



CORRUPT *Cupid*



BE MINE
VICIOUS
VALENTINE

APRIL JADE

BE MINE, VICIOUS
VALENTINE

APRIL JADE

CONTENTS

[Triggers and Warnings](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Corrupt Cupid Series](#)

[Thank you](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by April Jade](#)

Copyright © 2023 by April Jade

All rights reserved.

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

Not for readers under 18 or those uncomfortable with adult content.

Cover Design: Charli Childs



TRIGGERS AND WARNINGS

Thank you for your interest in reading my book. This story features a main character suffering from a form of selective mutism, needless violence, mentions of childhood trauma, graphic descriptions of a teen murder, and on page parental abuse. This is a fast-paced read. Expect to find steamy scenes and insta-love.

NOTE: In this story, Cupid acts as a manifestation, whispering in the ear of our hero, urging him to do whatever it takes to protect the boy destined to be his one true love.



Corrupt Cupid
Logo

PROLOGUE

SEBASTIAN

Blood pooled around my unlaced sneakers. The potent, iron-like scent was a fist around my throat, squeezing and squeezing and squeezing until I choked on the density of it. I reached for oxygen as though it was something I could capture inside my fist and punch through my chest.

A scream formed low in my gut, wild and feral, and when it finally burst past my lips, the force of it was enough to stop time. I got lost in its echo, bones quivering and heart still. My kneecaps bobbed fiercely beneath the jeans I wore, and I collapsed against the pavement. My palms found purchase in a puddle of his blood, and I watched the thick liquid race past my wrists and dribble down my forearms.

The sight made my stomach heave, and I felt the telltale burn of vomit as it thrummed violently in my chest and burst from my throat. My hand shook as it shot into the night air, fingers aching as they searched for someone, anyone, to anchor themselves to.

Foster. The only pillar I'd ever known.

I linked my warm fingers with his cold ones, lifting his lifeless hand to my chest. I pressed his palm to my heart as though the unsteady force would be enough to make his beat again.

His arm remained limp in my grasp, his veins prominent and blue as they rose to the surface of his grimly painted skin. Blood flowed from both of his nostrils, over the curve of his lips and down the slope of his chin. The green in his eyes had

vanished alongside his soul, and I stared into their unfamiliar darkness, my conscious screaming at them to brighten again.

Each of his legs were crooked, bent at unnatural angles, and I possessed this sudden, painful urge to straighten them—to put him back together. His right hand was frozen in a tight fist at his side, drowning in the ripples of his own blood. Once blond hair was now stained red with the last of the blood that flowed from it.

Sweat surged down my neck as quickly as tears stained my cheeks, and I felt my heart jump in my chest as I collapsed against his body and scooped his blood into my palms. My movements were frantic, and breath burst from my chest in uneven exhales as I desperately tried to shove his blood back into the wound that pierced his head.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

I felt the sound of that clock low in my gut. Each thrum got stronger than the last, cracking the earth that surrounded us. I was racing against that sound, and my moves became more hectic and determined as I willed my efforts to be enough.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

Tick...

...tock.

CHAPTER ONE

SEBASTIAN

8 MONTHS LATER

Ridgemont High was cast under a veil of darkness. Rows of cracked bricks were stacked one on top of the other, lined with moss and littered with leaves. Rain pummeled the curved edges of the building, tearing sections of old paint off the window sills. Its peak was concealed by shadows, protected by the thick morning air. Between its angled walls sat a two hundred year old clock that never stopped singing. The ominous noise was buried in the sounds of the storm, camouflaged by taps of rain and the whistles the wind made.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

The heavy sound was near palpable—enticing in a way that made it Ridgemont High’s very own siren song. The slow melody the clock sung charmed teachers into aisles of isolation. It lured students into tunnels of somber hallways and silent classrooms.

It promised life... but only ever managed to tie us all to death.

Fragments of cobblestone shifted beneath my feet as I walked. Rain curled around the edges of the hood I wore, pooling in the tops of my eyebrows before racing down the sharp angles of my cheeks. My knuckles popped when I curled my fingers into my palms and shoved my fists deep into my front pockets.

The hairs across my neck rose to attention when a violent rush of students flew past me. They dodged dimly lit puddles with curses leaving their lips. Some had textbooks clutched to their chest while others held soggy cups of coffee. Their urgency seemed to syncopate with the sounds of the clock, and it felt a little louder with each step I took.

Tick. Tock.

Old, iron gates separated Ridgemont High from the rest of the Massachusetts population. They stretched far above my head, their chiseled tips disappearing into the fog. My shoulders rolled forward as I moved past them, my bones heavier and tongue thicker. Memories of my past assaulted me in waves of nausea, and the reason I was back here seemed to slap me square across the face.

There was nowhere else to go.

Two rust covered gargoyles flanked either side of the double doors, their wings wide open and mouths frozen in a scowl. Their presence felt a lot like a premonition, and I wondered often if their front and center position was purposeful—some sort of subtle yet twisted metaphor for slow torture.

My exhale was heavy as I climbed the steps of the building and crossed the threshold. Chin low, I kept my hood in place as I put one foot in front of the other. The walls felt more narrow than they did the year before, and though heat was now blasting me from all directions, my goosebumps were as prominent as ever.

The inner workings of Ridgemont High was a lot like a puzzle box. The intricate web of walls were woven together without purpose and one had to work their way through one tangle before they could move on to the next. It was something of a nightmare for anyone who visited us but those of us who grew up here knew the secrets these walls kept.

Some were hundreds of years old, whispered and hidden long before we ever made this space ours... and some were more recent.

Some were *mine*.

My fingers crawled across the wall's harsh edges, dipping in and out of divots as I walked. The sconces lighting my path were more dull than bright, flickering every so often. Their design felt too intricate for this place, too beautiful—their artistry a keepsake of the church that was here first.

Wooden boards creaked against the bottom of my sneakers, and one by one, I felt the heat of a dozen stares crawling up the base of my spine. Uncertain whispers and hushed conversations vibrated the insides of my ears. The unwanted attention made my stomach curl, but I understood their curiosity.

Death made everybody curious.

A sea of bodies flanked me as I walked, their quiet questions like stamps across my skin. I was more mystery than human now.

My fingers vibrated as I reached for my locker, carefully spinning the dial. It opened with a loud *pop* and a creak I felt in my spine. The dark, cavernous space called to me, and I wrestled with the idea of folding myself inside and closing the door until I heard the telltale sound of the lock clicking.

My exhale made my insides shake. *Five months*. Less than half of a year until graduation... and then I could run.

My backpack slipped off my shoulders, and I didn't bother removing anything before hanging it on the metal hook. My coat was next, and the zipper squealed as I peeled it off my body and dropped it at the bottom with a sad plop. It was a subtle sound, but I felt its echo move through every inch of me.

The metal was cool against my palm when I pressed the door shut. Reaching backward, I grasped the edges of my hood and pulled it up over my head, tugging it low enough to sweep the ends of my eyelashes. My shoes made a noise when I spun, and I almost laughed at the way everyone averted their eyes, feigning as though they weren't fascinated by every move I made.

The first period warning sounded. It was a deep, dismal noise that was more gong than bell, but it managed to coax everybody back into their morning routine. Lockers opened and closed. Sheets of homework crinkled. Bodies scattered in a maze of direction. I remained still, watching the commotion of it all.

The senior locker bay was tucked in a shadowed corner, farthest from any classrooms or offices. Some would run just to make it to first period before the final bell... but most wouldn't care.

Ridgmont High was a boarding school in name only.

The students here lived on campus because they had nowhere else to go. The rules were lax. We had no uniforms. There wasn't a cluster of parents bribing the enrollment office to get their kid a spot. We were a last resort kind of place but most didn't mind.

Somewhere was better than *nowhere*.

The hallway cleared. The walls quit whispering. I found myself grasping at the threads of stillness as though they were an anchor. I held them loosely in my fists as I walked. My jeans made a whooshing sound that reverberated off the brick, and my shoes clapped against the floor as they led me toward my stop.

Indignation settled heavily in my gut, and I felt my cheeks heat as I stared at the frosted door and the letters pressed against it.

Mr. Roman Hayes—Counselor.

CHAPTER TWO

SEBASTIAN

I raised my fist and rapped it against the door. It was a feeble, barely audible sound, and I worried I'd have to do it again when the door flew open. The hinges squealed, and I felt a burst of air dance across my cheeks. It was stale enough to choke on.

“Sebastian.”

People often stumbled over those three syllables, gagging against the sounds of my name as it rolled across their tongues. It wasn't always that way but tragedy had this way of infecting people. Now the stench of death lingered throughout the letters of my name, and I braced myself for the fear and disgust that often followed the sound of it.

There was... none.

Not this time.

The absence of any malice and the abruptness of the change had shocked me into a stillness I often hid inside.

“Sebastian?”

His voice was like a bass drum, low and strong. The last letter rolled off his tongue, the beat making my name sound like something bright and brand new.

“I'm—”

I knew who he was.

Roman Hayes was as much a stranger to this place as I was now. Ridgemont didn't always offer counseling services to

their students. It was a position the board had created years ago, and it was a position we couldn't seem to keep filled.

They quit. *Always.*

No single counselor had stayed more than a couple of months. I'd blame it on the eerie atmosphere and horrible pay, but it was likely the students that kept scaring them all away.

Not so much on purpose but the students here were... *a lot*. Most were foster kids or orphans. Some had parents that dropped them off at the curb for the year just to spend some time alone. Others chose this place as an alternative option to juvy.

Me? I was born here.

Trapped.

Mr. Hayes cleared his throat. The noise was gentle, but it commanded attention in a way that had my chin sweeping upward.

My eyes were narrow, hidden beneath the shadows of my hood and the ends of my bangs. I studied him through the wispy strands. He was several feet taller than me, and his arms were folded across his chest, displaying the color that decorated them. Beginning at his wrists, disappearing beneath the edges of his sleeves, were bold, vivid lines. No two tattoos looked exactly the same, but they seemed organized somehow, more meticulous than random.

I noticed the bird on his forearm first. It was bright red, wings open and beak cracked. Feathers were falling from his body, and they were cracked too, as if someone had torn them off.

"Do you like birds?" he asked.

I shrugged.

I didn't *think* I liked birds... not until I saw that one.

"It's a phoenix," he said. "A tad cliché but I like what it represents."

Resurrection.

I couldn't help but wonder if the bird with the broken wings represented who he was now or who he was before.

I was broken now... *silenced*. A lot like that cracked beak.

Mr. Hayes flexed his arm, and the phoenix danced across his skin a little. He was as patient as I was apprehensive, and I think he must've picked up on my nervous state, because he stood there and let me study him.

His choice of outfit lacked the pompous flair that most of Ridgemont's staff possessed. I wondered if the headmaster had seen him yet and what he'd say about the simple black t-shirt Mr. Hayes wore. It was clean, free of wrinkles, and tucked into a pair of pressed jeans. A belt was secured around his waist and there was a pair of shiny black boots on his feet.

"Should we get started?" He asked, and I liked that he made it sound as though I had a choice.

Morning sessions with Mr. Hayes was a mandatory condition upon my returning to school. Trauma and tragedy were a vile combination, and the board was worried I'd spiral.

As if I hadn't already.

Mr. Hayes took a step backward, making room for me to slip past him. My steps were tentative and small as I moved into his office. It was bigger than I thought it'd be but it wasn't grand by any means.

He had lamps of all variations placed strategically throughout the room. I imagined they were to make up for the lack of windows and the absence of natural light. Their beams cast a gold-colored hue across his wooden furniture, and there were shadows concealing the areas the lamps couldn't reach.

A wall of bookshelves stood proud behind his desk. Their cleanliness contradicted the scent that lingered through the air. It was a musky, vintage smell that made this place feel thousands of years old.

I nearly expected cobwebs to be strung across his low ceiling and tangled in the legs of his oversized desk.

"You can have a seat wherever you're comfortable."

Mr. Hayes moved past me, and I watched him round his desk and sit carefully into a large, leather chair. It creaked when he sat and he folded his hands on top of his desk... waiting.

I surveyed my options. There was a single seat in front of his desk. It looked comfortable enough, albeit a little old, but it was too close to him.

My eyes found a small, plaid sofa. The cushions swayed when I sat, and I immediately brought my knees into my chest and wrapped my arms around them. I felt his eyes on me, but the weight they carried was much lighter than those in the hallway.

“You can call me Roman, if that’s more comfortable for you.”

Nothing about this was comfortable for me.

“We are going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next couple of months. I don’t believe it’d be fair of me to ask you to open up if I weren’t willing to do the same in some capacity. I’d like our sessions to be conversations but I won’t expect you to answer any questions that make you feel uneasy or uncomfortable.”

That is *not* how I expected this to go, and I wasn’t so certain I believed him. I thought maybe I’d walked into the wrong office. I couldn’t believe the headmaster would send me to a counselor that’d show me even a measure of kindness.

Headmaster Arthur was a pitiless human. He often confused strength with cruelty and sympathy with hatred. He possessed not even an inch of warmth, and no one knew that better than me. *His son.*

“Maybe today we could start with you asking me some questions.”

I lifted my chin. Our eyes touched for the first time and though his were dark, they were warm. His features were lost beneath a dark beard, shaved close to skin. A polite smile rested softly beneath his nose, and there was a faint scar on the

curve of his jaw. His hair was more gray than it was brown but he didn't look old.

He looked... distinguished.

The room fell still as he waited for me to say something.
Anything.

I wanted to ask him how he ended up here, and if his broken bird had anything to do with the places he'd come from.

My jaw quivered, and I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, biting down. Blood danced across my tongue, saturating all the words I couldn't say.

My eyes were low as they wandered, tracing the outer edges of his desk. They paused on a thin brown folder, resting carefully in the center. I felt my lungs constrict and breathing became somewhat of a chore as I stared at that file.

My file.

Dread crawled beneath my skin, and I wanted to destroy that thing as much as I wanted to hide from it.

I could only imagine all the lies it held—all the rumors and accusations that so carefully altered my reality into one where I was the villain.

My new moniker was painted across those pages.

Vicious.

CHAPTER THREE

ROMAN

F *ragile* was stamped across Sebastian's body, the letters bold and painted in red. His anxiety was palpable enough that I could taste it against my lips and feel it quiver on the tips of my fingers. It made this pea-sized room feel even smaller, and Sebastian looked as though he was drowning in his own uncertainty.

His eyes were hidden behind a mop of curly black hair, but through those locks, I saw the way they darted from wall to wall, looking for an escape. Slim, pale fingers were knotted together, and they tugged anxiously at the denim that covered his legs.

He appeared much younger than his nineteen years, and nothing like the label his fellow students had christened him with.

Vicious.

It'd been scrawled across his file in various degrees, penned between the margins of his tragic story. I questioned which lines were true and which ones were falsified for the sake of the school's reputation.

Sebastian couldn't stop staring at it, and something in his wide gaze told me he wondered the same thing.

His eyes were big, almost too big for his face. Long lashes swept the tops of his cheeks when he squeezed them shut, and it was several moments before he opened them again.

Color had seeped from his already pale skin. His lips were cracked, and they quivered when he ran his tongue across them in worry. He was a delicate thing, glass-blown and fragile. I worried if I blinked too hard or breathed too heavily, he'd shatter at my feet.

The thought was a kick to the gut, so strong and unexpected it left me breathless.

Sebastian made a meek sound, one that only intensified my abrupt compulsion to wrap him in safety.

It was... unsettling.

I'd been a psychologist for nearly a decade, and though I'd always possessed a certain degree of care for my patients, I'd never felt captivated by one like I did Sebastian. Perhaps it was his mystery, or all the lies he seemed to be tangled in. Fact and fiction weren't synonymous, but in regards to Sebastian's file, I couldn't tell which was which.

The door burst open with a loud creak, and Sebastian nearly crawled from his skin. Headmaster Arthur St. James stood in the threshold, his oversized shadow eating half of the room. I recognized him from the portrait hanging in the foyer. His smile then was just as phony as it was now.

"Headmaster." I stood. "How can I help you?"

He clasped his hands in front of him, eyes thin as they pointed in the direction of his son and then back to me. "May I speak with you privately for a moment?"

"Certainly."

I glanced at Sebastian as I rounded my desk, noting his stillness, and that he hadn't so much as *twitched* since his father stepped into the room.

I followed him into the hallway and pulled the door shut with a soft click. "What can I do for you, sir?"

He thrust his hand at my chest, and I noticed the thick gold rings he had wrapped around each of his fingers. "I'd like to introduce myself. I'm sorry I couldn't be present at your

interview but the board had wonderful things to say about you.”

I returned his handshake. “Thank you.”

“I’d apologize for the abrupt timeline but chaos has become a rather pertinent part of Ridgemont’s brand.”

“It’s not a problem.”

Ten days separated the day I’d gotten the job and the start of the new semester. The thick of the transition occurred just after Christmas, and I’d fallen under the impression that Ridgemont always operated at a breakneck speed.

He released my hand. “I understand you have a military background?”

“Yes, sir. I was a military psychologist for about eight years. Enlisted for three years prior.”

“This is quite the change in scenery. May I ask what prompted the change?”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I think a change in scenery was just what I needed, sir.”

“I see.” His eyes were curious as they pursued me, narrowing with every passing second. Disapproval was laced in his slow blinks and dotted throughout his counterfeit smile. “Mr. Hayes, the staff here has sort of an unofficial dress code.”

A wave of arrogance tunneled between us when he lifted his chin, as though he expected me to preen over the tie around his neck and the cufflinks at his wrists.

“I’m sure you can understand how difficult it might be for some of our students to feel comfortable opening up to an authority figure. Dressing casually is a small but effective way in showing my patients that I’m just as human as they are.”

His tongue made a clicking sound. “I see. Well, I suppose you’re the expert, though your experience is limited to a rather specific field.”

It was a struggle not to roll my eyes.

This man was a toxic mixture of cleverness and deviousness. He coated his insults in a layer of sugar that made them seem as though they were simple, passive comments. *Compliments* even.

Unfortunately for him, I was somewhat of an expert on reading between the lines, and I knew the difference between when someone was being genuine and when they were just fake as fuck.

“I would hardly call my experience limited. I’ve worked with hundreds of patients, sir, and I’m sure you can recognize how no two patients will process and react to trauma in the same manner.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to imply you were unqualified.”

Didn’t he, though?

“You must understand my curiosity and concerns, Mr. Hayes, not just as the headmaster but also as a father.”

“My goal here is simple, sir. I do my best to help my patients cultivate a sense of safety. It helps them reverse the effects of whatever trauma they’ve experienced. That process looks different for every patient, though it typically starts with a conversation.”

“I see. Well.” He linked his fingers together, dragging his thumb over the harsh ridges of his rings. “A conversation may be difficult seeing as my son hasn’t spoken since the entire ordeal.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Sebastian.” He cast a look at the door, lips curling as though he wasn’t fond of what lay behind it. “He hasn’t uttered a word since his roommate died.”

I frowned. “Sebastian hasn’t spoken to anyone, in any capacity, in nearly eight months?”

“Not that I’m aware of, no.”

“That wasn’t included in his file.”

“I don’t see why it’s relevant.”

Was he joking?

“Had I known of Sebastian’s aversion to speaking, I would’ve approached our session much differently.”

“Sebastian knows how to speak, Mr. Hayes, he’s just refusing to.”

My jaw hardened. “Traumatic mutism is a lot more complicated than that. If Sebastian isn’t speaking, it’s likely because he feels like he can’t.”

“He was a quiet kid, Mr. Hayes. Solitude has always been his preference. His lack of speech doesn’t concern me, and I believe it’s probably for the best.”

“You think the best thing for your son is that he doesn’t speak?”

“I think it’s best he forgets what happened.”

Christ.

“Your son’s roommate died right in front of him, Headmaster Arthur, I don’t imagine he’s likely to forget that anytime soon.”

“Perhaps not but his presence here is making it difficult for the rest of the students to move forward.”

“I don’t think Sebastian is the problem, sir. Are you aware that the students here have taken to calling your son Vicious?”

“I am, yes.” He rubbed the back of his neck and made a noise that suggested he was bored. “You’ve read his file, Mr. Hayes, I’m sure you’re aware that there was some evidence of foul play in Foster Lake’s death. Sebastian was cleared as a suspect but it seems the students have latched onto the idea that he killed his roommate.”

The space between my eyes began to throb. “And you think that’s appropriate?”

“Of course not.” His chin lifted, eyes hard as he tried to stare a hole into my skull. “Let it be known, Mr. Hayes, that I was not in favor of Sebastian returning to campus. *He* was the one who expressed interest in returning to complete his last

semester. I thought an online route would be more appropriate.”

“Sebastian wasn’t required to repeat the entire year?”

“His last semester was all that was left of his requirements. Mr. Lake’s passing was only six weeks before graduation. It affected Sebastian enough that he couldn’t complete his studies in time.”

“I’d say that’s a pretty standard reaction given the circumstances. What exactly has Sebastian been doing the past few months if not attending school?”

“I can’t be certain, Mr. Hayes. He spends most of his time in his room in the dormitory. I told you he prefers solitude. I believe he’s fond of reading.”

My nostrils flared, chest collapsing with a breath that nearly knocked me off my feet. Toes curling in my boots, I closed my eyes and counted backward from ten. It was rare I displayed anything other than professionalism but Headmaster Arthur’s aloofness regarding his son had my blood heating beneath the surface of my skin. I’d dealt with passive parents before but this felt different.

Worse.

“The board and I agreed that if Sebastian were to return to campus, it’d be in his best interest to dedicate his first period to sessions with you. Perhaps it’ll help him cope.”

“I’m not sure how you expect Sebastian to heal in an environment that continues to hurt him.”

“I’ll mention again that it was Sebastian’s idea to return.”

I stared into his cold, flippant eyes and wondered how true that was.

So much of Sebastian’s story was laid out across my desk, but enough of it was redacted that the truth remained a puzzle. I wondered how he’d have written his own version if someone had bothered to hand him a pen.

“I apologize, Mr. Hayes. I didn’t mean to take up the entirety of your time with Sebastian. I do hope you’re able to

help him.”

He flashed me another one of those plastic smiles before clapping me on the shoulder and walking away. His shoes clicked against the wooden floor, and I stayed where I was until the sound faded into nothing.

My hand shook as it reached for the handle. It unlatched with a soft sound, and I stepped back into my office. Sebastian didn't appear to have *breathed* let alone moved.

He remained stoic, curled up tight on that sofa, arms protecting his body as though he expected the weight of the world to come crashing down on him.

My gut clenched, chest aching with an unfamiliar intensity. Instincts that previously lay dormant had roared to life, and I felt this rapid urge to guard him from the threats I was certain lay ahead.

“He needs you.”

The voice came out of nowhere, tickling the inner edges of my ear as it whispered. The words were an echo that bounced around my head.

It was a premonition—one I wouldn't ignore.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEBASTIAN

R idgemont bred experts of aloofness—artists of fake smiles and professional pretenders.

I liked to think of them as apathy masks, flat features and lifeless eyes they wore against their skin to make it past each minute of the day. It wasn't until the skies darkened, and the fog was thick enough to hide the truth, that those masks slipped away, revealing the monster that lay beneath.

The switch was seamless—a non-negotiable midday vs midnight psyche change that even the teachers went through.

It was almost crucial for surviving this place and all the reasons you were sent here. The split was painless—a smooth, even cut down your middle the second those gates latched shut behind you.

I'd always been more midday than midnight, worried that the fog would piece me into something that looked a little too much like my father.

Since Foster's death, I felt my fear wrestle against my anger, and I wondered what midnight would look like etched throughout my fine features.

“Sebastian!”

I froze.

Cruelty laced the sound of his voice, echoing off the brick walls and syncopating with my exhales as they left my chest in stilted breaths.

The bodies that swarmed me stopped with the initial boom but quickly restarted, moving through the foyer with a purpose I couldn't seem to find.

“Sebastian.”

His voice was at my back now, close enough that I could nearly feel his sticky breath coat the sides of my neck. It slipped down the ridges of my spine in a way that made my muscles quake. The bruises across my torso throbbed, and I wrapped my arms around them, pressing my thumbs into the most tender spots. The dull ache of pain was a reminder not to piss him off, and I took a breath to steady myself before pivoting to face him.

His hand shot out, and I felt the blunt heads of the rings he wore dig into my scalp when he tangled his fingers in the hood of my sweatshirt and yanked it off my head with a force that had my neck snapping backward.

Tears sprung to the corners of my eyes, but like all the other times he'd hurt me, I made not a single sound.

I didn't even flinch.

“Wearing that hood will not hide you from your peers, Sebastian. It only feeds into the rumors.”

I said nothing.

He nudged my chin with his swollen knuckle and forced me to look at him. The wrinkles in the corners of his eyes tightened when he looked me over, studying me as though I didn't inherit most of his features.

We had the same muted gray eyes that kept us looking more villain than hero. I wore my dark hair long in the front, using the curled ends as a privacy curtain. He kept his real close to his scalp, effectively cutting away any distractions and daring people to look him in the eye.

There were no other versions of Arthur St. James.

He was all midnight. All the time.

“Foster Lake's parents have decided not to renew their funding this year.”

I blinked.

Was he... shocked?

Their son's blood was still smeared across our campus.

"I suppose I was naïve to believe when investigators ruled his death as accidental, they'd be more inclined to support the home they'd chosen for their son."

A home they'd chosen haphazardly.

The same *home* that had killed him.

Every day I wondered if they regretted giving him away, and whether they mourned his death or celebrated it.

"The board believes we haven't done enough for Foster's family, so they've decided to have a plaque made in memory. It'll be placed in the garden closest to the spot he perished. A ceremony will be held when all is said and done. It's best if you don't attend."

The exile felt like a kick to the chest. It wasn't an unexpected blow, but the pain was no less potent as it lanced through my muscles. My nostrils flared with the heat of the hurt.

"I hope you'll understand, Sebastian. The ceremony is supposed to be about Foster. Your presence would craft an unwelcome distraction that'd take away the purpose of the day."

He wasn't wrong.

The truth that danced around his ugly words hurt more than the banishment.

I curled my fingers into my palms, squeezing just enough that I felt the blunt tip of my nails pierce the top layer of my skin. I wanted to *scream* at him—to spit in his face and throw my fists into all the same places he'd thrown his. To pull his hair and wrap my hand around the base of his throat, squeezing just enough to frighten him but not enough to leave marks.

I wanted to toss him off a balcony and watch as his blood washed away the remnants of Foster's.

My anger was heady, and I knew he could smell it because his lips curled upward, issuing a challenge. He rolled his palms together, flashing me the inscriptions on his rings, and took a single, heavy step toward me.

Just like that... I relented.

Fear came crashing in, slamming down on my anger like a set of steel shutters.

He chuckled when he saw the switch, eyes brightening. "I'm glad you agree."

I nodded... and a piece of me hated myself for it.

"Have a wonderful day, son." He said, right before he flashed me a smile and walked away.

I wasn't fond of the way my hands shook when I reached for my hood and pulled it back over my head. Animosity tapped at my chest, and for as brave as my thoughts were, my body couldn't help but remember what those rings felt like when they slammed into the tender skin that covered my stomach.

Five months.

Five more months... and then I was free.

I kept my arms around my middle as I shuffled through the foyer. Students took turns passing by me, hips angled and shoulders stiff. They built themselves a barrier of safety, ensuring the berth was wide enough that not even my strongest breath could touch their skin.

The indifference their midday faces feigned only lasted as far as these old walls. I knew once they'd crossed their invisible threshold of security, whispers of disdain would slip past their curled, midnight lips.

It broke me as much as it amused me.

People were hurting.

They were angry.

We'd lost one of our own, and all that fury had to fall somewhere. It just so happened to have fallen on me.

Vicious.

There was irony packed somewhere between those letters. Fear and apprehension laced with indifference and neglect. They blamed me but they didn't know me... not really.

I hadn't had a roommate before Foster Lake, and though I wasn't opposed to it, I worried my lack of friendships wouldn't make me a very good one.

Years ago, I lived with my father—in a small, cottage style house just a short walk from Ridgemont's campus. I was seven when he packed my suitcase and took me for a walk. He ushered me up a damp staircase with a smile between his cheeks as though the loneliness my new room offered was a gift to be grateful for.

I remember the way his back looked that morning, walking over the threshold and leaving me behind as I studied my new home.

There were cobwebs in the corners and a crack in the center of the balcony door. The room felt forgotten about—a lot like I was.

I guess that's why I liked it.

My room was in the peak of the dormitory, just below the clock tower. For years, it was just me and desolation... and a few spiders I called friends.

...and then I met Foster at the start of ninth grade.

He'd come from an elitist family—the kind that liked to use their kids as trophies. His parents had been grooming him to be the state's next great business typhoon, but his soul was a creative one, and all he'd ever cared about was photography.

His parents had nearly disowned him, translating his dislike for business into an act of rebellion. They'd brought him here, and though there weren't any rooms available, the headmaster had accepted his enrollment, anyway.

That's how he ended up with me.

I don't know that my father would ever admit it, but I think he hated he handed me a friend. Solitude had always been my preference, but it was hard to make choices when you hadn't ever really been given any.

Foster was approachable in all the ways I wasn't. He was outgoing and warm, friendly enough that nobody was afraid of him but mysterious enough to keep them from asking too many questions.

I was more hesitant, restrained and withdrawn. The headmaster's elusive son who'd lived here his entire life but hadn't managed to make any friends... until Foster.

I think people thought I was a pity companion, someone he felt bad for. That assumption paired with my evasive, keep-to-myself demeanor made it easy for people to latch onto the idea that I'd throw my best friend off our bedroom balcony.

The rumors bruised me. The looks burned me. The threats shoved in my locker scared me... but buried beneath my pain was a sliver of understanding.

Foster's death was one worth avenging... though I wondered if anybody would have cared had it been my body on the pavement that night.

The warning bell seemed especially loud this morning, and it shook the walls just as I was stepping into the senior hallway. The narrow space was mostly empty, the sconces flickering as I walked past them.

The dread I harbored was quieter today, not anywhere near as prominent as it was four days ago when I curled up in the corner of that ugly plaid sofa.

I sort of... missed it.

The cushions felt like a hug, and they smelled like the kind of home I wished I grew up in. I'd made a section of it mine, and Roman was careful to keep his distance, allowing me my space but never letting me feel alone.

I... liked it.

Liked *him*.

My ears had caught everything that first day, his voice resolute and unwavering as he stood his ground against my father. I felt his conviction seeping through the cracks of the walls, and I wished I could've bottled it up and taken it with me when I left.

Roman was bold. Intelligent. Self-assured. His presence was a big one, but he'd been careful not to take up too much space around me. He made himself smaller to make me feel bigger, and that gesture felt like security somehow.

Safety.

He smiled at me often, and he never—not once—tried to force me to speak.

I'd always favored a whisper but Foster's death had shocked me into a silence I couldn't find my way out of. My brain knew how to form words, and I felt letters on the tip of my tongue but there was a barrier they couldn't get past.

Maybe it was fear.

Maybe it was indifference.

Maybe I was like all the men who'd investigated Foster's fall and had just given up.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROMAN

His knuckles were red. Split open. Bruises were forming beneath the surface of his pale skin, and I almost couldn't see it through the crimson haze circling my vision.

“Sebastian?”

He peered up at me. Tears were perched on the ends of his eyelashes.

What swept through me then was a wild, barbaric sensation that left my insides quaking.

My nostrils flared. “Sebastian, did someone... hurt you?”

The words tasted like blood on my tongue, and it was a near miracle I'd gotten them past my lips without seething.

The hood Sebastian favored swept the tight skin of his forehead when he shook his head. He held his battered hand in front of him, opening and closing his fist as though he was double checking his knuckles still did what they were supposed to.

“Did you hit someone?”

That... wasn't likely.

Sebastian wasn't one to summon destruction. He fled from violence and avoided humans as though he wasn't one himself.

He shook his head again. This time when his knuckles hinged inward, he left them folded into a loose fist and pressed

it to the palm of his other hand.

Sebastian often used gestures to tell me stories, punctuating his past with flicks of his wrists and snaps of his fingers. He answered my questions with a thumbs up or thumbs down and tore at the threads of my sofa when he was feeling particularly anxious.

Elbows on my knees, I studied his movements and tried to discern what he was telling me now. His palm rotated on top of his wrist, back and forth as though it was opening and closing.

“You punched a door?” I guessed.

Sebastian’s injured hand fell to his lap when he nodded. A sigh left him, making his lips tremble, and he used his thumb to point at his chest.

“You punched your own door?”

His forefinger extended, working in tandem with his thumb to make the letter L.

I thought for a moment. “Locker? You punched your locker door?”

Sebastian gave me a thumbs up, his hand quivering before falling to a heap on the sofa that now belonged to him. He wrapped his pinky finger around a loose thread and tugged hard enough to rip it from the cushion.

“Are you in pain?” I asked him, and the second he took to answer was a second too long. My shoulders stiffened at the weak nod he gave me, and the soft, frustrated sound he made felt like a punch in the kidneys.

“Go to him...”

“He’s yours now.”

There was a potency in those words I couldn’t ignore. I could taste the letters on my tongue, feel them tapping at my chest and slipping through my veins.

The voice that whispered them greeted me as nothing more than a faint tickle. Days later, it felt like thunder crashing into

my chest, and for each second I spent with Sebastian, it'd only gotten louder.

"He's yours..."

"He's yours..."

"He's yours..."

The tone was a foreign one, something I didn't recognize as it left marks across my subconscious. The more I listened, the more I thought it sounded a lot like my own voice... and the words it spoke were no longer simple omens perched lightly on my shoulder.

They were assurance—a *pledge*.

"He's yours now."

Sebastian's eyes were on me as I shifted in my chair and reached for the bottom drawer of my desk. The brass handle was loose, lopsided and barely hanging on. It made a grinding noise when I tugged it open, and I caught Sebastian's flinch from the corner of my eye.

The first-aid kit was wedged haphazardly between the drawer's narrow walls. I was reluctant to believe this thing had ever been used, and I was suspicious about every counselor that had come before me and what the hell they did all day.

My whole desk rattled when I yanked the kit free, and I wrapped my palm around its edge to steady it. Placing the kit on my lap, I popped it open and looked over the contents. Instant ice packs lined the bottom of the kit, cushioning gauze and cheap band-aids. I grabbed one and set it aside before picking up a disinfectant wipe and tearing it open with my teeth.

I held it out to him.

Sebastian glanced at it and shook his head.

I rolled my chair a little closer to him and tried again. "Those cuts need to be cleaned, baby bird."

He lifted his chin. There was an adorable divot between his eyebrows that I wanted to press my lips against.

“Say it again.”

“Baby bird,” I whispered.

His movements were cautious as he wrapped one thumb around the other and flapped his hands as though they were wings. They moved in a silent pattern, rising and falling as they danced through the air.

His wings fell apart, and the curve of his eyebrow lifted with a quiet question. He pointed a cautious finger at his chest, and his eyes were shy as they glanced up at me... waiting.

I smiled. “Yes, that’s you. My baby bird.”

Soft, pale cheeks filled with color. His finger left his chest, and he held it outward, tracing the outline of my smile in the air. His eyes grew, and he studied the shape he made as though it was something new to him.

“Are you comfortable with me calling you that?” His nod was quick, and I chuckled. “Alright, baby bird. How about you give me that bloodied wing, and I make it look brand new?”

I felt the pulse in his fingertips against my palm when he slid his hand into mine. The touch settled something inside of me, and I felt my own pulse shift, searching for the tempo that matched his.

It took several passes with the wipe to get him clean, and even then, he was stained—painted in purple and blue undertones that would soon turn yellow and green.

The rigid way his knuckles curled against my palm was an indication of the pain he still felt. I tossed the wipe in the wastebasket below my desk and grabbed the ice pack. I squeezed until I heard the telltale *pop* that signaled it’d been activated. The chill was immediate, and I laid it carefully across the top of his hand, adjusting it so it touched the most battered of places.

Placing my palm over it, I applied pressure, worried it was too cold for his skin. The thumbs up he gave me told me it was just enough to offer him relief.

I waited several more seconds, allowing the ice pack to mold to the divots of his fingers before I started to pull my hand away.

Sebastian surged forward. His hood slipped off his head and his unbroken hand shot outward, grasping at my fingers and tugging them with a force that had my entire arm lurching.

“He doesn’t want you to leave.”

A noise tore from his throat, his head shaking and eyes low.

“Hey now,” I soothed. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise. Can you look at me? Just for a second?”

His eyelashes left small drops of tears on the top of his cheeks when he blinked his eyes open.

“Good boy. Now, how about I get rid of this kit on my lap, and then we’ll hold this ice pack here together?”

His chin dipped in a nod I barely saw. It took him a handful of breaths before he was able to release my hands. The ice-pack slipped off his skin and hit the floor with a muted *plop*. I expected him to reach for it but he remained unmoving, stoic and still as he stared at me.

“He’s waiting for you to help him.”

The conviction behind those words had me questioning whether Sebastian could hear them too somehow.

Devotion was a heady thing, and it swept through the room in a strong enough wave that I couldn’t discern whether it was his I was feeling or my own.

I moved quickly, closing the first-aid kit and placing it in the center of my desk. Standing from my chair, I swept Sebastian’s ice pack off the floor and approached him.

I gestured to the spot beside him. “May I sit here?”

Sebastian’s thumb lifted in permission, and I lowered myself on the couch. Foot propped on my knee, I rotated my upper body and held out my hand. The cushions dipped with soft movements when he slid a little closer. He shoved his

injured hand at me in a gesture that felt both eager and desperate.

A sound escaped his lips when I repositioned the ice pack. He sunk into the couch, his loose curls swaying as his cheek pillowed against the cushion. The tension he held in his muscles seemed to melt away.

I ran my thumb over the tops of his icy fingers. “Was this the result of anger or sadness?”

He flashed me the number two.

Both.

“Okay.”

My mind raced, waging a war between thoughts of aggression and obsession. The psychologist in me was a think now, act later kind of man but Sebastian had drawn out the soldier. I was fighting for him now. Identifying the enemy had become priority number one.

I extended my hand toward him, unrolling my fingers and offering my palm. “Maybe you could draw me a picture of what happened?”

He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, gnawing at the tender flesh as he nodded. The tip of his finger shook as it touched my palm, and I felt his skin glide across mine when he began to draw.

V I C I O U S

Letter by letter, he penned the word that tormented him the most, punctuating it with an aggressive exclamation mark.

“Somebody called you vicious?”

His eyebrows pulled tight, cheeks reddening as he shook his head. His mouth opened and closed, and he pulled his hand from mine in favor of wrapping it around his throat. Nails digging into the flesh, he tugged roughly at the tender skin and an ugly noise burst from his chest.

He was trying to speak to me... and when he couldn't he took his hand and slammed it into the back of the couch.

I reached for him, pressing my thumb against his lips. “The words will come when you’re ready.”

I felt his sharp inhale against the pad of my thumb. He nodded, though his frustration remained clear in the way his chest collapsed and the sheen of tears that coated his eyes.

I wasn’t a weak man, but those tears made me want to beg for some mercy. I’d fall to my fucking knees if it earned him just a small sliver of grace.

Christ.

“Try again, baby bird. Show me what happened.”

He wrapped his hand around my wrist and guided it away from his mouth. Rather than seeking my palm, he used his own fingers to fold mine into a careful position. One by one, he manipulated my smallest limbs into a position that looked almost like...

“A claw?”

Sebastian made a huffing sound, and it was so damn cute, I nearly chuckled. His eyes narrowed as though he knew what I was thinking, and I caught the way his lips curled upward, just a smidge.

He used his pointer to tap mine, pressing and releasing as though it was a trigger of some sort.

“Am I... spraying something?”

His eyes brightened, and he let his fingers fall between mine, linking our hands together. The difference in size was almost jarring. I wanted to haul him into my lap and wrap each of his limbs in a layer of protection.

He was safest with me.

“Only you.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that when my jaw snapped closed. My pulse quickened as I considered the last several moments, and I finally understood what he was trying to tell me...

CHAPTER SIX

SEBASTIAN

*V*icious.

Someone had sprayed those letters across my locker door in an ugly, jagged pattern. I had to believe they knew how sadistic their color choice was—a thick, crimson red that dripped down the steel in obscure waves. Globbs of it had drizzled along the bottom, staining the wooden floorboards and the soles of my shoes.

It was all too reminiscent of the blood that slipped between my fingers that night. The nausea was the same too, searing the walls of my throat. I gagged on vomit as I forced it back down into my stomach, and I felt it curl the same moment my fist did.

There were no thoughts—only anger.

Resentment. Heartache. *Grief*.

My emotions culminated into an action I'd likely pay for later. The vandalism wouldn't matter... nor would the pain I felt looking at it. Arthur would take one look at the fist-sized dent I left behind and demand payment—both in bruises and in bucks.

I'd nearly cursed myself, but I was too tired to hold on to regret. I was too tired to hold on to *anything*. When the pain in my knuckles subsided, I'd succumb to the numbness, and when that eventually faded, indifference would remain.

It was a cycle I was acutely familiar with, and soon, those letters on my locker door wouldn't matter. My exile would be

forgotten, and there'd be something else. *Something new* that threatened my heart, tested my breaking point, and chipped at my insides as though they were nothing but stone.

I was tired.

Exhausted, even.

I think Roman felt it. Hell, I think he wanted to *fix* it, and I wanted to let him... desperately.

The ice pack across my knuckles had since gotten warm, but I didn't dare move. I liked the way he cradled his palm over mine, protecting my injury as though it was his own.

Roman handled me as if I were constructed of pieces, glued back together in a haphazard pattern that could shatter at any moment. He'd built a suit of armor around me, and I lavished in what it felt like to feel safe... if only for a moment.

The attention he gave me was the kind of thing drugs were made of, intoxicating and easily addictive. I found myself wanting to bathe in it, to paint it across every inch of my skin so I'd still feel it even after I stepped out of this office.

Roman lifted my injured hand, tossing the ice pack aside. His eyes narrowed as he inspected the darkened skin. "Flap your wings for me, baby bird."

I opened and closed my knuckles.

"Good boy. Any pain?"

I shook my head.

He moved as though he were going to set my hand down.

Nope.

Every inch of me rejected the idea of losing his touch, so much so that my hand shot outward and gripped his chest. His t-shirt was soft against my bruised knuckles, and I gripped a handful of the material in my palm and anchored myself to him.

"I don't know where you think I'm going, sweetheart, but I promise the only place I want to be is right next to you." He

wrapped his fingers around my wrist, his thumb sweeping across my pulse point. “Does your heart always beat this fast?”

I... maybe?

I’d never been able to catch my breath. Peace was as foreign to me as compassion was, and for as long as I could remember, I’d been racing against the clock above my head.

Tick. Tock.

Foster’s presence made it marginally better. He’d slowed me down enough to smile every so often, but the moment he died, I was sprinting again—never quite certain if I was running toward something or far, far away.

“I wonder which moves faster, baby bird, your heart or your mind.”

I made a noise in my throat.

My mind—no contest.

The thoughts pressing at my skull often gave me whiplash, and I spent most of my time sorting them into sections of truths and lies. My father lived firmly on one side with the facts of Foster’s death hovering somewhere in the middle.

There wasn’t a lot of authenticity in my life, not a lot of things I was certain of. If I had to draw the last nineteen years of my life, I’d pen a giant question mark, dripping in my blood—for all the pain I’d experienced and for all the reasons I didn’t have.

Roman Hayes was the first genuine thing I’d ever felt, not just in the patience he’d shown me but the ferocity I saw in his eyes. It was like looking into a mirror—for everything he was feeling; I felt it twice as much. Maybe it was my heart compensating for my lack of voice, reaching for him, touching him in all the ways I otherwise couldn’t.

The longer I spent in his proximity, the more I craved it. *He* was the only thing I’d ever wanted—the only thing I’d felt remotely protective of, and for all the answers I didn’t have, there was one I did: this was mutual.

Lord help whoever tried to take me away from him.

Roman's hands found purchase beneath my armpits and he lifted me with ease, plopping me across his lap. A surprised sound tore through my throat, and I felt his chuckle vibrate his chest. He pinched my chin with his thumb and forefinger, lifting my gaze to his.

"Is this okay?"

I nodded.

He smiled, slipping his thumb across the curve of my lips. "Affection is foreign to you, isn't it, sweetheart? Nobody has ever given you what you deserve?"

I tightened the grip I had on his shirt when I shook my head.

"That changes today," he vowed.

It was a threat to the world as much as it was a promise to me.

"You'll have to tell me if I'm too intense. The last thing I want is for my baby bird to fly away."

That wasn't likely to happen, not just because I never wanted to leave this office but because I was pretty sure my wings didn't work.

"There's this sort of preconceived notion about psychologists. This idea that our job revolves around getting our patients to reveal whatever secrets they may or may not have. I think that's what your father was hoping I'd do with you."

His hand slipped across my jaw and wrapped around the back of my neck. I pillowed my cheek against his chest and felt his fingers dance along my hairline as he spoke.

"This job is about guiding someone through their fears and watching them come out the other side stronger for it. I've had hundreds of patients, Sebastian, and I've watched each one cross a proverbial bridge back into the world but you? I don't want you to cross that bridge. Not without me."

Certitude melted off his lips, and I had an urge to taste it.

“There’s this voice inside my head, this deity of the universe that’s decided I make no sense without you.”

The only voice I heard was his... but it was enough.
Plenty.

“A week ago, I was barely aware of your existence, and now it feels like it’s the only one that matters. The voice in my head that’s telling me you’re mine is also telling me there’s something I need to protect you from. So you just tell me who your villain is, baby bird, because I promise for as scary as they are, I’m worse.”

It was almost too difficult to believe—that this man, the *only* man, to show me a measure of kindness had a version of himself that put my moniker to shame.

I wondered what his secrets would look like stacked against my own. I buried most of mine with Foster, but there were some still stuck in my throat and hidden beneath a loose floorboard under my bed.

Roman’s were hidden in plain sight, and now that I was close to him, I could see their shadows. The tattoos painting his skin were a mask, a kaleidoscope of colors that concealed raised ridges of skin and barely there scars. I ran the tip of my finger along their edges, tracing both the pain he experienced and the designs he’d chosen to cover them up.

“You’ve found a map to my past, baby bird.”

I rested my chin on his chest, peering up at him with curiosity filling my eyes. My throat bobbed, and I choked a little on the questions that were lodged at the base.

“I see your questions, sweetheart.” He palmed the back of my head, using his thumbs to trace shapes against my scalp. “I grew up here in Massachusetts, in a town a few hours away. After high school, I did the college thing and got a degree in psychology because it interested me. Around the time I finished my masters, my brother graduated high school and enlisted in the Marines. The big brother in me couldn’t let him go alone. I spent three years in active duty. Towards the end, I found myself a little too close to a blast. Flames ate the top

layer of my skin and there was shrapnel that tore me open but really, I was lucky it didn't spread past my arm."

Trauma rarely felt fortuitous, but I think I understood... in my own way, on my own level.

Covert scars and dark dreams didn't seem so bad when there was still breath inside your lungs... and a big enough reason to force them to work.

"After my injuries, I stayed with the military and put my degree to use. I counseled people like myself. People who'd been hurt in the line of duty, POW victims, and families of those who'd lost loved ones. Some days, that job was more painful than the weeks I'd spent in the hospital, but I felt a responsibility toward them. In some ways, I'd felt like I was doing more with a pen in my hand than I ever did with a gun."

I ran two fingers across the phoenix on his arm, trailing the feathers as they fell.

"A little more than two years ago, I lost my brother. He was somewhere across the world, in a desert with bullet holes in his chest and all alone. Charlie's death felt like the end of everything, and I spiraled. *Hard*. I quit my job because it made little sense for me to help people anymore, not when I couldn't seem to help myself. I spent about a year grieving, and it wasn't until I'd gotten word that Charlie's unit had taken out the man who'd killed him that I felt like I could live again. I moved back to Massachusetts and picked up my pen, but I also promised myself that I'd never put down my gun. Not fully. The psychologist and the soldier work in tandem now, and I've never felt them blend so seamlessly until I met you."

Each word he spoke felt like another layer he peeled back, tearing himself to pieces and offering me them all. I ached to give him something in return, to match one of his scars with one of my own, but when my lips parted, there was silence.

It crushed me in a way that made my eyes wet, and I burned with a lick of frustration. I hadn't wanted to speak—had been afraid of what would be revealed if I did, but now that I found a purpose for my words, they were anxious to come out and play.

I wrapped my arms around him instead, squeezing his middle with every bit of strength I could summon. It wasn't much, but he grunted with my efforts, and I hoped he'd could feel my empathy.

Charlie was his Foster...

"I got my phoenix tattoo as soon as I moved back here. A symbol of new life rising from my old one. The cracked beak was supposed to represent my grief, but now when I look at it, I only see you."

Baby Bird.

I'd not had a nickname before—not one that I liked, anyway.

The label he'd given me seemed to ease the pain of the one everyone else used, and if I was a bird, he was one too.

I sat up straight, capturing his attention. He watched my gestures carefully as I pointed to myself and flapped my wings. I repeated my movements, but this time, I pointed at him.

"You're baby bird, and I'm... big bird?"

I slapped a palm over my mouth, a chuckle tickling my throat as I shook my head.

He laughed. "Okay, let me try again. You're baby bird, so that makes me..."

I flapped my wings even higher, up above my head, showing the strength his bird possessed—a strength my bird hadn't quite found yet.

"Daddy bird?" He guessed, and I smiled.

Yes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROMAN

Ridgemont High had a cryptic reputation—the old church turned school for misfits, hidden beneath the fog and locked behind gates.

It was enchanting in a vile sort of way, a villainous little village we'd all heard about as kids but never quite knew which stories were genuine and which ones were made up for the sake of the scare.

People spoke of it as though it were fictional, and I remember the tales I'd heard on Halloween, the speakers passionate and vivid enough that it felt like something out of a pop-up book. Goosebumps spread across my skin as I listened to story after story about teens that drove up here in the middle of the night, only to step one foot on the cobblestone path and never be seen again.

Our parents used our apprehension to their benefit, threatening us with what lay behind those gates to coerce us into behaving.

Decades later, I stood at the base of those concrete steps and stared into the stone faces of the gargoyles that bordered them, wondering what secrets they'd reveal if they could talk... and which ones they'd protect.

The stack of files I held felt heavier the longer I stared at them, and I remember the way the door creaked behind me and the hair that rose on my arms as I navigated the halls on my first day. They were every bit as eerie as I thought they'd

be, and I found it strange that in such a cavernous space... I couldn't hear any echoes.

The office they'd given me was tucked between a bend in the walls, small but efficient. I appreciated the position amongst the maze of bricks, and though the absence of others often left people feeling leary, I thought the solitude would make my patients feel safer somehow.

Pain was a sensation that demanded to be felt, and the brick walls I stood between were oozing with it. It was still a mystery to me whether these students carried that pain to campus in their backpacks or if it was something that seeped into their bloodstream the minute they stepped through the doors.

It reminded me of the way I used to carry men through the desert, a rifle strapped to my chest. I went where they told me to because I'd wanted to survive.

That's what these kids were doing.

Surviving.

Their cruelty were their weapons, their strength a coping mechanism. Kids who weren't fed love on a silver spoon often learned to lick it off knives, and the thought that Sebastian had lived here all his life was one I almost couldn't handle.

He was too soft for a place with hardened edges, and as I stood outside my office door, I looked carefully into the shadows that surrounded me. Somewhere in the dusk was the beast that followed him around, and I intended to find it.

"Mr. Hayes."

Shit.

I plastered a smile on my face. "Headmaster. What can I do for you?"

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The rings he wore made contact with the brick, creating an eerie melody as he strolled along the curve of the wall. His pace was leisurely, gait pompous and smile rehearsed. I imagined it was difficult for him to look any other way. There was a reason he'd been headmaster for nearly twenty years, and I suspected it had nothing to do with his passion for education.

"I've come for an update on Sebastian's progress."

"I'm sorry?"

His toes were mere inches from mine when he came to a stop, and I watched him adjust the lapels of his jacket. "My son? I'd like an update. Is he speaking yet? Has he alluded to ___"

"Sir, I can't discuss the details of my sessions with you. Sebastian is nineteen years old, nearly twenty."

"He's my son."

"He's an adult and legally protected by confidentiality laws."

His jaw hardened. "Mr. Hayes, perhaps you don't understand the purpose of why you were hired."

"What a bastard."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, but are you suggesting that my job is to spy on your son for the sake of your curiosity rather than guide him through his grief?"

"I don't believe that's what I was implying, Mr. Hayes. You ought to be careful when interpreting my concern."

I arched an eyebrow. "What concern might that be?"

Arthur leaned toward me, glancing over his shoulder as though ensuring we were alone. The look he gave me suggested we were besties about to exchange secrets.

"Punch him in the face."

Shit. I wanted to.

“You once told me that Sebastian hasn’t spoken because he’s afraid of something. Do you still believe that?”

“I do, yes. Whether it’s a mental barrier he’s frightened of or a physical entity, I’m uncertain. Though if I was, I still wouldn’t be at liberty to share that with you.”

“But you would be required, *by law*, to report Sebastian if you thought he may harm himself?”

My heart lurched. “Does Sebastian have a history of self-harm?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but we can never be too careful.” He clasped his hands together and offered me a smile I wanted to rip right off his face.

What the fuck was this man playing at?

“Furthermore, you’d be required to report whether Sebastian admitted to harming someone else?”

“I’m sorry, Headmaster, are you...” I shook my head. “Are you suggesting you believe Sebastian killed his roommate?”

“No, Sebastian isn’t capable of murder.”

“I agree, so forgive me but I’m still not sure why you’re here.”

He rubbed his palm along his jaw, exhaling slowly.

“It’s a very punchable face.”

It was, and for a moment, I let myself consider what it’d feel like to sucker punch this man. Adrenaline tore through me and my pulse jumped. My knuckles nearly ached to be split open... but I couldn’t.

Not yet, anyway.

“Mr. Hayes, I believe Sebastian knows the truth about what happened to Foster Lake and his refusal to speak is because he’s protecting that truth.”

“You’re suggesting Sebastian is protecting the person who murdered his best friend? His *only* friend.”

Arthur shrugged, and I had to bite my tongue to hold back my laugh of disbelief.

For fuck's sake.

There was a fine line between delusion and intelligence, and Arthur seemed to tow the very edges of it. He was sharp—patient in a cunning way. Reckless enough to ask questions but ambiguous enough that nobody could connect his dots.

I almost wanted to applaud him for how well he'd camouflaged his cruelty, painting himself in war-paint and bullshit. For years, I'd been face to face with some of the world's most hardened men, and what I saw then was being replicated now.

Mercilessness.

Animosity.

Hatred.

Desperation...

Arthur made claims of wanting to protect his son, but I was familiar with the smell of bullshit, and all this man wanted to protect was himself... and this godforsaken school.

"I'm not sure I understand your concern, sir. You've made it quite clear that investigators ruled Foster's death as accidental. Has Sebastian expressed anything differently to you?"

"He hasn't, no." Arthur ran his tongue along his teeth. His eyes swept the floor, and I saw the way they twitched, calculating the most proper response. "Perhaps, I'm just projecting my own fears as a father onto the investigation. Sebastian has always been... spineless. Self assurance is not a trait he possesses, and I'm worried with the target on his back, it's only going to get worse."

"The target meaning the rumors, the nickname, and the vandalism?"

His lips flattened. "He told you about his locker?"

“In his own way, yes.” I folded my arms across my chest, concealing my clenched fists. “Forgive me, Headmaster, but isn’t discipline in your job description? Perhaps, the first step in ensuring the safety of your son would be some repercussions to the ongoing bullying?”

“Mr. Hayes, I have no idea who created that moniker nor do I know who defaced his locker door. Do you suggest I discipline the entire student body?”

“I’m suggesting the best way of offering Sebastian some security begins with protecting him. He witnessed a death, sir, and instead of garnering support from his peers, he’s had to fend off attacks.”

“If I knew who was to blame, they’d be punished. I can assure you, Mr. Hayes, I’m looking into—”

“You could begin with looking into yourself.”

His teeth ground together. “Excuse me?”

“You’re his father, are you not? Have you considered that all Sebastian seeks is some comfort? Have you offered your condolences at all in the last eight months, or do you spend your time outside of counselor’s offices attempting to pry confidential information out of them? Perhaps, Headmaster Arthur, the person your son is afraid of... is you.”

His spine stiffened, and though he tried to mask it, I saw the blood leave his cheeks and drain down his neck. The rings lining his fingers flickered against the dull light when he spun them in circles around his knuckles.

He cleared his throat. “I would certainly hope my son is not afraid of me. We’ve not had the greatest of friendships, but I always thought we shared a mutual respect. Has he... insinuated something different?”

“I think we both know I’m not going to comment on what Sebastian has or has not insinuated.”

Arthur’s nostrils flared, and I nearly saw a flicker of the man that lay beneath the suit. His concern wasn’t placed with his son—that much was obvious.

One half of me wanted to pick up my pen and sort through the pieces of his brain until an agenda became clear. The other half wanted to cock my gun and blast him in the face for calling Sebastian spineless.

“The gun is always the right answer.”

Sebastian wasn't spineless. He was *sad*... but even the saddest of birds sang songs, and one day my baby would open his mouth and scream loud enough to bring this whole place to the ground.

I glanced at Arthur one last time before pivoting and reaching for my door handle. “You do an awfully good job of matching your shoes to your shirt, sir, perhaps tomorrow you could try matching your words to your actions. You might have better luck connecting with your son.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

I was bred from death, and maybe that's why it seemed to follow me around—why I couldn't ever escape it. Some children were just born with tragedy in their blood, and I think that's probably what happened to me.

For a long time I was envious of it—*death*, and in some ways I think I still am. The only two people I'd ever cared about, the only people who'd ever cared about *me*, were somewhere inside of it, existing in the place that came after all the tragedy.

Wherever that place was was where I'd wanted to be.

It was interesting to think about... almost *sad*. I knew how to make Hell feel like home, so much so that the threat of the actual underworld didn't frighten me. Not even a little.

The tip of my pointer finger lost color when I pressed it against the chilled granite. My movements were slow as that finger dipped in and out of the ridges, tracing the smooth letters of her name and the date she died.

It bugged me that there were no flowers here—no other tombstones or souls for her to rest with.

She was all alone.

Just like me.

The late January wind turned my tears into glaciers, slipping down my cheeks and splashing against the thin sheen of ice that decorated her tombstone.

My arms were heavy—weighted down with exhaustion and grief when I wrapped them around the granite slab and squeezed its frigid edges with everything I had.

It was the closest I'd ever come to hugging my mother.

Annie St. James died the morning of my first birthday. My father had explained her death to me in almost picturesque detail, as though it were a fictional horror drafted and reenacted for the screen. He sat on the edge of my childhood bed, cruelly and callously recounting the moments before her stroke and all the ones that came after. He described her rose-colored nails to me, and the way they twitched in his palm when he cradled her feeble hand in his.

Her light eyes were filled with fear, and he'd promised that he held her until all that frightened her had drifted away.

I'd since come to learn that my father's promises were nothing more than sugar-coated lies.

The actual truth was that he cared about my mother the same way he cared about me—minimally and abusively.

It was Foster who'd found the evidence, hidden in the only photo I had of her. The film had captured the smile painted across her red lips and the shiny pins holding back the blonde curls in her hair. My chubby face was buried in her neck as she held me in both of her arms. It was *those* arms that guarded the truth of everything I suspected.

Five, barely there bruises were wrapped like jewelry around her slender wrists. They matched the ones I often wore around my ankles.

I'd inherited all of my mother's wounds... as though the pain of them was stitched throughout her DNA.

The thin weeds and overgrown acreage around her tombstone often treated me like a friend, concealing my cries and protecting my grief the same way they protected my mother's soul.

My father had attempted to disguise her memory with the thick of the forest, burying her between the trunks of two trees, a mile from the house she died in. He wouldn't admit it, but I

think he was trying to keep her locked behind these gates forever, trapped beneath his proverbial thumb.

It was the same thing he was doing to me... except *no*.

Not anymore.

My jacket made a soft noise when I peeled my arms from her memory and slid across the cold ground. Draping my body over the spot she lay, I pressed my cheek to the frosted blades of grass that covered her and listened as though she might have something to say.

Legs curled tight to my chest, I wrapped my arms around myself and closed my eyes. A vision of her appeared on the backs of my eyelids, and I matched her smile with one of my own.

My lips parted, and though no sound came out, she heard every word I said to her. Her spirit often acted as a balm to my wounds, and she came ready to tend to them.

Except, this time... I didn't speak about pain.

I spoke about my daddy bird...

I spoke about my wings...

I spoke about life...

... and all the ways I wanted to learn how to live it.





I climbed to my bedroom the same way I always did, cautiously, as though there were eyes in the walls that surrounded me.

The stairs creaked beneath my weight, the echoed sounds of my steps synchronizing with the clock above my head. There were railings on either side of me, coated with a layer of dust. The sconces that lit my path had burned out months ago, and now I relied on the dull light of my cell phone to guide me up the spiraled trail.

My curls swayed against my face, my fingers tightening around the edges of my jacket. A yawn tore from my throat when I reached the landing, and I carefully avoided the rotted planks, stepping over them like landmines.

My keys clinked together when I pulled them from my pocket. Positioning my phone, I cast the beam of light across the lock in my door and fit the key inside. The release made a heavy sound. I turned the brass handle at the same time I used my toe to kick the door open. As quickly as I was stepping inside of my bedroom, I was being thrown back out of it.

A grunt left me when he rammed his fist into my middle, hitting me hard enough to knock me off my feet. Oxygen surged from my lungs, my mouth opening and closing as it gasped for relief. I flipped to my stomach, fingers struggling to find purchase against the wood floor as I crawled away from him.

The sound of my fingernails snapping was cast back to me, vibrating in my inner ears when he wrapped his fingers around my ankles and dragged me over the threshold. Adrenaline raced through my chest, and I threw my arms over my head, tugging my knees into my stomach.

My father laughed at the passive way I protected myself, the ugly sound like nails down my spine. My strength was no match for his, and though I fought against his attempts, he managed to untangle my limbs. He placed his thighs on either

side of mine, and I saw the blur of his fist right before it crashed against my mouth.

My eyes rolled. Blood danced across my tongue, pooled in my bottom lip, and dribbled down my chin. I gagged against the familiar, pungent taste, pursing my lips just enough to spit it back in his face. The color that haunted my nightmares was dotted along his reddened cheekbones, and I smiled to myself right before his hand surged forward and locked around the base of my throat.

“Speak, you coward!” He screamed. “Speak!”

His eyes were wide, pupils blown and impossibly dark. He appeared anything but human as he snarled down at me, jaw bone quivering hard enough to break skin.

He used his free hand to wipe the spots of my blood off his face, saturating his fingers with evidence of my pain before smearing it across my lips.

“What did you tell that shrink, huh?”

Roman?

He was here because of Roman?

“He thinks you’re afraid of me. Did you tell him you’ve been afraid of me your whole life? Did you tell him what a fucking wimp you are?” He forced the heel of his palm against my windpipe, and I felt my eyelids droop. “If you want to use your voice, Sebastian, you can use it now. With me.”

He pressed our foreheads together. His breath was sticky as it coated my skin, and I felt my stomach curl. I squirmed beneath his weight, both of my hands locked around his wrist, clawing at the thin skin. “Tell me where it is, Sebastian. I know you know where it is!”

I felt his saliva on my eyelids and on the bridge of my nose. His voice reverberated against the base of my skull, sending signals of panic across the rest of my body. My mind raced to figure out what it was he wanted me to tell him but it couldn’t summon an answer.

My vision darkened, and then his weight just... disappeared. A flood of air stuffed itself down my throat, and I grasped at my neck, feeling for the skin as though checking to make sure he hadn't ripped it off.

Exhaling hurt.

Blinking hurt, but I lifted my chin to him anyway, glaring with all the strength I had left.

Arthur's shadow was big enough to swallow me whole as he stood over my body, pointing an angry finger at my chest. He licked his lips as though he enjoyed the taste of barbarity.

"I don't know what you think you know, or who you think you're protecting, but you keep that voice in your fucking throat. Understand me? Any suspicions, any questions, and any fucking clues you find should be brought to *me*."

I didn't know what he thought I knew, or what he wanted me to bring him, but it didn't matter... not in the grand scheme of things.

Each time he made me bleed, I worried I'd end up like my mother... dead and forever trapped under the heel of his boot. Tonight, the concern was thick enough to choke me, and I panicked at the thought of running out of time.

I had to find my wings.

Arthur stepped over my body, kicking me once in leg before palming the edge of my door. "It's best if you don't attend class until that lip is healed. We wouldn't want anyone thinking you're violent, would we, Vicious?"

CHAPTER NINE

ROMAN

Rain fell from the sky in harsh slants, pelting the sides of my face like bullets. I tasted it on my bottom lip, felt it dripping off my eyelashes. My breath formed clouds in the air with every uneven pant that escaped my lips.

Thunder rattled the ground. Bits of unsteady cobblestone swayed beneath my boots as I ran.

“Run faster!”

The urgency was familiar, and in a lot of ways, it reminded me of being back in a war zone—running from a faceless enemy, desperately trying to make it back home.

The dead bodies were just puddles now, but I leapt over them without pause.

The rifle on my chest was now a handgun at my ankle, and it was practically burning a hole against my skin.

The home I felt so devoted to, the one I fought so desperately for, was him.

My baby bird.

In the field, we treated our guts like guardian angels—built-in bullshit detectors. When something was off, our guts knew first, and we acted without hesitancy. That faith often saved our lives—*intuition* saved our lives, and it was the kind of protector that never really left a man.

Instinctive nudges weren't something I ignored, and I knew the moment I stepped foot inside my office this morning that something was... off.

The air was dense, suffocating and stiff...

The clock sounded too fast, and the walls were too quiet...

The hair on the back of my neck rose to attention, my gut nearly screaming at me. Bombs blew, alarms sounded, and when Sebastian never walked through my doorway... I knew.

Ominous clouds loomed above me, breaking apart with each wave of thunder. Lightning crackled somewhere in the distance and for a moment, it cast a dire glow across the outer edges of the dormitory.

Its peaks were concealed by shadows, and the closer I got, the more it appeared darkness had swallowed the entire building.

I'd thought the storm was an omen for war... but it was only a disguise for the aftermath.

My palms were wet with rainwater as I wrapped my fingers around the iron handle. The hinges creaked as I forced the door open, the air cold as I stepped inside the foyer. A slam echoed through the vastness of the space when the door fell shut behind me, blanketing me in an illusion of nightfall.

A lonely sconce flickered in and out, situated haphazardly at the base of a wooden staircase. Boards were missing, the rail was loose. Cobwebs danced along the ceiling as I ascended. I passed several floors, noting the gold plates on each of the heavy doors.

Sebastian's room didn't have a number.

It had a name: attic.

My boots left a trail of water, dribbling over the uneven steps—leaving evidence of my presence behind. It was sort of an unspoken rule that staff were prohibited from entering a student's living quarters. It was a sensible rule, and a month ago, it was one that made sense to me.

Now, the only thing that made even a measure of sense was him.

The walls seemed to tighten the higher I climbed, the rough brick nearly brushing the edges of my shoulders. It was

a blink away from being pitch black. The only light source was a sliver-sized glow, projected from beneath his closed bedroom door.

My shadow landed in the light, my toes a mere inch from the bottom of the door. Knocking softly, my voice was only an octave above a whisper. “Sebastian?”

Silence.

I knocked again, pressing my ear to the chilled wood. My own blood was the first thing I heard, pulsating beneath my skin, throbbing in tandem with the unsteady beats of my heart. Sweat saturated my hairline, slipping down the back of my neck in a way that made me shiver.

“Sebastian?” I called louder...

... more silence.

Adrenaline seized my chest, and for a moment my eyes blurred. Somewhere in my mind, a flare gun went off, blasting flames and smoke into the sky, signaling a cry for help.

“Go to him!”

A crack sounded. Wood split. Pieces of it flew through the air before littering the ground below me. Fists clenched, I stood inside his narrow doorway, surveying his bedroom.

My blood ran cold.

Caution tape was draped across the balcony doors, the handles taped shut. His bed had been turned over, the mattress upside down and sheets missing. Dresser drawers were dumped out and left in a maze around the floor. His backpack was wide open, torn pages falling from it. Posters and photographs had been yanked off the wall, leaving behind pieces of tape and rusted thumb tacks.

Christ.

He was living in a fucking crime scene.

Anger started in the tips of my toes, driving into my chest at a speed that made me dizzy. My exhale was more growl

than breath as I spun, eyes wide but focused as I cataloged my surroundings.

A thin door sat crooked on its hinges, half closed and without a handle. The trim that bordered it was covered in faded doodles of stars and trails that led to nowhere. A gargoyle sat hidden in the corner, an angry slash through its center. Blood was smeared beside a decaying hinge. I trailed my thumb around the dried edges of it, crimson flakes staining my skin and floating through the air.

My throat ran dry when I pushed the door open. The pockets of air surrounding me burst when I saw him.

Baby bird...

Oxygen punched through my lungs, and I nearly tripped over my own feet trying to get to him.

Sebastian sat in an empty bathtub, fully clothed, arms wrapped around his knees. His eyes were open, but they were bottomless—*vacant* as they stared at a crack in the white wall in front of him. His jaw quivered, and his muscles shook as though he were cold. He was pale enough that for a moment; I felt like I was seeing the world in black and white.

Only one color punctured my vision... red.

It was smeared across his flat lips, frozen in a thin line against his chin. The tips of his fingers were soiled with it, and my vision took the exact hue as I approached him.

“Sebastian?”

I lowered to my knees beside him, voice steady as I tried to lure him from the place his mind held him. I couldn't be sure if he'd gone there on his own, escaping to a place that made it easier to bear the pain, or if he'd been thrust there forcibly and was struggling to find his way out.

“Hey, baby bird. It looks like your wings got a little messed up. Can I help you fix them?”

My nostrils flared against the scent of the room, a stale combination of blood and fear. Anger thrummed deep in my gut, echoing across my insides like a steady drum. I felt it

escape me with every exhale, and for all the answers my mind demanded, tending to him was most important.

Fix his wings... and then destroy who broke them.

“Sebastian, sweetheart.” I stretched my hand outward, carefully grazing his shoulder with two fingers.

The moment we made contact, he screamed. His body surged forward, and his arms flew over his head protectively. He made a noise that suggested he was begging the world to stop hurting him. That simple, pleading sound felt like a splinter in my heart, tearing a hole straight down the middle. My chest bled but my voice remained steady.

“It’s just me, sweetheart. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I drew slow circles against his skin, reminding him what it felt like to be touched tenderly and without cruelty. “I missed you this morning. These sweet wings had a hard time flying, huh? Well, that’s just fine, baby bird, because I’ll always know where to find you.”

I pressed my palm between his shoulder blades. His muscles tensed before they relaxed and his inhale seemed to lift his whole body. My fingers danced across his hairline, capturing the curls between the pads of my fingers. Goosebumps rose across the base of his neck, and color blossomed, sweeping the pale skin.

Leaning forward, I pressed a firm kiss to that same spot.

A noise left him, and his head slowly rotated. He peered at me beneath the safety of his arms, the haze in his eyes clearing the longer he stared. His shoulders slumped forward, his arms falling to a heavy heap at his side. Cracked lips parted, and though he was soundless, I saw the word his brain tried to make.

Daddy...

“Hey, gorgeous.”

He blinked, and the numbness he was imprisoned in seemed to leave him all at once. Tears sailed over his

eyelashes, pouring down his chapped cheeks. His chest collapsed, and he launched himself at me with a loud cry.

“You’re okay.” I whispered, palming the back of his head.

The tip of his nose was cold when he shoved it into the space between my shoulder and neck. Evidence of his anguish soaked the collar of my shirt as he cried. I was careful when I lifted him from the tub and sat with him in my lap—chest to chest. The tile floor we sat on was cold but he didn’t seem to notice as I rested my back against the wall and protectively draped my arms around him. My voice was a low, confident murmur as I rocked him back and forth, filling his mind with vows of safety and promises of love.

“Let me see that lip.”

He moved as though his limbs were brand new. It took him several seconds to peel his face from my neck.

My palm encased his cheek, and I held the weight of his head in my hand as I swept the tip of my thumb across the edge of his swollen lip. “Someone cracked your beak, baby bird.”

He made a weak sound.

“Don’t you worry. Daddy is somewhat of a pro when it comes to tragedy.”

Bullets and bombs were pieces of me now, as vital to my life as bone and muscle. It wasn’t always that way. They often lay dormant somewhere in my chest, rising only when there was a war to be won.

With Sebastian, there would always be a war.

There would always be a pin to a pull or a gun to draw.

Protecting him was the only battle that mattered, and I intended to fight it for the rest of my life.

I fingered his bottom lip, and he chased the taste of my skin with vast, eager eyes. Sinking his teeth into the pad of my thumb, he sucked it into his mouth, humming. Smooth eyelids fluttered once before drifting closed. His hands were cold

when he placed them on either side of my neck, stroking his fingers across my skin.

Pressing our foreheads together, I pulled my thumb from his mouth. The whine he made went straight to my cock, and I swallowed the sound with my lips.

Fuck.

He tasted like purpose—like *life*.

Sebastian tasted like reason, and it was the sweetest fucking thing I'd ever felt across my lips.

Our kiss was tender, and I was mindful of his injuries when I swept my tongue into his mouth. He made a noise that made my eyes roll and melted into my embrace. When I tried to pull away, he sunk his nails into my cheeks and yanked me back.

I laughed against his mouth. “We’ve got to get you cleaned up, baby bird.”

And then... vengeance.

“Bullets and bombs.”

A bruise for a bruise. A scar for a scar. Blood for blood.

Sebastian made a huffing sound and kept his hands on my cheeks when he surrendered. Our foreheads came apart. Wide, gray eyes trailed the features my face wore, and his nose made an adorable wrinkle.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

The pads of his fingers felt rough as he brushed them across the corners of my mouth. His own lips turned downward, and it took me a moment to understand what had made him upset.

I was wearing his blood.

“I don’t mind the taste of your pain, baby bird.” I sucked my lips into my mouth. His blood was sweet as it exploded across my tongue. “I like making it disappear. I promise.”

His lips tipped up into a smile. As though it were a paintbrush, he moved his finger in waves across my face, tracing my jaw and drawing hearts on each of my cheeks.

“Hold on tight, sweetheart.” Hands anchored on his thighs, I stood from the ground. His ankles locked around my hips, and I carried him to the sink. It was small, and the porcelain top was stained. I was careful as I placed him on the edge, squeezing his thighs once.

“Keep holding onto me, yeah? I don’t trust this thing not to collapse.”

He nodded.

There was a small towel folded neatly in the corner, and I snatched it. The faucet was loose as I flipped it, and the water made a chugging sound before it filled the bowl. Checking the temperature, I made sure it was warm enough for him before wetting the towel and dabbing the cut on his lip.

“Do you have any ice, baby? Any antibacterial ointment? Something to prevent infection?”

He lifted a finger and tapped it once on the mirror behind him. Flipping it open, my breath caught at all the first aid supplies he had stuffed inside the medicine cabinet.

Bandages...

Gauze...

Ointments and sprays...

There was a finger splint and a suture kit. A small bottle of concealer was tucked in the corner, and *fuck!*

I couldn’t breathe.

Turning away from him, I choked on violent breaths, chest rising and falling in rapid succession. Hostility burned a hole in my chest, but pain burned a hole in my heart.

How many times had he put himself back together?

How many times had he bandaged his own wounds and wiped his own tears?

Sebastian tapped me once on the shoulder, the gesture shy. I pivoted toward him and palmed his face. My voice nearly broke as I spoke to him. “I’m so fucking sorry it took me so long to find you, baby bird.”

He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and mouthed my name again.

Daddy...

I pressed a kiss to the center of his forehead and returned the cloth to his mouth, dabbing at the remaining blood. His fingers were next, and I had to talk myself down from a fit of rage when I inspected the way some of his nails were broken.

Once his fingers were bandaged and his lip was smeared with ointment, I dropped the towel in the sink and palmed his waist. I moved to lift him off the sink, but he stopped me with a meek sound and a hand over mine. Sebastian guided my fingers to the hem of his shirt, and he winced as we lifted it together.

Fucking hell.

“Did someone hit you?”

His stomach matched his knuckles, skin stained with splotches of blue and purple. Bending at the waist, I inspected the injury and pondered over whether he needed a visit to the hospital. His ribs seemed to be okay, but the way he winced told me he was in a lot of pain.

He reached for the bruise. I quickly grabbed his finger. “Don’t touch, baby. We’ll get you some ice just as soon as we get out of here.”

His nose bumped mine, and he wiggled his finger aggressively before I finally released it.

He was trying to show me something...

Sebastian’s finger circled a section of his wound. Eyes thin, I tried to find the secret he was sharing with me. It took me a moment, longer than it should have, but I finally saw them.

Symbols.

There were faded, barely there engravings pressed into the soft parts of his skin. I recognized Ridgemont's logo and the intricate designs as the ones his father wore on his rings.

“Your father hurts you?”

Sebastian didn't answer, but he didn't have to. The evidence was in that medicine cabinet, on the floor of his bedroom, painted across his pale skin...

Sebastian's wings weren't broken, they were chained behind his back. He had more scars than friends—was scared more often than he was at peace.

That ended now.

I lifted him off the counter. “You can't stay here. Can you pack a bag? Maybe two? Bring everything that means something to you.”

He spun on his heels and took off into his bedroom. His movements were slow, but they were purposeful as he swept articles of clothing off the floor and stuffed them into an old duffel bag.

“He trashed your room.”

Sebastian made glasses with his hands and moved his head from side to side.

“He was looking for something?”

He nodded, and then lifted his shoulders in a gesture that told me he had no fucking clue what his father wanted.

“Should've punched him in the face.”

I was going to do more than realign his jaw.

The zipper on his bag made a noise when he sealed it. He dropped it at his feet with a thud and secured his backpack over his shoulders. Rushing around his bed, he pointed at it and made a shoving motion.

“You want me to move your bed, babe?”

He nodded and batted his sweet lashes at me.

I fucking kissed him.

Palms to the bed, I gave the frame an easy push. It made a grinding noise as it slid across the floor, and Sebastian dropped to his knees. Lifting his small fist, he slammed it into the ground hard enough that a floorboard popped loose and he tugged it out of place.

Flat on his stomach, he stuffed his arm into the hole he'd created and reemerged with a shoebox. He set it at my feet and opened the lid, showing me what he had inside.

A wad of cash lay rolled up in the corner, beside a photo of a woman I assumed was his mother. There was a list of out-of-state colleges, an old map, his birth certificate, the bus schedule, and a stack of information on how to legally change his name.

It was his security net—a runaway package, and oh it broke my damn heart.

He repositioned the lid on the box, and placed his palm over it, lip quivering.

“Sebastian...”

He shook his head and moved to readjust the floorboard when I saw the shadow of something else.

“Baby, I think you missed something.”

His brows furrowed, but he reached inside anyway. After a second or two, he sat up straight and lifted his palm.

Two plastic canisters lay against his skin. “Is that... film?”

Sebastian bit his lip, nodding as he stared down at the objects in his hand.

“Those aren't yours?”

He glanced once at the balcony doors, eyes wet.

“Foster?” I guessed. “That's film from Foster's camera?”

Sebastian nodded. His head cocked once, and the wrinkles in his forehead deepened before his mouth formed an O. His eyes flew open, and he made a noise in his throat as he stared up at me.

Hell.

He'd found what his father was looking for...

CHAPTER TEN

SEBASTIAN

I t was hard to forget your past when it was written all over your body...

In bruises...

In scars...

In tear-stained cheeks...

My childhood was a map of wounds, laid out across my skin. Some years were faded markers—others were more prominent. I felt a little like I was stained with the ink of my father's soul. The words on his tongue were tattoos on my heart. His deadly disposition was trapped beneath my skin, and I worried I'd never be free of it.

For most of my life, I'd thought freedom meant I needed to disappear. Turns out, all I really needed was to be found.

I wrapped my palms around Roman's bathroom sink, chin low but eyes lifted. My hair was overgrown, sweeping my eyelids. There were ugly, gaunt-like splotches beneath my eyes that made me look a little more monster than human. My lips were devoid of color, and I felt them cracking as I opened and closed my mouth.

My chest did something funny beneath the shirt I wore, and my knuckles tightened on the rounded edges of his sink. Nostrils burning, I felt a familiar surge of emotion crash against my lungs, and I inhaled a sharp breath as tears crested the bottoms of my eyes.

The image the mirror projected was one I often avoided. Day after day, it was weakness that stared back at me, and it made me feel sorry for myself.

It made me angry.

Today—*now*—I only saw strength, and instead of walking away from my reflection, I wanted to step inside of it and give the broken boy I saw a hug.

I sniffed once, using the heel of my palm to dab at any wayward tears slipping down my cheeks. When I straightened, I felt my shoulders tighten and though I wasn't actually a bird; I wore wings, anyway.

Finally, I had a safe place to spread them.

My lungs expanded with my inhale, nostrils flexing as I released the breath. Stepping away from the sink, I brushed my hair out of my eyes and reached for the door handle. It was quiet when it unlatched, and I slipped out into the hallway. My toes curled against the soft fibers of the carpet, and I took a moment to take in my surroundings.

Daddy lived in a quiet house, built from stone and filled with plants. It was surrounded by trees and plains of plush grass, concealed from others but protected by life. His driveway was gravel, and the crunch I heard as his tires rolled down it was my new favorite sound.

Home.

I hadn't had one before.

It was only a simple drive from Ridgemont's campus—a mere twenty minutes from those iron gates but I felt a universe away. Like I'd spun the globe and landed somewhere with brighter skies and warmer clouds.

There was oxygen here, and it was maybe the first time I'd been able to breathe without pain.

“Baby bird?”

I followed the sound of his voice, fingers trailing along the wall and the photos he had lining it. Most were landscapes,

vivid and detailed enough that I thought I could take my daddy's wings and fly right into one.

There was a simple snapshot in the middle of the adventure. Roman stood proud in military fatigues. A streak of dirt was smeared across his tanned cheek but it didn't dim the smile that spread across his lips. His arm was slung over another man's shoulder, and there was laughter in a set of eyes that looked just like my daddy bird's.

Charlie.

He was taller than Roman by a foot or so, and he clenched the barrel of a rifle tight in his fist. Black smudges stained the skin beneath his eyes, and I sort of liked the idea that wherever Charlie was, Foster was there too.

A ray of sunlight filtered into the hallway, dancing across my toes. With one foot in front of the other, I followed it into a well-lit living space. A wide window stretched across the width of one wall. There was a little bench just beneath it, and I had this vision of sitting there forever, the sun on my cheeks and peace in my heart. Curtains swayed on either side of it, brushing the carpeting as they moved. Plants were placed strategically around his plush furniture, and there were blankets everywhere.

Roman stood in the place where the kitchen met the living room, arms folded neatly across his chest. His eyes were warm as he stared at me, the corners of his lips twitching just a little.

"There he is. For a second there, I was worried you flew away."

I snorted.

Yeah, right.

Moving quickly through the room, I leapt over the threshold and into his arms.

He grunted and palmed my butt as he lifted me up his chest. "Careful, baby. You'll irritate your injuries."

Arms locked around his neck, I shoved my nose in the base of his throat, inhaling him. If love had a smell, *this* was it.

It was like sunshine tickling my nostrils, warmth touching my chest. My lungs stretched to make more room for it, and buried beneath all that security was a hint of something delicious that made me want to lick him all over.

How did I ask for that?

Excuse me, Daddy, I know we have a lot to talk about but I was sort of hoping you could press me against that counter over there and do inappropriate things to my body?

The tops of my cheeks warmed, the cords of my neck tightening. I felt my toes curl the same moment my thighs tightened around his waist, and then he moved.

With a kiss to my forehead, he tried to set me down in a kitchen chair. I refused to let go of him. Roman's throat vibrated when he chuckled, and he pivoted once, setting me on the edge of the table while he sat in the chair. Palms slipping up my thighs, he spread them enough that they caged either side of his upper body. My feet locked around the back of the chair, and I placed my hands on the column of his neck, sweeping my thumb across the pulse point.

He hummed. "As far as the administration knows, I have a cold. Are you sure your father won't come looking for you today?"

I hitched an eyebrow. My lips flattened as I stared at him. I wanted to ask him if he was serious... but I knew he was. Daddy didn't play games with my safety, and I saw the gravity of that hidden in the firm line of his jaw and displayed in the circles of his eyes.

My throat bobbed, and I used my finger to tap at my busted lip, attempting to convey my response. His forehead wrinkled, and though he was trying, he couldn't read the story I was struggling to tell.

Eyes closed, I took a long breath. Letters floated up my throat and piled on the tip of my tongue. I sunk my fingers into the skin around his throat, and all at once, it burst out of me.

One word.

"Daddy."

It burned a little, and I choked on the sounds. It left my lips like vomit but it tasted like relief. My chest caved in, and I said it again. “Daddy.”

It had been almost a year since I’d heard the sound of my own voice. I barely recognized it. It was soft, a little raspy and coated in glass. The syllables left my mouth one by one, and though there was some hesitancy, there was some strength too.

The fortitude was a sound that’d been missing before.

My eyes opened, greeting his shocked expression with a shy blink. His lips parted, and he shook his head, laughing into a smile. The palms he had on my thighs tightened, and I felt his muscles pulsating like they were only seconds away from busting out of his skin.

I felt a little like that too... and I thought maybe it was what joy felt like.

“H... hi.” My words were slow, and they had the inflection of a drunk robot but he didn’t seem to mind. “I’m, uh, Seb... Sebastian.”

His eyes danced, and he lurched from his chair so fast, it crashed to the floor behind him. His hands covered my cheeks, and he tipped my head up just enough to fold his lips over mine.

I hummed.

“Your voice is the sweetest goddamn song I’ve ever heard. Say something else.”

“I think... I’m a little in love with you.”

“Hell.” He growled and nibbled at my lip. “Baby, there is nothing little about the love I feel for you. My heart is damn near detonation.”

“What will I do if it blows?”

“Pick up the pieces, gorgeous. They’re yours, anyway.”

The words he spoke crashed into me like a heavy wave, sending me tumbling to the surface and gasping for breath. I’d

just remembered how to breathe again, and here he was stealing it all, pulling it from my lungs just to put it in his.

“You... you love me?”

My ears were ringing now, my heart beating too loud. I’d heard him the first time, but I needed to hear it again.

...and again.

...and again.

“So fucking much. It hit me like a bullet to the chest.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Not one bit.”

His lips fell over mine again, and his tongue came out to play, tracing the edges of my lips before sweeping into my mouth. My back arched, my chest finding his chest as a rough sound floated up my throat.

One hand anchored on his neck, I dipped the other beneath the hem of his shirt, dragging my fingers along his waistband. His muscles clenched beneath my touch, and I liked how warm his skin felt when I pressed my palm flat to his stomach and slid it toward his chest.

Daddy tore his mouth from mine, pressing our cheeks together. His breath tickled my spine, floating down the edge of my neck as he spoke. “We should talk.”

“Boo.”

“Sebastian, your father just trashed your room and assaulted you.”

“Sounds like a regular Tuesday to me.”

Palm on the back of my head, his lips fell across my temple in a whisper of a kiss. It was paradoxical, really—the way he could make me feel so many things at once.

Passion and safety.

Desire and longing.

Hurt and love.

“My... my father won't come looking for me because he told me to stay away until my lip was healed.”

“Your father is garbage. A literal pile of trash decorated with a pompous suit and ugly fucking shoes. For every place he hit you, I'll hit him twice as hard.”

My chest flapped, and my cock swelled beneath the zipper of my jeans. A whine left my throat when I rubbed it against him.

There was a difference between loneliness and being all alone. Loneliness was something to be felt, something that left your chest hollow and made your heart bleed.

I felt it.

Every day.

Body surrounded by hundreds of people, ears filled with thousands of words... I felt the same void since long before I knew what it was.

With Roman, it was different.

I was never all alone, and I certainly wasn't lonely. Even all the way across the room, when his voice was the only thing that touched me, I felt encased by him. *Protected*.

I wanted him to take me apart and piece me back together—chisel, chip, and sculpt me into the person I was always supposed to be.

“Sebastian...”

“Daddy, talking sucks. No talking. Touches only.”

“I gotta say, baby bird, I wasn't expecting you to be so bossy.”

“I like it here. Feels... safe. Warm.”

He made a noise and ran his nose along my throat. “I imagine that's why you're speaking. Your words are safe here, and something inside of you knows it. Don't be alarmed if your throat closes up again.”

I liked counselor daddy.

Counselor daddy was *smart*. He had a brain that worked at impossible speeds, and there were concepts that made sense to him that I hadn't even known existed. He understood my mutism in a way I didn't, explaining it to me with patience and grace. In an hour or so, the threat of my voice going away again would terrify me, and I'd beg for his help, but right now I just wanted *him*.

Roman Hayes.

The man that made the daddy.

I brushed my thumb over his nipple, enjoying the way he shivered under my touch.

"You want to play, baby?"

Oh, God. "Please."

He pressed a kiss to the base of my throat. "Tell me what you want."

"Uhm." I tugged on his nipple, rolling it between my fingers in a needy, nervous gesture. "I'm not... I don't really know. I've never done this before but I sort of want you to... ravish me? Like in a gentle way. Maybe touch my cock but then give me cuddles."

Daddy smiled against my skin. His lips made a trail over the column of my throat and the curve of my jaw. Long, sure fingers dipped into the curls at the base of my neck, tugging just enough to make me feel it but not hard enough to hurt. Carefully manipulating my head into the position he wanted, our mouths were just inches apart. His breath on my lips made me groan, and I swallowed his words as he spoke them.

"I'll be rough with you, sweetheart, but only in the most tender way."

His nails made a noise as he ran them up the denim wrapped around my thighs. My legs shook, heart kicking when he popped the button on my jeans. The sound of my zipper falling was the sexiest thing to ever touch my ears.

"People tried to warn me about you, baby bird. They said you were dangerous." He licked across my lips. "But did

anyone warn *you* about *me*?”

Oh, hell.

He could be the devil, and I wouldn't care. *Nope*. I'd spread my wings and follow him straight into the flames.

“I'm not built for an uncomplicated life. I like puzzles and questions. Riddles and intricate brains. There's an instability in me that craves wild, convoluted things. You make me restless, Sebastian. I am so drawn to you, I think I can actually feel myself going insane.”

His hand dipped below my waistband then, his fingers trailing the edges of my cock.

“You make me *want*, baby bird, and I'm so fucking addicted to you just *try* to run from me.”

My chest collapsed, hips thrusting as I silently begged for more. One by one, his fingers wrapped around my cock, tugging just enough that I sprang free.

Cool air touched my heated skin, sending a ripple of uncertain pleasure through each one of my nerve endings. It was almost too much for me to take, and I stared at the top of his head, gaze heavy as I watched him use his tongue to catch a bead of moisture that had slipped down the ridges of my cock.

“More.” I gasped.

Daddy licked his lips before wrapping them around me, sucking me into his throat with a deep growl. I came off the table. He was quick to slap a heavy hand on my stomach, forcing my hips still. He made a noise as though it wasn't enough, as though that first taste made him insatiable, and he'd spend the rest of his life hungry.

Something in my chest began to stir, the breath punching out of my lungs. Pieces of me fell, and when I reached out to catch them, I only found him. Fingers still latched on to his nipple, I anchored myself to his body, tangling my other hand in the collar of his shirt. I tugged him closer, forcing my cock deeper into his throat, worried he might leave before putting me back together again.

“Daddy, please.”

Panic and pleasure were a knot in my stomach, and I wasn't sure what I was begging for when I arched my back and widened my thighs. My waistband bit into my tender, flushed skin. Heat rose up my neck, leaving my mouth in harsh, unstable pants. Tears crested the corners of my eyes, and I swore I was floating. The novelty of the pleasure, the unfamiliar bliss, frightened me as much as it turned me on.

I'd never flown this close to the sky before.

The muscles in my belly tightened, my toes curling. The cords in my neck nearly burst from my skin when a groan left my throat, and I spilled across his tongue.

Jaw slack, my head rolled, but he held it steady in his palm, licking me clean and leaving a trail of wet kisses up my cock.

“You're a work of art, baby bird.” He whispered, nuzzling his nose in my neck. His tongue painted pictures in the crook of my skin, using his teeth to tug the supple flesh into his mouth. Daddy sucked as he worked, undoing his belt with an unsteady hand. I watched with a blur in my eyes, as he tugged his cock from his briefs and jerked it in perfect sync with my breaths.

I fixated on his cock, noting the veins that throbbed beneath his angry, red skin, and how much bigger it looked in his hand than mine. His balls hung heavy between his legs, swaying with the motion of his hips. Fingers leaving his nipple, I reached for them, a pathetic whine escaping my throat when I realized I was too far away.

Daddy shifted a little closer, tugging me so deep into his chest, I was no longer on the table. My legs were nearly folded in half, my muscles burning as I captured his balls in my palm and squeezed. He growled, and I felt the sharp bite of his teeth when he sank them into my neck. His lungs filled, hips faltering. His movements were jerky as he shoved my shirt up my chest, bunching it beneath my chin. I held his balls in my hand, and he emptied himself across my stomach.

I melted against his sweaty skin, pressing our foreheads together. My eyes touched his, the dark circles wild and dilated. His lips were swollen, wet with saliva that dripped down his chin. Daddy looked feral.. debauched and dirty, and *oh*, I hoped I looked the same.

I slipped my fingers across my wet stomach, dragging them through the puddle he left me. Bringing my thumb to my mouth, I painted his come across my lips and used my tongue to lick it clean. Hand on his jaw, I forced his lips on mine and gave him a taste.

His body jerked as though his knees went weak, and then he laughed. "You're going to kill me."

I hoped not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROMAN

Sebastian spent his life trapped in a labyrinth of pain, screaming at an octave nobody could hear. His wounds bled and then scabbed over, leaving scars on his skin like stars in the sky.

A person could only be stabbed so many times without dying that eventually they begged for relief.

I wondered how long Sebastian begged.

I wondered how loud he cried.

I wondered how often he bled before his scream turned to silence.

It was interesting, really, that the moment he stopped speaking was the moment someone wanted to listen—not because they wanted to hear what he had to say but because they were afraid of the words he'd eventually speak.

The littlest birds sang the scariest songs.

“I learned something in science class the other day,” he whispered, and I couldn't decide what drew me in more, the words he spoke or how he sounded.

It was like music—a timeless, sacred song, and only the most worthy of people could hear its melody.

How fucking lucky was I to be one of those people?

“Every seven years, all the cells in our body are replaced with brand new ones.” He said, dragging the pad of his finger over the wide wings of the phoenix on my arm. “It's kind of

nice, isn't it? To know one day I'll have a body he never bruised?"

Christ.

Sebastian had spent too long wondering if he was raised without love or if he was just born someone who didn't deserve it.

"Your father is heartless, Sebastian, full of all the wrong feelings. He insulted you, scarred you, broke you again and again and then expected you to respect him and act as if he deserved it. *Fuck no.* He deserves nothing."

Sebastian's finger paused in its perusal of the bird I've named him after. He shifted where he lay across my bare chest, his cheek pillowed against my shoulder. Hair fell across his eyes in a sleepy, adorable sort of way and though his vision was compromised, I never felt like he couldn't truly see me.

"He cried at Foster's funeral, did you know that? I had to stand in the very back, all alone and watch my father give a speech about a kid he didn't actually know. It was an almost believable performance, fit with phony prop tears and a box of cheap tissues. He shouldn't get to cry for Foster's death, not when he did nothing for him in life." He made a noise. "I'll bet that's what he does at my funeral."

His funeral?

"Excuse me? Are you planning on taking a quick trip to the afterlife without me?"

"I just always thought that's what would happen. I'd die, and he'd bury me in the woods next to my mother to be forgotten about. Another bird, another day."

"There are no days without you, sweetheart. None."

His lips curved upward. "I think I believe that now, and I think maybe I'll be the one at *his* funeral, a stream of fake tears on my cheeks. But I wouldn't bury him next to my mother. I'd toss him in the river or throw him off a cliff. Maybe I'd turn his ashes into fireworks and watch him blow."

"Morbid... I like it."

Me too.

A yawn tore through him, his legs seizing against mine. He grunted when he flung himself on top of me, kicking the sheets until my skin was the only thing he felt. “Your bed is the comfiest of all the beds. I never want to leave.”

“So, let’s not leave.”

“We’ll be mattress people.” He decided. “We’ll eat here, watch horrible television, and touch each other inappropriately.”

A laugh burst free of my chest.

Hell.

I wanted to fuck him breathless, and then turn around and cook for him. I wanted to leave bite marks across his neck but make sure he was emotionally stable.

“Would you like me to fetch you the remote?”

He slapped both palms on my chest. An *oomph* left him when he dragged himself to a seated position on my lap and wiggled his little hips around until he was comfortable.

My dick nearly punched out of my briefs.

“When do you have to leave?”

I frowned. “Where am I going?”

“To work? You know, the place where you earn a living so you can afford the loveliest mattresses and the best snacks.”

“Yeah, I’m not going back there, and neither are you.”

His lips parted before they closed again. Head cocked, he stared at a spot on the wall, the shutters in his eyes slamming closed. A quivering hand flew upward and wrapped around his throat. I saw the cords there tighten, and it dawned on me that his voice had left him.

“Hey.” I sat up, knees bent, one arm around his waist. I captured his cheek in my palm, sweeping my thumb across the shadowed rays of morning sun. It was peeking just slightly

through my bedroom curtains, and I don't think he noticed how drawn he was to the warmth.

I saw it last night, in the way he gravitated toward the window seat in my living room and the kitchen chair that sat parallel to a set of glass doors. Even as he crawled in my bed, wrapping himself in my skin and my sheets, he kept the curtains wide open, watching the sun until it disappeared.

“Sebastian, baby, it's okay. This is going to happen sometimes.”

Collapsing against me, he draped his arms over my shoulders, rubbing his palms over the skin of my back. His face found a home in the crook of my neck, and though he exhaled, it was unsteady. I saw his toes curl in frustration, feet flexing against a rumpled bundle of sheets.

He coughed against my skin, heaving just slightly before spitting out a single word. “Why?”

Voice cracking on the last syllable, I could only imagine what the inside of his throat looked like. The fibers swollen—throbbing and bleeding into his chest.

“Your mutism is selective and trauma-induced, baby bird. In some situations it's going to feel impossible for you to speak. Usually those circumstances, those situations, have to do with your past. Say... Ridgemont's campus, the place your father abused you? Or possibly your bedroom, the spot your best friend died? Baby, you've been living in a horror movie where the monster never dies. It's why we're not going back there. It's not safe.”

“I... I want to go back, Roman. I ha... have to.”

Shock rendered me immobile, just for a split second, then it reared back and punched me straight in the face.

“What do you mean you have to go back? Sebastian, your father is deranged. He could've killed you over two fucking canisters of old photo film.”

He peeled his face from my neck, exhaling with his chin low. Nails digging into my shoulder blades, I saw his throat working to build words. When he looked at me, I found his

gray eyes brimming with a cloudless storm. They shook with fear but pulsed with bravery.

“That’s... that’s why I have to go back. There is something in that film my father doesn’t want the world to see. Foster captured something on that camera, and now he’s dead.”

“He’s right. Arthur needs to be put down. Bullets and bombs.”

“My skin feels alive, like it’s crawling with all the words I couldn’t say, and I swear it’s trying to tell me that my father is the reason Foster fell off the balcony that day.” Tears crested the edges of his eyes, and he struggled to blink them back. One errant tear slipped over the hill of his cheek, and he swiped it away angrily.

Oh, baby bird.

“Is that why you went back to school? Why you didn’t just run away?”

“I told myself it was because I needed a diploma. What job could I get without a basic education? No college would ever accept me. Not that I have the slightest clue what I want to do, anyway.” He sniffed and used his fingers to trace the lines in my skin. It was something he did often, a way to cope when his brain got too loud.

He wasn’t ignoring the words it was saying... he was just making them quieter.

“Maybe it was actually because I never believed he fell. Maybe it was because I was angry people thought it was me, and maybe it was because I’d always been wary that my father was the one who started calling me Vicious.”

That son of a bitch...

“It makes sense now that I know about the film. If my father killed Foster over some photos, he’d do whatever it took to keep suspicious eyes off of him.” Sebastian shook his head, jaw rigid as he batted away another tear. “Arthur used me as a scapegoat so he could protect himself.”

My eye twitched, my vision blackening as I struggled not to toss Sebastian off my lap and make a fist-sized hole in the nearest fucking wall. Blood throbbed beneath my cheeks, my temperature rising enough to make me sweat. The only thing keeping me sane was his finger and the shapes it made across my skin.

“You have to go to work. We have to act like everything is normal.”

The fuck?

“Sebastian, baby, I want to curb stomp your father with a steel-toed boot.”

“Are you flirting with me, Daddy? Because it sure sounds like it.”

I licked over the bite marks I’d left across his neck last night—little love notes written in flesh. He made me promise to never let them fade.

“Does my devotion make you horny, baby?”

“A little.” He squirmed when I grazed my teeth against his skin. “I think maybe I’d like the smell of blood if it was his.”

Christ.

“You say stuff like that, gorgeous, and then expect me to walk into that school like everything’s normal.”

“We have no other choice. We can’t let him know we’re on to him. That’s like mystery 101. Haven’t you ever watched Scooby Doo?”

“The show with the talking dog?”

“The show where they rip masks off of monsters.” He cocked his head, capturing my lips before pressing our noses together. “I want to rip my father’s mask off.”

Muscles quivering, I knew he was a tangle of conflicting emotions. Anticipation and apprehension were likely eating him alive, and I knew despite his courage, there was fear buried somewhere beneath the surface.

He was worried about what we'd find on that film... but the threat of finding nothing scared him more.

“Will you help me, Daddy?”

“The man put bruises across your boy's skin. What the fuck are you gonna do about it?”

I was going to rip his skin off his goddamn body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SEBASTIAN

Silence was something you felt, not heard—like the soft wings of a bird or the seconds before you started to cry. It was a ghostly nothingness that engulfed the air and melted against your skin.

It was a sound that scarred...

... a sound that *killed*.

I think it's what Foster felt before he died, and I think, *maybe*, it's what I was feeling.

The brick walls I stood between swelled with unspoken words and well-kept secrets. It made the familiar hallway feel bigger somehow. The surface was rough as I ran my palm along it, placing one foot in front of the other. My shoes made not a single squeak—my breath not a puff.

The sconces that flanked me were unlit, which only made the quiet seem thicker—warm and over-saturated as it spread across my skin. I relied on my memory to guide me through the curved walls, as though the silence and I were playing a well-practiced game of hide and seek.

Hiding was sort of my expertise... though it wasn't all that difficult to conceal yourself in a world that had forgotten you were part of it. When no one remembered to search for me, the second part of the game became simple.

Somewhere beneath the veil of all this quiet were the answers that I sought. I was counting on their discovery to be effortless, but even if they weren't, we had a plan for that.

The military made my daddy bird somewhat of an expert in contingency plans.

The door to the basement made the faintest *click* when I tugged on the iron handle. Opening it just enough to slip through, I found myself hovering at the top of the steel staircase. Darkness surrounded me the second the door fell closed behind me. Arms above my head, my fingers grappled with the cool air, searching for a thin string. Once I found it, I wrapped my palm around it and gave it a rough tug.

Light flickered, brightening for the shortest of seconds only to dim again. It cast a rust-colored glow, descending the center of the steps as though it were a beacon of caution. Eyes closed, I took a steadying breath and followed that lonely ray of light.

With every increasing step, the chill in the air became more pronounced, billowing down the sides of my neck in waves that felt like needles poking me over and over again. My knuckles popped when I curled them into my palms, bottom lip quivering. My breath was a precarious cloud, escaping my mouth every few seconds and disappearing only inches in front of my face.

When the sole of my shoe touched down on the cement floor, it felt like I'd run a race of some sort, bursting through the ribbon at the finish line only to realize there was so much more to go.

Fingers dancing across the walls, I explored the damp surface for the hard, metal box that housed a lonely light switch. With a flick of my pointer finger, the ceiling illuminated over my head, the tubes of light buzzing softly as I studied the place Foster had made his own.

Ridgemont wasn't known for extracurriculars, or their support of any activity that made someone stand out as an individual. Creativity was a concept that frightened my father, as if he knew it was the most visionary people that could build a life out of what they wished existed.

Foster was like that.

His imagination led him into places I only dared to dream of, and his curiosity for all the things he hadn't seen left him dangerous.

He'd told me once that photos were simply return tickets back to a moment that would otherwise be lost—a time machine of sorts. *Proof* in the palm of his hands.

A month into his four-year stay, he approached the board for permission to use an empty classroom as a darkroom for developing the photos he took. They'd denied him, just like we assumed they would, though the prediction of the outcome didn't make his disappointment any less potent. His annoyance only acted as fuel, his determination the gas pedal as he scoured this oversized school and found this dingy, unused basement.

I'd only been down here a handful of times, and as I stood in the center, looking at everything he left behind, I couldn't help but feel like I was lost in a snapshot, forever stuck in a moment of the past.

An old sweatshirt was draped across a crooked, wooden stool. His favorite coffee mug sat haphazardly between two reels of film. His equipment was still spread across the table he'd built himself, waiting for him as if he never left.

The canisters in my pocket felt heavier than ever.

I stepped up to the table, pressing my palms flat against the surface, head hanging low. My lips quivered, and even as I pressed them together, that didn't stop the swell of emotion that thundered through my chest.

Tears crested the inner edges of my eyes, soaring down my cheeks with an easy blink. Through my blurred gaze, I caught sight of a photo, sitting in the center of his chaos. I saw myself staring up at me, only faintly recognizing the smile I wore. It was a rare expression, but it danced across my cheeks more often when Foster was around. In the photo, he had his arm slung over my shoulders and I had my hand curled into a fist, seconds away from slugging him in the stomach. Laughter was colored in the lines of his face, and if I listened hard enough, I could almost hear it.

My hand felt numb when I reached for the photo, my thumb brushing over my smile as I lifted it from the tabletop. Flipping it over, I saw the word he'd scrawled on the back.

Brothers.

Grief was impossibly strong, and I felt it moving through me like a sickening disease, eating me alive as I stared at those letters and the truth they held.

I had a brother... and my father killed him.

Probably.

Pressing my face into the crook of my elbow, I took several long breaths and used the fabric of my sweatshirt to soak up my remaining tears. There was a telltale pinch in my chest when I took a final sniff and carefully placed the photo I'd found in my back pocket.

I wrestled with my nerves and stiff muscles, freeing the canisters from their denim prison. The plastic bit into my skin as I squeezed them in my palm, and I felt my jaw click as I surveyed Foster's equipment.

One chance.

I had *one chance* to develop these photos without completely screwing it up.

I didn't have a lot of time, but I'd done this with Foster enough times to feel marginally confident. What I lacked in assurance, I made up for in preparedness. Roman and I spent all night researching developing techniques and watching how-to videos.

I could do this.

I *had* to.

Popping the lid of the canisters, I pinched the edge of the film roll and removed it carefully. A breath left me as I reached for a pair of scissors, cutting off the film leader the way Foster had shown me. Locating the reel's entry point was easy, and I moved with patience as I fed the film into the reel, twisting the sides until the end of the film was pulled inside. Placing the reel in the developing tank, I got to work

collecting the chemicals, measuring them with extreme precision. I was moving almost *too* slow, and I tried to steady my hands as I poured the developer in the tank.

The lights above my head flickered, and I cast a glance at the ceiling. Roman was several floors above me, sitting politely in a conference room with the rest of Ridegemont's staff. I thought maybe his ears were bleeding as he listened to my father drone on about the rest of the year's budget and all the progressive teaching techniques the state suggested we implement.

Arthur held this meeting every quarter, on a Sunday afternoon. Daddy bird thought it'd be the perfect time for me to develop Foster's photos. Not only because the school would be empty, but because he felt better about me walking these halls with my father in his line of sight.

The plan was for me to develop the negatives, wait for them to dry, and then meet him in his office.

Roman had been in counselor daddy mode *all* night.

I think he was rather nervous about how these photos would affect me, and how I might react to what they would reveal.

I was more concerned about him going rogue.

It'd be a miracle if Roman sat through a four-hour meeting without punching Arthur square across the jaw.

Not that I'd mind... but it wouldn't bode well for the covert-level mission we were attempting.

I'd missed the entire week of school, spending my afternoons wandering around Roman's house, reading books and studying. He'd gone back to work after the first day we spent together, feigning oblivion when my father fed him some line about me having the stomach flu.

My lip was mostly healed. The bruises had faded and the swelling went down. All that remained was a small, inflamed patch of skin that nobody would notice because nobody ever looked at me.

Removing the film from the developing tank, I tugged it slowly from the reel, using a sponge to absorb any excess water. The string Foster had hung rested at the tip of my nose. It was frayed, and I noticed patches of mold roped into the fabric when I hung the negatives with old clothespins he'd stolen from the campus laundry room.

And then... I waited.

The tips of my fingers were pruny, and I picked at their hardened edges as I sat along the wall, glaring at the photos as though my impatience would make them dry faster.

The constant buzzing of the lights felt louder now than it did several minutes ago, and my ears seemed to fixate on it. My brain throbbed with every jolt, and I slapped my palms over my ears, damping the sound as I looked around the room. I struggled to remember my best friend without an unsteady pulse of anger or a terrain of grief that felt too deep to escape from.

Foster's photos were all that was left of him now, like little footprints on the earth, showing the world where he'd been and all the places he wanted to go.

His parents were like all the rest of ours in that they didn't actually know who he was or all that he aspired to be.

It was... absurd.

More so, it was *sad*.

Foster was a heart on his sleeve kind of guy. He didn't hide who he was, and if you wanted to see even a piece of his soul, all you had to was *look*.

I think maybe that's part of the reason he's dead.... because nobody ever cared enough to look.





My sneakers clapped against the floor as I ran, the uneven sound bouncing off the brick walls and hitting me twice as hard in the chest. I didn't care much for being quiet... not anymore. My chest seized, throat spasming as air tried to punch free of my lungs, only to swell and get trapped inside. The walls on either side of me moved like waves beneath my vision, as though my brain lacked what it needed to focus. Color swarmed me, but it was all a blur—as though I was no longer capable of *seeing*.

Sweat covered my skin, dripping down my neck and pooling against my palms in a way that made me shiver. When a wave of dizziness swept over me, I nearly tripped over the feet I could no longer feel.

My fingers were weighted, and when they tingled, I wondered if they were even part of my body anymore. I was littering this hallway with all the pieces of myself, my limbs abandoning me the same way my breaths did.

The photos I held at my chest felt like a bomb, ticking louder the fast I ran. The edges slipped against my palm when I rounded a bend in the wall, and I worried if I dropped even one this whole place would blow.

Boom.

I burst into Daddy's office, the heavy door crashing against the wall behind it. My ears couldn't distinguish the sound from the thud Daddy's chair made as it fell to the floor. I saw his lips move right before I collapsed to my knees. One hand tearing at the carpet, I pressed the other to my chest, seizing the fabric that covered it.

I couldn't breathe.

Photos, *my proof*, flew through the air like crooked wings, scattering across the space. Daddy's hand was a beacon, reaching for me as it struggled to pull me from the weight I was buried under.

My throat worked, a harsh, inaudible cry ripping from my lungs when I tore so hard at the carpet, my fingers began to bleed.

Help me.

Help me.

Help me.

Death was here, dragging me into a place that felt more hole than home. My voice broke again, and I struggled to tell Daddy to call somebody. *Anybody.*

The cops.

An ambulance.

A fucking heart surgeon.

“Sebastian.” He wrapped himself around me, forcing my empty body into his lap. His palm was heavy as it fell against the side of my head. Familiar lips fluttered against a spot in the middle of my forehead, and then he was pressing my ear to the center of his chest. “You’re okay. I promise you’re okay. I’m here with you. Just focus on my breaths, baby, count my heartbeats.”

My vision blurred and sobs wracked my chest, quivering against my lips in a way my words refused to. The shirt he wore was wet with my tears by the time I could start counting the throb I felt beneath it.

One... Two... Three...

“You’re having a panic attack, baby bird. They’re horrible, and they feel like the end, but I promise they’re not. Hang in there, sweetheart. I’m going to help you through this.”

Four... Five... Six...

Reaching for his arm, I wrapped my fingers around the warm, familiar skin. I focused on the colors I saw there and tracing the pretty patterns.

Seven... Eight... Nine...

My own heart knocked against my ribcage, and I rotated just slightly, pressing my chest to Daddy's so our hearts lined up. With my nose in his neck, I breathed through my mouth and tried to get my beats to sync with his.

Ten... Eleven... Twelve...

“That’s it, baby. Just breathe.”

He swept his palms down my back, lifting the hem of my sweatshirt just enough to press the pad of his fingers into the soft skin.

My own fingers dug into the space at the nape of his neck, fixating on the way his hair felt against my skin. Bit by bit, my limbs returned to me, and I couldn’t help but notice how lethargic they felt—how tired and overworked they were for doing absolutely nothing.

Oxygen tasted like luxury as I dragged it back into my lungs, exhaling large enough to shift against Daddy’s lap. Eyes filled with tears, the objects I saw still seemed blurry, but they’d stopped moving at a pace I couldn’t keep up with.

“I think you’re stuck, gorgeous. Half a breath between the hurting and the healing but I promise I’m going to get you to the other side.”

I draped myself over him, clutching the back of his shirt. My lips moved to tell him I loved him but when no sound came out, I drew the letters across his shoulder blades.

“I love you too, baby bird.”

We stayed like that for a while; him rocking me back and forth, whispering vows of love and pledges of protection. I felt his sweet nothings move through me as if my ear was connected to my heart, and each time I heard his voice, it was a bit easier to breathe.

Daddy didn’t mention the photos on the floor, but I knew he saw what they captured... *the truth*.

My father killed Foster Lake... and he was coming for me next.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROMAN

Humans were like the moon in that they had to go through phases of nothingness, *emptiness*, before they could feel whole again.

It was a process that was misunderstood by most, something that prioritized the hurt over the heal.

Witnessing my baby bird's suffering—*watching* him wrestle with a voidness that left him barren and confused was like watching myself bleed out.

It was excruciating...

...never ending.

His wound leaked for hours, seeping a sense of security and a wave of emotional turbulence that left him grappling for pieces of reassurance.

I gave him every one I had.

I filled Sebastian's wounds with my blood and bandaged his scars with what was left of mine.

It didn't feel like enough...

... and I wondered if anything ever felt like enough when you loved someone as insanely and infinitely as I loved him.

"Daddy bird?"

I spun. Coffee sloshed over the rim of my mug, dribbling down my knuckles. "Good morning, sleepyhead."

Sebastian grinned at me, and then yawned into his palm as he made his way into the kitchen. A blanket was draped over his shoulders, and he tugged it tighter around his upper body before lifting himself into a stool. “Do you know the best part about your bed?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s mine too.”

Fuck yes it was.

I smiled and placed my mug in front of him. Dropping a kiss to the tip of his nose, I tapped the ceramic edge of it. “Everything in this house is yours now, sweetheart. Forever.”

He caught my hand, tugging it into his chest. “Including you?”

“Always me.”

He made an adorable noise before bringing my hand to his lips. One by one he sucked each of my fingers into his mouth, ridding them of coffee stains and making my cock swell.

“Coffee tastes better off your skin, Daddy bird.”

“Tempt me, baby, and I’ll start bathing in it.”

He laughed.

The sound nearly brought me to my knees.

My baby bird was born in a cage, and the most important thing I’d ever done was bust that lock and set him free.

“How are you feeling this morning?”

Pale fingers wrapped around the sides of the mug I’d given him, and he stared up at me with thin eyes. “Are you going to ask me that every morning, counselor?”

“That’s more probable than not,” I said, resting my elbows against the counter’s edge. I didn’t bother getting another cup of coffee. My boy preferred to share. “It might be the psychologist in me, or maybe it’s just because I’m psychotically in love with you.”

“Psychotically? Daddy, I think you need to make an appointment with yourself.”

“I’m past curing, sweetheart. Now, tell me, how are you doing?”

“I’m okay.” Lifting a shoulder in a shrug, he set the mug on the counter and used two fingers to push it toward me. “It’s been two days.”

“Just because it’s over doesn’t mean it left nothing behind.”

“Poison.” He whispered. “That’s what it felt like. A slow death, and the only thing that made it marginally better was you. You’re like an anecdote for darkness.”

Christ.

“Everything got better when I met you, and there may not be a voice in my head, but there’s a feeling in my chest that’s screaming at me to never let go.”

“As if we would ever let him go anywhere.”

I was *this close* to just tearing my heart from my chest and handing it to him. He could put the damn thing on a stake and carry it around if it made him feel even one percent more secure.

“With you and I, baby, there’s no such thing as letting go. I promise.”

His chin dipped in a slow nod, and he pushed his hand through his hair. A breath big enough to rattle his bones left his chest, and he cast a narrow glance at the dining room table.

Thirteen.

There were *thirteen* images of Arthur St. James spread across that smooth surface, each one more telling than the last.

We’d made copies...

... and more copies

... and more copies.

Some were locked in our bedroom safe, others in a safe deposit box three towns over. I'd even mailed a stack to my parents' house and instructed them to stash it in a guarded, secure place.

Sebastian slipped off his stool and padded his way across the kitchen. Raising a hand to his mouth, he gnawed at the edges of his fingers as he peered down at the evidence he'd found.

"You know, I knew when I developed these that there would likely be evidence that pointed us toward my father, but I guess I... wasn't as prepared as I thought."

"*Assuming* your father might've had something to do with Foster's death is inherently different from *knowing*. Something in you hoped it wasn't true, and when it was, it rattled you."

"It *scared* me," he corrected. "Like full on jumped out of the closet, ripped my lungs from my chest, and beat them against that ugly basement floor."

Stepping up behind him, I wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him back into my chest. Pressing a kiss to the base of his neck, I forced his bloodied fingers from his teeth. "Stop scarring yourself. It's not a healthy coping mechanism."

"Well, excuse me, counselor daddy. My best friend is dead, my father is printing fake money, and my skin feels like it's going to slip off my bones and stick to the floor like something from a low budget horror movie. If it weren't for you, I'd probably be comatose on the cement ground."

"You're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for, baby bird." Positioning his hand at my wrist, I encouraged him to trace my tattoos. He left a thin trail of blood behind as he did so, but like I told him before, I didn't mind wearing his pain.

"I'm sorry if you felt like I was downplaying how you must be feeling. When Charlie died, I felt like I was being torn apart. The lack of closure, the unanswered questions, it all felt like a tornado designed to rip my limbs off one by one."

He angled his head just slightly, pressing a tender kiss to the center of my chest. “I’m sorry you went through that all alone.”

“It led me to you, sweetheart, and that’s all I really give a shit about.”

“Does it make me completely deranged to love when you say stuff like that?”

“Baby, if you’re deranged, there’s absolutely no hope for me.”

He grinned against my skin, and we stood there for a moment, bathing in silence and the comfort of each other’s embrace. His hands kept busy, circling my tattoos and playing with my knuckles. Looping his fingers with mine, he squeezed once before they danced across my palm and drew shapes against the lines he found there.

The photos laid out before us were like a simple storybook, one he’d read too many times, fit with missing chapters and an ending that broke his heart every damn time.

It sat abandoned for nearly two days after the first read through. He’d left it behind to process—to work through what it was telling him and the all horrific yet relieving things it made him feel.

He processed with puzzles. With math problems. With long showers and songs without words. He processed by hiding in those hallowed halls and mid-day blow jobs on the couch in my office.

He processed by wearing the truth against his skin until he’d absorbed it completely and was finally ready to tear it back out.

“These photos don’t even incriminate my father.” He spat. “Not in the way that matters most.”

“Foster captured real, shot for shot images of your father breaking the law. Six days later, he was found dead. His death might not be displayed across these photos but they sure as shit offer probable cause for questioning.”

“This is... a lot.” He sucked his lips into his mouth, eyes slipping shut before popping right back open. “I didn’t really have expectations for what I’d find on that film but this feels like more. Bigger. *Huge.*”

It was fucking massive—a colossal sized cluster fuck that went deeper than your average homicide.

Sitting in the nearest chair, I pulled him into my lap. His hand shot to his mouth, but I caught it, loosely twisting his wrist and capturing it inside my palm. Forcing the misbehaving hand between my thighs, it became my prisoner.

“Daddy,” he whined.

“If you want to bite, bite me.” I wedged my pointer finger between his lips. “You’re done bleeding.”

He made a noise low in his throat before dragging his teeth over the top layer of my flesh. The faint lick of pain sent a jolt straight to my cock.

Trailing my nose over the column of his neck, I inhaled him, sinking my teeth into the supple skin before licking over the indents I created. An adorable cooing burst from his lips, making him sound every bit like the bird he was.

“I’m glad I’m not dead yet,” he said, and I about fell off the fucking chair.

“What are you talking about?”

Sebastian placed a hand against one photo, tapping his father’s face with the tip of his finger. “I think... I think my father believes I’ve known this whole time. About Foster. This money scheme. He hasn’t come after me because I haven’t been able to talk. My silence saved my life.”

Fuck.

I tasted blood on my tongue, jaw ticking as it ran down my throat.

“I’m talking now, but put me back in that school and I swear my mouth forgets it has a tongue.”

“If he’s waiting for you to talk, it’s better that you don’t. At least until it’s taken care of.”

“Bullets and bombs.”

“How are we supposed to take care of this, Roman? My father committed a federal crime.” He jerked his hand in front of him, waving it around in a circle. “Who the hell even are these people?”

“Ridgemont alumni.”

“Somehow that makes this so much worse.”

Sebastian may have needed time to cope with the truth the pictures painted... but not me. I’d worn my keyboard down, researching until all hours of night, staring at a computer screen until my eyes bled, and then staring at those photos until it dried against my cheeks.

Foster Lake had stumbled upon an extensive, well-run counterfeit ring. Arthur was facilitating the printing and distribution of fraudulent money. He was running it out of an old campus laundry building—one we’d all assumed was being used for overflow storage.

The faces of former Ridgemont students were etched all over the evidence. Some were as young as graduating two years ago. Other’s graduations dated back as far as twenty-two years.

Arthur had built himself an empire of corruption, and he’d staffed it with all the kids he’d taken an oath to protect.

Sebastian rubbed at the wrinkles in his forehead. “Do you think the board knows about this?”

Arm brushing the table’s edge, my fingers walked across several photos until they’d found the one they were searching for. I pinched it between my thumb and forefinger and set it in front of Sebastian.

His jaw dropped. “That’s Frank DuMont. The—”

“Board president, I know.”

Though the photos were in black and white, their faces were as clear as day, each feature a little more prominent than the one above it. Their eyes each glowed with the hint of a riddle, as if they both knew an answer the whole world had been searching for.

Foster had managed to capture the moment they shook hands, and I could almost feel the air of respect they had for each other and the grandiose way they saw themselves.

“President DuMont has been in his position for like eight years longer than my father has been headmaster. That could mean they’ve been running this thing for decades. What the hell are they doing with all that money? It’s not like the school has had any upgrades.”

“Your father is likely running this across state lines. Out of the country, for all we fucking know.”

An expert in money laundering, I was not.

I couldn’t be certain what Arthur did with the money he printed, but it didn’t fucking matter.

He’d murdered a kid...

He’d put his fucking hands on my baby bird and drew blood from his beak...

Men like him were *exactly* who I was trained to kill.

“We have to go to the police!” Sebastian’s hands shot out, gripping the edge of the table so hard it shook. “We have to go to the police, show them the photos, and tell them about Foster before my father figures out we’re onto him. He’s going to come for me, Roman.”

“He can try.”

“If that man takes even one goddamn step in your direction, I will put him flat on his trouser covered ass.”

Sebastian grinned.

“And we can’t go to the police. Not yet.”

He leapt off my lap, the blanket around his shoulders falling to heap at his bare feet. Chest collapsing, his mouth

gaped as he stared at me with a fresh sheen of tears in his eyes. “You... you promised you would help me!”

“I’m going to help you, baby bird. I promise.” Wrapping my fingers around his slim hips, I tugged him between my legs and dropped a kiss to his stomach. “If your father has been doing this for decades, it’s obvious he’s smarter than we’d both like to admit. He could have police on his payroll, possibly somebody in the mayor’s office. This whole town could be funded illegally. We have to be careful about who we trust.”

Chin dropping, he pressed his forehead to the top of my head. I felt his breath across my scalp. “What do we do?”

“We need to be patient. We can’t take down a twenty-year operation in a day. Give me some time to think, make some calls. In the meantime, keep your head down, avoid your father, and don’t go anywhere alone.”

He palmed my neck. “Valentine’s day is in ten days, Roman. How do you expect me to do this? To ignore everything he’s done? If he didn’t kill Foster then he knows who did, and *still* he’s going to stand in front of the community and unveil a memorial for a kid he could’ve saved but didn’t.”

It was a lofty level of fucked up—as morbid as it got—to host a memorial for a man you murdered on a day dedicated to love.

It didn’t feel fair to ask Sebastian to pretend like he’d never found a ticket out of this nightmare, but I was licensed for war. *Trained* for combat and bloodshed.

He just had to trust me.

“We’re in our own little unit now, baby bird. Do you trust me?”

“With everything.”

“Then I’ll get us out of this. I promise.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Love was a funny thing—this idea of giving someone the power to destroy you but trusting them not to.

I trusted my daddy bird... it was *me* I had less faith in.

There's always talk, this murmur of sorts, that excuses the lack of trust in others and makes it something acceptable.

Especially when you've been hurt...

... over

.... and over

... and over again.

But rarely does anyone speak about how difficult it is to trust yourself after a decade of condescending comments, minimized opinions, and undermined gut instincts by the one person who was supposed to be programmed for protection.

Daddy bird was resolute. Unshakeable. He was everything my father wasn't, and the clear juxtaposition between the two made it easy for me to run to him. Daddy's actions were kind, his tongue told no lies. His fists bled for me rather than because of me. He was the protector I'd been waiting for, and I recognized him almost instantly.

My father was a villain that acted as a hero, and Roman was a hero that took the role of villain—a part he played just for me. While Arthur fled Hell, feigning as though he wasn't its creator, Daddy let the flames touch his skin and learned how to survive inside of it.

I survived too, but I did it by hiding, and now that I was ready to fight, I wasn't sure I knew how to.

If Daddy was the hero, and Arthur was the villain... then who the hell was I?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ROMAN

He was radiant—beautifully out of place in this sacrilegious prison. His skin was extra pale today, porcelain and ghostly in a way that made the tint of his lips look bloody. The bottom one was plump, swollen and bruised as though he'd been gnawing it all day.

I wanted to suck it into my mouth.

Curls danced across the tight skin of his forehead, the ends tangling with his eyelashes. Nimble fingers flicked the wayward strands out of the way, and our eyes locked.

“Baby bird,” I greeted.

He made an ugly sound, lips curling. With a violent swing of his foot, my office door slammed hard enough to shake the frames on my walls.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Hard day?”

He'd been... restless.

Fidgety.

Anxious.

He rarely slept unless he was tangled between all my limbs. Eating was a challenge, and when we were home, he refused to let me out of his sight. The neediness was fucking cute, but the rest of it made me want to vomit.

Sebastian was suffering, and each day that went by without consequences for his father, his misery stained him a little darker.

The inactivity was practically killing him, and I died a little every night just to make sure he kept breathing.

Arthur was competent—a skilled, capable criminal with an organization that typically took governments years to take down properly.

Lucky for us, I didn't care much for protocols and bullshit red tape.

I cared for Sebastian... and taking out the man who'd hurt him.

“Forever.”

My baby wouldn't have to pretend for much longer, and for every piece he lost during this process, I gave him one of mine.

“Sweetheart, I'm—”

Thud.

His backpack fell to the floor haphazardly, the contents spilling across the stained carpet. One foot in front of the other, he stalked toward my desk, jaw twitching hard enough to punch through skin.

“Sebastian?”

Lips parting, he struggled to speak, and a harsh growl ripped through the depth of his chest when he slapped his palms against the surface of my desk and thumbed through all my files.

“Whatever you're looking for, baby, you can have.”

You can have *everything*.

The gray in his eyes darkened to a cloudless, midnight sky. One by one, his features pinched together, and he mumbled something under his breath before reaching for a pen.

Fingers flexing, he popped each of his knuckles before wrapping them around the curve of the pen. Sebastian used the tip to flip open a file, acting as though the papers inside were riddled with poison and seasoned to kill.

Slashing sounds touched my ears when he made aggressive, uneven strokes against the pages. When the pen touched the name of the patient, Sebastian pressed so hard, his knuckles whitened and ink bled across the page, blurring the name.

He made a satisfied sound, flipping the file closed with a smack of his lips. There was a bounce in his step when he flicked it off the edge of my desk and watched as it dropped into the trashcan below. The pen was tossed next, and when he caught sight of the ink staining his palm, he smeared it down the leg of his jeans.

I cleared my throat. “Do you... have a problem with Dimitri, sweetheart?”

He nodded.

My pulse jumped. “Has he hurt you?”

Sebastian shook his head, then nodded, then shook his head again. I followed his eyes as they touched my chest and then the door.

Ah.

“You don’t like that he’s my patient.”

His thumb lifted in a half-hearted thumbs up, lips thinning as he walked around my desk and plopped his ass right on top of it. The soles of his shoes settled on either side of my chair, finding a home against the armrests. Looping his ankles around the handles, he gave a light tug until the distance between us was nonexistent.

His muscles vibrated beneath my palms when I wrapped them around his inner thighs and rubbed them up and down.

“Are you jealous, baby bird?”

His throat worked, lips open and closing. A vein in the column of his neck throbbed with each breath that escaped him and after a beat, he could speak. “Jea... Jealousy implies wanting something I don’t have. I have you. So, I suppose that makes me territorial.”

I bit back a laugh.

“He’s just a patient, gorgeous.”

“I was just a patient once.”

“*The fuck?*”

“No, Sebastian. You weren’t.” Rising from my seat, I planted my hands on either side of his hips, caging him with my upper body. His chest knocked against mine, and I felt his little gasp floating across my cheek. “You were a force. An unstoppable wave of desire and passion. I wanted you before I met you, and now that I have you, I crave the taste of you every second we’re apart. You were never just a patient, baby bird, you were mine. Always. Right from the start.”

He fucking whimpered.

Body sagging, he melted against the surface of my desk, head falling just enough to display the length of his throat. I licked along the ridges of it, enjoying the way he squirmed beneath me before sinking my teeth into the newly flushed skin.

“I... I just want to paint myself all over you. I want to mark you. Scar you. Tattoo my name across that bird on your arm so everybody knows that you’re my daddy. *Mine.*”

“You can light me on fire, sweetheart, burn your initials into the skin covering my heart. Whatever the fuck you want.”

A shiver tore through his lithe body. Spine curving, he rubbed himself over me like a kitten begging to play.

Wetting my lips, I folded them over his mouth and whispered against panting breaths, “do you want something, baby bird?”

“Take me apart,” he begged. “Rip me to pieces and then put me back together.”

My fucking pleasure.

Anchoring my hands to his hips, my nails bit into the delicate skin. The moon-shaped indent it left behind made my cock jump behind my zipper. Sebastian loved when I marked him—when I left trails of my obsession across his skin for him to find and stare at later.

He yelped when I flipped him, and I slid my palms down his quivering arms, knotting my fingers in his and guiding his hands to the edges of the desk.

“You’re going to want to hold on to something.”

His grip tightened, and he forced his ass against my cock in a needy, eager motion that made me want to spank him and praise him all at once.

Fingers in his hair, I forced his head backward and nibbled along the shell of his ear. “I’m going to give you what you want, baby. You don’t have to beg but I sure fucking like when you do.”

“Daddy…”

“You sound so pretty when you say my name.”

Lips on his jaw, I sucked the skin into my mouth until he whined for me.

“More. Please.”

His cheeks were glowing with rose-colored desire, pillowed against the hardtop of my desk. Lips wet, he gasped for me, eyes wide and eager as he waited for me to claim him.

It was like falling to my knees—each touch a prayer, each kiss a vow. He was my ritual, the only fucking faith I believed in.

My fingers were on his waistband now, toying with the button there. A smile tugged at his cheeks, and he moaned at the sound of his own zipper.

“Are your undies all wet, sweetheart? Have you been leaking for me?”

He whimpered when he nodded, his eyes glassy and breath labored.

“You’re falling apart already, and I’ve barely touched you.”

I tugged his pants down just far enough to expose his rounded, supple bottom. With one finger, I traced the curves of it, bending just enough to take a bite out of one cheek.

He made a choking sound.

I grinned.

Dropping to my knees, I gripped his cheeks and pried them open, exposing his hole. Lips puckered, I blew across the tight space. His poor legs shook on either side of me, groaning when I licked over his rim.

He blubbered something unintelligible when I dipped my tongue inside of him, fucking in and out in a smooth, relentless motion. He nearly came off the table when I wrapped a sure arm around his waist and captured his balls in my palm, tugging and kneading.

Dragging a lonely finger down his crack, I removed my tongue to tap twice at his hole, growling at the sight of it glistening and coated in my saliva. I was gentle when I pushed my finger inside of him, pumping at a pace that both thrilled and infuriated him.

He came up on his toes, rocking back and forth, hips wiggling as he forced my finger further into his body.

“Slow down, baby bird. I got you.”

I slipped free of his body. His desperate, unhappy whimper made my knees weak. One hand still toying with his balls, I used the other to unzip my pants, freeing my cock. I swept the bead of come off the reddened tip and slathered it over his hole.

I smiled.

I fucking liked when he was wet with me.

Fumbling for my pocket, I tore my wallet free and captured two packets of lube between my teeth. I ripped them open. The lube was cold against my skin, and I rubbed it between my fingers, warming it just a little before pressing those two fingers against his hole. I tapped once, asking for permission. Back arched, he relaxed for me, pulling my fingers into his body with a pleased sound.

I folded my chest over his back, capturing his earlobe between my lips. “Are you going to make a mess for me,

baby? Come all over Daddy's desk? Will that help you feel better? Remind you that the only lips I want on my skin are yours?"

Hand around his cock, I stroked him in time with the thrusts of my fingers.

"Da... Daddy..."

"That's right, baby. Clench down on my fingers. Make a mess all over my knuckles. I want to feel your come dripping down my fingers. I want to taste it on my tongue and smell it in the air whenever I sit down in my fucking chair.

"Ohmygod."

His legs went rigid, mouth opening in a silent scream when he erupted over my hand, muscles pulling taut.

"Good boy."

"Only boy." He groaned, his hole fluttering around my fingers.

Eyes falling closed, he went boneless against my desk. The back of his neck was coated in a sheen of sweat that glistened against the dull glow of my lamps. I lapped it up with my tongue before sucking him off my fingers. The taste of his pleasure made my eyes roll. I smeared what was left across my aching cock, using it to jerk myself.

My fingers stayed lodged inside of his ass, and when I tried to free them he shook his head. His eyes opened and quickly darkened when he caught sight of my rigid dick.

"Put it inside me," he demanded. "Please."

"Baby, we haven—"

"We've been tested. We've had the talk. You finger fuck me every night in bed. Please, Daddy. Please, fuck me. You promised to take me apart."

Christ.

"You want to get fucked, sweetheart? Alright." I continued to spread his come over the length of my cock. "Then Daddy's going to use his baby's come to fuck this sweet little hole."

I teased the head against him. Liquid dripped off the tip, and I watched with tunnel vision his hole spasm, desperately trying to lock me inside of him.

“Ask me nicely.”

I barely recognized the inflection of my voice—the needy, wanton way I spoke to him.

“Please? Please, fuck me with your baby’s come?”

Fucking hell.

Nostrils flaring, I growled, slapping a heavy hand on his lower back, anchoring him in place while I eased my way inside of him.

“Oh, god.” His spine curled. “Daddy... fuck.”

“You doing okay, baby?”

“More, please. Don’t stop. *God.*”

I moved until I was fully seated, my balls resting against the firm curve of his ass. His chest lifted and fell with labored, uneven breaths. Hips rocking, he tested my length.

“I... I like how full of you I feel. Like we’re tethered. Unescapable.”

I kissed his sweaty cheek and licked the tear that crested his eyes.

“Will you move now?” He rasped. “Please?”

Hand around his dick, I tugged in time with my thrusts. Flames started at the base of my spine, tearing through each of my limbs. My balls drew up tight, teeth grinding together as I struggled to breathe.

“Make me another mess, baby.”

He howled, and I felt his dick swell right before a warm rush of come flooded my palm. I brought it to my face, inhaling his musk while I chased my release. Toes curling, my neck pulsed, and I came with a low groan.

“Daddy, I can feel you.”

My grin was lazy as I slowed my thrusts, milking it for just a moment before pulling free. Come slipped from his wet hole, dribbling down his inner thigh. I captured the liquid with the pad of my finger and shoved it back inside of him.

“You keep that in there, sweetheart.”

Lips tugging upward, he became one with the table. “We’ll have to be mattress people for sure now. I’ll never walk again.”

I laughed and kissed the spot behind his ear. “Are you okay, though? No pain?”

“No pain.” He confirmed. “I’m perfect.”

... and all *mine*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SEBASTIAN

I was afraid of my own heart... of all the things it hoped for but never got...

... of its never-ending longing for a touch of kindness—*something* that could fill all its empty spaces.

It was bleeding for something it'd never have, thumping anxiously and precariously.

Searching.

It wasn't until I'd met Roman that I realized those stilted beats and periods of yearning were just my heart readying itself for the one getting ready for me.

I think maybe it waited my entire life for this day... the one dedicated to honoring love. The day it could praise the universe and whatever deity was living inside Roman's head, whispering the steps he needed to take to bring him straight to me.

Instead... my heart was quaking. Dripping with blood and tears. It'd spent *years* waging a war within itself, battling opposing sides of love and grief.

Love should've been triumphant.

Every day, but today especially, love should've been the victor... yet all it beat for was grief.

... and a sliver of anger that made me want to scream.

“You didn't come when I called for you.”

I solidified.

Agile, icy fingers draped themselves over the nape of my neck, squeezing my pulse point until tears filled the corners of my eyes.

“Sebastian.”

He always did this... came at me from behind, as though my fear was some kind of twisted game. As a child I used to believe he lived in the shadows, but I knew now that he controlled them.

It's why I'd never been able to escape.

“I don't like being ignored.” He seethed.

Drops of his spit dotted the back of my neck and curve of my jaw. The liquid was warm as it slid across my skin, but still I shivered. It made me feel... unkempt. Unclean. Utterly and impossibly *gross*.

“Do you know who I am?”

The headmaster?

My sperm donor?

I couldn't be certain which answer he sought... so I waited, bones rigid and muscles unmoving so as not to agitate the hand he had around my throat.

“Did you not receive my message?”

Oh, I'd gotten the message my English teacher placed in the corner of my desk—the one from the headmaster's office, demanding my presence at his desk.

I simply... disregarded it.

It was almost fortuitous that I was incapable of speaking in his company, because what was I even supposed to say?

My daddy told me not to go anywhere near you, you abusive, murderous son of a bitch?

I didn't imagine those words would bode well for me or my seizing windpipe.

Nostrils flaring, I grappled with my breaths. My fingers twitched anxiously at my sides, my eyes pinging from one

corner to the other, perilously searching for a human my father respected more than me. One that would force his mask back in place.

I found no one.

Not a soul.

These halls were as desolate as ever, concealed by the darkness he'd crafted under greed and malice.

“Pathetic.” He snarled.

His grip tightened, pulling an ugly cough from my throat seconds before he shoved me.

Hands surging forward, I landed on my palms, my knees hitting the cement with an unpleasant *crack*.

A wince ripped through my muscles, and I felt a notable lick of pain spread through my thighs before scrambling to my feet.

Arms around my middle, I dipped my chin and backed away from him one step at a time. It was a technique I'd learned in biology... the same one humans used when they came in contact with a wild animal looking to strike.

His cruel laugh filled the narrow space, and though I avoided looking him in the eye, I saw the rings on his fingers and the way he twisted them in anticipation.

I wondered if he ever washed my blood off them... or if he kept my pain as some sort of trophy.

“Foster's memorial reveal is this afternoon. I've come to remind you how distasteful your presence would be.”

God.

I hated him... and I hated how even after all this time, his words still hurt me.

“I've given each student a rose to honor both Foster's memory and the holiday. I thought it rather appropriate.” His grin was that of a cartoon, oversized and cringe worthy.

It was absurd, laughable even.. but I knew the soul that had sewn that smile was the same one that murdered my best friend.

It wasn't comedy... it was insanity.

His head cocked, and he ran his tongue over his teeth, lifting his wrist to tap at the face of his expensive watch. "Not too long before the memorial begins. I best make my way to the podium. Happy Valentine's Day, Vicious."

And then... he was gone.

Shoes echoing off the disheveled brick walls, figure disappearing into the shadows.

Arthur left me alone with my fear.

Abandoned with my thoughts.

Possessed by my anger and a savagery I inherited from him.

If I was Vicious... it's because he made me this way.

The temperature of my blood rose several degrees and now it was I who felt like a cartoon, ears red and hair flaming. My muscles tightened in assurance and a readiness to disobey.

Toes curling, I took a charged breath and pivoted once, starting down the hall with determination and uncertainty flanking my steps.

The entire student body was predicted to attend Foster's memorial, as was the staff and most of the local community. I was the one cast out, and until now, I'd planned to spend those sixty minutes alone in Daddy's office, drawing pictures of birds and feeling sorry for myself.

Not anymore.

Perhaps, my presence would create a charge of negativity, but I was aware of a way I could bear witness to that memorial and the garden his soul had been put to rest in.

It was the best view that Ridgemont had to offer... and it just so happened to be the place he died.





I wasn't a corpse... but I rotted like one beside him.

Stained with his blood and the scars his death made, I sat with my knees on the pavement that night and my palm over his still heart.

His eyes were frozen in panic, bloodless lips forever parted in a silent scream. It was an image that visited me often and each time felt exactly the same.

Sharp.

Breathless.

Like a wound that refused to heal, forever bleeding and forever stinging.

I felt it burning in the center of my chest and the rough skin lining the hands that couldn't save him. The hands that weren't fast enough, weren't skilled enough to get that blood back in his head and make him breathe again.

Every once in a while, my nose caught a whiff of the stench, drifting so far down my throat I could nearly taste its iron-like potency.

It was hard to discern memory from reality.

The past blurred the lines of the present as I stood out on that balcony. An angry gust of wind blew through me, stinging my cheeks and upper lip. Behind me, the glass doors flapped with each violent gust, caution tape billowing like an untied ribbon.

My fingers were colorless against the concrete railing they were glued to. Chin low, I stared down at the faded stain his blood left behind. Vision blurring, my eyelashes caught my tears before releasing them down my cheeks in a steady stream of pain. Like rain, they soiled whatever they touched.

My father's voice rang out across the campus, amplified by the crowd and the microphone poised at his lips. I almost couldn't hear the words he spoke over the sound of my heart beating or the clock I used to call home.

Tick. Tock.

Vomit churned low in my gut, burning my insides and the back of my throat. I gagged on every word my father spoke, choking on his feigned grief and the speech he gave about loss.

Arthur didn't give a shit about loss.

He'd only ever cared about life.

One life. *His.*

The applause was loud enough to crack the atmosphere, tearing through the solemn ceremony and turning it into one of celebration. My father stood beaming at the students circling him. They were lined throughout rows of freshly planted flowers in a meticulous, cult-like fashion.

From my spot on the balcony, they appeared like tiny soldiers—same apathy mask, same fake smile, and same displaced hate for an enemy they knew nothing about.

I couldn't see my daddy bird from here, but I knew he was somewhere amongst the well-rehearsed anarchy.

Camera flashes lit up the otherwise foggy sky, capturing the moment my father so graciously relinquished his spot at the podium to offer space for grieving students.

One girl had written a poem... I wasn't sure she'd ever even met Foster.

It was wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

I could hardly place much blame on the students. They were simply doing what they'd always done.

Surviving.

I'd been doing exactly the same, but it wasn't enough for me. Not anymore.

The ceremony ended with a letter from Foster's parents, and I watched with wet eyes and an aching chest as each student placed a rose atop the stone wearing his name.

Nostrils burning, I pressed my lips together to keep from crying out. The place between my shoulders tightened, and I dragged a heavy hand down my chapped face.

The wind struck me again, harder this time, and I placed a palm in front of my eyes to shield myself. Shuffling backward, the bottom of my shoe met a piece of the caution tape, and I lifted it from the cold ground. The plastic felt heavy in my palm, and all at once, I began to tear it to shreds.

Ugly, incoherent sobs wracked my chest, and I tossed those little yellow pieces to the wind as quickly as I tore them apart. Snot ran down my chin, and I wiped it away with my sleeve. My movements became more hectic, more imminent, and I didn't stop until every inch of caution tape was gone.

Lost.

My forehead fell against the balcony doors, and I watched my breaths come back to me, tainting the section of glass closest to my lips.

Lungs seizing, I willed myself to calm down and wondered how many more times this would happen. How many more times would my grief leave me in pieces?

“Feel better, Vicious?”

Shit.

My eyelashes met the tops of my cheeks, and I wasted a breath I didn't have preparing myself for more pain.

There was always more pain.

Head rotating, I searched for him. Arthur stood in the center of my bedroom, in the heart of the wreckage he'd created. His jacket was gone, tie loosened. The rings he wore were positioned over his cracked knuckles.

“I had a feeling you'd come back here. If not more of your things, then for memory's sake.”

My eyes thinned.

“I’m afraid I’ve known for weeks that you abandoned your room, though that begs the question of where you’ve been staying. You’ve got no friends. No money.”

He took a single, menacing step toward me.

“If you tell me where it is right now, I’ll walk away.”

The film...

My throat swelled, and I shook my head but his hand shot outward and locked around my throat. Eyes bulging, I grabbed hold of his wrist, tearing at the skin and struggling against the strength of his grip.

His lips pulled back, and he bared his teeth at me right before he used my throat as leverage and tossed me across the room. The hem of my sweatshirt shifted slightly, and I felt the excruciating burn of my skin being clawed away as I slid across the wooden floor.

Thud.

My back hit the wall so hard my teeth rattled, and I was quick to toss my arms over my head when I saw his figure looming over me.

“Tell me where it is, you good for nothing shit!”

Fingers tangled in my sweatshirt, he forced my upper body off the ground a few inches before me slamming me back into it.

Air punched out of my lungs.

“I know Foster told you where it is.” He stabbed an aggressive finger at the narrow space between my eyes, digging his nail into the thin skin. My head twisted, face recoiling from the assault as he dragged that finger down the center of my face.

Blood oozed out of my skin, dripping over the bridge of my nose. It lingered on my upper lip, and I tasted its vigor on the tip of my tongue.

His own lips had spittle hovering in the corners, eyes wide enough I could describe every detail of his black, lifeless pupils.

“If you think I’m going to let you ruin my organization, you’re dead fucking wrong, kid. Emphasis on the dead.”

Fingers knotted in my hair, he tugged me across the room. My scalp screamed for mercy, my heels digging into the stiff floor.

“You’re just like your mother.”

I stopped moving.

The pause stunned him enough that he hesitated, stumbling over his own feet and dropping my head. It cracked against the floor, and I heard a faint ringing in my ears but it was nothing compared to the volume of his words as they echoed across my mind.

Did he say... my mother?

“Annie threatened me once. Threatened to go to the police, expose me and the board. She wanted a better life for you. As if my money, my fucking school, wasn’t good enough.”

Oh.

My.

God.

“Did you...” I gagged, tears soaring down my face. I struggled to speak, but I couldn’t understand. Not when all I wanted to do was scream. “Did you... kill my mother?”

His smile was like a loaded gun.

“Found your voice, did ya, Vicious? Your mother had a stroke.” He tore me off the ground, using two hands to tug me toward the balcony’s edge. “It was tragic. Just like Foster’s death. Wasn’t that tragic, Sebastian? A kid so young, an aspiring photographer. So many things he’d could’ve been, if only he’d minded his fucking business.”

Dizziness moved through me like an unexpected wave. I reached out for purchase, fingers stretching and aching for a

lifeline.

They came up empty.

I started sagging to the ground, but he forced me up by the tops of my ears. Crying out in pain, my hands lashed out, punching and clawing and slapping whatever flesh they touched.

He laughed, delighted, as though my fury fueled something in him.

“You...” My tongue felt heavy and dry, searching for words amongst the blood it tasted. “You... tried to frame me.”

“Don’t be so fucking dramatic, Sebastian. You were barely a person of interest.”

I swung.

My knuckles clipped him in the jaw, hard enough that his head throttled backward before righting itself again. Blood lined his teeth, pooling in his bottom lip in a way that only made him look more menacing.

Oomph.

Hands now anchored to my shoulders, he slammed his knee into my gut. I folded forward, eyes rolling. My mouth opened in a cry, and I fought to keep from vomiting.

“I wonder who will be a person of interest in your death. Maybe you were stricken with grief. Maybe you left your father a note, saying you just couldn’t take it anymore.”

He shoved me toward the railing, and I wrapped my hands around it just in time for him to place one hand on the back of my head and *push*. My feet came off the ground, and I dug my fingertips so hard into that railing, my blood stained the concrete.

“I wonder if your body will make the same sound Foster’s did. I wonder if you’ll bleed out slowly, or all at once.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, chest racing and feet flailing.

I don’t want to die...

My lips parted, and I screamed for all I was worth. Wind got caught in my shredded throat. I couldn't place the familiar *Tick, Tock*, and I thought, maybe, that clock was finally listening to *me*.

I slumped to the cold ground, hands on the pavement. My chest burned as I panted, saliva dripping from my lips in a long, thin line. Eyes glassy, I lifted my chin.

Was I... dead?

No.

Confusion swept me, and I placed my palms on my cheeks, feeling their rise and fall as I blew uneven breaths. My blurred gaze caught Athur's feet, dangling several feet off the ground. It followed his struggling body to the terror on his face and the hands locked around his throat.

Daddy bird...

The phoenix I loved so much was brighter than it ever was before, flexing as Roman tightened his grip. The tip of his nose was mere inches from my father's, his breath coasting across his now stricken cheeks. Nostrils flaring, Daddy's pupils dilated, and I saw his jaw tick once before he spoke.

"You will never touch him again."

And then... he tossed him.

My father grasped at the air as he fell, lips parted and eyes forever in shock. Wind raced past him... except he wasn't like me and my daddy.

He had no wings.

The crack his body made as it hit the pavement was a sound I'd remember forever... but it wouldn't haunt my nightmares.

No.

That was the sound of my dreams.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROMAN

I wore the stench of his death like new cologne. Blood covered my palms, staining my hands like a well-worn glove, but it didn't stop there.

No.

Every inch of me was saturated, *dripping*, in the crimson liquid that poured from the wound in his head.

I was forever tinted with it, and there wasn't enough holy water in the world to make me clean again.

My hands were scarred with murder... yet my baby bird ran right into them, kissing their edges as though he worshiped all they were capable of.

One thousand men couldn't have prevented those hands from protecting their lifeline.

God, or Zeus himself, wouldn't have been strong enough.

Those hands were revenge.

Karma.

A thin sheet concealed Arthur's broken corpse, the threadbare corners billowing in the wind. I thought it rather serendipitous that his blood now covered Foster's, oozing down the cement in thin, red lines.

Boots clapped against the perimeter, dropping evidence markers and unrolling caution tape. Flashes of red and blue left shadows across the crime scene, and I watched the familiar

buzz of federal agents and medical examiners complete their obligatory rounds.

A curious, impatient crowd stood behind a barrier the local police had put up, struggling for a proper view. Reporters were salivating, positioning their microphones at the mouths of anyone willing to speak, to share what they'd seen.

Except... nobody saw a damn thing.

They'd only heard the heavy, ominous crack his scalp made when it split wide open.

Sebastian's nose was nuzzled in the tender space of my neck, a mylar blanket draped over his shoulders. His steady, quiet breaths moved across my collarbone in a way that lit my skin on fire. Tears stained his pale, chapped cheeks, even after I'd licked them all away. His knuckles were white, colorless as he secured them to the front of my shirt, fastening himself to me as though he worried they'd drag me away.

"Roman Hayes."

The voice was a simple echo, a familiar memory I hadn't heard in nearly five years. The smile that whispered it was still the same, as were the shadowed eyes carrying mischief and loyalty.

Brotherhood was tattooed in bold script, just above his collarbone. His teeth caught the ring that was fixed in his bottom lip, and he laughed.

"Holy shit, Rome. What kind of clusterfuck did you drag me into?"

I smiled.

The shadow Damian carried was gargantuan, his broad shoulders flexing as he ran a hand over his head. The bullet-proof vest he wore displayed three letters across the front.

FBI.

"Sebastian, baby. This is SSA Damian Madoni. We served together."

He peeled his face from my neck, jaw unhinging as his clouded eyes moved from me to Damian and then back to me.

“You... you know the FBI.”

I laughed at his expression and dropped a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “I told you to trust me, baby bird. Another hour and this will all be over. I promise.”

“But you... pushed my father off a balcony.”

“Did I, though? I think maybe he fell. I think, *maybe*, investigators might rule it as accidental.”

I winked.

His smile was a fucking grenade, and it blew the earth to smithereens as he stared up at me with silver eyes.

Damian clapped me on the shoulder. “Isn’t that something? The son of a bitch died in the same spot he murdered a kid. Hell. I love happy accidents.”

Sebastian made a choking sound, and Damian flashed him a gentle grin.

“Hey, kid. It’s good to meet you. Sorry about all this shit you’ve had to deal with. My team is going to take it from here.”

Sebastian nodded but his voice remained cinched in his throat. He placed a questioning hand on my jaw, tugging my gaze downward until they locked.

Tell me.... his eyes plead.

So I told him.

Everything.

Damian Madoni and I met over ten years ago, on the first night of training camp when we were both drenched in sweat and self-pity. We trailed war zones together, counted bullet casings to pass the time and slept side by side in the dirt.

Bloodshed had this way of turning strangers into brothers, and though Damian wasn’t Charlie, he was a close fucking second.

Nobody wore allegiance the way Damian Madoni did, and I knew the only way to win this battle was to bring his team to the front lines.

I'd mailed copies of Foster's photos to his office and lengthily described everything I'd witnessed. In the bottom of the envelope was a snapshot of Sebastian and a single sentence.

He's my unit now.

Sebastian St. James was my miracle bird, and if he fell, the whole fucking sky would come tumbling down.

"They're not... they're not going to arrest you? Take you away?"

"Arrest him?" Damian scoffed, and his lips curved. "For what?"

Sebastian's head shook, eyes damp with disbelief. "So, it's over then?"

"It's over, gorgeous. Damian's team has been here for the last ten days. They've got footage of your father's total production. An evidence team is down in that building right now, bagging and tagging everything. I don't know that they'll be able to indefinitely prove your father killed Foster, but those photos he took provide some intense motive, and you can sure as shit believe that'll be public record."

"We've got Frank DuMont in cuffs. Dude is singing like a tone deaf canary." Damian folded his arms across his chest and nodded at the campus. "The Bureau will probably shut the school down for a couple of days, interview staff and students to see if anybody else was threatened or harmed similar to Mr. Lake."

Sebastian's forehead tightened, and he gave my upper body a little shake. "Daddy, they can't... they can't shut down the school. These kids don't have anywhere else to go."

I placed a hand on the back of his head, stroking over his tangled hair. "I don't think they're planning to kick them out of their homes, baby. Just cancel classes for a little bit. A new

board president will need to be sworn in, a new headmaster chosen.”

“Promise me you won’t let them throw these kids away. If they had suitable homes to go to, then they wouldn’t be here.”

I shot Damian a hard look. He responded with a curt nod and a tap to his radio before walking away.

“I promise, baby bird. Everyone is safe now. Especially you.”

Sebastian pressed a palm to his chest, voice cracking. “Why didn’t you... tell me?”

I cupped his cheek. “I wanted to protect your heart. Your wings. If something went wrong, I wanted to be certain you could still fly.”

Chin quivering, he pulled his lips into his mouth, sniffing once before launching himself at me. He crawled up my body with renewed fervor, fastening his arms around my neck and legs around my waist.

“I’m never letting go.”

Don’t.

We’ll fly together.

EPILOGUE

SEBASTIAN

ONE YEAR LATER

My husband stood in the doorway of my office, roses in one hand and a gift bag in the other. His smile was a beacon I still sought—a light I still chased.

I ached for him every second he was away from me—my hero turned villain. The man who'd sacrifice the entire world, and all its intricacies, just to save me.

“Baby bird.”

“Daddy bird.”

His lips curved, and with a soft swing of his boot, he latched the door shut behind him. Hips swaying as he walked, his thunderous eyes tagged every inch of my body.

“Do you know what today is, gorgeous?”

“The anniversary of the day you threw my father off a roof?”

“Valentine’s Day,” he corrected, and I laughed.

“Both romantic.”

The roses he held shook when he placed them in the center of my desk. Arm around my waist, he swept me from my chair and brought us chest to chest. His tongue dipped into my mouth, and I sucked on it eagerly.

God.

The man kissed as well as he fucked, and I was ready to drop my pants and fold myself over this desk. We always did sex just right... nasty with a hint of sweet. He fucked me lifeless, but he always held my hand when he did it.

“Good afternoon, Headmaster Hayes.”

“Counselor Hayes.” I chased his lips. “How’s your day so far?”

“Terribly exhausting. How’s one to be a counselor and the board president? I’m going to need a raise.”

I chuckled. “I think you’re managing just fine.”

“As are you. This place feels brand new.”

I’d taken over the headmaster position just two days after my graduation, learning something new each day I sat at my desk. I wrote grants, begged for donations, and tore down all the ugly that rotted the halls of this campus. The gargoyles were gone; the sconces replaced. There were new walkways and a paint job that felt more sun than moon.

Foster’s memory remained in that garden and in our old attic bedroom. I made a spot for him beside my mother and replaced those vines with flowers that never wilted.

Daddy and I visited them often.

Next month, we were breaking ground on a new wing, financed by the Lake family.

Foster Center For The Arts.

Daddy brushed a thumb over my swollen lip. “I’m proud of you,” he whispered, and I felt my wings flap.

Just a little.

“Do you want your present now?”

I thrust my hands outward and made a grabbing motion with my fingers. “Yes, please.”

He set the bag in my palms, and there was zero finesse to the way I tore that thing open, flinging tissue paper in the air. The bag split down the middle when I shoved my eager hand inside and found... “fireworks?”

There were tubes of them, lining the bag in a careful pattern. I pulled them out one by one and placed them on the edge of my desk.

Daddy observed me with a smirk on his lips and a gleam in his eye that spelled mayhem.

My brows furrowed. “I don’t...”

Ohmygod.

My mouth fell open. He laughed.

“Daddy, did you... turn my father into fireworks?”

Ohmygod.

“What do you say, baby bird? Want to go make some sparks?”

Best. Valentine’s Day. Ever.

CORRUPT CUPID SERIES



Corrupt Cupid
Logo

Be Mine, Twisted Valentine—Gianni Holmes

Be Mine, Vicious Valentine—April Jade

Be Mine, Bloody Valentine—Skyler Snow

Be Mine, Heartless Valentine—Ashlynn Mills

Be Mine, Cruel Valentines—Brea Alepou

THANK YOU

Thank you to every reader who picked up Roman and Sebastian's story. I had the most fun creating Ridgemont High and all its intricacies. Writing a boarding school romance has always been on my author bucket list, and while I'm sad to put Ridgemont to rest for now, I won't close my heart to it forever.

Thank you to Gianni Holmes for being the leader/organizer of this collab. Each time I'm asked to be a part of something like this, it blows my mind.

Thank you to Skyler, Ashlynn, and Brea who contributed incredible stories to this collab. I'm so lucky to call you all friends.

HUGE thank you to Mads and Gena of BreathlessLit for all their help with marketing, proofreading, and being absolute gems.

As always, thank you to my husband for being nothing but supportive and a true hype man.

THANK YOU to my readers and every person in my reader group. I wouldn't be able to do this without each and every one of you.

XO,

AJ

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

April Jade lives in Central Michigan with her husband and their troublemaking cat. She is a self-proclaimed bookaholic and splits her time between reading and writing MM romance novels full of possessive men and the sweet boys that make them melt.

When she's not writing, she's probably binge-watching Supernatural, listening to true crime podcasts, or impatiently awaiting the release of the next Marvel movie. She loves pizza, romance, and penning happily ever afters!

[Join My Facebook Reader Group!](#)



ALSO BY APRIL JADE

Dangerous Daddies

[Mad Love](#)

Standalones

[Midnight](#)

Be Mine, Vicious Valentine