

ALEXIS PIERCE
NATALIE BARRY

WAKING HER DEMON

*They call him the devil,
but she's the one who's cursed...*

STRANGE ROCKSTARS BOOK ONE

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Cover Design by Kate Hall

Interior Design by Kate Hall

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*For the readers who know that some demons are better than
others...*

...and want to fuck the best ones.

CONTENT WARNING

This book is a work of fiction that contains a large amount of triggering material.

ON PAGE:

Throughout the book, Christine is plagued by the Phantom, a demon that's possessed her since she was a child. This character is a metaphor for Christine being the victim of an emotionally and physically abusive relationship from a young age, and the content between the Phantom and Christine can be extremely triggering. He is never shown to be a positive or "sexy" figure in her life, as this is not that type of book. Christine's manager Jason is also emotionally abusive. There are also depictions of an eating disorder toward the beginning of the book.

Other on-page depictions include: Blood, torture, human death, animal death, and characters with anxiety and depression.

There are also several spicy scenes in which Joseph and Christine participate in fairly heavy BDSM that involves a degradation kink (imagined), choking, chasing,

SPOILER WARNING:

At the end of the book, there is a scene in which Christine is physically injured by Joseph's actions, although she is healed by him immediately afterwards.

OFF PAGE, MENTIONED:

Before the start of the book, Christine attempts suicide in order to escape her abuser. This is mentioned throughout the book, and is a major part of Christine's character arc.

It is also mentioned that Jason, one of Christine's abusers, does not allow her to eat, although these actions are not directly depicted on-page.

Before the events of this book, Christine's mother passed away from cancer, which is mentioned a few times.

Again, this book can be triggering for some people. Please use your best judgment when deciding if this is the right book for you, and don't feel bad if you decide you cannot continue reading it. Your mental health is more important than reading this book.

Breathe for me.

Don't wake me from this slumber.

Stay with me...

— BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

BEFORE

THE HUMAN'S BODY WAS FLUNG FROM THE VEHICLE INTO A ditch, the cargo van still steaming higher up on the interstate. I'm not the only creature here tonight, the scent of blood and death and alcohol drawing in all sorts of monsters.

I have no interest in those in the van, though, nor do I care about the driver of the truck who fell asleep going seventy miles per hour down the interstate.

A high-pitched whine comes from the man with distant eyes filled with glass, his lung punctured and collapsing in on itself as he tries to breathe.

I rest a smoky hand on his cheek. I don't have long in this world, not without a physical body to hold me here. I can't go back, though, not when I have the chance to escape, to come to this world of light and color and *feeling*.

"Chris," he gasps, and I tilt my head.

"No," I say in his strange language. "No, I do not think that's correct."

He tries to cough, but his body is too weak, and tears fall from his blinded eyes. "Please help me," he says, the words straining to come out as he tries to sob from fear and pain, but the injuries are too great for even that.

The empty space in my chest pulls toward him, desperate for his heart to become mine. I've been waiting so long for this opportunity. The chance to have my own body. "I cannot save your life," I say honestly. I'm not strong enough to heal him

from the outside, and by the time I can possess him, he'll be dead.

“Soon, your soul will go somewhere I cannot reach.” I cringe at my own words. I'm doing this all wrong. I've been told that these delicate creatures prefer comforting words, that it's easier to convince them that way. “I can save your loved ones from pain, though,” I say. “If you gift your body to me, I can take care of it, care for those you love.”

Before I'm even finished with the words, he gasps, “Yes. Do it. Please. Find...” He does one of his non-coughs again, and I wait patiently for his next words. “Just tell her I'm sorry.” The last words are barely audible, even to my sensitive receptors, his voice fading quickly.

“Tell who you're sorry?” I ask, but it's too late. I watch as the wisp of silver floats from his body before floating up to the sky in a sprinkling of dust. He's gone, and my soul aches at the loss of a soul from this world, but there's nothing I could have done.

From there, instinct takes over, the smoke of my body melting into him.

For the first time in my long existence, I...feel. I feel everything. The agony of broken bones, the sadness he left behind, the longing for...someone.

I don't get to keep his memories, but there's something far away that I can't quite catch, a longing that I can't fill.

Slowly, I use my smoke to repair the damage, to remove the glass, fix the bones, stem the bleeding. Then, I stand and climb up the hill toward the wreckage. By the time I make it up there, emergency vehicles with bright lights that streak across the night are surrounding the accident, and a young man who is close to this body's age is staring at me with wide eyes.

“Joey? Holy shit, I thought you fucking died!” he runs over and wraps his arms around me, and I take in a bitter smell that makes me step away. He looks normal and happy, but there's a tightness in his eyes, and a bloodstain shaped like a bite on his arm.

“No,” I say. “I feel more alive than ever.”

I’m not the only one who made a deal tonight. Now, it’s time to uphold my side of the bargain.

CHAPTER I

CHRISTINE

PEOPLE CALL JOSEPH MUNSON “THE DEVIL.” AS THE LEAD singer of the hit metal band Corroded Hellfire, it’s probably an easy image to lean into. He already has the long hair and tattoos, so acting a bit unhinged on stage was probably more than enough to keep up that image. A poster of him sits on the wall across from me, holding his signature red guitar with his other hand up to mimic horns.

I don’t remember him like that, though. I remember the boy who was two years older than me and would still play with me when the other kids in our neighborhood would push me off the slide. I remember the kid with a gap between his front teeth who taught me to ride my bike because my parents were too busy for that sort of thing. Then, when I started middle school, he taught me to skateboard.

I also remember that he was the image in my mind when I discovered my body, and I never told him how he made my heart race, how he made me melt when he gave me his casual hugs. Not even when I was about to move and his eyes had grown distant as I revealed that I was leaving the trailer park where we both grew up.

My hands shake as I sit in the waiting room on the sixteenth floor of the Twin Records skyscraper in downtown LA. My agent, Jason, worked his ass off to get this meeting, and he made me swear I wouldn’t blow it.

You have to get this, the constant voice at the back of my head I call the Phantom says. It’s an apt metaphor, but only in the most literal interpretation of the old musical, the

interpretation that nobody should thirst over. The Phantom is the reason for my success, but he also haunts me, taunts me. Sometimes, he hurts me. *You know you must.*

I shiver, and nausea builds in my stomach. I haven't eaten yet today, because Jason told me I have to look extra skinny in any pictures we take. Nell had tried to argue, but she isn't here, and Jason watched my every move before the meeting.

The door opens, and a thin, middle-aged woman looks over me in my green sweater dress, and her lips purse.

"Come on in," she says. Jason stands, and I follow his lead. I keep my hands at my side despite how badly I want to pick at my nails. This is why we went to the nail salon yesterday, though. If we hadn't, my nails would already be worn to nubs.

A signed guitar hangs on one wall of the massive office, and the record executive, Wynn Roberts, sits at her desk, her arms crossed as she studies me. How did she get over there so quickly?

Keep moving, the Phantom within me growls, and I flinch, stumbling as I move forward. If I don't listen, my muscles cramp and pinch, and I'm already feeling unwell due to hunger.

"So," Wynn says, her hair short, dark, and curly as it frames her face, "I hear that you're the next big thing." She gestures at the wall. "But I already have the biggest thing."

I open my mouth to speak, to defend myself, but Jason speaks for me. "You have the biggest performers in metal, but we know that the Shattered Festival Tour is starting in a month, and you're still looking for an afternoon main stage act."

Wynn raises her brow at Jason, then looks at me. "I don't like bringing on acts with bad press."

Jason laughs at that, then gestures toward the guitar. "And Joseph Munson isn't bad press? Didn't he beat the shit out of someone on his album tour like two months ago?"

Wynn's lips purse, and she stands. "Mr. Thompson, I'd like you to wait outside while I speak with your client."

I knew it. I knew they wouldn't take me, but Jason insisted that this meeting would work out. Now he's going to leave, and she's going to tell me exactly what she thinks of me. Then, the voice will punish me with pain and possibly injury, and Jason will ignore my texts and won't tell me about new opportunities for a few months until I "learn my lesson."

He scoffs, but because Wynn is an important contact for him to have, he does as she says.

When she makes it back to her desk, she looks... concerned? She'd been so strict-looking before, but her features have softened. What changed?

"Christine, are you doing alright?" she asks, leaning forward. "You just got out of the hospital two weeks ago, and they're trying to put you on tour."

Of course she would bring that up. Tears burn at the corners of my eyes, and my heart thuds so loud in my chest I fear it could escape.

"I made a mistake," I lie. "It was an accident. I didn't actually want to die."

I couldn't remember much of the night, but the performance had been great. My best yet. When I got back to my executive suite, though, the voice was waiting for me, telling me to do better, telling me what would happen if I failed. It started to hurt me, and I reacted the only way I knew how.

I woke up in the hospital, locked in for two months before my management company would let me out. It was for my own safety, they said. Meanwhile, they were planning *this*. If I made a comeback, showed how successful and great I was, then Jason would get plenty of that glory himself.

She frowns. "You don't have to get back out there. I saw the pictures, honey. Everyone did."

I squeeze my eyes shut, and the images assault me. The moment I walked out of those hospital doors, a magazine was

in my hands, with my face on the cover. My face as I was being carried out of the hotel by Jason, who found me when he wanted to celebrate the show. My eyes were wide open, my irises rolled back. My skin was paper-white and delicate, my veins standing out blue as my jaw sat slack.

“It was an accident,” I breathe. The words are the same as I’ve rehearsed in the mirror. The same as I’ve been told to repeat. The same as I’ve told the press.

Still, the headlines continue to speculate.

Pop Sensation Christine Osmond Crazy???

Or, as a fun alternative:

Christine Osmond Possessed by Devil! Inside Source Tells All!

They’re sensationalist headlines, but how wrong are they?

“Don’t get me wrong, I want you on this tour. Having Christine Osmond on the main stage at noon? We’d be packing them in! But I don’t want you to get hurt.” Wynn seems genuinely concerned about me, and my heart pulls in my chest. Nobody has been concerned about me since Mom died. They’ve all just done their best to figure out how they can benefit from me.

“I won’t,” I say. “Please. I need this.”

I look back at the guitar on the wall, and a memory hits me. I was sitting on the couch with my best friend, and he was holding me after I found out about my mom’s diagnosis. “You know, Joseph and I were friends as kids. He probably doesn’t remember, but he was always so kind. When my mom was sick the first time, he was there.” I shake my head. I don’t know why I’m even thinking about that. None of it matters when it comes to here and now.

Wynn smiles at me. “He’s a good kid.”

I tilt my head. Kid? This woman can’t be older than thirty five, a decade older than me. “He’s twenty-seven,” I point out.

She pricks an eyebrow, more playfully this time. “And I’m turning fifty in October. You’re all kids to me at this point.”

I chuckle. “Well, I should have done more research, because I thought you were thirty.”

She laughs back. “Well, fine. Just for that, you’re in.”

I blink at her. “Wait, seriously?” Thinking she was younger is what did it?

She shrugs. “Sure. But if that manager of yours does anything sleazy, call me.” She pulls a card off her desk, flips it over, and writes down a series of numbers. “This is my personal cell, alright?”

I take it, and my hands tremble. I did it. I actually pulled it off. Maybe I wouldn’t be punished in my nightmares tonight.

Don’t get your hopes up.

CHAPTER 2

JOSEPH

MY HAIR IS TIED BACK AND UNDER A CAP, AND I'M WEARING sunglasses and a plain outfit when I walk into the main lobby of Twin Records. I have a meeting with Wynn at three, and then a studio session to remaster Wake Up, the song we posted on TikTok four years ago that made us go viral and led to all this.

A girl walks by, her strawberry blonde hair up in a ponytail, and she's wearing a deep green dress that goes to her knees over a pair of designer heels that look ridiculously painful. There's something else about her I can't quite identify, something that haunts me and stirs something painful in my gut. I immediately flash back to that night, the longing and loneliness that attacked me as soon as I took over this body.

I'd forgotten that feeling to this point, and I freeze.

She pauses her walk when she spots me, and her eyes widen. Ah, perhaps she's a fan. "Joey?" she asks, her face breaking out into a grin. Yes, definitely a fan, although she's using the nickname that died with this body's host. I never felt right using it. I tried it for a few weeks, then had a breakdown and had to admit the truth to Owen, the band's bassist, after one particularly terrible rehearsal.

So we agreed on Joseph.

I put on the winning smile I've practiced in the mirror a thousand times. It must be perfect. Not too threatening, not too apathetic. "Yes, that's me," I say. "Although I prefer Joseph." She'll probably want an autograph, and certainly a selfie, so I

pull out the sharpie I always have on hand. I still occasionally have fans proposition me for more than just an autograph, but I quickly learned to push any of that aside. I have no interest in sleeping with random human women, no matter how many of them show off their breasts or grope me in dark clubs.

Her face falls a few degrees. "It's me. Christine."

I blink. The name and face are suddenly familiar in two horribly different ways. I shake off the paranoia in my gut that this could be *that* Chris, though. I point the pen at her. "You were in the news," I say. "You're a pop singer, right?"

Her now subdued smile falls completely. "Yeah, but... We, uh, went to high school together," she says.

I shake my head, and my heart sinks low in my chest. She must be from *before*. This part never gets easier, but it's far better than anyone having to mourn Joey. "I'm sorry, I was in an accident a few years ago and lost most of my memories." With any luck, she's one of the classmates that had been disinterested at best in Joey's existence, bullies at worst, and she never truly cared about him.

She suddenly looks so sad, though, that I want to wrap her in a hug, but it's better than how she'd feel if I told her the truth. *The boy you knew before is gone*, I want to say. *He died in that ditch, and I'm someone entirely different*. "You were the only one who was there for me my freshman year. When Mom got sick." She wraps her arms around herself, and she averts her eyes, which are growing watery with unshed tears. "Well, the first time."

My stomach turns, and realization dawns on me. Whoever Joey was before, he was important to her, and possibly vice-versa. This isn't just a random classmate who suddenly cares just because I'm famous. Then, her last words absorb into my mind. "What do you mean the first time? Did she..."

She nods, then looks away. Oh, God. Did her mom die? And now I'm the asshole who doesn't remember all she's been through, the one who should know how to help. Tears gather at her waterline, and I want to reach out and comfort her, the

motion somewhere deep in my muscle memory. Joey used to comfort her. I don't know how I know, but I do.

A douche-y-looking blonde guy in a suit takes her arm. "We'd better get going. Thank you for your concern, Mr. Munson." His voice is hard, and she flinches a little when he touches her.

"See you on tour," she says, her voice distant. A shadow falls over her, like there's a cloud that follows her around.

Before I can reply, I'm left alone in the lobby, staring after her as she leaves in a Rolls Royce. The last words she spoke ring through me. Is she going to be at Shatter Fest as well? I knew she was famous, but Wynn doesn't usually take on pop acts for Shatter.

It's after she disappears into the traffic of the LA day that I remember a single word, one that I'd nearly forgotten after all this time.

Chris, he'd said. It had been so important that he used his last words to beg for this Chris person, but I'd never considered that Chris had been the *she* he mentioned. I thought he'd assumed I was someone else, was all. It's not often used as a woman's name, but her words have all but confirmed it, and I want to chase her and ask her more. My heart leaps toward her, this gifted body knowing her better than I could ever imagine.

For some reason, I want to know more about her.

I look up more information on her while I take the elevator up to the meeting.

Christine Osmond and Joey went to the same school from the time they were kids, and, mostly thanks to the real Joey's dyslexia holding him back for two consecutive senior years, graduated the same year. It was a small school, so there are pictures of them sitting right next to each other at graduation. *Munson, Osmond.*

When Christine almost died in January, Owen and Darren showed me the news, although I hadn't known why until they explained that she and Joey had been friends. A paparazzi

came up to me at the stage door after a particularly exhausting set and asked under his breath if it was true that “Crazy Christine” had always been like that, and I hadn’t thought twice before breaking his fucking nose, although moments later I realized what I’d done. I’ve never been violent, despite the media about my kind stating otherwise, yet something deep within this body made me hurt a human.

Now I know that it had been the last whispers of Joey, the small things I can’t quite explain. Joey liked lavender ice cream, and so do I. Joey played the hell out of the guitar, and so do I.

Joey cared about Christine, and now I want nothing more than to comfort her. I wish now that I’d gotten to know her the way Joey did, that way I could take away the tears that had fallen from her face in the lobby earlier.

I make my way to Wynn’s office in a haze. How did I not connect the dots of who Chris was until now? I look through her Wiki on my phone while I sit outside Wynn’s office, and right under her professional history, it says:

Osmond’s success came shortly after her mother’s demise. She was already a local sensation, singing at local and regional events such as rodeos, proms, and graduations. When she posted her first TikTok (to cope with her mother’s passing, according to the video), it garnered one million likes in two days, and she signed a contract with Veccone Management two weeks later.

I pull up her account, scrolling down until I reach the bottom where that video rests. It’s currently sitting at eight million likes, only a slightly fewer than the song that made Corroded Hellfire blow up.

“Hey, I’m Christine, and I wanted to sing a song. My mom died after a long battle with cancer yesterday, and I need something to cheer me up. Maybe this will help you smile, too.” The song is upbeat and poppy, completely opposite her sunken features and messy hair. Her fingers played the piano expertly, and she was right. I can’t help but smile.

When I’m allowed to walk into Wynn’s office, I say, “Did you happen to have a meeting with Christine Osmond today?”

Wynn looks up at me, and her eyes crinkle as she smiles. “She’s something special. She said you know her, is that right?” Despite her fierceness, Wynn has a wispy frame and airy voice, like she’s made from a gust of wind that had better things to do than rustle the leaves.

I cross my arms, and I’m feeling unbelievably tense for some reason I can’t identify. I give an answer that will satisfy her question without being an outright lie, “We were friends in high school. What was the meeting about?”

Wynn leans back in her chair, putting her hands behind her head. “We booked her as the final main stage act for Shatter this summer. Noon.” She knows how one-track my mind can be, and she doesn’t point out that it’s rude for me to push. That’s something I appreciate about her. Besides, she would have already known about our connection. Wynn knows everything about everyone. Like she’s a witch or something.

I let out a single laugh, more out of surprise than anything. “A pop act on the main stage?” I’ve performed at this festival before, and it’s heavily attended by rock and metal fans. It will be an interesting year if one of the biggest names in pop is also singing. The more I think about her, about the girl who must be Chris, the more I need something to do with my hands. The itch is uncontrollable.

Wynn sits back up, leaning toward me on her elbows. “You seem agitated about this, Munson. Is there something I should know about?”

I frown. Am I agitated? I take stock of myself, a habit I took up whilst adjusting to having a human body. When I looked up the issues I have with being a living, breathing person all the time, the symptoms were similar to autism, so I use those coping mechanisms. My breathing is heavier, my heart rate accelerated. I blink a few times, then take a deep breath to steady myself, trying to figure out where this mood came about. She’d been so upset, and before I could help her, she’d been taken from me.

“Her agent seems like a bit of a dick, don’t you think?” It’s not just that, of course. It’s the fact that I’ve never once tried to

get in contact with her since Hellfire got big. I told Joey that I would find his Chris, and I barely even tried. I should have known about her mom. I should have been there, just like Joey had been. That's what he wanted me to do, I'm sure of it, and I left her high and dry.

And she almost fucking died because she'd been so sad and alone in the world.

Wynn's lips tighten into a line, and she says, "I'm not at liberty to call clients' agents assholes, even if they seem like weirdly possessive douchebags."

I nod. We understand each other, then.

"What's this meeting about?" I ask. She knows I don't like to sit, preferring to pace while I talk. I grab the guitar off the wall, signed by everyone in our band, and start finger-picking a few notes of Metallica to get some of this manic energy out.

"I want you to look after Christine on the tour," Wynn says. "I've known you for a few years now, and I think I can trust you. Can you make sure she isn't alone?"

I frown. "I'm not sure why you think she'd talk to me." I'm not Joey, after all, and I'd hurt her by not recognizing her.

Wynn shrugs. "Call it intuition." Then, she checks her watch. "I have to be in New York for a dinner with Jim Hicks."

I stop playing the guitar and hang it back up. "I didn't think he was a Twin Records artist." Jim Hicks sings old-fashioned country, the kind that soothes the soul without being too preachy. As far as I know, he retired when his daughter passed away. It seems that Wynn is collecting sad souls.

Wynn shrugs. "Well, if my charm works on him, he might be."

She leads me out of her office, and I head down to the basement studio we have reserved for our recording session. Then, I play the hell out of my guitar and sing until my voice can't take it anymore.

CHAPTER 3

CHRISTINE

WHEN I FINALLY ESCAPE JASON AND LOCK MYSELF IN MY apartment after a long dinner with some company rep or another, I run a hot bath and climb into the water, trying to get the image of Joseph out of my mind.

What would it be like if he did remember me? Would he still have a grudge for the fact that I moved? It's not like I planned on moving.

Maybe he's mellowed out a bit as he's gotten older, and maybe that anger with me wouldn't be as strong.

I lean my head back and hold my phone above my head, looking up pictures and videos of his performances. Eventually, I find a fan account that's entirely made for thirsting after him, and I consider clicking away.

The way I stare as he grins whilst playing his guitar at the last Shatter Fest is straight-up perverted.

My core tightens as I continue scrolling the TikTok, and I land on a slow-motion video of him lifting his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, revealing a set of abs that make me suck in a breath.

Before my hand can move down, I toss the phone on the nearby counter and groan, submerging my head in warm water in hopes of clearing it.

It's the water. It must be.

The Phantom is still quiet, just like it was when I spoke to Joseph at the label. I relish in these quiet moments, the breaks

between torment.

I wrap myself in a towel and go to my bedroom. I only have a couple weeks of my own bed, the comfort of being surrounded by plants like no other. I want to get a cat, but it's nearly impossible to take a pet on tour, so I just take care of my dozens of plants. A not-insignificant portion of my income goes to plant care, and I bury myself in my plush pink comforter and stare at the ceiling that I painted with fluffy clouds over a pink sunset. It's not the most professional job, but I'm proud of myself for being the one to do it.

Still, my thoughts drift back to Joey—*no, Joseph now*—and my hand finds its way down to my slit. When I part myself, I let out a little moan.

Maybe it's like one of those fairytale movies. If I kiss him, he'll remember everything.

Or maybe it will take more than a kiss.

I circle my clit, picturing what it would be like for him to be here with me.

He would lean over me, his hair tickling my face. I close my eyes, almost able to feel his breath on me. My middle and third finger slide down to my entrance, and I tease at it for a moment before moving back up to my clit.

In my imagination, Joseph is brushing his hand over my face, braced on that elbow while his other hand strokes his cock. Would he run his cock down the length of my slit before shoving it into me?

I groan as I push my fingers into me, but it's not enough. It's not real.

In my head, he slams into me, and I roll my hips. His mouth has found mine, and he's kissing me with a rough and sloppy technique. I love it, though, love the way his tongue slides over my lips. I part my mouth and stick my tongue out, and the Joseph in my imagination sucks on it for a moment before shoving his tongue violently into my mouth.

As my hand slips over my clit, I wish that I knew where the hell my vibrator went. Last time I checked my top drawer

for it, it was gone, and it's so much harder to satisfy myself without it.

"Please," I beg no one as my imaginary Joseph pumps in and out of me, using me like a sex toy for his own pleasure. I use my other hand and pretend it's his, covering my mouth.

Good girls are quiet, he says, his breath hot in my ear.

I cry out against my own hand, shoving three fingers into my cunt and pressing my palm against my clit. Tears gather at my eyes as they always do, and I buck against my hand as I come.

When the trembling subsides, I curl up into a ball, wiping my hand on my towel before tossing it on the floor. I bury myself in the nest of pink blankets I have, and an aching loneliness spreads through my body.

Sure, I got the sexual satisfaction I needed, but now I just wish I had someone to hold me.

Even worse, a presence forms in my head, and I feel the Phantom say, *Why are you being so lazy? You should be preparing.*

My tears change from satisfaction to frustration and anger, and I gasp out an enraged cry as I climb out of bed, get dressed, and do what I can to prepare for the show. Usually it's exercise, so I get on my stationary bike and press *start* on a random workout.

I just want to lie down and sleep, but that's not allowed. My life isn't my own, after all.

I quickly forget about the imagined encounter, falling into the deep pit of darkness that is my life.

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTINE

IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT, AND I'D WALKED INTO THE WOODS TO do the ritual. It involved an internet search to some sketchy sites, stolen materials from an occult shop I went to when visiting the mall with my grandma, and a midnight ritual. The gravel trail burrowed into the skin of my hands, and the air was frigid and wet with mist.

I offered my servitude.

The creature made of writhing smoke and twisting tar took the deal. I called him the Phantom, because he reminded me of a ghost.

I was told my mom would get better. He promised that she would go into remission, and that we'd get a good life.

Well, that lasted a few years, and then she got sick again. I came home from college, dropping out to take care of her, and I watched her deteriorate.

The Phantom didn't care. It said it made good on his promise, and it had never promised she would stay healthy.

Apparently, demons you summon to solve your problems might just trick you.

I ignore it as best as I can, but when I do it too much, it makes me do things. Once, I woke up in the middle of the road holding a dead, bloody rabbit corpse. Another time, I stole my neighbor's car and totaled it during a fugue. They never found out who did it, and I still suspect that everything I've gotten away with has been on the demon's part.

One night, a few months ago, the Phantom popped up again, demanding more of me. I'd just had the best, most exhausting show of my life, and it got the thousands of adoring worshippers it wanted. It didn't matter to the Phantom that they were calling my name; it received the energy either way. It told me it needed more, the gluttonous thing. When I tried to argue, it put me to my knees with pain, my insides twisting and painful like I was being torn apart.

That was when I made my attempt, trying to escape the pain that had plagued me for years, pain I couldn't escape because it was coming from inside of me.

But the Phantom won't let me die. I know that now. If I die, it goes back to Hell—or wherever it's from.

It's a hot afternoon, not uncommon for Los Angeles in May. I wear my hair up for rehearsals, along with a pair of chunky white sneakers, a pink pleated skirt, and a cropped t-shirt. I have about a million dance moves to practice, and I have to be able to do them in perfect sequence whilst singing flawlessly. Some pop stars lip sync on stage, but the act of singing is the last sliver of joy I get from this job, and it's something I'll never give up.

I walk into Twin Records alone, although my publicist will be meeting me here later in the afternoon. I hit the down button on the elevator, then hear a "Hold the door!" when I step in and it begins to close. I throw an arm out, and a tall figure rushes in, the same scent of fruity aftershave joining him as yesterday.

My heart skips a beat, and I consider darting out of the elevator and waiting for the next one. I spent years getting over Joey, and now I can't escape him. The worst of it is that he was so fucking nice about telling me that he had no idea who I was. As soon as I got into the limo, I'd thrown up in an empty ice bucket. Jason hadn't even blinked at the action, hadn't asked if I was alright.

I look up, and Joseph's brown eyes are looking down at me, and he gives me a soft smile. "Hey, Chris," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets and lifting his shoulders. His

tone is uncertain when he uses the nickname, but it warms my heart. Has he remembered something about me, then? My stomach flutters, and I consider, just for an instant, hitting the emergency stop on the elevator so I can pull his face to mine for the kiss I never gave him. The kiss I always wished for.

Maybe he'd lift me up to the handrail, his hand slipping down, and—

I don't kiss him, though, and the longer I stare into his eyes, the more I realize that the actual recognition isn't there. My whole body deflates, and I inspect his outfit. He's wearing a pair of ripped-up black jeans, and his sneakers are an old pair of vans with holes in them. His t-shirt has the name of one of those metal bands whose logo just looks like a pile of sticks, and his hair is down in gentle waves that frame his face.

Joseph has always had that bad boy persona, even in school. I noticed yesterday that he was wearing a ring on at least half his fingers, just like he did in high school. Maybe he doesn't remember me, but I remember him. I remember that, despite that bad boy persona, he's a total softie.

Half a smile finds my lips before I can stop it. Just because he doesn't remember me doesn't mean we can't somehow be friends again, right? For once, the Phantom is quiet. It goes into this sort of hibernation occasionally, but I never know how long it will last. Sometimes it's hours, and once, it was over a year. "Hey, Joseph," I say, reminding myself to use his full first name instead of the nickname. "You rehearsing today as well?"

He looks at the floor, and I could swear that his cheeks turn pink. "Yeah. We're trying out a new set for the summer. Seeing how it goes. A few new songs."

I nod. "I have one new one, and all new choreography. It's about to be a rough couple weeks."

His brows shoot up. "Yeah, I forgot you have to do a whole dance. I just have to stand and look cool with my guitar." He mimes holding a guitar and bangs his head a few times, and I can't help but grin.

“Yeah, but you have to play guitar and sing simultaneously. I can barely play basic piano when I sing.” My whole body warms, and I wonder if he’d let me brush that stray bit of hair out of his eyes. Even when we were young, though, I’d never been bold enough to do that sort of thing.

“I wouldn’t say barely,” he said. “Your TikTok was awesome.”

Now it’s my turn to flush, my face warming by about ten thousand degrees. “Oh, god, you saw that? I was a mess.” I cover my face with my hands. It had been a really dark time in my life, but something gave me the idea to sing a song. It hadn’t been the Phantom, just something inside me that needed to feel one ounce of happiness.

After that, everything changed. The Phantom hadn’t seen the possibilities before then, but it took my one source of happiness and warped it, tore it apart until it was something horrifying. If I had the audacity to enjoy myself, it would ruin that.

Joseph puts a hand on my wrist and gently pulls, and I wonder where he’s gonna put it. When he just holds it there, my heart trips over itself in its excitement. I could kiss him right now. I’d have to stand way up on my tiptoes, and he’d have to lean down, but god it would be good, and maybe we’d find a supply closet and his fingers would find their way down to my warm core and...I stop myself right there, embarrassed even though he can’t read my mind. It’s like I’m that same teen girl who had a crush all those years ago. One he’d never reciprocated, of course.

“It was great,” he says gently, his face suddenly serious. Something flashes in his eyes, something unfamiliar and delicious and terrifying, but it’s gone before I can figure out what it is. It takes me a moment to remember that we were talking about my TikTok, not the imagined fingerbang in a closet.

Before I can reply, the elevator stops, and we’re at sub-basement C, which contains the best rehearsal and recording studios in the city.

He releases my wrist like I'm on fire, and I can't decide if I should be offended. My core nearly throbs with need as his lips glance down to mine. I have to get out of here right now.

I walk out of the elevator first, giving him a little wave. "See you later," I say as though I'm not absolutely desperate for him to touch me again. My heart trips over itself, and I want nothing more than to turn back and drag him somewhere private.

That would be ridiculous, though, and I have a show to rehearse. Despite how awful it is that the demon is controlling the things that bring me joy, I truly love performing, and I won't disappoint those who come out to see me.

I will have to find my good vibrator as soon as I get home, though, because this need is absolutely unbearable.

CHAPTER 5

JOSEPH

I FLEX MY NOW CLAWED HAND AND WAIT UNTIL CHRISTINE finds her own rehearsal room before walking forward. Of course Wynn would put us right next to each other. She asked me to look after her, after all.

I hadn't missed the way her eyes flicked to my lips, and I couldn't help but do the same. What the hell is wrong with me? I've never had any interest in anyone sexually, but now, I just want to hold her in my arms and kiss her until her body goes soft and she hops on my cock.

Which isn't how things work, but I have to think of something else before I enter the rehearsal hall. I take a breath and will away my hard-on, although it takes a couple minutes of awkwardly standing in the hall. My erection goes down, and the few demonic features that sprouted fade.

When I walk in, my band mates are waiting for me. Owen is tuning his bass, and Darren is picking the perfect pair of drumsticks. I once tried to tell him they were all the same, and he looked at me like I was out of my mind. I don't know jack shit about drums, but all the ones he buys have the exact same label on them. He then told me it was about the mood of the wood, and I stopped asking.

Owen says, "So, Christine Osmond." It didn't take me long after meeting Owen to figure out what happened to him. So that he would survive, he made a deal with a werewolf to keep that particular curse going. He's still the same person he was before the accident, just with a set of accommodations we need to look out for. Wynn seems to have accepted a tissue

connectivity disorder as enough reason that he couldn't perform on the full moon after we went on a spiel about the different gravitational pull. None of the Shatter Fest dates are on the night of the full moon, and I again picture Wynn as some sort of witch controlling the nebulous tour dates.

I frown and plug my red guitar in to the amp. "Yeah," I reply simply. I can already hear the heavy thumping bass of one of her popular songs through the wall, although nothing else is clear with all the padding they put down here. As soon as we start, it'll be drowned out.

Sasha is the last to arrive. As one of the few Black women in a mainstream metal band, she probably had to get through a crowd of admirers and paparazzi alike when she showed up to the building. She's also the youngest in our group. When we were discovered, she was still in high school, and the morning after she graduated, we flew out to LA to start rehearsals for our first ever Shatter Fest. Her hair is out in all its natural glory, a fro she takes pride in. She pulls out her signature pink sequined guitar, the one all the purists would make fun of when they saw it. That is, until she told them to fuck off or she'd shove it up their asses. Not many people know it, but the back of the guitar's head is signed by Nita Strauss, and a specialist preserved it in resin so she could keep playing it.

She's also the only *human* in the band at this point, and she knows it. Out of everyone, we couldn't keep our paranormal secret from her, although nobody quite knows Darren's deal.

As soon as she walks in, she plugs her guitar in and starts playing the first notes of *Wake Up*, the opener for our forty minute set.

Darren comes in on drums, and Owen and I start our parts simultaneously.

I lean toward the mic, and I can't help but picture Christine standing there in front of me.

"*Wake up,*" I say, my tone low. "*Wake up and see what you're doing to me.*"

Sasha's fingers move expertly over her guitar. She goes up to her own mic and whisper-sings, "*What are you doing?*"

I let out the snarky laugh that makes women melt and annoys YouTube vocal coaches, then continue, "*Wake up if you give a shit. Wake up and show me you care.*"

"*Why should I care?*"

Then, we move into the pre-chorus.

"*Don't tell me you don't see it,*" I sing.

Simultaneously, Sasha sings, "*Don't make me do this.*"

"*If I meant anything to you...*"

At the same time, Sasha: "*If you would just look at see...*"

I pull back, and Sasha goes into a raging chorus. "*Why would I wake up if you won't listen? Who is there when I'm dying? Why the fuck do you even care?*"

I cut in and sing with her this time, "*Let me die with you darling, for going gentle into this good night is bullshit.*"

Our guitars go lower, basic power chords now. Was Christine alone when she almost died? Was anyone there to hold her hand?

Sasha sings her verse. "*Wake up. Pack your shit and get away from me now.*"

"*Please don't let me go,*" I sing, backing up her words.

She continues, "*Get away and don't come back. Wake up, this isn't working.*"

"*Why don't you care?*"

I take over for the pre-chorus, and she takes her part in the chorus.

Then, I pull away, playing a simple melody on my guitar while Owen claps to the beat of the drums. Darren brings up the cymbals, and, with a violent hit of the bass drum, Sasha rips into her guitar.

I can play guitar. I've practiced until my fingers bled to get back to the level they needed from Joseph for this band to

work.

Sasha, though? She was built to play guitar. The music pours from her instrument, trilling notes that overlap in impossible patterns. Actually impossible, according to several professional and amateur guitarists alike. Without Sasha, we would still be sitting in a garage fucking around.

As her notes space apart and grow slower, I lean back into my mic, and, when the final note of her solo rings out, I croon, “*Why don’t you just wake up and see...*”

At the same time, Sasha and I scream, “*What. You’ve. Done. To. Me!*” We hold the final word out, and Owen comes over to my mic for the “*woah*” section of the song.

Then, we play the chorus one more time, and our instruments trail off together, Sasha playing the final note.

My heart races, and the rightness of the moment floods my body, the adrenaline of a perfectly performed song.

“Christ, Munson, where was that the other day?” Darren asks, and I can’t do anything but shake my head.

Sasha rolls her eyes. “Something going on with you this week?” She doesn’t actually want to know, though, as evidenced by the snark in her tone.

Still, I shrug and can’t help but smile a little.

Christine is going on with me this week.

And to think, we’ll have the whole summer. It sounds impossible and wonderful, although I can’t be certain she actually wants anything to do with me after I didn’t remember her. Maybe, though, I can try to be her friend, the same way Joseph used to be.

CHAPTER 6

CHRISTINE

I HAVE A PHOTOSHOOT AFTER LUNCH AFTER THE NEXT DAY OF rehearsals, and the walls shiver as Corroded Hellfire's song ends, the world reverberating with its power. It seems we've been put into neighboring rehearsal halls, a coincidence that warms me inside and floods me with desire. Not that I'll ever tell anyone any of that.

For a moment, I consider going up to the door to peek through the thick glass to catch a glimpse of Joseph, but that would be weird and stalkerish. I make my way to the elevator so that I can go to the building's cafeteria, the best way to avoid stares and attention when I just want to get lunch.

As I'm waiting for the elevator to appear, a figure shows up beside me, and I glance up to see Joseph standing there. His hair is down today, the waves flowing down over his shoulders, a few strands plastered to his skin with sweat. He's not the only one. I'm sure I'm absolutely rank at this point, so after lunch, I'll take a shower before going to the shoot. A quick one, though, because Wynn has me on a tight schedule.

"Getting lunch?" he asks, his voice soft and breathless with a distant sort of joy. I can relate to the exhilaration, the way that we can get lost in our performances.

"Yup!" I say, my voice too loud and enthusiastic, a leftover from my upbeat persona that I have to have on stage. It sounds so fake to my ears, and that's not how I want to be around him.

Not that it matters. He doesn't remember me, and it's not like I stayed up until two in the morning thinking about how a

magical kiss might be the cure to his amnesia. Or a magical fuck.

It was midnight at the latest, but my magical new vibrator was to blame for most of that, since I gave up looking for the lost one.

I clear my throat, and, in a more normal tone, say, “I mean, yeah. I have to be quick, though, because I’m due for a shoot upstairs in an hour, and nobody should have to smell me. so I’ve gotta squeeze a shower in as well.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I definitely smell a lot worse than you, but I’m pretty sure I’ve gone nose-blind at this point.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “Well, I can’t smell you at all, if that makes you feel better.”

He smiles down at me, those dark eyes warm against my aching soul. There’s still something wrong about that shade of brown, but I can’t quite put my finger on it when he’s staring so intently at me.

My hand twitches to brush away a strand of hair that’s caught in his eyelashes, but a body moves between us.

“Forgot to press the button,” the intruder says, and my whole body freezes. Did I really?

The person between us is Owen, another member of Corroded Hellfire that I remember from school, although he graduated a year ahead of me. “Christine, how the hell have you been?” he asks, tossing one sweaty arm over my shoulder and the other on Joseph’s. I should cringe at the sweat, but I’m used to it at this point, and the thing that really should be bothering me is that he’s touching me at all.

He doesn’t seem to be doing it to cop a feel, though, and I don’t get that ick I get whenever Jason’s hand lands on my skin and makes nausea roil in my gut.

I smile awkwardly. “Oh, you know, drugs and rehab are always the true mark of celebrity. I’ve made it!” It’s supposed to come off as a self-depreciating joke, but it lands wrong and makes his expression freeze as panic hits his eyes. I can practically see everything he’s thinking. *Oh, what a poor*

fragile girl. I'd better not get too close in case she shatters and cuts me.

Joseph, however, snorts. “Yeah, and now you’re stuck rehearsing next to this asshole. Congrats, you won the worst lottery ever!” He shrugs off Owen’s touch, and Owen’s expression clears off the awkwardness in exchange for a jovial grin.

“At least I’ve got great hair,” he says.

Joseph rolls his eyes, and when we enter the elevator, he’s careful to position himself between Owen and me. It’s subtle, and I can’t help but appreciate it. Why do I have to be so bad with people in real life situations? When I’m putting on my pop persona for fans, I’m the most social butterfly in the world. Yet in small groups like this, I can feel myself sinking into the shiny elevator walls that are devoid of life as they argue about their hair.

When the doors open, I expect for them to walk off together.

Owen asks, “Are you coming to the usual spot?”

Instead of agreeing and abandoning me to my afternoon, though, Joseph looks at me and gives a gentle half-smile. “Nah, I’m gonna grab lunch in the café.”

Owen shrugs. “Suit yourself.” Then, he leaves the both of us behind.

My face heats. “You don’t want to go with him?”

He watches me carefully, that smile still in place. “Trying to get rid of me?”

My face grows hotter. Without makeup on, I must look like a lobster. “Of course not!” It seems like he wants to join me for lunch, but maybe he just doesn’t want to risk being swarmed on the street. “You can eat wherever you want. You work here too.”

Oh, god, now I’m rambling. I’ve forgotten how to have normal interactions with people without a demon interfering, and now I’m making an absolute fool of myself.

Something like hurt flickers in his eyes. After a long pause where we're both standing right outside the elevator, he says, "Maybe I wasn't clear enough. I was hoping we could have lunch together. And perhaps I could go to your photoshoot. As, uh, moral support."

He'd started by saying it so smoothly, but it's the "uh" that gets my head out of my ass. I'm not the only nervous one.

I give him a small smile. "Yes, that would be great. You just don't get to join me in the shower this time."

This time??? Foot, meet mouth.

He shrugs. "That makes sense."

Did he not understand the implication that most of the men in my life would have grasped at desperately? Or is he just pretending for my sake?

I can't help but run circles around my mind in an attempt to figure out what's going on in his. He doesn't remember me, which means he has no reason to care about me.

Hope blossoms deep in my chest. Maybe, after spending some time with me, he's starting to remember something.

We walk toward the café side by side, and celebrity has no meaning here. We wait in line like everyone else, because these people see famous musicians every single day. There's no reason for them to give us special attention, which is why I wanted to come to the café. If we went to a coffee shop or a restaurant nearby, I'd probably end up late to my photoshoot.

And someone might get a picture of Joseph and me, which would start rumors I'm certain he doesn't want considering how different our public images are.

Not to mention how much my incident might smear him.

He gets a metric fuck ton of chicken strips and fries from a small fast food outlet that I've never seen outside of this building before, and instead of going to find a table in the crowded café, he waits in a separate line with me while I get a coffee, and he even holds my purse while I dig through it to find my damn debit card.

Jason tried to put a clause in my contract that I have to follow a specific diet for this tour, but it wasn't long before Wynn struck it down, claiming that it could be actionable and she didn't want to open the company up to any sort of lawsuits. With the way she looked at me when she said that, though, I knew she had more to her motivations than the lawsuit, and I haven't missed how she looks at Jason every time we interact. Like he's a bug she wants to squish.

Now, though, I don't have to feel like I'm breaking the rules when I order a mocha Frappuccino for lunch. I'm exhausted, and the chocolate will make me feel a million times better about how much work I have left today.

"Damn, I should have grabbed one of those," Joseph says, perching my purse's strap back on my shoulder without actually touching me. If he were Jason, he'd brush his hands over my skin, leer at me, make eyes like I totally want to fuck him.

And honestly, the fact that Joseph doesn't do any of that makes me wonder what he'd be like in bed. At the very least, he's probably considerate. Maybe even attentive if I'm—*no*, not me, if *someone else*—is lucky. I take a sip of my drink, shrugging at whatever he said, because now all I can think of is what it would be like to run my fingers through his hair, to press my lips to his after all these years. To grind myself against him and unzip his pants and pull out his...

Fucking hell, Christine, I tell myself. Keep it in your pants!

We stop, staring into the vast ocean of ugly tan tables and plastic chairs in neon colors. "I don't see any—" I start, but Joseph loops his arm through mine and drags me through the crowd, eyes bright and a laser focus in his expression.

That's when I spot it. There, in the very back corner, is a recessed alcove that contains a small sofa with just enough room for two people, along with a coffee table for our food.

He sits on one of the two cushions, and I'm reminded suddenly that this type of sofa is called a *loveseat*. I shake away that thought and sit beside him, careful to make sure our

legs don't touch. We're more secluded here, a wall blocking the rest of the room.

"No one ever sits over here," he explains, and I remember that he's worked here far longer than me. He checks his phone. "What time is your photoshoot? I'll make sure you aren't late."

I give a small smile. "One."

He nods and sets a half hour alarm on his phone. I'd planned on just drinking my super sugary Frappuccino, but he slides one of the baskets of chicken and fries in my direction.

I prick a brow at the meal, ignoring the way that his eyes bore into my skin intently.

"How do you know I'm not a vegetarian?" I ask, trying my best to seem snarky, but my heart isn't in it. Even without the clause in my contract, I worry what will happen if I eat this meal.

I don't look at him, but I can feel him shrug. "Considering I saw a burger delivery to your rehearsal studio yesterday, I think I can guess."

I smile lightly but still stare at the food. Sure, it's not in my contract that I have to eat a certain way, but they scheduled my shoot for right after lunch, and if I eat, my stomach will look slightly more bloated, and—

"If you don't eat, I'll make you," Joseph says. I think he's joking when my eyes snap to his, but his face is utterly serious.

I frown. "You wouldn't."

His smile doesn't return to tell me he's joking. "Wynn told me to take care of you. Starving yourself for a photoshoot is not taking care of yourself."

My stomach tightens from hunger. I only had half a muffin for breakfast, mostly because I dropped the other half getting out of the car this morning. I've been hungrier, though, and the demon will punish me if I don't look absolutely perfect in the photos.

I grit my teeth. “I’m not hungry.”

He glances out the window, the only vantage point anyone could have to see us past the barrier between the sofa and the rest of the café, then back at me. “As you wish.”

I almost think he’s going to drop it, but instead, his hand moves up to my jaw, and his hand settles so that his fingers press on my cheeks over the spot where my teeth meet.

If I weren’t so shocked that my jaw dropped anyway, he would easily be able to force my mouth open. Then, he picks up a fry and sets the end of it on my tongue, the salt causing me to salivate.

At least, I think it’s the food, because this is absolutely not a turn on for me.

Absolutely not.

“Eat,” he says gently.

And, to my surprise, I comply. I reach up and take the end of the fry, and he releases my jaw. He’d been gentle with me, so goddamn gentle, so it doesn’t hurt even a little as I chew the single fry. He leans back and crosses his arms, his veins standing out on his skin as his dark eyes bore into me.

He doesn’t stop watching me until I’ve eaten every single bite, and his phone’s alarm goes off. He stands and helps me up, but his hand doesn’t linger in mine afterward. “To the gym?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I’m good on my own. You don’t have to make sure I get everywhere safely.”

His eyes finally gentle, and there’s something like loss in his expression. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

CHAPTER 7

JOSEPH

MY ENTIRE FUCKING HAND BURNS FROM TOUCHING HER. IT had been stupid, and I don't even know where it came from. All I know is that the idea of her not eating something when she was clearly hungry filled me with rage, and I had the overwhelming need to take care of her, even if she wouldn't.

Watching her open her mouth, her tongue sticking out to accept the fry, did horrible things to my mind.

I sit outside the frosted glass shower stall, leaning against the brick and eating my now cold lunch that I'd neglected. She'd asked me to come in so I wasn't standing outside the private bathroom like a weirdo, although she waited to remove her clothing until she was already in the shower.

I'd almost been insulted. If I'm going to see her undress, it won't be a peek when she's trying to clean herself. It will be after she fucking begs me to take her clothes off.

Which she'll never do, so it doesn't actually matter. Besides, when did I get so interested in removing anyone's clothes?

No, not just anyone.

Christine.

I want more than that, though. I want to go into that shower and push her against the wall, fucking her as she smiles up at me, begging me for everything she needs. I didn't miss the way she said *This time* before, but it must have been a slip. She didn't mean anything by it. I was already too wired,

and I had to let that slide right off me so I didn't shift into my demonic form right there out of pure horniness.

Her phone dings on the ground beside me, and she calls, "Can you check that for me?"

I pick up the phone, shoving down the thoughts that have my cock hard against my fly. "It's a text," I say. "Doesn't say who it's from."

"The code is one-one-two-five."

I type that in, wondering why the number sounds familiar. It picks at the back of my mind as I read the text out loud. "Jason says, '*Where the...*'" I refuse to read that word out loud in the aggressive way he puts it. "...*heck are you?*" And then a bunch of angry emojis." I frown. "You should really fire this guy. I think my agent is taking on new talent, and she's not a complete shit."

The water turns off, and I wait for what feels like eternity before she comes out, her skin flushed from the heat of the water. She lets her still-dry hair down from a claw clip, shaking it out. "I can't," she says matter-of-factly. "I signed a five year noncompete. If I break it, I legally can't work for the remainder of that time, and he owns the rights to all of my music."

I grimace. "So you'd get none of your royalties."

She shakes her head. "Exactly." She doesn't seem horribly broken up about it, more like she's resigned to this horrible fact of her life. "Only two more years, though, and I can take you up on that offer." Her tone has a little bit of humor in it, but her eyes won't meet mine.

We're completely alone in here, with no eyes that could possibly see me ruining her image, so I make the split second decision to pull her into my arms like I've wanted for days.

I expect her to huff about it. Anytime I try to dig deeper with her, she shutters up with humor.

Instead, though, she sinks into me and wraps her arms around my back, taking in a deep breath.

My arms were built to hold this woman, and it breaks my fucking heart that I'm not the man she actually wants to be here. She deserves so much better than a demon who scavenged a body from a dying man—a dying man whose desperate final words were to apologize to her.

“I'm sorry,” I say. I know she'll think I'm still talking about the contract, but it's so much more than that. *I'm sorry I couldn't save him*, I wish I could say. *I'm sorry he's not the one here with you*. *I'm sorry I'm just a monster that doesn't deserve your touch*.

Her shoulders shake, and her breath comes in gasps. My shirt dampens against my skin, but I don't pull away to look at her. I already know she's crying, after all. Instead, I hold her tighter, pressing my face into her hair and running one hand in small circles over her back.

“He won't let me go,” she sobs. “He's always there, always waiting for me. I just wish I could get rid of him.”

She's talking about Jason. She must be, although I get the idea that there's more to her words. What it could be, I have no idea.

“I know, Chris, I know,” I mumble into her hair.

She buries her face into my chest, and I hold her for a long time. Too long. Her phone dings a couple more times, and I text behind her back:

CHRISTINE

On my way!

It's a complete lie, but they can wait just a few more minutes while she gathers herself.

I don't let her go until she pulls away from me, wiping her nose on the long sleeve of her t-shirt.

“Do I look like complete shit?” she asks, holding her arms out. Her eyes are rimmed with red, and her skin is flushed and dewey from crying.

“You’re always beautiful,” I reply with complete and utter sincerity. It’s not for me to say, but I can’t help myself.

She gives me a halfhearted laugh. “Right. I’m sure the makeup team will agree.”

Her eyes flick to my lips, and I don’t stop myself this time. I lean down and kiss her, my hands cupping her jaw on either side.

She moans and kisses me back, throwing her arms around the back of my neck and standing on her tiptoes. Her tongue flicks over mine, and I can feel my body changing, stretching to shift as my vision goes violet.

I yank myself away, and it feels like ripping a limb from my body. I hold my arm up over my lips, panic surging through me.

She falls from her toes back on her heels, her eyes still closed. Her brows bunch with confusion, and by the time she actually opens her eyes, I’ve got myself under control.

She can’t see me like that, can’t know.

She also doesn’t know that I’m not Joey, the person she actually cares about. Kissing her was wrong, but I’d lost my composure for a moment. I’ve heard of demons who go into a frenzy when they bond with a human, but that can’t be me. I won’t be that. It would be taking advantage.

“I’m sorry,” I say, taking a step back. “There are...things.” I don’t have a way to explain that she’ll believe, nor do I want her to believe these horrible things about me. If she knows I’m a monster, she’ll run.

“What things?” she asks, and hurt laces her tone. I want to throw up, knowing that the pain is my fault.

I shake my head. “It’s hard to explain.”

She breathes out heavily through her nose, closing her eyes to steady herself. When she opens them, her expression has hardened, steeling against me. “I understand.”

Then, she strides out of the bathroom, and I peek out to make sure nobody is watching before I follow her out.

She hasn't said as much, but I know that being seen walking out of a bathroom with me would be more than enough to ruin her image.

When I do exit, I walk up to her, because walking a few strides behind her from here all the way to her photoshoot would actually look worse for both of us. I don't want people saying I'm a stalker. Friends? Absolutely. Stalker or boyfriend? It would ruin her. Even taking her hand to pull her through the cafeteria earlier had been risky, but it had been as natural as breathing.

Not to say she couldn't bounce back, but I don't want to be the reason she has to do so. Now that she's broken down about Jason, I'm starting to understand the sadness I've seen in her. With a controlling asshole like that for a manager, it makes sense that she's so stressed all the time.

"I want to be your friend," I rush to explain. "I just can't..." I don't finish the sentence as I brush a hand through my hair. The truth is, I can't stay away from her. I want to make sure there's someone around to advocate for her needs, because so far, I don't think she's had that in her career. As a solo artist, she has an entirely different system than me, a member of a band. We have each other. We watch each other's backs.

She shrugs, then turns her face and gives me a weak smile. "I get it. You don't have to explain. Are you still coming to my shoot?"

I should say no. I should let her get on with her life, because if I'm around, I'm not going to let anyone touch her. I can't be with her, because she deserves so much more than a demon in her best friend's body. But I also can't stand around and watch her be with someone else.

"Yeah," I say, trying to be cheerful. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

When we exit the elevator on the fifteenth floor, I realize that the code to her phone is my—Joey's—birthday, November twenty-fifth, and I feel an ounce of joy and ten pounds of guilt.

CHAPTER 8

CHRISTINE

REHEARSALS FLY BY, AND EVERY DAY, JOSEPH MAKES SURE I have food and my afternoon coffee. I still wonder if perhaps he remembers something, but the Phantom within me basically tells me to shut the fuck up because I'm not worthy of love.

Shattered Fest starts in Orlando, goes straight up to Atlanta, hits all the major cities until we reach Boston, then goes across Interstate 70 for places like Kansas City and Denver, up to Salt Lake City, then way up to Seattle, and back down for Portland and two stops in California.

It's a massive undertaking, but Jason insisted that it was the best move to get me back on track.

We fly out to Orlando, and Nell, my manager, arranges a trip to the Happiest Theme Park Ever so we can get some good pictures before the show tomorrow. Thankfully, Jason won't be attending, as he's schmoozing a telenovela star he wants to represent. I'm swarmed by fans half the day, although most people are willing to give me space. I'm not the only performer here, and I catch glimpses of Joseph and the rest of Corrupted Hellfire standing across from me during the parade. Owen, their bassist, gives me a little wave, then nudges Joseph, who does the same. He looks adorable with his galaxy-themed mouse ears. I smile and wave back.

When afternoon draws near, storm clouds close in, and a sudden downpour begins as we're walking to a separate location for more social media pictures. On instinct, I sprint for the nearest shelter to protect my hair and makeup. It's just a little overhang next to a courtyard with little purple flags,

and there's what appears to be a hallway that only goes a few feet before hitting a wall. Nell took off the other direction, and I can barely see her through the sudden downpour. I stare out into the weather and back up, my body hitting someone else I hadn't seen when entering the shelter.

“Sorry, I—“

Hands move to my forearms to steady me, and the hair on the back of my neck raises. I look down, and the warm, veined hands are covered in rings. Instead of pulling away, I look up and back, and Joseph is looking down at me, a gentle smile on his face.

“Are you stalking me?” I ask in our little haven. Nell is across the courtyard in a shop that sells touristy jewelry, finally visible as the initial opening of the sky lets up slightly, and she makes eye contact with me, pricking an eyebrow as if to ask if she needs to come over here. I give a small smile and shake my head to let her know I'm okay.

“Only a little,” Joseph jokes, and I chuckle. I shouldn't do this, but the Phantom is quiet, dormant for now, so I lean back against him, my wet body warmed by his. His body stiffens for a moment, and then he wraps his arms around me. Something hard is against my ass, and a small, satisfied smile hits my face.

I should mind. I shouldn't be okay with this. People will take pictures. They'll talk. I barely know him, after all. It's been over a decade since we were actually friends, although something else has been building between us for the last couple of weeks. We haven't kissed again, but I've caught him looking at my lips, and I once came out of the shower in only a towel, and I could swear he was holding onto the countertop by the sink for dear life. “I'm sorry I wasn't there for you,” he says. His words are low, and I almost miss them. This isn't the first time he's apologized, but it doesn't hurt any less when he says it.

I pull away, and a shiver runs through me when I turn to look at him. I give him a half smile. “It's alright,” I say. With a

laugh, I say, “You know, the day I found out, I called you, but your number was out of service.”

The words were supposed to be funny, but his face crumples in front of me. His brows tilt up, and his lips part. “Chris, God. I’m sorry.”

My heart breaks at the nickname I haven’t heard since Mom died, at least not until he came around, and I immediately regret saying what I did. It was supposed to be funny, a little “Look at the poor sad girl trying to relive the past.” Instead, the words seem to have genuinely hurt him. Why does he care? It’s not like we’d spoken for a few years by that point, and he doesn’t even remember me.

He says, “I had to change numbers like a month after our video. Someone found it and doxxed me.”

I nod, looking back out into the rain that’s already letting up. “That happened to me, too. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I can’t keep hurting him by bringing this up. He has nothing to apologize for, and now that the rain has already stopped, I have to get back to Nell. “I’ll see you later, alright? Please don’t feel bad.”

He reaches out like he’s going to take my hand, and my heart reaches back to him.

Pain strikes me like an icy knife plunging into my heart, though, and I know I have to go. If I don’t get back to doing what the demon wants, it’ll only get worse.

When I get to Nell, I take one look back at where Joseph is standing in his black denim jacket and studded jeans, his curly hair plastered against his face from the rain that managed to catch him. That darkness from before is in his eyes, and I shiver.

“Can we go?” I ask, and the pain must be obvious, because she loops her arm through my elbow and leads me past the castle and out of the park, an SUV picking us up right as we exit.

CHAPTER 9

JOSEPH

I DRAW A LONG DRINK OF BEER ON THE BALCONY OF MY hotel, and when I glance over, Christine is next door. I can see her through the windows doing some sort of stretching in a vintage pink nightgown with a lace hem that nearly reaches the floor. The first day of the festival is tomorrow, so we'll be moved to the grounds at five in the morning. The gates open at ten, which gives bands five hours to rehearse, get dressed, and do any sort of exploring beforehand.

I asked Wynn for Christine's phone number this afternoon over text, and Wynn just responded with a text.

BIG BOSS, DO NOT PISS OFF

???No??? Ask her yourself!!!

Which apparently meant that it was an odd question. I still haven't quite figured out what humans consider rude. I send a quick reply.

Will do

Christine looks up, then notices me on the balcony. She doesn't have a balcony like I do, but she gives a wave with a small smile through the window. I raise my beer toward her, and she spins around suddenly, like someone just walked into her room.

I have a bad feeling about this.

I rush back inside, and, sure enough, I hear a masculine voice yelling. A surge of protectiveness that I don't understand runs through me, and my hands tense into fists so quickly that the beer bottle is crushed in my now pitch-black hand, causing me to bleed. Then, Christine's voice replies. Is that fear I can sense in her tone? Every hair on my body raises, and I drop the glass onto the carpet and heal the wounds on my hand and my vision goes purple. I don't care. Maybe someone will see me, maybe they won't. I need to see her, though, need to make sure she's alright.

I knock on the door, and the yelling pauses. Nobody comes to the door, though. The man yells again, and something heavy slams against the door.

I bang on it this time. "Chris, open the door!" My voice is deeper, a growl as I've fully shifted, my body taller than the doorway now. I know she doesn't go by that nickname anymore, but she seems to like it when I say it.

Something shatters, and I hear a scream.

An interior door slams, and I slam my fist into the door once again, the wood shuddering and creaking under my fist.

"Christine, I'll break this door down if you don't open it right the fuck—"

The door rips open, and I almost fall forward. What I see in front of me doesn't make sense, though. Christine is standing there, but she's wrong. Her eyes are deep red, glowing in an impossible way. My blood runs cold. This isn't possible. These demons aren't supposed to exist anymore. Humans just don't summon demons to get their wishes. When they do, it's a death sentence.

But right now, Christine's hands are elongated into black claws that seem to be made of tar, and my mouth dries as I shift back into my human form out of pure survival instinct.

"Chris, what did you..." I can't finish the sentence, though. When I glance at the floor, blood is seeping out from under the bathroom door, soaking into the hotel's patterned carpet.

“Leave,” Christine says, but the voice isn’t hers. She smiles, and her teeth are elongated into fangs, and there’s something feral and hungry about the way she’s looking at me. This isn’t her. She’s possessed, and the demon is in a blood fueled rage. The thing inside of her is powerful, although I can’t quite tell how powerful.

I was never a fighter, keeping to myself until my time came. This thing, though, is a demon killer. I can tell just by its scent.

I take a stumbling step back.

I should help her. I know I should.

Instead, I turn around and run.

I’m such a fucking coward.



CHRISTINE

I SLAM my fists against the invisible walls of my mind he’s locked me in. When Jason showed up drunk and pissed, I tried to get him to leave, but he wouldn’t listen. He grabbed me, and I went to hit him. It was a blur. I was locked up so deep I couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t *feel*. When I came to, I remembered one single thing, and that was Joseph at my door, terrified and running away from me. I blacked out again moments later.

The Phantom wanted me to see that. It wants me to know that it was a mistake to try to get close to him. I’m not allowed to love. I’m here for one thing, and that’s whatever the Phantom wants. And right now, it wants me to focus on bringing it worship. I don’t know what ends it wants to meet, but it claims I don’t need to know.

When I’m finally free in the morning, before dawn, I get dressed in a form-fitting t-shirt dress that has one of the Corrupted Hellfire album cover designs on the front. I got it

from their merchandise manager back in LA, and I've been planning all week to wear it while I wait for my set to start. I was gonna surprise Joseph with it, maybe try to seduce him.

I don't put on any makeup other than a thick black eyeliner, the brand-name one my team has approved, and instead of my contacts, I wear my thick-rimmed glasses and tuck my hair into a black beanie.

I still wear my comfiest pair of white sneakers, though.

When Nell knocks on my door at five, I'm ready to go, a pink mouse-eared backpack I bought at the park yesterday slung over my shoulder.

"Interesting outfit choice," she says, raising an eyebrow and pointing at the logo on the shirt-turned-dress.

I simply shrug. I want to walk around the festival with people, and I won't be able to do that effectively if people recognize me. Christine Osmand is an all-pink, all-the-time girl, so wearing all black with heavy liner and glasses, I'm a different person.

The parade of SUVs brings us to the festival grounds in the dark. We pass the airport, and I wonder if Joseph is in one of the vehicles near me. I need to talk to him, need to explain. Well, I need to lie, at least. With my luck, though, he'll never speak to me again. He'd been running, so he must have seen *something*.

When we arrive at the festival, Nell leads me to my tour bus, and I look through the outfits they've picked out. Pleated skirts, of course. Always pleated skirts. And, for some ungodly reason, slouchy cardigans. In Florida. In July.

I suppose I'll have water and ice packs backstage, and the performance is only half an hour long. I take a nap in the tour bus's bed, waking up to my alarm at ten.

When the festival opens, I explore as though I belong, and nobody looks twice at me. I'm just another Corrupted Hellfire fangirl today.

They have a meet and greet at ten thirty, which is plenty of time before my own set if I get to the front of their line. Maybe

I can go to Joseph and ask what happened that made him run. Or maybe he'll be so awestruck seeing me in the band's merch that he'll take me back to the privacy of the tent's stockroom and fuck me on the ground.

I'm nowhere near the front, as it turns out, and I stare at my phone, using it as a shield just in case a discerning eye does notice me.

When I get to the front of the line, though, Joseph isn't there. Fans are groaning about it, but most of them are here to meet Sasha. Still, a few complaints are met with Owen's apology and an assurance that Joseph will be at the six o'clock meet and greet.

I walk up and buy a CD, and the merchandise manager that gave me the shirt last week looks at my card, then at me. She smirks. "Didn't recognize you for a second."

I flush and move on to the band. Sasha is busy getting selfies, and Darren is chatting with a fan, so I lean toward Owen.

"Who do I make this out to?" he asks without looking at me.

"It's me," I say. "Uh, Chris."

He looks up at me, and a single laugh comes out of his mouth. His canines look sharper than most people might have, but I must just be paranoid about all of this supernatural shit in my own life. "Hell. Nice dress! It works for you." Then, his brows scrunching, he stands. "Pretend we're taking a selfie."

I do as he says, and while I'm holding it up, he asks, "Did something happen with Joseph? He texted that he stayed at a motel near the venue and would be here later. He's never been late for a show." He says all this with a grin, and his voice is low enough the other fans can't hear.

I blink at him twice. "He's not here?" My heart crashes like ocean waves, tearing my chest apart like the cliffs of Dover.

Owen shakes his head, then takes out his phone and holds it over mine. Immediately, my phone buzzes, and his number

pops up. Out loud, he says, “Text me. Your set is starting soon.”

I glance at the time, and my breathing stops.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

It’s eleven thirty.

How the hell did this line take so long?

I take off in a dead sprint toward my bus, and Nell is waiting in frustration. “Come on, Christine. I know you’re obsessed with him, but you’ve gotta be here on time. Team’s inside, and they’re pissed.”

I sigh. “I know, I know.”

Nell shakes her head and looks at her phone. “And nobody can get a hold of Jason. Probably drunk again or something.”

My heart stops as I remember Jason showing up last night, but nothing afterward. “Jason is missing?”

She shrugs. “Missing is a strong word. I’m sure he’ll be cussing out the roadies backstage when you get there.”

I run in and strip in front of my team, wiping myself down with baby wipes to get rid of the sweat while they get to work on my hair and makeup.

They finish up in record time, and Nell puts me into a golf cart that zooms to the main stage.

I plaster a grin on my face and wave at the fans we pass, and the Phantom says, *Good girl*. The words make me sick, but I have to keep up the act. I have to look like I’m so healthy and excited to be here. This is my first public appearance since the incident, and it has to look like I’m put together.

I have to get a mic on the instant I’m backstage, and then I walk out to a crowd of screaming fans so big it makes me sick.

It’s twelve-thirty in Florida. How are there so many people out in this heat? Worse, most of them are teenage girls, and the demon is already eating up their adoration.

“I’m so happy to be back! I love you all so much!”

That garners another scream, and the backing tracks start to play. Reya and Pree, my backup dancers, pop up beside me like they’d been there all along, and I start to sing.

My first song is the one I wrote for my mom in a depressed haze. The one that talks about bubblegum ice cream and sunflowers, her two favorite things.

The crowd chants along.

The beast is fed.

Twenty-six minutes to go.

Then, I’m going to find Joseph.

CHAPTER 10

JOSEPH

MY HANDS TREMBLE AS I BRING THE BOTTLE TO MY LIPS, THE whiskey burning as it goes down. I'm gonna be in so much fucking trouble for this, but I can't bring myself to care. I'm sitting on the floor of a shitty motel room, my back pressed against the bed.

I am an absolute piece of shit. I am the saddest excuse for a demon that anyone has ever seen. Christine was in serious trouble, and I ran away. Maybe I could have helped her, but I cowered and ran. I could have challenged the demon possessing her, but there's no way I'm strong enough to fight anything like that.

It's almost two in the afternoon, so I open social media and search her name.

And there she is, her figure tiny on the massive stage at Shatter Fest Orlando, her face projected on the massive screens that allow audience members further back to still see her. She looks good. Happy. Normal.

Maybe it was just a dream. Maybe I got drunk off that one beer, fell asleep, and had a nightmare. I've never been drunk before, as my smoke destroys the alcohol in my blood to keep me from harm. There's a first time for everything, though.

Where did that blood on the ground come from? Someone had been in her room, and then there had been blood. Did the demon possessing her kill the visitor? Was it thinking about killing me?

Then, I realize that someone might know about it. A housekeeper at the hotel must have found the body by now. There would be something in the news.

I check my texts, and I have several messages in the band's group chat asking when I'm planning on showing up. One from Owen catches my eye.

OWOOOO-EN

Christine showed up at the meet and greet looking for you. Wearing our merch. You gonna tell us what's up?

I toss my phone on the bed, then lean forward and put my forehead on my knees. For a moment, I try to forget about everything else and just try to picture Christine wearing Corroded Hellfire merchandise, but I can't imagine it. She's always wearing something cute and girly and usually pink, although there was that one time at Twin Records she had on a green dress.

My phone rings, and I skitter away before remembering that Christine doesn't have my phone number, as it's apparently agreed to be rude to pass one out without asking first. After I got doxxed and my number spread across the internet, the band made a new policy. Only people in the industry would get our numbers. If it had been Sasha, who gets harassed far too much by metal purists for more than just her pink guitar, things could have been much worse. For me, though, it was a few women telling me they were in love with me and a few older people telling me I was going to burn in hell for my sins.

When I got those messages, I smiled. They had no idea how right they were. That was around the time I took on the nickname of "The Devil." If people think I'm the devil, I'm happy to play into the persona.

Now, though, I'm not so sure about the nickname. Because the devil is real, and it's in Christine. A true demon, the type you only read about in horror stories. Nothing like me, a weak coward who wants desperately to hold her and talk to her and

fuck her, but couldn't protect her when she might have actually needed me.

I answer the phone just as it's on its last ring, not even bothering to check the number. The voice on the other end says, "Munson, why am I getting calls from crew that you aren't at Shattered yet?"

Fuck. In all this, I forgot about Wynn. Of course she would find out.

I open my mouth to speak, but she continues before I can, "You know, Christine asked me for your phone number, and I refused to give it to her because you told me not to give it out no matter what. But you have some explaining to do. Is this about those damn theme park photos?"

I blink, the demonic possession that sent me to this motel forgotten for the moment. Theme park photos? I haven't seen any theme park photos.

I put Wynn on speaker. "One sec," I croak, my voice hoarse from the burning alcohol, lack of sleep, and dehydration. I search the park's name with mine, and, sure enough, a single photo of Christine and I has garnered thousands of likes overnight. In the photo, I'm reaching out to her as she walks backwards away. I hold my breath, waiting for her to turn around like she did yesterday, but it's a photo, so of course she won't. The sadness and desperation are clear on my face, and hers is filled with pain.

The caption on the original post says,

Okay, I ship it! Bad boy and bubblegum girl?

Followed by an assortment of heart emojis.

I do the only thing I can think of in the moment. This could bring more bad press to Christine, being seen with me. She's still a wholesome pop star, and she should get to stay that way. If something else is going on, she doesn't need my darkness spilling over to her already tainted image.

I retweet the picture with my own caption.

When you see the hottest pop star ever walk by and people start shipping. #flatteredyouthinkshedevenlookmyway

Then, I post it.

“Joseph, are you even listening to me?”

I forgot Wynn was on the line, honestly. A car pulls up to the motel, and I look out to see a black SUV waiting for me.

“Yeah,” I say distantly. “The car just got here. I’m on my way.”



I DRINK an entire bottle of water on the car ride to Shatter, and then another in the band’s studio trailer, but by the time our second meet and greet comes up for the day, I have a screaming headache. I do my best to be cheery and interact with fans, many of whom are here to see me since I missed the signing this morning.

I take about a million selfies, and we’re eventually ushered out of the tent by Marlene, our merchandise and signing manager, so we can make our set on time. Signings don’t usually last for more than an hour or two, but I realize that it’s quickly approaching ten at night, which is when we’re supposed to take the stage.

I’d expected Christine to show up again like Steve said she had this morning, but she never did, and I can’t help but feel a confusing mix of anxiety and relief. I’m not sure what I can even say to her after what I saw. Do I tell her the truth about myself? Do I run as far as I can?

We’re taken to the main stage in a golf cart, and I give passing fans the rock symbol as we go. When we get backstage, our makeup artist messes with my hair, spraying it with some dry shampoo to help with the oiliness it’s gained throughout the day of summer heat. I drink another bottle of water in one go, and Darren hands me a bottle of Tylenol.

Demons shouldn't have to deal with human headaches, but I take two, and, just as we're about to walk onto the stage, time stops.

Christine is standing backstage, dressed in her usual pink attire, the same outfit she'd worn for her performance, sans the impractical sweater. She looks nervous, and she gives me a little wave.

Sasha takes my arm and drags me onto stage, though, and I don't have the ability to think about Christine or what will happen after the set.

There's only the music, and I pour all of the emotions I've felt today into it.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTINE

WHEN THEIR FINAL SONG ENDS, THE BAND COMES OFF STAGE, but I know how this goes. The audience starts chanting “One more song!” which means at least two more.

Still, as soon as they come off from their set, Joseph walks over to me and puts a finger under my chin, lifting my face to look into my eyes. He’s wearing bluetooth earbuds for the show, and I’m wearing ear plugs to keep from getting deafened by all the amps, so neither of us says anything. His jaw is tense as he stares at me, evaluates me. My stomach drops, and my heart races. I almost think he’s going to kiss me again.

We’re locked in this moment, the world screaming around us as he waits for something to happen, but there’s nothing that *can* happen. Once again, the Phantom is silent.

Darren grabs Joseph’s arm and drags him away for the encore, and I take a breath.

The Phantom arrives just in time for me to be alone again, and I have to hold my arms around myself and beg my body to stay in control. He can’t do this to me. Not again. Nausea rolls through my gut, but I will wait. I will hold on until Joseph gets back.

Maybe if I just had something to take the edge off. I haven’t been allowed certain medications since my incident, and nobody on my team is around to provide an approved hydroxyzine, which is just a more powerful antihistamine that can keep me from spiraling and losing myself in the demon.

My stomach twists and cramps, and I beg the Phantom to stop the pain.

I hold on until the song is over, although I don't even notice I'm sitting on the floor curled into myself until Joseph lifts me up without a word and carries me away, his arms warm.

"What do you need?" he asks when the audiences screams have died down enough to be heard.

"My meds," I gasp. "In my trailer. Something to..." I shudder, and the nausea is still there, but the demon seems to have given up on trying to take control, at the very least. "I need to get out of my head," I admit. The hydroxyzine will make me sleep, which will make it all better. It will make the pain go away.

An SUV is waiting less than a hundred feet past the stage, and Joseph buckles me in to the very back row carefully, like I'm delicate enough to break if he's too rough. I expect for us to just go, but Sasha, Owen, and Darren all hop in first. Joseph sits in the middle, and nobody asks what I'm doing here. I lean into Joseph, who puts an arm around me and rubs his hand over my forearm as he holds me like a life raft. Doesn't he know that he's *my* rock in this storm?

"I have just the thing back at the hotel," he promises, his voice a mumble as the others talk loudly and excitedly about the set. It was an incredible show, and I wanted to cheer louder than anyone in the crowd, but the demon had taken any joy out of the moment. It always does.

I focus on my breathing, watching Joseph's fingers tap on his knee nervously. Eventually, I tune back in to the conversation the rest of them were having.

"Tonight is gonna be fucking wild," Darren says, tapping his hands against the dash.

Owen rolls his eyes. "We can't be up too late like last time. We're gonna be on the road all day tomorrow." He looks back at Joseph and me and asks, "You in, Chris? We get pretty intense."

It makes sense that this metal band would do the whole blowout party thing after a show. I usually prefer a night in with Netflix, but if I want the comfort Joseph has to offer, I'll have to deal with their plans. "Sure," I croak past the finally fading pain.

The SUV lets us out at the hotel, and I freeze as the flashing of cameras penetrates the car's blackout windows. Did someone leak the hotel where the acts are staying?

"Fuck," Joseph mumbles, looking down at me.

My heart tightens, and tears prick at my eyes. I'd seen his earlier tweet, the clear boundary he'd set. No, we're not together. There's no chance of it.

It makes sense, of course. For one, I'm a pop princess and terrible for the image of a metal singer. For another, I'm possessed by a demon, and Joseph saw...*something* last night.

I just don't know what it was he saw. Enough to run, at the very least, but not enough for him to avoid me now.

He looks down at me, pain crossing his features. "Do you want the car to pull around the block before you get out? I can send Nell to grab you. You're still welcome to join us in Owen's suite for the evening, though."

Evening is a stretch, as it's just past midnight at this point. He clearly doesn't want to be seen exiting the car with me, so I nod, no matter how much the motion hurts my soul.

He gives my shoulder a single squeeze, then exits the car to a crowd of screaming fans. They must have waited here instead of seeing the show at Shattered. The tickets are a hundred bucks a pop, so it makes sense that some would just try to catch us after we get back instead.

When the SUV makes it around the block, Nell is the one who opens the door. Her short, curly brown hair bobs as she strides over, opening the door like an avenging pixie.

"You alright?" she asks, her square jaw tense.

I shrug, then plaster a grin on my face. There aren't as many Christine Osmond fans here, probably because kids that

follow me don't tend to be out this late. Still, I sign a few autographs and take a few selfies before entering the building.

As Nell leads me to the elevators, I deliberate on whether or not to go back to my room. I don't want to be alone tonight, but Joseph's shame at being seen with me really did hurt. He probably only invited me to be with him just because he felt bad for me. I can just ask Nell for my meds now that I'm here, and then I'll go to sleep.

When we turn the corner to where the elevators are located, though, Joseph is standing there with his hands shoved in his pockets, and he grins when he spots me. He's alone. Did he wait for me?

"You good if I leave you with him?" Nell asks, her voice low as she watches Joseph with suspicion.

My entire body warms, and I should say no. It would be so easy to say no, to go be by myself like I always am. It's safer for everyone that way, and I wonder once again what happened to Jason last night.

Instead, I nod, and Joseph leads me into the elevator while Nell turns on her heel to head to the bar.

We head up to the twentieth floor, as it seems that Owen has lucked out into a proper two bedroom suite.

Joseph already has a key, and I brace myself for what will surely be a booze-and-drug-soaked orgy like all the rock parties I've ever heard about.

Instead, what we find brings me to a halt, and I tilt my head.

Darren and Sasha are carrying a table from the balcony over to the living area, pressing it awkwardly against what seems to have been a work desk. Meanwhile, Owen is unpacking a plastic tote with what appears to be...game guides?

"Not what you thought when I offered to help you get out of your head?" Joseph asks, placing his thick, warm hand on my lower back, right where my tank top has ridden up past the

top of my skirt. I look back at the table. Well, *tables*. There are now three of them put in a row.

“I don’t know how to play,” I say, unsure of what else there could be to say. I’m not even really sure what game they’re playing, as the guides all seem to have different titles.

Joseph grins. “Don’t worry, I’ll sit with you and help. Sasha is a pretty good Game Master, and there’s an app that makes it easier to keep track of your character.” He holds out his other hand, and I fish my phone out of my bra, wiping the sweat off before handing it to him self-consciously. He unlocks it without an issue, as I have yet to set a new password. I should be more embarrassed that my password is his birthday, but he hasn’t said anything about it yet.

He leads me to the loveseat that’s been dragged to the center of the room, and I sit right at the edge, not sure how to make conversation with these people. I vaguely knew Owen in high school, as he graduated the year before us, and Darren is suddenly familiar as someone who was in Joseph’s game club.

“Did you go to high school with us too?” I ask Sasha.

She frowns. “I started after you left.”

I guess it makes sense that Joseph’s band would all be from our hometown. Her last name suddenly makes sense, though. “You’re Trevor’s sister.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ugh. No. I’m *me*. Not just someone’s sister.”

I shut my mouth, my heart sinking because I seem to have committed some sort of faux pa I wasn’t aware of.

Then, she smiles. “I’m just fucking with you. You’ve gotta relax.”

I blink, then force a smile on my own face. “You really got me there.”

Joseph plops down beside me on the sofa, leaning back into it. “Alright, Christine, let’s get you a character built.”

He invites me to their campaign on the website so I can use their digital resources and have the most options, but it’s

all so overwhelming.

I take a deep breath and scroll, trying to ignore the fact that Joseph is staring at me. I want to make the best character, want to make him think that maybe I'm not terrible at this game I've never played, that I'm not a terrible evil person. How do I do that when I don't know what I did to make him run, though?

My vision blurs, and he reaches forward, his thumb swiping my cheek. "Hey," he says, his voice lower while the others talk about the game in the background. It's like we're in our own little bubble on this couch, though. "You don't have to play if you don't want to. I just...after last night, I don't want you to be alone. If you still need your medication, I can..." He doesn't finish his sentence, and I'm sure he's remembering whatever it was he saw in my room before. "I don't know. I'll figure it out."

I want to ask him what he saw that made him run, but there are others here. It's already so ridiculous and unbelievable, and these people will think I'm just as insane as the press believes me to be. Joseph would maybe believe me, but only because he saw it with his own eyes. At least, I think he did.

"I can play," I say, swiping the tears away from my face. I have no reason to cry in front of these people. "Will you help me make a character?" I can suck up my emotions for one game. How long can it take, anyway? An hour?

CHAPTER 12

JOSEPH

AT SIX IN THE MORNING, WHEN MY ALARM GOES OFF THAT THE tour bus will be here any minute, Chris is standing on the sectional, pointing a finger at Owen, whose character screwed us over earlier by stealing a charm from a Goliath that worships the god of the forge.

Owen is now only in his pajama pants, although none of us remember him having time to change out of his jeans. Chris is wearing my denim jacket over her tank top and skirt, yelling, “The bastard deserves the stocks! Now we’ve got to flee the damn city because you can’t keep your hands to yourself!” She’s put on a fantasy English accent, which isn’t accurate to the actual country, but works great in a fantasy setting. Her faun sorcerer character has been made of pure chaos, and she opened up about half an hour in when Sasha prompted her to role play with the barmaid in our party’s favorite tavern.

Her hair is down and messy, and her makeup is patchy from the way she rubs her eyes when she’s agitated—or possibly just sleep deprived. She’s gone through more of the glass-bottled frappucinos than anyone else in this room.

“Get your shit,” I yell over the group, waving my beeping phone in the air. “We can pick up at the next stop.”

Christine blinks a few times, seeming to come back to herself as she looks outside to find that the sky is slowly turning pink and violet with the oncoming sunrise.

“Oh, god, Nell is gonna kill me,” she says.

I laugh, ruffling her hair. “That’s the game for you. If nobody tells you when to stop, you might not.”

“Shit,” Christine says, looking at her phone. She shows me a text.

HELL’S NELLIS

Bus is here! Where you at??? Got your bag btw!!

Fear strikes my heart. Someone went to Christine’s room? What about the blood? My own body runs cold, and adrenaline hits me like a goddamn freight train. I have to keep her safe from the others. She doesn’t know what happens when her demon takes control, and I can’t protect her from that kind of power.

I have to strain to hold back my demonic form. Not here. Not in front of her. The others know, but she doesn’t.

Christine puts a hand on my arm and says my name, which brings me back to myself instantly. “It’s alright,” she says, giving me a knowing stare.

Then, she stands and looks at the others. “Um, thanks for the game. It was a lot of fun.”

Before anyone can get their bearings to reply, she takes off, leaving us all alone.

And everyone is staring at me.

“What?” I ask, looking down like I’ve got something on my clothes. Other than my missing jacket, I don’t know what’s so interesting.

“Dude,” Darren says. “Do we have to spell it out for you? Go. After. Her. We’ll see you in Atlanta.”

He’s right, although he doesn’t know just how right he is. I can’t let her leave on her own like this. For one, we still haven’t talked about what happened last night. Wait, not last night. Two nights ago. Pulling an all-nighter for tabletop RPGs has my sense of time all fucked up.

I grab my phone and dice off the table, pocketing both, then go after her.

She's just stepping into the elevator when I arrive, and I leap in after her before it can close.

She looks up at me, and her eyes are watery. God, it breaks my fucking heart, my soul shattering in my chest. "Oh, you want your jacket back?" Her voice is subdued.

I don't hesitate to pull her up against me. "I don't care about the fucking jacket, Chris," I mumble. It's my favorite jacket, but I can't stand the tears on her face. She can keep my jacket, can keep my fucking heart if she chooses to rip it right out of my chest.

She sinks into me, and I bury my face into her hair. It was a long night, and we have so much to talk about, but for right now, I just want to get on that bus to Atlanta with her. More than anything, I want her not to be alone.

When the elevator doors open, a camera flashes, and I mutter, "Shit," letting her go like she's on fire.

It's too late, though. The photo exists. A fangirl is standing there holding her kawaii-accessorized phone case, and she slaps a hand on her mouth and giggles. "I knew it I knew it I knew it!" she squeals before a security guard can grab her and drag her off. "I love you Christine!" she shouts before she's out of sight.

Goddamn it. I didn't want to taint Christine with my image, but the photo has her wrapped in my arms with my jacket on her. She's even wearing the same outfit from yesterday. We both know what it will look like.

Christine looks up at me, and her eyes are filled with hurt. She opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but instead, she closes it, takes my jacket off, throws it at me, and storms away.

I pick it up and chase after her. I'm not letting her go. We need to talk, and no matter what, people will think we slept together last night. If she's so goddamn disgusted by me, we need to figure out how to spin this before the press gets their

hands on it. I'm sure the post will be on every form of social media within the hour, but we still have time to come up with something.

Christine stomps her way to her bus, which has her name in glittery pink cursive across the side. All it needs now is a massive photo of her face to be a little more conspicuous. I get on the bus right as the doors close, and I glare at the driver, pretty sure she tried smushing me with them.

As the bus pulls out onto the city street, Christine turns on her heel toward me. Nobody else is on the bus. I expected Nell or Jason to be here, but neither of them is.

Well, maybe I don't expect Jason. I shudder at the unclear memory. It had been his voice shouting at her, hadn't it? And then there was blood, and...

We're mostly alone, although I don't think the driver would hesitate to throw me out on the street.

"What is so wrong with being seen with me?" Christine demands. "Sure, you'll hold me if nobody is looking, but then the moment someone is, you pull away? Or you post on fucking *Twitter* without even talking to me about it?"

I open my mouth, then close it. I was a hundred percent certain that she was angry about being caught with me. This is a thousand miles from what I thought she'd say. A *million* miles.

I take a step forward, "God, Chris, no!" I want to reach out to her again, finally realizing what I've been too stupid to see. That I've hurt her with my distance. I've been so worried about my darkness tainting her that I didn't see how my actions made her feel. "Of course I'm not embarrassed to be seen with you."

Tears well at her eyes, and her cheeks are splotchy and pink. "Then why?" she asks, her voice breaking. "Is it because of...what you saw? If it is, why did you take me to your game night? Why did you follow me here?" She wraps her arms around herself, and I take a step forward. "I don't need your pity, Joseph Munson. I won't take an ounce of it."

Pity? Is that what she thinks? “I have never once pitied you, Chris,” I say, my voice gentle. Can’t she see that? Have I been so bad at expressing how I feel? I guess this is why they say demons don’t have emotions. They’re wrong, though.

I feel everything, and right now, all of it is pain.

“Then why did you stop talking to me? After my mom got better, you got really into your band and your games. I tried talking to you, but you were too busy for me. I spent every week at your house beforehand, and then after I moved, I didn’t see the inside of that trailer once.” She turns, but I already saw the tears plummeting from her eyes like daggers seeking my heart. “You didn’t call when she got sick again, either. I thought maybe you would, that you’d know, but...” Her voice cuts off with a choked sob.

I stride forward and grab her shoulder, then lift her chin with my thumb as though I have a million times before. Perhaps, in another lifetime, Joseph did this. It’s time to be a hundred percent honest with her, even if that ruins everything. Even if it makes her scream and kick me off the bus and never speak to me again.

Tears flow freely from her eyes, and I say, quietly enough that the driver can’t hear me over the motor, “Chris, I know you’re possessed by a demon. I know you made a deal for something...” I pause, and nausea twists my gut. “Your mom,” I say with a deep, shameful realization. “You made the deal to save your mom, but the demon did nothing to keep her healthy after healing her once.”

Her eyes turn down, refusing to look at me. She hiccups, but she doesn’t pull away. She doesn’t seem surprised that I’ve figured it out. Now for the hard part. “Chris, I’m not...the Joseph you knew before.”

She glances up at me, grimacing. “I know,” she says, her voice miserable but a little more controlled. “The accident. You told me. I shouldn’t have brought up before. It’s not fair to you, since you don’t remember.”

I shake my head, moving her so we’re sitting on the wide leather sofa. She shouldn’t be standing in a moving vehicle for

this. Slowly, I ask, “Chris, what do you know about demons?”

Her brows scrunched together. “I know they need worship to be powerful, or worship of their human hosts. I know they have to make a deal to possess you...” She trails off, and I realize after a long pause that she’s done speaking.

She knows so little, yet she jumped into this at the sliver of hope that it could save the person she loved. It must have destroyed her when it didn’t work, and when Joseph wasn’t there for her...I don’t know why he did it, but if he were alive, I would strangle him.

“Chris,” I say, my voice the barest of whispers. I release her so she doesn’t have to be touching me, and her eyes bore into mine. “Joseph Munson died that night.”

Her confusion doesn’t leave her face. “Like, metaphorically?”

I grit my teeth. Why are these words so difficult to get out? I was able to tell his bandmates when they guessed enough for me to be open with them.

Chris is different, though. I’ve only spent a couple of weeks in her proximity, and she’s dragged me into her orbit.

Before I ever knew her, Joey loved her. The moment I took his body, I was doomed to love her, too. No matter how far I ran from that town, she was going to find me eventually, and I would fall apart.

“I am a demon, Chris. Not like the one you have, but...” I sigh. There’s no good way to explain this that makes it believable, and if she does believe me, she’ll hate me for it. “I found Joey on the interstate that night. He was dying, and I thought the deal I made was to keep his loved ones from hurting about it. Instead, I promised to care for this body, care for those he loves.”

Understanding dawns on her the more I speak, and tears form in her eyes once again. They drip down her face, and I’d do anything to stop the hurt, so I say, “He asked for you, in the end. He asked me to tell you that he was sorry.”

Finally, the dam breaks, and she covers her mouth as she lets out a sob. Her head falls against my chest, and her other hand goes to clutch at my t-shirt. I freeze, unsure if I'm supposed to comfort her or pull away. She's not in the right state of mind.

It's wrong of me to love her. I don't even know her, and she was never mine. Even though I'm the one who's been spending weeks with her, all her feelings have been for Joey.

I can't stand to feel her sadness and not do anything about it, though. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my lap. She buries her face into my neck and cries and cries, wrapping her arms around my throat to hold us tightly together.

Eventually, though, the sobbing and trembling fades, and she pulls away, looking at me with those beautiful, sad hazel eyes of her. I'd give a thousand worlds to make her smile.

"I need you to kiss me," she says. Then, she adds her words from last night. "I need to get out of my head."

I take a deep breath, my nostrils flaring. "I don't think that's a good idea." Still, it's hard to resist her words, and I find myself leaning closer to her. It isn't *me* she wants. She's distraught, and she isn't thinking clearly.

Her brows flatten in anger. "Do you think I can't make decisions for myself? Do you think I don't know the difference between Joey and...whoever you are?"

Her words are painful and hopeful, the sun burning away all the ice in the middle of winter. I know it will freeze over again, but I want to bask in this warmth for every second I can. Slowly, I cup her hand in my palm and lean down, pressing my lips to hers one gentle time. When I pull away, I say, "I should have told you sooner. I should have worked harder to find you."

Before I can react, she throws her arms around my neck and presses her lips against mine. She kisses me like a hurricane kisses the shore, destructive and permanent, damage that will never heal. I will never heal from her touch, from this

woman who has every bit of me and always has, from the moment I was gifted a life in this world.

CHAPTER 13

CHRISTINE

HIS KISS IS THE IMPLOSION OF A THOUSAND STARS, THE creation of black holes blotting out the sky. His kiss is my reckoning and salvation. He is the beginning and end of the world.

I knew there was something off about Joseph the moment I saw him in that lobby. A shadow writhed in his eyes, subtle enough that only someone looking closely would see. Somewhere deep inside me, I knew that the Joey who was my friend, who took care of me, was gone.

I think back on the weeks we've spent together, and everything falls into place and makes more sense, rewriting itself in my mind.

It's never been the Joey I knew, but that doesn't mean that nothing between us was real. Somehow, I know deep in my soul that this demon is different than the Phantom. The one with which I made a deal is sick and twisted and angry, but Joseph? He's kind. He's considerate. He cares. If I know anything about demons, it's that they have no qualms with sharing their true feelings, even if that makes them come across as evil monsters with an endless thirst for violence.

I have to ask myself, though, if he's only doing this because he made a deal. Does he want this? Does he even want to be around me?

Does he have a name that's not Joseph?

He looks like someone I once loved, someone who helped me through a difficult time before abandoning me, someone

whose last words were about me, and that's not fair, and the world isn't fair, but I want *him*, want the man who's been taking care of me the past few weeks.

I pull away, the action agony. Kissing him has me more in my own head than I was before, and the goal had been to stop thinking about horrible things, death and torment and demonic possession.

He blinks down at me, a small half-smile finding his lips before he sees my face. His smile fades slowly, and he takes his hands off my cheeks.

I glance toward the front of the bus, and the thick blackout curtain that divides Amanda from us is already shut. On my first ever tour, I once sat up front with her overnight, and I know from experience just how deafening those curtains can be.

Slowly, because I don't want to startle him, I reach forward and lace my fingers with his. He tightens his hand on mine instead of pulling away, and I look up at him. "We have a lot to talk about."

We sit on the tour bus's sofa, and I tell him everything from my side, even what he's already guessed.. I explain the deal I made with the Phantom, the miraculous recovery of my mom, and everything good the few years afterward. "The attention I got from cheerleading was enough to sate the Phantom for a while, but it was always growing. It needed more."

"The Phantom?" he asks, and I realize I haven't explained the nickname.

"Like the musical," I say. "When I was a kid, I thought about the mysterious, romantic aspect of it, the dark figure helping me sing, getting me attention. When that wore off, though, I realized that the nickname still fit. Because it isn't good for me. I can't escape from him."

I shiver, and Joseph immediately sits up and drapes his jacket over me. I blink at the consideration. "Thanks," I mumble even though I wasn't cold. "Anyway, when I was

asked to sing the National Anthem at the county fair, it got a lot worse. Nothing else I did was good enough. It feeds off this energy of attention. When I didn't perform for a while, Mom got sick again."

Joseph looks down at the floor, his brow furrowing. "The night you went to the hospital. You had a show."

I nod. Somehow, the Phantom hasn't stopped me from having this conversation. I don't know how long I have until it returns, but just being able to tell someone is lifting a weight off me that I hadn't realized was pressing me down, paralyzing me.

Joseph looks at me, those perfect eyes burrowing into mine, and I realize with a start that his eyes are a different color than they were. How did I never notice that? His eyes used to be blue, and now they're such a dark brown they're nearly black. "Now it's my turn to tell you everything," he says.

"The concept of heaven and hell that you're familiar with is...flawed. Demons aren't tortured souls or fallen angels. We're creatures, just like you, but we're from a different realm. There are thousands of entrance points to our realm from Earth, the intersections of what some call Ley Lines." He pulls up an image online and points as he explains. "These are powerful lines that cover the world, and if you look closely, most supernatural activity happens along these lines. However, when someone bleeds on these lines, it summons creatures from my world, and sometimes those from yours.

"Most of us just want to escape our realm. It's dark and cold, a sort of upside-down of this one. There's nothing there but smoke and death, and the shadows."

I watch him while he explains this. The Phantom had appeared as a cloud of shadow when I first summoned it, hadn't it? I'd barely been able to see it through the rainy night. Joseph's brow is furrowed, and I can't help but smile at the expression on his face despite all of the horrible things we're dealing with right now.

“It’s rare to come across demons who are willing to take on a living host,” he says, his eyes meeting mine again. “Our lives are long, and we are patient. For the most part, we make deals to take the body after the death of the host.”

“But doesn’t that mean you can kill them to get their body?” I ask. It seems an obvious loophole.

“No,” he says, his voice hard. “Our deals are binding, and we are sent back to our realm until the death of the person who owns the body, however far away that might be.”

“Okay, but what about Joey?” I demand. I don’t mean to be angry with him, but he’s telling me that Joey died, and my heart aches at the idea I’ll never see my old friend again.

His expression crumples, and he doesn’t look at me. He takes a shuddering breath. “The accident was bad, Chris,” he says, using the nickname despite how I yelled at him before. “If I could have saved him, I would have. I swear to you, I would have.”

And, for some reason, I believe him. I don’t want to believe him, can’t trust another demon like the one holding me hostage, but I do. The way his dark eyes stare into mine on that final sentence...He can’t possibly be lying.

I move my hands up to his face and lean in, ready to kiss him again, already missing his touch.

His hands meet mine, though, clutching them tightly as his eyes look into mine. “I’m not him, Christine.”

I’d been offended when he made that insinuation before, at the idea that I couldn’t tell the difference. Now, I think about what he’s really saying, the hesitation in his tone, the vice grip of his big hands swallowing mine.

He’s pleading with me, I finally realize through our stare-down. I don’t understand it, but he cares about me, about what I think of him. Is it just the deal he made on Joey’s deathbed? Or is it me?

Do I hold the power to hurt a demon?

Slowly, keeping our hands together, I climb into his lap, straddling him on the couch. He sucks in a breath, his eyes carefully trained on mine. I get a sudden memory of pulling off my bra under my tank top so I could have a projectile to throw at Owen when his character stole that charm in the game before, and now, my nipples are pebbled and basically in Joseph's face.

A slow smile finds its way to my face when he hardens beneath me, but his eyes never once leave mine. Carefully this time, I lean forward, pressing my lips to his.

This could be a mistake, but I need him to know that I care about *him*. It's not just that he's in Joey's body. Joseph is the one who showed up after all this time, the one who heard my pleas to get out of my head and brought me into his inner circle. He's the one who got my favorite coffee every day during rehearsals, who made sure I was eating.

I move my hands down, brushing them through his wavy hair and to the collar of his shirt before tracing my fingers on his collarbones.

His hands find the patch of bare skin at my waist, and he tucks his fingers under the hem of my tank top, his touch sending my skin ablaze with need.

"Bedroom," I gasp before I can lose all sense of thought and reason. If we're going to do this, I'd rather have more than a curtain between us and another person.

CHAPTER 14

JOSEPH

I SHOULD CARE THAT SHE DOESN'T ACTUALLY GIVE A SHIT about me. I should care that she's looking at the face of someone she used to care about, that this is a plane crash waiting to happen.

No, not a plane crash.

This is the fucking Hindenburg, and it's already on fire.

Yet I carry her to the bedroom of the bus, the sensation of walking in the moving vehicle strange, but I don't stumble or sway. I toss her on the bed effortlessly, and she gasps as her body bounces once.

I reach behind me and slide the door shut, locking it. Chris's eyes are inspecting me, and I steady my breathing as well as possible, which is not well at all. Slowly, her hands move up her thighs, lifting her pleated skirt to reveal what's underneath.

During a break in the session last night, she'd gone to shower off her stage-induced sweat, and I hadn't considered, until now, what she may have used as underwear.

The answer?

Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

"God damn it, Chris," I hiss, kneeling down over her and trailing a hand up slowly, memorizing the feeling of her ankle, her calf, that little crook behind her knee, and her thigh. I will savor every moment of this, will never let myself forget how beautiful and delicious she is for as long as I live.

She puts her hand on mine lightly, and I pause in my venturing to look into her eyes. She gives a gentle smile and urges my hand on until my fingers brush over her crease, light as a feather.

She bites a section of her bottom lip, and I use my thumb to part her. She's already wet, and I can't even suppress my groan as my thumb glides through her slick folds. She lets out a little mewling sound, tilting her head to the side just so as she watches me. Instead of continuing, I move upwards, shoving her shirt up to palm her breasts. I thumb one of her budding nipples with my still-wet thumb, and she lies back, her eyes flicking closed with bliss as I touch her.

Imagining *him*, imagining Joey, I'm certain of it, and damn if that doesn't hurt like a sonofabitch if I think about it for more than a second.

"Look at me," I growl, the monstrous part of me taking over for just a moment. I can't have her thinking of someone who isn't here. She needs to see *me*. She needs to look into my eyes that are dark, knowing they'll never be his light shade of blue again.

Her eyes open, and I squeeze her supple flesh that molds so well to me. Her own hands move to my wrists, her fingers fluttering over the pulse there as she smiles up at me as though I'm the moon and stars and not just some parasite.

My heart tightens as she gives me that look, that trust that I know I don't deserve. I strain myself to contain my true form. She doesn't need to see that, doesn't need to know just how monstrous I look. "I'm going to lick your pretty nipples," I say, pinching both of them hard enough that it will make her hurt just a little. She gasps, arching her back toward me just how I need. "And then I'm going to eat your pussy until you beg me to let you come."

She whines, her hands tight on my wrists now, clutching me like I'm the only thing anchoring her here. "Yes," she gasps. "Please. Please, Joseph."

A low rumble forms in my chest at the sound of my name on her lips. *Mine*, not his. Because she *does* know the

difference. Even if she's humoring me right now, trying to make sure I don't feel bad, I don't stop.

I brush my lips over the space between her breasts, then trace my tongue over her skin. She's absolutely delicious, and the scent of her arousal wraps around me and tempts me even further.

I might not be experienced in the ways of human lovemaking—or fucking, whatever you want to call this—but I went through a phase that involved reading every romance novel I could get my hands on to figure out what humans found so appealing about it. For that, I'm thankful, because I'm determined to make this the best thing she's ever experienced in her life.

Or, at the very least, I don't want it to be terrible for her.

I kiss up one breast, pinching the nipple again before taking it between my teeth. I put enough pressure on it for her to let out another of those little mewling cries, then flick over it with my tongue for a moment before drawing her in and sucking.

Her hips buck against me, so I move my other hand down and grab her hip tightly, her flesh so damn soft and supple in my grip that I could die right here from the pure ecstasy of the moment.

"I need—" she says, then gasps when I roll my own hips against hers. "Fuuucckkkk," she says with a high whine.

I nearly come right the fuck there. I'm barely doing anything, and she's falling apart in my arms. I abandon my idea to go over both of her breasts, moving myself back down to bury my face in her perfect cunt and breathe her in.

"You're so perfect," I say before licking a slow line over her crease.

Her body quivers, and I move the hand that had been on her breast to her belly, and the other one down by my face. Using two fingers, I part her and dip my tongue in for the smallest taste.

Ecstasy.

Torment.

Her stomach tightens at that, and I notice that she's entirely stopped moving when she'd been so frantic before.

I sit up, and her mouth is wide as she pants, her eyes toward the ceiling.

"Chris?" I ask, pulling my hand away from her pussy as I watch her. "What's wrong?"

I'd expected her to ride my face until I was suffocating, but the moment I licked her, she stopped her movement entirely.

She glances down at me, and her face reddens. Is she... embarrassed?

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable," she says, her voice hushed.

I tilt my head. "Like, emotionally?"

She shakes her own head, her hair a disaster from it all pulling from her ponytail in different directions. "I mean, you don't have to...do what you're doing." God damn, her embarrassment is both adorable and concerning. "But if you do, I want it to be...good for you."

My heart is beating so hard that it nearly bursts in my chest, and I lie down beside her, my head on the pillow as she props herself up on one arm.

"Christine, you cannot hurt me by letting me eat your delicious pussy." Then, I give a dark smile. "However, if you could, it would be the most glorious demise."

She gasps, her plump pink lips popping open at my words.

"Now," I say, pricking an eyebrow, "I think I'd very much enjoy it if you were to ride my face."

Her nostrils flare, and her face somehow grows redder.

"Joseph," she gasps, but she doesn't move.

I move a hand over to her cheek, brushing some of the loose strands of her strawberry blonde hair away from her face. "Chris, I don't want to beg, but I will. Will you please

fuck my face until I can feel your pussy clenching around my tongue?”

Her body shivers, and, slowly, as if in a daze, she moves up and rests her knees on either side of my head. Her skirt flares out over me, and I move my arms so they're gripping the little crease where her thighs bend toward the tops of her hips.

She's light as a feather, yet she hovers just high enough that I can't quite lick her.

“Christine,” I chastise, dragging her down so she's actually sitting on me, and I lap at her pussy like I need it to survive.

When the flat of my tongue moves over her tight little clit, I moan, taking her in and sucking for a moment. Then, I move back down, spearing her entrance as well as I can with my human tongue. I want more, but I will not take more. I cannot let her see *that*.

As if on pure instinct, she bucks against me, and she muffles a cry. I smile, moving my tongue back up slowly and lazily before drawing on her clit again with another moan.

Stuttering, she says, “M—my skirt. It has a—a—“ she cries out, and I can picture her gripping the headboard. I move my hands to find that her skirt has a zipper on one side, and I pull it down.

It stops at one point, though, and I growl against her cunt, which makes her body quake against me so deliciously once more. It won't go any further, though, so I maneuver my other hand and just tear the damn thing in half before throwing it on the floor. Thankfully, none of my features show through, although I used my power to boost my strength.

With the skirt out of the way, I can get a good look at her. I want to see every expression on her face as I feast on her incredible cunt.

Her eyes are down on me as she rides my face. Just like I'd imagined, her hands grip the headboard in a vice, and her tongue is peeking out of her open lips. I can't even let myself hope she'd ever take my cock into that sweet mouth of hers,

yet I picture it nonetheless. Just for a moment, but it feels like enough time for me to be a bastard.

Against her clit, I mumble, “That’s it, baby. Rock against me, take everything you need.” Then, I go back to sucking that delicious clit into my mouth.

Deep down, the part of me that’s still a monster, a beast, growls,

Mine.

I move one hand suddenly and work two fingers into her, rubbing against her front wall as well as I can. She throws her head back. “Yes, Joseph! Just like that, oh, fu—“ but the rest of the word is cut off by her trembling cry as her pussy clenches against me suddenly, and I keep the pressure and tempo right where it was as my cock throbs in my jeans.

I’m so lucky, so fucking lucky, to watch her lose herself as she rides my face with reckless abandon, and when she tilts her head down, her eyes are scrunched shut as tears glisten on her lashes. She’s still tightening and trembling against me, and I ride her waves down and down as long as she needs.

It could be an eternity, but it’s not long enough when she climbs off of me, lying down in the bed.

Then, she does something I absolutely could not have predicted, considering that I’m the same type of monster that’s been tormenting her for years.

She cuddles herself against me, her exposed breasts pressed against my bare ribs, because somehow, my shirt slid up without me noticing. Her hand traces over my chest, dipping under my shirt for a moment to flick over my nipple. Her entire body relaxes against me. “Is it your turn?” She doesn’t sound apprehensive, but she *does* sound absolutely exhausted.

I move a hand up and take hers. “You need to sleep for a while, darling. I’m not going anywhere.”

She mumbles something unintelligible against me, and I brush her hair and scrape her scalp with my nails gently. She doesn’t insist, and soon enough, her breathing evens out.

Only when I'm absolutely certain that she's asleep do I allow myself to fall unconscious beside her.

CHAPTER 15

CHRISTINE

I AWAKEN WHEN WE REACH ATLANTA, THE BUS'S BREAKS jolting me out of my slumber as it stops at the light at the end of the exit ramp.

I glance out the window, reminding myself over and over that the dozens of people holding signs outside can't see me, can't see my state of undress. Most of the signs are for the metal bands coming in, but there are a few with my name on them, and several fans—adults and teens alike—wave at the bus and cheer just in case I can see them. I always admire the dedication of people who wait at exit ramps, and I would wave if I didn't have to get dressed first.

I'm not wearing any bottoms, and my shirt smells like sweat and ass, so I quietly peel myself off of Joseph and open one of the cabinets that holds clothing for me.

Some of it is tour clothing, but I do find plain cotton panties and a pair of pink leggings with the tag still attached—they're one of my brand sponsors, one of a few that I retained after my bout in the hospital. I chose the brand because it's run entirely by women, and the fabric is thick and lush with massive pockets that can actually fit anything I need. I also put on a matching sports' bra and a tight, sheer black top from the same brand.

When I glance down at the bed, Joseph is smiling up at me lazily. "Good morning, beautiful," he says.

I smile back as I put my hair back in the scrunchy that is holding on by just a few strands at this point. "It's almost two,

actually,” I say, leaning down to give him a peck on the lips. It’s just as much of an assurance for me as it is for him, the briefest touch to say, *We’re okay. What happened happened, and it wasn’t just a fluke.*

Before I can stand up straight again, he grabs me by my ponytail and drags me down, kissing me like the world will end if he stops.

“You taste so good,” he groans against my lips. Then, he sits up and straightens his shirt, running his fingers through the strands a bit.

The bus starts moving again, and I lose my footing, falling back onto the bed and face-planting against his chest.

Instead of helping me off him, he wraps his arms tightly around me and buries his face in my hair. “Mmmm, I adore this. I could never let you go and be totally fine.”

My heart trips over itself at his words, how casually affectionate they are. I scramble to get up. I don’t know how to express myself like he does, so I just smile and rush out of the bedroom.

I need a minute to clear my head, so I stumble my way toward the front of the bus, sitting beside Amanda and clipping my seatbelt.

She pricks an eyebrow at me. “Everything good?”

I look at her long and hard. “I think so.”

She gives me a half-frown. “Want me to kick him to the curb? Or kick his ass?” On that long drive from before, she informed me that she’d been getting really into MMA as a hobby, although it wasn’t something she’d ever be interested in pursuing professionally.

I smile and shake my head. “No, it’s just...” I look behind me, closing the curtain again and talking low enough that she’ll only just be able to hear me over the growl of the motor. “It’s weird. Between us. There’s kind of a history there, but...” I hesitate. Should I go for any ounce of truth? “He lost his memory in an accident, so he doesn’t remember a thing. But

this new version of him..." I trail off, letting my silence speak for itself. She can make whatever assumptions she wants.

The truth is, I'm still mad at Joey for abandoning me after I moved. Even at graduation, when I tried to chat with him like we used to, he was distant and cold. It was like he thought I betrayed him when my mom decided to move us out of the trailer park.

Did he think I didn't need him anymore? Was he protecting his heart?

There's no way to know, and it's absolute agony to know that I can never tell him how I felt all those years, that I can never vent to him about how frustrated I was. Sure, from the outside, it looked like I had all these new friends, but god, was I lonely.

Something deep within me says, *You were never alone.*

I shudder with revulsion. The Phantom is back, then. It seems to never speak to me when Joseph is around, which doesn't even make sense. Joseph had run from the Phantom, been terrified. Does it just think it has no reason to be present with Joseph around, that he's too lowly for its attention?

It laughs distantly in the back of my head. *Keep guessing.*

Nausea broils in my gut, and I wrap my arms around myself. Maybe I shouldn't have come up here. Back in Joseph's arms, I'd been safe. I'd been alone in my head.

The longer you avoid me, the harder you'll be punished.

I want to scream at it to just leave me alone, to stop forcing me to do things I don't want to do.

If I were a character in a fantasy book, the Phantom inside me would be sexy, its controlling behavior thrilling. I would relish in how it's cruel to me.

But this is my fucking life, and it hurts, and this thing within me made me want to die but then kept me alive through the pain. *There is no escape*, it told me when I was lying in a hospital bed, drugged out of my mind to keep me from hurting myself again.

What the doctors didn't know was how defeated I felt in that moment. The Phantom punished me, tormented me with nightmares of my pain, of my mom's death, of the horrors I'd never be able to imagine on my own. All because I'd tried to find my way out.

I will never escape this monster, but now I know that they aren't all like that. There are some that are loving and kind and protective but not possessive. I just happened to find one that wanted to use me until I was destroyed, giving nothing in return but the fame that's a bastardization of my passion.

"I like him," I say to Amanda, trying to block out this creature within. I still don't know what happened the other night, and I don't know if I want to. Joseph said he saw something, that there had been blood.

I don't think the Phantom has ever made me kill a human before, but with Jason attacking me, it might have decided to do so anyway. Not out of any sort of care or concern for me, but because my body was its possession, its toy, and it didn't want anyone else touching its toy.

No, my destruction would only be by the Phantom's hand.

"Do you like him because you like him, or do you like him because he's giving you attention?" Amanda asks.

I frown and consider her words carefully. "I like him because I like him. He's kind to me. And gentle. He actually seems to care about me, and I'm starting to think it has nothing to do with...I don't know, some sense of obligation to before? I hope that makes sense."

She nods. "It does. But Christine?"

I look at her as we pull up to another stop light. The hotel is visible up the road, but she bores her eyes into mine.

She continues, "If he does anything shady, I will kick his nuts so far up his body that they'll come out his ears."

CHAPTER 16

CHRISTINE

WHEN WE ARRIVE AT THE HOTEL, JOSEPH TAKES ME UP TO THE room we'll be sharing.

The door opens to reveal a singular bed, which is fine by me. He'd stopped earlier before I could move things along, although I suppose I needed the sleep.

Now, though, I walk over to the bed and drop my bag beside it, climbing in despite it being early in the afternoon.

"Back to sleep?" he asks, giving me a little smirk.

I watch him with hooded eyes, sitting up on my knees and peeling off my sheer top and my sports bra.

He freezes and stares at me, his nostrils flaring and eyes widening.

"Not back to sleep," he says, his voice a huff of air.

I smile up at him, and he drops his bag and strides over, kneeling at the edge of the bed and wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me toward him for a rough kiss.

I hum with appreciation, then reach up and cup his face with my hands.

"Do you know how irresistible you are?" he asks.

I bite his bottom lip, and a growl exits him, sending heat to my core. He pulls me against his chest quickly, twisting so he's against the headboard and I'm in his lap.

"Chris, I have to tell you something," he says, nuzzling my throat. "I've never...been with anyone."

That gives me pause. “No one?” I ask gently. I’d assumed he was experienced after our foray on my tour bus, but now, he presses his face into my neck, and I realize he’s avoiding my gaze.

“I’ve never wanted to. Until...”

Understanding dawns on me, and warmth blooms in my heart. I sit up and straddle his lap, taking his face back in my hands and giving him a soft kiss.

“I’m glad you told me,” I say gently, “I am really honored to be your first.”

He brings a shaking hand up to my face, and I sink into his touch. “You’ll be my only,” he says. “Nothing else matters but you. Nothing will ever matter but you.”

My heart beats hard, and I wonder if he can hear it trying to get to him through my chest. I slide my hand over his chest, his heart beating against my palm. “I’m yours,” I say. “Endlessly yours.”

This feels an awful lot like a confession, one that’s premature for how little time we’ve actually spent together, but neither of us actually says the words.

He breathes in deeply, pressing his forehead against mine.

We sit like that for a while, but eventually, his hands trace circles over my bare waist, and I my hips roll over his of their own accord.

He tilts his head back so his lips find mine, and he gives me the softest, most tender kisses I’ve ever received in my life. I trail my hands down his chest and pull up the hem of his shirt, and he doesn’t hesitate to remove it, pressing his hard, muscular chest against mine.

Then, his lips trail down to my jaw before he nips little bites down my throat. He doesn’t do anything that could leave a mark, and he’s being careful with me and so, so gentle.

I press myself against him, humming at his warmth, his affection.

Soon enough, my hips are rolling over his, and I fumble over the waistband of his jeans, freeing his—frankly impressive—cock so I can stroke my hands over it.

He groans against my throat, his own body moving to the rhythm I've set.

“That feels incredible,” he breathes, and I smile even though he can't see my face at this angle. His fingers tuck into the waistband of my leggings, and I adore just the feeling of his skin against mine. If the barest touch of his hands were all I could get, I'd be happy.

“I want to make you come,” I say, and his motion stutters as he bucks into my hands. I give a light laugh, and his arms wrap around me to hold me closer against him, making it difficult to continue pleasuring him.

“I want this to be good for you,” he mumbles against my skin, and I realize that he tightened his grip on me so I couldn't see the hot blush that tints the tops of his ears, which are all I can see of his face at this angle.

I remove a hand from his cock and stroke his hair. “I will,” I promise. “First, though, I'd like to get you off so you'll last a little longer.”

He sucks in a breath, and I lean back, giving myself more room to work with.

A bead of precum appears on the head of his cock, and I smear it and use it to lubricate the motion of my hands.

He leans back against the headboard, watching me work in fascination, although his eyes keep moving to my breasts as they jiggle from the motion of me rubbing his cock over and over, faster and faster.

“Yes,” he groans. “Just like that. Just—”

He lets out a gasp as his body seizes up, and I keep stroking as ropes of cum shoot out of him, his face pure ecstasy as his body paints the high waist of my leggings.

When he's done, he leans forward, his forehead crashing against the space half an inch below my collarbones as he

pants with the exhilaration of his completion.

“That good?” I ask, a little humored.

He simply nods, and I kiss the top of his head.

“Well,” I say, “I’m gonna get out of these wet clothes, and then we’re really gonna get going.”

Thankfully, I’m on birth control, so I don’t have to worry about finding a condom.



JOSEPH

MY COCK IS BROKEN. That’s the only explanation for why it dies the moment Chris leaves the room, and the sink starts in the bathroom.

She said she’d be back for more, but as I try to stroke myself like she did, nothing happens.

Panic floods through me. What if that was it? What if my dick is just done? One and done? Will she be disappointed? Will she leave?

I mean, I can’t make her stay, but this certainly won’t help my case.

When she walks back in the room, I look up, my eyes wide. She’s got absolutely nothing on, and my heart rate must triple. My mouth goes dry as I look over her fucking stunning figure, her lovely rosy nipples that I just want to lick and suck until they’re sore, her soft skin, and that little patch of hair that hides what I now know to be the greatest treasure of all.

And my. Fucking. Dick. Doesn’t. Work.

She smiles and saunters over. She must not have noticed yet. Do I tuck it between my legs? Do I tell her that the one orgasm was it for me?

She climbs back over me, sitting on my thighs, and I wait for her to look down and see that she has no reason to be over here, no reason to be with me.

She smiles and kisses me.

“You’re thinking so loud I can practically hear you,” she says. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

She seems...amused. Oh, god. Is she going to make fun of me?

I open my dry mouth to speak, but a whoosh of air comes out instead.

I swallow, trying to come up with anything I can say that will keep her from leaving. This time, it’s not my horrific demonic nature, but a human body issue that I’ve never had to worry about in the past, because I’ve never wanted to fuck anyone as bad as I want to fuck her.

“I don’t...know what to do about this,” I say, looking toward the window as my face heats. I use my hand to gesture toward my cock, and her body shifts.

“Hmmm,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice. Yes, she’s definitely going to make fun of me before she dumps me.

Then, her hands run down my torso, and I look up to see her watching me. Her eyes are still dark with lust, and that smile is something wicked.

“You aren’t mad?” I ask, still afraid that she might be, that she’s biding her time.

She shakes her head. “I’m thinking you’re a lot less experienced than just never having had sex before,” she says, “because it’s pretty normal for a guy to need some time after coming. I didn’t expect you to be at attention for me the moment I came back.”

Is she telling the truth? I look down to see that my cock seems more swollen than a moment ago, and her fingers pinch my nipples. Electricity shoots through me right to my center, and I tilt my head back with a moan.

“While we’re *preparing* you, though,” she says, “I want to tell you what I’d like. If you’re not comfortable with it, I understand. I’ve yet to find someone who is.”

At the mere mention of searching through others, I growl, my desire so strong that I grow dizzy, and I glance down to see that my cock is finally ready. Mostly because my instincts are telling me to take my woman and pound her into the bed until she forgets her name and can only say mine.

She smiles, and her face is suddenly withdrawn and shy. “I want you to dominate me,” she says. “I’ll tell you if I want you to stop, but...” She sighs, looking away.

I suppose I’m not the only one who can be embarrassed by sexual acts. I put a hand on her cheek. “Tell me,” I plead. Just her first sentence was enough that I’m ready to go again, ready to shove my cock into her as I hold her down.

“I don’t want to have to ask you,” she says. “When we’re...sleeping together...I want you to be fully in control, and I want you to dominate me. To...use me.”

Her face is fully bright red right now, and I sit up so we’re eye to eye.

Slowly, I wrap a hand around the back of her neck like I did before. “Anything else?” I ask, my voice low and humming with magical energy. I cannot shift, cannot frighten her more than she already is. Just telling me this obviously took a lot of courage, and the act of shifting into my hideous monster form would be enough to ruin the trust she’s found in me.

She blinks at me, then says, “I have a hard time talking when I’m in that mental state, so I guess...listen to my nonverbal cues. If I push you away, stop. If I pull away, though...I want you to keep going. I want you to...take what’s yours.” Her final words are small, the barest of whispers.

I frown. Those aren’t many rules. She wants me to take over, and she wants me to pay attention. The bar is on the floor, it seems. With how embarrassed she was, I thought she

was going to tell me she was into something exceedingly odd, but this is...right.

My demonic nature takes over, and I crash our lips together, ready to claim my mate.

No, she's not my mate.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 17

JOSEPH

I SMASH MY LIPS TO HERS, AND WHEN SHE GOES TO PULL herself from me, my hand tightens around her neck, and I growl as I spin to push her down on the bed.

“Stay,” I snarl, but she doesn’t listen, moving to her elbows to watch me roam down her body.

I growl yet again, grabbing each of her hands with mine and yanking them above her head.

She moans, her hips already rolling, her body scented with desire.

“I’m going to fuck that brattiness out of you,” I say, “Until you’re all used up.”

She lets out a small cry, tossing her head back at just my words.

I lick my lips, adjusting so her wrists are bound by one of my hands. Then, I move my other hand to her breast, pinching and pulling at her nipple before taking in my mouth. I draw it in, sucking hard and biting at it for a bit of extra punishment.

“That’s my good girl,” I say when she moans, leaning into my lips. I massage that breast with my free hand, then move my mouth to the other, feasting on her as she bucks against me.

Because of her insolence, I flip her over, then tuck her hands behind her back so I can hold on. I sit up on my knees behind her, observing as she bares her pussy to me.

“I’m going to fuck that pretty little pussy of yours until it’s ruined,” I say, and she lets out a cry and lifts her ass higher, arches her back more, and wiggles her hips.

Such a good little mate, the bestial part of me growls, but I tamp it down. I have not truly claimed her. I would have to be in my true form to do that, and, despite her words from earlier, pledging herself to me, I am not going to claim her.

Not yet, the beast says for the second time today. It taunts me, begging me to shift and fuck her until I come inside and all over her, coating her with my essence.

But no, this is not the time for that.

I stroke my throbbing cock, rubbing the tip against her soaked pussy as it waits for me.

“Ohhhh,” she says as I push just the head in, her face pressed against the pillow. Her hands tighten around my one, and my heart sings with joy at the tiny, affectionate motion.

Mine, mine, *mine*.

I pull out slowly, and she whines, but then I slam my cock into her all at once, not bothering to prepare her.

This is what she wanted, isn’t it? To be fully dominated? To be used?

Meanwhile, I am in ecstasy, my cock held in her warmth. She lets out a long moan as she presses against me, and her fingers tighten on my hand a little more. Is this what it is to be cherished?

“You love being used,” I say. “You love when I fuck you like you’re just a toy.”

“Yes,” she gasps. “Oh, fuck, yes.”

The last couple of words are more whine than word, but I smile at them either way. Her hips rock against me, and I use my free hand to wrap around her, my fingers rubbing circles around and then pinching her clit.

Her pussy clenches around my cock, and I see stars at how amazing she feels. I thrust in and out of her, keeping a slow

but rough pace, slamming in so hard that I worry I'll hurt her against the headboard. I have to be more careful than that, despite her words about wanting me to fully dominate, be fully selfishness.

For me, selfishness means taking care of her needs. She is the most important thing in the world. She is my heart, my soul, my—

She cries out as I pinch her clit yet again, her cunt trembling around my cock as I hold it inside her, pressing as hard as I can and tightening my hand around her wrists.

“Please, please, yes, please,” she cries as her completion takes her, fully disorients and destroys her.

As she falls apart around me, I rock against her, releasing her wrists so that I can lean my body over her, hunching around her like a cocoon. Protecting her, holding her.

It's only when she turns her head to kiss me that I come again, and I pour every bit of myself into this moment. Not just my spend, but my sadness, my lust, my happiness.

My love.

Her body trembles and shines with a thin layer of sweat as I come out of my dazed state, and her eyes are bright as she watches me as I fall to lay beside her. Then, just like on the tour bus, she moves to curl up against me, tangling her legs with mine before she falls asleep.

I brush her hair out of her face, kissing the top of her head and untangling her locks gently enough that I won't wake her.

“I love you,” I breathe, not daring to say it loud enough for her to actually hear.

There are so many strange rules to human interaction, and I know this is one of them. It's far too soon for me to be professing my love, but I loved her from the moment she walked into that studio. My body and soul knew hers, and it wasn't just because Joey knew her, because he cared about her.

Hell, he spent years ignoring her before I ever came around. He spent years breaking her heart.

No, she is mine. I've only heard of it in tales of someone who heard of someone who told another, I knew my mate the instant our eyes met from across the room.

And if I have to, I will spend a thousand lifetimes taking away every ounce of pain that Joey left behind.

CHAPTER 18

JOSEPH

THE ATLANTA SHOW IS WHAT I EXPECTED SHATTERED FEST TO be. I spend the whole day sweating during meet and greets, stand backstage to watch Chris perform her set, collect food for the both of us from the performers' craft services tent, make sure she actually eats—it isn't as difficult as it was when she had a photoshoot, but her relationship with food isn't exactly healthy, although I'm starting to figure out what her safe foods are—and afterward, we go back to the hotel to play games with my band all night until we do it all over again.

This time around, I don't worry about anyone seeing us together. I hold her hand and help her out of the SUV, and I'm asked by about a dozen fans if it's true that I'm dating Christine Osmond. I don't have a perfect answer, so I just reply, "I'm not at liberty to confirm the status of our relationship." Then, I wink, and most of the guys say something along the lines of "nice," and the teenage girls squeal with excitement.

Atlanta is a two-day show, unlike Orlando, but after the second day, I ride with Christine on her tour bus again, except this time, we spend most of the time sleeping and absolutely none of it fucking. The day had been long, and I don't mind it. Her company is enough for me.

Charleston is another one-day show, and when Christine walks off stage with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes and a grin that lights up the world, I gather her in my arms and swing her in a circle.

“That was badass, Chris!” I say, and when I set her down, I take her face between my hands and lean down to kiss her. She hesitates for a moment before throwing her sweaty arms behind my neck and kissing me back with a ferocity I hadn’t expected.

When she pulls away, I glance behind her to see that some of the still-cheering fans are staring directly at us, their phones pointed our direction. They’re either taking pictures or recording, and I smile and wave.

I swear, one of them almost faints.

Chris looks out at the crowd, backing up against me as the cheers of “One more song!” reverberate throughout the stage, shaking the platform on which we stand.

She looks at me, and she smirks. “I’ve gotta get back out there. Um…” Her face flushes a deeper red, and I brush my hand over her sweaty cheek. She says, “Is it alright if I, uh, call you my boyfriend? Publicly?”

My heart bursts with adoration for her, and I pull her close despite the heat and humidity and sweat covering our bodies. “Of course, darling,” I mumble into her hair.

She gives me a grin when she hops back toward the stage, and the audience’s screams grow louder. She’s a queen, a goddess. She commands the stage like I could only imagine.

“Sorry, everyone! I just had to say hi to my boyfriend for a sec. You might have seen some pictures online, and I wanted to confirm it before anyone else started another rumor. Yes, Joseph Munson and I are officially a couple, although we wanted to keep it to ourselves for a while.”

My heart nearly explodes from my chest when I hear her say that out loud to a field of thousands of fans, and their screams mimic my own internal excitement and joy.

She sings a song called “When You Found Me Again,” and I cross my arms and mouth the words alongside her. It’s not quite a ballad, but it’s not as upbeat as a lot of Chris’s music tends to be. It’s an excited love letter between two people.

In the studio version, Paul Taylor, the lead singer of an indie band called Fish in the Office Microwave, sings the second verse and final chorus, but whenever Chris performs it live, she does it alone.

As she starts the first chorus, Chris looks at me and raises her brows in a question. Her joy is palpable, and I don't quite know what she's asking of me.

When she holds her hand out, though, I understand. She'd noticed me mouthing the words, or someone backstage had and told her through her headset, and now she wants me to sing with her.

Wynn will lose it when she finds out that Chris had me hijack the end of her set, but I don't care at all.

"Hand me a mic," I tell the stage manager, who waves at someone before a mic is pressed into my hand.

The chorus ends and goes into a techno riff, and I hold the mic up to my lips.

Christine backs away from her own mic, watching me with a smirk.

The crowd is quieter than they were between songs, as people tend to sing along during the actual music. There's less cheering, but when I sing, "*Do you realize how lost I was?*" they lose their absolute shit.

That's when I walk onstage, holding a hand out to wave as I continue the verse.

I sing the second chorus while Chris leads the audience in a rhythmic clap, and despite my ripped black jeans and studded denim jacket, there doesn't seem to be a face in the crowd that's angry to see me here.

After the chorus, I shout, "How are we doing Charleston?" They cheer, and I say, "I am so happy to be here with Christine. And I am absolutely the luckiest man alive that she wants to be with me."

I turn toward her, taking her hand and pulling her to the standing mic as we go together on the bridge, a flirty back-

and-forth. My vocals don't sound the same as the guy on the album, but I can't help but think, *Damn we sound good together.*

Music is everything to me, the thing that feeds my very soul. I'm so addicted to playing and singing that it's the reason the band discovered my demonic nature. I was so passionate during one rehearsal that I shifted without even realizing. Before the accident, they said that Joey would be late to practice, wouldn't rehearse his riffs, occasionally showed up to a show drunk.

After spending an eternity of darkness in a realm of nothing, music became my light. I told myself that it was just a way for me to honor his wishes, but it was more than that.

I would give up the music entirely if it meant one more day with Chris, though.

And I don't have to. She wants me, she wants me, she wants *me.*

When the song ends, the audience explodes, and Chris stands on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. I have to lean over her to hug her properly, and I breathe her in, take in the moment of the audience, the music reverberating through me, and, more than anything, *Christine.*

CHAPTER 19

CHRISTINE

WITH HOW DORMANT THE PHANTOM INSIDE ME HAS BEEN, I mostly forget about it until I'm in the middle of a performance in North Carolina and get hit with a bout of dizziness. Corroded Hellfire is doing an interview with a YouTube channel, but I wish that they weren't so Joseph could be here.

I stumble over one of the dance moves and catch Nell's eye backstage. She grabs the stage manager and mumbles something to her, who then says something over a walkie. There's a procedure for this sort of thing, after all. A music festival in the middle of summer? There has to be.

Instead of continuing to dance, I stride toward the microphone, continuing the song. I'm not gonna pass out. I'm not gonna pass out.

I will not allow it.

That voice wasn't my own. I've grown complacent in its absence. Its silence.

The Phantom was never truly gone, though, only dormant.

Now, it basks in the adoration of the crowd, and nausea roils in my gut. I won't throw up, nor will I pass out. No matter what, I will make it through this damn show, and then I will go lie down while the Phantom punishes me for whatever it thinks I've done wrong this time. I'm sure some super-fans will notice the slight inconsistency in my show, but I should be masking well enough that nobody assumes I'm tripping on some sort of substance.

Thankfully, this song is the one where I do a quick-change afterwards, so when it's over, I walk off and hand my mic to the stage manager.

“What happened?” Nell asks, handing me a bottle of water. I drink as much of it as I can without getting more nauseous. “You looked a bit wobbly for a second.” She doesn't mention the change in my routine, for which I'm thankful.

“I think it's the heat,” I lie. “I should have had more water before the show.”

She takes my face in her hands, looking into my eyes. She frowns but doesn't say a word as someone swaps out my clothing in seconds.

She knows something, the Phantom growls. I always knew she needed to die.

I jerk away from her, and her face drops in shock as she stares at me.

“Christine?” she asks, her voice distant as the next song starts up.

I take a step back.

No, I tell it. You will not hurt her. I've never been able to tell it no before, but now, I command it to listen to me.

It doesn't back down, and my gut pinches like I've been punched. I wrap an arm around my waist, but I don't have time for this. I have to get back on stage.

That's right, the Phantom says. Bring me worship, and then we shall get rid of all these little distractions.

I bring the mic to my lips, still staring at Nell. Then, I sing, “*You always have bubblegum for me...*”

The song tumbles out of my mouth from mere muscle memory, because whatever the Phantom is doing to me, it hurts. It feels like something is trying to dig its way out of my belly, clawing and tearing and twisting.

And I have to take it all with a perky smile, because if I don't, it will only get worse.

I glance backstage, and Nell is texting someone. Wait, is that *my* phone?

The stabbing in my gut twists yet again, and I go into the next song, the final one of the set. I make my way through it as my head spins and my vision blurs, and I make my way off stage as the song closes.

I stumble into the darkness of the backstage area after the blinding sunlight of the day, my heart thumping so loud in my ears I can't hear anything else.

Hands reach for me, crawling over my skin as dark forms stand around me.

"I can't see," I gasp, sucking in air and clenching my hands around my gut. "I can't..." The words are muffled, and I'm led to a chair as the Phantom tears me to pieces.

That's when I realize that he's eating me. He's taking physical parts of myself and eating me from the inside-out, and eventually, there will be nothing left.

Tears burn hot like lava in my eyes, blazing with fire down my cheeks as the hands won't. Stop. Touching. Me.

One gentle hand finds my face, though, cupping my cheek, and the destruction stops. "Chris, I came as fast as I could," he says, his words the only clear thing in the whole world. I blink away more of the hot tears so I can focus on Joseph's face. He's kneeling in front of me, watching me with bunched brows. "What do you need?"

This isn't the first time he's asked that, but this time, I don't know how to answer. Despite the Phantom's destruction ending, it still hurts. *It hurts so bad.*

"I know, darling," he says, pulling me close to him. Did I say that out loud? "We're gonna get you some help, okay?"

I nod against him, breathing in his comforting scent. He lifts me just like the first time, except now, all I can focus on is the pain. The agony. I shiver, and my breathing is fast and desperate.

I don't see anyone else. Don't hear anyone else. It's only me, only Joseph. He lies me down on something, and the light is too bright, and I hear someone say something about "so much blood" and Joseph says, "I'm not leaving her. Just go," and I have no idea what he's talking about but we're moving and there are more hands on me but the only one that matters is the hand holding mine and...

And it hurts.

God, it fucking hurts.

CHAPTER 20

JOSEPH

WHEN THEY ASK MY BLOOD TYPE, I KNOW IT'S BAD. I SIT IN A too-bright, sterile room with a needle in my arm, and I can't see her, can't feel her. The doctors say they can't tell me anything, but it's such great luck that we're both O-negative.

Something has changed, and I have this gut-sinking feeling it's my fault that this is happening to Chris. The Phantom hurt her. It was because of me. I know it.

I scroll through the internet to see what people are saying. Of course, there are photos of me carrying her to the ambulance. I climbed in with her even when one of the paramedics tried to force me away, and I kept my hand in hers as she cried and sobbed, half-delirious with pain.

Already, there are people claiming that she's obviously having a bad trip, that her rockstar boyfriend was the easiest way for her to get more drugs. They say the Devil took her down with him.

I knew that my image would taint her. I knew it, yet I was so fucking selfish that I stayed with her anyway.

Yet I'm not the devil that's hurting her. I don't know why it's doing this, what the Phantom could possibly gain from hurting the body of its host.

I drink the overly sugary beverage they handed me before, trying to use my mystical smoke to prevent my physical body from getting sick and passing out.

They almost don't let me donate two pints, but after I insist, they attach another bag. A nurse whose name I've

already forgotten is sitting in the room with me, probably to make sure I don't actually go into shock from blood loss.

"I saw your pictures online," she says, and I realize after getting my head out of my own ass for a moment that she's a little starstruck. "Is it true you and Christine Osmond are dating?"

I give a weak smile, but it's hard when I still don't know how she's doing. "We are," I say. "She's..." I shudder as I think about how pale she looked, how much her body shook while she cried in the ambulance. "She's everything to me. I don't know what I'd do if..."

I can't even consider it. She can't die. She won't. She's going to be fine. If nothing else, the Phantom wouldn't let her die. It needs her too much for that.

A small voice in the back of my head says, *But if she dies, the Phantom would just take over her body.*

Maybe that's what was going on. Maybe it's decided that it has no use for a living host anymore. It would have its body, and I would lose her.

The nurse stands up and walks over. She's younger than me by at least a few years. She reaches out like she wants to pat my shoulder, then thinks better of it. "She'll be okay. They're doing the first transfusion now, not that I'm allowed to tell you that. And I can't tell you that one of the other nurses was talking about a burst ovarian cyst that ruptured her ovary, either."

I can't tell this nurse that's not what happened, but I am thankful for her candor nonetheless.

I let out a shaky breath. "Thanks," I say. Tears prick at my eyes, and I have to look up at the ceiling and blink them away. I won't cry right now. Nobody will see me cry, because I'm not the one who bled out. I also don't want them to think I'm going into shock, because the bag is only half full of the blood Chris needs more than me.

Finally, the nurse pats my shoulder awkwardly. "It's a hard situation." Awkwardly, she holds up a small paper bag with a

clear panel. “Here, eat this cookie. It’ll help the dizziness.”

I nod and take it, although the nausea from everything I’ve seen today makes it hard to do more than nibble on it. If I show any signs of physical weakness, though, they won’t let me see her. They have to let me see her.

The nurse backs away and sits back in her seat, and I continue scrolling through my phone. There are a bunch of TikTok live feeds right now from outside the hospital, although I’m deeper in the building and have no access to a window to look at the growing crowd that figured out which hospital Christine ended up in. People are holding up signs showing their support, although I have no idea how they were made so quickly.

The door rips open, and I can’t believe the sight in front of me.

“What the hell happened?” Wynn says, her knuckles white as she grips the doorknob.

“Ma’am, you can’t be—“ the nurse says, but I shake my head.

“It’s alright,” I say. To Wynn, I reply, “She’s in surgery right now. They can’t tell me what happened, but if they could—“ I glance over at the nurse “—it might be a burst ovary.”

I wither under Wynn’s glare, and I know she can sense the lie in my words. She looks at the nurse. “I need to speak with Mr. Munson alone.”

The nurse opens her mouth to refute, but a simple glare from Wynn sends her scampering out of the room.

The room that Wynn proceeds to close and lock.

Why do I feel as though I’m suddenly trapped in here with her?

“Cut the shit, Munson. What is actually going on?”

I open my mouth to lie again, and she grabs the arm that has a needle in it. “I know there’s some weird shit with every member of your band. I don’t know what, but just know that I’ve killed or castrated a dozen demons in my life and a few

vampires, so I need you to be honest with me. Really, truly honest.”

That is not what I expected her to say, and I’m left speechless. And terrified. Will she kill me if she finds out what I am?

“No,” she says, “If I was going to kill you, I would have done it by now.”

I definitely didn’t speak my thoughts aloud. I look at her hand, which is still gripping my arm hard enough that it hurts.

“You can read minds if you’re making contact with someone,” I say. It’s not a question. “You’re a witch.” Also not a question. I’ve pictured her as a witch a few times before, mostly out of fear and respect of her terrifying ways. I had no idea how spot-on I was.

She pricks her brows. “Only surface thoughts, and only if they’re clear. Now, I need you to explain to me, out loud, what is happening so I can fix it.”

She releases me, and I take in a deep breath. Then, I explain everything I know. I tell her that I’m not Joey, the original owner of this body, and I tell her what I know about Christine and her deal.

She simply nods and listens. At the end of everything, I say, “I don’t know why it would hurt her now, though.”

She sighs and drags a seat over before sitting in front of me. “I had my suspicions about Christine when I saw her at a smaller festival while scouting talent a few years back. I didn’t approach her though, because she seemed to be doing fine. After her suicide attempt, I reached out to that skeezy agent of hers, and he was more than happy to have us sign her. Without a label, he couldn’t make more money off her.

“So when she came in, I figured out that there was something off about her. I don’t pry into peoples demons—metaphorical or otherwise—unless it seems urgent. But now she’s almost died on stage, and that dickhead Jason is missing.” Her eyes darken, and she gives me an intent stare.

“They found his blood, though, Joseph. I got the call this morning.”

I shake my head. “It wasn’t her fault. It was—“

She frowns. “You don’t understand. They found the blood in your hotel room in Orlando.”

My heart stops. Christine told me she didn’t remember anything about blood like I saw, and I believed her. I still do.

But I’ve also heard stories about how cunning those demons who possess living humans can be.

“I’m being framed,” I say.

Wynn leans back and crosses her arms. “Yeah, that’s kind of what I’m thinking. I’m trying to deal with it, but...it doesn’t look good, Joseph. They don’t have enough evidence to arrest you quite yet, but they’re trying.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Jason’s blood was in my room, somehow. I’d left all my personal belongings in Owen’s room when we got to Orlando, because I knew we’d be up all night playing games, so I didn’t think to return to my room after the show. I didn’t think to check for blood or a body or something. I’d seen Christine’s glowing red eyes, and I’d run, never to return to that room.

She continues, “Is there anything else you should be telling me?”

I look at her, and her brows are pricked in the air.

I shake my head. “I’ve told you everything I know.”

She grimaces. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to wait for Christine to wake up, then.”

CHAPTER 21

CHRISTINE

I'M NOT IN PAIN WHEN I WAKE UP, AND THE PHANTOM SEEMS to be dormant for now. I look around, but I'm alone in a hospital room, a curtain drawn beside me.

"Is anyone there?" I call. It's daytime, and I have no idea what's happened. I try to sit up, but my body still feels like mush. After a moment of struggle, I find a panel of buttons on the hospital bed and press one to move to a sitting position that way. "Joseph?" I ask, my voice growing smaller.

The curtain opens, and Joseph stumbles in, worry lining his features as he moves to my side, taking my hand.

"Chris, you're awake," he breathes.

Another voice calls from the doorway, "You can't be in here! I told you to wait in the hall."

I glance behind him, and a pissed-off older woman is standing there in scrubs.

"No, I want him here," I mumble. My words slur a bit, but I have to get the message across. "He's my boyfriend."

I squeeze his hand. If someone wants to take him from me, they'll have to rip him away. His thumb traces over mine, and I lean my head on the pillow and relish his touch.

The nurse sighs. "Fine. But only because I'm super nice."

I don't refute that, although she does stride over like she's on a vengeful mission to destroy everything. She picks up my chart and glances at it, then at me with sympathy, and then Joseph with a glare. "The doctor will be in to speak with you

momentarily now that you're awake. We're glad to have you conscious."

With that, she adjusts something beside me, taps my IV, and then leaves Joseph and me in the room alone.

He leans down and presses his forehead to mine, his eyes closed as he takes in a deep, steadying breath. "I was terrified, Chris." His words are a whisper, and I reach up with the hand not attached to a tube and cup his cheek.

"I'm sorry," I say, his pain permeating into my very bones. "I feel...better than I did." I'm not in any physical pain right now, but something in my stomach feels tight, and there's definitely a bandage there, although nothing huge.

A small knock sounds at the door, and he turns like he's guarding me with his body. I tighten my hand in his, pulling him to move enough for me to see a doctor walking over from the doorway. She's a short, older woman with a massive pair of circular glasses.

"Ms. Osmond, we had quite a scare today," she says, picking up my chart and looking at me from the foot of the bed. "You don't know me, but I've been hanging out with you for a few hours now."

She looks over at Joseph. "Without this young man, we may not have formally met. He donated the blood we needed to keep you alive."

I look up at Joseph, who's staring at the wall with his brows scrunched in pain. "What happened to me?"

The doctor sighs and sets my chart back on the hook at the end of my bed. "From what we can tell, you had an ovarian cyst burst, and it ruptured your left ovary. We had to perform a laparoscopic oophorectomy, along with blood transfusions to stabilize you."

"A laparo-what?" I ask.

She grimaces. "Your ovary was fully ruptured, like something tried to eat the damn thing, so we had to remove it. Otherwise it would have gotten infected and killed you, at least if you hadn't bled out first."

“Doctor Johnson!” the angry nurse from a few minutes ago says, scandalized by the harsh phrasing.

My hand moves down to that bandage, where I’m starting to get some soreness. The medication must be wearing off. A sinking feeling grows in my gut. “What does this mean for me?”

The nurse takes over, glaring at Dr. Johnson. “You’ll have to rest for a few days, but this shouldn’t affect you too badly in the long term. Because of the blood loss, we’re keeping you overnight, but since it was only one ovary, you shouldn’t get symptoms such as early menopause or fertility issues.”

I flush with heat as Joseph’s hand tightens in mine. “Can I still perform?”

The nurse, whose name badge reads Darla, says, “You’ll want to take it easy for a few weeks, so it’s up to you. You definitely shouldn’t be doing any strenuous dancing, and if you feel any abnormal pain or if the pain gets worse after you leave here, you should get to a hospital immediately.”

I frown. My fans will be upset, but that’s not the most upsetting part about all this. It’s the way Joseph’s face has gone fully distant, his face drawn in resignation or anger or something else I can’t quite read.

“Can I have some time to myself?” I ask. “I just...need to process this.”

Darla nods, giving me a sympathetic tilt of her head, and she ushers Dr. Johnson out of the room. “Press the call button if you need anything.”

“Wynn will want to speak with you,” Joseph says after the room is empty. He tries to release my hand, turned like he’s going to leave, and I squeeze tighter.

“Are you leaving?” I ask, my voice small. I don’t want to be alone right now, but I also don’t want him to be here if he doesn’t want to be.

He looks down in my direction, but not at my face. He’s instead staring at our intertwined hands as though he doesn’t

know how that happened. “This happened because of me,” he says. “If I’m not around, maybe it will...”

Rage suddenly fills me. “This didn’t happen because of you,” I say, my voice hard. “This happened because I am possessed by a fucking demon that’s mad that it’s not the only thing getting my attention, so it punished me by attacking me while I was on stage.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t know what people are saying about you, Chris. Because of me. Because I’m ruining your life.”

“Oh, are they saying I’m a drug addict? That I was high out of my mind and now I’m in rehab? I have news for you! That’s nothing new. Even before my...incident...I had a thousand different people speculating about every single thing I do. I lost a few pounds, so I must be on drugs! I gained a few, so I must be pregnant, and the dad is Jim Hicks because he politely helped me get off stage at the Grammy’s the year before.”

He keeps staring at our hands, so I tighten mine, although my muscles are still a bit weak from the anesthesia. “It doesn’t matter what people say about me, Joseph. Not to me. If it matters to you, sure. Go. But I care about us. I want to have a real shot, even if all this shit—“ I wave my other hand in the air, gesturing toward everything “—is going on.”

He sighs and sits on the very edge of the bed.

“I just don’t want to be yet another problem for you to deal with, Christine.” The way he avoids my nickname is like a dagger to my heart.

I finally voice something I haven’t admitted to him out loud. My voice is quieter this time when I say, “When you’re there, it leaves me alone. I don’t know why, but ever since I ran into you at the studio, it’s left me alone whenever you’re around.”

His eyes snap up to mine. “What do you mean, it leaves you alone?”

I frown. “It’s like it’s just gone. Or dormant, deep down where I can’t access it. I thought it was just a coincidence at first, but even that night...whatever happened...it left. For just a second, but I saw you running. I saw you, and I wanted to call out, but then you were gone, and it came back.” Tears stream down my cheeks. “I think it was mad when I was on stage. It’s getting...weaker? Maybe? When you’re around. It can’t keep taking from me. Back at the studio, it would only take seconds after you left for the Phantom to come back. Now, I can go a while before it wakes up. If you leave...”

His lips part, and I wait for him to speak. It takes a few tries of him opening and closing his mouth before he finally says, “So it attacked you while it had the chance. I wasn’t at your show.”

I nod. “And if you hadn’t shown up...”

He grits his teeth, and his brown eyes literally darken to black. Even the scleras are dark, but it doesn’t make me scared. In fact, my core clenches, and I lick my lips before I can help it. “Fuck, Chris. So the damn thing is punishing you because I’m around, but if I leave, it’ll kill you.”

A knock sounds at the door, and I want to cry with frustration. Why can’t we just be left the hell alone?

“I know it’s a bad time,” Wynn says, “But we need to talk.”

So not only did the Phantom try to murder me from the inside, but now I’m about to get dropped from my label.

Wynn sits in a chair, and I wonder how such a tiny lady can look so terrifying sitting in a hospital recliner. “So, Joseph told me about your demon problem.”

I tilt my head and look at Joseph. “Seriously?”

He holds a hand out toward her and says, “She’s terrifying! Of course I told her when she made me!”

I should be more angry with him, but when I look at Wynn, she doesn’t seem skeptical. Her words had been matter-of-fact, not confused or weirded out.

“Anyway,” she says, raising her voice a bit, “I think I might be able to help, but I’ll need to do more research on the subject. I’ve got some colleagues who might know about how to exercise a demon safely.”

My eyes widen, and my heart stops, as evidenced by the momentary flatline in the monitor. “Wait, seriously? All I’ve found is just stuff from movies.”

She nods, “Yes, the curse of movies. It’s nearly impossible to find good information online nowadays.” After a pause, she grimaces. “I overheard what you said about Joseph’s presence.” Then, she looks at Joseph instead of me. “Would you be able to stay near her for the foreseeable future? At least until I can find a solution for this?”

“Of course,” he replies. “Anything.” His hand squeezes mine, and I lean my head on his shoulder, suddenly exhausted by the events of the day.

“Great,” Wynn says, standing from her spot. “I’ve let your nurse know that Joseph has to stay with you for your own safety, and if they want to argue, they can call me about it. Under no circumstances are you to be left alone.” Her eyes bore into mine, and she goes toward the door. All in all, she was only in here for seconds. Less than a minute.

She pauses at the doorway, though, and says, “If anything happens, I’m a text away. I’ve got a jet, and I’ll come out at a moment’s notice.”

With that, she’s gone, and I’m left wondering what the hell is going to happen next.

CHAPTER 22

JOSEPH

I'M CONFLICTED. I SHOULD LEAVE CHRISTINE AND NEVER LOOK back. I'm a demon, after all. My very existence is an abomination, and she deserves better.

Yet I have to stay and keep her safe, and that means my presence.

After Christine falls asleep in the hospital bed, I stand at the window, glancing down at the few lingering fans still waiting out in the parking lot with their signs of support. With Chris's permission and Nell's help drafting it, I posted to her Instagram:

This afternoon at Shatter Fest, in the middle of a performance, Christine had an ovarian cyst burst. Amazingly, she finished her performance before collapsing backstage due to extreme blood loss. Thanks to the efforts of the staff at Charlotte West Regional Hospital, she will make a full recovery. In lieu of performing at the tour stop in Washington, D.C., and at her doctors' behest, she will be doing a complimentary meet and greet with fans and signing autographs. Future events subject to change.

-J

I also include a picture of her making a peace sign and sticking her tongue out at the camera, her eyes bright and a subtle smile in her expression. Her phone is blowing up with notifications, so I turn it to Do Not Disturb so she can sleep without the device vibrating constantly. Nell and Wynn have my number, and Chris told me that nobody else should need to contact her directly.

My head snaps in her direction when I hear a whine dragged from her lips, and her brows scrunch like she's in pain. I walk over, shoving my hands in my pockets. "Chris?" I whisper. Is she awake and in pain? "Do you need more pain medicine?"

She doesn't answer, and after a moment, a cry comes out of her, and my hands instinctively jerk for her, looking for an injury or something I can do to help.

"Please," she mumbles, "Please don't." Her words are quiet, but she gasps as something else happens in whatever nightmare she's having.

I look at the door, but it seems that the night nurse on duty isn't around to hear her cries.

Before I can change my mind about this terrible decision, I kick off my shoes and climb into the bed, pulling her against me carefully so I don't accidentally tug on her IV.

She turns her body toward mine, burrowing her face in my chest. Her body is trembling, and I pull the blanket up over her shoulders.

"You're safe," I mumble, kissing her hair since there's nothing else I can do. "It's not real. It's a bad dream." I rub a hand over her back, and eventually, her whines stop, and she stops shaking. Her body relaxes against mine, and her breathing slows.

A better man would go. A better man would plan his escape so he would never hurt her again after Wynn gets rid of the Phantom.

I'm not a man, though, I'm a demon, a parasite whose whole reason for living is this woman, and it would take an army to pull me away from her.

An army, or a single word from her.

I stay up all night, refusing to sleep in case she needs me. The night nurse moves quietly when she comes in, and Chris is so exhausted that she doesn't wake the whole night.

Early in the morning, when dawn is just breaking over the hospital, she stirs, rubbing her face against my chest with a small groan.

“I feel like shit,” she says with a groan.

I smile, although my heart twinges with pain. *Your fault, your fault, your fault*, my mind chants toward me.

“I know, darling,” I say, brushing her hair out of her face. “Darla should be back soon, and she’ll give you some medicine to help with the pain then, alright?”

Chris huffs. “I’m so sick of all the meds. They make me nauseous.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her slight indignation. “Well, that’s better than pain.”

She pulls away, and I stand, stretching out the soreness that’s gathered in my stiff muscles from holding her through the night.

Before I can stop her, she goes to sit up on her own before gasping and clutching her stomach. “Bad idea,” she groans.

I rush over and help her sit up. “Chris, you have to take it easy. I’ll help you with anything you need.”

She looks up at me shyly. “Are you sure about that? Because right now, I need to pee.”

I frown. Why would she ask like that would be a problem? “Of course. Let me help you walk over.”

I do so, helping her to stand carefully, and I insist that she put her weight on me so I can support her whilst leading her IV cart to the little bathroom in the hospital room. I even help her sit, then turn around and stare at the momentarily closed door while she does her business. This seems to be humiliating, but I don’t want her alone, even if she makes me look away. What if she falls?

What if the Phantom comes back and murders her?

These aren’t worries I thought I’d have when I started my day—well, when I started yesterday—but I’m just glad she’s

going to be alright. I would wipe her ass every day if it meant she would be okay, although she doesn't ask me to help with quite that much.

When I'm helping her back into bed, it truly hits me that I almost lost her yesterday. If I hadn't shown up, she would have died.

I braid her hair back at her request, wrapping her in an extra blanket that a nurse brings by around six in the morning. Then, I find a cheesy romantic comedy for us to watch on my phone, and when she's lying in my arms on the bed, I look down at the top of her head and say, "I love you, Chris."

She turns to look up at me, her eyes wide. "You what?" Her voice is the barest of whispers, and I wonder if I shouldn't have said it.

Instead of backtracking, though, I take her face in my hands, brushing my thumbs over her soft skin. "I love you. I've known it for a long time, but I haven't said it, and I should have said it before now, but I was scared. But the idea of you not knowing...that's so much worse."

She blinks up at me, her mouth opening and closing. I've caught her unawares, and now, she doesn't know how to respond. It's clear from the stricken look on her face.

"You don't have to say it back," I say with a sad smile. "I know you can't...love me. That it's him you—"

Before I can finish the sentence, her lips are on mine, and her hands tangle in my hair and hold me in a kiss.

"Of course I love you, Joseph," she breathes. "You. Not him. *You*."

I close my eyes and kiss her again. I want to hold her tight and never let go, but I have to be gentle and careful with her broken body, so I just kiss her and kiss her until—

A throat clears from the doorway, and Darla walks in. "Sorry for interrupting," she says, humor lacing her voice. "Dr. Johnson is here to see you so you can get the hell out of here."

Chris's face flushes crimson, and she buries it in my chest. "Finally," she sighs.

Checking out takes an hour, and I keep in contact with Nell about the progress. There's a whole security procedure to follow when celebrities are released from the hospital, which she and Wynn have to set up.

When Darla wheels her down to the entrance, there are about two dozen fans outside, waving signs and reaching out past the barriers as though they'll be able to reach where Chris is standing a dozen feet away. She smiles and lifts a hand to wave, but I have to help her stand to climb up into the tour bus. I want to get her into bed so she can rest some more, and perhaps we'll get some privacy to talk about what was said a few minutes ago.

In theory, I should also be able to speed up her healing process, but it's not something I've ever done with a body that's not mine.

When she stands, the fans cheer, and a few shout, "We love you!" I give a small wave of my own, and again, nobody seems upset to see me here.

"I love you, Joseph!" one of the teen girls yells, and I smile as I make my own way up the steps.

It's only when the doors close that I realize I missed my own show yesterday, and when I check my phone, I have a single missed text from Owen.

OWOOOO-EN

Take care of her. We've got it tonight.

Some would be angry about one of the lead singers missing a big show, but I smile and text back:

Thanks man.

Owen must have sung in my stead, which has only happened once or twice, but I appreciate the hell out of him for doing it.

When I enter the bus, ready to just curl up and nap with Chris, a very angry and very tiny young woman is staring at me, arms crossed.

CHAPTER 23

CHRISTINE

IT MAKES SENSE THAT NELL WOULD BE WAITING ON THE TOUR bus, but I still wasn't expecting it. She pulls me in a hug, then stiffens when Joseph's steps shake the bus with his entry just a little.

She pulls away from me and crosses her arms. "Alright, I'm gonna need some honesty from the both of you." She glares at Joseph like she's ready to murder him. "Are you doing some weird demon shit that's hurting her? Or is this about the demon she already has?"

I open my mouth to argue, to deny everything, then shut it. I finally turn to see Joseph gripping the back of a recliner that swivels by the door, looking from Nell to me and back again.

Finally, he asks, "Is there a single person at Twin Records who isn't a paranormal?"

Nell shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. But that doesn't answer my question." She pauses, digging through her purse before pulling out an honest-to-god potion vial like something from a fantasy movie. "Here," she tells me, shoving the vial toward me and causing the pale blue liquid to shimmer and glisten. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

I shouldn't take strange drinks from vials, but this is already so fucking weird that I just do as she says. She's always been protective of me, a guard dog with a tiny stature.

The drink, despite being that pretty glittering blue, is bitter and earthy, not like a good coffee, but like I'm straight-up drinking mud and piss.

I cough and hack after downing it in one swig like I'm taking a shot. My stomach warms, and the spot inside me that was hurting immediately feels better.

"That was disgusting," I say, coughing on the aftertaste.

She shrugs. "Healing potions don't have to taste good. They just have to work."

Joseph strides over and takes the vial out of my hand, sniffing it with widening eyes. "Where did you get a healing potion?" He sounds amazed, and I'm just confused.

Nell pricks a brow and steps between the two of us. "I made it, but I used the last of my stores."

I hold up my hands, pushing past Nell. "Okay, you're telling us to talk, but you're saying a lot of stuff I don't understand, so how about you go first? You seem to know more than I do."

Honestly, I feel a little betrayed that Nell knew about the demon and just...never brought it up.

I stick my tongue out and exhale a hot breath, trying to dispel the taste of that horrid potion, because apparently magic potions exist, too. I sit on the couch, and Joseph goes to the fridge and gets me one of the protein shakes I drink when I have a performance, because the discharge instructions said I should try upping my protein.

I take a sip of the chocolatey beverage, and it clears some of that flavor while Nell sits in the recliner across from me and Joseph sits beside me. I glance up at the front of the bus, wondering if Amanda is some sort of magical creature as well but too afraid to ask.

"First off, I'm gonna say that I don't know much about dealing with demons," Nell says. Her eyes brush over Joseph, and she grimaces. I take his hand in mine, and he squeezes reassuringly. "However, I was raised in a werewolf hunter clan in the smoky mountains, and I come from a long line of witches."

Joseph tenses beside me, and I don't know if I should ask why, calling attention to his discomfort. Does he hate witches?

Or was it the werewolf thing?

My brain catches up with what I've just heard. "Werewolf hunter?" I ask. For just a moment, the sentence seemed totally normal, but no, that's actually insane.

Nell shrugs. "I wasn't that into it, but I have a special power that allows me to sense other paranormals with a touch. When you collapsed backstage, I discovered that Joseph here is a demon, but I've known about *your* demon for a long time."

I cast my eyes at the floor, ashamed at keeping this from her despite the fact that no normal person would have believed me. It just so happened that I found the one person who knows just how real this stuff is.

"I thought that you wanted it there, because you seemed so happy all the time. And then you had a suicide attempt, and now you just about died on stage. What the fuck is up with that?"

My hand tightens in Joseph's, and I can't force myself to speak. I want to explain, want to info dump everything about my life to her, but I can't. My face is hot, and my mouth still tastes gross, but I can't bring myself to raise my protein shake to my lips and drink.

Joseph speaks for me, and tears prick at my eyes. I'm so ashamed with myself for being unable to say anything. He tells her what I've told him, and it almost sounds rehearsed. I guess he must have told Wynn, as well, because she seemed to know quite a bit when she was in my hospital room for a brief moment last night.

He tells her that the Phantom is dormant when he's around, so he can't leave me, not if it means I could get hurt again.

At the end of his speech, the bus is on the highway, and we're headed to our next tour stop. Everyone is silent, and tears have fallen from my face to splash on the vinyl floor below.

After thinking for a long moment, Nell says, "Have you ever seen a young horse meet an angry adult? Especially a colt

meeting a stallion?”

I tilt my head. “I grew up in a trailer park,” I remind her. “You have to know my answer is no.”

She frowns. “Well, I grew up on a farm. And there are certain behaviors colts will use to keep from being attacked. The most noticeable one is that they’ll chomp their mouth at the stallion, letting him know he’s just a baby, not a threat.”

I have no idea where she’s going with this, but she continues. “This is something that happens with a lot of animals, though. The whole alpha/beta thing was disproven with wolves, but domestic dogs still show certain behaviors when they’re threatened.”

“What does this have to do with us?” I ask. Maybe she’s just an animal fanatic.

“I think that this Phantom might be afraid of Joseph,” Nell says, leaning back in her seat. Her arms are still crossed, but her expression toward Joseph has gentled a bit. “I think it’s hiding.”

“Why would it do that, though?” Joseph asks.

Nell nods toward me. “Well, you said demons are powered by worship. And I’m guessing they might be similar to vampires, able to absorb the power of others if they consume them.” Okay, gross. “If Joseph is more famous than you, then it would make sense that the Phantom isn’t as powerful.”

“But I’m getting more and more famous by the day,” I say, dread bubbling up within me. If I don’t perform, I’ll be punished, but if I do, the Phantom grows more powerful.

Joseph takes my hand and kisses the back, and I lean into him, my shoulders trembling. Despite sleeping through the night, I’m exhausted, and I want nothing more than to lie down and sleep, but there are suddenly a whole bunch of people who want to help me solve my Phantom problem for me, and I don’t know how they can help. This new information does nothing but make me more terrified. It doesn’t help us get rid of the Phantom.

Nell's face softens as she looks at me. "How about you two go get some sleep? I'm gonna hang out with Amanda and do some research."

Before I can thank her, Joseph swoops me up into his arms, and I don't protest. I'm not in pain anymore, but I love when he carries me. I let the conversation float away, desperate to just get these little moments with him when I can.

He takes me to the bedroom again, pulling back the comforter before laying me down. Then, he crawls in behind me and pulls me against his chest to spoon me.

"Can you say it again?" I mumble, my eyelids already growing heavy.

He buries his face in my hair, and I can almost feel him smiling.

"I love you, Chris. Get some sleep, alright?"

Despite the stress of the world, I smile.

"I love you, too."

In his arms, I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 24

CHRISTINE

I'M ON STAGE PERFORMING WHEN A SHADOW CREATURE CLIMBS onto the stage with me. Its form is nebulous, but it has ram's horns and clawed hands that reach for me.

I should be scared, but I walk toward it as the world goes silent and empty. It's just the two of us on stage, no band, no dancers, not even an audience.

This isn't the Shatter Fest stage, but an old-fashioned theater that I recognize from a million concerts I've attended or seen, although I've never actually performed at Radio City. I back up as the creature strides toward me, a smile on my face as a lilting electric guitar riff floats in.

I know, deep down, that this creature is Joseph, his smoky demonic form stalking me in a sensual way that gets my heart skipping beats in my chest.

"Are you ready, darling?" He asks when he backs me up to a backdrop, one that I'm sure is super expensive, so I don't want to fold or tear it.

Instead, I lean toward him, and he uses his smoke to lift me so my face is at the same height as where a face would be.

He leans forward, and smoke pours into me, filling my mouth so beautifully.

"Good girl," he growls.

He uses those clawed hands to part my thighs, hooking my knees around his hips as a cock forms and enters me slowly, torturing me.

My body burns from desire and need, and I jolt upright and fall out of bed, scrambling away from the sleeping man. He's been so scared, so careful with me since what happened in North Carolina. I don't want to wake him, don't want to disturb him.

I go to the restroom and splash my face with cold water, trembling with need as my body continues to be alight. I don't pay enough attention to my aim, though, and my shirt and pajama pants are now soaked with water. At least, I hope it's water and not sweat from how hot my body is. I sneak back into the bedroom, but we didn't bring bags in, so I steal the t-shirt Joseph left on the floor.

Being wrapped in his scent is not a good way for me to calm down, though, and my skin tingles with every movement of his shirt against my body.

I need a better way to cool down without waking him up. I stride as quietly as possible to the window, opening the curtain and cranking the air conditioning to be as cold as possible. I wrap my arms around myself and hope the cold is enough to get rid of this near-painful lust pulsating through me.



JOSEPH

I WAKE UP DISORIENTED, and it takes me a moment to remember where we are. Right. D.C. We were only awake briefly after the tour bus arrived, and then we immediately went back to sleep in the massive king-sized hotel bed.

I glance at the digital clock on the night stand, and it's almost two in the morning. Why did I wake up?

I look up, and the streetlight that had been annoying us last night is visible again, and Christine's silhouette is standing against it as she looks out the window. She must have opened the blackout curtains.

“Chris, are you alright?” I ask. She turns halfway toward me, her arms wrapped around herself. I can barely see her with that light behind her, so I stand up and walk over, wrapping her in my arms.

When we’d arrived in D.C., I went to change her bandage to find that the healing potion did its job and got rid of any signs of an injury. She’s not hurt at all anymore, something no doctor would be able to explain. I wrapped my arms around her waist and kissed where there should have been a scar, then carried her to bed so we could get more rest.

Despite the chill of the overpowered air conditioner, her skin is hot when I put my hands on her shoulders. She’s breathing heavily, and she looks up at me. Her eyes are normal, although there’s pain there.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my heart racing. I’d been dreaming about something excellent, although now I worry that she left because I lost control in my sleep and revealed my true form to her.

She leans up on her toes and presses her lips to mine. “I had a dream,” she mumbles, a whine in her voice.

I kiss her back. “A bad one? Do you want to talk about it?”

She glances away, biting the corner of her bottom lip for a moment. Then, she replies, “No, not a bad one.”

I tilt my head. “Then wha—“ Before I can even finish the word, her lips are back on mine, and her hands trace down my chest until she finds the hem of my t-shirt. Then, she moves her fingers underneath, and fire tingles over my skin as she touches me.

I groan, and my cock hardens so quickly that it makes my head spin.

“Chris,” I breathe against her lip, breathing heavily as I trail kisses down her jaw. She’s up on her toes, and I still have to bend myself over to kiss her. I wrap my arms under her ass and lift her so her face is above mine. If I hadn’t seen the miraculous recovery for myself, I would be scared to touch

her, let alone carry her to the bed, where I sit on the edge and rest her so she's straddling my hips.

"It's been days," she whines, tilting her head back. Her champagne-colored hair is a waterfall of light behind her, and I carefully lift and remove the t-shirt she wore to bed, one she stole from me. The simple act of seeing her in one of my shirts awakens something feral and possessive in me, something I never knew was there.

I take one of her now exposed nipples between my lips and bite down gently, then mumble, "Mine," before I can think any better of it.

She sucks in a breath, and I wonder for a moment if I shouldn't have said that. Then, she sighs, "Yes..."

Her hands find their way into my hair, and she scratches up and down my scalp, careful to not tug on any of my overnight tangles when she finds them.

Her hips grind against mine, and I move a hand down between us and rub over her plain cotton panties that have a little satin bow in the front. I cup her mound, and my fingers find wetness. For a moment, a sliver of panic pierces my heart, and I wonder if she's bleeding again.

She would have told me if she was in pain, though. I'm certain of it. I use my thumb to pull her panties down as I tease her nipples with my tongue, one for a few seconds, then the other. When my fingers part her gently, she gasps, bucking against me.

Slowly, I work one finger into her, pressing my palm against that sensitive clit of hers.

Another whine pulls from her throat, and I smile, looking toward her face. She's looking down at my face, watching me as I get her where I want her.

She shudders, her hips twitching and working over my hand. She's trying so hard to hold back, and I remember what she said when I was tasting her delicious pussy before. She was afraid of hurting me, of making it unpleasant for me.

I use my free hand to tilt her chin down toward me, then help her mouth open like I did when I was feeding her. Her hips speed up, growing more desperate as I rub the sensitive front wall of her. I put another finger in, and she gasps as the tip of her tongue sticks out on her bottom lip.

I groan at the sight of her opening herself for me, and I can't help but kiss her, taking her tongue into my mouth. She lets out those adorable and sexy little mewling cries of hers, taking her tongue back and teasing my lips with it. I follow her with my own tongue, and she parts her lips wider around it as I delve a little deeper, and her lips tighten as my tongue exits.

I've never considered that fucking her mouth with my tongue could be an option, but my cock is so hard that it throbs against the zipper of the jeans I never changed out of when we arrived. I don't have my overnight bag, so after my shower, I just went commando in my jeans and slept without a shirt. I groan, pulling away so I can fucking breathe as I press my forehead against hers.

Before I can stop her, she shimmies back off of me, going to the floor to her knees.

“Chris,” I gasp, “What are you doing?”

My hand already misses the feeling of her pussy clenching around my fingers, her clit against my palm.

CHAPTER 25

CHRISTINE

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO UNBEARABLY HORNY IN MY LIFE. IT'S only been a few days since we slept together, and I haven't stopped thinking about it. I want him inside me in every possible way. Once I'm on my knees on the floor, I unzip his pants and tug them down. Finally, fucking *finally*, I get to hold his glorious cock, and I take it in both hands and rub them over it, rubbing his precum over the head before greedily taking him into my mouth.

"Fuck, Chris," he cries, losing his resolve in an instant. I look up, watching him watch me, and his eyes flicker with that shadowy darkness that I love so much in him.

I moan against him as I take him further, my mouth stretching deliciously over his girth. I want to swallow him down, take all of him in.

I don't know how much I can actually take, though, so I settle for bobbing my head over his cock, my lips popping over the tip as I suck my cheeks in and watch him.

His eyes widen, and he puts a hand on my shoulder suddenly, gripping hard.

"Chris, I don't think I can—" his sentence is cut off with a shuddering groan as I take him a little bit further, the head of him against the back of my tight throat for a moment before I pull myself all the way off of him.

I smirk up at him, and he pants hard, releasing his tight grip on me.

“I need a moment,” he says, and when I take a break, climbing up to sit with him, his scleras go black, and I gasp, my hand tightening over his. Maybe I should be horrified at this blatant display of his inhumanness, but instead, I find it incredibly sexy.

He shuts his eyes, scrunching them shut like he’s realized what happened.

I lean forward and kiss him. “Don’t hide from me,” I say. “I want to see you. *All of you.*” I emphasize the last bit. I don’t know just how much he changes when he truly frees the demonic part of him, but I suddenly want nothing more than to see it.

He shakes his head. “You don’t mean that,” he breathes.

I release his cock and put a hand on his bare chest, mirroring his hand over my heart. “I do,” I say a bit louder. “I want to see what it looks like when you lose yourself. When you fuck me without inhibitions.”

His nostrils flare as he takes in a deep breath. “If I do, you’ll be claimed as my mate. After that, there will be no going back. For either of us. You’ll be mine forever. You won’t age, won’t fade away with time. There will be no end.”

I pause. Do I really want that? Do I trust him with myself? With my heart? My life?

The more complicated question stands. Do I trust him with eternity?

I kiss him gently. “Do it,” I breathe. “But only if you want to.”

Because yes, I do want him. I want him for as long as I can have him, as long as he’ll have me. If that means forever, then I’ll take forever.

“There’s nothing I want more in the world,” he says. Slowly, he changes. It starts small, but the color seeps out of his skin until he’s the palest white I’ve ever seen, although deep purple-black veins stand out on his skin. His eyes open, and his eyes are black other than glowing purple irises.

Massive horns sprout from his head, curling like a ram's might.

Those veins spread from his eyes, lightening as they get further away, and he has to part his lips to reveal a double set of fangs and a long black tongue, not the human tongue he had mere minutes ago.

I tighten my thighs around his, and his hand starts to pull away from my chest. I stop him, looking down to find that he's grown long claws that curve and tent my skin just slightly from their points. His skin is pitch black from his hands down just past his wrists, and those same veins come out from there. Glowing purple symbols cross over his chest, some sort of runes that I've never seen before. His whole also seems... bigger, somehow. I just know if he were to stand up, he would tower even higher over me.

I take one hand and trace it over the runes. "What do these mean?" I breathe, licking my lips while I imagine what it would be like to lick those glowing runes. My hand doesn't shake, although I have to force myself not to tremble with excitement. All he's done by showing me his true self is make me want him more.

He glances down, his brows scrunching together like he can't quite figure out why I'm not running yet. "It's the deal I made," he says. "The terms."

I move my fingers over his skin, loving the feel of him under me. "They're beautiful," I say.

He points at one, placed right over his heart. It's a simple design, yet gorgeous. "This one is your name, or at least the closest my language could get to it."

I look him in his eyes, and he's watching me again, presumably waiting for me to run, to scream. "You're beautiful." Then, I kiss his parted lips, slipping my tongue to test out the sharpness of those fangs.

When one scrapes my tongue, I know I'll have to be careful not to cut myself.

His tongue peeks out from behind his teeth to meet mine again, and I realize with a start that there's a texture to it now, bumps that line the edges. I groan as I suck it into my mouth, relishing the taste of him.

He doesn't lose himself in it this time, doesn't thrust his tongue in and out like he's fucking my mouth with it. I pull away and place my hands on his cheeks.

"Joseph," I say sternly. Then, I tilt my head, reminded of a question I've had but have never directly asked. "Wait, do you have a different name? One from...where you came from?"

He gives me a small smirk, but I can tell he's still nervous. Despite those massive fangs, his words are clear as he says, "No. I didn't have a name until I came here."

For some reason, that makes me endlessly sad. "How long did you go without one?"

He shrugs, and there's still fear in his eyes, fear that I'll reject him. "Probably two or three hundred years. It's difficult to say with how differently time moves there."

I gasp, and his eyes snap to mine.

"That must have been so lonely," I say. Deep down, I'd been a little worried about how little time he's spent in this world, but I never thought to ask his true age. Knowing that he's not weirdly young, though, is a relief, even if he is absurdly ancient.

Then, I kiss him again and again until I'm consumed by him.

Slowly, carefully, his hands begin to explore me yet again, and he doesn't change back. He moves his big hands over my skin, and I get goosebumps where he touches me.

"I love when you touch me," I admit between kisses. He moves his lips down my neck again, nuzzling the spot at the crook of my throat that I like.

"I love touching you," he says, his voice less tense but far from casual. He pulls me flush against him, and his cock presses against my stomach.

I gasp and look down, confirming what I felt.

Yup, he got bigger.

And...different.

My mouth waters as his cock twitches. It's a deep purple at the tip, which is flared and thick before fading down to that pale, pale white. He's covered in bumps and ridges, and he's thickest in the middle.

Based on how I'm sitting now, I look at him and wonder how the hell he'll even fit inside me.

My lips part, and I don't even notice that I've stuck my tongue out until his thumb traces over it. I groan and don't hesitate to take his thumb between my lips, wrapping my tongue around it.

"God, Chris," he moans, and I use his moment of distraction to wrap my hands back around his cock. He makes a shocked sound as he thrusts into my hands, and my mouth continues to water around his thumb.

Slowly, I pull my lips away, careful not to startle him into changing back or taking off, and I climb back off the bed onto my knees to put my lips around the head of his now bigger cock.

He bucks against me, and I cry out as his cock thrusts further into my mouth than I was prepared to take. My lips stretch painfully, and my eyes water. I force my eyes open and watch him, and his brows are scrunched with concern as he pauses his motions to look at me. He starts to pull back, saying, "Oh, darling, I didn't mean to—" but my cry turns into a moan as his precum runs over my tongue with his motion, and I grip his cock in my hands and move my head down slowly until I'm stretched as wide as I can go, and his cock is pressed against the back of my throat.

His hands pet my hair, and his violet irises glow even brighter. "You look so pretty with my cock in your mouth," he growls.

I pull away and take a breath, giving my jaw a moment to relax before taking that amount in all at once again. I tighten

my throat and stroke the rest of him with my hands. My clit throbs with desperate need, and I need him to come, need him to release down my throat.

Like he can sense my train of thought, he pulls back slightly before pushing back in, going slow and easy so it doesn't hurt me, and he says, "Are you ready to feel my cum dripping down your throat, baby? I bet you are. I bet you're desperate for it."

I press the flat of my tongue against him and release him with one of my hands as my core pulses. I need to touch myself, need to—

"No," he growls, leaning forward over me so he can snatch my hand away. "You come when I tell you to."

I let out another cry around his cock, pumping my hand over him faster and bobbing my head along with it. He places my other hand back on his cock, then traces his fingers over my stretched lips, my jaw, my throat.

"That's a good girl," he says. "You're such a good girl, taking my cock down your throat." At those words, he lets out a choked sound, and his hand tightens on my face, his claws stinging over my face, pressing my delicate skin to the limit.

His cock swells before bursting, and his hot release pours down my throat in waves as he fucks my face a little harder now. His cum smooths the way, and more of him slips inside, choking me and making me gag, but there's no escape, and I wouldn't take it if there were.

When he's done, he pulls his cock out and lifts me into his lap. I'm dazed and worn, and it takes a moment for my eyes to find his before he kisses me deeply.

"You're so perfect, Chris," he groans around his kisses. His beautiful, monstrous kisses.

I whine as I straddle just one of his thighs, rubbing him and desperate for release.

He pulls me close, holding me with my face buried in the crook of his neck. "How do I still want to fuck you so bad?" he asks.

I don't answer, instead moving my hands down to slip my panties off. Then, I climb to my knees over him and perch right on the head of his cock, circling my slick core over it. He doesn't have the issue he had the other day, his cock still just as hard now as before his release.

God, he's thick.

He takes one of my nipples between his teeth and tortures it with that textured tongue of his, and his hands move down my back and between my ass until he can reach my soaking cunt.

He parts me, and I can feel his hands changing just enough that he doesn't use his claws to enter me. He starts with two fingers, one from each hand, pulling me open and massaging and stretching.

I feel so empty, so needy, and my clit hurts from the pure desperation coursing through me.

I try to sit on him, try to push myself over his strange and delicious and massive cock, but in this form, he doesn't even budge, doesn't waver. He just holds me over him, petting me and massaging me inside before putting two more fingers in to prepare me for his cock.

He works and stretches me, occasionally pressing the head of his cock against my entrance to test me.

The third time he does this, I open my mouth and say, "Just d—" but before I can finish the sentence, he yanks my body down over him, and I cry out as I suddenly stretch around him.

He was right to prepare me, and one of his hands moves up quickly to cover my mouth. He breathes in my ear, "People are trying to sleep, darling."

I groan against his hand, breathing in my own scent that coats him and tortures me.

He wiggles his hips, and my eyes flutter shut as I adjust to both his length and girth.

“Good girl,” he says. “Take my cock. That’s such a good girl.”

I sob against his hand, and tears prick at my eyes once again.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, his fans brushing over his lips and his glowing purple eyes flicking over me. I roll my hips over him, and he does so in return, somehow sliding further into me.

I want to beg him or ask how much there is left to take or something, but his hand is against my mouth, preventing me from speaking, and my body trembles with the effort of keeping myself held up in this position for so long.

He leans forward and presses his lips to my forehead. “I’m gonna change our position, alright?” I blink at him, wondering why he’s asking. He pricks a brow. “That means you can’t scream when I remove my hand. You have to be quiet. Got it?”

I nod as best I can, and then gasp when I’m suddenly on my back toward the head of the bed. He leans over me, and I’m empty again, and it hurts more than taking his cock had. I whine, but I keep my promise to stay quiet.

He nuzzles my face and uses one hand to move my hair back. “So beautiful,” he mumbles. “I can’t fucking believe you’re mine.”

I smile at his words, reaching my hands down to guide his cock to my entrance.

He chuckles. “So needy for my cock,” he says.

Joseph is so different when he’s fucking me. More confident, more commanding. After ensuring that I know what I’m getting into, he doesn’t ask me what I want. He tells me what’s going to happen, and he follows through. Yet he still makes sure he isn’t hurting me. Well, that he’s not hurting me in a way I don’t want him to. He wants me to be comfortable, yet pliable to his touch.

Just as I asked, although it’s obvious this is what he wants, too.

“This is your last chance to change your mind,” he says, his voice strained, but I know he would stop, would pull away if I asked.

“Fuck me,” I beg. “Take me, make me yours. *Please.*” The last word is nearly a sob.

His cock prods at my entrance, and he pulls his body away, sitting up on his knees. Watching me for my reaction, he lifts my legs so my knees are over his elbows, then elevates my lower body so I can watch him enter me at a downwards angle.

I can't take my eyes away as I watch our bodies join together, his cock slowly filling me until I can't take it anymore. I writhe against him, trying to get some sort of friction going so I can adjust, can take more.

He growls, and I freeze, a visceral reaction making my blood run cold. My body is instinctually terrified of that sound, but when his cock goes a little further into my tight entrance, I shiver with pleasure.

One of his hands slides from my thigh down my body, and he crooks one of my knees on his shoulder and pulls the other leg back, forcing my body to slide against him.

“Mine,” he growls, the sound deep and feral and no longer in control. He leans down, and that long tongue roams over my body, slick and black as he claims me with slow, steady motions.

“Yes,” I gasp, and he wraps his other hand around at just the right angle to rub a finger over my pulsing clit. His long, lithe tongue wraps around my breast, moving up to flick over my nipple.

I watch his body move over mine, the way he ruts into me like an animal, but he's still careful enough not to go too deep. Now that I'm helpless at this angle, now that I can only watch, I see that he's stepped out of his pants to reveal legs that are just a little too long, his ankle joint higher up than it was before and extending down into monstrous, clawed toes that are the same black of his hands.

I move my hands down to his horns, rubbing my fingers over the bumpy texture as he fucks me slowly.

He growls again, that same sound that sends my blood running cold.

I don't realize it's coming, so I can't prepare before my orgasm rips through me, but before I can scream, the hand he had on my chest moves up and clutches my face, his claws digging into my face, albeit not enough to actually cut me.

I scream into his hand, the sound muffled as he holds his position, his cock pulsating inside me as a snarl rips through his body and out his mouth.

His teeth clamp down on my breast, and I arch against him, my own completion intensifying as he finishes inside me, his cock slamming the rest of the way inside as he seats himself fully in me.

Something changed, and I ride my orgasm over his cock that I've been made for.

The waves take what feels like an eternity to subside, and he carefully pulls his mouth away from me, licking what are now red prick marks from his fangs piercing my flesh. Small beads of blood are licked away, and he groans as his body cracks and reshapes back down to appear human.

He presses his forehead on my sternum between my breasts, and he pants from everything that just happened, his body trembling on top of mine.

Carefully, he helps me move my leg down off his shoulder, and his hand releases my face.

"I'm sorry," he gasps. "I didn't mean to hurt you..."

Frustration wells inside me, and I put my hands on his face and pull until he's over me, his cock softening and sliding out with a gush of his completion.

"I'm alright," I say, my whole body shivering from my own orgasm. "If I didn't want what you were doing, I would have asked you to stop. I love you so fucking much."

He opens his mouth to speak again, but I put my hand over his mouth this time. “But I need you to hold me,” I say. “I need aftercare.”

He breathes slowly out of his nose and nods, and I release him. He lays on his side and pulls me in against him, brushing his hand over the back of my head and kissing my forehead. “I love you,” he breathes.

I smile, burying my face against his chest. My core feels tight and a little sore, but other than that, my entire body is mush. I wrap one arm around Joseph, sighing as he kisses me and tells me how much he loves me.

All the while, I can feel his apprehension.

I want to comfort him, to tell him how beautiful he is in his demonic form, but with his affection and my recent orgasm, I quickly fall back to sleep with my mate.

CHAPTER 26

JOSEPH

IN THE MOST MONSTROUS FORM I CAN POSSESS IN THIS WORLD, Chris has accepted me into her body, but more importantly, her heart.

She's my mate now.

We're inseparable for the next few weeks, attending each other's shows and signings, and we always share a hotel room. Slowly, Shattered Fest makes its way across the country. I'm asked at every signing about my relationship with Christine, and I have rehearsed answers that I give out now.

Throughout the trip, Wynn sends occasional updates. She's chasing leads, talking to everyone she can think of to find out more about Phantom's possession, but she's also running one of the largest record labels in the world during the biggest tour in America.

The first dead animal appears in St. Louis. Chris and I are leaving our room for the show after a night of little sleep and lots of sex, and a dead rabbit is lying on the floor of the hallway.

Because Wynn is busy, I call Nell, who picks through the corpse with one of the hotel's branded pens and finds nothing but blood and sinew.

"Did you do this?" she asks Chris. "Like... unintentionally?"

Chris's eyes widen, and her mouth opens like she's going to deny it.

I don't say a word, but I did feel her get out of bed earlier, although I quickly fell back to sleep. I didn't hear her leave, but I also don't remember when she returned.

She shuts her mouth, and finally, after a while of thought, chokes out, "I don't know."

We do the show, play our game overnight, and move on to the next one.

In Kansas City, it's a bird with guitar strings around its neck, and when we get to the festival grounds, the strings are missing on one of my guitars as a roadie re-strings it.

By the time we reach Denver, Christine is afraid to go outside, although we still have shows to perform. I don't let her see the eviscerated raccoon on the floor when we leave, covering her eyes. I try to stay up overnight, try to catch the moment the Phantom takes over, but I'm never able to catch her.

I know the Phantom has made her do horrible things, but I genuinely don't think this could be her. She sleeps through the night, and dead animals are still found.

Even Nell hasn't been able to catch the culprit, though, and an increased security team is waiting for us in Seattle. When we wake up, there's no dead animal on our doorstep, for which I'm thankful.

Chris is brighter this morning as we make our way to the festival grounds, and she takes a selfie of us in the back of the SUV and posts it to her Instagram with the caption:

Headed to work with the boyfriend! Excited to see you, Seattle!

The dead animals have stayed out of the press, thankfully, and I immediately comment on her photo,

Who's that sexy and mysterious man next to you? #ThirstTrap

She laughs when the comment pops up on her phone.

Moments like this remind me how much I just love being around her. Posting to our social media is part of our jobs, and we both sit and go through comments and emails whilst sitting beside each other. Just being with her is a salve to my soul. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I kiss the top of her head while I respond to an email from Marlene about a new shirt design releasing in time for the holidays.

I'm already dressed for my meet and greet, so I go with Chris to her tour bus and sit on the couch while she gets ready. It's always a little bit magical to watch her hair and makeup team do their jobs, because the most I ever get is a little concealer and some hairspray. Meanwhile, they transform Chris from her normal, natural beauty into Christine Osmond, pop princess. They do something called contouring to give her a very specific appearance, and her hair, despite the fact that she wears it in a high ponytail for her shows, takes the longest.

It's an intricate ritual that's fascinating and terrifying all at once.

She goes to my meet and greet with me, although she spends her time in the stock room where Marlene keeps everything meticulously organized. We learned pretty quickly that Chris would get swarmed if people knew she was in the tent with us, so it's best if she just keeps to herself.

After the meet and greet ends, we go to her show, and some people cheer as we go by on the golf cart together. The air is misty and cool despite being the middle of summer, which I use as an excuse to pull Chris in close and press a kiss to her forehead. I learned early on in the tour that her makeup is immovable, and she has special soaps and oils she has to use to remove it, which means I can kiss her as much as I want without worrying about Nell's wrath. Still, I tell myself that I'm just keeping my mate warm.

When we make it to the stage, I give her a quick good luck kiss as the stage manager passes over the glittery microphone. At this point, audiences look forward to seeing us perform the last song together, and I've already gotten messages from Wynn about recording a new single with Chris after all this is over.

As she does the dance for her third song and builds up to a ridiculously impressive whistle-toned high note, something falls from the rafters above the stage and falls to the ground. It takes me a moment to realize, and then Chris screams instead of singing that note, stumbling back.

I rush forward to do something, anything. I lean down, and the crumbled body on the ground is familiar when I see his face, but it takes me a moment to realize that it belongs to someone who I haven't seen in months and months.

It's the reporter who called her "Crazy Christine," the one I punched.

He also happens to be suing me.

I'm still being set up.

I look at Chris, but Nell is already dragging her away from the stage.

It doesn't take long for the crowd to respond, panicking and screaming as they trip over each other to escape.

I spin around, as security comes on stage and someone speaks into a mic that everyone needs to remain calm, but I don't see the one person I'm looking for.

Chris is gone.

CHAPTER 27

CHRISTINE

NELL DRAGS ME THROUGH THE CROWD, AND I POINT AT THE golf cart. “Shouldn’t we—”

“There’s no time,” she growls, pulling me away from the stage.

Away from Joseph, whose face is stricken as he stares at the body in front of him for a few seconds before looking around. Just before his eyes are able to meet mine, I’m pulled around a corner.

“Where are we going?” I demand of Nell.

She doesn’t look back at me, doesn’t slow. “Your bus. Whoever did this, they might be sending a message, but they might also be trying to hurt you.”

“What about Joseph?” I ask, panic choking me. The Phantom stirs for the first time in weeks, and nausea roils through me.

Screams of the fans who’d been watching my show drown out everything else, and we weave through the crowd for what feels like hours but is only actually minutes before Nell shows a security guard her badge and pulls me back to where the tour buses are parked.

She finds my bus and rips the door open, shoving me in ahead of her whilst looking back through the fairly busy walkway where people are rushing and arguing over walkies. The news of the incident has spread quickly, and everyone is in a panic.

“It wasn’t me,” I gasp as the door shuts behind us. Nell runs over to the kitchen’s pantry and opens it like she’s blasting the locks off a bank vault, not like she’s looking for my stash of candy that makes my face break out.

“No shit,” she says incredulously, like I couldn’t have said anything more obvious. When she pulls away and shuts the door, I do a double take.

In her hands is an honest-to-god shotgun.

A freaking sawed-off shotgun.

“You... You have a gun,” I say, taking a step back.

She rolls her eyes. “Of course I have a gun, Christine. I got it after we found the dead animal in St. Louis.” She checks the barrel, then loads it with two shells that she apparently just keeps in her purse. “Do you know how easy it is to get a gun in Missouri?”

Forgetting all about the dead body that landed in front of me during my show, I shake my head. “How did you have time with the background checks?”

She gives a single bark of laughter as she rushes over to the door. “I got it off a guy on CraigsList for two hundred bucks.”

I blink at her. She said before that she’d trained to be a werewolf hunter, but I hadn’t quite believed her. After all, she’s a tiny woman who’s my manager, not a muscular Ripley type.

“Who are you?” I ask, my hands trembling as the Phantom writhes with glee, waking itself from its weeks-long slumber.

I can only hope it doesn’t hurt me while I wait for Joseph to show up.

She smirks. “A badass bitch who’s gonna protect her best friend.” Then, she cocks the gun and steps outside.

The moment the door closes, the tour bus’s bedroom door slides open. Did Joseph make it here before us? I turn with relief, opening my mouth to speak, but I freeze when I spot a

man with cropped blonde hair and a bloodstained t-shirt. A man who shouldn't be here, who shouldn't be *alive*.

"Hello, Christine," Jason says, meandering toward me. Smoke writhes around him, and his hands extend into claws. "Have you gotten my gifts?"

I open my mouth to scream, but the Phantom silences me, choking off my air.

Let him speak, the demon says smoothly, like he's on Jason's side.

Jason raises a clawed hand to inspect it. "After you tried to kill me, I made a deal with one of your *friends*." When he says the word *friends*, his lips part to reveal a full set of sharp teeth and black saliva that spits out on that final hissing sound. "I would survive, and he would use my body. Until you were clawing my eyes out, I had no idea you were possessed. Isn't that funny?"

I gasp as the Phantom lets up a little, just enough that I don't pass out from oxygen starvation.

"Now, you're gonna come with me, and that stupid metalhead boyfriend of yours is gonna meet us at a special spot for a chat."

I choke out, "What if I say no?"

He smirks. "Then I'll kill as many people as I can as I leave here. Your choice. With all this power, it's not hard to stage some sort of horrible accident." His chin tilts toward the direction of the stages, and my blood turns to ice.

The worst part is that the Phantom seems to be on *his* side. He wants Joseph gone, as Joseph obviously makes him weaker.

He lets off of my air a little more, and I say, "How do you expect to get out of here? Nell is right outside with a gun." I don't know if getting shot could kill Jason, but I know it would hurt like hell and slow him down. The force is supposed to be like getting hit by a car.

A tendril of smoke moves toward me, but this one isn't like Joseph's comforting power. It's a slimy tendril that sticks to my skin, and he tugs me toward the bedroom.

As it turns out, he broke the back window to get in here, and he shoves me toward it. "Go ahead," he says. "And if you yell for that bitch up front, I will kill her and everyone else."

My heart trips over itself. I don't know if I could scream if I wanted to. Jason doesn't seem aware of the fact that the Phantom is choking me, controlling me, forcing me to climb out. My hands scrape over shards of broken glass, and blood drips down on the dirt, beading up on the ground before being washed away by the real rain that's falling now.

My phone buzzes, and I look back at Jason, who's holding his own phone. "I just sent you some coordinates. Forward them to your boyfriend." The way he says *boyfriend* is poisonous, dripping with hatred.

I don't want to do what he says, but my hands move of their own accord. I slip my phone out of the secret pocket on the band of my bra, silently begging my hands not to send that text. I know Joseph will come after me, and when he does, Jason is going to hurt him.

Against my will, my fingers hit send.

CHAPTER 28

JOSEPH

I'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR HALF AN HOUR WHEN MY PHONE dings with a notification. Relief sinks into me when I get a text from Chris, and then confusion.

It's a pin on a map, and I pull it up to find that it's miles away inside the national forest that borders the festival grounds. Did she try to escape the grounds and get lost? Concern soon turns to fear, and I race to the edge of the grounds, making it just as I hear police sirens pulling in.

This field is the parking lot, and they race right past me. My heart beats heavily in my chest. If I'm caught here, I'm going to be arrested. I sprint away, knowing that I look suspicious, but also knowing that the Phantom could destroy Chris, and the further away she is, the more danger she's in.

The festival is held in a clearing on the edge of Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, a massive expanse of land northeast of the city, and the pin she sent is nowhere near any trails.

The moment I make it into the trees, I shift into my demonic form, the one Chris has now seen several times, the one that doesn't scare her no matter how much it should. My strides are longer in this form, and I sprint through the woods, my senses heightened so I can dodge off-trail hikers.

When I finally reach the clearing on her map, I sniff the air, a growl rumbling deep in my throat.

"Chris?" I call, my voice deeper and more gravelly in this form. I should shift back now, but I have a bad feeling about

this place. I don't trust it, don't trust the text I received.

A male laugh sounds behind me. "Holy shit," he says, and I spin on my heel, crouching and snarling as I'm faced with Jason, who I could have sworn was dead. Hell, the police sure think he is.

He lifts a hand, and demonic black smoke pours from him, wrapping around my wrists, my ankles, my throat.

My muscles tense, ready to attack despite the bonds, until he steps to the side to reveal another tendril wrapped around Chris's throat.

"Calm down," Jason says, "or I will kill her."

Immediately, I step back, turning my hands to expose my palms.

He raises his brows. "Call off the beast," he says.

I glance at Chris, and she gives a single terrified shake of her head.

The smoke around her tightens, and I do as Jason tells me, shifting back into my human form despite Chris's silent protest.

"Don't hurt her," I say, holding my hands up in surrender.

Jason shakes his head. "You know, what I don't get is why the fuck she wanted a freak like you." He talks about her like she isn't there, and her body trembles.

"Look at me," I tell Chris, interrupting Jason's villain monologue. "You're going to be okay. I promise you, okay?"

Jason snarls, but I can't bring my eyes to look at his when Chris's are so pleading. There's something wrong. She can't breathe, but if I step forward, he'll only make it worse. I'm trapped.

"I did everything for her!" Jason yells, spittle flying from his lips. The saliva is black and eats away the plants, and Chris flinches away from him, her hands grasping at the smoke holding her.

Slowly, her eyes darken, and the so does the sky.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and the rain comes down harder.

“Jason, let her go,” I say, holding a hand out to him like he’s a wild animal that needs calmed instead of an angry man with a supernatural weapon.

He laughs again. “Why, so she can fuck a monster like you some more? I don’t think so. She’s gonna learn to behave, and that doesn’t involve you.”

The smoke around my own throat stretches and then tightens, cutting into me hard enough that blood drips down my neck.

“Chris, look at me,” I gasp, choking on the power that overwhelms me.

She watches me, her trembling lips turning to a smile. That’s when I realize the real reason her eyes were darkening.

Gray veins stand out around her own eyes, and her hands turn to claws.

“Fuck,” I gasp, jerking away from the smoke that holds me as hard as I can, but he doesn’t let go. “Stop this, you fucking idiot!” I yell, my voice hoarse from the magic crushing my vocal cords.

He crosses his arms. “What are you going to do? Kill me? You know if you try I’ll just—“

Before he can finish his sentence, a clawed hand shoots through his gut, reaching up to grip his torso.

His face freezes and pales as he looks down in shock.

“She is mine,” the Phantom growls using Chris’s lips, and my blood runs cold with ice. “No one shall have her, and I tire of these games.”

Fear freezes me in place as the Phantom takes over Chris again, her eyes going blood red. It’s been hiding from me until now, according to Nell, but it seems to have decided that it’s powerful enough.

The hand jerks back, and the Phantom licks bubbling black and red blood off of her hand.

It's not her, I have to remind myself.

The Phantom tosses Jason's body to the ground, and he gasps for breath. I feel sick, but there's nothing I can do. Would I even want to help him if I could? He threatened to kill Chris. He threatened to kill me.

In Chris's hand is a bubbling black mass of tar, and I have to hold myself back from retching. The Phantom has ripped the demon out of Jason, and it's now vulnerable and shivering.

So slow that it's like I'm watching in slow motion, Chris's jaw cracks and opens wider than should be possible, sharp teeth tearing into the flesh of the demonic soul. When that skin is torn, more black ichor pours down her hands, staining her clothes and skin.

I've heard of demons who will consume their own kind to grow more powerful, but I've never seen it happen firsthand. Nell was right, and Jason showing up was the boost the Phantom needed to try to kill me. I don't back away, though, don't run.

The quivering creature stills, and the Phantom takes another bite. The fangs taking over Chris's mouth grow larger, the veins on her face more stark.

The smoke around me dissipates, and the Phantom walks toward me slowly but steadily, its red eyes on me.

"Chris, I know you're in there," I say. I don't take a step back. I won't run this time. I won't leave her alone, not again.

With a flick of its hand, the Phantom summons chains that bind my wrists and yank me to my knees.

"Chris, you can fight it," I say, that ice cold fear wrapping around my heart. I could shift, could fight the Phantom, but that would only hurt her. I can't hurt her.

When her body is close enough, a clawed hand swipes across my face in a motion that's icy cold and then burning hot an instant later as blood beads and then pours down my face. I

grit my teeth and suck in a breath, but I don't pull away. I won't.

Her knee moves up and cracks me in the jaw, and the Phantom laughs, warping her voice to be its own.

"Chris, I love you," I gasp through the pain and the blood. "You can escape this."

The Phantom shakes Chris's head, and I see a glimmer of her eyes. She moans a painful, "No," before the Phantom takes over once again. Tears pour from her eyes before turning to ichor, black strips of liquid coming down in rivulets.

"I am done with your interference," the Phantom says, bunching a handful of my hair and slamming my face down on Chris's knee. Then, claws tear into my back, and hot liquid pours down, soaking my shirt. "I am more than you have ever been. Stronger, greater."

I shiver, but, slowly, a heightened awareness creeps into me as the scent of Jason's blood and mine penetrate my senses. The world grows more stark as lightning flashes and time slows. I look up at Chris's body leaning over me, hands coated in blood that streaks away with the rain. The eyes of the Phantom glow red with bloodlust, and it licks my life force off its claws.

"You should have left that night," the Phantom growls at me, a hand wrapping around my throat and lifting me in the air. As my feet try to find purchase on the ground, it stomps on my ankle, and I cry out as the bone cracks.

My nostrils flare as I breathe in more of the scent of my own blood and Jason's, and I can't stop it this time.

My bones crack as my body shifts, and I feel myself growing, my skin drawing tight against muscle and bone. My vision doesn't go purple, but red.

The Phantom shivers, and its eyes turn hazel for an instant.

"Please," Chris begs me, and my heart stops. She's still in there. If I fight back, I'll hurt her. "Please get it out."

She shrieks as something deep inside her cracks, and her eyes fade back to red. It's already hurting her, though.

My own rage grows tenfold, and my hands grow into claws that are a foot long.

I reach for her chest, feel her heart's fluttering beat.

The Phantom is killing her. Now that it's powerful enough, it's killing her to take over once and for all.

If I tear the Phantom out of her, she could die from the wounds. If I don't, she'll die anyway.

No matter what I decide, I'll lose her, because she will never forgive me for what I'm about to do. I will never forgive myself, especially because I made the mistake of claiming her, so she'll never be able to feel anything for anyone else. She won't move on, and she won't want me.

I dart a clawed hand forward and plunge it into her stomach, my hand wrapping around the sickening, bubbling mess that is the Phantom, the thing that controls her, destroys her.

I tear it out, and instantly, her features turn back to normal, but her face goes slack, and I have to catch her with one arm to keep her from falling to the ground.

The Phantom writhes in my hand, the atmosphere of this world burning it. It tries to dissipate into smoke, but I clench it tightly, using my own smoke to contain it. Then, despite the rancid smell, I pull it up to my stretched lips, my extended fangs, and bite into it.

The dripping ichor of its blood splashes over me, splashes over Chris's too-pale skin. As I consume it, though, I can feel my own injuries healing, my life force growing more powerful. Yet, I can also feel myself disappearing. I am a creature, a beast that consumes others of my species to survive.

I don't—no, I can't—stop until it's fully consumed. Fully a part of me. Until I lose myself. I am a monster, and I must—

I look down at the body in my arms.

She's so pale, and blood pours from her stomach. Her eyes are open and staring at the rainy sky, and instead of tearing into her flesh next, my heart stutters.

I stop healing myself. If I allow my broken ankle and the slashes on my body to heal, there will be nothing left.

For her.

It's a moment, but it's a year. It's a fleeting instance where every bit of me disappears into the pit of my soul with the demon I just consumed, but when I see rain marring her features and pouring the blood in rivulets down her stomach and legs, I hunch over to protect her from the falling water.

A gasp sounds behind me, and I twist my head, snarling at the thing on the ground that threatens the thing in my arms.

It's a human, I realize after staring at it, although it doesn't seem to be a threat to me, my prey.

No, not prey. She's...who is she?

I look back down at this delicate thing in my arms, and nausea swells through me. I let out a high-pitched whine as her heartbeat grows weaker, then brush the back of my clawed hand over the soft skin of her face. Something unnatural sparkles on that skin, and I lean my face down to run my tongue over that glitter.

I don't know what she is, who she is, but she's important.

And she's dying.

I blink down at the wound on her stomach, the torn flesh that's supposed to be smooth skin.

My fault. It's my fault this is happening to her.

Her spine below my arm feels wrong, too. Twisted, broken. I move my hand to feel her, and I don't hesitate to pour my smoke out, feeding it into her.

Putting her back together.

The word comes to me in a flash. *Mate*. She's my mate, and I did this to her.

My smoke glimmers in the fading light. How long have I been standing out here?

I look up to find that the rain has calmed, and back down to see her skin stitching itself shut, leaving nothing but pale pink scratches that will, too, fade.

Her eyes close, though, and her heart rate steadies, although it doesn't strengthen. It's not enough. My power isn't enough. I failed to protect my mate. I will not keep failing, though.

I gather her close to my chest, doing my best to keep her warm as I look around. I scent the air and find the faintest trail of the direction from where I came, and I follow it swiftly, careful not to jostle her. Her own kind can help her. I'm certain of it.

When I make it to the edge of the forest, sticking to the shadows, I remember that I'm not supposed to look like this.

I was human. Almost, anyway.

Pain strikes me, tearing me apart as I crack and shift back into that form, holding her tighter as flashing lights make stark shadows against the trees.

I stumble out of the trees, and someone screams. The blood has washed away at this point, and I try to remember.

Christine. She's Christine.

No, for me, she's Chris. Only for me.

I stumble slowly through the lot that's emptied of cars. Only a few remain as attendees trudge through the mud now.

The lights. I'm supposed to take her to the lights.

Nothing matters but that. Nothing matters but her.

My ankle is on fire, the heat raging through me with every step, but I spot a young woman talking to a man in uniform, and I recognize her.

Good. She's good. She cares about Chris.

She turns and spots me, and her eyes go wide as she sprints over.

“Oh my god,” she shouts, the sound piercing my ears and stirring my beast yet again, but I tamp it down. I can deal with the sound, the people, the pain.

As long as she’s going to be okay.

“Paramedic!” she shouts, waving to people I don’t care to search for.

A bed is placed in front of me, and they have to gently pry my hands away from her as they strap Chris down.

“Joseph,” the small woman says, “you’re bleeding. You need to sit so someone can take care of you.”

I shake my head. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters.

Only she matters. Without her, there’s nothing.

Nothing.

The world fades, and my arms are weak as I try to reach for her.

Then, everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 29

CHRISTINE

I AWAKEN IN A HOSPITAL.

Again.

This time, though, nothing hurts.

It's dark, and I sit up suddenly.

“Joseph?” I call.

There's no answer.

I stumble out of bed. I feel fine, not even dizzy as I rip the IV out of my hand and the monitors off my chest. Something beeps loudly as I presumably flatline, but I ignore the machines and press my other hand over the hole where the IV had been to keep it from bleeding.

I stride toward the door, pulling the curtain aside and then looking up and down the hallway.

Shouting comes from further away, voices I don't recognize.

When I walk through the much brighter hall, I find a doctor and a nurse ready to sprint by me.

When they spot me, though, the nurse says, “You shouldn't be walking.”

I frown. What does it matter that I'm walking?

“Joseph Munson,” I say flatly. “Where is he?”

Before she can answer, another voice calls out, “Christine?”

A figure darts in front of the nurse's station, and I shove past the nurse to where Nell is watching me with wide eyes.

“Oh my god, Christine,” she says, pulling me into a hug, then putting me at arms length to inspect me. I glance behind her to see all of Corroded Hellfire standing and watching me from the waiting room beyond the nurse's station, although Owen seems to be staring more at Nell. “They said you might never walk again. How are you up?”

What is she talking about? I think back, trying to remember what came before the darkness.

I'd been trying to break away from the Phantom. Then, there was an agonizing pain in my back, and another pain in my stomach quickly followed.

He'd done it. Joseph had removed the Phantom from my body, destroying it because I begged.

I'd resigned myself to dying in his arms, his face going feral as I passed out from blood loss.

Now, though, I'm standing in a hospital, staring at Nell with only one question on my mind. “Where's Joseph?” I ask.

Her face pales, and her lips tighten. “He's in a high security room. He was in pretty bad shape when he showed up, and Jason—“

“Jason?” I demand, my voice practically a shriek at this point. She grabs my arm and throws a hand over my mouth.

“Jason claims that Joseph tried to kill both of you in a satanic ritual after he found you together.”

My eyes widen, and panic hits me for an entirely different reason. Joseph is being blamed for all this?

I mean, he did tear a hole in my stomach the size of a crater, but when I put my hand on my belly, there's not even a little tightness there to indicate I'd been hurt. Nell removes her hand from my mouth, giving me a look that indicates that she'll do it again if I yell.

“He didn't,” I say. “You know Joseph would never—“

“I know, Christine,” Nell says, a little annoyed at this point. “It’s only been a few hours, though. They have to go through footage from Shatter, but there’s a lot to check.” Her face crumples then, and she wraps me in another hug. “I shouldn’t have left you alone,” she says. “This was my fault.”

I spread my arms out. “Nell, I’m fine. Look at me.”

She does, and that’s when a doctor interrupts, “Um, miss Osmond, I would be much more comfortable if you would get back to bed right now.” I turn, and the woman seems uncertain as she inspects me.

“Fine,” I say, “but I’m going to complain the whole time.”

I’m true to my word, although they allow Nell to go between my room and Joseph’s. Apparently, he was half-feral when he got back to the festival grounds after the attack, and it took him an hour to respond to his name after he woke up. He’s calmed down significantly since finding out that I’m awake, but I won’t feel better until he’s holding me in his arms.

After a set of x-rays and an MRI scan, a team of doctors determine that my original x-ray had been wrong, that I hadn’t actually broken my back in the woods. They still seem confused and eye me strangely whenever they talk about it, but I’m released with a clean bill of health before the day is over, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a comfortable sweater that Nell brought from my tour bus.

Instead of going to my hotel and waiting like Nell asks, I go directly to Joseph’s room.

A guard is standing outside, and he frowns at me. “You can’t go in there,” he says, but I push past him, ignoring his words to find Joseph sitting on the ground in a set of scrubs, one hand held above his head by handcuffs, attaching him to the rail of the bed. His wrists are red and raw, and his eyes have dark circles under him like he hasn’t slept.

The moment he sees me, I expect his face to turn to excitement, but instead, he crumbles with despair.

I rush over, and he snarls and jerks away, the hospital bed shoving back from the force of his escape.

I stop, and my heart pinches in my chest.

“Joseph?” I ask, my voice small and uncertain. I’d been sure he would be happy to see me, but now, he’s trying to get away.

“Stay away from me,” he growls, keeping his eyes averted and his form small on the floor.

I wrap my arms around myself, and the memories from yesterday that I’ve been holding back flood in. The Phantom had possessed me, and I hurt him. Badly. I almost killed him.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I understand why he doesn’t want me to touch him. I may understand that he didn’t mean to hurt me when he tore into my stomach, but he has every right to be wary of me, to push me away.

He looks up at me carefully. Finally, he says, “I don’t want to hurt you anymore.” The final word breaks, right along with my heart.

I shake my head, tears pricking at my eyes. “Then why are you pushing me away?”

He tilts his head, but he still doesn’t stand.

His voice is distant when he says, “You’re crying. You’re forcing yourself to be around me when—“

I let out a single, harsh bark of laughter. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.” I crouch down, still a few feet away from him as I watch his wary eyes. “You can’t seriously think that I’m afraid of you. After everything.” Another memory floats to me, Joseph’s monstrous form protecting me from the rain as he healed me despite his own wounds. “Without you, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

He shakes his head. “Without me, you never would have gotten hurt.”

I roll my eyes. “God, stop wallowing in your own self-pity and use your brain.”

His face jerks toward me, and he frowns like I've offended him terribly. "I have been thinking nonstop, Chris," he growls. "If I'd left you alone, you wouldn't have been attacked. It was because of me that everything got worse."

I move toward him, crawling on my hands and knees before resting right beside him. I still don't touch him, though, and I can see the way his muscles strain and his hands clench into fists.

"I was possessed by a demon a long time before you came around," I say. "And now I'm not. Because of you."

Uncertainty flickers in his eyes, and he reaches one slow, careful hand up toward my face, although he doesn't touch it.

I use my own hand to take his and press my cheek against his palm.

Then, I take a deep, shuddering breath, and my tears fall freely. "I was so scared when I woke up and you weren't there," I admit. "I thought...I thought maybe the Phantom had..."

I let out a sob, and with a quick twist of his hand, Joseph separates his hand from the cuffs. He must have only had them on for the comfort of the people guarding him, because it took no time at all for him to remove the cuff from his hand and bring me in close.

His body trembles as he holds me tight, and I curl into his lap and let myself cry as he pets my hair and my back.

"You aren't allowed to leave me," I say when I've finally calmed down enough to speak. "I can't lose you. You said forever. That's what you said, remember?"

His arms tighten around me, and he buries his face in my hair.

"It would be for your own good," he says. "You'd be better off without me."

I open my mouth to argue, but he's not done.

"But I'm a selfish bastard," he growls. "Unless you tell me to, I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER 30

CHRISTINE

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

I LOCK THE PENTHOUSE DOOR BEHIND ME, GLANCING OUT THE window as the sun sets over the ocean. Joseph pulls me into his arms, although I don't like the texture on the suit he had to wear to the sentencing.

"It's over," he says.

I sigh. "I know."

After all the security and cell phone footage from Shatter Fest Seattle came out, the police looked further into everything that had been going on during the tour. Then, the FBI got involved, and Jason admitted to several counts of animal cruelty, two counts of attempted murder, and first degree murder. He denied the assault allegations from when he attacked me in my hotel room, but he was found guilty on all charges nonetheless.

Two life sentences without parole.

I run my hands over the suit jacket, unbuttoning it before Joseph can stop me.

"Chris, what are you doing?" he asks, his voice curious and a little exhilarated as I pull off the suit jacket.

I look up at him and smile as I loosen his tie. "Celebrating," I say. Then, I start unbuttoning his black shirt.

He groans and leans down, pressing his lips to mine. "You're killing me, Chris," he says.

I smile into his kiss, tugging the shirt down over his arms. He didn't wear an undershirt this time, and I scrape my nails

over his bare chest before unbuttoning his slacks. He shivers, his hands going to the hem of my blouse and pulling it over my head. I take a step back, and he follows, pressing me against the door and kissing my throat.

His hands find my breasts, massaging them and then pinching my nipples through my bra, a sheer one with white lace. I move my own hands down to unbutton my dress slacks, tugging them down to bare myself to him.

He starts to move himself downward, but I tangle my hand in his hair and say, “Not until you give me what I want.”

He gives a dark chuckle, shifting into his demonic form. It’s always exhilarating for me to see him like this, and I smile when he kneels, propping my legs up on his shoulders. His fangs scrape over my skin, teasing me before that long, thick tongue pierces my core, the texture absolute torture as he fills me.

“Ohhhh...” I moan, tossing my head back and riding him as he tastes my pussy greedily. One of his hands pinches and swirls around my sensitive clit, and I don’t hesitate to buck against him. He’s a big demon, and he can take care of himself.

His other hand clenches around my waist, his claws careful and delicate when they brush against my stomach, as if he’s once again remembering hurting me. I yank on his hair hard, and he growls, the sound vibrating his tongue inside me and sending tremors through my body.

His tongue writhes within me, and he uses the hand around my waist to bounce me on him, my back still pressed against the wall beside our front door.

My orgasm washes over me slowly in massive waves that crash again and again, and he doesn’t let up on the pressure or movement as I cry out again and again.

When he finally sets me on the ground and wraps his arms around me, pressing his cheek to my stomach, my legs are wobbly, but there’s something I’ve wanted to try for a long time.

I pull away from him, moving around so my back is to the giant apartment.

He smirks and growls, “What are you doing, darling?” His words are slow and languid, and he steps out of his slacks, taking a step toward me.

When he does so, I take a step back, and his eyes widen.

“Don’t,” he warns me, and my heart trips over itself in excitement.

I take another step back, and a low rumble comes from his chest. “I’ve told you what will happen if you run,” he growls.

He has. Several times. I’ve considered it before, but I’ve always chickened out, always worried that he’d be upset with me, or worse, himself, afterward.

This time, though, I turn and sprint toward the sofa, leaning over it.

A snarl rips from him, and I don’t dare to turn back as his long strides bound toward me. When a hand brushes over my skin, I pivot and use my momentum to fling myself around a column that we couldn’t remove when we were renovating.

His roar makes me glad for the ridiculous amount of soundproofing we had to do when we renovated the apartment, and I dart into the bedroom, not bothering to lock the door behind me.

He’s close on my heels, and I feel his hot breath on me before I turn to face him and reach out to defend myself from the monster who’s been hunting me.

He’s far closer than I thought, and I trip backwards, twisting mid-air to try to catch myself as I fall into the open walk-in closet.

He catches me around the waist before I hit the ground, though, and his tongue runs over my pussy once before he sits up, propping a leg over me and pressing my face into the lush carpet as his massive cock slams into me from behind.

I let out a scream, clutching the thick rug I bought just in case. I’ve been planning this exact scenario for months,

although I haven't told him.

He fucks me hard and fast, and I cry out again and again as he fucks me ruthlessly. His claws dig into my hips, and my face rubs over the rug as my body jerks forward with each stroke of his cock pounding into my cunt. There's a floor-length mirror ahead of me, and I watch as he takes my body, showing me no mercy as he uses me for his pleasure, shows me what he meant when he told me not to run.

"I told you," he growls, then slams into me again, "not to run."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as the pleasure grows too overwhelming, and when he moves one of his hands to pinch aggressively at my clit again, this time hard enough to hurt, I'm hurled into another orgasm.

He roars out as he pours himself into me, his cock throbbing and hands tightening over me. He comes so hard that it drips out of me as his cock twitches again and again, and I take every bit of it.

When he's done, he flips me onto my back and stares at my spent body, my cum-filled pussy that's dripping with him.

"Mmmm," I say, smiling up at my demon.

His expression darkens, and he says, "I'm not done with you yet."

He picks me up and carries me back to the bedroom in his arms, and I breathe in his delicious scent and let my eyes drift shut.

He lays me on the bed, and his hand moves around my throat.

My eyes open, and he's leaning over me, his tongue lolling out as he moves his face toward my breasts and bites and licks. All the while, his hand strokes over his cock, and a bead of cum forms at the tip.

"I'm going to fuck you until you can't get out of bed," he growls after releasing my nipple. Then, he lifts my hips with the hand that's not around my throat, curling himself around

me to press his cock into me once again. This time, smoke billows out of him, forming a long, solid appendage that he curls around me to hold my leg up, and the end lengthens and prods at my tight asshole.

I open my mouth to say something, but now that he's holding me up with his smoke, he can use his other hand to cover my mouth.

"You're gonna take me like a good girl," he growls. "We aren't done until I say we're done. Is that clear?"

When his smokey appendage shoves into me and rubs alongside where his cock is in me, my eyes roll back, and I groan against his hand.

"Atta girl," he says, then releases his hand from my mouth before bringing his face down to kiss me roughly. His tongue dives into my mouth, shallow at first before diving down deep in my throat, deeper than anything should ever go. He holds it there for a second before releasing and pulling back, and I take a deep breath before releasing a sob as he tortures my pussy and asshole with his violent pounding.

Then, his tongue slips into my mouth again, and I can't escape as he uses a part of him to fuck every one of my holes, and I can't move as he holds me down.

He shudders, and I feel his cock swell as my final completion washes over me. I scream around his tongue, choking and gagging as he releases into me. This time, he lets me choke, doesn't remove his tongue until he's finished coming inside me.

Then, slowly, carefully, he slides his tongue out of me, lets his smoke dissipate, and pulls his cock away.

I can't even move, my entire body pliant and soft as he pulls me into his arms.

"Are you alright, darling?" he asks, and I simply let out a little hum of pleasure. He sighs. "I told you not to run." His voice is pained, and I realize with a start that he thinks he actually hurt me, that I somehow didn't enjoy being brutally fucked by a demon.

I force myself up on my arms so I can look down at his beautiful demonic face. I trace a hand over his purple veins, and he takes my hand gently in his before turning his head to kiss my palm.

“I would do it again,” I say, forcing the words out through my haze of pleasure and exhaustion. “Any day of the week.”

He growls, surprising himself based on how his eyes widen. “Please don’t run again right now,” he says, his voice low and serious. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

His eyes flick down to my stomach, and I know he’s still thinking about all those months ago when he hurt me to save me.

I place a soft kiss on his lips. “I couldn’t run if I wanted to, baby. You fucked me too good.”

He looks me over, then smirks before pulling me in. He knows the routine after sex by now, that I need him to hold me and pet me afterward. After I pat his chest to indicate that I’ve safely transitioned out of “bratty little sub” mode, he gets up before lifting me, carrying me to the shower so he can wash me off, his big, monstrous hands so gentle and delicate with me.

I pull his face down for a kiss, my heart bursting with love for him.

For my demon.

If you enjoyed Waking Her Demon, please consider leaving a review! Reviews help to ensure that Amazon sees my books and that I can continue writing more spicy paranormal romance!

*Keep reading for a preview of **Her Cries in Vain**, Nell and Owen's story in the *Strange Rockstars* series.*

NELL

CHAPTER ONE

I'D ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT I ESCAPED THE LIFE OF A HUNTER. When Mom found out I carried true sight, the rare magical ability to sense if someone was a paranormal just by touch, I was destined to be this great fucking hunter or some shit.

The moment I turned eighteen, I took off and never looked back. I got my degree in entertainment management, took on my first client who is now my best friend and a famous pop star, and accidentally brushed my arm against Owen's when we were leaving from our visit with Christine in the hospital to grab food.

I breathe in the Pacific Northwestern bay air slowly, taking it in through my nose and breathing out through my mouth. It does nothing to calm my racing heart.

Perhaps it had looked odd, me sprinting out the door before hyperventilating on the sidewalk. I then proceeded to take off through the streets until I reached water, and now I'm strolling along the sidewalk beside the water that laps below. Maybe I could go for a swim to clear my mind.

I almost consider it before remembering that the water is beating harshly against the stone wall, and I would probably get a concussion and drown.

A plan. I need a plan.

For one, even if he is a werewolf, Owen is the bassist of one of the biggest metal bands in the entire world. People would realize if he went missing, especially if I was the last person he saw.

Maybe I could contact the hunters. Mom would take care of it.

I haven't spoken to them in almost a decade, though. I'm slowly creeping up on thirty, and despite their efforts to contact me, I've left them with nothing. If I were to contact them out of the blue, it would stir up some drama.

I wonder about poisoning his food. A little bit of silver here or there. That might show up on an autopsy, though, and it would bring up lots of questions.

I can avoid him, I decide. As long as there's no sign of him hurting anyone, I can just steer clear. Even if Christine performs at Shatter Fest next year, what are the chances of me coming across this one guy who's got his own busy life?

"Nell," a voice says, gruff and low from the shadows. It reverberates as though it's bouncing off the very walls that plummet down into the water.

I swallow and turn, and the devastatingly handsome man is standing a few dozen feet away, his eyes glowing a stark gold in the night. He's standing below a street lamp that's gone out, and I look around to realize that I'm completely alone out here. A lot of the city has gone to sleep.

I could kill him, but he'd be just as likely to kill me in the struggle. I haven't fought in a decade, after all. I'm out of practice, and I don't have my trusty knives on me.

He strides toward me, and I'm half-tempted to run.

That's not the girl Mom raised, though.

"I know what you are," I say, my voice loud and strong. "And if you come any closer, I will have no choice but to—"

He covers the ground as my voice grows weaker and weaker, my knees wobbling. I've never been afraid of a foe before. That's why I was considered a prodigy in my younger years. I was always perfectly stoic in the face of danger, and my enemies would quake before me.

"If you know what I am, then you know why I'm here," he says.

When he gets close enough, I open my mouth to protest, and his lips meet mine, his hands grabbing my face tightly as he absolutely consumes me with his kiss.

The anger and confusion all flood out of me at once, and I groan against his lips. He pushes me against the wall to a building that I'd been standing near, lifting me up so I match his height a little better.

I try to speak, to protest, but I simply articulate a smooth and clear, "Hnnnggghhh," before wrapping my legs around him and grinding my hips against him while he holds me up against the wall.

I should be fully aware that we're in public, but something about his kiss destroys every inhibition I've ever felt.

I reach down and shove my hand down my leggings, pushing my fingers into my folds and finding my clit immediately. *Fuck, I'm so slick.*

His lips release mine, and he kisses down my neck and shoves the stretchy neckline of my top down and past my bra, which is a plain sheer lace that I thought would help my luck in the dating scene.

He licks my nipple through that lace, then draws me into his mouth and sucks. I rub my clit harder, the heat washing over me nearly unbearable despite the chill in the air tonight. A gentle mist comes down, stark past the street lights.

He licks up my neck in a sloppy way that should turn me off, but I just want that tongue all over me. I want it *inside* me.

I unwrap my legs from him, and he has the audacity to growl before he realizes that I'm just shoving my leggings fully off my body.

It's not like there's anyone around, after all.

He huffs, fumbling to free his cock and rub it against my soaking cunt. His hands trail down and lift my thighs so I'm wrapped around him once again, and he uses his inhuman strength to hold me up against the wall as he takes me in one thrust.

My body stretches painfully, and I tilt my head back and open my lips with a silent scream as I adjust to his inhuman size. Who would have thought that werewolves were so damn hung?

“God, yes,” I moan, so unlike my usual composure. “Fuck me so hard.” I cry out when he pulls out just to slam himself back in, his girth filling me so deliciously. It’s like he has a magic cock or something, and I need every bit of it.

“Oh, yeah, just like that,” I gasp out, barely able to wrap my mind around the words before they’re tumbling out of my mouth into the night air.

I do my best to bounce on his cock, but in this position, he has full control. His lips find mine again, and I wrap my hands in his hair and clutch tightly.

“You’re so beautiful with my cock ruining your cunt,” he groans. “I want to fuck you until you forget your name. I want to take you until you don’t know anything but my cock, my scent.”

Fuck, why is that so hot? I suddenly want that, want him to bring me to absolute ruin. I want to be spent and used with cum splattering my body, my face, my tongue. “I’m just your little come slut,” I moan, words I never thought I’d utter.

“Fuck yes you are,” he growls, his breath hot against my ear as he ruts into me like an animal. “And you are going to take every drop I give you, aren’t you?”

I can’t speak anymore, can only nod as the images in my head clash with the feelings attacking my body and the knowledge that I’m fucking a near stranger in an extraordinarily public place before I fall completely apart, crying out over and over again as my orgasm takes me.

He rips away from me, and I open my mouth to complain when he shoves me down to my knees on the dirty ground, and I lick my lips with anticipation, knowing exactly what’s about to happen. He takes my chin in my hand, tilting me up as my pussy still quivers from my now fading completion.

I lick my lips. “Please,” I beg, taking him in my hands and pumping over him before pushing my lips over the head of his cock. I swallow him down as deeply as I can, gagging on his cock, but it’s not enough. Tears of frustration well in my eyes as I bob my head wildly on his cock. This is right. This is what I need.

He holds my face gently as I take the lead on sucking him, and after a few short moments, he says, “I’m so close, my good girl. So fucking close. I have to mark you with me. I have to cover you with my scent.”

I have no fucking clue what that means, but I let out a cry as he pulls his cock out of my mouth with a pop of my lips that are sore from sucking him, and he groans and holds me so goddamn gently as his come exits him in ropes that paint my face.

Before he’s entirely finished, I greedily take him back into my lips so I can swallow the last little bit until he’s entirely spent.

Eventually, I finally release him, and he pulls out of my mouth and brushes his fingers over my stretched lips. I stumble to my feet, the awareness that I’m naked from the waist down and covered in a near stranger’s cum sinking in as I glance around the city street.

Even worse, Owen looks at me with a satisfied smile, his nostrils flaring like he’s taking in my scent.

The rain is falling in earnest now, washing away the evidence of our depravity. He brushes his fingers over my face, and I slowly begin to remember that he’s my enemy. He’s a werewolf, a monster that kills for pleasure, and I just recklessly fucked him on the sidewalk where anyone could have walked by.

“I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect mate,” he says, using his now damp hoodie sleeve to wipe away the last of his spend from my face.

My brows raise as the words hit me like a sack of fucking bricks. “Your what?”

This cannot be happening.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALEXIS PIERCE is a small-town writer with a big-city heart. She lives in southwest Missouri with her family and pets, and, when she's not writing about sexy supernatural creatures, can be found horseback riding, drawing fantasy artwork, or playing D&D.