The kind that refuses to die.”

I wanted to tell him that the feeling never went away, it only got louder, loud enough to deafen all the logical thoughts telling me to ignore the thrill of holding the power of death in my hands.

Pushing him down the stairs.

Watching Burton hold someone hostage and forcing him to beg for his life.

I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with death, and I liked it too much to be the good girl everyone assumed I was. My entire life, my meekness was mistaken for weakness. My entire life, my parents’ honor somehow rubbed off on me and I became the model daughter, model student, model child.

It made me want to scream.

Burton asking me to hurt me in that haunted house while I wore a Red Riding Hood costume somehow stifled the shrieking inside of me. For the first time in my life, I breathed.

“Why do you love me, Jameson?” My voice was barely a whisper when I let my eyes well up and blur my vision.

“Because death doesn’t scare you, it turns you on. I’m a fucking reaper, Mira, that’s never made you run.” His lips closed the gap between our mouths, and I felt his tongue licking his way inside mine.

Pushing into me, his hands still cupped my face, his tongue wrestling mine into submission to him.

Letting myself go weak and my hands wrapped around his tense biceps, I let him defile me the way I knew would never come close to the way I wanted. His mouth hovered over mine like a long pause with no words coming.

“Jameson, what if I need you to be the worst villain anyone has ever seen? What if I need it to hurt?”

I didn't know how to ask him to let me hurt him. Maybe I didn't want him to hurt me, but pain seemed to be the closest thing to death I could find since the absence of Burton.

Holding hands with death was the only consistency in my life. That was the sharp end of chasing perfection and holding all the control.

Jameson thought he was a reaper, yet he never drew blood.

Not responding, his lips simply kept brushing mine in the teasing way he always did. Forcing me to speak up, I said it louder, beckoning the confidence I wore as armor.

His hand dropped down to my lap when I sat back down, letting my weight rest on the stool instead of his arms. His hand still burning against my cheeks and my eyes were still full of shame.

I was shaming myself for liking anything outside of this imaginary box, the same imaginary space where two people like Burton and I worked out some happy ending.

“I want you to hurt me. I want it to hurt.” My voice nearly begged. I felt his hand barge its way between my legs. His fingers danced along the sensitive part of my thighs when his fingers found my clit. Squeezing my arousal between his two fingers I nearly felt myself collapse into his chest.

“You want it to hurt, baby? You want me to show you what hell feels like?” His words skated down my spine and all of me ached even more at the thought.

His face disappeared into the crook of my neck, nibbling at my skin and leaving me wetter between my thighs. “Open

your legs, Mira. Show me how wet you get.”

I felt like I was dreaming as my body pulsed with every syllable. Slowly, my body swayed against his touch as I opened my legs wide enough for him to see my pussy on display.

In the heat of the moment, I closed my eyes and felt his breath on my neck. “Tell me, baby. Tell me how far to go.”

“No limit,” my husky voice mumbled through the moans I wasn’t letting fall from my lips.

His fingers pinched my clit relentlessly, squeezing all the arousal from me and forcing me to pant at the orgasm building in the bottom of my stomach.

Jameson still wasn’t hurting me, yet his eyes were permanently sad, the kind that couldn’t inflict pain.

His mouth caught my hard nipple between his teeth, causing me to jump into him even more when I felt his teeth bare down. I moaned around the wrong name without even thinking.

Burton.

Quickly eating my words, I turned his name I said in vain into a fumbled moan instead. One I could lie about later as I did about that night Burton defiled me, burying his secrets inside me and hoping I kept them.

“No, hurt me, Jameson. I want it to hurt enough to draw blood... or soul.”

I needed him to give me a full body exorcism, drain my soul and all the corrupt parts. I needed the pain to be enough to create a change.

One where I could end up with guys like him and leave my love of chasing men in the dark behind.

Jameson stood up, abandoning me and leaving me suddenly cold like whatever I was asking for was too much.

“I have to go to work. Big party tonight for VIPs. I’ll check up on you but try to rest.” Leaning down kissing my

head his fingers slipped free from between my legs.

The sting of rejection and the shame in my own kinks felt worse than I expected when I hugged myself, still sitting on the bar stool pushed up to the island and watching him walk away.

I wanted to hide until he was finished getting ready and left, but I was forced to share the same space with my eyes filling up to the brim with unshed tears. It was as if my body was rebelling against hiding every fragment of me that seemed to break.

Without knowing it, Jameson had proven that he was too good for me.

Maybe I deserved the torment of being with someone like Burton.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BURTON

Letting Mira leave my apartment was on my short list of mistakes.

I should have trusted her to come back, text me, tell me about the baby, but once she left, everything returned to the sense of normal I was comfortable with.

The normal where we don't talk and speak through public assaults on each other's mental health.

I made sure whatever scum with a camera had noticed the revolving door of girls hanging from my arm at games, the afterparties, dinners. I could pretend it was romantic but it was a precursor to fucking in the car after.

Two birds. One stone.

Piss Mira off and still fuck my way to petty.

When Mira walked out of my life, I replaced her with meaningless fucks and a straight blade as she forced me to cope in high school. Mira not being mine felt like damnation.

The hell that burned enough to leave me permanently disfigured.

Pulling the door open, I felt the cold air graze along my exposed boxer line and made my nipples harden in response. Running a hand over my chest, I walked over to the fridge, toying with the thermostat controls on my phone and grabbing a smoothie from the shelf.

I heard Thatcher's voice groan only after I dropped my phone on the hard countertop. "Can you keep it down? I have a splitting headache and I'm trying my best to not take it out on people."

"I thought you were staying at Vane's old place. We're too old to couch surf. It's no longer a red flag that attracts pussy."

With another groan bellowing from his bowl, he threw the pillow over his face. "Pussy is my signature scent, couch or

not. I got evicted. Guess my lifestyle is against the rules.”

“You mean partying until you drop dead?”

Slumping down into a chair with my smoothie, I watched Thatcher groan with each movement like it hurt. He was the wounded bird with too much soul to die and too many mistakes being held against him.

He didn't grow up like us. He grew up in a double-wide with a meth lab in the bedroom, an absent dad, and a mother who loved drugs more than him.

He was abandoned when he fell into the Unholy Trinity.

We thought he was like us when we realized all the bad blood in his life was accidental. He was a victim himself, living among killers.

“Not dead... yet. Clearly, I'm not doing it hard enough.”

Coming from the guy trying to get next on the embalming table.

“Threw in the towel yet? Maybe she's the answer...” I said it knowing exactly how catastrophic his response would be at the mere mention of G.

Sitting up, rubbing the tiredness off his face, and throwing his legs off the edge of the couch, he looked at me so seriously I felt like I was under a magnifying glass. “Don't. Don't even talk about her. You think these women are the answer? Vane needed Holmes to come back to reality. Why do you need the bitch who put me behind bars? Don't think I got drunk enough to forget her confession.”

My eyes felt hazy in anger when I returned the glare. “No one is touching her.”

“Touch her? No, I'm gonna fuck her until it feels like you paid for the mistake. Fair is fair, right? You had no issue giving Vane a taste of punishment.” Standing up, he kicked the blanket that fell to his feet before gathering his stuff cluttering up my coffee table. “It's the only warning I'm giving you.”

Pushing him back down to the couch, I pressed my forearm into his throat, leaning into my arm and pinching him

under the pressure. “That death you’re chasing? The girl you love but refuse to ruin with your bullshit? You have a lot of liabilities, Thatcher, don’t make me show my teeth.”

I didn’t care if we were friends. Hell, I didn’t even care if he was as vile as me. All I cared about was protecting Mira from anything that could take her away from me.

With Mira, it was us against the world, no loyalty lingering anywhere else.

Thatcher coughed and gagged his way to taking in new air when I finally removed my arm, satisfied he got the message. Backing up enough to let him get up, I watched him slowly walk backward until he was far enough away from my psychotic break to be safe.

Picking up the phone, I dialed Vane, letting it ring, until his voice doused in drowsiness.

“We have a problem.”

“I saw the email. I don’t care if you kill your fuck buddies. I’m over policing everyone. If you want to go to jail, then be my guest, Burton. Just don’t bring the body to my doorstep and expect me to clean it up.”

Surprised, I put him on speaker phone while I brought up my email trying to find an email. “What email?”

“The club. VIP party. The insane membership price we pay for... one night of the rules being thrown away.” He sounded bored but only because he never lived by rules created by anyone else, only his own rules about what we do to stay free.

“Rules? Was that in the fine print?” I asked sarcastically considering I was violating them all most of the time.

“Just don’t get caught. I’m going back to bed now.” The quick click of the line disconnecting forced my phone to redirect itself to the clock on my home screen that read five in the morning.

I was used to sleeping only a few hours and being up before everyone else. It was peaceful like the world had died and I was the last one standing.

Dropping my phone down by my side, I chugged the rest of my smoothie down before heading back into my room when my phone buzzed in my hand roughly. Turning it over, I expected a fuck you from both Vane and Thatcher, but numbers came up instead.

Jameson: Is ignoring me really the right solution?

I didn't even have to put any effort into thinking. I knew it was Jameson. I had blown him off when Mira showed up shaken instead of stirred.

The anxiety medication was only a Band-Aid. The sleeping pill was enough to keep her hostage for a few days in my bed until I came to terms with the timeline of coming inside her.

I knew I was the father, but without proof, it wasn't going to force her to stay.

It seemed right to create an out for her. Manipulating the situation into her thinking she was helping me, keeping him alive, gathering information I didn't need before letting my bat cave in against his head.

My whole body was itching to kill.

I needed to kill.

It had been a month since my last kill, and I couldn't go into killing Jameson this hungry for his death. I wanted to enjoy, consume, and suck in his life like it would somehow replace the desire to die.

Mira used to be my only hope but now she was also my desire, a constant reminder I would be a father and not to fuck it up like mine did.

My phone buzzed against my palm again, requiring my attention in the worst way when I saw Jameson sent another text through with a location.

I had no one counting on me, no one looking for me, nowhere to show up when I realized I had no one to text if shit went sideways. I would meet up with Jameson and let myself

edge enough to piss me off and force me to kill someone else before I could kill him.

Only no one would miss me if I didn't come back.

Pushing my legs into the sweats I had lying out for practice, I disregarded the undershirt when I pulled the hoodie over my head like a noose.

Standing in front of the mirror, I tried to recognize myself when I scanned the reflection. My eyes looked dead, the bags under my eyes looked heavy and the trauma I was still carrying was sitting on my shoulders, making sure I wasn't standing up straight.

I could barely remember life before being dragged from hell by Mira. I could barely remember T-ball practice or a time before my dad beat me in our basement while my sister and mom slept.

I had been this evil for so long that it felt permanent, so why not lean into it?

Mira wanted a monster, so I became one who didn't even show mercy to her.

Grabbing my wallet, keys, and phone off the bench sitting inside my closet, I stopped at the threshold. My bat, leaning against the wall, was shimmering off the light bouncing into the room after I flicked the lights off.

Snatching it, I threw it over my shoulder, trying to remember I wasn't going there to kill Jameson. I was going there to surrender Mira's heart because she deserved better.

Better than me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BURTON

Once I was behind the wheel, I felt more control come back. I let my phone give me directions to the club when I didn't need them.

I had punched my frequent customer card enough to not need anything but a silent head nod before moving out of my way. Slipping through the world I knew I didn't belong but here I fit right into the world of violence and sex like it was a breath of fresh air.

This is the depravity I knew like the back of my hand.

This was exactly the marred black coating the inside of my organs and the reason Jameson needed to be better than me.

He could never understand giving up Mira's heart. No one would understand except maybe Thatcher, while he helped me drown out the ache later with whatever party favors he peddled now.

Pills, booze, pussy, whatever I can bury myself under like a well-dug grave so I can rest in peace.

The dim lights opened up a floodgate of seduction filled with velvets and leathers. The way the dark wood invited you to step further into the darkness until it attacked your senses, chipping away at whatever morals were left.

Standing at the bar, I didn't even have to speak before a drink appeared in front of me, dark liquor with one ice cube stealing most of the room in the glass. "Put it on my tab. I'm here for Jameson." I didn't even glance to my left when I scanned the room for his presence.

I watched him greet people on his way to the bar, shaking hands and ordering bottles to prove he blended in. It was a false sense of respect but it was all he had when you weren't like the people in this room.

Beds against the walls, booths, even a fucking altar sat at the front of the room if you needed to confess or worship. It was ironic since no one here praised anything but the hellfire of home. We were all demons, monsters, savages trying to get by.

None of us fit in. We all had kinks condemned.

He noticed me when he finished whispering to a waitress wearing only a black thong and diamonds dripping over her torso, covering her tits, and glimmering in the light. Stepping toward me, he slapped the nameless waitress's ass before she scurried off with her marching orders.

"You actually came..." His voice faded into surprise.

"I had some spare time. What do you want, Jameson?"

"We need to talk about Mira." I could hear the strain in his voice, trying to overpower me and control everything he couldn't. Even me.

I could feel my eyes squinting down, focusing on him and my hand curling into a tight fist as he said her name. "You're fiancée?"

"I know she spent the last week at your place. I know you guys have history." He paused before looking around at the room full of demons sniffing out weakness. "Come up to my office."

Confirmation I needed.

Confirmation I wanted.

Jameson was pulling the strings here. Torture Garden was his own personal playground. Now I needed to know how dark and dismal his soul was before I handed over Mira. I needed him to be an imposter, a runner-up, a close second like he always was.

Twisting off the bar, I took my drink with me to keep my hands occupied. I needed to kill... soon... before it became too hard to control and I lashed out at the only person I could hurt without killing.

Mira.

Fitting into the elevator by ourselves, I forced my free hand to wrap around the cold metal handle, so tight I could feel the sting of my hand losing feeling. Keeping my mouth closed, I waited for him to speak up when his thumb jammed into the elevator button.

Everything seemed sadistic and violent.

Everything around me mocked my desire to kill or be killed.

“Do I need to be worried?” Standing in front of me, not even bothering to look over his shoulder, I stared into him, imagining all the ways I could strangle him right here and now.

After too much silence, the doors swung open, and I found myself on a floor I had never seen before. The atmosphere was silent and vacant, making your skin perk up in those pesky bumps that forced you to be cognizant of your surroundings.

I haven't gotten those since Mira let me steal her virgin blood. Since she cut me, since that night she stood next to me knowing I was going to end someone.

It was the world finally settling, my wounds finally scarring.

But right now, it felt much more sinister to feel that sharpness slice up my spine.

“Worried? She's your fiancée yet I keep finding her in my bed. You tell me if you should be worried.”

In a quick movement, I felt him spin around, pinning me against the wall, and his baby blue eyes threatening to show me his monster.

“Don't fuck with me, Burton. We aren't kids anymore and this isn't a game.”

“Go on, killer, show me that monster. I've been dying to see it,” I taunted him so willingly it felt like a death wish.

Another one.

He walked through a glass wall that blended in so well I wondered if I had misjudged him altogether. Turning around behind the desk, I stepped through the same crack in the glass, trying my best not to look at all the details of his office. Nothing matched his personality. There were too many warm woods, comfortable furniture, inviting trinkets begging you to ask him for the story behind each one.

Everything here showed a heartbeat, one I always assumed he had but could never hear.

That was why he always came in second — he wasn't prepared to turn it down, blocking out the extra beats you hear right before you do what it took to win.

He was weak yet this office showed strengths I didn't have, all the ways he won in life, all the ways he beat me with humanity.

“Deserve her? I won her fair and square.”

“Won her?” I retorted the words that tasted too bitter to swallow.

Finally sitting down in the broken-in chair behind the desk, he slumped back comfortably. “Yes, Burton, you won the trophies, but I won the one thing you wanted most. Her.”

My jaw clenched so hard I felt the tension wire my mouth shut.

“Mira isn't some game.”

He smiled like I was mistaken. This wild smile proved whatever I thought until this point was wrong, that I had been played and there was nothing I could do about it. “Oh Burton, you think you still won? The only thing you had that I didn't was her. Now that I have her, we're even now.”

It didn't come close to how much space was on the board between us. I was polished, shiny and sitting on a first-place pedestal. Jameson Kendrick was... right.

Everything I had, he had: money, respect, power, the taste of Mira still reminding you nothing will ever taste as sweet.

He took the only thing that made us different and now my plan to give her to him was foiled in every way.

I wanted to take her back. I wanted to lock her up. I wanted to wrap my bare hands around his neck and push down until he stopped breathing. I wanted to send him back to hell.

“Even? Mira isn’t a trophy and I’m not competing with you. We aren’t fucking teenagers anymore.”

Taking out a cigar, I watched him cut the end violently with the miniature guillotine in his hand before he produced a lighter for the end. The end of it burned up, shrieking at the flame and his mouth closed around it like he knew what he was doing. Despite the showmanship.

Pulling the cigar from his lazy mouth, he finally responded, “We aren’t teenagers, that’s why competing is that much more dangerous, Burton. There’s so much more at stake. These kinds of games are lethal, treacherous, and I’m not stopping until one of us is dead. There’s not enough room for the two of us and I refuse to be your damn shadow anymore.”

“You have Mira, what else are you trying to prove?” I stood even further in his office, the tension holding me still and my jaw so tight it felt like it could crack.

“There can only be one of us, brother. She can’t love both.”

I felt my face shrink into confusion when the word brother came out of his mouth. We weren’t close, I wasn’t even close to the people I shared a kill club with, they were just people who were like me. No matter how many of those were in the world, I was still alone as ever.

“Shocked to hear mommy is a slut or that mommy has a type for sadistic?” Jameson’s voice almost sounded fun even though everything he was saying was traumatizing every rule, every command, every principle of my world.

“What are you talking about? My mom doesn’t even know your dad. We’re practically the same age, don’t you think I would have known?” The fog of uncertainty seemed unreal when I felt like my body was swaying against a current.

Standing up, he tossed me a photo frame. I barely caught it when I turned it right side up to see my mother standing right beside a stranger, only it wasn't that innocent. His hand was laid against her pregnant belly and they were both smiling in a way I had never seen my own mother. It was happiness the Draven name had never provided.

Security, power, stability, the standard you had to grow to meet — yes, but not happiness.

It was the price of success... or at least that was what I told myself.

“I'm one year older than you, Burton. Guess Mommy couldn't help herself.” He was eating up every moment and hoping it would put the nail in my coffin.

“I want proof. I want more than some fucking photo.”

“How about the DNA test I ran myself when I didn't want to believe it? You aren't the only one disappointed by this.” Rifling through his desk, he dropped a huge folder, held together by a rubber band and sheer will, on the desk. “Go on, I have copies. See for yourself.”

Stepping closer to his desk I stood right against it, fingering the band off and opening the worn folder fraying at the edges.

Examining every piece of paper, I scanned for keywords I didn't even know yet. I was waiting for it to jump out and punch me in the face, so at least it felt physical instead of all emotional like it was right now.

My straight edges showed up in my mind and my mouth watered thinking about dragging one of them across my skin like I used to when the trauma hurt and I needed to destroy my perfect fucking exterior to match.

I held on to the hope of mutilating myself later, but right now, I was trying to prove I couldn't be related to Jameson. I had no one, and I would not start with my best rival.

He stole Mira from me as a move in a game we had been playing our whole lives. The only thing he deserved was death, not a brother.

“She didn’t love you enough? Choosing us hurts, so now you’re showing me a lesson? How fucking boring. Get a new narrative.”

Jameson laughed out loud, nearly choking on the inhale of his cigar before sitting up straight. “Love hurts when you don’t have it. It’s the worst kind of pain you can give someone and I lived without it my whole life. You can’t hurt me, Burton. Nothing you do will ever hurt me like our mother did. I’m just repaying the favor. It’s your turn to feel rejected by love that should have been yours.”

Pausing, he sat up, his forearms bruising the edge of his desk when he almost whispered his next threat. “You don’t love anything like you love her. So tell me, does it hurt to know Mira so willingly puts her mouth around me every night? I go deep enough to leave her soul ruined. She’ll never be the same when I’m done with her.”

My rancid stomach seemed to crawl up my body, destroying each organ in its path until it reached the bottom of my throat. I wanted to hurl up every bad part of me so I could suddenly be the guy Mira deserved.

But nothing would wash the blood off my soul. I was born to be her soulmate, twisted into a monster, summoned by her desperation, and now I was nothing she needed. I was the person holding her back.

Jameson was supposed to be the person I wasn’t. Turned out he was cut from the same cloth — or DNA.

My mother wasn’t my mess but his too. Incapable of loving anything that didn’t resemble cold, hard, shiny gold. Runner-up was never good enough.

“Keep thinking you’ll survive me. All I have to do is wait for you to fuck it up like you always do. Once second place, always second place.” My jaw seemed to tick and my hands were losing feeling all too quickly in the tight fists I didn’t realize I was making until I looked down at my white knuckles.

“She’s pregnant with my kid. Looks like you’ve already lost. Why do you think I invited you and your merry band of fucked up friends to be a part of my empire? Front-row seats to how I ruin you.”

Pressing my knuckles into his desk, I leaned forward, my scowl nearly burning into my features and all my rage sitting on my tongue. “I’ll fucking kill you. One way or another.”

Turning around, I left him in his office. If nothing else, I had the last word. It wasn’t nearly as satisfying as the scenarios playing in my head, each one more disturbed than the next. At the end of each one, he was dead.

Vane took responsibility for his actions, killing those who deserved it as if he were a fucked-up angel of death. Thatcher was only out for revenge.

I was something different. I had ice running through my veins and violence on my brain — I was the psycho hiding behind charm.

I was the monster under your bed.

Jameson Kendrick was going to get to know his brother and he was going to regret ever sharing the same blood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MIRA

I was starting to show. Through the baggy white satin shirt and the elevator's shiny surface.

Twisting to the side, I ran my hand over the growing bump and watched the outline only seem worse.

I had built a wall between me and my unborn baby, trying not to let myself be disappointed by whoever was the father. I wasn't even sure what would be considered disappointing.

I was engaged to Jameson, yet Burton was never erased from any part of me. I could still feel his voice skating along my spine and his touch crawling over my skin. He was under my skin in the worst way.

The elevator halted and the doors opened when I arrived on my floor. I was an executive designer here with a corner office, but it was just another way I was keeping Burton's corruption alive and well. I spent all day designing roller coasters and thinking about haunted houses and how to capture that night repeatedly.

Drowning in Burton was my real profession. It was never enough. I was never satisfied, and it seemed endless enough to keep me hungry for more.

As soon as I walked past the desk that sat nearly right outside the elevator doors, the woman behind the large bouquet of flowers shot up causing me to jump out of my skin. "Miss Eckland?" Her voice shook with intimidation before I twisted to face her before she continued. "These roses were sent to you, but it looks like a mistake. They're already dying."

Stepping toward the flowers, I snatched the card from the death wafting off the roses and opened the miniature envelope. Tearing the seams open, I pulled the card out of it to read: *Roses are red, violets are blue, and I found a liar in you.*

There was only one person capable of sending someone dead roses. His name was stamped across my soul like a receipt.

Burton Draven only became more cruel as he aged.

“It’s not a mistake, it’s a message. A well-received one.” Taking the heavy roses with me, I headed toward my office. I tried not to let my cheeks burn up to let everyone know I was embarrassed before I could hide behind the door.

Setting the flowers down, I pushed over the model I was working on, the most recent addition to the haunted theme park in Trinity. The same exact one where Burton had stuck his fingers inside my pussy after I bled all over his cock and licked me off afterward.

He stole my virginity and then ate the taste of purity after like a professional. Now he was sending me cryptic messages and dead flowers to prove I had chosen the wrong person.

None of this should have worked. I told myself countless times we were toxic... but at least he was chasing me.

Jameson wouldn’t give me water even if I was choking because he wouldn’t bother to notice.

Pulling my phone from my bag, I saw all the missed calls and messages from Burton that remained unread. I was too paranoid to read anything from him in front of Jameson. I was too scared I would look happier than he made me and that guilt felt unbearable.

I picked up the phone to his husky voice ready to cuss me out. Instead of yelling, his voice was dulled down to a strong whisper. “Did he tell you, Mira? Did you know? Are you in on it?”

Burton wasn’t the kind of guy who rushed anything.

He was calculated enough to spend years torturing me, perfecting his skills in cruelty, and whatever game this was, it was to his advantage.

Everything about his voice was emotionally charged, something I had never heard before.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, knowing the answer would be only a web, one I probably created.

“Jameson. Did he fucking tell you he was my brother?”

My ability to respond suddenly malfunctioned when I couldn't even form any words. My mouth fell open and my voice went mute.

“Your silence is fucking deafening. Don't let me find out what you know, Mira. They already want your head for calling the cops. You can't afford to keep secrets, causing even more havoc.”

“I-I didn't know, Burton.” I barely pushed out all the words while my mouth still hung open.

“He's going to die either way, baby. It's going to be a bloodbath, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it so you better figure out whose kid that is.”

I was punishing myself for cheating, punishing myself for loving them both, and now I was sabotaging a relationship between found brothers. Two people who couldn't be more alike and I was standing between them, ruining their chance of knowing each other.

“Burton—” Before I could finish, I heard the line go dead and it rang in my ears like a war cry.

Jameson had lied to me.

Keeping his ties to Burton a secret felt like a move in their game of hate. I couldn't figure out what his endgame was except to create chaos and watch as he finally beat Burton at his own kind of game.

That made me a game piece.

A fucking game piece.

A game piece wearing his ring.

All the anger Burton pushed through the phone felt contagious, swarming my head and heating up my body.

Nothing about Jameson was a saving grace and I wanted him to pay for it. Not in some insignificant breakup or useless

argument, I wanted him to pay in a way that actually hurt, but that would not happen until he was broken.

I had to break Jameson before I could hurt him. All those secrets he wore as armor needed to rust first.

The best way to punish a man was to make him feel everything all at once, until his mind stopped making logical connections. I needed Jameson to do one thing he wasn't used to doing so I could ruin him for using me like a pawn.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BURTON

Batting practice was mandatory. Everything about my life outside of killing felt mandatory. I was passing through the motions trying to starve myself to forget what being full felt like.

Too bad it wasn't working.

My hands wrapped around the bat's handle so tight I thought I was strangling the solid wood into splinters. The pitcher gave me that look like I was the guy who didn't have to try, hell, I didn't even have to show up and somehow I'd still win.

Can't blame him when it was true.

Most of my teammates had the same feeling. I was costing on mommy's married name. Despite what it seemed like, I was trying hard to remain human, to hold on to those parts of me I wanted to bury. It was hard to distract myself long enough to forget all the ways someone could die.

At my hands.

I was consumed, fucking consumed, by it, and no one saw that struggle. They only saw my last name stitched into my jersey and scuffed thinking shit was easy to be perfect.

I was a nightmare stuffed into a body that made panties melt and I broke hearts like I was collecting broken pieces to make myself whole.

The only person who understood that was Mira. She was as fucked up as I was, only she pretended she could fix herself with enough gold fucking stars.

There weren't enough brass rings and awards to make us feel anything but second-place losers.

Swinging the bat across my body, I heard the sweet sound of the ball connecting. The sharp, dense, sound that was music

to a ball player's ears. Most of the time, we heard it before we saw it. That was our cue to take off.

Still standing there, I twisted my baseball cap around, letting the brim shield the sun and create shade over my eyes. "Bradley, next time, don't try to show off unless you have perfected the skill. Makes you look less stupid when you try to hurt your teammates."

His fists turned into tight balls at his side and I watched his jaw square. I had done my job of pissing him off today. It was well-deserved.

Blowing off steam as insults was the only outlet I had left. Calling Bradley out, sending Mira dead roses, ignoring my mother's calls since I discovered she was the slut who lied.

It was all I had left to keep me sane when I was on the verge of cracking wide open.

Dropping the bat like it had disgusted me, I stepped over it and breezed past our coaches. "Where the hell do you think you're going, pretty boy?"

Still walking by Coach, heading for the tunnel, I didn't stop to even make eye contact. "This is a waste of my talent. I need a challenge."

The coaches hated me as much as my teammates, but no one made any moves to fire me because I was the reason we had championship rings and they knew it. I was a necessary evil and felt like it too.

Kicking the door open to the priceless locker room, covered in dark expensive woods and our photos blown up to match our egos, I shook my head at the audacity. Everyone was trying so hard to forget all the ways we were screwed up. We can hide behind egos and kinks however we want. If we took a second to accept it... to listen to that voice whispering to us to do it... maybe I would not have to hide so hard.

It pissed me off that the world could keep spinning that way.

Enough for me to slam my hand into the wall so hard I heard things crack. Mumbling fuck under my breath, I held the

air in my lungs, holding the pain and letting my heart speed up.

Looking at the damage, I could see my hand trying to swell up, my knuckles puckering up in the skin to scream the outside matched the inside. Screwed up.

I didn't expect Bradley to strut through the locker room door when I shook my hand, dusting off the ache and scowling in his direction.

“You really think you're some kind of god's gift to humanity, don't you?”

My mouth turned up at the edges and my jaw seemed to relax. Bradley was looking for a fight and I was done starving myself. It was no use. Nothing would banish the monster.

Turning toward him, I let my brows drop into my vision. “No, I'm a plaque from the devil himself.”

I knew smirking the way I was only made it worse when he threw down his mitt and charged for me.

I was looking for a fight and Bradley made it disgustingly easy to get a rise out of him enough to let it go to blows. Letting him think he had me, I felt his knuckles ride along my jaw in a poor execution of a punch for someone paid to aim.

I couldn't help but laugh out loud when he pushed me down to the floor. I didn't even have to insult him when he spat out the words inches from my face. “Fuck you, Draven.”

“Heaven is going to hate you.”

It was true, most people I knew were going straight to hell, right with me. Yet they couldn't help themselves for making sure I knew exactly how different we were.

Various degrees of separation and all that shit.

“Go back to hell.” He was speaking insults in my own tongue and it felt like a version of home I never found.

Home didn't exist and the one that did was broken. The one I couldn't have was engaged and pregnant by a dead man.

Crawling my way back to dominance, I stood, begging him to end it with my dead eyes that glowed enough to be considered gems. I hoped he could see it, all the dead hope still floating around my irises.

A closed fist punched the air when the monster took over every reflex as I grabbed his wrist and pushed his face down enough to fall onto the wood bench beside us.

I vibrated with adrenaline when I expected him getting even more pissed... only he didn't get up. Instead his body rolled off the edge and fell to the ground.

I had never killed someone by accident. It was always full of malice and intent, but this was something wildly different when I stared at his lifeless body like it was a mistake.

Stepping right over his body and the bench he was lying next to, I fished through my leather bag sitting there with my change of clothes in my locker. Pulling out my phone, I texted Vane immediately even though he was the keeper of my spoiled parts.

Me: I need your help.

Vane: Who is this?

Me: You know who this is. Stop fucking around.

Vane: Definitely not Burton. He never asks for help.

Me: I'll meet you at your house in twenty.

I wasn't giving him a chance to ignore me. I needed help figuring out if I was even more broken than normal, if Mira was turning me soft or the fear of being a dad was twisting violence into fits of regret.

Bradley was still lying there when I grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder. Staring down at him, I expected him to suddenly revive himself. Carefully kicking my shoe into his side, I watched his body refuse to react when I scuffed at the burden he continued to be before squatting down to look closely.

Pressing two fingers against the column of his neck, I felt no pulse when I saw the blood halo around his head. Maybe he

was going to heaven but his halo was covered in rage and blood now.

I couldn't leave him there and I couldn't take him with me. I was stuck when my ass fell on the bench, eyes fixed on his body.

Killing him was a mistake even if it fed the monster.

Without even trying, I shifted my mask, letting it turn into emotions, ones I perfected but never felt. I only subscribed to the emotions looked down on like anger, the rest I left up to everyone else to feel.

With no part of my demeanor changing, I let my voice tremble. The fear I didn't feel flooded to the surface before I left Bradley in the locker room. Racing to the dugout, where everyone was, I snapped my fingers, forcing my body to match the fake feelings.

"I-I was on the phone when I came into the locker room. Bradley... h-he must have tripped over my bat. Call for help, quick." My voice begged to be heard. That was what I did best — pretend. I recognized it so well on Mira because of that.

That was why people hated me but couldn't decide why.

That was why I could keep relationships alive but never lasting.

That was exactly how I'd found Mira. She refused to believe any of my bullshit and that was all I needed to apparently never get over her.

My coach was the first person who came over to me, close enough to touch but not daring to. Instead, his eyes filled with worry and he carefully asked me to show him.

I was convicted, tried, and considered innocent, but sometimes that wasn't enough.

Sometimes it was the opposite. Sometimes it fueled a whole conspiracy of exactly how poor the justice system was or how much my last name did pay to have.

Either way, I wasn't going on some parade to change the opinion of people who didn't like me. They didn't like me

because I was a cold-hearted killer, they just didn't know it yet.

My hands tremble before I touched the door and my eyes shifted down like it was too hard to see again.

My bat was in the floor along with his mitt, my duffle bag slammed down in front of my locker and no signs of a struggle. It looked like he had tripped, and that was what I was going for.

Coach took his pulse as I did, but when he couldn't find it, he mumbled a sharp fuck under his breath. "Can't say he wasn't asking for it. Doesn't make this any less of a pain in my ass, Draven."

Standing up off his knee, he pulled out his phone from his sleek sweats and pushed it to the shell of his ear. "Yeah, we have a problem. That kid, Tim Bradley... he's dead."

I watched him talk into the phone with less effort to fake emotion than me when I realized my face had gone from paralyzing fear to annoyance with his lack of empathy. If I was putting in the work, then I expected him to fake it too.

Pulling the phone down, I could still see the call logging the seconds and the glaring end button still lit up. "Go home, Draven. This shit happens. We don't expect anything less of our athletes. They need to think they're the best to actually be the best. I've got this handled."

My eyes were pinched and all the hiding I normally did felt a lot like being visible. For the first time in my life.

Stepping around him and Bradley still lying on the floor, I grabbed my leather duffle bag and left the locker room truly not sure how to feel. It was an accident, but I wanted the blame like it wasn't. I wanted the scolding and trial because I was slowly refusing to hide even if every part of me was on autopilot.

Not getting caught was a hard habit to break.

Bradley's body was in the rearview mirror almost literally when I got behind the wheel, dipping my finger into the start button, and peeling out of the parking lot sitting right outside

the employee entrance that so many people didn't know existed.

My own personal escape, my exit strategy, one I didn't need until now. Before I was caught, my body buzzed with the urge to run away.

That was the human part of me trying to survive while my monster only prospered.

Crazy how much I prided myself on being authentic just because I knew the bad parts existed. Crazy how different it felt when you stop hiding it from everyone else.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BURTON

The urge to show up at Vane's house faded by the time I had stopped for two espressos. I picked up *Architect Digest* on the newsstand a few feet from the exit.

I always picked up the magazine every time I saw it, hoping to see Mira splashed across its pages.

I was always rooting for her even if that meant condoning her blending in when she was born to stand out.

Pulling alongside the curb with the manicured trees and bushes along the brownstones, I felt free. More free than ever before. I wasn't pushing the sickness into the dark, I wasn't faking it anymore and it felt like the breath I had been waiting to take.

Jogging up the steps with two coffees in my hands, I realized I took this long to fall in love... not with Mira but with my monster.

Instead of acting crazed and in love, I had acted like a schoolgirl with an inappropriate crush that required so much secret it felt like a lie. Bradley, my coach, Jameson, they were all living their lives out loud. Unapologetically.

If they could be the definition of immoral, then so could I.

Why was I still trying so hard to be perfect?

Why did I care what people thought?

Why couldn't they hate me for every excuse instead of wondering why?

I didn't even bother to knock when I pushed down on the smooth metal door handle that wasn't locked. We no longer locked our doors. You'd have to be suicidal to try breaking into a psycho's house.

"I brought coffee." Once a few minutes passed and no one responded, I shouted his name, hoping to hear the echo of an attempt to respond. "Vane?"

Moving along the narrow hallway covered in antique frames and artwork that looked picked out by Poe himself, I looked around every corner for Vane coming up empty. Standing still for a second, I finally heard it, the whirling of a power tool humming in the distance.

Following the sound to the back door, I pushed open the screen and found myself in their backyard, somewhere I had never been before.

A yard in the city was lost on me. I didn't want the best of both worlds, I wanted the cold, hard, concrete since it made me feel at home. Nothing about a garden, tortured or not, made me want to settle down in comfort.

A tiny shed occupied the highest point of the yard. I yanked on the padlock, missing the vital piece that kept people out, and the humming only got louder with every step I took toward it. "Vane?"

The uncertainty of what awaited me on the other side of the shed door made me hold my breath when I opened it. As my nostrils flared at the end when I smelled the familiar scent, my face twisted up in disgust.

Death.

Rotten skin.

The smell of blood at a standstill.

There was Vane, buzzing along with the power saw in his hand and a latex apron on. Slicing through his latest victim and enjoying it. In our sport, he enjoyed the dismantling, the blood, and the mess it left.

He was a maestro.

I was the talent.

Killing was the best part but for him, it was ruining someone so much they became non-existent. No evidence to find. No body to bury. No crime committed.

"Vane?" I said it again, closer but not close enough to get nicked.

Vane turned off the saw and rubbed the back of his hand across his own face, only making the blood splatter worse. “What are you doing here?”

“I said I would be here in twenty minutes, didn’t I?”

“That was two hours ago.” His voice was flat and unamused.

“I was taking my time and enjoying the scenery. Sue me.” I took a seat at the vacant barstool in front of a work bench full of nasty tools I knew he would enjoy.

Vane was back. There was no denying that. Whatever hiccups Skyler and his dad gave him seemed to subside.

Death is a Band-Aid like anything else. It breathes life into people.

“Who are you and what did you do to Draven?” he snapped without looking at me while he cleaned up. Using my last name was a hint that however I was acting, my mask was slipping.

Little did he realize I had taken it off.

Spinning around in the barstool like a child, I watched him blur. “I’m not hiding anymore. I’m going to make *dead inside* desirable. Look at Thatcher, all his fucking mischief and bad habits, no one questions him.”

“Because he went to jail for attempted murder.”

“That’s not the point, Vane. I’m done pretending. I’m done creating sheds to hide out in just to feel normal.”

“What are you planning? I have a family to take care of. I’m not going to jail, Draven.”

Everyone was aware of how pregnant Holmes was. She was finally showing at seven months and was still wearing black head-to-toe like some shadow.

Holmes had this way with Vane. I envied it. She understood him, his demons, the way he needed to hunt and kill. She brought him back from the brink of hell to hold his hands more.

She gave in to her own demons to be the one who could handle him.

In a perfect world, one where Mira wasn't knocked up by my brother I didn't know I had, we would have that. Only this wasn't a fairytale and all the bad shit that happened wasn't some cute hardship in our love story.

"I'm not planning anything," I said coyly. He knew I was always planning.

Taking off the apron and covering the body like it was only for him, he twisted around to face me before snatching the espresso off the slab of wood where I left it. "Jameson rings any bells?"

"Who said I was going to kill him? He's my blood brother, after all."

Vane choked on the hot espresso. All of his expressions spread out into a thin layer of shock and awe. "Excuse me? He's fucking what? How long have you known?"

"Few days. Apparently competing with me wasn't about being the best, but to win Mommy's love she stole from him. Instead, she married money and power. Little bastard was over being rejected and someone had to pay. Mira is simply the cherry on top." I kept spinning while talking, letting the world blur and enjoyment cloud any tone my voice could have.

"Brother or not, I know you. You don't like to lose."

"Nope."

It was true, I was a bad loser and an even worse player. I wanted complete control. I wanted to make the rules, create the game and still win.

Jameson took that from me.

Dropping my feet down, I stopped myself from spinning when I faced Vane, seriousness sweeping over me. "Oh, he's going to die but that has nothing to do with you. I came over because I needed to ask you how you knew... with Holmes."

"Are you asking me if Mira is like Holmes? Or are you asking me if she'll accept the truth?" Vane had this look in his

eye, pride. He knew everyone else would kill themselves trying to get the same thing he had.

Maybe that was what it took — killing yourself. Or at least the parts of you that stand in the way.

I stayed silent, looking up through a veil of vulnerability waiting for him to respond.

Pulling out another stool from under the table where the dismembered body sat, he finally took a seat. “You risk it and you hope that you don’t have to kill the one person you actually care about. Holmes never had to be like me for this to work. All she had to do was accept it. How much does Mira know?”

“Everything.” Dragging the words out, I expected him to snap. Vane kept our kill club secret to protect us while Mira always knew who I was.

She summoned me.

He stayed silent, squinting and analyzing me for details he didn’t have, forcing me to explain. “My dad. He got shit-faced and was talking about how delicious young pussy would taste, feel, and how much she owed it to him for taking her in. I didn’t take him seriously until I caught him outside her room, watching her through the crack in the door. Then I lost it. I killed him and she saw me. She didn’t know why until after.”

“Not so cold-blooded then. Maybe all killers are made for the moment.” Vane was trying to lighten the moment, but every memory already threatened to take me back to that night if I didn’t keep myself distracted. He must have sensed it when he asked again. “Do you really care if it’s yours or his?”

It was a question I refused to ask myself. I didn’t want the answer. I wanted it to be mine and only mine.

He stood up in a dismissive type of way. “Start there. If you can raise the baby with her, no issues. You have a shot at making it work.”

“What if they turn out fucked up like us?”

His reaction made me jump when he looked back at me startled, his hand on his chest and his breath caught in his throat. “What? Like us? What’s wrong with us?”

“Fuck you.”

Vane was the first person to tell you nothing was wrong with us. We were the whispers people had and never acted on. We were the shadows people feared because the spotlight felt less cruel. We were the psychos people wanted to be.

To him, nothing was wrong with us.

Leaving him in the shed, I got up with no cordial goodbyes or even a casual see ya later. We didn’t need bookends to our conversations; they were simply one long run-on sentence and continued thought.

I was sure of two things: Jameson Kendrick was going to die, and Mira didn’t have a choice in not being mine anymore.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MIRA

I could feel the color draining from my face while I watched the beast of twisted steel woosh by me at a speed that made my stomach drop to my shoes.

Normally these thrills, hard work paying off, would send a tingle down my arms. Yet I was trying not to hurl in the nearest trash can.

Morning sickness carried through to every part of the day, showing its true colors with my favorite foods I could no longer eat anymore. Jameson was noticing, and hiding my growing bump was getting more difficult without changing my style altogether.

My boss was looking at me and examining my exterior for reasons to explain why I was different. Constantly late, constantly wrapped in chaos, and my temper? Well, that had become non-existent now.

As soon as I got the slightest constructive feedback, I snapped and glared at anyone who pissed me off. My mask, which I was so used to wearing, had vanished without me noticing.

“Congratulations, Mira. This is going to be in every headline. That promotion is looking promising.” My boss breezed past me in a hardhat and enough cologne making my stomach turn.

Smiling, I mentally gave myself all the praise I never got from the people I wanted it from.

My parents.

I thought the need for them to be around would fade but it never did.

By adulthood, I had built up thousands of unanswered letters, dropped calls, and memories so faded I didn't even know if I had made half of them up.

Touching my stomach, I looked down at my bump, caressing its shape. Whispering out loud but only for them to hear. "I will never abandon you and I will always be proud of you." They deserved to know the truth now before the bad world chewed them up and spit out lost hope.

Once they knew the truth about how evil I was and potentially their dad, I would have no control over anything.

The email was sitting on my phone with Jameson's DNA tucked into the scientific parts before I read: *Not a match*. Burton was the father. That was enough of a curse. The least I could do was not make the same mistake as my parents.

My boss was huddled around construction workers, holding blueprints and building an amusement park from scratch. Trinity was famous for their Halloween Haunt every year, filled with rides, concession stands, and a good scare around every corner. It was the same fairgrounds where I lost my virginity.

Looking around, I could almost smell that night, with cheap beer and popcorn filling the air. Everything about Halloween made me feel alive in ways that paled in comparison. Something about when the lights go off and the ghouls come out that makes mine seem less scary.

Halloween made the worst ideas, the good ones and ugly personalities amusing. We all wanted to fit in and Halloween was that.

Fitting in used to be my only issue. Now, it was ruining fake baby daddy's and trying to understand Burton in ways my mind had a hard time wrapping around.

I had been toying with ways to ruin Jameson for countless days now. I had been extra sweet, extra attentive, and when he was fucking me, I even almost let myself come. Not giving him the satisfaction of making me come felt like a small victory in the war.

I would take it until I felt like I could forget being used as a pawn between brothers.

My boss's voice bellowed across the field of dead grass and dust kicking up with every step. "Mira, there is a visitor at the gate. Don't take too long, we need to test it out."

Testing out my designs wasn't something I ever did. I rarely got to see my creations in real life but this one was too close to home to miss.

The town that raised me, broken me, and molded me into this darker version suddenly seemed so small in comparison to the monster I built. Just like me, it would only be here for a blink of an eye.

Scrunching my face up in surprise, I headed toward the gates of Hell Mouth and immediately knew exactly who was here when I saw the red sports car. It was an eyesore in a town like this.

Trinity was divided into two parts: the trailer park everyone hated and the burbs of the rich but not elite. It was a delicate balance that Burton was disrupting with his flair for asshole.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

I watched his lazily folded arms tense. "It's a big day for you. Did you think something could keep me away?" I flinched when he placed his hand over my stomach, "Something you want to talk about, Mira?"

Slapping his arm off, I felt his muscles feel like pure stone, before I looked over my shoulder. It was still my secret, and I wasn't willing to share with the rest of the world, least not the people I worked with.

"Stop it. If you're going to be here, behave."

The smile pushed its way through every other feeling. No one else showed up for me but Burton was here daring me to push him away this time.

Maybe we finally got tired of running.

Maybe the monsters between us were tired of the taste of each other.

Perhaps fate was at work.

I let him guide me through the fairgrounds with his arm slung over my shoulders. Leading us right to the only coaster sitting on the edge of nothing. It was beautifully misplaced. “Is this you?” Burton pointed, and his mouth opened wide. “Damn. Really trying to outdo what we did, huh?”

My cheeks turned violently red almost immediately. Looking down, I was hoping no one saw when my boss made his way over to us with a handful of guys in reflective vests and steel-toed boots. “Ready to test out your handiwork?”

He kept smiling and nodding at me like it was code for promotion. Until he found out I was pregnant. Most women didn’t make it far in this world. Now, I was drawing a target on my back for a vacant seat once I take on a maternity leave.

I wanted to enjoy it while I could.

Nodding my head back, I pushed forward while Burton was still attached. Without permission on the platform, he twisted toward my boss, offering his hand. “Burton. Burton Draven.”

“I thought her fiancé’s name was Jameson? He wouldn’t be known, she kept him so hidden.” His face no longer matched his expensive cologne and suit. Confusion wasn’t his best look.

“Must be mistaken. We’re high school sweethearts. Unless she’s cheating on me and you just outed her.”

I and my boss were struck silent and awkwardness swelled around us while the seats came to a halt in front of us.

Burton slapped his shoulder playfully, harder than he probably meant to, when he cut right through the tension. “Just kidding. Mira knows better than to put someone’s life in danger like that. She knows I would comb the phonebook for that fucker. We’re doing things backward. Shotgun wedding, ya know.”

My boss produced a card from the inside pocket of his jacket and fingered it in Burton’s direction. “We should have drinks.”

“Baseball fan?”

“Who isn’t?” he retorted while I watched them bond. More than Jameson ever would, he lacked charm. That used to be why I liked him, no bullshit, but now I see it as something else.

“I’m a pro for Gotham Rogues. I’ll do you one better, we have box seats. Come by anytime.” Shaking their hands in a tight squeeze, they finally concluded their bonding when the guy on the other side of the platform clapped his hands together.

Sliding inside, I took the seat in the middle, leaving the end vacant, after I leaned over into Burton’s space, whispering, “Why did you do that?”

“Make it easier for you when shit is done with Jameson. Like he never existed. It’s okay, you can kiss me now.” He smiled so wide, I saw his teeth.

Only this time, they weren’t filed down and vicious.

I wanted to thank him but apparently perfecting my ability to withhold satisfying others was damn-near perfect. So perfect I forgot how to say thank you and ask for more. Instead, I simply bit down on my smile and forced my eyes forward.

The guy in the reflector vest stopped at each of us, pushing down on the safety features, and combing through my nerves. We were the first people to sit in these seats. I wanted to be two feet on the ground but keeping secrets always outweighed everything else in life.

“Stop. Undo hers. We’re getting off.” Burton’s voice rumbled, and I could hear anger forming, wedging itself between words.

His hand squeezed my thigh while the guy raced to undo the buckle between my legs. Making his voice low and full of depth, he forced me to hear him. “How far are you going to go to protect your secrets, Mira? I’m not letting you get out of this the easy way. Tell me it’s not my baby and you can do whatever you want.”

I wanted to tell him a lie. I wanted to run away. Yet I slipped out of the seat carefully, landing on my feet and holding my hand over my mouth like it would catch all the shame.

Racing down the stairs, I found myself on steady ground again when I saw people pouring in and trucks howling at nothing. Construction around the coaster behind me had begun and I was in the way as I always was when I was younger.

My chest was caving in and rattling on exhale when hands on my shoulders pulled me back, away from the chaos. I let them pull me away until we were nudged under the coaster, right below the second twist where the fence was supposed to go up, and a sign that clearly said *restricted* on it.

Burton never followed the rules, fences or not. He did what he wanted and had everything to prove it worked.

Each step he took, I matched by moving backward when my back hit cold metal between my shoulder blades. I could feel my knees lock, my spine crawl, and the danger of being under the coaster became a real threat.

Burton lived in threats; thrived even.

“Tell me it’s not mine,” he barked so close to my face I felt the heat of his breath leave my features scorned.

He was yelling at me to tell him the baby wasn’t his, but really, he was begging me to tell him differently.

My eyes blurred and flooded until Burton was simply a barrage of marble, black and gold, fitting for a god.

Even one who thought he was a monster.

“Do you want a lie or a truth? I never know with you.” I spat my words out in front of him knowing what kind of insult it was. It was an honest kind that hurt more than lies.

His hand hit the hollow metal behind me until it vibrated against my back. “I want the fucking truth, Mira. This isn’t some kind of game. You don’t get to decide what kind of father or husband I’ll be.”

I sank to my knees when they buckled erratically.

Burton's hand molded against my hip, catching me, pulling me into him and forcing me to look into his sad eyes. His emerald eyes were layered with every emotion he had deprived himself of.

Whimpering, my lips trembled, and I was holding my breath. "Why do you care? We don't work, Burton. A kid isn't going to change that."

A snap later, Burton's hands clutched tight around my shoulders, squeezing so tightly that I felt him squeeze my love for him out of me. "Goddamn it, Mira. This changes everything. I'm not about to be the failure my father was."

My chest ached where my heart should be. "You've never been a failure..." I wasn't sure what else to say when I physically hurt for Burton in a way that only someone who knew his secrets could.

His mouth closed in on mine, wrestling my lips on contact, and his tongue slipped into my mouth.

I could feel my spine bending backward, pushing all of me into him while his hands smoothed down my ass.

I wanted to scream. The exhale I had been waiting for, and all the edging I was doing finally had me right where it wanted me.

In his grasp.

Every touch felt like coming when his hand raced up my spine to curve over my shoulder and fall down my breasts two sizes bigger already. My bra was forcing them up higher and producing more cleavage than I used to have.

His fingers tickled right through the satin material, finding my hard nipples tightening into small buds for him to tease even easier.

The loud sound of smooth metal and cranks filled the air enough to push any sanity from touching us.

His mouth lingered on mine long enough to press against my ear in a husky whisper. "The one thing I don't fail at — making you come all over me."

I moaned at his words, and I felt my whole body go hungry for more. “Stop teasing me. I need you to fuck me.”

Our faces kept rubbing and our bodies vibrated against each other. The space grew between us when his eyes scanned me. His hands stretched out and barely reached me now. “Look at you, you’re shaking. He hasn’t touched you... or made you come.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I squirmed for him. “Keeping up illusions, right? That’s what we’re good at — playing the part. I can’t stop him from touching me.”

“So you stop yourself from coming,” Burton finished my words before I could. He confirmed every way my body was begging for his cock.

Dropping down to his knees, eyes following him while he stained the knees of his sweats with dirt. His hands didn’t ask permission when they forced down the tights I was wearing under my skirt. I could hear the fragile material break out against my legs before he got them down to my ankles with my panties stuck to the inside.

The air caressed my pussy and I clamped my eyes down trying to force myself from coming.

Every part of me was so sensitive I felt my blood bang and pulse through me like a tantrum. “Burton...”

“I know, baby. I know. I’m gonna make your needy little pussy come.”

Burying his face between my legs, I felt his wet tongue lick up my inner thigh until his lips pressed together, blowing delicate air all over my bare pussy. If I wasn’t already a mess, I would have melted into a puddle right in front of him.

Lifting my leg over his muscular shoulder, I watched him force his way between my legs even more. The moment his mouth covered every inch of me and his tongue flicked the bundle of nerves, it felt too good to be true.

Keeping my eyes open was too hard when my fingers smoothed through his hair that was long enough to tug on.

Giving his hair a stiff jerk, I felt his lips close around my clit until I cried out.

We chased pleasure but knew how to enjoy the pain too.

His tongue was lapping up all my wetness when he pulled away just enough to speak into my thighs. “Always so fucking impatient.”

“Hurt me, Burton,” I said it so desperately I almost looked around for another voice not believing it came from me.

I was so used to him asking me to hurt him instead but all the ways I was pretending had caught up with me. I needed to hurt, to punish myself, to feel justified.

Jameson refused to hurt me. Only because he had bigger and better plans for the pain he was delivering.

Emerging from between my legs, Burton stood in front of me, pushing down his sweats just enough to show off the band of his underwear. Groping himself, I watched his hand dive below the band and smooth over every hard inch.

In a husky voice, his mouth pressed against the side of my face. “Hasn’t it been painful enough, baby? We have the battle wounds to show for it. Now it’s time to kiss them better.”

I watched him fuck himself in front of me in this taunting way with my eyes stuck on his hand. It was painful enough without the insults and sharp bite of a razor blade.

“I don’t want to pretend, Burton. I like that part of us. I’m done hiding and pretending I’m some good girl.”

Eyes were fixed on mine and I could see the desire to tell me something, but instead he ate them. Instead he forced me to spin around, his knuckles dragging around my slit, and his tip nudging at me.

Stretching me out with every sinking inch, I felt myself only breathing in exhales, no inhales.

“I want to hear you say it with my cock inside you.”

“Say what, Burton? Don’t stop.” I felt his hips thrust against mine and paused like I had to earn it now.

His chest brushed against my back and his mouth found my neck. “Say it, Mira. Say you know what I am. Say it turns you on.”

Burton was a lot of things. Burton wasn't simply watered down enough to be some clear response. He buried all ten inches of me in me and still wanted to ruin me even though his cock was already doing a perfect job at it.

“You're a psycho. A fucking murder. A monster. My monster...”

“That's right, baby. Your monster. You're going to come all over me now.” His husky voice sang into my ear when his hips continued punishing my pussy with hard thrusts.

I could feel my legs trembling and I let my face lean against the cold metal for stability.

It felt like my whole life had been waiting for this moment. The moment I stopped being the good girl they could abandon or drop off at some firehouse. The moment I stopped pretending and started being the bad girl I tried to bury under good grades, Xanax, and boyfriends who didn't make me come like Burton was about to.

Burton was a monster, but I was something just as bad. Just no one knew it.

“Make me come,” I begged him even though there was no question.

His hands molded against my hips and his thrusts became wild, primal even, when I felt him jerk inside of me. I was strangling him with my tight pussy and my clit was screaming for him.

Holding onto the thick metal pole with nothing to grasp on to, I pushed my ass out further. I helped him fuck me when his hand smoothed up under my shirt. Teasing my nipples, his fingers pinched down on the hard buds sending a shock down my spine.

My whole body shuddered and shivered from the pleasure I didn't want to end.

“Coming isn’t optional, baby. You’re going to come all over me and I’m going to come inside this tight little pussy.” His voice was filled with breathless pauses and hushed moans that pushed me over the edge.

The roller coaster above us only got louder when the gush of wind seemed to steal my breath as it sped through the tracks above us. Looking up, I watched the fierceness of it try to compete with Burton inside of me.

Nothing compared.

As the ride passed, I finally realized that I couldn’t hold my breath any longer, so I moaned out and did exactly as he said. Come. My pussy tightened around him and I could feel my body still while I did what he told me to do.

My legs shook under me as both my hands clung to the pole. “You fucking asshole. I could have gone longer.”

Laughing behind me, I felt his cock still pumping into me from behind, his hands smoothing up my chest until he found my neck. Closing his hand around my throat, I felt him jerk inside me, hardening even more than he was when I felt his hips pick up speed.

“I’m not done with you. Did you think you were only coming once?” Grunting behind me, bending at the hips in an exhausted way that begged for more but knew I couldn’t handle it. “You’ll come every damn time I tell you to. Isn’t that, right? Because I’m your monster. Now come again, baby.”

My pussy was a fucking slave to his husky voice when I felt myself clench and shudder for him again.

Burton Draven used to be the bane of my existence, but now, he was heaven on earth until we were sentenced to hell.

Pulling himself away from me, I felt his hands run down my trembling legs as he fumbled for his sweats that clung to his legs. Recovering, the roller coaster went by us again, in a rush of wind and the violence of metal scraping metal while I stood up. Letting my back fall into the pole, I tried to catch my breath but failed.

Every part of me was still pulsing, raging, and trying to decide if I wanted him to demand I come again.

“I’ve been proving everyone wrong. Everyone except you. You never wanted me to prove anything. Why don’t you want anything from me?” His voice was laced, full of little holes you could barely see, only hear.

I didn’t have an answer. All I knew was Burton was a monster, and if I didn’t want to be a monster too, then we couldn’t be together.

There was a reason the devil didn’t keep angels around. He only fucked their halo off before sentencing them to Hell.

I was angry. Hell, I was contemplating killing Jameson to snuff out the feeling. I wasn’t angry enough to not regret it later.

Like that night in college when I almost killed that frat asshole for hurting Burton’s sister.

Jameson saved me from regretting it by claiming responsibility and not judging me for it.

“Because we don’t even know what we look like without our masks. We have no idea who those people are. We’ve been using each other as glue, Burton. We’ve been patching ourselves up and still playing pretend in our lives. One of us will run... because what’s under these masks is too scary to let anyone see and that pain won’t be something I can outlive.”

I was scared shitless of trying with Burton.

I was terrified that he would finally see all my faults, all the cracks in my surface, and realize my parents had the right idea about leaving me behind.

Rejected by Burton was far worse than the pretty perfection I was trying to be. For everyone else’s sake.

“Bullshit,” his voice barked loudly in my face. “You know exactly who I am. There’s no secrets, Mira. I’m the monster who killed my own father for wanting to fuck you. We’ve been patching ourselves up with each other because we have no fucking relief in our miserable lives. You want real? It’s right

here. It's fucking messy, ugly, sometimes terrible. That doesn't change how right it feels when I'm with you. Fuck being perfect, fuck what people want from us. All I want is you."

His words felt like a gag when the ball in my throat bobbed and I went mute.

He didn't realize how perfect he was. Right here and now. Perfect, just not perfect for me, and that broke my heart far worse than I could ever admit.

"I'm sorry..." I whimpered.

Rushing toward me, his hands grabbed on to me like he was losing me. "Sorry? That's all I get, Mira? A fucking sorry? Let's not pretend you aren't carrying my baby. You can't run and push me away anymore. It's not that easy."

"I'm still engaged, Burton. That hasn't changed. What am I supposed to tell him?"

His abused lips were more pink than normal and taunting me with the closeness. "That I was just inside you, baby. Tell him you came all over my dick and if you weren't already pregnant, I would have spilled every fucking last drop inside you because you'll always be mine."

"I won't be a pawn, Burton, in whatever sick game this is with him."

"No, you're going to be the poison that kills him for me. Nothing left between us, nowhere to hide, no reason to run." His lips nearly grazed mine, his breath still hot on my skin and my sensitive clit wept for more.

Burton was promising to eradicate everything stopping us from being together and I couldn't fight it anymore.

Monsters belonged with monsters.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MIRA

Instead of driving back with my boss, listening to him glide through all his accomplishments, I let Burton drive me back to the city. We sat there for most of the ride in silence, letting our monsters be off leash and our hands grabbing at each other like it wasn't enough.

You could drown in Burton and it still wouldn't be enough to kill you.

You could never be satisfied when it came to him.

"What are we going to do?" I twisted enough in the seat to almost face him.

"I've told you, Mira. He's going to die and you're going to help me do it." His eyes were fixed on the road, his jaw square and his body relaxed. No sign of sarcasm in sight.

Normal people would joke. Not Burton. When he marked you for death, that was what you were getting, an unmarked grave or an accident no one could question.

"That's exactly what he wants — for you to fight back."

The car picked up speed, weaving in and out of lanes, cutting people off so effortlessly when I finally pulled the seatbelt across my lap.

There was no sarcasm because death didn't scare Burton. He lived for it.

When he didn't slow down, I let my hand wrap around his forearm, squeezing before calling out his name, "Burton. Slow down."

Crossing four lanes of cars to get off the exit at the last second, he finally came to a slow stop at the red light. Letting his head drop and staring into me. "It doesn't matter how tough you are. Everyone falters when it comes to dying. It doesn't matter if he's gunning for me, he'll still piss himself when I say so."

“He’s your brother.”

His entire body flexed and tensed before sitting up right, shoving his face into mine. “Don’t you ever fucking say that shit to me again. He’s nobody but a second runner-up.”

I wasn’t sure what actually set him off: the word *brother* or that we knew why they were so alike.

I kept my mouth closed the rest of the ride until he pulled up alongside the curb of the apartment I shared with Jameson. Share was a loose term since he was never home and only slept and showered here. We didn’t watch movies or enjoy dinners anymore. All that changed when he took this new job.

Now I knew exactly why without him confessing.

He was running a sex club secretly.

My attentive, caring yet not sweet boyfriend turned into an illusion. Part of me believed I made him up, someone who could rival the memories of Burton. Every morning, I would roll into his spot left empty but warm, and I knew he was real.

I got out of the car without so much as a goodbye kiss from Burton. Pushing the door open, I twisted around until my feet hit the sidewalk. When I went to stand up, I felt his hand drag me right back down. “Don’t do anything stupid thinking you’re protecting me, Mira. I paid a heavy price the last time you thought you were saving me.”

I sat there, soaking up his words, before I got out of his sports car and headed up the stoop that led to a building with apartments filling the inside.

I wanted to save Burton but that was before I realized he was what I always needed. He never needed saving, he was reflecting back how much I did.

Good girls didn’t summon monsters.

Good girls didn’t down Xanax to get through the day.

Good girls didn’t keep monsters as pets and demons as fiancés.

Everything changed that night at Hell Mouth in that field when Burton fucked the virgin out of me. Everything shifted again when he made me come on demand just as a viciously as the ride a few feet from our heads. That place had a way of making Halloween last forever, everyone being their worst and it being okay.

No more good girl. I wasn't some little girl afraid to be abandoned anymore. I was a woman who needed to take control back.

When I pushed open the sticky door to our loft, I wasn't surprised when Jameson wasn't there. We were passing ships and at the time I was thankful for him not noticing I'm pregnant. Now I was annoyed that his absence was fueled by secrets and lies.

The familiar chime rang through the air when my head snapped to my left, following the sound into the small cut out where Jameson placed a small desk. One he hadn't used since he stopped working from a laptop.

Ambling over to the desk, I stood in front of it so still like it was a bomb that might go off at any moment.

His computer.

I wanted to race over to it, crack up the spine, and thumb through his emails, but this felt like a trap. Maybe it was how I was conditioned or how much I never belonged that made me hum with caution.

Trying to talk myself into taking a quick look, I heard Burton's words echo like a well-formed threat. I was the reason he was put on trial yet I was still inching closer, determined to right that wrong too when I slipped into the cozy office chair.

His screen illuminated a password entry, one I didn't know or have when I rifled through his desk unapologetically like it would be stuck to a post-it for me to find too.

After I came up empty, I kicked my shoes off and propped my leg up in the chair with me trying to think my way around

it. Jameson was too smart for it to be as simple as password and too deviant for it to not be personal.

Pulling out my phone from the bag I dropped beside me, I googled his dad. All I had to do was type in serial killer, nurses, and life in prison before images and articles flooded my screen.

Jameson Kendrick was really *Jameson Barclay* according to his father's last name.

I tried his dad's name and sentencing date first, then moved onto his mother — all failing. Then I tried *Draven*, the married name of the woman who gave him life. Then rejected him for the perfect family image in Trinity behind the white picket fence.

The screen loaded up and his desktop populated in access granted when I saw files lining his desktop so neatly it felt sinful. Each one with a name I recognized. Even Holmes had a blue folder sitting there taunting me with more information I didn't have.

Picking up my phone, I snapped a photo of his computer, too scared to send myself anything and tip him off.

Double tapping the mousepad on the laptop, I let the internet pop up, taking up the entire screen and opening on a website with animated gates. I watched them open, words appearing and the invitation I wasn't supposed to see, all too clear now.

Torture Gardner, his cushy job that forced him into a night owl, was throwing a VIP party. One I was planning on crashing.

I was determined to see the vile version of Jameson everyone else saw. The version that kept being related to Burton a secret. The version that pretended to not know Mrs. Draven before crashing dinner and introducing himself. The version that Burton was willing to kill.

I felt the Stockholm syndrome course through my veins, corrupting every part of me screaming to run with all the proof. Yet, I couldn't decide which side of the war I was on.

All the proof I had wasn't enough. Not yet.

There was only one problem: I didn't have a membership but I knew someone who did. Holmes... The future Mrs. Wolfgang and the one person I had pushed further away than Burton.

She almost asked me to start a support group for loving serial killers and I had shot her down. Now I wondered if it was because I was a bitch, scared of wanting people and them rejecting me, or simply avoiding being Burton's so much I refused to support anyone loving walking-talking-cruelty like them.

It was a long shot when I typed out a new message to Holmes, begging her to forgive me and help me all in a few sentences.

I felt like a true hostage with a small window of hope and screaming for anyone to help me survive. Everything about it was impossible.

Holmes: Vane said he brainwashed you. I told him you're a bitch like that.

I wasn't even sure how to respond when my fingers typed on their own, words vomiting up everything like a confession in a diary. I had told Holmes everything and not once did she judge me as I judged her.

She knew all this time I was the one who called the police and didn't tell a soul. I knew I could trust Holmes with my life even if we were some Unholy Trinity fan club.

Texting another quick message to meet me at the club in an hour, I tossed my phone on the bed and swung the door open of my closet. Searching for everything that would hide who I am, just enough to slip through the entrance.

Slipping into a black dress short enough kept me from wearing it any time before I knew it was perfect. It fell right below my ass showing off my long legs I wasn't ashamed of. I wasn't drop-dead gorgeous but I had legs models would die for.

Stopping to look at myself in the mirror sitting against the wall, I fixed my blonde bob wig, making sure none of my mousey brown hair was showing. None of me was showing. Only my monster.

Smirking at the sight of myself, the most accurate reflection of myself I had ever seen, I felt the power spike my spine straight. Suddenly, all the self-doubt, all the insecurity, all the ways I was determined to stay meek and human faded into the floor below me.

Anger seemed to hold my hand, guiding me toward the door, and whispering to burn my old life down to prove I wasn't a pawn in anyone's game.

Not Burton's.

Not Jameson's.

And I was tired of relying on my words to make it clear.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BURTON

I made the taxi driver run up the meter while I waited for Holmes to arrive when I saw a huge SUV pull up along the opposite curb. Idling there, I couldn't make out anything through the pitch-black window until the door cracked open and she slipped down.

Throwing a few twenty-dollar bills in the slit where money was supposed to go, I forcefully pushed it all against my palm. I yanked on the door handle, letting my velvet boots stomp onto the curb as I got out of the car with my head held high.

My monster was in control now and Mira was dead.

Mira couldn't do what I planned to do. I learned that in college when it came down to killing someone, how easily I scrambled for excuses and hoped he was alive. Then I tried again but failure forced me to call the cops instead.

Be the hero because being the villain was something I couldn't commit to.

Holmes caught up to me, climbing each step, and pulling back the sleeves on her black sweater to show off a small tattoo on her wrist. I had never noticed it before until on display I focused on the words.

Use the window...

The delicate cursive made it ominous and I immediately wanted to ask what it meant.

The two bodyguards parted just enough to let me follow through the door. I felt his hand squeeze my biceps when he held me back from straying too far. "Are you vouching for her?"

Holmes turned around, her baby bump blending in so well it felt like a secret. "She's with me. Give her the mark."

The mark I questioned.

The big guy on the left who still had a firm grip on me produced a stamp and held it in the air like I was supposed to direct him where to put it. Showing him my neck, I let my head twist and fall to the side enough to expect pressure from the stamp.

As his hand pulled away, branding my monster with whatever logo I couldn't see, I snatched his bicep in the air. Preventing him from escaping my wrath I spoke up, "No one touches me. Do you think someone vouched for me, big guy?"

"You got a mouth on you, huh? That's always the first thing to go after a night in here." His words were leather, tough and edgy.

"This isn't Disney Land for adults. Everyone here is a demon."

Her warning would not be heeded, not tonight anyway.

If I was a pawn in his game, then this was the game board and the pieces cluttering our abilities to make decisions were feelings. I wanted to make him feel stupid when he walked right by me. He mistook my demon for his angel, and I wanted it to hurt when he realized he had fucked with the wrong person.

It didn't matter what my last name was; I was liable to hurt either way.

The club was full of people dressed up in beautiful dresses and the men wore suits. But the girls taking drink orders wore skimpy outfits that showed off every asset they had. You could tell they were hungry and hunting for kinks to feast on, something I didn't know you could be.

Was I hungry and hunting?

Nothing made sense when I told Holmes I would meet her back at the bar in exactly two hours. That gave me enough time to find answers, find blackmail, and find Jameson so I could rub his face in it.

"Be careful. Even Vane wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole." Holmes's hand reached out and touched my arm carefully.

“That’s because Burton would kill him. Jameson is his to kill.” I smiled when I spoke, softly enough to be considered friendly even though my words were sharp.

We were both in love with killers, but that didn’t make us some support group. My behavior was as bad as Burton’s, and we all wanted Holmes to stay away. Far enough away to save herself.

I watched her face drip down into worry when I leaned in, whispering, “I’m the reason Burton is a monster. I’m just as terrible as him. I drew the curses after us in blood, Holmes, so I don’t need warnings. This is my chance to make it right. He deserves that much.”

I chose wrong. I called the cops. I rejected him every time he tried to tell me he was the one for me. Everything I could do wrong, I did.

I had to make things right.

Holmes didn’t back away, instead she smiled devilishly at me. “My hands aren’t clean, Mira. Vane didn’t corrupt me, he just made me realize I always had a demon in me. Two hours, that’s it. If I sense any trouble, I’ll speed dial Burton. Don’t try me.”

Holmes was a living, breathing Wednesday Adams. Only, she blinked; and when she did, your soul caved in. I believed every threat that came from her mouth.

Scampering off, she left me at the bar when a bartender with no shirt on, a shit ton of eyeliner and suspenders asked me what I was drinking.

Looking down at the bump I had hidden well, I shifted my eyes upward, locking them on him. “I’m here for Kendrick. He said to wait in his office.”

Steeling my voice,, I waited for the answer like I was already annoyed he needed to breathe between words.

After sizing me up, squinting at me and coming up empty, he slid a card across the bar in front of me. “Elevator to the third floor. Last office down the hall. Next time, come in the back door and avoid wasting my time, sweetheart.”

So this happens a lot.

Not only was Jameson Kendrick a piece of garbage, but he was also a cheating piece of shit.

Taking the key card off the bar top, I bit my tongue until it hurt enough to force me to swallow my own hurtful words. My monster had a short fuse and I wasn't wasting time in jail over some bartender. All my anger was reserved for Jameson.

Shoving my thumb into the elevator buttons, I waited for the doors to open before I stepped inside. There was a keypad inside next to the button that forced the elevator up to the third floor. Jameson had a layer of security that screamed secrets and lies.

Pressing the keycard against the pad, I waited for the small light to turn green before poking the button labeled with a three. My whole body danced with anticipation, with nerves, with unspoken anger, and rage that wanted to make me like Burton.

By the time the doors opened, I was high on my own intoxication. I was almost foaming at the mouth.

The third floor seemed empty and so quiet when I noticed the soft glow coming from down the hall. Following the light, the floor glowed, making it clear someone was here.

My heart picked up speed the closer I got to the frosted glass door and my ears perked up to the sound of breathy moans.

The wasted nerves I had seemed to evaporate when I pushed the door open. My fiancé aka Burton's brother was sitting on a couch with his hand tangled in some woman's hair. Her face was buried in his lap and she was gagging on his cock, making it difficult to see her expression.

I stood there, waiting for him to notice me when his eyes finally skated back down and his head picked up from hanging off the edge. More annoyed than anything, his voice was out of breath when he spoke. "I'm busy, get out."

I wanted to blow my cover, but instead, I dug my fingernails into my palms. I bit my tongue to keep the disguise

from slipping.

Standing there awkwardly, I finally took another step until I was dropping to my knees in front of him too. I ironed out my eyebrows so my face became smooth when my hands touched the woman deep-choking my fiancé.

“Two is always better than one...” I spoke so softly I could barely hear myself.

“Only if you stop watching.”

Pushing her mouth back down on him, I forced her to stay there while he assessed the damage. My monster choked her with him and it was hard to feel bad even though she was fighting for a chance to breathe.

Looking at me like I was a mystery he couldn't solve, he sat up, turned on by death fucking her right on his lap. “That's enough. Ophelia, leave us.”

She struggled to get to her feet when Jameson pushed her hands off his thighs. My eyes followed her when I realized I knew her name. She was the model-like beauty who came to dinner with Burton the night we announced our engagement.

Jameson used everything Burton touched as a weapon. He didn't want him to pay, he wanted his whole life handed to him.

“Do you think she tries as hard for you as she does for Burton?” The words escaped my mouth before I could take them back.

Still kneeling on the ground where Jameson had left me, I looked up at him like the dead man he was.

“Oh, Mira, is that you? Under all that pathetic?”

Getting to my feet, I pulled the wig off, realizing there was no divide between my monster and myself. We were the same, stuck with each other.

I tried my whole life to erase the parts of me that could make people walk away, because my parents never looked back not realizing I was only hurting myself. I was getting rid of everything but the meek and weak parts that were easier to

swallow. The monstrous parts of me were meant for anyone to swallow.

They kept me from being prey the way I was for Jameson.

“Let’s avoid the dramatics. What do you want and what do I have to do in order for you to crawl off the ledge somewhere tall?” The parts of me I kept separated were finally bleeding into one.

I watched him light the end of a cigar from behind his desk, laughing. “Now why would I do that? I’m not going anywhere until Burton has nothing, the same way I had nothing.”

“He’s been hiding his whole life just like you. You got off lucky,” I snapped back, defending Burton.

Laughing even more, he closed his mouth around the cigar, stifling the response, until he was ready. “Hiding? He’s never hidden a day in his life, Mira. He does whatever he wants and gets away with it. While everyone else is forced to hide, to lie, to steal, and to cheat because the game has always been rigged. The world bows down before people like him. Praising everything he is. Who worships the ones who make their own luck?” He paused for a moment before continuing, “No one, but don’t worry, I’m gonna change that.”

“With a sex club and million-dollar memberships?”

“No, Mira, by forcing him to beg for it all back. Worship starts with one person on their knees.”

Standing up, the dim lights scattered against his chest, illuminating a mess of scars I had never noticed before. I knew Jameson had scars but we had never fucked with the lights on enough to let me see them.

Looking down at himself before buttoning his shirt, paying me no mind at all. “Those? Just a trophy of rejection. Pretty, huh?”

“You don’t have to do this. Burton had no idea you existed,” I argued, knowing it was useless. Jameson was hellbent on getting revenge and me being a pawn didn’t matter. Only stopping him did.

Moving around the desk, he stopped in front of me, staring at me like I was only garbage. “He always knew I existed. He just didn’t care until I stopped losing.”

“What about me? I never did anything to you.” I felt my voice tremble enough to break all focus on being tough.

Maybe because it was a lie. I had hurt him, he just didn’t know it yet.

His fingers caught my chin, holding my face up, and my eyes were fixed on his haunting ones. “I was waiting for our wedding night to ruin your life. When it would hurt the most. You really believe I didn’t see you fucking him in his truck that night? You think I don’t know you drove to some abandoned house to murder someone? You think I couldn’t fucking taste him on you the night we announced our engagement?”

His voice was a dagger and he had pushed the sharp edge right through me.

I was at fault. Maybe not as much as Mrs. Draven but I was as much part of the rejection Jameson was fighting against.

The apology I didn’t say out loud sat on my tongue like a weight keeping me from speaking. I earned the punishment and I would take it like the prize I had won. We all deserved it.

Parental rejection was a feeling I knew more than I wanted to and no pain could ever compare with it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BURTON

No one ever knocked on my door. The absence of a welcome mat here made me almost invisible, which was appreciated.

Until it was two in the morning and the knocking lasted long enough to force me out of bed. Despite my yelling for them to leave from the comfort of my own bed, they were too far away to hear me.

When I finally ambled down the stairs and pushed down on the door handle enough to let the door fall open, I stood there, rubbing my eyes against the flood of lights.

Mira.

Mira held a wig with her face stained with tears.

Mira the meek seemed different now. More like the girl who wasn't afraid to pick up a straight blade, cut me deep and call me a pussy for wincing.

Something was supposed to break her tonight, but she refused to let it. Instead she let the disappointment of people fan the flames I always knew she had surrounding her.

Finally, she remembered that monsters could only be summoned by monsters. I didn't show up this brutal. I was made into something capable of protecting her, and now I was no different.

Immediately wrapping my arms around her, pulling her limp body into my chest, and forcing her to cling to me too. "Like you mean it, Mira. Don't pretend to be tough."

Her hands smoothed across my back, looking for something to hold on to when I wasn't wearing a shirt. Her fingers dipped into the waistband, tugging it away from my every muscle, and her mouth was hungry for mine.

"I don't want to talk. I want to do what we do best." Her voice broke into pieces, and I could feel one of them stabbing

me right in the heart.

Whatever was supposed to break her did after all. Just not enough to win.

My arms around her body, I dragged her inside and let the door slam behind her. “Then we won’t talk.” I forced my voice to be a gentle whisper. Something I wasn’t good at and it had been keeping me up at night.

How was I supposed to raise someone fragile if I couldn’t be gentle?

Bending down only enough to throw her over my shoulder I made my way to the stairs. With every step, I could feel her trying to bury her small laugh each time her skirt rose higher. By the time I reached the landing, her entire ass was showing when I struck her ass with my palm.

After opening my bedroom door, I dropped her down on my bed, getting lost in the cloud-like blankets and sinking into them. “What do we do best, baby?” I asked her, wanting her to say something different than the truth.

What we did best was hurt each other and fuck until we wondered what pain was. Right now, I wanted her to admit no one loved each other like we did.

That was ours.

Sitting up, her legs hanging off the edge, I got down on my knees and watched her struggle to form a response. Thick tears ran down her face and her lips looked dry like she had been crying her whole way here. The sight of her hurt by anyone but me made my fists tense and the violence in me woke me up.

“Just love me, Burton. That’s all I want.”

Pushing my face up, I let my lips gracefully touch hers until she kissed me back with more than her lips. Her tongue bullied mine until I opened my mouth wider and her voice moaned into mine.

“I can’t just love you. It’s impossible. This will never be just about love. This is too ugly, too painful, and it has more

unpleasant parts than pleasant ones. We have to fight through it because it's worth fighting for. You're worth fighting for."

I could feel her back arch, pushing her chest into mine, and her hands smoothed down my face like she was trying to engrave the memory into her mind. Everything felt too vulnerable the way our hands were moving slowly and carefully.

The darkness surrounding us only amplified our monsters. Any traces of masks were removed from our skin. We weren't running and hiding anymore.

Mira's hands dropped down between us, pushing my boxer briefs down my thighs to show me how needy she was. Her whole body shook with anticipation and her mouth nipped at mine so much I latched my hand on the back of her neck, forcing her to stay close.

My tongue swiped at her lips, prying her mouth open, and letting our tongues wrestle like teenagers. Letting her struggle to push my boxers down far enough to grasp every inch of me, I laughed into her mouth.

Finally pulling away and releasing her neck, I yanked at the band until my cock fell out between us. Every inch of me was stiff enough to ache and throb for her without trying.

Mira never needed to try. She needed only to look in my direction. I was already fantasizing about being between her legs, deep enough to touch her soul, and long enough to feel saved.

That's what Mira did, kill me to save me later. Our lives were stuck in a vicious cycle of being what damned us and what saved us, as if we were simultaneously in heaven and hell.

"Fuck me like I'm worth fighting for," her breathy voice trailed out in a moan.

Slipping my hands up her legs, I felt for the lacy material of her panties before latching my fingertips inside and dragging them down her long legs. Discarding them over my

shoulder, I bit my way up her leg, holding her ankle in a firm grasp and licking her wounds as I made them.

Killing and saving.

By the time my mouth had bit her inner thigh, I could see exactly how wet she was, a mess for me.

Letting my fingers carefully pull her pussy open, I watched her drip for me, her tight pussy too excited to be stretched for me. “This is the painful part, baby. You want to give up?”

I kneeled on the bed, forcing her back against the sheets, and pushing my way between her legs until I fit perfectly. Guiding myself between her legs my tip bullied her pussy until she was stretched enough to let me slip inside.

Strangling me with her thighs, I kept pushing until I exhaled when every inch of me was inside of her.

Shaking her head, fisting the sheets and holding her breath, I watched her torture herself. She enjoyed every painful part like my own personal glutton for punishment. That was what made us different. We liked the bad parts just as much as the good ones.

“Just like that, baby. Every inch of me.”

Her hands curling into the sheets loosened enough to glide over my abs, up to my chest, and suddenly her small fists crashed against my muscles like a threat.

“I hate you. I hate you for this.” Her voice trembled along with her bottom lip while she tried to bleed out every pent-up disadvantage life had handed her. Finally, Mira was cracking. Her monster would be the only part of her left and I was responsible.

Letting my hips find a rhythm, I collided with her repeatedly while her hands scratched, hit and punched me.

“I can take it. Make it hurt, baby girl.”

I could take anything Mira threw at me. Not because I deserved it but because I knew she was worth it.

By the time her arms got tired, she was sobbing. Letting my callous hands smooth up her arms until our fingers laced above her head, I dropped my face down into her neck, trailing kisses along her flawless skin. My mouth ate every tear like it could fuel my fight for the next decade when her voice moaned again.

“What if we don’t deserve better?”

Pushing my hand over her mouth, I kept my face pressed against hers, lips rubbing against her face and my voice so low it felt insulting. “You think you deserve better than me? You had boring and you still couldn’t help yourself. Your pussy wept for me the same way it is right now around my dick, soaking... fucking... wet... Whatever we deserve, this is it, baby. Now stop killing my hard-on.”

Keeping my hand from muffling any snarky retort, I felt her relax under me. Her legs tangled in mine, forcing me deeper inside her than I already was.

I could hear muffled moans choking out against my palm still covering her mouth, and her tongue swiping across my skin as she tried to break free.

Mira Eckland was never meant to be free of me.

Fitting perfectly between her legs, I kept thrusting my hips into her wet pussy, slipping in and out effortlessly. Too effortlessly, my hips picked up speed and became relentlessly punishing.

Tightening like a vise, she was begging me to let her milk every drop from my cock without saying one slutty word or harsh dig at my ego.

She didn’t need to say a thing. She had finally stopped overthinking and let herself feel.

“Just like that, baby. Take every inch. Say it, Mira. Let me hear you say it.”

The one thing she had never admitted.

The one thing I knew she wouldn’t lie about.

The one thing I needed her to say before I became a dad and killed the one person on this earth who hurt her without my permission. If I was going to jail, I needed her to give me something to hold on to.

Taking my hand away, I soaked up her long drawn-out moan that seemed like an exhale on the buildup. She was close to coming and I hadn't even abused her pussy.

“What?” Her muffled voice seemed faint.

Licking her lips, I stared down at her, all my weight in my palms against the bed and hovering above her. “Don't play dumb, Mira. We both know you're smarter than that.”

Smiling playfully around another moan, she fixed her eyes on mine. “I've always known what to say... I love you, Burton.”

Instantly, all the turmoil raging inside of me subsided. One I couldn't hear anymore, not with Mira under me purring that she loved me while her pussy squeezed me tighter.

Nothing was about to change who I was, not after all the lives I had taken and all the apologies I never said, but I felt brand new. Enough to pretend my past would not bleed all over the life I wanted with Mira and our child.

Imagining this new life I never thought I could have while I thrust inside of her, stretching her and forcing her to squeeze me in place while I spilled everything inside her like I was getting rid of the curse I carried.

Every.

Last.

Drop.

Everything changed in a way no one could undo when I swayed my hips, burying myself in her and watching her come undone for me. Mira threw her arm over her face, biting herself and stifling the moan of relief when she came all over me.

Falling next to her, I pulled her into me, not ready to let any distance between us just yet. Hiding her face in the crook

of my arm, I watched her try to regain composure the way she was used to. This was the control she needed to always have a grasp on, and manipulate until she had more power.

Mira was a product of abandonment, and I was a product of needing to be the only person who never left her.

I stared at the growing bump after she fell asleep, whispering to it and letting my hand mold against the roundness. Instead of sleeping, I formed bonds I could not have with anyone but Mira. The desire to be the dad outweighed every pitfall in my personality.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

BURTON

Carefully, not to wake Mira beside me, before I slipped out of bed for a practice I couldn't miss. I was still showing up for games but skipping the practices and avoiding my teammates after the death of the pain in my ass.

It didn't help I skipped the memorial too.

And the pre-game in his honor.

My personality already left a lot to be desired, and now I was single-handedly the most hated player instead of the most valuable.

The back parking lot was full when I pulled in and parked as far away as possible. It was my way of getting away from people before I was dragged into endless conversations or invitations I would never accept. Distance was always my weapon of choice. Having a bat in my hand hurt more.

Grabbing my gym bag from the passenger seat, I slung it over my shoulder and made my way inside the locker room. I was expecting their worst in the comfort of the big door and our coach was nowhere in sight. I didn't need his protection.

I still needed to know what he meant when he claimed to be like me, unfazed by death and all the accidents that came with being someone like me. That was a mystery for another day when I yanked on the door handle and walked into a full room.

Ambling to my locker, I tossed my bag on the bench, the same spot he landed and bled out. Staring at the spot, I had lost track of what I was doing when a towel slapped against my face.

“Don't pretend that it wasn't your fault.” One of my teammates, Weissen, made sure his voice bellowed loud enough for everyone to pay attention. The exact way he wanted everyone to.

Everyone paid attention, staring at me like I was a monster they could see. Everyone looked at each other like a planned attack was heading my direction, a way to get even instead of dead like he was.

Standing my ground, I continued unzipping my bag, rifling through my things and feeling for my bat behind me. Wrapping my fingers around the handle I slowly forced it by my side in case things went sideways and I had to defend myself.

I was actively trying to avoid jail. I needed to raise my kid and protect Mira in ways she couldn't protect herself.

Snapping up right, I stood up tall, bringing my bat to the front of me and letting their insults become annoyances instead. I was ready to let them roll over my shoulder. I forced everything to fade into background noise. I knew myself too well, if I let it, I would kill anyone without hesitation.

Our coach opened the door, keeping his hand wrapped around the edge and scanning the room like it was an attack.

Everyone was changing, getting ready for the game, and yet their attention was focused on me. Bullying my personal space, pointing fingers, they just didn't have pitchforks.

"Son, put down the bat. It's not going to come to that." Coach's raspy voice sounded like a command I had no choice but to listen to. "And you, motherfuckers, get back to focusing on yourselves. If it wasn't for Burton, we wouldn't have even found him until hours later when there was nothing we'd be able to do. You should be thanking him."

Still standing there, he waited until the huddle of them broke apart, coughing as the only warning we were getting before he acted.

Coach played no games. Suddenly I felt stupid for not seeing how much he was like me in these moments of throwing his authority around.

He was vicious in a way that left no room for error or questions.

"Get on the fucking field. Now."

Everyone picked up the pace, rushing to be ready, and forgetting their mission to make my life hell. Once I was alone in the locker room, I still stared at the floor, the stain still tainting the hardwood floors and my guilty conscience.

He was my only fatality that was an accident. I didn't do accidents.

Buttoning my jersey, I left it hanging there while I stripped out of my sweatpants and fished out the cherry red socks rolled neatly behind me in my locker. I wasn't aiming for perfection today. I was trying to get through this game with a team plotting my murder.

Tucking the thin gold chain into my jersey I never took off, I made sure there was no trace of it. No one ever saw past my personality to ask me about it. Not that I was freely telling people it belonged to Mira's mother.

Her old house sat there, vacant yet filled with the life before us, and I couldn't help but break in.

I would escape the tyranny of my own family by slipping into the house she grew up in. Sitting in her room, soaking up everything I could until it felt like she could be no one else's.

The necklace was sitting in a ceramic dish by itself like it held more significance. Anything that meant anything to Mira, I wanted to steal and force her to love me to get it back.

She never saw it on me, hiding it under other chains and my bad attitude.

I had spaced out enough to hear the quiet that meant the national anthem was playing and players were lined up respectfully. All but me when I made the move to head out onto the field.

The crowd was producing enough energy to silence everything else under the harsh lights making every imperfection on the field obvious if you knew what to look for. My coach had his arms crossed, a smug expression that demanded respect and wins, when he waved the clipboard as my signal to warm up.

Picking up the chain I had left outside the dugout in a neat pile, I wrapped it around my hand until I felt my hand choke up. I needed that self-inflicted pain to perform the way I did. Success was my visceral reaction.

I could hear my name faintly enough to be sure if I was losing my mind when I scanned the crowd for a familiar face. My sister was leaning over the rail enough to go over it with a beer in her hand and wearing an expression I knew all too well.

She was trashed.

My sister who was so proud to be sober was trashed at my game, screaming my name, and quickly becoming an embarrassment as I quickly glared at her with enough pissed off in my eyes to pin her down.

Still gripping the chain around my knuckles, I made my way to the wall. I looked up at my sister in the stands, waiting for her to spew slurred words my way.

“Burton, Burton, I made it! This is my sexy, sexy friend.” She said it while pawing at her like she was some commodity instead of a friend.

I knew this bit all too well too. It was something my sister and I had been doing our whole lives once we were old enough to realize what sexual attraction was.

She knew I wanted her best friend so she made the extra effort to produce hot friends for me to fuck instead. It was a pity fuck out of respect until she presented Mira with guys to distract her. After that, everything went out the window and all mutual respect dissolved.

But that was kid's games. She knew it was a much more dangerous game now.

“What are you doing here?” I let my voice become hostile for me.

I wanted to shout about her broken sobriety but instead I left that bullet for my kill shot, the one that would ruin her and push her into a week long bender before begging me to help her sober up.

Nothing had changed since college. Only Mira not being there to see it while she built her new life void of us.

“You need to get over her, Burton. I’m providing options.” Her whole body leaned over the rail, enough to shock her nervous system trying to protect her, and her plastic cup fell to the ground in a splat.

I felt like I was made of stone, a cold, hard stone. Every muscle was tense enough to crack with the right blow. “You’re fucking—” I cut myself off and dropped my voice down so people couldn’t eavesdrop as easily. “Wasted. What happened to all the progress? All the fucking rehab I paid for. All the shit I did for you.”

I wanted to rip her down by her hair and force her into the spotlight the way she used to love. Before she used her body as a trashcan.

“Shut up. That’s none of anyone’s business. I’m grown and can make my own decisions. Maybe if you and Mom didn’t use me as a fucking puppet, I would be normal.”

Puppet.

Grown.

Years of sobriety down the drain.

We grew up in the same home wearing the same last name like a curse instead of a genetic predisposition like most people thought. We had to fight harder, lie better, and abuse perfection into being a verb instead of an adjective.

The Draven name was strings and we were puppets but it wasn’t an excuse.

“Was it Thatcher?” I asked, knowing he didn’t have the balls to betray me like that.

She refused to answer, causing whatever sanity I had left to break off and the obvious crack in my composure pissed me off. I worked hard at keeping myself level, hiding my monster, pretending to be normal and she ruined that with her silence.

Dropping the chain next to me, I wrapped my hand around the rail and pulled myself up. I let my feet climb the side, the

bench, and rails to reach her bad attitude. “Fucking answer me when I ask you a question, Emma.”

I could feel her flinch in my grasp when I finally jumped over the rails. I could hear my coach screaming behind me, my team glaring at the dramatics, and the ref’s whistle blowing some penalty.

Nodding her head up and down, she confirmed it was Thatcher without having to admit it.

Emma Draven never admitted anything. She never had to. She escaped all punishments by letting people assume the worst in others.

She was putting a nail in his coffin without realizing it. Normally she was too trashed to realize exactly how much she was condemning victims to keep herself guilt free.

“Fuck you.” Her voice stifled around all those messy emotions. Those pesky emotions I rarely had but I knew anger and self-doubt. That’s what she drowned in when she lashed out.

I knew from personal experience that her lashing out wasn’t contained to a simple fuck you. There was more coming, enough to slaughter you where you stood.

She knew I could take whatever she wanted to throw my way.

Leaning back over the railing, she whistled loud enough to get the attention of almost everyone when my team was behind me scuffing at my family drama. Looking over my shoulder, I could see my coach with his hands on his hips and the disappointment flaring into something else.

“You’re all invited... Up in Trinity, the new haunted house that opens this weekend. I have VIP passes for Burton’s teammates.” Her eyes flirted, her tits pushed out and the alcohol made her brave when we both knew she was insecure.

That’s why she was such easy prey. That was really the problem plaguing her, being the girl who believed every guy she met and persuaded to do stupid things to be the kind of girl they wanted.

Emma invited every person on the field who hated me back to our hometown, to the one place I called my happy place and in the one day a year I didn't have to fucking hide. She knew what she was doing by ruining a place that mattered to me more than she did.

I wanted to strangle her but Dravens didn't die. We came back as ghosts, lifelong curses, personal hauntings, and whatever bullshit could ruin your life.

Grabbing her bicep with too much pressure, I held her close enough to hear my hushed voice. "I would fucking kill you if you weren't a Draven. You grew up with blinders on while Mom drank herself to death missing our long-lost brother while Daddy beat me in the basement." I watched her face realize how easy she got off. "You got to fuck around, play with people's lives and manipulate your way out of everything I had to clean up for you. From now on, you're on your own. Beg Mommy to pay for rehab before you start stuffing your nose with coke again."

Leaving her there, I jumped down the wall, landing on my feet, and ambling across the field to home base. Picking up a bat, I gripped the handle like I was strangling the wood to death, waiting for everyone to snap back into action.

Everyone stayed still, watching me like a car accident about to happen and keeping a safe distance. Pissed off, I dropped my stance when I shouted, "Can we fucking play ball or do we want to discuss my sister's sobriety?"

My team shuffled back into action and my coach slapped his hands forcing everyone to get back into place. I blocked out everything while the pitcher tossed the fast ball in my direction like I would somehow be off my game all because of my family.

I had been wearing the Draven name for too long to let it destroy my focus.

Swinging the bat, I watched the ball fly over everyone before I dropped my bat and slowly jogged from base to base. It would only piss off my team who hated me more, but I didn't care.

Everyone had enemies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BURTON

The crowd had erupted into pure joy when we won the final inning despite the pre-show my sister put on.

I was raised under pressure, no amount of bullshit would keep me from fulfilling my destiny of winning.

Not an entire team who wished me dead.

Not paying for another failed session of rehab for my sister.

Not having a brother I never knew existed.

I was the first one off the field when I pointed at my sister, even more drunk now, to not move an inch. Going through the tunnel, I had a plan to stomp my way up to the stands where she and give her every piece of my mind.

She was always breaking so no one else could. Someone had to be strong and I was an asshole because she refused to become callus. Emma Draven was spoiled, selfish, and needed to realize how close I was to giving up on her.

Mira was the only person on the planet who saw it as anything but a cry for help. One everyone else stopped hearing.

Forcing myself to change knowing it would causing less of a scene by making myself harder to spot outside of my team uniform. Skipping the shower, I ripped off my uniform covered in sweat and pushed on a pair of sneakers before grabbing my gym bag.

Before I could make a clean getaway, before the tension I felt all night from my teammates came to a head, they poured into the locker room. Smug expressions, angry mouths, and their bodies so tense they probably thought they could beat me into admitting something that wasn't true.

Had I killed before? Yes. Did I enjoy it? Every second. Did I kill him? Not on purpose.

I know they would not ask the right questions. No one ever does.

Weissen, the second most talented player on the team now that Brad was dead, spoke up first. Pinning me in place and keeping me from leaving the locker room.

Circling me like sharks, I let them. “Sister is crazy too, huh? What about Mom and Pops? Do they know what you are?”

Swiping my tongue over my front teeth, I tried to quiet myself. Failing, I pulled my gym bag off my shoulder and let it drop with a loud thud. “Actually, she’s probably the only sane one. That’s what happens when you live with a bunch of self-loathing assholes who destroy first and ask questions later. My pops is dead... guess you want to assume how that happened.”

Grabbing him by his uniform, I slammed him up against the lockers, forcing him to trip over the bench while I stepped over it carefully. Learning a lesson only took one accident.

“You fucking freak. I knew it.”

Weissen thought he was tough, but most men crumble when faced with death. All that bullshit about wanting to live kept them scared. That’s what makes me dangerous: I never expected to survive this long.

“Get whatever you have planned over with. I didn’t kill Brad. Killing you? Crossed my mind.” He smirked, leaning forward like it was a secret. “People like you deserve a one-way ticket to hell, bitch.”

I felt the pinch in the side of my neck when I knew what had happened. Someone behind me, someone he brainwashed, had enough balls to press the needle into my now marked skin until every drop of sedative was flowing through me.

The room tipped on its side, blurring, and Weissen’s voice was distorted as I fell backward on my ass.

It was more than a bad trip, it was the exorcism this world needed to get rid of me and I wasn’t even pissed off about it.

CHAPTER FORTY

MIRA

Burton was juggling life as a psycho, a bad brother, and father to our baby with so much ease it made me hate him in a way that wasn't actually hate.

It was something different and it felt a lot like committing to the feelings I knew were always there. I wanted to hate him for sticking around, for refusing to give up on me, but I couldn't.

Whatever ability I had to hate him faded when I believed his lies that we could beat the odds. Me and my monster.

Letting my hand smooth down the bump beginning to appear, I sat at the empty table waiting by myself for Mrs. Draven. I knew I had to get ahead of this before I was showing enough for people to assume I was carrying Jameson's child. A fair assumption but I didn't need Burton slaughtering everyone with the wrong idea.

All my texts remained unanswered from Burton and my anxiety felt like it was spiking at his silence. I didn't trust myself enough to keep taking Xanax or anything Thatcher would sell me. I had used it as a crutch so much I knew it took only one pill before I was doomed.

Before I was addicted.

Before the pills felt better than trying.

Before the pills clouded every bad judgment I had.

The waiter stumbled over carrying a bottle of wine shoved into a bucket of ice and two glasses with Mrs. Draven trailing behind him with zero worries in the world. She had enough money to stop caring and enough to fix the wrinkles from when she did care.

Sitting down in front of me, she shrugged her jacket off and expected the waiter to just sense what she wanted without

laying a finger on the menu. “Mira, sweetie, tell me what’s been going on. Catch me up.”

Her voice was like warm hot cocoa, always inviting and empathetic like whatever pain you had could be cured with a sip of her. Ironic, since she couldn’t help herself, not from finding the bottom of a bottle. That was her medicine.

We all had vices trying to kill us. Mine was tall, dark, and vicious.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something...” I forced myself to look into her eyes so deep I felt my lungs stall altogether. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I forced myself to talk out the awkward. “I don’t want you to think I’m trying to force you into being some motherly figure or anything. I just haven’t heard from mine. The card I got was from five years ago and I still didn’t have any way of contacting them. Not when they’re trying to save the world.”

Her hand reached over the table, fingers stretching out to reach me while the waiter poured the wine into a chilled glass.

Carefully fighting through the ambush of extra forks and spoons lined up on the table my attention broke. “Don’t ever do that. You don’t have to apologize for anything, Mira. At least not for that.”

Smiling through her confession, I tried to hold the way my eyes were watering hostage by controlling my breath, but it was only making it more uncomfortable. Coming up for air, I let myself hold her hand even tighter, letting myself need her in the most desperate way right now.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurted out the words like a secret I couldn’t keep anymore.

The sides of her mouth tugged into a beautifully soft smile, the one she always gave me, but there was something different about this one. She glowed and gleamed more than her indiscreet habits, more than her power, and more than the expensive taste she was dripping in. It stomped everything else out.

“Oh sweetie, I am so happy for you. Does he know?” Her free hand picked up the glass, holding it in the air before she pressed her lips around the rim.

There it was, that nasty habit that followed her around, even in good moments. That was the thing about alcohol: it was the best way to celebrate and the best way to drown your sorrows.

It was the perfect double-edged sword.

Alcohol or not, Mrs. Draven was still sharper than most people.

Shaking my head up and down, I was trying to find the right words to say. “Burton knows. Jameson is complicated...”

Mrs. Draven must have known, must have recognized him, yet every time I could recall, her composure never slipped. She had perfected how to fake it and passed it down to her children like toxic DNA.

“We can talk about that complication after... I am so proud of you, Mira. You have to know that. I would be lucky to call you my daughter-in-law. I wish Emma was more like you.” I smiled even though it was an insult to Emma. My vile nature made me a perfect match for Burton’s monstrous ways. I was all too willing to step on her if it meant something I never had: a mother.

Her hand pulled away, leaving mine abandoned and cold suddenly, when she continued, “There’s actually something we need to talk about first. I wanted to wait until you had built your own life, got out of Trinity, had people worth fighting for, and a family of your own. Your parents... they died when you were a senior in high school, sweetie.”

I watched her mouth continue to move but I could no longer hear her voice. It was muffled into sounds instead of words I could understand.

I felt all of me shatter into this numbness while I sat back in my seat letting all the pieces fall into place around me.

My parents died and I had turned to the darkness for protection when I conquered my own monster straight from

the depths of hell.

I was the daughter Mrs. Draven wanted so she kept me happy, kept me motivated, kept me feeling like a guest. Owned. I owed her too much to simply take off running after all she did for me. It was the most ideal kind of cage.

I was the second chance to make up for Jameson's abandonment.

My name might be Eckland, but right now, it felt so used up by the woman I trusted that I couldn't even make out the letters anymore. I didn't deserve the name carried by soldiers anymore, not when I was lost behind enemy lines.

"You lied to me?" My voice shook enough to loosen my grip on the tears I was holding back.

Melting into some guilt, her hand tried to find mine again. "Mira. I was trying to protect you. You were headed for so much success. You were applying for colleges, and I didn't want you to lose your focus."

Disgusted with her response, I let my eyebrows grow angry while my face felt wet. "My focus? You made me believe my parents were alive. I got cards from them. I missed them, not mourned them."

Looking away from her, I felt all that sadness twist into something much darker in a snap, when I realized she had stolen my ability to mourn them, bury them, cry over their remains. My hands dug into the napkin on my lap and I felt my nails scrape at my legs in the dress, which failed to conceal my pregnancy.

"I didn't want you to throw away everything you worked so hard for, Mira. I was protecting you from losing them."

"Who protected Jameson from losing you?"

Lifting my face, I stared her in the eyes, my spine made of steel and my voice pissed off instead of broken.

"Jameson is exactly what you said... complicated." Her discomfort was apparent when she shifted in her seat and looked around the restaurant like someone may be listening.

Burton's father and I were already together. It was a mistake and I didn't know it until it was too late. His father was disturbed... he belongs behind bars."

I didn't bleed a single expression when I spoke, wearing the Draven mask the way I was taught. "Burton was almost behind bars."

Licking her lips and throwing back the entire glass of wine, she made eye contact with me again. She extended her finger and pointed downward like she had the power of a Bible to send me home. "Listen, you little ungrateful bitch, I took you in when your parents ran off to fight a pointless war. I fed you, clothed you, gave you every advantage our name has. You don't have the right to question what sane looks like when you fucked my son and got engaged to my other son."

I was accidentally caught between two brothers. The only thing she didn't know was that one of them was terminal in Burton's mind.

"I got everything I wanted and you still didn't get me to replace my name. You chose power over your own son. How could you? You created a monster." I wanted to know what made a parent abandon their offspring. I had to know if it could be the same reason my parents would use.

She snorted into the air as she slammed back another glass of wine. "I created a monster? All you had to do was keep him happy. Spread those long legs of yours and be grateful that he put a roof over your head. You turned my son into some kind of hero, but he didn't know how to be anything other than a villain. Did you do the same thing with Jameson? Force him to be dirty as you refused to be?"

She knew about that night. She knew Burton wasn't the one-of-a-kind piece of Draven history she kept pressuring him to be.

Was I forcing everyone else to protect me?

Was I avoiding getting my hands dirty?

Why couldn't I be the victim?

“Jameson was born angry and I wonder why that is. He was born out of a lie, handed off to a man servicing a life sentence, and forced to watch his mother love someone else the way he should have been loved.” I spat out my words before standing up.

I always had a family; it was just more depraved than I thought.

Rushing out of the restaurant I slowed down when my boots hit the pavement of the sidewalk and the fresh air hit my wet face with a sharp slap.

Texting Burton, I begged him to answer the phone when my anxiety wasn't taking it easy on me anymore. I could feel my bones rattling and my heart pounding too quickly to focus on anything but my body crumbling.

Dialing Thatcher, I held the phone to my face praying he answered when I heard his husky voice come through the other end but nothing was being said.

After too much silence, I rambled, “I need a ride. Burton isn't responding.”

“If it isn't the rat... Just locate him. We had it all downloaded in case of shit like this. He's probably hunting.” His voice was casual and breathy like he was already preoccupied.

“I'm serious. Something is wrong.”

Groaning out loud, I could feel the annoyance in his voice. “Great, you guys have an emotional LoJack, cool. Drop me your pin or I'm not picking you up. Unlike Burton, I don't hunt anything, not even those who need saving.”

Thatcher Throne wasn't a hero.

He was as guilty as the Unholy Trinity; I wasn't sure why yet. Either way, the evil I knew was better than the evil manipulating me.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

MIRA

I kept refreshing and refreshing when I told Thatcher to keep driving toward Trinity. It wasn't a long shot when Hell Mouth held our history in a chokehold.

The place where we eventually gave in to each other, the void within each other, and all the ways we would break each other to come out stronger.

“Can you drive faster?” I evened out my voice to avoid sounding bitchy, despite the resting bitch face and the monotone voice.

“Can you tell your face and voice to be thankful I'm not still buried in pussy while you spin out?”

Thatcher was thin, frail even, enough to make it hurt to look at him. His muscles were long and lean, poking through his skin with no real effort.

He always seemed sad but no one ever expected any different. His life story was the reason rooms quieted down when he walked in and why strangers felt the pull of his antics. They could sense a survivor and wanted every drop of his algorithm.

The fucked-up part was there was no equation for surviving.

That's how we became unholy. We had survived each bruise, cut, punch and now we were walking punching bags. Leather bound and begging for more.

“Can you tell what my face is saying now?” I didn't look up from refreshing the screen repeatedly, praying his phone would pop up on the map.

“Fuck you. I'm not the cop caller here. I was sent to jail for your boyfriend and somehow I still end up doing him favors.”

Dramatically, I felt the leather seats around me. I gasped, “Oh my god, Thatcher, this car feels so expensive. How did

you get it?” All the sarcasm leaked from my mouth like poison while he tried not to smirk.

He knew Vane and Burton had paid him back in full. Maybe not the way he wanted but trailer park boys who sell coke on the weekends couldn't demand the world like the privileged could.

I should know, since I lived in their world too.

Holding my phone in my grasp tighter, I watched Burton's phone appear on the map, close by but not close enough to lift any anxiety. Fingering the screen, I forced the map to zoom in when I realized it was the fairground from our past. I wanted to smile but something inside of me felt like we had done too much to survive.

The world only lets you survive so much before it breaks you.

Thatcher pulled into the dirt parking lot, turning the car off and telling me to wait in the car like some nuisance.

As soon as I opened the door, I slipped out of the car, still tapping the screen from going dark and following Thatcher before he stopped dead in his tracks. “You look really pregnant to me. Burton would never forgive me if you get hurt. Just stay in the car and don't get in the way.”

“I did that once. I stood by, I watched, and I didn't have the heart to let him get beat so I called the cops. I'm not going to watch and I'm not willing to call Trinity's sorry excuse for cops. Tonight, I'm the monster he needs me to be.” I stood toe-to-toe with Thatcher's height that felt like a skyscraper in the poorly lit parking lot.

When I nearly ran over Thatcher while jogging toward the car, I spotted a familiar sports car. Letting my hand graze the hood, I felt the cold metal sting my skin, it had been here awhile, long enough to send me over the edge.

“It doesn't mean anything. You know Burton doesn't answer to anyone.” Thatcher wasn't concerned the same way and I didn't expect him to.

Driving my hand through the driver's seat window, I nursed my knuckles to my chest instantly after. The glass only wobbled and my knuckles were screaming for mercy when Thatcher stuttered over smugly, forcing his hand through the glass while his entire body stayed relax. It was like watching close magic.

“Trailer parks and shit. You learn how to break into cars instead of whatever shit you learned.” He smiled with his mouth closed and picked the glass away from the edge for me.

I ripped out the bat sticking out of his gym bag. It was Burton's weapon of choice and my redemption for that night years ago.

Not waiting for Thatcher, I made my way to the entrance, fishing out twenty-dollar bills from my crossbody and throwing them on the ledge of the small booth.

Following the icon, I buzzed through attractions, games, people dressed up so well you couldn't tell who they were every other day of the year. I stopped at the fence, devoid of any attractions, a fence caging everything.

Thatcher whistled, breaking my concentration, when he peeled back enough of it for me to slip inside.

Memories of that night sent chills down my spine that were almost impossible to shake off.

With every step, branches and twigs snapped under my boots. Dead leaves made it impossible to see the haunted trail underneath, and the red rope strung between trees felt like more of a suggestion than anything.

Thatcher was pointing his cell phone at the ground, trying his hardest to illuminate the darkness but he didn't know my eyes had adjusted a long time ago. Stopping, I exhaled a silent cry when I saw the outline of a body hanging from a tree outside the ropes keeping people on the trail.

Dipping below the rope, I ran toward the figure, sure I would find Burton strung up from some tree like the victim he never was.

I rolled my tongue under my teeth and mumbled my scream, careful not to draw attention to myself when I crawled to free his body from the rope.

Still choking and gagging, Thatcher lifted his body, relieving the pressure off his neck. “Knife. Back pocket.”

Fishing my hand into his back pockets, I found the small switchblade and sawed it across the rope before his weight fell into Thatcher’s hands. Helping him down to the ground, he set him against the tree when I noticed the sign around his neck.

Ripping it off, I waved my phone over what read: *I killed Bradley.*

Dropping down to my knees, I worked my way into his lap, touching his face and looking for those emerald eyes in the midnight shade of despair. “Who did this?”

“We all have enemies, Mira. That’ll never change. The only thing we can do is choose to stop outrunning them.” His voice was raspy in ways worse than normal as he tried to speak against having his throat crushed minutes earlier.

“We can’t stop running. We have to keep running.”

His thumbs swept across my face, catching stray tears while the flecks of gold in his eyes shimmered in the moonlight. “No, baby, we have to stop running. We’ve survived all this time and for what? To keep letting them scar us, teach us lessons we didn’t ask for, to force us to hide better? No, we’re done hiding and running. I love you, Mira. That isn’t going to get easier and I don’t want it to. We’re a side of pain with our pleasure kind of people, aren’t we?”

Throwing my arms around Burton, I sobbed into his neck until I felt like every pent-up piece of pain that came with surviving had leaked out of me.

Burton was right, what was the point of being this strong if all we ever did was fight each other every step of the way.

“I wanted to fight for you, prove that I could be your monster too. Redemption for that night.” I wasn’t even speaking in full sentences or thoughts. Everything was a

jumble of emotions; a mess of pain and whatever trauma was still lurking.

Smoothing down my hair, I laid against him on the floor of the woods that October night with the crisp air and the screams in the distance being our music. “You’ve always fought for me. I was only killing for you to prove I could fight too. Help me up, let’s go home before you stress out my baby.”

His.

We were his.

After years of pushing each other away because we weren’t willing to admit there were parts of us that were imperfect, unlovable.

Standing up, Thatcher assisted me with Burton, helping him to his feet and ambling to the car. Walking through the parking lot to Thatcher’s car, I spotted a group of guys drinking and laughing happily as we helped Burton into the car.

Even beaten up, his eyes red and swollen, his throat bruising already and his once angular face now full, I could still see the reasons everyone willingly worshipped him. He was a masterpiece even when broken.

Thatcher closed the car door before grasping at my arm, holding me back from walking toward the group. I didn’t even realize my hand was trying to engrave myself into the wood until Thatcher tried to yank it away from me.

“Not worth it. Trust me, I’ve done the legwork. Revenge is best served as a fantasy inside your head.”

I didn’t agree. I wanted to erase everyone who threatened us and live in utter bliss.

“They can’t get away with this. I can’t just forget they did this to him.” I said every word too loudly, making sure they could hear. I was giving them the same courtesy warning Burton gave in the field that night and I finally understood.

It was the thrill of the hunt, not the search for pain.

Yanking the bat back, I quickly made my way over to the group. It was easy to pinpoint their leader with the short blonde hair, winning smile, and the douchebag attitude that earned him their loyalty. It was easier than getting burned by him.

Swinging the bat recklessly, I hit his jaw without trying to aim and I watched him fold in half. “So much as look at him wrong and next time, I’ll fucking kill you because I don’t have a problem admitting it anymore. I would kill for Burton Draven.”

Too stunned to respond with anything that made sense I dropped the bat at his feet. “Something to remember me by.”

Slipping into Thatcher’s car, in the backseat with Burton, I placed his arm around my shoulders, pinning me down, and I let myself get comfortable. Needing him and loving him despite what could happen because nothing mattered except how willing we were to stay still.

No more running.

No more hurting each other.

Whispering into the shell of my ear, I pause, giving him my attention. “We can always kill them later. It’s about being able to, a skill most people don’t have. Most people don’t get this lucky. Fuck everything else except you, me, and our baby. All it takes is a slice of heaven to make a guy from hell feel like he’s home.”

We were a match made in *hell* just trying to find *heaven*.

EPILOGUE

JAMESON

He thought they got away with it.

Escaping every retribution life was trying to feed him with the silver fucking spoon he was so used to.

Burton Draven was my brother I just failed to kill. I was trying to hurt our mother, erase the very thing that snuffed out my existence and forced me to feel like the permanent runner up.

I thought Mira understood that when I realized exactly how much Burton was to blame for the walls she built up around her.

I left nothing to chance when I bumped into her on the quad of Trinity's campus. She was the perfect pawn.

The perfect ally to loathe him right along with me.

Until he stole her too.

Cut from the same cloth, overachievers by nature and a killer instinct woven through our genes I wasn't meant to fail.

Giving his teammates the push they needed and the idea of where to leave his body when I sent those passes to some out of the city attraction seemed flawless until waiting for the confirmation text never actually came through.

That one single text making me an only child.

The child our mother should have chosen.

Burton Draven won this round when he refused to die, but I was going to win the war.

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