



GODLESS
HEATHENS

DIRTY TWISTED
LORD

JORDAN GRANT

DIRTY TWISTED LORD

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PRETTY WORDS



Jordan Grant

BROKEN HEARTS

The characters, events, and places portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're new to the Godless Heathens universe, please review the content warning provided on the next page. This book contains disturbing and graphic descriptions of **religious trauma, crucifixion, Christianity-related kinks, and various mental illnesses** including, but not limited to, antisocial personality disorder, psychosis, mania, and auditory and visual hallucinations.

Although you don't need to read the first two installments in the Godless Heathens universe, [Bloody Savage God](#) and [Wicked Vile King](#), respectively, to enjoy this book (you won't find any cliffhangers in this series!), I do recommend them. You'll spot Killian over there with our two other lords of Chryseum Academy, Saint and Gabriel.

You've been warned.

Welcome to the final semester at the Asylum, darling reader.

- Jordan

CONTENT WARNING

Dear Reader:

This book is dark, graphic, and intended for those 18+. As with [Bloody Savage God](#) and [Wicked Vile King](#), **there are no anti-heroes here, only *villains*.**

Killian Wilsdorf is a disturbed psychopath with several questionable coping mechanisms. He has lived through **heavy religious trauma** and spends much of this book concerned with punishing God for what he perceives as God's wrongdoings. Please read the content warning before proceeding, which may be found [here](#).

As always, your mental health matters.

- J

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This one's for those raised to be devout, to keep their legs closed and their mouths shut, and who wonder what it would be like to get on their knees for the Devil instead.

PLAYLIST



Broken — Seether, et al.

this is what self-destruction feels like — Marina Lin

self destructive — Vorsa

Devil Side — Foxes

Dawn of Faith — Eternal Eclipse

War of Hearts — Ruelle

Mary On A Cross — Ghost

Bone Church — Slipknot

Ashes of Eden — Breaking Benjamin

Prayers for the Damned — Sixx:A.M.

Take Me To Church — Hozier

all the good girls go to hell — Billie Eilish

Toxicity — System Of A Down

Gods & Monsters — Lana Del Rey

Twisted — MISSIO

Devil Is Fine — Zeal & Ardor

For the full playlist, click [HERE](#).

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KILLIAN



My feet dangle off the side of the concrete sarcophagus as I stare out at the forest, the night hemorrhaging purple across the thicket of encroaching trees. Something watches me from the darkness, hiding in the shadows untouched by the moonlight. I feel it staring straight at me, drilling a pair of invisible holes through my breastbone, but it doesn't step forward. It never does. Maybe the coward will show his fucking face one day. Until then, I'm left to wonder if it's God or the Devil peering back at me, waiting to claim my soul for all eternity. Either way, the bastard better be ready. I'm not going into the big unknown without a fucking fight.

The queen of the necrophiliacs pulls my attention down to her with a tight squeeze on my thigh and a pinch of her stubby fingernails into my skin. I look down to find her where I left her before I started this game of chicken with the thing in the darkness. She kneels in front of me, her dark hair falling to her shoulders in straight, shiny locks. Her black lipstick's smeared and what's left has faded to bits of gray, which works for me. I prefer it, actually. She tells people that she makes the color with the ashes of the undead. I have it on good authority, though, that it's just dirt she picks from the floor of the cemetery. I don't know which is worse to be honest.

I don't like feeling unclean. It makes me ... *unhinged*, one millisecond from splitting at the seams and finally losing it for good. I'd prefer the lipstick entirely gone, but then I'd have to

touch it, and the thought sends shivers spider-walking up my spine.

I'll have to take a shower after this, but it's worth it. At least I'll get to fuck with the bastard upstairs tonight, and that alone makes the necro queen's lips on my dick worth it.

Nikki's managed to get my pants unzipped and my boxer briefs inched down my thighs. She's currently fawning over my cock like it's the first time she's seen one, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. Once upon a time, it was, but then I plucked her cherry and left it to rot in the secret tunnels that snake through the academy. There's still a bloodstain on the floor down there, darkening the weathered stone.

Not that I care.

Not that there aren't *many* others alongside it.

Collecting v-cards from virtuous virgins is a challenge that's less of an actual challenge and more of a chore lately.

What happened to the devout princesses who fought to keep their legs together?

Nikki took exactly two smiles and a compliment to give it up. Most take even less.

And it's just not fun winning a war when the other side is barely manning the front lines.

I made Nikki into what she's become, the self-proclaimed queen of the undead freaks. I brought out her most devilish instincts, and I didn't even flinch when two months later, she fell down the fetish rabbit hole and said she'd like to ride a cold cock next time.

It didn't even take a full semester from the time she stepped foot on campus to become proudly fucked up. It was like she'd been waiting her whole life to ditch that Puritan girl persona and join the dark side.

Just like with the others, when I took her virginity, ripped her open, and made her scream, I filled that gaping hole in my middle, the ever-present emptiness that wants to engulf the

world. In return, she got power, followers—hell, even worshippers. The deadheads love her. But then again, maybe what they love about her is that she loves me, which is unfortunate.

Well, for her, at least.

I don't love anyone.

I don't understand what it is, except in a philosophical sense.

I can read about it, hear people talk about it, and see it, but every time I learn about it, the more I think love is just the acceptance of weakness. And I will never tolerate that. I abhor weakness.

Weakness killed my mother.

Weakness crippled my father.

It won't fucking destroy me too.

I feel nothing on most days, except the simmering boil of a decade's old rage and an insatiable thirst for vengeance.

Happiness isn't even a dream, much less a reality. I have one mission, and that's righting the wrongs done to me and my family. Nikki, on her knees before me, ready to suck my cock like the whore she is, well, she's just a stepping stone on my path.

Unfortunately, I'm rock hard right now. She must think I'm hard for her, but I'm not. It's this place, the cemetery. It's the way death permeates the air, spilling from the graves in the ground beneath us and curling in the air. It clings to the shadows that slither between the trees and pervades the moonlight that falls in slivers between the barren branches overhead. And two things in this world only ever make me feel alive.

Death and blood.

In the beginning, God created light. But in the end, I will exist in the darkness. Death is my calling, my namesake, and

my birthright. If God brings life, then I fucking take it away.

Blood.

Rot.

Decay.

They are what I live for. My cock wouldn't give a fuck if Nikki had both tits out and was performing like a porn star. I bet she thinks she's doing an extra good job, too, because it's too cold for this shit. Well, it would be for most men. I don't mind though. She should know that, but then again, how much does she really know about me? Not much, except the color of my boxers and the taste of my cum. If she thought about it, she'd realize she never has to work for it out here. She doesn't have to bleed to get me going, not in the place where the dead keep me company. She especially doesn't have to work for it when it's cold out either. If anything, the colder it gets, the better.

See, I've never minded the cold. I like my weather like I like my corpses, freshly chilled. Bonus points if the skyline has a blue tint like the dead bodies do in the morgue beneath the school.

Speaking of the morgue ...

It's been too long.

When was the last time anyone died around here?

At least a few months, which has to be a new record, sadly.

I miss seeing the result of God's creation, the perfect image of himself rotting on the table, and I miss even more what I do to that creation when no one's looking.

Granted, I'm not a necrophiliac.

I don't get all hot and bothered by the cold flesh, but there's something nice about dishonoring it and making it unclean for the burial. Even death can't save the devout ones from me.

Nikki sucks in a big breath like she's surprised and wondering how she got onto her knees so quickly. It's not rocket science though. She came into my space. She knew what she was doing. The necros can claim this graveyard all they want, but when I'm here, the cemetery is mine. The sarcophagus, the headstones, the rotting bodies beneath, it is my domain. I let them borrow it every now and again, the devil worshipers who have no idea what the fuck they're doing and the necrophiliacs who like to get down with their bags of bones, but they all know who it belongs to.

The outskirts of campus are *mine*.

I exist on the fringe, and the rest of them can fuck right off as far as I'm concerned.

I was perfectly content sitting here, desecrating this holy ground just by existing, but then Nikki showed up. She batted her fake eyelashes and offered me a blow job, which I didn't accept. I didn't decline either.

I'm ambivalent, especially when it comes to sexual acts from her. Normally, it would piss me off, her coming into my space like this, but I'm feeling generous, or maybe it's the brain fog from the meds finally wearing off. I don't know, but she definitely took my silence as approval.

She interrupted my nightly ritual when I sit among the graves with the death, the decay, and the rotting flesh hanging from bones.

Fuck, I wish she would leave.

But then I couldn't desecrate this holy ground.

She grabs my dick in one hand, rubs the entire length, and purrs, "Someone's happy to see me today."

If I couldn't smell the rot in the air, I'd instantly deflate at the shit she's spewing, but something's died since the last time I was out here, and I can smell it decaying out among the brambles.

Nikki lowers her mouth, wrapping her tight lips around me, and begins to suck. There's a zing of electricity to my balls, but the truth is that I'm barely paying attention to what she's doing.

Hell, I barely fucking feel it.

The morning meds are finally starting to evaporate from my bloodstream, sending me spiraling down to earth in a messy tumble.

I'm half asleep, half awake, and on the verge of irritated. Still, I love it though.

This is my favorite time, when the meds they gave me in the morning start to wear off, and I can begin to think again, the fog lifting from me.

Nikki's mouth runs up and down until she gags and her fingernails bite into my thigh again. Normally, it would annoy me, especially from someone with so much experience as Nikki, but I do like the idea of the big bastard upstairs looking down and seeing me sitting here, the word of God carved into the concrete edges on the side of the tomb, sullyng it with my sins.

Nikki slurps and moans on my dick, sounding like she's trying to imitate something between a whale and a wet vacuum. It's irritating as fuck, but I can put up with it. At least she'll be done soon. Then she'll skedaddle back to her hideaway hole and leave me to my shadows, my cum hopefully dripping across the etched word of God. She always sputters on the swallow.

Nikki slurps again, and the sound is obnoxious as she rolls her lips around her teeth and takes me like a champ.

Still, I find my mind wandering, and I'm staring at the thing ahead of me in the shadows, waiting for it to show its face when there's a commotion through the woods to my left. My gaze slides, and I catch a glimpse of something with white-blond hair loose and hanging long as its owner bolts in between the trees.

I track her movement instantly. Maybe it's a reflex. Maybe it's curiosity. It's probably the bloodlust though. It craves more than Nikki could ever offer me.

The blonde girl trampling through the forest blinks in and out of existence, like she's a projected movie skipping through the slides, and for a moment, I think maybe I was wrong. Maybe they gave me some extra strong shit this morning, and I'm seeing even more things than normal, but then I realize it's the trees cutting my picture of her.

She's a few hundred feet away from me, and it's a good thing I have the eyes of a predator; my vision is damn near perfect. I can make her out, but I'm pretty sure Nikki still has no idea she's there. I can even hear the girl, which is a feat considering the loud slurping sounds slipping from between Nikki's teeth.

The blonde angel is breathing heavily as sobs chop through her breaths and leave her in tiny hyperventilating bits.

The questions roll in slowly as the meds roll off me.

Who is she?

And what is she doing at this hour?

Everyone knows not to come out here at this time of night when it's my domain. Nikki is just stupid enough to do it. Or maybe it's pride, I don't know. I need to put her in her place and remind her who's boss.

I'd recognize that blonde hair, though, if I had seen it before. I've always liked the blonde ones, especially when the starlight hits just right and it makes their hair look like strands of pure Heaven sent down by God. The way the starlight is hitting her hair now makes her look like she's fallen from Heaven too.

She's an angel, crashing to earth. If I could feel anything, I might feel sorry for what I'm going to do to her. But I am ambivalent on most days and icy numb the rest.

There is nothing in this dark, cold chest of mine.

No happiness.

No fear.

And no empathy.

The only thing that breaks through my ice walls is the rage.

My rage at *him* for fucking up my life and ignoring my mother's prayers.

God's a fucking coward. At least I own my sadism.

I don't ask for penance and tithes and then say fuck it when people beg me for something. I don't pretend to be anything I'm not. And right now, I'm a predator watching his next meal.

The girl hits something, stumbles, nearly falls, and keeps going like a champ. She sobs, her cries cutting through the air and landing like a bucket of ice water atop my head. It makes my skin prickle, and goosebumps speckle my skin.

She's darting even faster now, running like her life depends on it. She sounds like a trampling elephant, and even her loud, wet sobs can't mask her clumsy footfalls.

I watch her, curious. It's interesting, her being out here at night. When was the last time someone entered my domain? Nikki doesn't trample through my space. She's careful about it, walking slowly so as not to disturb me.

Speaking of Nikki, she moans loudly, like she's riding my dick instead of sucking it, and it reminds me of her existence. I cinch my fingers into her hair tight and rear her head back to look at me. Indignation sparks in her gaze as her eyes pop open, but smartly, she keeps her mouth shut. She may run the necrophiliacs, but she's not the one in charge here, and we both know it.

I cinch tighter, and a gasp escapes between her crooked teeth as I hold her still, away from my wet cock. I look up at the girl who is still running, painfully oblivious to what is watching her from the shadows. I should see it coming. It's my

pride, for sure, because no one goes there, not at night, not when it's all mine.

I watch her as she does something that no one does—not the guards, not the Administration, not the whore at my feet. She enters the chapel, *my* chapel, throwing the door wide open so that I hear it hit the stone wall. Then she disappears inside.

What.

The.

Fuck.

Nikki's still staring down at me, oblivious, and I push her away from me and jump down from the tomb. I hoist up my boxers and my pants as my feet hit the earth. Nikki lands hard on her ass and curses as I zip up my pants. Her palms slap the thin dead leaves littering the ground, but I ignore her temper tantrum. I don't have time to deal with her now because he comes out of the darkness. He watches and waits, standing with the others behind the velvet curtain of the shadows, but, just like always, he's the only one to ever show his face.

He materializes, slithering and snaking across the winter-deadened ground, one shadowy tendril piling on top of the other until he is beside me, glaring at the closed door to our sanctuary.

I feel his rage. I know it well. Because it is mine.

He stands tall, darker than pitch black or anything known to this earth. He claims his spot beside me and rises even taller to his full height until he towers over me.

If he was real, he could kill me with one massive swipe of his taloned claw.

But I'm not afraid.

I'm never afraid.

I might be crazy, but I'm not a spineless little bitch.

“Punish the blasphemer!” he seethes, fat drops of saliva sliding down his sharp, black teeth and showering the forest

floor at his naked feet. He huffs and puffs beside me, his serpent tongue lolling out of the hooked beak of his mouth. He sounds like a dog slopping at water, and I hate that sound.

“Punish! Cleanse! Make her repent!” he snarls, but he doesn’t move. He won’t. Not until I do. He follows me around like my own little demon puppy until the horse pills I choke down every morning send him back to hell.

Maybe he is the worst of me.

Maybe he’s what had to happen for me to survive what I went through as a child.

Or maybe he’s nothing more than a figment of my imagination.

Regardless, I agree with him. I need that vermilion liquid pounding in her veins. I need to see her insides and see if they are as pure and untouched as her white-blond hair. I need to *punish* her.

No one enters the chapel without my permission.

And they especially don’t do it during my hours.

Nightfall is mine, God be damned.

The girl with white hair and sobs that slice through the dead of night desecrated my altar. She’ll pay for it with her blood.

She has no idea what she’s in for.

Because if there ever was a God, the bastard gave up when he met me.

MILLIE



Sounds I don't recognize burst from my body, cleaving me in two. My soul is sheared from my mortal form, and there's a ripping inside of me that both aches and burns. Maybe I'm imagining it, but if I'm not, I'm going to be ripped apart any second now. From my hair to my head, all of me hurts, and I didn't know pain like this could exist. I don't know now how I'm going to survive.

Daddy.

I need him.

I need him to save me.

I need him to let me come home.

But he sent you here.

I can hardly believe he did it, but here I stand, proof of his abandonment. I've been deserted in the tall mountains of the Catskills of New York, abandoned by the man who is supposed to love me without limitation. His love has its limits, though, and I shattered through them in an instant. I know he's not coming back. I'm stuck here until graduation. He told me so himself.

Repent, Millicent, and you can come home, he had said to me.

God spoke to me, and this is your punishment.

Stop now. Stop your crying and be a good girl.

Eighteen years old and on the cusp of graduation, yet here I am, caged, with no hope of escape.

Because you're a filthy, dirty liar.

The thought sends another sob corkscrewing through my middle and pushing through my lips. Salty tears and desperation weigh heavy on my tongue, but I barely notice them. I taste nothing except the frigid chill of the cold air against my teeth and the encroaching loneliness coming at me from all sides. A pit has opened beneath my feet, and no matter how far or how fast I run, I know it's going to catch me soon enough.

Just like you deserve!

I can't be here.

It's not fair!

I'm an obedient daughter, a good girl all the way to the core.

I listen to my elders.

I don't curse or steal things.

I'm *polite*.

I'm not mean or cruel like the popular girls at my old school.

I. Am. Good!

Except for when you lie ...

The thought torpedoed through my belly and wrenches another sob from me. My cries die in the night air, lost to the fast pitter-patter of my feet and the branches I collide with on my way, sending twigs cracking and snapping to the hard ground.

It's the truth, though. I did lie. Or at least I think I did. They say I did, and so I must have. For as long as I can remember, I've told the truth, but then I lied one time.

One. Single. Time.

And when I did, my words mattered more than all my honest ones before them. I ruined my life with those words, and every minute of every waking hour since, I have prayed to God to let me take them back. I want to go back in time and not go to church that day. I want to snatch them from the past and bury them somewhere to never be found.

But I can't.

Liar!

I wince at the outburst, but try as I might, the lie still doesn't feel real. *I'm* separate and apart from the bad thing I did. Maybe I can't handle it, knowing that I did a bad thing, but when I think of my mistake, I see a body double seated in that wooden chair in the meeting room at my church. I don't see me.

Millicent Grace Mintz doesn't lie, but my body double did.

Wait ... No. Maybe I did lie, and I just can't accept it.

It's all so confusing in this jumbled mess inside of my head.

I remember sitting there across the expanse of the laminated wooden table, opposite the pastor and the deacon. Both of them were dressed in their Sunday best, and I had on the long-sleeved gown my father preferred, the one that reached below my knees. My fingers curled together beneath the table, wringing and releasing in tiny knots as I inhaled the scent of the cinnamon candy the deacon chewed the entire time until he emptied the small glass bowl on the table. I could see my reflection in the still water of the plastic cup in front of me, and it looked like me, but that girl at the table, she couldn't be me though.

She just can't.

I'm watching a video of someone else doing the bad things I would never do.

Because I am good.

FALSIFIER!

LIAR!

HARLOT!!!!

I sob, my tears welling in my eyes and washing the world away. A branch swipes across my forehead, and I feel the cut zipper my flesh and start to bleed. Everything already hurts, but it adds to my misery.

Daddy said I need to come to terms with what I did so that God can forgive my sins and welcome me into his loving embrace. He says the Bible teaches us that Jesus died on the cross for us sinners but only true salvation can come when we accept what we have done.

Maybe that's why he and God have abandoned me here and won't answer my prayers.

I haven't accepted anything. I can't. There's the Devil inside of my brain, whispering that I'm not a liar.

What is wrong with me? Accept it, Millie!

They all said I lied, everyone I know and love.

Daddy called me a liar.

The pastor said I brought disgrace to my family.

The churchgoers I've known my whole life couldn't even look me in the eye on Sunday morning.

Everyone said I made it all up, so I must have.

I have asked for God's forgiveness. I have begged on my hands and knees for hours, not moving from the spot on the weathered hardwood in front of the altar of our church. I stayed there until my knees went weak and I thought I was going to pass out.

It wasn't good enough, though. I failed to atone, so Daddy sent me here, dropping me off in the middle of the night. Then the mean man with a bulging belly and a nasty smile took me to the lady who runs this place, the interim headmistress, I think she called herself.

She was nice enough, I guess. She offered me a box of tissues as I cried and told the guard to escort me to my dorm, but everything was too much.

It was too much change too fast for a girl who's never been a hundred miles outside of her small community in rural Virginia. I fell to my knees in the dimly lit hallway and started to pray, begging for it all to be one bad dream. I asked for God to save me from this wretched place.

I can feel the evil here.

It's in the long shadows that stretch from the turrets and the resounding thud of the double doors locking with a loud click behind me as I was escorted inside. It's in the apathetic faces of the guards and the security locks on the doors. Chryseum Academy doesn't offer redemption, despite what it may claim. It's designed to keep its demons caged inside its stone walls, not turn them into angels. I knew it from the moment I saw the place, and my brief conversation with the interim headmistress confirmed it.

In my panic, I turned to what I've always turned to—prayer. But it didn't save me. The telephone lines to Heaven must be closed because no one answers when I call lately. Instead, the guard escorting me rolled his eyes, told me to save my wailing for the campus chapel, and brought me out here into the darkness instead.

He said my crying would *wake the animals*, whatever that meant, and to *get it out now while I still had the chance*.

Or at least I think he did.

This is real, right? Or is my mind lying about that too?

I don't know. Nothing makes sense anymore. My reality is knotted and twisted, and I can't untangle it.

I run down the pathway to the stone building up ahead. There's a light on inside, and it shines through the stained-glass windows on either side of the double doors like a pair of colorful beacons out into the darkness.

The forest smells like dirt and rain, and the cold seeps through my white cardigan and long-sleeved shirt to chill my flesh. I'm cold, but Daddy says liars burn in Hell, so cold is a good sign, right? Maybe God and Daddy are already forgiving me.

Deceiver!

Whore!

My flats catch on the roots twining together underfoot, and I stumble and nearly meet the ground. I right myself before I steamroll ahead, beelining straight for the building. If there's anything that can help me now, it's prayer.

Daddy taught me that.

I hope he's proud that I turn to it now.

Running away from here isn't an option. I couldn't imagine even attempting it. Daddy was angry, and he sent me here to be punished. He says I'm unclean. He says that the weight pushing down on my shoulders and making me want to fold into myself is the force of my sins. I need them lifted from me, too, because right now, it feels like the force of my transgressions is going to flatten me into a pancake and then keep on pressing.

My cries are loud and pitiful as I run through the night. Winter clings unnaturally to this place. It lingers in the fog that twines through the trees and sticks to the rotting leaves beneath the dead branches overhead. It cools my flesh and sends icicles needling up my arms.

I want to be warm, but more than that, all I want is to be inside the church. Then, I will fall to my knees and beg forgiveness, and maybe, just maybe, the tightness in my chest will loosen, if only a little. It won't strangle me anymore, clenching around my heart and squeezing tight, and I will be able to breathe again.

Finally, I reach the stone steps of the church. I stumble up them, the world washing in and out with the tide of my tears. I swing open one of the double doors and bolt inside the

building. It's dimly lit inside, but the overhead light is enough, casting the pews and leather-bound bibles in a soft shower of golden light.

The skeleton of the church stretches above me, ribs of bare wood crisscrossing across the arched ceiling. Maybe at one time, it was beautiful, but now, it's aged and unkept, faded with time. The light from the iron chandeliers doesn't stretch to the top of the arched ceiling or reach the shadows in the corners of the room. Yet, I'm relieved to be here, even though everything smells of decay and dust. It doesn't smell like a church should, like summertime picnics and happiness.

My steps slow a little, and I'm no longer running as I move between the pews toward the altar at the front of the building. My flats tap against the smooth stone floor as I look up to the wooden pulpit and the crucifixion of Jesus mounted to the wall behind it.

There are melted candles in long rows that have oozed onto the votive stands to the left and right of me, but I see no way to light them. In front of me, behind the pulpit, the crucifix hangs on the wall, large, old, and weathered to a silvery gray. The thorns of Jesus's crown rip into his forehead and the nails mark his hands, sending blood falling from the wounds. It's a gory sight, and I fall to my knees before it to ask for forgiveness before the son of God.

"Please," I whisper through my tears. "Please, Lord, forgive me."

I choke on my tears, coughing, sputtering, and chopping my words into broken bits. Daddy was right. My mother would be ashamed of me if she was alive to see me. I am a bad daughter. I killed my mother during birth, and Daddy's always said that I committed the sin outweighed only by the ultimate one.

It's no surprise I ended up here, but it hurts just the same.

The stone is hard against my knees as I pray, my fingers wringing together.

“Forgive me,” I murmur, squeezing my eyes shut. “Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned. I’m a liar, and I don’t deserve your grace, but I’m not sure I can take this. Please, please, *please* save me.”

The stone walls of the chapel echo my sobs back at me as the son of Christ stares down from the wall and judges me.

You deserve this, liar.

“Please,” I cry, bending forward and flattening myself toward the pulpit. The squeeze in my middle wrenches tighter as my tears fall and hit my hands in front of me. Cold seeps from the stones and into the tips of my fingers, climbing up my arms until I shake all over.

I can’t take this.

I’ve never been away from home.

I’ve never even slept a night away from my bed.

But now I’m abandoned and alone.

The rest of my prayers are swallowed by my tears. My fingernails dig into the stone, scratching against it, and I suck in air, unable to catch my breath.

A loud creak sounds behind me, and I hear the door open. I can’t stop crying though. I’m sobbing, silently asking God to save me from this place as the smell of cinnamon and something else, something darker, wafts over to me. My eyes open and my shoulders heave as I struggle to regain my breath.

I turn slowly, blinking away the tears that blur my vision, and look behind me, my hands still on the stone floor.

All of me goes still at what I see.

There’s an angel in front of me.

A beautiful, golden-haired angel.

God has answered my prayers.

Long locks of blond hair frame a remarkable face as the angel stares at me, his mouth turned into a perfect pout. His blue eyes were made to match the Heavens, and he's immaculately dressed in dark slacks and a white button-down shirt open at the collar. I stare at him as he takes a step closer to me.

The Lord's sent an angel to save me. Hope and relief blow over me, filling my lungs and lifting the weight that has been growing inside my chest like a tumor since the moment I stepped foot on campus.

The angel falls to his knees beside me, leaning back on the heels of his feet, and I blink at him as the smell of cinnamon grows stronger, tickling the inside of my nostrils, and leaving the bite of fire on my tongue.

Is he real? Or is my mind lying again?

"Are you an angel?" I ask him.

A smirk tips the corners of his mouth, but he doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. I know what he is. I know it as sure as I can breathe again.

The tears falling from my eyes slow to a trickle, though I still taste the salt of them slipping between my lips as he reaches out and cups my cheek. The warmth of his touch spills over me like a ray of pure sunshine delivered straight into my soul. It heats me from the inside out and scares the cold away from my shivering bones.

The angel looks at me, his expression impassive and not showing a shred of the thoughts that lie behind his beautiful blue eyes. He examines me for a moment, peering down the line of his nose at me before the left side of his mouth tips upward in a smirk once more.

He leans closer, his hand still cradling my cheek, and I breathe in cinnamon and that other thing I can't quite place. He looks at me a moment longer before his hand cinches tight, his fingers biting into my jawline and pulling the flesh away from my eye. He squeezes hard, and it hurts, and I whimper

and try to pull away before the angel obliterates the space between us and flattens his mouth to mine.

He kisses me like a demon sent to claim my soul.

All I can think is that God didn't answer my prayers.

The Devil did instead.

MILLIE



With one hand gripping the side of my face, his other finds the back of my head. His fingers push into my hair as he pulls me forward and pins me against him. He's strong, too strong for me to wrench away, and his touch hurts. His fingers dig into my flesh and press deep as he claims the air from my lungs. His teeth collide with mine so hard it feels as though he's knocked them out to rattle inside my skull. I can't break away from him, even as alarm bells blare full tilt inside my head.

His kiss tastes like cinnamon. I was wrong, so very, very wrong.

The boy—this *man*—isn't some angel sent by God to save me.

He was sent to pull me kicking and screaming down to damnation.

I know what the other thing is now, the scent I couldn't quite place. It's fire and brimstone, and he's dragging me to Hell with him.

Make him stop!

I'm frozen, though, pinned and immobile, as his hand snakes down from the back of my head to around my neck, worming its way through the strands of my hair and dragging me even closer. My breasts flatten to his chest, and his shoulders bump against mine as everything inside me goes cold all at once. The warmth that he had brought to my skin

with his appearance evaporates in a fraction of a second. I'm colder than I was before, and my mind is jumbled again, even more confused than when I first stepped foot on this unholy ground.

Do something, Millie!

My thoughts trickle in slowly, hesitant to believe this is happening.

This is a sin.

I think it again, trying to convince myself. This guy can't be an angel.

Not when he does things like this.

He must be the devil instead.

As if to prove the point, the guy thrusts his tongue into my mouth, and I choke on it as he pushes forward, curling it with mine and leaving cinnamon and brimstone on my tongue.

My body betrays my heart, and my flesh warms beneath his rough touch. I'm on fire, burning with shame as he holds me against him. The feelings he stirs inside of me are unfamiliar, yet I know I shouldn't feel what I do. Daddy always said it was a sin, a commandment of God that must be obeyed.

Lust.

It's primal, addictive, and utterly unlike anything I have felt before. The man sent by the devil moans loudly when he finally tears away from me. The sound is guttural and mined from deep within his chest, and he bites my bottom lip as he tips back onto his heels. He scrapes his teeth across my sensitive flesh, and the fire burning inside me erupts into an inferno. It licks at my ribs and engulfs me from the inside out, burning the last whispers of my breath away and threatening to combust me on the spot.

I'm a liar and a whore.

Corrupted by sin, by shame, and by seduction.

Make him stop, Millicent!

I shove him with both hands, and it stings as he breaks contact, his fingers scraping my flesh with the sudden release. An *oomph* escapes between his parted lips, and I shouldn't be staring at his lips, wet and slightly puffy from his cinnamon-flavored kisses. His tongue darts out to run across his top row of teeth, and I'm transfixed by the movement.

I can't help it. He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen, in person or otherwise.

Blond hair.

Blue eyes.

And a perfectly symmetrical face like Michaelangelo drew his blueprints personally before God brought him to life.

He has a face from Heaven but intentions from Hell. Daddy would say he's a seducer sent to tempt me.

Resist, Millie!

I hate the heat skipping across my skin, and the embarrassment of my blush burning across my cheeks and at the tips of my ears. This place should be sacred, but he has defiled both me and this church, this place of worship, tonight.

"W ... w ... why?" I stammer out the question.

I should run, but I hardly believe it.

Maybe this is some cruel trick of my mind instead.

I'm a liar, and my brain is too, apparently.

"Why would you do that?" I ask him as he stares at me, cocking his head and narrowing his gaze. He doesn't blink. I don't even think he breathes, and I realize that his beautiful blue eyes are not the clear skies of Heaven. No, they are two orbs of hot blue fire, and there's a furnace behind them, burning brightly with something I can't quite figure out.

He stares a moment longer until it feels like his stare is drilling into my brain, trying to figure me out. Then his mouth

tips upward and his gaze falls to my lips before it rises once more with his answer.

“I wanted to taste your pain,” he tells me.

What?

I should be running and screaming right now, but what if my mind is lying again, and this isn't real? If it's not real, then I'm not here, and I'm home a thousand miles away, safely tucked in my bed, warm and loved beneath my downy comforter.

I blink at him, and the left side of his mouth lifts, giving me a glimpse of straight white teeth. Even they are perfect.

“Your pain tastes like sugar and sacrilege,” he says.

I blink at him again, more confused than ever, yet the more I stare, the more I think this is real—he is real. This thing, this kiss, happened. I'm here, and he stole a kiss from me.

Daddy would be ashamed.

I am ashamed.

We aren't supposed to kiss before marriage. We aren't supposed to touch or do anything that might lead to temptation. Yet here I am, on my knees in front of a beautiful angel—no, man.

It's a sin.

Now, I'm a liar *and* a sinner.

Daddy will never forgive me.

I want to move, to run away and never look back, yet I don't. His blue-eyed stare pins me where I sit, and I'm brought back to last summer at our home, when I held the hand of the neighbor boy and let him kiss me underneath the apple trees in his backyard.

That kiss didn't feel like a sin. It felt like happiness and love and all the things you're supposed to feel. There was the warmth of the sun overhead, the bees buzzing in the air, and

the whisper of the wind in his brown hair. It was perfect, but then his grandmother, nosy Mrs. Bartholomew, saw us through her kitchen window, and she ran out of the house, shouting and waving her arms like a caricature of herself.

Daniel turned the color the apples would be in a few short months as she screeched at me and called me a whore. She caught me by the ear and dragged me all the way home as I cried and begged her to let me go. She didn't though. No, she told Daddy what she had seen, and I've never, ever seen him so mad, not in all my days on this earth. Sweat poured from his brow and stained the front of his polo shirt as he shouted at me, his *slut daughter*.

Daddy grounded me for six months because of that kiss, even though it was short and sweet, barely a peck on the lips and nothing more. Daniel hadn't shoved his tongue into my mouth, pushed his fingers into my hair, or pulled at my skin and dragged me closer. His kiss was a whisper of his lips against mine, but as I stare at this stranger, I realize he stole something far more valuable from me.

Innocence.

That kiss beneath the apple trees didn't make me feel like I do right now. Daniel's kiss was sweet, kind, and perfect. Now, though, I feel sullied, dirty, and naked. Liquid fire burns beneath my belly button and winds tightly, a snake bedding down for the night. My skin warms with the blush that bridges my cheeks and creeps down my throat toward my collarbone.

The stranger has taken my innocence, and I should hate him for it, but I don't. If anything, I'm terrified.

Temptation is a gateway to sin, and I need to redeem myself so Daddy will let me come home.

I have to go home!

The stranger blinks at me, and I realize that I haven't moved away from him.

Why haven't I moved?

Because that kiss felt good.

No! It can't. I'm ... I'm horrified.

He's real, and I'm here, and I haven't moved away from the man who defiled me and this place of worship. The realization lands like a baseball bat to my sternum, and I startle away from him, scrambling away on my hands and knees across the hard floor.

"You're the devil," I spit, saliva thickening the words and making them run together.

He laughs at my curse, and the sound fills the small space, echoing in the hollow of the chapel and falling back down to slap me with my shame.

Whore!

His laughter fades slowly from his lips until the beautiful stranger shakes his head. His tongue peeks out to taste a canine before he cocks his head and smirks at me.

"I'm not the devil, angel," he tells me, the deep timbre of his voice falling over me like warm rain, "but he and I are on a first-name basis."

He stands suddenly, and there's something unnatural in his movements, like he's a cat crisscrossing between its owner's legs. He's too lithe, too graceful, and it sends my pulse skyrocketing up to the astronauts. I reach blindly onto the pew behind me and grab the first thing I find, a worn, leather-bound copy of the Bible. I bring it with me as I clamber to my feet, not nearly as gracefully as he did. He stands there in front of the pulpit, his hands loose at his sides, watching me as I back away from him.

I nearly trip over a pew in my panic to get away. He's fast, though, and he catches my wrist, his fingers tight and crunching the bones together.

I wince as he peers down at me, his gaze hooded as he says, "Pray with me."

I can't tell if he's being serious. Why would he ask that? I don't care to know.

I snatch my hand away from him and back away to the front doors.

"I'm not falling for any more of your tricks!" I shout at him. "You're ... you're ... a d ... deceiver! You're a liar! A snake in the Garden of Eden! You are ... are evil!"

He smiles then, showing all his pretty teeth, but the expression doesn't reach his dead eyes. It's like watching a puppet wear a mask, and I think for a moment he might actually be a demon hiding behind human flesh. His approximation of a smile is terrifying.

I dash toward the door, nearly tripping over my own feet as I do, and he steps closer, the smile falling from his lips and a frown marring his face.

"Don't go," he says, and a laugh bubbles out of me because he's crazy. He's a sinner and a liar, a puppet wearing the face of an angel, yet he wants me to stay and *pray* with him.

Heck, no!

He steps forward again, and I react on instinct. I throw the Bible at him, and he doesn't deflect. The book hits him straight in the chest and falls to the floor with a thud.

The stranger looks down at it and then back up at me before he pouts and says, "Fine. Run away and say your prayers, angel, but know they won't save you from me."

He doesn't need to tell me to leave twice, and two seconds later, I'm out of the church and sprinting through the cold night air. He cackles as I leave, and the sound follows me as I run back toward the Academy and away from the chapel. His laughter chases me, taunting me, as I do.

I know one thing as I beeline for the Academy.

God isn't coming to save me.

I don't think he knows this place even exists.

KILLIAN



The angel darts out the door, shaking like a leaf as she meets the last whispers of wintery wind. Her blonde hair swings with each of her steps, and my eyes track the movement as she darts into the darkness and back toward the Academy. I don't follow her, which is a surprise to both me and my shadow. Although, unlike me, it definitely pisses him off. He's still there, standing beside me, hovering and watching like a pestering pigeon tracking breadcrumbs. As she disappears past the tree line, he snarls, the sound loud and wet.

Black saliva drips from his obsidian fangs to sully the floor and the tops of my shoes. It reminds me too much of spilled blood, and although I know the disgusting dribble doesn't exist—or at least not outside the world of my fucked-up brain—I have the urge to wipe the sticky substance from my shoes regardless.

Drip, drip, ddddrrrriiiiiipppp.

Pull yourself together, Kill!

The shadow's not real.

The nasty stains on your loafers aren't real.

None of this is real.

Still, my eye twitches because some part of this must be, right? Why else can I feel the heat radiating off my shadow like he's my own personal furnace and feel him breathing down my fucking neck?

He hovers next to me, his rage simmering beneath his skin as he huffs and puffs like he's trying to bring the whole church down.

I wish he would stop, but he doesn't. My shadow's like a starving dog eyeing a prime-grade piece of meat, and he licks his chops. His pitch-black eyes latched on the spot where the devout girl disappeared over the edge of the horizon. She'd run toward the Academy like her life depended on it. Hell, if I wasn't feeling generous, it would've depended on it.

I'd shoved Nikki off my cock as soon as I realized where the girl was headed and came here with one intention: to punish the person who dared to desecrate my sacred space. The rage boiling in my veins demanded that I make her pay. Fuck, it should be a Vatican-recognized miracle I didn't commit murder tonight and drop her body in one of the open graves of the cemetery caving in from time and neglect.

I've done more to others for less of an insult.

I've broken the teeth of bastards for looking at me the wrong way.

And spent countless hours in the hole, rotting in the isolation chamber, while Dr. Boucher tried to figure out how to control my *violent urges*.

Hell, I once gave an A+ effort trying to gut a new student with a chunk of a cracked headstone for interrupting me out here. Dumb luck and an even dumber pair of guards saved him, but he left Chryseum with a nasty scar above his belly button and a stutter that only showed its face when I was near.

That girl defiled what is mine. I should have crucified her to the wall or bent her over the pulpit like a priest with a naughty choir boy. But I didn't. I couldn't, not after I opened the door to the church and found her on her knees like destiny made sure she was waiting for me. The indent of her bent spine pressed tight against her cardigan, showing the outline of her delicate vertebrae. Her white hair spilled down her neck and across her shoulders as she sobbed. She knelt beneath the

image of a broken and bloodied Christ hanging on the wall and begged for the Lord to save her.

I couldn't have imagined a more delectable first impression myself.

She was gone, lost in her own desperate cries to her god. For a moment, she had no idea I watched her, and I'd never been as hard as I was then. And I didn't need graves or deathly cold to get my dick going either.

She was pious even when the world wasn't keeping tabs, a rare feat from what I've seen. She didn't use prayer as some social bingo card or to impress someone else. She didn't kneel for fellow churchgoers or because someone else demanded she do it as penance. She knelt for herself, and I knew from the broken sobs spraying from her mouth that she was begging God to save her.

Too bad. I'd never let him have her, not again, not after she defiled my sanctuary and greeted me on her knees like she was waiting for me to arrive.

The sight of her in front of the altar rained hail over my bloodlust, even as the shadow at my side shouted at me to make her pay.

"Slice her up!" it screamed, howling as though in pain. It probably was. I certainly was as white-hot lightning shot through me, demanding retribution.

"Dice her quick!" it howled. "Give her last rites and watch her bleed."

But I couldn't do it, not after I'd seen the perfect visage of her blubbering and breaking on *my* floor. It was like she knew I was coming. She was in position and preparing herself to pray to her new god.

Sure, girls tend to cry in my presence, especially after I fuck them hard and leave them to deal with the guilt of their so-called sins. I'd never seen an angel break before, though, and the image of her lying there and crying for help, well, I want it branded into my brain for all eternity.

It was ironic when she turned around, looked at me, and asked if I was an angel.

I certainly wasn't one, but she was, or at least the closest thing I'd ever see to one. God doesn't let men like me behind the pearly gates. It'll be brimstone and hellfire for all eternity for me.

Even my shadow quieted his screams for vengeance for a moment when she stopped her prayers and turned toward me. Her bright blue eyes were bloodshot and puffy, and snot dripped from her nose and down to her upper lip. She stared at me, her mouth falling open as saliva stuck between her teeth in thin ropes. She was so pale, so perfect, and so utterly breakable, sitting there beneath the son of God.

Nothing had ever been as perfect as her kneeling there.

Not one of the times my cock's been coated in blood as I've racked up another win for debauchery.

Not when I've convinced the virtuous princesses that God's abandoned them and watched as the hope faded from their eyes.

Absolutely nothing.

Yet, my shadow howled then, just as he's howling again now. I wish he would get over it. She's long gone, probably being escorted to her room by a couple of guards.

The bloodlust is still calling us both, though. I'm not sure how long I can ignore it this time before I need to feed the beast.

Eventually, my demons will demand payment, and the meds will only hold my shadow at bay for so long. Then I'll be carving up another body in the morgue if I'm unlucky or seeing how the new girl looks in the mausoleum, if luck favors me. The bloodlust always wins, and I can't have a repeat of last semester when I woke up in my bed covered in someone else's blood and wondered what I had done.

It's just no fun if I can't remember.

Sometimes when I'm awake at night and staring up at the stone ceiling, I wonder if one day I'll find out that it was all just a dream. At that moment, I'll know padded walls have always been my reality and that would mean all of this was just my screwed-up mind playing pretend.

I don't think I could take it if that happened. I'm waging a war against the greatest delusion of all time, and I couldn't stand to find out that my battle has been one-sided.

"Follow her!" my shadow bellows at my side, sending spit dribbling across my face and reminding me once again of his existence.

Fucking asshole.

His saliva hits hot and sticky, and I swipe it off my cheek with one hand. If I could hit him right now, I would, but it's futile to try.

I have tried.

And I've failed.

Then I attempted to kill him with a paring knife.

And I also failed then.

He's a specter, but he's my specter. He's stood next to me for over a decade, since I was six years old. That's when the doctors said my parents' death irrevocably damaged me, and my mother's sister came and collected me from rural Utah.

My aunt cried when she first met me at a police station, a can of soda on the metal desk in front of me. I was hungry and tired, but she welcomed me immediately into their perfect family. Back then, she'd wanted to make me bright and shiny like her own perfect children, a twin brother and sister.

My aunt and her husband sent me to fancy schools just like they did their own kids and then put me in fancy doctors' offices when I didn't fit in. After those fancy doctors told my aunt and uncle that I would never be normal, I was no longer a treasure my aunt could collect like a breathing reminder of her beloved sister, so my picture didn't go on the walls of their

home or above the mantle for all to see. I became a skeleton to hide in the closet, and they shipped me across the continent to make sure I stayed hidden.

My aunt never could handle me talking about the shadow man. The first time a psychiatrist told her about it, she fainted. That guy, a chief psychiatrist at a kid's mental health hospital, said that my shadow was a way for my young brain to deal with the trauma.

She didn't like what he had to say, though. I don't think she believed him, so she took me to another and then another after that one. Yet, they all agreed with the first doctor.

I view the world as two separate people, Killian and his shadow. Most of the time, I don't mind. Still, those doctors never understood that my shadow is more than a coping mechanism, maybe if they had, they would have extinguished that bad part of me back then. They didn't though, and he grew over the years until he wasn't just anger and rage at what my father had done, but something that craved what we had seen, an insatiable beast for blood and violence.

My shadow wants God to pay as much as I do, and he'll destroy the world to do it, starting with devout girls first, of course.

"Follow her!" my shadow snarls again, the words so loud that they rumble through my chest.

"Shut up," I snap back at him, cocking my head to look at him head-on.

I rarely do it because it's just not in good taste to talk to figments of your imagination, and even at my worst, I've known he wasn't real.

When I put a knife through my palm and tried to cut the sins out of me.

When I listened to the shadowy sonofabitch and fucked the devout twins in the graveyard, one after another, over and over again until they begged on their hands and knees for God to forgive them.

When I went to the morgue and cut open the body of the girl who killed herself last year and carved the word of God into the chilled flesh of her middle.

Revelation 8:7, my favorite verse.

The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the earth.

Even when I've listened to the bastard at my side, I've known he wasn't real. The shadowy fucker brings out my worst, but then again, I manage to do that all by myself too.

I've been called a lot of things over the years.

Psychopath.

Schizophrenic.

Madman.

If my parents were still alive, maybe I wouldn't be the way I am, but my inheritance came in the form of psychosis and pain.

My father stole my chance at normal when he butchered my mother, and now even her sister can't stand to look at me.

How long has it been since my aunt visited?

Seven years—maybe more—since she came to see me?

The last time I spoke with her, she looked across the expanse of the plastic table at me and grimaced. Then she said I have my father's face, the face of the man who stole her beloved sister away from their family and then stole her life from the world as well. My aunt said I have my mother's eyes, though, blue eyes so pure it's like looking up at summer skies. Still, she can't stand to look at me, and it doesn't matter that she says it's not my fault. It feels like it is most days.

“Don't you remember it?” The thing whispers to me, licking his chops again as I continue to stare at the spot nestled among the trees where the girl disappeared.

“The stench of blood and piss?” he continues with a groan. “Your father out of his mind on barbiturates and communion wine, convinced the Devil was inside of her?”

“Of course, I remember!” I snap.

The bastard knows it. He’s just pissed I didn’t let him open the new girl tonight.

“What do you think he would’ve done if he hadn’t fallen?” my shadow asks. “Bet he would’ve chopped you up into little bits too.”

My shadow thinks his words are hilarious and whoops with laughter, the sound booming between my ears and setting off a headache, until he finally gets his shit together.

“We didn’t have any fun,” he pouts to me.

“I had fun,” I tell him, though we both know it’s a lie. Fun would’ve been fucking the new girl or tasting her innocence. Kissing her doesn’t even register as an option.

“I’ll have fun soon enough,” I amend, my gaze lifting to the tall turrets of the Academy disappearing into the foggy sky.

My shadow breathes in deeply, his nostrils flaring as he does, and moans.

“I can smell the virgin on her,” he grumbles.

I nod in agreement.

“There’s something else,” he tells me.

“Sugar,” I answer for him. “She tastes like sugar cookies.”

My shadow peers over at me, and I stare back at the bastard as he licks his lips and says, “She’ll taste even better when we break her.”

I nod again because it’s the truth.

Cookies always taste better when they are crumbled and colored crimson.

KILLIAN



I'm in line for my morning punishment, shuffling my feet as I wait to reach the dispensary windows set into the walls. Once I reach the front of the line, I'll get my pills from the asshole of the day behind the safety glass and choke them down while he watches. Then I'll lift my tongue and say *ah* so he can be sure I didn't hide them to spit them out later.

I hate this shit.

Waiting, taking, swallowing.

It's like sitting in your cell before your execution. I know what's coming, but there's not a goddamned thing I can do about it. If I refuse, I end up in the hole, and then they restrain me on one of the tables and shoot me up with even stronger shit. This is the lesser of two evils.

And this time, when I get to the front of the line and the guard hands me the bastards in a little paper cup, I choke them down with the matching cup of water. There are six: three small white ones, one yellow, one red, and a big blue bastard I don't recognize.

The giant one sticks in my throat, and I force it down with another swallow of water.

Maybe it's lithium.

Maybe it's something more powerful this time.

Dr. Boucher aka the Academy's Butcher is always messing with my meds, trying to figure out the secret formula that will

unlock all my deepest, darkest secrets.

Fucker's a dumbass if he truly wants to know what's inside of my head. If he had any idea what really went down in my brain, he'd lock me up far away from here in a place no one could ever hope to see sunlight again. Too bad for him that I learned early not to tell the doctors the truth. The truth's never done me any favors.

It stole me from my aunt's home and put me in involuntary inpatient facilities.

Then it put me on meds that deadened my senses before it sent me a thousand miles away to rot in a mental institution.

The truth's for those who can afford it, and I don't have anything left to give.

As the pills dissolve in my empty belly and begin to seep into my bloodstream, I enter the dining hall with my shadow striding beside me. I feel the eyes of the necrophilia queen glaring at me from the northeast corner of the room. I spare her one glance, and the entire table she's at collectively looks away when they see me watching them. I wonder what she's told them this time. If I had to guess, it's that I'm going to help her raise an undead baby army or some shit because no way is Nikki sharing what went down last night. If that happened, then she might not look all-powerful to her pitiful band of followers.

I walk to the middle of the room, a fuzziness creeping over my brain as the meds kick in. I drop into a seat at the table I share with Saint and Gabe, and as always, there's a tray already waiting for me. Maybe it's from Gabe's merry band of fire freaks or one of Saint's prior conquests. I don't know, and I don't care.

"Morning, sunshine," Gabe says with a snort, which makes his girlfriend sitting at his side laugh.

Neither my shadow nor I think it's funny, and the tall bastard snarls as I look at Gabe, my expression blank. Everyone at this table knows how much Gabe calling me that

annoys me. The ancients used to worship the sun like it was their god, and I don't want to be associated with that shit. If anything, I'm the devil, so they can call me hellfire or some other shit.

I blink at my so-called friend and begin what has become our morning ritual. He insults me. I insult the whole table and feel mildly better about my existence.

"Hello, fire fetish," I clap back at him, matching his fake, preppy tone.

My gaze slides to his girlfriend next, Ms. Avery fucking Anorexic.

"And morning to you too, Death," I tell her with a shit-eating grin.

The strawberry-blonde menace bares her teeth at me.

"Dick," she retorts, meeting my gaze, but I've already moved on in my quest to fuck with all of them this morning.

I eye my roommate on the opposite end of the table, Saint Laurier. His dark hair falls into his blue eyes, and his skin looks like the pale color of death this morning. He looks bored as I give him a lopsided grin and a three-fingered salute.

"Prince of darkness," I tell him with a nod.

Gabe snorts as I move on to Willow, Saint's girlfriend, my gaze sliding down to the leather collar around her throat.

"Saint's pet," I finish.

Death sneers in the seat across the table from me.

"What's your problem this morning?" she demands. "You're more annoying than normal."

Gabriel chortles into his breakfast at her side as I shrug, stab my fork into my rehydrated eggs, and take a large, disgusting bite.

"What?" I ask, swallowing before I raise an eyebrow at her. "You look good for a corpse."

“Stop. It.” Gabe says, and I smile. I love it when I take it too far, and I can hear the click of his lighter as he flips it on and off beneath the table. I’m playing with literal fire this morning if he’s already this close to lighting me up.

Whatever.

Don’t. Fucking. Care.

Let’s see who bleeds first.

My shadow hisses as he stands behind me, but the sound is a quiet rumble. That blue pill must be strong for him to fade so quickly this morning.

Gabe looks at his girlfriend and smiles, and the eggs rotting in my belly go for a tumble.

Ugh. I’m going to be sick.

“Don’t make me kick your ass, LaRue.” He looks over at his girlfriend. “Avery’s healthier than ever, and I’m fucking proud of her.”

I roll my eyes and stab my eggs again, shoveling another bite into my mouth. Over my dead body am I apologizing to any of these fuckers.

Saint blinks at me from down the table.

“Don’t make Gabe fuck up that pretty face, Kill,” he deadpans.

I roll my eyes.

Gabe’s always two breaths from setting someone on fire and Saint lives on a plane of existence where staring too long can escalate to a bloodbath in about three and a half seconds. I expect violence at this point, but I could do without the fucking blood.

I don’t like it on me.

Hot and smelling like rancid meat and making me feel ... unclean.

It's always some damn heathen that bleeds all over me too, and then I have to go into full-on ritual mode and cleanse their debauchery away. It reminds me too much of my father to be covered in someone else's shit blood.

It takes one drop spilled from a fight in the halls, and then I have to go find someone pious and cut them like a stuck pig. Sure, I'll get in a few good uppercuts before I dive head-first into my rituals, but the final product is never a good look for me. I end up resembling the masculine version of Carrie while whatever poor girl I find ends up serving as a human blood bag for my cleansing ceremony.

The only time spilled blood doesn't make me feel downright nasty is when it comes from the pure ones, the devout girls who taste like repression and religion. If the blood of a sinner makes me into my father, then theirs makes me into a fucking god.

I remember the last kid I beat the shit out of. It landed me in the hole for three weeks, and I never saw the kid again. His parents pulled him out of the academy for fear they'd have to pull a plug on him later down the line. It took seventeen days of pure hell to find someone to cleanse his filth from me.

I bet her blood would look pretty on the altar.

I kill off the last of my eggs and ignore the bastards I call friends.

"What are you thinking, oh King of the Underworld?" Gabe asks, while Saint looks away from his girlfriend, takes one bored look at me, and calls it.

"New meat," he remarks.

Gabe starts hitting the top of the table and chanting like a frat boy gone wild.

"New meat! New meat! New meat!" He looks at the Saint. "I want the details, but Kill's a secretive bastard, isn't he?"

"Mhmm," Saint murmurs noncommittally.

It's true though.

I won't tell them, not yet, not until I know every part of her, taste her innocence, and rid her of it for good.

I pluck the biscuit off my tray, but I miss it entirely, and my brain is going smoky again as the rest of the meds enter my bloodstream. My shadow grumbles as he's pushed into his cage.

"Holy fuck," Gabe remarks with a cackle, "what did they give you this morning, a horse tranquilizer?"

"Sssshhhhiittt," I say, or at least I think I do.

I nearly fall over in my seat as the meds steal the rest of my appetite away.

What the fuck is in that blue pill?

I push the tray away from me, the rest of my appetite dying a quick death beneath the pills. I stand, swaying a little as I do, and shove away from the table. I turn on my feet, or try to at least, and nearly face-plant onto the stone floor.

I need something to pull me out of the upcoming zombie mode for a minute. Where is the angel, *my* angel, with her perfect pink pout and baby-blue eyes?

I want her innocence.

Her virtue.

Her conviction.

Then I want to be her fucking *religion*.

There's a burning inside my brain, and it's covering the world in hazy smoke. My shadow is gone, disappeared into the gray matter between my ears. The pills keep him at bay, but I can still feel him clawing at his cage and howling to be let free.

I stumble a little, which is unusual for me, but my body isn't cooperating this morning.

Fuck.

I hate the pills. Bitter bastards big enough to choke an elephant. They taste like sulfur on the way down, which is ironic, given the hell they are trying to keep at bay.

Saint's gaze slides from his girlfriend to me, and he frowns. I don't know if he actually cares, or if he just knows he should, but I appreciate the effort. We are two peas in the same pod, him and me. Not that Gabe isn't there with us, but he's the runt in our deranged litter.

I stumble again, managing to turn toward the exit this time, and the fire burns even brighter, combusting through my frontal lobe and making my movements clumsy. I shake my head to clear the smoke away, and everything is heavy beneath its curtain and the fire burning away at my brain. It makes my limbs slow to react and my breath catch in the back of my throat.

I wish it would stop. Tonight, it will die like it always does, a slow death in the graveyard, and I'll be able to think clearly again.

I'm still here, still me, but everything is charred and coated in a heavy blanket of ash beneath the fire charge. Somewhere inside my brain, my shadow grabs the bars of its cage and rattles them. A tremor starts in my hands, and I clench my fists, open and close, open and close again, and it pulls me back to the present.

I'm delivered back to reality, my two feet planted beneath the massive chandeliers of the dining hall and across from the guards who speckle the walls like dirty stains. There are fewer than there were last semester or the one before that. Somewhere deep inside of me, the shadow laughs, and I know why. It's because this place is forcing them to leave. Hell, maybe we are.

Although the guards used to patrol the halls, they barely try anymore. Then again, why would they? Poor bastards are probably paid pennies to keep the animals contained. They don't stand a chance against the crazies, and they all know it. Saint used to say that you could commit murder in these halls,

and they'd do nothing except restrain you when it was over and cart you off to the hole. I used to think it was an exaggeration, but right now, it's probably more accurate than ever. Pretty soon this place will be a pile of rubble, and it's too bad I won't be here to enjoy it.

First, the naughty doc met his maker, the one who liked to touch his female patients while they were sleeping. He was taken care of by Saint. Then it was Gabriel, who sent the former headmistress away to save his girl. I don't plan on doing anything, though. The Butcher can have this place as far as I'm concerned.

I'm counting down the days until I leave these crumbling walls and the pills behind. My aunt's guardianship over me expires when I graduate from here, and then maybe I'll go off to college at Prodigum University, the Academy's sister school in Connecticut. Or maybe I'll head somewhere else and run away from everything.

I don't know. I don't care either.

Wherever I go, I know I can't be here, not with the sulfur pills burning between my ears.

I manage to get my feet to obey and walk toward the dining hall doors. I have class in a few minutes, though it doesn't matter if I'm late.

I look up from the stone tile floor and catch a glimpse of the blonde angel. The vision of her lands like a lightning strike atop my head, burning away the fire that clouds my brain and igniting an entirely different one. She's perfect with big blue doe eyes and white-blond hair, dressed in her school uniform of a plaid skirt, white tights, a white button-down, and a green Academy-issued cardigan. She looks pure, and although she's been crying, her cheeks flushed red and her eyes puffy, she's beautiful. Hell, she looks even tastier when she cries.

In my brain, a series of shots erupts.

Down goes the fire of the sulfur pills.

Next falls the veil of smoke clouding my head, and third goes the trembling in my hands.

She's a jolt of adrenaline straight to the heart, burning away the rest of the world.

I need her.

Now.

Maybe it's the pills or my lack of *give a damn* this morning or maybe it's something else, but I walk straight for her. I pick up speed as I do until I'm running across the dining hall, and someone shouts at me to slow down, but whoever it is, they don't intervene. Her eyes go wide, and she blinks, going utterly still in her panic. She freezes before common sense falls from the heavens and smacks her in the forehead. Then she staggers two steps back and runs, bolting down the hall.

I give chase, and now I'm sprinting. I've got a good eighteen inches on her, maybe more, and she has no idea where she's going. Still, she's fast for a lost little lamb as she bolts down the hallway.

She can run as fast as she can for as long as she can, but the verdict's already decided. When I catch her, I'm going to taste her faith and get the closest I'll ever be to Heaven.

MILLIE



I walk into the dining hall, hunger gnawing at my middle. My stomach grumbles loudly, apparently not appreciating my breakfast of the antidepressants the guards made me take this morning. The aroma of hot food wafts into the hall, and I follow the last of the girls from the dormitory and walk into the massive space.

To my right, windows line the exterior wall, and to my left, staff stand and watch the students eat. I expect to hear the clattering of trays and clinking of forks, but chatter is the loudest thing here, and even that's mild at best. I look out at the plastic tables dotting the room and see why. Silicone utensils and soft plastic trays don't clatter, and the students look more dead than alive, nodding off in their seats and drooling onto their food. Where did Daddy leave me if the students have to be heavily medicated and can't be trusted with silver spoons?

My stomach gurgles again, pinching tight, and I wrap my arms around my middle to quiet it as I step further inside and try to get my bearings. The cafeteria line starts at the far-left corner of the room, and my stomach wants me to dart there and gobble everything in sight. My brain, though, isn't sure that's a good idea. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be, but the guards dragged me out of my bed this morning, peeling the blanket off me and threatening to send me to the isolation ward for insubordination if I didn't get up. I refused their commands and begged them to take me to isolation because I

knew anything would be better than facing the stranger who had accosted me in the church last night.

The guards had looked at me like I was crazy before they laughed and told me there was no way in hell I was avoiding the general population that easily. The taller of the two, a broad-shouldered lady with a permanent scowl, yanked me out of bed and pushed me in the direction of my closet.

“Get dressed!” she barked.

In that moment, I would’ve leapt out the window and tried to run off the roof if the window hadn’t had bars on it. Even my new roommate looked like she felt sorry for me while I stood there, my face reddening with shame as the guards grabbed my uniform out of my closet and tossed it at me. I thought they’d make me remove my bracelet, a black ribbon with a small silver cross, but they didn’t.

I’m grateful for it too. The staff took everything I owned last night, including the clothes on my back, but I *need* my cross. It makes me feel safe and reminds me of home. Last night, I fell asleep with it in my palm under my pillow. Even now, I tuck it into the palm of my hand again and squeeze it tight. God will give me strength to make it through today. Right now, I wish it was a giant cross, though, big enough to touch the ceiling. That way I could scamper up it and hide because as I look across the hall, I spot the stranger who defiled my prayers last night.

He stands tall and still in front of the table in the middle of the room like he is their king. As I look at him, I swear even the commotion in the dining hall ceases just for a moment.

I understand why the other students can’t find their words. He’s stolen mine away too and my breath away with them.

He’s even more beautiful in the full light of morning. But then I remember what he did and no Romanesque nose, sharp jawline, or blue eyes can make up for the sinner standing across from me. I don’t care that he looks like he could grace television channels. He interrupted my prayers, stole a kiss,

and tasted my pain, and he had no right to do any of it. I went to the church for salvation, and I found a path to damnation instead.

The beautiful stranger staggers forward a couple of steps, unsteady on his feet, and I think he doesn't notice me, but then he stops walking dead-center of the dining hall and looks up from the floor to stare at me instead. If looks could kill, I'd be in a pine box in the graveyard already. This time, I *know* the entire room falls silent. We stare at each other, and time pauses, everything put on hold, until suddenly, he's running toward me. Then he's outright sprinting, and I can't believe my own eyes as I stand frozen between the double doors.

I can't move.

I can't even breathe.

Fear coils around my heart and squeezes tight.

Something in me cries out in panic.

Run!

Move!

Fight, Millicent! Fight!

Alarm bells chime between my ears as I peel my feet off the floor. Then I spin on my heel and run like I've never run before in my entire life, even faster than the night before. One single thought blasts through my brain.

I have to get away from him and go somewhere safe.

Maybe it's my survival instinct finally kicking in or maybe it's pure adrenaline, I don't know. The only thing that I'm sure of is that I have to get away.

I'd hoped maybe I had imagined it, that a golden-haired demon didn't kiss me in a holy place to fulfill some sick fantasy.

I was wrong.

Utterly, undeniably, devastatingly wrong.

He's real.

I've confirmed it with my own eyes, and his gaze gleams dark and dangerous. I don't want to find out why. Heck, I'd rather never see him or meet his gaze ever again.

I dart down the halls, past pairs of patrolling guards, who ignore me when I cry for help, the useless jerks. My feet skid on the freshly polished floor, and everything smells like lemon-scented cleaning solution. A janitor dressed in a black uniform that matches the rest of the staff looks up from her mop bucket as I pass before she returns to her task.

Save me! I shout at her with my eyes because I've already wasted all my breath on the guards and by running through this maze of interconnected hallways. The cleaning lady doesn't look up again, staying on task as I turn the corner to the left at the end of the hall and start in another direction.

Then I take another right.

A left.

A right again.

My heart pumps wildly, hammering against my sternum. If it beats any harder, it's going to knock itself free from my chest and run away from me, hopping like a bunny down the hall and leaving me behind as a sacrifice.

I don't look back to see if the stranger is still chasing me. When someone runs at you, you run the other way, especially when that someone is a gigantic Nordic godlike creature who steals kisses and probably souls.

I've always been small, but right now, it's to my advantage. I slip between the bodies crowding the hall and the students headed to and from class. I slide past a gaggle of girls in the hallway and then past two guys chatting next to a bathroom.

The boys at my old school called me *the doll*. Not because I was pretty, but because that's how they viewed me, small and breakable. I cried for two weeks after I found out. Then I cried

even harder when I learned they had made a list ranking the girls at my school from best looking to worst. I was in the bottom third. They can shove it where the sun doesn't shine though because being petite is helping me escape the scary stranger, and for that, I'm grateful.

I can hear my breath roaring between my ears, and my lungs hurt for air that isn't there. Still, I know I can't let him catch me. He already kissed me, and I don't know what he'll do next. Daddy always said temptation comes in the prettiest packages, but what do psychopaths come in?

I turn the corner at the end of the hall, though I have no clue where I'm going. I haven't had time to study the map, read the student handbook, or do any of the things you're supposed to do. I'm in a windowless hallway now, half of it cast in shadows where the lights on the walls don't work.

I keep moving forward. At the end of the hall, there's a door on the right that stands tall. I don't know what it leads to, but it looks like an exit. I'll take it.

I dart toward it, and I'm almost there, three feet away at most, when someone grabs the back of my shirt by the collar and jerks me to a stop, choking off my air. The fabric cuts into my throat, starting a coughing fit before I collide with a wall a moment later.

"Where are you going, little lamb?" the spawn of Satan says as I sputter, dribbling spit onto my chin.

The blue eyes of a demon meet mine, and I flush red. My breath comes and goes in a sharp wheeze, and by the way my heart's beating at the moment, I'm sure it would have rather let me be the sacrifice.

The stranger looks unhinged, and to my dismay, I realize that he's big enough to kill me if he wanted to as he stares down at me, breathing hot air over my face.

If it came down to it, I couldn't overpower him. Just like I couldn't before.

Liar! the thing inside my brain hisses.

I'm staring at the giant in front of me, but I'm drawn back in time, thinking about the event—the *lies*—that brought me here.

Shh, let me help you, he tells me. Let me make you feel good.

I shake my head. *No, please.*

I start to cry, and then there's the heat of a warm body and the press of bare flesh against me.

LIAR!

The stranger raises his hand and pins me against the cold stone wall by the throat. He snaps his fingers in front of my face as he squeezes with his other hand, pulling me back to the present.

"Where did you go, little lamb?" he says.

"That's not my name," I murmur with a swallow.

"What is it then?" he asks, cocking his head and raising one perfect eyebrow.

"Millie ..." I manage. "Millicent."

"Killian," he says by way of greeting, like he hasn't already kissed me and doesn't have me pinned against a wall, like this is all completely normal.

I watch him, my heart battering wildly, as he releases my throat to grab my hand. He presses it flat against the stone wall next to my head and lifts something shiny and metal a moment later.

Before I can think or react or even breathe, pain shears through my palm.

It hurts!

I try to jerk away, then I try to hit him. A second later, I do both again, but he anticipates every move I make. He swats me away like I'm nothing. Tears prick at my eyes, and it takes everything in me not to cry as he withdraws his knife a

moment later, pocketing it quickly. I watch in horror as blood drips from my palm and trails in thin rivulets down toward my wrist.

I can't believe he did that.

Why would he do that?!

Then he leans in, smells my palm, and moans loudly, sending shards of fire skittering up my skin. He murmurs something, cocking his head over his shoulder as he does, but I don't know who he's talking to.

"More," he says, *sniffing* me again, his eyes rolling to greet the back of his skull.

"Stop this!" I demand, trying to jerk away, but his fingers around my wrist cinch tight.

It feels like he's breaking my wrist, and I can't help it. I whimper.

"What do you want from me?" I plead, writhing and pulling, trying to free myself from him. I raise my hand and manage to slap him this time, and his eyes pop back open at the *crack* and land on me. Still, though, I can't pull away, and the harder I try to free myself, the tighter he squeezes until I feel something pop inside my wrist.

As he stares at me, he draws my hand to his lips and sucks, his tongue snaking out to flatten and lick my palm. He laves the cut, cleaning it until his teeth, tongue, and lips are coated in my blood. I think I'm going to be sick.

"What do you want from me?" I repeat with a cry.

"I want the taste of your innocence and the flavor of your pain," he says, his expression deathly apathetic. "I want every sinful thought and sacrilegious word. Then I want you to bounce on my cock and scream my name so loud even God can't deny you are *mine*."

What?

Oh God.

Oh no!

My hand starts to bleed again, trickling down my arm and wetting my cardigan.

“You taste better than the others,” I hear him say as my vision rolls at the sight of it. “You taste like you might bring me salvation.”

A heartbeat later, he kisses me again, shoving his tongue down my throat, and I freeze on the spot. I’m a good girl. I was taught to obey, to not fight back, and to follow orders as God has commanded. Still, I lift my arm and with my hand in a fist, I punch him, and the hit lands hard. It sends him staggering back with a bloody smile on his face.

He shakes his head and mutters to himself again, but I don’t stick around to see what he has to say. I’m running down the halls again, tears pouring from my eyes and my hand on fire with the pain.

Help me Father for I have sinned, and I think he may break me before I can atone.

MILLIE



He's crazy!
He's deranged!

He's ... *captivating*.

I run down the hall, blood dripping from my open palm and falling to the floor as I bolt away.

I need to find someone, a guard, a staff member, a teacher, anyone who will listen, and just as the thought torpedoes through my head, I stumble around the corner into two guards talking with each other.

"Whoa, there," one of them says as I collide with him. He reaches out to steady me with both hands.

"Watch where you're going, freak!" snaps the other, and I flinch at his tone.

Can't they see I'm bleeding on the floor, literally staining the stones beneath their polished boots?

I nod, choking down a sob, and the nice one says, "Hey. You okay?"

No, I'm not okay! I nearly scream. *I'm far from okay!*

"He ... he stabbed me," I stutter.

I look down at my bleeding hand, and there's so much blood still pouring from it.

I'm dizzy and nauseous, and I don't know if I'm going to throw up or pass out first. The world stumbles around me, or maybe I do.

I raise my hand to show them, and blood stains my palm, my wrist, and my cardigan. Everything sways again as we all look at it.

The mean one curls his upper lip and blows his morning coffee breath into my face with his disgust.

"Nasty," he says, taking a step back from me.

The first one frowns, looking from my hand to my face and back to my hand again. He hits the button on the radio receiver hooked to his shoulder. It powers on with a beep as he says, "We have an injured student. Second floor, northwest quadrant. Requesting backup."

"Who did this to you?" he asks me as he waits for a response.

I point with my good hand to the way I came, and the nice one nods and says, "Wait here."

His radio chirps before his message is acknowledged, and he's told backup is coming.

The pair of them walk down the hall and around the corner, drawing their heavy batons from their belts as they do. Vaguely, I realize the guard told me to wait, but he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to stay around here. The psychopathic giant might show up with the knife again, and I can't risk it.

I'm dizzy, but I start walking again.

Did he go all the way through?

Did he crucify me like Jesus on the cross?

I flip my hand over, and I find that the top of my hand doesn't have a gaping hole in it.

Thank God for small miracles, I guess.

The two guards start running down the hallway, shouting something, but I can't figure out what they're saying. What happens when the giant kills these two and comes after me for a third time? Is this a three strikes and you're out rule?

He tasted my pain.

Then he tasted my blood.

What's next? Tasting my death?

I stumble down the hall, shaking the dizziness from my brain as I do.

Don't pass out, Millie! Stay awake! Stay awake! STAY AWAKE!

Students and staff alike pay attention to me now. I guess some violence is tolerated, but bleeding out on the floor is frowned upon. Guards look up from what they're doing, and students press themselves to the other side of the hall like I carry the plague.

Maybe they think that I did this to myself. I don't know.

My vision goes fuzzy at the edges, and I blink rapidly to keep myself awake as blood continues to drip down my forearm. I have to keep my hand upright though. I need to stop the bleeding.

The commotion at the end of the hall grows louder, and there's grunting and yelling now. I can't tell who's winning as more guards run down the hall, batons at the ready and shouting into their radios. All these people for one crazy student? I almost throw up at the thought.

I stagger down an intersecting hallway.

Someone yells at me to stop, or at least I think they do, but I don't.

I'm headed down one hallway, and then another, and yet another, until I'm turning round and round in this maze of intersecting tunnels.

Left.

Right.

Left again.

Right again.

I'm hopelessly lost, and the adrenaline's starting to wear off. I'm getting sleepy as the universe does that fuzzy thing again.

Stay awake!

I blink and come to a stairwell. The administrative office is on the first floor. If I can just call and tell Daddy what happened, he'll save me from here. I'm sure of it. I just need to get to a place with a phone first.

I start down the stairwell, my good hand skimming the cool stone wall as I descend. Round and round, and the air smells like copper pennies and sounds like a countdown until I pass out.

I arrive at the first floor, and I can't remember which way is the exit and which is the administrative office. When I look over at my hand again, there's so much blood, too much, and I realize it's soaked my bracelet as well, tinging the metal cross in red. I cinch my fingers together over my gaping palm and try my best to ignore the stab of pain shooting down my arm and toward my hand.

Stay calm.

Stay awake.

Just breathe.

In and out, I inhale through my mouth, the Academy air cold against my teeth.

I count as I breathe.

One breath. Two breaths. Three breaths.

I'm not sure if I'm saying the words aloud or murmuring them inside my head instead, but I keep on counting. I'm going to pass out if I don't, and God only knows what the

crazy giant will do if I pass out and he finds me. Did the guards get him under control? Do I want to know the answer?

I stagger down the halls as the fuzziness turns to shadows and bleeds into the corners of my vision. I take turns, but I don't know where I'm going, and I'm lost in the maze of this place until, abruptly, I arrive at the administrative office. I look at the hammered placard on the wall next to the door in disbelief for a moment before it registers. Then I start inside.

There's a guard behind the desk, playing on his phone as he leans back in his chair, and I walk past him and down the hall, straight toward the headmistress's office. He spots me too late and nearly falls off his stool in his hurry to stop me.

"Wait!" he shouts, but I don't have time to explain. I need to get to a phone, and I know the boss of this place, the interim Headmistress, has one.

Daddy wouldn't ever let me get a cell phone. He always said it was a gateway to sin, but what I would give for one now.

I run down the hallway as the guard continues to shout at me to stop. I get to the left-hand door at the end of the hall and without knocking, enter the room.

I open the door to find the Headmistress kneeling in front of a pile of boxes, her blonde hair in a tight bun on her forehead. Her hazel eyes go wide when she sees me, and she stops rifling through papers on the floor. The guard arrives behind me, grabs me by the elbow, and says, "I'm so sorry, ma'am. This one got away from me."

Her gaze skips from him to me to my hand before she holds up a hand, signaling him to stop whatever he has planned.

I sob in relief, my injured hand still lifted like I'm waving.

"Millicent," the Headmistress says to me, her words soft. She eyes my bleeding hand spilling crimson drops across her tufted carpet.

My vision tightens and loosens, contracting with each breath.

Stay awake, Millicent! Just stay awake!

“What happened?”

“Please,” I say, staggering out of the guard’s grasp and into the room. “I need to go home.”

The guard yanks me back by my uninjured hand, but the Headmistress looks at him severely.

“It’s okay, Gerald,” she tells him. “Let her go.”

He does with a disapproving huff.

“Please,” I repeat, nearly sobbing as she stands and walks over to her desk, dialing numbers on her telephone.

“Nurse Hawkins?” she says a moment later into the receiver. “Yes, please come immediately. We have a student bleeding from an injured hand.”

“Please,” I tell her, swallowing loudly. “Please let me call my father. He will want me to come home. I don’t belong here.”

The Headmistress looks at me and then my bleeding hand and back again before she gives me a single nod. She hits a button on the phone and hands it to me. I type in my father’s number with my good hand, and the line begins to ring.

Please pick up. Please pick up! Please ...

He answers on the third ring.

“Hello?” he says on the other end of the line.

He sounds more tired than normal, somehow older than before, though I’ve only been at the Academy less than twenty-four hours.

“Daddy!” I sob with relief.

“Millicent?” he asks after a moment. “Are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“Daddy, please let me come home,” I beg, crying as I clench the receiver in my uninjured hand. “There’s a boy, and he ...”

“A boy?” he interrupts, his tone razor-sharp. “What have you been doing with a boy, Millicent?”

His words chip away at my heart, breaking me piece by piece. I don’t think anything’s going to be left of me when it’s over.

I sob even louder, my cries ugly and broken.

“He hurt me,” I tell him. “He cut me, and ...”

“Millicent!” my father nearly shouts, interrupting again.

I clench my fingers together, pressing the cold metal of the cross against my wound and silently begging God to make him listen. “Millicent, calm down.”

I take one deep breath, then two, and a third, until I’m only half sobbing in his ear.

“Please,” I murmur. “Please let me come home, Daddy.”

He sighs wearily.

“You know I can’t do that, Millie,” he replies.

“But the boy ...” I begin.

“You will keep your legs shut!” he snaps at me. “You will not sully your body like a common whore! Your mother would be ashamed if she had lived to see this!”

There it is, another reminder of the sin I committed when I entered this world, killing his beloved wife.

“I didn’t ...” I wail, and he sighs again on the other end of the line. I can hear him breathing heavily now, his breath turning to static through the receiver.

I start to cry again, hiccupping with my sobs, and all the while, he breathes.

The heat of his judgment scalds me through the phone.

“Are you telling the truth?” he asks a long moment later. “Or are you lying again?”

When I don’t immediately answer, he demands, “Tell me, Millicent!”

I cry even harder but manage, “The t ... t ... truth!”

There’s silence on the other end of the line again, and I know he’s debating believing me.

“I will talk to the Headmistress,” he tells me after a few seconds. “I will tell them to keep this boy away from you, but you have to stay at the Academy. You need to atone.”

His words break the dam holding back the worst of my tears, and they fall unrestrained now, blurring my vision.

“You’ve been a naughty girl,” he says to me. “Listen to the doctors and the staff. Get better, Millie, and then you can come home. I will sort this out with the Headmistress today. Understood?”

“Understood,” I say with a swallow and a nod.

As the nurse arrives with a medical bag in hand, I fall to my knees in the office and pray.

I don’t know why I bother, though.

All my prayers remain unanswered nowadays.

KILLIAN



My eyes open to padded walls, a pounding headache, and the stench of piss.

What in the actual fuck.

How did I get here?

There were the pills and then breakfast and ... And?

Shit.

My gaze dips, rolling on unsteady waters, to my hands bound by thick leather straps to a wooden chair. I lean forward as far as I can since I'm tied down around the middle as well, and my gaze drops to my feet, finding them bound as well.

Fucking fantastic.

The assholes left my head free—and only my head—and it's definitely intentional. I know what they were doing. They want me to be able to look around and get a good view of my jail cell. Like a dumbass, I gave into the temptation too. In fact, I'm still looking, despite the annoying as fuck fact that I can *feel* my heartbeat pounding in between my ears like my brain is a gong and my pulse the mallet.

I ignore my impending migraine and look from side to side, examining the dirty padded walls peeling off the stone.

Double fucking fantastic.

I know this room well.

It's one of the Butcher's favorites.

Electrotherapy.

When was the last time I was here?

Was it three weeks ago or four?

Wait ... no, I think it was after I fucked the English professor in her office, and the new headmistress walked in on us.

That was fun. I wish I could go back there now. Or anywhere really.

God, this is tiresome. There are three things I won't miss about Chryseum Academy when I graduate in three months.

One, the people.

Two, the food.

And three, the predictable psychiatrist bullshit.

Speaking of psychiatrist bullshit, have I already been lit up like a human Christmas tree? Am I starting a new round or waking up from an old one?

Hmm ... I don't think he's fried my brain today, not yet at least. I don't feel the familiar aching throb at my wrists or my ankles. Hell, Dr. Boucher's even left my head free this time, which is wonderful because I hate having my temples charred first thing in the morning.

He might add it later though.

Fuck.

Whatever. I don't think he's turned on the electroconvulsive therapy yet, but I've got a hundred on him making me buzz like a bee within the hour. He likes to set it real high for me too, jolting me over and over again until the current electrocutes me, and everything melts together, the electricity zapping into my bones, scrambling my brain, and frying my DNA with its unforgiving current.

Where is the asshole anyway?

As if the Devil heard his name called, I look over at the door as the hunk of metal opens and the star psychopath himself walks inside. For the record, I don't give a fuck if Dr. Boucher's a psychopath or not, but the least the bastard could do is own his proclivities instead of hiding them behind fake altruism for his strident and *scientific purposes*.

Two guards follow him as he enters the room, which almost makes me laugh before I remember the dude's going to be controlling the voltage knob any second now. It's good to see him squirm though. Since when has he ever come into this space with his minions? He normally tells his glorified butlers to wait in the hall while he speaks to me privately. He'd stand just far enough away that I couldn't reach him and subtly rub my current position in my face.

He's definitely stepped up his personal security now though, but then again, who could blame him? Chryseum Academy staff has been dropping like flies to a bug zapper in a forest lately. His head is on the chopping block, and by the looks of it, he knows.

Dr. Boucher steps closer, and his bald head shines underneath the fluorescent lights that buzz above us, one of the long lightbulbs blown. He studies a manila folder in his hands before he looks up and frowns at me.

He can stop the act now. We both know if that decoy he's holding was my real file, he'd need a bulldozer and a crane to get it in here.

“What happened, Killian?” he asks me with a small smile, his tone mild and polite, like we're old friends. “What made you lose control this time?”

What the hell is he talking about?

I don't remember losing anything, but I'm not about to tell this asshole that.

My tongue darts out, licking my lips, and luck favors me today. I'm gifted with a small taste and a hint of what happened.

The metallic bite of blood washes over my tongue, and I almost wretch at the taste.

Dirty.

Nasty.

Unclean!!!

But then I remember her white-blond hair and the angel that lifeblood used to belong to.

Her, my angel, my salvation.

I chomp down on the inside of my cheek to stifle my moan. I don't want the Butcher anywhere near her. The doc can pretend she doesn't exist because she is *mine*.

Not his.

Not God's.

Mine.

I lick my lips again, relishing as the gritty, metallic flavor darts across my tongue again.

On second thought, maybe the butchering motherfucker did already fry my brain because how could I forget?

She'd never been more beautiful as when I saw her bleeding, terrified, and silently begging for God to save her. It's like each time I see her, she ups the ante on perfection.

It's too bad I didn't even get to complete the crucifixion. But I wasn't prepared. I let myself get too excited, and then I couldn't get enough of her taste. How could her blood taste like pure gold and sugar cookies?

Fuck, maybe he has already fried my brain, and I've really lost it this time. I hope not. I need to see what she looks like desecrated before her god first.

My angel would be stunning nailed to a cross, naked, bleeding, and bound. I can imagine her there, strung up for the heavens to see, the heavy iron nails puncturing her flesh.

In no universe, though, does a benevolent god let my mother feel her organs split apart beneath my father's wrath, but the big man upstairs let it happen anyway. Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of the Lord, died so that the sins of us mortals may be forgiven, right? Well, then my sweet angel is going to make sure the bastard regrets giving up his only kid for the task.

My dick's already up for a crucifixion challenge, but I tell it to calm down. Now's not the time, not when the Butcher is here, and God knows the freak would probably cream his pants if I got a half-chub in front of him.

Ugh. Nasty.

I can see it now, the old bastard smiling, his paper-thin lips stretching over yellowing teeth too big for his skull. Any visceral reaction I had to the thought of my angel reenacting the crucifixion with me vaporizes on the spot, and I resume staring at the one we call the butchering doc.

Why do we call him the Butcher?

Well, it's 'cause the fucker will cut you to pieces and see you back together upside down and inside out before your time at the asylum is over. No one leaves here the same as when they arrived. They leave broken and butchered, if they ever leave at all. I have the scars to prove it too.

I have pink raised ones inside my wrists from my last round of electroshock therapy.

And purplish pinpricks inside my elbows from needles shoved into my veins.

And cigarette burns on my abdomen when the doctor loses his temper.

Not to mention the ones no one can see.

Still, I'm not scared of the guy, and I look up at the bastard, my face perfectly blank. I know it's perfect too because you get good at showing nothing when everything you say, even not literally, will be used against you.

“You were found wandering the halls,” he offers. “I don’t know if it’s animal blood or human this time, Killian, but from what I understand, it looked like you were enjoying yourself.”

What he means is I was licking her blood from my hand and washing it clean like a goddamn cat with its dirty paw.

And *mmm* did it taste good too.

I couldn’t get enough of her, her perfection and purity.

If I gave a fuck about what this ancient asshole would do to me, I would feed him some lie about how I was trying to become a vampire, but there’s no way he’d buy it. I could tell him I was trying to gain someone’s life force for a Satanic ritual, but let’s be real, it would be awkward as fuck for the both of us if I opened my mouth now.

I haven’t said a word to this freak in my four years here, and I don’t intend to start talking now. So it will continue like it always does. He’ll make his assumptions, and I won’t refute them. He’ll make more assumptions. And still, I won’t talk, not to him, not to any mind doctors.

At six years old, I was locked up between the padded walls for the first time, and I learned to keep my mouth shut after that. If you don’t say anything, they can’t treat you, though they sure will try regardless. They’ll diagnose you with mutism, then selective mutism when they find out you talk to other people, just not them. They’ll say they’re here to help, and that they can’t help if you won’t talk to them.

But the fact remains that the first psychiatrist I ever saw didn’t help me fit in with my aunt’s family. If anything, the more I talked, the worse it got for me, until I finally learned my lesson and stopped talking at all.

Now, of course, Dr. Boucher knows I can talk.

Hell, I’ve even once told a guard to fuck off back to hell right in front of him, and I know it just grinds his crotchety old gears that I won’t say a word to him. I still wonder if he’s tried to put listening devices in my dorm room, given sometimes he’ll mention my parents or my shadow or ask me what it was

like to watch my mother bleed out. Then again, he could have picked that up from my prior childhood medical records too.

He knows I talk to my brothers too, or at least the closest thing I will ever have to them, Saint and Gabriel. He must have seen it over the security cameras or received reports from the guards that my mouth actually does produce multiple syllables on occasion.

But not for him.

Not ever.

And boy oh boy, do I love watching the bastard squirm. I'd be dumb to open my mouth to this fuckwad. Sure, he's tried everything to get me to talk.

Hydrotherapy.

Electroshock.

Sensory deprivation.

Sleep deprivation.

Pins and needles in my arm and pushing drugs strong enough to down a horse into my veins.

It probably gets his dick hard, watching me convulse against the tables and chairs. Bet the motherfucker even jacks off while he watches.

"You don't feel like sharing today," he says to me, "that's fine."

Like I care if it's fine with him.

Like he gets a choice in the matter.

Even my shadow, eating up my room and breathing over my shoulder keeps his mouth shut, save for his rumbling, pissed-off breath. We don't like to be contained, my shadow and me. We need freedom and open air and to feel the outside air whisper against our skin. Otherwise, the walls start to close in and then it feels like we're in our own grave, slowly running out of air and suffocating together.

Dr. Boucher stands and walks over to a machine in the corner of the room. I know what's coming, but I don't give him the satisfaction of continuing to watch. I stare straight ahead past the guards and at the puffy, pockmarked wall, zeroing in on a rip in the fabric.

"Maybe this will help you remember," he tells me.

He turns the dial, and the current shoots into my wrists, ankles, and up through me. It makes my toes curl in my shoes and my fingers clench the hard wood of the chair, but I don't give the doctor the satisfaction of moving anymore.

"You only have a few months left with me, Killian," he shouts over the loud buzzing noise. "Why won't you let me help you?"

He sounds sad by the fact, but it's just a tactic to get me to talk, and it won't work. He turns off the machine, and my chest deflates, my shoulders slumping forward in relief. He looks at me, sighs, and tells a guard to strap my tongue down.

A moment later, two beefy hands grab my jaw and force it open, and he shoves a wooden stick between my lips.

Well, that's never a good sign.

That means it's about to get painful.

Then the doctor walks back over to the machine, and this time when he turns the dial and the machine buzzes, the current lands hard. I smell the stench of sizzling flesh, and I know it's going to leave burn marks on my skin like it always does when the Butcher gets carried away. My teeth bite into the wood, splinters itching my tongue, as my body convulses against the wooden chair. My head tips to the ceiling as my back arches, all of me contorting against the restraints.

It could be a few seconds.

A minute.

Even more.

But when he finally flips the switch and I can breathe again, I fall back into the chair, the world rolling in and out, my brain fizzing with the invisible current. Far away from here, my shadow howls in pain for us both.

“Are you ready to talk now, Killian?” Butcher asks me.

Never; I think, as I taste the wood of the tongue dowel. Butcher kneels in front of me, and if I could use my limbs, I’d crack his head with mine right now, but the current is still alive in my extremities and electrifying me.

“We don’t have to talk about what happened,” he tells me, his blue eyes almost clear like he lacks whatever human thing it is that gives them color. “You can tell me about your parents instead.”

It’s a piss poor effort on his part, but I appreciate the effort because up close, he looks exhausted. Dark circles have made themselves at home beneath his eyes, and his skin has taken on a disturbing jaundiced color. I think if I cut him open right now, he’d bleed yellow, not red. His almost clear eyes cut to a guard with a frown, and I know what he’s about to do, but I won’t open my mouth to stop him. That would make it worse for me in the long run.

He stands to his full height, the white end of his lab coat lifting from the floor. Then he walks over to the machine again, looks back at me, and says, “You’ve done this to yourself, son.”

He flips the switch, and the result is instantaneous. My shadow howls again, and I hear my knuckles crack as my fingers bend and contort. My heart stops mid-beat and freezes, killed off by the current frying me.

He’s going to kill me before this is over. Vaguely, I wonder what he’ll do to me and how long he’ll keep me here, but it doesn’t matter. I’m his until he’s done with me. It’s all I can do as I stare up at the painted white ceiling, the paint cracking and peeling, and think of her.

She's beautiful, devout, and perfect with kisses that taste like sugar cookies and blood that sings when it hits your tongue. I want to think of her, only her, but the current is strong, and it rips me away from her perfection and deposits me back in the old root cellar in the woods of northern Utah. My father stands in the corner of the large room in front of the altar of the church he says he's building. He's so proud, and he says that God told him it's his calling, so he's poured every bit of money from odd jobs into it, leaving our bellies empty but our hearts full, or that's what he claims at least.

He's taken wood from the forest and built a makeshift altar. He's stolen the car seats from the junkyard and piled them on the dirt floor alongside each other. My mother sweeps the floor, but it's no use. He tells her it needs to be perfect, but no matter how much she sweeps, more dust lifts from the floor and swirls at her feet.

"This is my calling, Leanne! Do you hear him?" he asks, raising his hands to the dark ceiling. "He talks to us now!"

I sit, huddled in a corner and watch them, afraid of the spiders that hide in the shadows, but more afraid of him.

The current grows stronger in me once more, shooting through my veins, and the memory glitches, metamorphizing into another, and my father is there again, except it's my mother in front of the altar, and the machete is in his hand. He raises it, brings it down to her middle, and she screams.

"God demands a sacrifice!" he shouts, though I barely hear his words over her wails and my sobbing.

"Run!" She shouts at me, but I can't. I'm terrified, my feet glued to the floor.

"Daddy!" I beg, but he's not here, not anymore.

As my teeth bite into the wooden dowel and the butcher turns the dial all the way up, my father's raising his machete again.

I squeeze my eyes shut and pretend that I can't hear her scream.

KILLIAN



The synapses in my brain fire and then fizzle out. They spark, then go cold, and spark again. One minute, I'm alive, and the next I'm dead. I fucking feel dead. Maybe the Butcher killed me after all.

Ha! The bastard would probably print out my obituary and pin it to the pocket of his white physician's coat as a badge of honor. Not that anyone would ever print an obituary for me. Still, I can imagine it in black-and-white: Killian James Wilsdorf, eighteen years old of New York, has died. Wilsdorf was the only son of a cultist who butchered his wife a decade prior. Wilsdorf was institutionalized at the time of his passing for being whatever the opposite of neurotypical is.

Ha!

Too bad my aunt would never allow it into the papers.

I stagger down the hall, the muscles in my fingers and toes contracting and releasing with the lingering aftershocks of the currents that have fried my brain. With each contraction, another wave of pain swallows me. I can't walk. Or think. Or even breathe. Just how Dr. Boucher likes me: one serving of deep-fried Killian served hot.

Fuck. Me.

My fingers writhe again, and I can't control them as they clench into little balls, the joints popping and cracking as I force them to relax. I'm going to be feeling the aftershocks of the electroconvulsive therapy for hours at this rate. Normally,

he lets me stay in a little room in the ward until the fallout faded, but not today apparently.

My toes squeeze the soles of my shoes and I trip on my dead feet, hitting a wall with my face. I grunt at the impact, and once again, it feels like every muscle in me tightens at once.

God be damned, I think he might've done it this time. The Butcher has actually broken me.

Hell, I think I even garbled a few words here and there during his most recent round of torture, but I can't be sure. Everything inside my skull has been burnt to a crisp and everything outside of it hurts from the tips of my fingers to the ends of my toes, my muscles quivering like a virgin before the Devil beneath the lingering jolts of electricity.

I suck in a strangled breath and continue down the hall. My legs ache as though I ran a hundred miles and then finished a dozen marathons. I'm not in the chair anymore, yet I still exist beneath the licking current. I swear I still feel it, lighting me up and shooting through my veins.

I push forward with another grunt, one hand against the stone wall to steady myself.

Flashes of the past few days—A week? More? —play through the charred gray matter of my brain. I'm there once again, back on the metal gurney, strapped down while the butchering doctor stands over me. Then I'm standing in the hall, my feet planted to the floor as I grip the wall. Moonlight enters through the tall windows to my left and stretches across the floor to tickle the tops of my loafers.

I take another step, but in my head, I'm strapped down again. I'm in the chair this time, and one of the nurses grabs my skull, squishing my face between her chubby hands as another pushes a needle into the side of my neck and depresses the syringe, injecting the antipsychotic directly into the carotid.

In the blink of an eye, the memory vanishes, and I stagger forward a moment longer, my eyes latching on the dark shadows in front of me at the end of the hall. As I continue toward them, I'm swallowed up again, transported back to a hospital bed and strapped down between the metal bars. The mattress is thin and lumpy beneath me as a sharp pain shoots through my temples and ricochets through me. The buzz of the electrotherapy machine fills my ears. With another step and a blink, I'm back in the deserted hallway once more. Someone screams in the upper floors above me, and it jars me back to reality.

I continue forward, holding onto the wall for support, but no matter how far I walk, I can't leave behind the stench. I reek like burnt barbeque or when one of Gabe's pyromaniac disciples accidentally chars themselves. I need a shower and a good old-fashioned blood cleanse to remove the stench.

Where the fuck am I?

They used to only release me first thing in the morning, but it's not morning right now. Is it? I stumble to a stop and turn to look out the row of windows by my side. I walk across the hall and press my fingers into the glass, looking out at the beautiful darkness.

No, it's not morning, not yet at least, but what time is it?

What *day* is it?

I wish the fuckers who left me three turns ago had told me the date and time or at least deposited me back in my dorm room, so I could ask my roommate, though Saint might actually murder me if I woke him up at this hour. The guards normally would have at least taken me to the boys' dormitory, but we were only three or four turns outside of the isolation ward when they were radioed to come back. Something about *out of control*.

Don't know. Don't care.

The bastards looked at each other, sighed, and left me alone in the hallway without so much as a *thank you, fuck you,*

bye, and disappearing into their little hidey holes. It's probably better for them anyway. No one likes to play with me in the middle of the night. What if I bit one of them like the pushy fucker two years ago—or was it three? —or found out which one screamed the loudest when I broke a window and shoved one of them out of it. One would fall to the ground floor, and the other would watch. Bet the guy who watched would scream louder.

Thunderstorms press flat to the dark sky overhead, and my fingers trail down the window, catching on the indents of the iron that divide the huge glass plane. It's cold against my fingertips, and I take a step closer. My feet catch on the floor, though, and I stumble, nearly hitting my face again.

“Fuck,” I curse before I shake my head, trying to get rid of the last lingering sparks lighting up my neurons.

It's hard to think when there are firebolts inside your brain.

I stand there in the hall in front of the window, and I shake like a dog, my hair hitting my eyes and shaking with me. Back and forth and back and forth again, I shake, but I'm not dizzy. If anything, the movement does clear the lingering shocks from my brain. When I look up and still find myself in front of the windows, the glass fogged with my breath, I realize it's not just the forest in front of me. Outside the window is the cemetery, and above it, the thunderclouds announce themselves with cracks and rumbles across the sky, splitting the heavens with spiderwebs of white light.

I watch as the lightning illuminates the graves, bathing them in gold for a fraction of a second before plunging them back into the darkness. Thunder sounds again, and I swear I hear the big motherfucker upstairs mocking me.

“You will never have her!” He laughs with the rumbling storm. “She is mine!”

It's not fair.

It never is.

God does all this fucked up shit, pretending to care about those made in his image, but he doesn't care at all. He leads his little lambs to a brutal slaughter and sits back and laughs. God's a sadistic asshole, and I should know. He killed the only thing I ever loved in this world, my mother, and he used the bastard I hated the most, my father, to do it.

The storm roars overhead, and I can feel his laughter mocking me. I step even closer to the window, nearly pressing my nose against the cool glass now. As I look outside the window out at the graves, I spot a ghost with long blonde hair and a white cotton dress. It's a simple gown with long sleeves and fabric that sways with the wind. The ghost dances beneath the tall trees of the forest as rain finally begins to fall from the angry sky, pelting the windows and plunging to earth.

She looks exactly how I remembered, and the sight of her kills off the last of the volts lingering in the creases of my brain. She's dressed like she's going to church on a Sunday morning, back before my father moved us away from everyone and hid us in the middle of nowhere, before he built his own temple and said he was called on by God.

The rotting organ in my chest flops a little in a final death throes

My mother winds between the headstones, and the sight of her sucks the air from my lungs and keeps pulling, until not only do I have no breath left, but I feel like I can never breathe again. Her hands trace the tops of the marble markers, and she flickers in and out of existence. My shadow crawls out of the darkness and pools beside me, thin tendrils climbing on top of each other until he reaches his full height. He stands next to me and watches with me, mesmerized.

He whimpers, and I realize this is all wrong.

She shouldn't be here, not at Chryseum Academy, not years after I watched her bleed out onto the dirt floor.

She was never in this cemetery, not in that beautiful white dress she loved so much, her favorite one for brunches and

church gatherings. She never danced in a cemetery or touched the tops of the gravestones. She felt the flowers in her garden instead, and when she did, she wasn't wearing that dress. No, on that day, it was a baby blue sundress that dusted the tops of her sandals.

My shadow whimpers beside me again, or maybe I do, because we both know this isn't true. Still, I can't help but look at the false ghost.

My feet move of their own accord, and I feel the pull dragging me outside. It doesn't matter that it's thundering. It doesn't matter that in a final act of shittiness, God could strike me down with a lightning bolt outside the Academy walls and fry my brain one last time. If I cared that she wasn't real, maybe I'd care enough to stop myself from going outside, but I don't. I'll take the false memory and thank the Devil for it. She was the last good thing in my life before God stole her away.

"Mama," I say, cocking my head as I do.

To my ears, it's not me speaking, or at least not the me that exists right now. No, I sound like a child again, six years old and soft spoken, not an adult. I watch, mesmerized as my mother twirls between the tombstones.

I need to see her.

I need to hold her and make sure she's real.

I walk faster and then faster until I'm running down the hall, headed to the staircase. When I arrive, I take the stairs two at a time, willing my feet to work again. I trip more than once, though, nearly colliding into the stone wall as I venture down, round and round as I make my way to the bottom of the turret. The emergency exit remains locked. All of them always are, unless there's an actual emergency, but I continue down the hall and take the third left before heading through a supply closet and into one of the old Typhus hospital tunnels that Saint showed me. The tunnels are his domain, but I'm borrowing them for now as I cross over into the threshold of

pitch black. I continue forward, blinking in the blackness, but I know this path well, and two turns later, I take the exit outside. It deposits me in a brier of itchy brambles that's died off during the winter.

I climb through the small door and feel the tiny thorns prick at my hands, my fingers, my face, and my exposed arms. When I'm finally outside, the sky thunders again, and I hear God still laughing. I run, the rain pouring down and pelting me as I veer around the side of the Academy and head toward the cemetery. I could run away from this place if I cared to, but I never do. I'm not stupid or prideful enough to think I could survive out in the wildlands of the forest for weeks on end until I finally found civilization.

No, I run toward her instead, following the corner of the building as the lightning spills overhead. My shadow runs beside me, rain hitting his obsidian face and sliding down his fangs as we pass the edge of the Academy and veer off across the lawn toward the cemetery. Thunder sounds again, and the ground quakes beneath our feet with a lightning strike, but I don't slow down, even as the wind whips against my face and stings my eyes. Lightning pours white across the cemetery grounds, illuminating the long dead, and I spot her. She's still there, dancing and twirling between the graves. I sprint faster, pushing myself even harder until my breath explodes past my teeth and my heart batters my ribs. My arms pump at my sides, but as my shadow and I draw closer, she begins to flicker.

In and out.

In and out again.

No!

God laughs, his cackles filling the night, as she turns and looks at me with a sad smile stretching her lips.

“Mama!” I cry, but my voice doesn't sound like a boy anymore. It's deeper and aged, and she flickers. An iron nail digs into my breastbone. She's being stolen from me again, and I push myself harder, running faster and faster, as she

flickers in and out like a light bulb going dim. Then, in an instant, she's gone.

Thunder roars overhead, and lightning cracks against the sky, splitting the world in two: the heavens and the damned.

God still cackles overhead, the bastard.

"No!" I shout at him as he laughs and tendrils of white snake through the sky.

My shadow roars beside me, and the rain falls even harder from the cruel sky, pummeling the earth. I'm frantic, my heart jittering in my chest, as I sprint forward, searching and darting between the graves, looking for my mother, but she's not there.

Everything is wrong, and my brain is frazzled. Lightning isn't above me any longer. It is inside of me, worming its way through my brain and setting me on fire. I'm going to combust before the night is out.

I sprint forward, darting between the dead. I duck around the gravestones and look at the trees, at the tall mausoleum, at the side of the Academy, but she's gone. Her ghost is no longer here, and all I can see now is emptiness and death.

Rain pours from the sky in hard, fat drops, and it's like zaps of electricity hitting my skin. I raise my hands and roar up at the cruel god. He has stolen her from me again, and my shadow stands next to me and roars along with me.

I shake my fists as droplets sting my eyes.

"Fucker!" I scream up at him, then I roar again, and it's so loud that it's all I can hear even over the thunder and the storm.

When I'm wheezing and out of breath, my shadow and I fall to my knees. I grit my teeth as I begin to cry. A pain splits my middle in two. I almost forgot how much it hurt to lose her, but I remember now. My shadow screams again with me as my breath is torn from my lungs, and a vise grips my heart and squeezes it to smithereens.

When I finally look up, broken beneath the mocking god, I look at the church—*my* church—showing itself from between the trees. Fragments of memories scatter like raindrops, falling but not quite clicking into place. There's the blonde girl again, my angel, darting between the trees and heading toward the church. It's a ghost sent by the heavens to ridicule me.

More shadows writhe beside me, speaking but never showing their faces.

Get her! they hiss.

Pin her! they demand.

Cut her open and make her bleed!

I stagger to my feet, angry at her cruel god and angry at her for believing his lies. I start forward again, toward her, my shadow and I running together as the hard rain pounds into me and pelts my already sensitive flesh. Lightning splits the dark sky, and thunder explodes in my ears. God himself yells at me to stop.

I trip over a root, slip in the mud, and slap a gravestone hard to catch myself. Droplets of water splatter everywhere, but when I look up again, the girl vanishes in the blink of an eye.

She's disappeared just like my mother.

I stagger a few more unsteady steps and come to a stop in front of the mausoleum. Its concrete walls stand tall with its iron doors, rusted to green, shut in front of me. I raise my hands in front of it with the graves behind me and scream up again at the bastard who mocks me.

"You can't have her!" I yell. "I won't let you take this one as well!"

I know one thing.

I will make him pay.

I will feel his suffering, and I will laugh when I do it, just as he does to me.

The world thunders again, but the bastard falls silent.

I need my angel down on her knees, covered in my cum and sullied in front of her new lord.

Above me, the sky thunders again as God shows his rage.

“You can’t have her!” I tell him. “I’ll send her straight to Hell before you do.”

God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in his name, but I’ll do one better.

I won’t sacrifice his precious acolyte, not yet, but I will steal her away, ruin her for all others, and make sure he watches as I do.

MILLIE



Every morning, I pray that God will come and save me. I beg him to take me away from this unholy place and put me back where I belong, with my father in our home, surrounded by our friends, family, and the love of our small church community. I'm not sure God can hear me anymore though. I don't think the Lord is here on the top of this mountain where the ground never seems to dry and fog winds between the turrets and over the rooftop to veil the campus. Chryseum Academy is the Devil's land, and I don't hear God talking to me anymore.

Heck, maybe I never did.

My father hasn't answered my calls for the past week either, and his voicemail says that he's unavailable and out of the country on a mission trip. He's probably gone to Cuba again, trying to convert the non-believers into God's loving embrace. I should be proud of him. Yet, my selfishness gets in the way because it feels like he's abandoned me, but that can't be true. He hasn't abandoned me. He told me that my time at the Academy is repentance, atoning me for my lies. Repentance hurts, just like it should, I suppose.

I hate this place, though I know it's a sin and that I'm allowing evil into my heart. We aren't supposed to hate or be envious, but I can't help but be envious of those who are not here. I can't help but resent the so-called friends and family members who have turned their backs on me, but then again, I know why.

Because you lied.

Fights break out in the halls of the Academy almost daily, and there's a perpetual uneasiness living between the smooth stone walls. It's as if everyone is on edge, waiting for the next catastrophe to be unleashed. The students don't look at each other as they pass in the halls, headed to and from class, the required therapy sessions, or the meals served in the dining hall. Well, not unless they're with their friends, at least, but it seems like friends are a rare commodity in this place.

After the boy who called himself Killian was taken away, I didn't speak to anyone for four whole days, except for the Headmistress when I asked to use the phone and to my father courtesy of his voicemail. I try to keep to myself because I don't want to end up in the wrist or ankle hobbles they use to restrain unruly students, and I don't want to find myself in the middle of a fight. The guards don't care about the students, or at least the majority of them don't, that much is obvious. The teachers appear to care even less. In my American history class, the professor plays movies nearly every day, but the last one wasn't even about the history of America at all. It was about the Crimean War instead, and from my notes, I'm pretty sure that didn't have a darn thing to do with the United States.

From what I've figured out, the library appears to be the only safe place at the Academy aka the Asylum, and I spend most of my days hiding in it or at the church, sneaking away from the world and trying to mind my own business. At least my roommate is nice, Avery. She and her friend Willow have been kind to me. Last week after another fight broke out in front of the girls' bathroom on the second floor, I was stuck between jostling bodies trying to throw punches. They helped me get away from it. Avery grabbed my hand, and Willow led me between the students until we were safely down the hallway.

I think both of the girls are a lot like me, stuck in a place where they don't belong. They aren't violent, not from what I've seen at least. They don't hit others, yell, scream, or try to start riots in the halls. Avery doesn't look at me like I'm

strange when I stop to pray before meals or talk to God before bed. When I pray at night, she just brushes her strawberry blonde hair as she sits atop her bed and afterward, she asks how my day went. Willow doesn't judge me either or stare at me like I'm some freak for believing, not like the other lost souls around here do. She waits patiently until I'm done, and then announces the daily countdown. It's something she and Avery started, I guess, and it counts the days until us seniors leave this place in a few short months.

Every day when I pray, I beg God to allow me to repent. I ask him to forgive me for lying, and I promise him and my father that I won't be bad again. I promise to be a good girl. Although I've always heard that God works in mysterious ways, I have to admit, this is worse than mysterious. There are no signs, no answered prayers, just nothing but silence on all fronts. I haven't heard from my church family back home, the friends I left behind, or my father. Without my new friends, I don't know if I would have made it these past two weeks.

Today, we're sitting in the library between the tall stacks, surrounded by old books that smell like pressed parchment paper and ink. In the center of the room, a glass skylight sends rainbows down to the floor in a kaleidoscope of diamonds. It's beautiful when it shines, but most of the time, it's dull, covered by the clouds. Willow sits across from me in between the stacks, cross-legged and staring at the book in her lap. Avery sits next to us, her book in hand. We've made our own coven on the first floor of the library, like we do most days.

Their boyfriends sit near us at a long wooden table across the aisle, but for the most part, they leave us alone. That's fine by me because both of them remind me too much of the scary boy who cut my hand and ended up locked in isolation.

Willow's boyfriend, Saint, and Avery's, Gabriel, sit at the desk, also reading. There's no television at the Academy, and no cell phone coverage from what I understand, so there's nothing to entertain yourself with except for words. I may be intimidated by the two boys in chairs across the aisle, but I know what the girls see in them. I mean, I'm not blind. Saint

looks like he could walk a runway, but something inside of him reminds me too much of the scary stranger. Well, not a stranger anymore, I suppose. He said his name was Killian before he tasted my blood.

Gabriel is just as pretty, and he's scary in his own way too, always playing with his lighter, flicking it on and off. I've heard them talking. I know they're friends with Killian, but I'm grateful for them because at least I don't feel so alone when they're around.

Avery looks back at her boyfriend and asks if he needs anything as well. He shakes his head, running a hand through his dark hair before he pulls out his silicone ruler, flattens it to the page, and continues reading. I'm not sure what's wrong, but I know it helps him focus on the words.

"How's your hand?" she asks me a moment later as she flips a page of her romance book.

"It's healing okay," I answer, holding my hand up for her to see. There's nothing there but a pink raised scar on my palm now.

"Hey, we're scar buddies," Willow says, raising her hand as well, and I notice when she flips her hand over that her scar is on both sides of her hand.

"Oh gosh," I exclaim, "how did that happen, if you don't mind me asking?"

I don't know how I've missed it, but then again, it took me a week to get used to her wearing a leather collar around her neck and a few days after that to figure out why. For the record, as best I can tell, it's like her version of a promise ring with her boyfriend. But her hands were the last thing I was closely examining.

Avery snorts at my question. "Willow's like a legend around here. She got Saint sent to the hole when she first arrived. She stabbed herself in the cafeteria and blamed him *loudly*."

Willow nods, her cheeks flushing with heat, though I'm not sure if it's embarrassment or pride.

"I was desperate," she explains before she runs a finger absentmindedly across the metal ring at the front of her collar. She looks over at her boyfriend, who shows zero indication that he's paying attention to us. "I was afraid of Saint. I just wanted him to leave me alone."

She stares a little longer, and he must feel it because although he still doesn't look up from his book, he murmurs a simple, "Pet."

"Wish I had thought of that," I tell her, looking at my palm again. "This wasn't voluntary."

I stare at the raised flesh and think about the scary one in the scary place they call the hole. At least I'm safe now with him locked up. I have to believe Daddy is going to return my calls soon and let me go home, but then again, maybe my prayers have been answered in God's own way by giving me my friends.

"Whatcha doing?" the girl named Trixie says, peeking her head around the corner of the stacks as she carries a tall pile of books in her arms.

"Reading," Willow replies to her roommate with a wave.

"What's the deal between you and Kill anyway?" Avery asks, flipping another page in her book. "Sure, he's an asshole, but he's harmless." She stops talking, looks up from her book like she realizes what she's said, and then zeroes in on my hand before she adds, "Okay, well I thought he was harmless."

"I don't know what his problem is," I tell her truthfully. "I went to the church my first night here, and he found me there. He's been a ... jerk ever since."

Willow snorts. "Jerk is an understatement."

"More like a raging asshole," Avery adds before Gabe whistles at the table.

My face flushes red. I didn't realize he had been listening.

“Oh shit,” he says, his gaze lifting from his book as he peers across the table to Saint. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?” I ask.

Saint is slow to look up from his book before he turns in his chair to face me. As I stare back at him, I get that same feeling I do when Killian stares at me too long, and it makes me worry there’s no one behind his eyes—well, not someone with a heart, at least.

“You entered his space,” he explains, though I still have no idea what he’s talking about.

“See, Killian’s got a thing about churches,” Gabe offers.

Saint cocks an eyebrow and looks at him. “That’s one way to put it.”

Gabe drops his book to the table with a thud and frowns at me. Willow and Avery watch now too, and I think even Trixie’s curiosity has gotten the better of her because she hasn’t moved from her spot at the end of the stacks.

“Kill’s dad started his own church when Kill was just a kid,” he says. “I don’t know that much about it, but I know it was in the middle of the woods, very *The Hills Have Eyes*, cult-like shit. Well, I guess one day, his old man thought like God was talking to him or something, telling him to chop Kill’s mom up to little bits. And that’s exactly what the guy did.”

“Jesus,” Willow murmurs, looking as green as I feel.

“Sounds more like the Devil’s work instead,” Avery adds.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” Gabe nods, not at all affected by the violence spilling from his mouth, “so Kill works out all his nasty trauma by going to the church and doing who knows what. I guess he thinks he’s avenging God or something. We don’t exactly question his process.”

“At least he hasn’t killed anybody this semester,” Saint deadpans as he flips a page, not looking up from his book.

“He hasn’t done what?” I squeak.

Willow’s boyfriend looks back at me, his expression deathly serious.

“Why do you think we call him Kill?” he asks.

“Oh,” I say with a gulp before Gabe starts laughing.

“Don’t listen to that fucker,” he says, nearly cackling. He smirks across the table at Saint. “Although I’m glad to see Willow taught you how to tell a fucking joke.”

Saint smiles at his friend, showing his straight teeth. They continue their barbs, but I’m not listening. I’m thinking I must’ve misjudged the boy who’s locked in the isolation ward. I thought he was sent by God to test me, to punish me for lying, but I don’t think that’s right at all. I think maybe I was sent here to help him instead.

He needs you, Millicent.

The thought terrifies me because this isn’t like spreading the word of God on a mission trip. People don’t just say no thank you and move on about their day. Here, consequences exist in a biblical sense, and I’d rather end up in one piece.

This is how you repent.

I take a deep breath and swallow my fear and my pride. I need to forgive Killian for what he’s done to me and show him that what happened to him wasn’t God’s work, but the Devil’s instead. I worry that I might end up like the apostles centuries ago, though, and he might kill me for trying to show him the path to salvation.

Oh God. What do I do?

With that thought, I stand, climbing to my feet. I take my book to the cart at the end of the row.

“I have to go to class,” I tell my friends.

“Bye!” Trixie calls with a salute.

Willow waves goodbye as Avery looks up from her book.

“See you later, roomie,” she tells me.

I’m early for class, and they all know it, but I need a moment to think. I walk through the double doors of the library and into the hallway. I walk down the halls, but I know the pattern of this maze now. I turn left, right, and left again, my mind whirling.

Am I up for this task?

Is this what God wants for me?

Am I supposed to save the damaged boy from himself?

Is this what is necessary to repent?

My heart stops as I turn another corner to find Killian standing there at the end of the hall, already staring at me like he knew I was coming. It’s like God sent a thunderbolt down onto my head to show me that this is my task.

He’s still, so still I’m not even sure he’s breathing, and he’s unkempt, his hair messy, his face darkened by lack of sleep, and a moment later, he mutters something to himself I can’t quite hear. He starts forward, and every strand of my DNA screams at me to run, but I don’t.

I plant my feet to the floor. It’s time to pay for my sins. It’s time to atone. He strides forward quickly on his unusually long legs. When he reaches me, the smell of cinnamon and brimstone fills my nostrils as he grabs me by the lapel with one hand and starts to pull me with him down the hall. He’s still muttering to himself, but I can’t make out what he’s saying.

“Let go of me,” I tell him, trying to push him away, but it’s like he doesn’t even register the impact of my fists as he drags me to the stairwell and shoves me inside. When I stumble on the steps, he swoops down, picks me up, and cradles me against his chest.

“What are you doing?!” I shriek, struggling, but he cinches his arms tighter, and it’s like fighting against a Nordic god. Plus, I come to my senses and realize I really don’t want him to drop me on the stone steps. As soon as we hit the exit and are outside, I fight and wriggle, slapping and hitting him, though it would be easier to slap a brick wall. This is too close, and he’s too hot, like the literal fires of Hell are inside of him, and he can’t be touching me like this.

“Let me go!” I demand with another hit to his chest as I kick my legs. With a grunt, he finally drops me, and I land with a squelch in the mud and dirt. As I look around and try to get my bearings, I notice he’s dragged me to a cemetery. Of course, the scary long-lost brother of Thor would take me to a cemetery. I swallow my fear and look him in the eye.

“We need to talk,” I tell him, but he starts forward, and I don’t want him talking again, not until I’m finished.

“Wait,” I say as he strides forward, and I walk backward.

A moment later, the backs of my legs hit a headstone, and in an instant, I tumble over it and into the wet soil of a freshly dug grave. I land hard on the ground, taking the brunt of the impact on my upper shoulders and back. Muddy water splashes across my face and over my clothes, and my head hits the side of the grave, shaking the world. I blink at the wall of dirt across from me, trying to steady my vision, and when the world finally stops spinning, I look up, finding Killian at the top of the grave, peering down at me like he hasn’t got a care in the world. My fingers clench muddy, wet soil, and when I look up, I see him.

“What are you doing?” I ask him as he stares at me, my words thick and slow with my confusion.

“Seeing if I’ll regret it,” he murmurs as he cocks his head at me.

My heart stutters in its rhythm. He can’t mean ...

“I don’t believe you’d kill me,” I manage, though my heart certainly believes him by how fast it’s pounding.

His gaze narrows on me before he rolls his eyes.

“Fine,” he mutters, “I won’t overcome your hang-up with death *today*, angel.” His hooded gaze sweeps over my body, and I feel it everywhere, across my mud-splattered white tights where my skirt flew up my thighs when I landed, over my dirty dress shirt and stained cardigan, and up to my flushed face. “On one condition.”

“What’s that condition?” I ask, breathing in the stench of freshly churned dirt.

“You will pray morning and night with me,” he says. “Every day, without exception.”

“What?” I say, swallowing thickly. This is too easy. This is like God willed it to be.

“You will pray with me,” he repeats.

“What’s the catch?” I ask him.

His blue eyes don’t leave mine as he says his words. “If you succumb to temptation or fail to show up for our prayer sessions, I get to reenact the crucifixion with your pretty, devout body.”

Surely, he didn’t say ... No, I know what he said. He definitely said the crucifixion.

What the ... ?

The thought sends my stomach somersaulting, but I know I’m strong. I can do this. God and my father demand repentance, and I will give it to them.

“What do I get if you convert?” I ask him.

He smirks before he shrugs. “You go free.”

This is perfect, I think, almost too perfect. God put me here to save his soul. This is how I am supposed to redeem myself, and he’s offering me the chance right now.

“Why me?” I ask him, my heart still battering my ribs.

“Call it a challenge.” He tilts his head at me, and there’s nothing in his gaze, just blue, cold death. I almost feel it when the icicles of his stare land across my skin and sting. “You pray to your savior, and I wage war against the false king.”

I am meant to save him.

This is destiny.

This is repentance, and when I repent, he’ll help me go home.

It’s perfect.

“Fine,” I tell him. “Agreed.”

He nods and stands, looking even taller as he rises to his full height and looks down the steep wall of the grave at me. I clench the mud beneath me and climb to my feet, my Mary Janes slipping in the wet earth.

“Hey,” I say to him. “I forgive you. I forgive you for stabbing me. I’m going to help you find your way back to Christ, Killian.”

He smirks at that, but the expression leaves his face quickly.

“Come to my chapel twice a day for thirty days, before breakfast and after dinner,” he tells me. “And keep that sweet virgin pussy pristine, and you’ll win. Otherwise, I’ll hang you up on the wall like the son of your god and bleed you like him too. Don’t be late, angel, or you’ll forfeit.”

He turns his back to me and starts to walk away.

“It’s not your chapel,” I call to him as he leaves. “It’s God’s.”

He laughs as I try to scrape my way out of the grave, dirt pushing beneath my fingernails and my shoes slipping in the mud again.

“Bet you won’t say that again when this is over,” he calls to me as he leaves.

KILLIAN



I don't know why I didn't just kill her.

Well, that's not true. I know why I didn't, *but* ... it certainly would be easier if she was already turning cold in an unmarked grave. That conclusion wouldn't be good enough, though, not for me and not for my shadow. As the light withered from her eyes, I'd still know what she believed, that Heaven would welcome her into its golden embrace and the angels would sing hallelujah as she departed the Earth to join their ranks.

If I killed her, I'd just be delivering her to her Lord, or that's what she'd believe, at least. Like I said, though, that's not acceptable.

Now, I don't know if there's a Heaven or a Hell, but I'm sure there's something out there. I'm not delivering my angel to her god, not today, not ever. She is *mine*, and I'll be damned if he gets her just like he got my mother. I'll fuck the religion out of her first and send us both to Hell instead.

I remember the way my mother foamed and gurgled at the mouth, bleeding out as my father stood above her. The machete in his hand dripped blood onto the cellar floor as I watched, terrified and pressed against the wall of the root cellar. Even then as my mother took her last breath, a smile stretched across her face and she reached her hand toward something I couldn't see, some unknown entity suspended above the dirt floor. My mother wasn't afraid in her final moments, and I know she believed she was going somewhere

better until her final heartbeat. So, no way does God get my angel via express delivery by me.

Still though, I wish I had let her enjoy the idea that the silt walls of the grave would be her final resting place. After all, I stayed up all night just for her, breaking the lock on the groundkeeper's shed and stealing a shovel. It took me hours to dig out the grave, and hell, I could've at least knocked the girl unconscious for a few hours and left her in the grave. It might have even done me a favor and scared the religion right out of her.

I guess at least I left her there for her to find her way out. She's not tall enough to climb out of the grave on her own, and she'll probably resort to screaming at some point. At worst, the necrophiliacs will find her this evening, and I hope it's the newest transfer who sees her first. He once had blue hair that's faded to an ugly green and will probably cream his pants when he hears her and thinks one of his precious corpses has awoken. On second thought, I better check tonight to make sure she escapes. If it is him and if he doesn't jizz himself when he spots her, then he's going to puke and pass out in quick order. If that happens and then it rains, the hole will cave in and suffocate her before I've had my fun.

I'll let her sweat it out for now though. She'll be easier to break this way, and I certainly like the challenge. She's more than a pretty face, a breakable body, and bow-shaped lips like her mouth is a gift, tied and ready for me to open. Plus, she's got that whole repressed sexual tension thing going on too, and I love it more than I should. You could say it's a habit at this point because I've got popping the cherries of pious princesses down to a science, though I think she might prove to be more difficult than most.

I hope so.

Normally, I'd give my newest target a smile and a compliment, and they'd turn to putty in my fingers. I got too excited though. I skipped that part and tasted her the first time we met. Then I did one even better and savored the sweetness

of her blood. She was a drug from the moment I saw her, and now I'm out here, jonesing for another hit.

I could backpedal, blame it all on a manic episode, and give her a sob story she'll gobble up like turkey on Thanksgiving. I'm good at telling pretty lies, though I doubt lies will be enough to convince her of that. With the others, I'd tell them how God wouldn't give us the act of lovemaking unless it was a gift to be celebrated. I'd cherry-pick the correct Bible verses and quote scripture.

So then, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.

Matthew 19:6

You should come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Corinthians 7:5

I'd tell them that God approves of our love, and that after, we would pray together beneath the watchful eye of their maker. I'd say whatever I needed to for them to give me what I wanted. Yet, most of them never made it very far.

It's the good girls who live lives of repression. Simply sliding a finger over their wrist, up their forearm, and toward their elbow is like undoing the zippers of their skirts.

Fuck.

I can't believe I told her I'd crucify her if she gave in to me. I'm a fucking dumbass for admitting it, but she makes me lose my mind. I've never told anyone I'd like to nail them up and make them bleed, mocking Jesus's ultimate sacrifice. She's definitely going to fight long and hard with *that* on the table, but it'll make it that much sweeter when I finally break her.

I want the *virgin Millicent* and the corruption of a true believer. It's rare to meet someone like her, especially here. It's like the front gates of the Asylum suck out students' faith as they arrive on campus. After I have her faith, I want her

blood—the pretty red liquid anointing my skin like holy water as the Lord looks down and sees how far she’s fallen.

If my immortal soul is at stake, then I want something equally as important to me on the other end of the pendulum. It’s honestly amazing she didn’t run away screaming when I mentioned the word *crucifixion*, but then again, she was in a grave and has deluded herself into believing I can be converted.

What made her think she could convert me? What makes her want to?

Ha! It’s laughable how this one wants to save me. None of them have ever wanted to save me before, though a couple of them claimed it over the years. They only wanted to prove their faith to themselves, but I think she actually wants to save my eternal soul from damnation. Before she accepted my offer, I watched the figurative lightbulb go off above her head. I told her we would pray together, and she didn’t look at me confused or afraid. She looked at me like she had won, though I think she’ll find we have far different definitions of praying.

She thinks we’ll be on our knees, the Bible in front of us, singing hymnals and talking to the bastard upstairs. I think she’ll be underneath me, screaming my name, and praying to *me* instead.

As I walk back toward campus, I turn back and spot the open pit between the crumbling headstones. The sight of it sucks the breath right out of me, and fuck if I’m not rock hard right now. I imagine her lying there in the dirt, pale skin made even paler and blue eyes turned cloudy by death.

The bloodlust is changing into something else inside of me, something worse. What can I say? The angel with the white-blond hair who wants to save my soul brings out something hedonistic in me. She calls to my shadow, just like she calls to me. He walks beside me now, his heavy feet thudding against the earth with each step.

It's cold this afternoon between the graves under the canopy of shadows overhead, and as I continue back to campus, I think of the ones who came before her.

There was the first, the original. She was a blonde just like Millicent, only Ingrid's hair was a dirty blonde, not pure white. Ingrid learned a lot about herself during our time together including that she liked to choke on communion wafers while riding me. Maybe that dirty blonde hair of hers knew something I didn't. Maybe it knew she was filthy from the beginning.

Then there was Natalie, and she gave it up far too easily for my liking. She was such a damn disappointment. From the moment I saw her frowning and clutching her cross on a silver chain around her neck, I thought breaking her would be harder. Yet all it took to get her to open her legs was a few late-night study sessions. Thinking about her pisses me off. As I said, she was a damn disappointment, and I was relieved when her father found out what his little girl had been up to, withdrew her enrollment, and sent her to the opposite side of the country.

Most of the girls leave once their families find out about me. Nikki's family is the exception to the rule because, for the rest of them, their mothers and fathers can't stand knowing that I defiled their daughters. Then again, maybe sex is the last thing Nikki's parents are worried about, considering her affection for the dead.

If I've learned anything during my time at the Academy, it's that parents are arrogant. They're convinced they can drop their offspring off on the Academy's doorstep, treat them like garbage, and they will still maintain their faith. Their daughters never do, though. They always find someone else to worship, and I try my best to make sure it's me.

The guts of this new one, though.

No one has ever tried to convert me.

Though granted, I'd never cut one open before Millicent, but with her, I find that I can't control myself. I can still taste

her on my tongue, though it's been weeks. She tasted like raw sugar, and when her flavor hit my tongue, I swear I saw stars.

God, my dick is so hard it hurts to walk at the moment. I don't think I've ever been this turned on, even for Tessa, and before Millicent, I thought she'd be the one to put up a fight. Tessa claimed to speak in tongues, and she'd sprout all sorts of shit as I chased her through the halls. She'd pretend she didn't actually enjoy it, but then when we finally fucked on top of the mausoleum and I left her there with my cum staining the concrete, she just sort of broke.

She was silent for days before she begged me to kill her. I told her to get her shit together and talk to her God again because I wasn't sticking around for that disgusting level of pathetic. Others have asked the same thing, feeling like after me they failed in their one fucked-up quest to remain virtuous until marriage. It's laughable, really. The deluded always break the hardest, and I think when Millicent finally shatters and I nail her to the wall, crucifying her in front of her God, she will crumble to dust. I'll stand in front of her altar and watch as the most perfect creation God has ever sent to me bleeds out like a stuck pig. Maybe I'll call for the nurse and save her before she succumbs, or maybe I'll just sit there on the wooden pew and watch until she grows cold. I guess it'll depend on my mood.

Either way, no amount of prayer is saving her from me.

MILLIE



I don't know what I'm doing.
I must be crazy.

Maybe I do belong in this place where the building is more of a mental institution than a reformatory academy and the students are more like patients than peers.

It hasn't even been a full day. Heck, it hasn't even been a full twelve hours since the deranged one—Killian, Kill, whatever his name is—abandoned me at the bottom of an unmarked grave in the cemetery. He didn't offer to help me out or ask if I was all right from my tumble inside of it. He did none of the things a normal person would do, and instead, demanded I pray with him twice a day before leaving me between the four walls.

Also, when exactly did he have time to dig a grave? I don't know what's more disturbing, that he wanted to see what I would look like in it, or that he actually dug it. It raises more questions than I'd like to admit.

First, did he do it, or did someone else?

Second, was it dug specifically for me or was another victim in mind?

Third, what would have happened to me if the nice girl with black hair and lip ring hadn't found me and offered me a hand? Would he have left me there to die?

I'm pretty sure he dug it though, if his dirty clothes and the soil beneath his fingers are any indication. I really, *really* hope he didn't dig it for me, but I have a sinking feeling that he did.

Seeing if I'll regret it, he had said.

I'm pretty sure that confirms the psychopath intended to murder me. Maybe I should abandon the whole conversion plan. I'm not sure knife-wielding, grave-digging, blood-tasting stealers of kisses can be saved.

How will you repent then, Millicent?

No, I know what I need to do, and I know what God wants for me now. I'm supposed to save Killian's soul. Sure, he's damaged—I doubt anyone would dispute that—but aren't those the people who need saving the most, the ones that so easily wander off the path of righteousness to walk the road to Hell?

Saving Killian is my mission. It's how I atone for all the trouble I've caused my family and my church. He's my ticket out of here and to salvation, and I won't give up that easily, even if the thought of spending time with him for the next four weeks sends hordes of invisible spiders crawling across my skin.

After I force down my dinner of soggy chicken nuggets and a fruit cup, I leave the dining hall and head to the campus chapel. I've been eating alone in a corner of the cafeteria for days now, and I don't mind it, though occasionally I join Willow's roommate, Trixie. Avery invited me to the table she shares with Willow, Gabriel, and Saint, but I prefer eating alone. That way, I can sit back and watch and make sure to not be in the line of fire when a fight breaks out. Plus, now that I know Killian joins them for meals, I'll hold steadfast to my decision.

I can't imagine trying to eat while he stares at me, looking across the table like he'd rather eat me instead.

Not today, Satan.

I don't know what time I'm supposed to be here, and Killian wasn't in the dining hall when I left, but I figure I'll get to the chapel and wait for him. I am *not* risking forfeiting because we didn't iron out all the details of our agreement yet.

As I leave the main building through a pair of double doors and enter the courtyard, I smooth my hands over my plaid skirt. It's a nervous habit, but not one I'm going to be able to break anytime soon. My heart beats fast, and I worry I might've gotten in over my head, but I swallow my fear and wind between the trees, cutting through the fog that's settled above the dead grass.

If this is what I need to do to atone, then I'll do it.

Save Killian and save yourself too. Easy peasy, Millie.

Now I just have to think it over and over again until I believe it.

I turn the corner of the building, winding between more trees that seem to reach out from the fog, cutting through it like scary monsters stretching up to the stars. I spot the campus chapel up ahead through the dirt path that begins at the tree line and weaves through the forest to the small stone church with its tall A-frame roof and stained-glass windows.

It's quiet as I leave the main building behind, too quiet, as though even the things that go bump in the forest can sense a predator here. Dusk beds down on the horizon, turning the fog into clouds of gold and painting the trees in beautiful light. Impending nightfall kicks my heart into overdrive as my flats leave the dirt and tap against the stone steps as I arrive at the church. Once I reach the landing, I heave open the heavy door and walk inside.

I expect darkness save for the overhead light and the last breaths of death trickling in through the windows, but as I walk inside the building, I see that Killian has lit the candles near the altar today. The white wax pillars throw slivers of light across the room and over the pews, stretching toward me. It smells like cinnamon and smoke in here, and I realize where

he gets his scent from, the one that I smelled my first night on campus when he knelt next to me and stole a kiss to taste my pain.

It's the burning candles that make him smell like he's gone to hell and come back again. I walk between the pews and spot him sitting in the third row from the front. My heart clobbers against my ribs as my shoes announce my arrival for me, but he doesn't turn around.

Everything in me screams at me to run.

But I can't. I must stay. I must ... *atone*.

As I walk farther down the aisle between the wooden pews, he stays seated, perfectly still. Why isn't he turning around to look at me? I make the sign of the cross I draw closer, kneeling before the crucifix as I do, showing subservience to my Lord and Savior. A dying Jesus nailed to the cross looks down at me, and I blink up at him before I turn to the damaged boy, finding his blue eyes locked on me.

His gaze reflects the low light of the chapel and the flickering candles in front of us, and I feel my heart trip in its rhythm. No one should look that devilish in a place this holy.

"Pray," he tells me after a long moment, his voice running over me like poured hot chocolate. He gestures to the altar. "Pray, little lost lamb."

I look at the altar and then back at him, ignoring the panicked beat of my heart and the fire his gaze has stirred to life deep inside of me. He's going to have to try harder than this to get me to falter in my path to righteousness.

"Pray with me," I tell him instead, and I swear I see the corners of his mouth twitch in the whisper of a smile.

A moment passes between us in silence before he finally says, "I'll join you, angel."

The pet name brands my middle and sends heat scalding my insides.

Calm down, Millicent!

Save him, save yourself, and be redeemed!

I sit on a pew on the opposite side of the aisle, clasping my hands together as I do, and begin to pray.

I begin with my favorite psalm in the entire Bible, the Psalm of David.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” I say. “I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.”

I close my eyes and say it over and over again, letting the calm feeling that always comes with that psalm come over me.

As I say the words, I silently beg the Lord for salvation. I pray for him to come down and deliver us from evil. I pray that he will save the soul of the broken boy across the aisle. I pray for all of us at the Asylum.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall feel no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

As I continue, the pew behind me groans as someone sits—Killian, I think—and I clasp my hands together tighter, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to focus.

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,” I say, my voice quiet against the soft crackling of the flames of the candles and the wind that whips around the chapel, causing the entire building to groan. “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

“The Lord is my sh ... sh ... shepherd.” My words falter when his fingers begin to comb through my hair that’s hanging loosely between my shoulder blades.

My eyes pop open as he continues to pet me.

“What are you doing?” I ask him with a swallow as I stare ahead at the candles flickering on the votive stand.

“Resisting temptation,” he says to me. “Continue.”

A question knocks at my brain. How is he resisting temptation if he's touching me?

"No." I shake my head, still staring at the flickering candles as he pets my hair, his touch featherlight.

"Give up so soon?" he murmurs with a chuckle.

"Pray with me," I demand with a swallow.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, and I continue to stare at the altar in front of us.

"You promised," I remind him.

"Ok," he acquiesces, continuing to comb my hair, the tips of his fingers setting a fire across my upper back. "Continue."

"The Lord is my shepherd," I begin again.

"The Lord is my shepherd," he repeats, but he doesn't stop touching me.

His fingers feather through my hair, and I'm silently begging God to save us both.

Help him see the light.

Help me show him all that you can offer.

Save us both.

His fingers climb higher, parting my hair to the side.

"He guides me in the paths of ri ... ri ... righteousness ..."
I falter as the pew creaks behind me, and he leans forward. His hot breath tickles my ear lobe as I finally finish the line.
"Righteousness for his name's sake."

Focus, Millicent!

His fingers brush against the bare skin of my neck with the fire of his breath, and a spark ignites in my belly, the same one that he stirred to life when he kissed me my first night on campus.

I try to continue to say the words, but I can barely breathe. My heart clobbers like a wild horse across a flat field, and it's

all I can manage to think this is the Devil tempting me, and I have to stay strong.

I blink at the flickering flames of the candle and try to focus, but my words fail me again as his fingers dip further.

“Pray, angel,” he murmurs against my hair, and I start again as goosebumps rise on the back of my neck.

“Even though ...” I murmur on a breath. “Even though I walk through the valley of the ... the shadow of death ...” I continue, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to ignore the fireworks exploding across my skin.

I continue to pray, ignoring the temptation and the soft kiss of his fingers down the back of my neck before they leave my neck to trail around my throat and below my ear to my collarbone. My heart’s pounding so fast now, and I smell the cinnamon and ash of him as well as taste it on my tongue.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,” I whisper as his fingertips scatter goosebumps like stars fallen from the skies in a meteorite shower.

Then the fire he ignited in my belly grows, licking at my insides and incinerating my breath away. His fingers fall from my neck and dip lower beneath my shirt, undoing the buttons of my dress shirt as he does.

My words stop again as my cheeks flush red with embarrassment and unanswered questions.

How far is he going to take this?

How far do I want him to go?

I squeeze my eyes shut again and continue to pray, desperate to ignore the trace of his fingers across my collarbone. As they dip even lower, though, I falter completely.

“Continue to pray,” he orders against my ear, his breath hot against my already flushed skin.

“What are you doing?” I whisper back at him. “Stop.”

“You agreed to be tempted,” he says, continuing the slow tortuous trace of his fingers across the top of my breasts. His lips meet the shell of my ear as he says, “Resist, angel. Feel nothing for me before your God.”

I start to recite the Psalm of David again, and a second later, the pew creaks as he stands. His fingers aren't a trace against my flesh any longer. They push and prod and dip even lower over my bra.

“This is a sin,” I manage.

“It's not a sin if you don't feel anything,” he murmurs with a laugh.

It's confusing. Maybe he's right. Maybe this is God testing me. Daddy always said I had to remain pure until marriage. This feels like a sin.

“You prepare a table before me” I continue as Killian's hand, his fingers hot and prodding, dips into my bra. It's like a glass of cold water thrown in my face.

“I want you to stop,” I tell him with a swallow. “Please.”

“Are you giving up?” he taunts, and he leaves his hand across my covered breast, his fingers still.

“No,” I tell him, shaking my head, “I'm not giving up, but how far are you going to take this?”

Surely, he wouldn't expect to touch me everywhere or kiss me again or ...

He chuckles behind me. “Don't worry, angel. Your virtue will remain intact until you beg me for it.”

“I will never beg you for it,” I snap, my face reddening.

He laughs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Stop!” I say as his fingers move lower again, this time across my sheathed nipple, and I shiver.

I abruptly spin around in my seat and look at him. Only when I do so, I find that he's so close, much closer than I

thought he would be, and when he looks at me, it feels like his blue eyes are staring straight into me, picking me apart and figuring me out.

“You don’t get to do that,” I tell him, standing with my heart pounding. “I told you to stop. What are you going to do next, Killian? Rape me?”

The word alone makes my ears blush, but I still look him in the eyes as I say the words.

He leans in, and the light of the candles glints across his teeth as he does. “Like I said, I won’t fuck you, angel, until you pray to me and beg me for it.”

I ignore his words, even as my ears burn even brighter.

“You don’t get to assault me. We’re done for the night. We can figure out the rest tomorrow.”

He cocks his head at me and smirks, and it’s like he knows how much he has affected me.

His next words surprise me, but they land like the kiss of a snake.

“If you insist,” he says.

I walk to the doors, feeling him staring at me as I do. As my hand finds the doorknob, he calls, “See you tomorrow morning, angel, before breakfast.”

I don’t reply as I walk outside. I’m shaking and shivering, my skin hot where he touched me but ice cold deep in my middle as I walk through the forest and back to the Academy to take the steps up to my dormitory. When I’m in my room, I walk straight into the bathroom. I undress quickly, or I should say I *try* to undress quickly because it feels like my skin is on fire, and I can’t get my shirt off fast enough. My hands are still shaking as I hop beneath the hot water, steaming up the shower. Then I try my best to scrub the smell of him, cinnamon and ash, off me.

This is going to be harder than I thought, I realize that now.

He's tempting me, making me feel dirty and unclean. The shower doesn't wash away my sins easily, though, and even after I exit the shower, dress, and climb in bed, I stare up at the ceiling and think of what I did that landed me here.

MILLIE



I look up at the stone ceiling, the white paint cracking and peeling. I should go to sleep, but the gears in my mind are whirring, and I know there's no hope of that tonight. There's an invisible weight pressed to my palm, and although I know it's a memory, I feel it right now, just like I did back then.

In my head, I'm back in my hometown, seated in the church next to Daddy. His hand is hot and sweaty against mine as we sit on the front row pew in front of the pulpit. Tears stream down his ruddy cheeks now that there's no one else to see him cry. The pastor is gone and so is the deacon, having left hours ago.

I've made everyone mad.

I disappointed them.

I'm ashamed of myself as I blink at the wooden steps of the altar bathed in yellow light by the spotlight above them.

I don't know how I got so confused. I don't understand what happened.

Daddy squeezes my hand, his fingers clammy and sticky now, but I don't let go. I blink away my tears as he cries beside me. When he looks over at me and I swivel in my seat to face him, his eyes are rimmed red. A knife dives through my heart and slices it in two as he snuffles, the sound wet and loud in the large room.

“How could you do this to our family, Millie?” he asks me with a sob.

I don't know how to answer him, and two blinks later, I'm crying with him. The wood of the pew is hard against my bottom, and Daddy squeezes my hand so tight that it hurts.

“I didn't mean to lie,” I say, choking out the words and blinking down at my black skirt falling over my knees.

The church smells like moth balls and the wine Pastor Bradley spilled last Sunday when he tripped on the way to give Communion. Something about that scent makes me feel even worse, and I sob even harder.

“I'm sorry, Daddy,” I tell him with a swallow as he squeezes my hand even tighter. It hurts, his fingers pressing deep, but I don't let go. He's everything I have in this world.

I'm an only child without siblings.

I have no close family, and my father and mother each had no siblings.

I have no friends either, not anymore at least, not after what I did.

Mary Marlene cornered me in the hall of the church this morning and said she wasn't allowed to be friends with me anymore. She said her father commanded her not to communicate with a liar like me. She cried as she told me, and I held her hand and told her it was all right, that it wasn't her fault, and mine instead. She stood in the hall, sniffing as her father wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her away from me, grimacing in disgust.

I guess they should've been disgusted.

They had every right to be.

“Say the Lord's Prayer with me,” Daddy commands, and we start together.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name,” I begin.

Daddy says it with me, but with every word, his grip on my fingers tightens, until I'm wincing through each word.

"Daddy stop," I say, crying even harder as pins and needles shoot through my fingertips and down into my wrists. "Please."

"Say it, Millicent," he orders. When I'm silent, he hisses, "Now!"

"And forgive us our trespasses," I manage, "as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I continue to pray with him as he squeezes my fingers, grinding the bones together. More tears prick at my eyes and my entire hand burns with the pain.

"Please, Daddy." I manage, trying to pull away. "Please stop."

He doesn't listen. Instead, he grabs my fingers even harder, until his knuckles jut white beneath his skin and the joints in my hand crack beneath the pressure.

"Continue!" he thunders, setting off a ringing in between my ears, and I start to sob, tears flooding my vision as I choke on the words, "F ... for thine is the k ... kingdom and the power and the g ... glory, forever and ever. A ... amen."

I don't know when I fell asleep. I'm not sure I ever really did. Maybe I was lost to a daydream. Maybe I was still reliving a memory I wish I could forget. Real dreams or daydreams, though, it still feels like only a minute or two has passed from the time I laid down in bed before a flashlight is shined into my eyes.

"Wake up!" one of the guards yells as Avery grumbles and climbs out of her bed to stand next to it in her tank top and pajama shorts. I'm slower to rise to my feet, and a second

later, my blanket is ripped off me. Cold air collides with my exposed skin and starts a shiver in my limbs.

“Wake up!” the guard shouts again, shining his flashlight directly into my eyes once more. He clicks it off a moment later, but floating ghosts of light remain, clouding my vision. “Dr. Boucher wants to see you, Mintz. So get your ass up and get dressed!”

His spittle is hot and wet on my face as I scramble out of bed, willing myself to wake up. Another guard throws a cardigan around my shoulders a moment later.

“Can ... can I get dressed?” I ask him as he grabs my hand and yanks me toward the door.

“You should’ve gotten out of bed the first time we told you to if you wanted that,” the one with the flashlight sneers. “Now move it, freak.”

He shoves my shoulder hard, and I stagger out of my dormitory room and into the hallway. The other guard grabs me by the elbow as my heart pounds against my ribs. It’s still dark outside, and no one else is awake as I stare at the dead hallway.

“Where are we going?” I ask, hooking my thumb around my bracelet to hold my cross in the palm of my hand.

“You’ll see,” the one with the flashlight retorts.

We leave the dormitory, and they make me walk in front of them. The hallways reek of bleach, and I figure either someone’s been doing some midnight cleaning or they’re trying to clean up the bloody aftermath of another fight. The thought sends my stomach bellyflopping.

“Let’s take the service elevator,” one of the guards says as we turn down another dark hall. He’s sweating and already out of breath, though I can’t blame him. It feels like we’ve been walking forever already.

“Okay,” the other shrugs. “Dr. Boucher will be pissed if we take too long.”

I stumble, tripping on my feet, and one of them pushes me forward, telling me to move it. I barely feel it though because I'm thinking I know that name. I've heard it before, and I comb through my brain, trying to remember what I've forgotten.

Dr. Boucher ... is that the doctor Avery warned me about, or was it another doctor here?

Which one's mean, and which one's boring?

I can't keep them straight, and it's too early in the morning. I can barely get my feet moving at this time of day.

We walk down the interconnected hallways until we arrive at a pair of silver double doors at the end of a long hall. One of the guards hits a button, signaling for the elevator before he hits a button on the radio clipped to his shoulder.

"We have Millicent Mintz," he says into it. "We're taking the service elevator. ETA in 5."

The elevator dings a moment later, and I'm glad for it. The Academy is creepy during the day, but it's downright disturbing at night. The shadows seem to stretch and contract, breathing in the dark corners, and the creaks and groans of the building carry down the halls. The elevator arrives at our floor, and as if to prove my point, the doors open with a long shrill creak that imitates nails being dragged across a chalkboard.

As soon as the doors open, I'm shoved inside. The guards follow closely behind, and we stand in the too-bright, stainless-steel contraption as the doors close again. One of the guards hits the button for the fourth floor, and after a slow climb, we arrive at the level and disembark.

The guards steer me down the hall, one on either of my sides. I don't think I've ever been on this floor before, and I'm pretty sure students aren't allowed up here by the looks of it. This floor is cleaner than the lower levels, and the halls don't smell like cleaning solution anymore. It's warm up here, too, not as cold as the first and second floors.

After a short walk, I'm steered to a stop in front of a pair of glass-pane, white doors. Light from inside the office shoots through the windows and across the hall as one of the guards raps his knuckles on the door, rattling the pane.

"Come in," a voice announces from the other side.

A moment later, a guard opens a door, and I'm shoved unceremoniously inside. The two guards follow me.

"We have Mintz," one of them says. "Anything else you need from us, Doc?"

"Yes, stay," a tall man in a white doctor's coat replies, his back turned away from me. "I'll need your assistance."

The guards take a seat in white chairs against the wall behind me as the man I can only assume is Dr. Boucher turns around and looks at me. He's tall, almost unnaturally so, and thin with a pale complexion that reminds me more of a ghost than a human.

Something in me wants to run, but I force my feet to stay put. I must be redeemed, even if it means dealing with whatever this is.

"Millicent Mintz," the doctor says with a wan smile, a thick manila folder open in his large hands. "I'm Dr. Boucher. I'm sorry we haven't had the pleasure of being introduced yet. Please take a seat."

He gestures to a wooden chair sitting in the middle of the large room, not close enough to his desk to be considered a chair for guests and not near any of the other furniture. Unease creeps across my skin, but I comply, taking a seat, and then he smiles at me, looking down at the folder in his hands again.

"You're a liar," he says without further preamble. "And a compulsive one at that from what I read in your medical record. Is that correct?"

"Yes," I say with a swallow.

Liar!

“Good,” he tells me before looking to the guards. “Strap her.”

“What?” I ask, thinking I must have surely heard him wrong as each of the guards catches one of my wrists and straps them with thick leather restraints to the chair. When they’re tight, they start to work on my feet, and I think I’m going to be sick.

My stomach shoots up into my throat.

Oh my God. Oh no.

What’s going on?

This can’t be happening. I’ve accepted responsibility. I said what I’m supposed to say.

When I look back at the scary doc again, I find him already looking down at me with a frown.

“Don’t tell me what I want to believe, child,” he remarks, his words clinical. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and I can assure you I can spot a liar.”

What does that mean?

“Tilt her head back,” he orders the guards, and one of them grabs my ponytail as the other exerts pressure on my forehead until I can’t help but look up at the ceiling. My heart pounds so fast as the doctor stares at me, apathy tattooed across his expression.

His dead face is the last thing I see before a towel is placed over my face, covering my eyes too. A moment later, as I heave for breath beneath the thick, itchy towel, someone pours water over my face.

Vaguely, I realize what he’s doing, but knowing it’s waterboarding doesn’t help me breathe. I cough and sputter beneath the towel, and the more he pours, the more I think about my father and those nasty lies I shouldn’t have told that made me end up here.

You didn’t lie, though, did you, Millie?

I did! I want to shout back, but I'm choking on the water, coughing and sputtering, sucking in mouthfuls of wet towel as the world shutters. Then I think about my father, and the dip of the bed as I lay in my room.

"How was school?" he asks me, reaching over to brush the hair out of my eyes.

"Good," I tell him.

Water lands atop my face again, and Dr. Boucher says something, as I try to wrench free of the restraints, but it's like the harder I pull, the tighter they get. My lungs squeeze tight, searching for oxygen that isn't there, and the memory skips forward.

Daddy's hand trails up my bare thigh to the hem of my shorts, and I feel sick.

The doctor removes the towel, and I greedily gulp down fresh air. Water drips from my forehead into my eyes as the guards continue to hold me in place.

"Tell me the truth," the doctor says. "Why did such a good girl lie?"

But it wasn't a lie, the devil shouts.

"I don't know," I cry, trying to breathe through the wet snot and lingering water drops. "Please."

I never finish the thought. My face is covered again, and the water is poured once more.

It's cold.

It chokes me!

And the world shutters once again.

I just want to make you feel good, he tells me.

His hand lands on the hem of my shorts.

God told me it's okay, Millie. His breath reeks of the alcohol he keeps hidden in the cabinet above the fridge. *You*

look so much like your mother. You've grown into a beautiful young woman.

It's the compliment I've always loved the most, to look like the woman who gave the ultimate sacrifice for me.

LIES! LIAR! WHORE!

I cough on a sob as over and over again, the doctor pours. I cough into the wet towel as the guard holds my head down by my ponytail.

I open my mouth, but no oxygen comes through the wet towel.

I can't breathe.

I'm going to suffocate before the night is through.

I cry into the water-logged towel, making blubbering sounds I've never heard before. Until, as I struggle against the restraints and try to remain conscious, the towel is lifted.

"Load her up on Clozapine," he tells the guards. "And take her back to her room. She won't be talking, much less lying about anything for a few days."

I choke on a sob and dribble down my chin as something sharp pricks my arm and a cold liquid is forced into my flesh.

A moment later, everything slows. My breath. My heartbeat. The laughter of one of the guards behind me.

They undo the restraints as one of them whispers, his breath hot and rancid against my ear, "Time to take you back to your room, blondie."

I want to move my tongue, to say something, but it's fat and heavy in my mouth, and I can't. I can't say anything at all, and I feel my eyes rolling in my head like loose bingo balls as each of the guards drags me out of the doctor's office and down the hall, their arms around my back as the tops of my shoes scrape the floor. I cough all the way back to the dormitory until I'm deposited back in my room and fall into an exhausted slumber.

KILLIAN



She's late.

I can't stand it when someone is late.

My existence relies on a carefully orchestrated routine. I'm up at 5:30 every morning, much to my roommate's dismay. I'd wager 50-50 odds Saint kills me for disturbing his beauty sleep one of these days, but there's too much for me to do to mope around in bed all day. I get up, shower, dress, and leave for the dining hall with the rest of the ingrates in the boys' dormitory by 6:00 am. Meds and the dining hall come next, and then I'm seated in my first class at the back row, the third desk from the left by 7:00.

I've already adjusted my routine for her. I got up at 5:00 this morning to get to the chapel in time for our morning prayer session, but apparently, she's going to just show up whenever the fuck she wants.

Unacceptable.

It makes my right eye twitch, and the anger I carry in my belly flares, engulfing my ribs in heat. My fists clench at my sides, and I'm itching with the need to punch something by the time she finally bothers to show. As the door to the chapel closes behind her and her Mary Janes tap on the stone floor, my imagination leaps over the pew like one of the parkour bros and throttles her neck for her insubordination.

Only two things ever disrupt my routine: Butcher and the hallucinations. If they interfere too much, then I'm about

between ten and twelve hours from needing to be sedated before I kill someone.

This girl is already testing my patience and throwing a proverbial wrench into my carefully crafted life.

Goddammit.

I want to be mad.

I *am* mad, but as she stumbles up the aisle, half-ass giving the sign of the cross before melting into a pew like she's the wicked witch of the west, my anger dwindles.

Well, *a little*.

She looks like she's already visited a new circle of Hell today, and curiosity gets the better of me. The longer I stare at her and the longer she remains oblivious to me as I stare at her, the more curious I become.

What is it they say? Curiosity killed the cat?

Yeah, I fucking doubt that—cats are awesome—but with her I think it's the opposite. It's more like obliviousness killed the mouse, only she's the mouse and I'm the cat about to gobble her up.

She's got blueish-purple bags weighing down her eyes, and even her blinking seems unnaturally slow as she stares up at the crucifixion of Christ. I'd know the slow cadence of her movements anywhere. That's the *I just took a horse tranquilizer for breakfast and can't feel my eyeballs* look. I could wave a hand in front of her face and shout that there's a fire, and I'm betting it would take her a solid minute and a half to even register the words.

What do they have her on?

Anxiety meds?

Depression pills?

Antipsychotics?

Probably all of the above with something special mixed to ensure her compliance and make her easier to deal with.

I continue to stare at her, and she continues to stare at the damned crucifix. I'm growing more annoyed by the second. I don't like playing second chair to some cut-rate asshole with a medical license he doesn't deserve. I can cure her better than he ever can, but not until she adjusts to her new meds.

God be damned again.

I guess I should feel bad for her and if that was in my repertoire of emotions, I'm certain I would, but what my father didn't kill off, the pills murdered a long time ago, and the only emotion left at this point is anger. I'm still angry too, angry that she's not here with me, not really. I'm angry that she's not fulfilling her part of the bargain, and I'm even angrier that I know it's not her fault and that there's nothing either one of us can do about it.

Days with zombie Millicent won't count toward her prayer quota, though, that's for damn sure.

As I look at her—How long has it been now? Two minutes of staring? Three?—she finally turns toward me. It's even worse seeing her face-to-face, and I wonder if I look that fucked too when Butcher adjusts my meds.

Probably.

The strong shit he has her on glazes over her baby blue eyes, and her bottom lip hangs loose, drool pooling at the corner of her mouth and nearly trickling down her chin. I knock out the urge to reach over and close her mouth for her, but it would be a losing battle by the looks of it. Also, I don't have any duct tape on me right now. I'll do her a favor and tape the thing shut later instead.

“Please pray with me,” she says, her words slurring together and slow to surface.

Even half comatose, the lost lamb wants to pray. It's both impressive and disturbing. Most people have trouble blinking

under the influence of the high-level shit she's on, but she's over here still all devout and asking me to pray with her.

Scratch that. It's not impressive and disturbing. It's impressive and a huge fucking turn-on.

My devout doll.

"Sure," I tell her as my gaze falls to her loose bottom lip before I look back up again and find the cloudy skies of her irises still locked on me.

She blinks, and it's so slow, I can count how long it takes.

One second for the drop.

Two total before her eyes open again.

Then, at a pace to challenge all sloths the world over, she drops to her knees in front of the pew, bows her head, and begins to murmur *something* to her savior.

Hand to the Devil, I have no clue what it is, though. It's like she's speaking a dozen dead languages at once as I slide off the pew to join her on the floor. The thin fabric of my dress pants does nothing to keep the chill of the stone off my knees, and she's got to be freezing in that skirt she's wearing. She's forgotten her tights today, and as I clasp my hands together beside her, I watch as she starts to shiver.

I need to have a word with Gabe's girlfriend. Millicent's roommate should have warned her about the side effects of the pills, but then again, even if she had, could my angel have heard her? By the looks of it, I could strike a gong two and a half feet from her skull, and there's still only halvesie odds she'd look up and say *huh*.

It's a side effect of benzodiazepines. Those little bastards pack a mean punch, slowing your heart rate and dropping your blood pressure. When you combine them with the antipsychotics and mood stabilizers ... Well, may I present the zombie on her knees next to me, teeth clattering, and her entire body shaking.

I have something that will warm you up, angel.

She continues murmuring unintelligible nonsense, and I watch her for a moment, enjoying the chattering of her teeth and the pallor of death that's crept across her cheekbones. Then my shadow grumbles behind me, reminding me I have work to do.

I turn toward my new muse, swiveling on my knees. As she murmurs her prayers, her eyes still squeezed shut, I raise my hand and trail two fingers across her temple and over the curve of her jawline to her perfectly breakable throat. Her skin is cold beneath my index and middle fingers, and she goes completely still as I trail lower, leaving a wake of goosebumps across her neck.

Her eyes open a moment later, and she blinks over at me.

“What are you doing?” she asks me, the words barely recognizable with her teeth chattering and her bottom lip shaking.

I don't answer. Instead, I continue my path, watching as the goosebumps continue to trail behind my touch.

Her flesh is so soft, perfect, and smooth. A crazy idea pops into my head that it would feel amazing as a blanket. I'm no Hannibal though. Well, shit, I take that back, maybe for the right girl.

Maybe for *her*.

She swallows against my fingers.

“What are you doing, Killian?” she repeats her question, her eyes fluttering shut on my name.

Hot damn.

She murmured my name in that soft, demure way of hers, and I wanted to hear her say it again and again, preferably beneath me. My dick instantly rises to the occasion. Well, that's not true. The greedy prick was already quickly working his way up to it, but now he's trying to tattoo my zipper onto my cock.

I swallow all the nasty words the girl beside me is not ready for yet, the ones that would send her screaming and running out of here and away from me.

I'm memorizing your color, angel. It reminds me of snow and the bodies chilling in the morgue.

I'm imagining fucking your tight cunt, angel, right here on the floor before your false God.

I'm telling myself I shouldn't hogtie you in front of the altar, Millie, and taste every inch of you until you scream.

Something's seriously wrong with me, but then again, that's why I'm here, right? No one ends up at Chryseum Reformatory Academy unless they deserve to be here, not unless they are extraordinarily unlucky. She is very unlucky, which is bad for her but good for me. Instead of all the nasty shit, I answer her question with a truncated version of the truth.

"You have your way of praying," I tell her. "And I have mine."

Her brow furrows, and she watches me. My fingers continue to memorize the delicate column of her throat. It's the meds she's on combined with a lifelong dose of sexual repression, but she doesn't stop me, not even as I undo the buttons of her shirt and my two fingers dip even lower. Her flesh is soft against my fingertips, like flower petals, though she doesn't smell like them. She doesn't smell of sugar today either. She stinks of bleached walls and Butcher's vile touch.

I test my luck and let my fingers dip lower, over her collarbone and across the tops of her breasts, sheathed by her white cotton bra. A better man would stop, but I'm not above using her overly medicated inhibitions to my benefit. I won't fuck her, though, not until she's clear-headed and crying for it.

A peculiar thing happens as I touch her, her bra teasing my fingers. She starts to cry, and I don't even notice at first. Her sobs are silent, and I'm not looking at her face. I'm mesmerized by the goosebumps I'm sprinkling across her soft

skin. She squeezes her eyes shut as fat tears roll down her cheeks and over her jaw.

This normally doesn't happen until after we've fucked, and I still my fingers as I try to figure out what's going on. It hits me out of nowhere, and I realize I've been stupid to not see it. This isn't guilt. This is pain. She's crying because my touch reminds her of something that caused her pain.

Oh. Oh fuck.

"Who broke you?" I ask her, my words flat and monotone as she cries.

My question breaks the dam holding back the worst of her tears before she crumples into a sobbing sack of flesh. Then, without warning, she throws her arms around me, crossing them at the back of my neck and pressing her face against my chest.

Every part of me goes still, including my frigid heart.

What the fuck.

Is she ... is she hugging me?

No one *hugs* me. Not my friends, certainly not my family, not the girls I fuck, and definitely not the girls I want to fuck.

Hugs make me want to wither and die.

Okay, hugs *normally* make me want to wither and die, but this one is ... strange. I don't feel entirely unpleasant, though I'm not exactly at ease either. It takes everything in me to slowly hug her back. I hold her in my arms, flattening her perky breasts to my chest as she sobs.

Her cries are loud in the old chapel, and they carry up to the rafters and then fall back to us. I don't know how long we sit there with me holding her and her clinging to me like I'm the antidote and she's been poisoned. Neither one of us lets go, even though I get the feeling it hurts her to hug me, just like it hurts me to hold her. Holding her reminds me of better times and flashes of my mother embracing me as a child embed like buckshot in my brain.

My shadow screams and shouts. He demands that I make her bleed, taste her blood, and make a mockery of God right here and now. I don't do any of that, though. I just sit there, holding the angel who fell from Heaven and into my life as she shatters.

I don't repeat my question. I'm not sure I want an answer to it. If I find out I misjudged her and some football star back home popped her cherry and left her high and dry, I'm going to abscond from the Asylum and travel a thousand miles to kill some fucker for touching what is mine.

Not that I won't do the same thing.

Not that my anger makes sense.

She's *nothing* to me, yet I feel possessive about her.

I've never felt anything like this for the ones that came before her. They were all a means to an end, nothing more. As she clings to me, I remind myself she's a means to an end too, a warm hole for my cum and comeuppance for her Lord and Savior.

For the rest of our time together in the chapel this morning, I hold her, her breasts pressed to my chest and my arms wrapped around her back, holding her tight. Then, when it's time to go to class, I let her stand, embarrassment flushing her cheeks like she's finally realized what monster had been holding her this morning.

On her way out the door, I call to her.

"We'll resume our prayers on Friday," I say, giving her two days of peace away from me.

Maybe she'll sober up before then and adjust to her new meds. Still, I don't know why I'm giving her a break. It's another thing I've never done with any of the others before her. I'm full of firsts today, and if I admitted it, I'd say I'm not so sure the break is for her as much as it is for me.

Whatever. I am *not* admitting it.

She is ... confusing. That is all.

I don't have connections. Every relationship I have is transactional. I give and take and hopefully come back better for it. Yet the thing that happened with her this morning doesn't feel like that. It feels like something more, and even after my classes are finished class and I take a long, hot shower, I still feel her on me.

It's like she's wormed her way beneath my skin with that hug, and I carry her with me wherever I go.

That night, the moment I lay down and fall asleep, I don't dream of her, though I'd prefer it. Instead, I dream of my fucking father, and I hate dreaming about him because unlike with my mother, every memory I have of my father is bad. Tonight is no different, and in my nightmare, he raises his hands and shouts at God, babbling in tongues and waving his machete.

I wake up in a sweat, nearly screaming as I bolt upright in bed.

Fuck this shit.

I'm used to nightmares, but I don't scream like a coward. I take the window out onto the roof, the cool night air greeting me as I do. I traverse up the steep side of the roofline, across the roof to where it flattens in the middle of the building, and over to the west side where the old plumbing pipes run up and down the side. I take the pipes to the ground, and my heart's still hammering from the nightmare as my feet meet the ground.

I hate when I remember my father like that, out of his mind and talking to God.

It reminds me too much of when I talk to God too.

I guess the difference is that at least for me, the big old bastard upstairs never talks back.

I snake between the graves and head toward the mausoleum, and when I reach the iron doors, green with rust, I pull one open and enter the darkness. The mausoleum smells like dirt and entering it feels like walking into a fine cobweb.

Still, I push ahead, blinking in the darkness and continue until I sit on the concrete bench in the middle of the dark chamber.

My nightmare still haunts me, cutting my brain open with tiny slices. My father had ranted at the heavens about how my mother led him into temptation, how she was his downfall, like Eve to Adam in the garden. I wonder if my angel is my downfall too. I tug at my hair, trying to quiet the inferno inside of my brain.

My shadow wants to taste her blood and see her insides.

He wants to punish God for stealing my mother away.

He wants to sully the angel and make her take my blood and cum, the body and blood of her new Christ.

I tug at my hair again, pulling the strands taut and blinking into the pitch-black, trying to quiet my shadow and the memories of my father.

Up above, far away in the stars, God sees me struggling and does nothing. I look up at the carved marble stones above me and raise my middle finger for him to see.

KILLIAN



Fuck!!!

A shiver shoots through my body, curling my toes inside my loafers as I exit the Asylum and enter the courtyard. This morning has already gone to Hell, and I need a fucking redo.

Calm down, Killian. Deep breaths.

But the blood almost touched me!

I walk beneath a willow tree and grab onto it, my fingers digging into the grooves of the bark like it's going to anchor me to this world.

Yeah, right.

I feel disassociation marching forward, invading my space and crawling up my spine to whisper in my ears words in tongues I don't understand.

Repress, Kill!

Ground yourself!

Deep breaths, deep breaths, deep breaths!

Holding onto the stupid tree, I suck in air like I've just surfaced after a free dive, and I spent too much time on the bottom distracted by the pretty fishies.

The world begins to shutter, black pulling in at all the edges, and I feel the tug on my consciousness peeling away from my body.

Keep it together, fucker!

I'm the king of repression, but what's going on right now is enough to start alarms chiming at full volume between my ears.

I blink and see the blood splatter again, the nasty red liquid transposed on the dead grass beneath my feet. My breakfast nearly cannonballs out of my stomach, and I remember how close it got to sullying me.

FUCK!

My fingers dig even tighter into the tree, the bark catching on my fingernails and pulling them back like little torture devices. The pain is a momentary distraction as the contents of my stomach try to make an appearance, and I swallow the vile shit down hard.

I don't want to be sick.

I fucking hate vomit, not as much as a sinner's blood, but still, I hate it.

If I puke, I'm going to keep on puking at the sight of it.

Repress, repress, repress!!!!

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on my breath and the whistle as it shoots across my teeth. I try not to think about this morning and how the Academy's resident morons, Dean and Zane, started yet another brawl in the hallway. They both suffer from closeted homosexuality, anger problems the size of their big-ass heads, and a critical condition of dumbassery. The amount of blood that tarnished the stone floor, the walls, and my fellow students indicated that either one of the idiots somehow got a chainsaw onto campus and was playing slasher or that everyone else took a heavy dose of blood thinners with their breakfast.

I was just minding my own fucking business on the opposite side of the hall, counting the hours until I would see my angel again, when punches were thrown kamikaze-style

and a nasty bastard's nose erupted like a geyser at Yellowstone.

That's the one that almost got me. I'm sure of it. Not the blood that blasted the walls as my fellow students tried to kill each other. No, some greasy motherfucker's booger-blood almost tarnished me.

Oh fuck.

I really am going to be sick.

I choke my breakfast back into its normal position and try to not think about how close the blood came to landing on me. It's good it didn't—I should be grateful, and I guess I am—because then I'd have to find Millicent Grace Mintz and begin my goddamned cleansing ritual of purifying myself in devout blood. She'd probably be disturbed that I know her full name, but I know for a fact she asks Avery and Willow about me, who in turn tell their boyfriends just how curious she is. I'm not about to be the only one left in the dark.

We aren't at that stage of our relationship yet. Without a doubt, she'd prefer we *never* be at that stage of our relationship.

If I had to cut her like a stuck pig *and* if she came out of it in one piece—and that's a big fucking if—she'd probably claim I violated our blasphemous relationship and refuse to ever see me again. That wouldn't work for me because now that I've kissed her, I need to kiss her again. Now that I've bled her, I need to taste her again, and especially now that I've held her, I want to hold her again.

I'm not exactly known for coming back for second helpings, but damn if she isn't an all-you-can-eat buffet I want to camp at until I graduate. Hence, doing anything to jeopardize our fragile friendship—no, relationship. No, better yet, arrangement—isn't part of my master plan.

Don't think about it. Forget, Kill! Forget!

When I close my eyes, though, I still see the disgusting drops on the stone floor. Just like I did a few minutes ago, I

zero in on the three- or four-millimeter space between the droplets of blood and the side of my loafer as the school's alarm system began to blare. I hope all the bastards get dragged to the hole this morning.

It was a close call, too close, and it has me jonesing for my favorite resident angel. It's been too long since I've seen her last. Well, okay, it's been only a few days, but the point is, it's been too long.

I should try to not think of her, but my close call with the bloodwork this morning keeps replaying inside my brain. She's the only one who has a chance of cleansing me when shit goes bad. My shadow stands beside me beneath the willow tree and whimpers. He feels it too, the pain at being so close to being sullied.

Shit blood reminds me of my shit father, and if it touches me, I have to clean it off with something pure and innocent.

Virgin, devout, pure blood.

Her blood.

Logically, I know that both are the same, blood from the heathens and blood from the true believers. Both are made of red and white blood cells, plasma and platelets, but they make me feel vastly different.

Maybe it's because my last image of my father was him painted by his blood as it gushed from his thoracic artery like a shaken-up soda with the lid popped after he slipped and impaled himself next to my mother. If there's anyone I hate more than the god my father believed commanded him to kill my mother, well, it's my father.

The scar tissue webbing through my cerebrum knows the difference between the good stuff and the bad. Unlike that walking plague who almost spewed his life force all over my shoes this morning, my angel is *perfect*. She's got a body made for sin but a devout heart.

The stench of iron sticks like glue inside my nostrils, and I feel myself spiraling, headed into the darkness. The universe

does that shuttering thing again, which is never a good sign, and I worry there's not much to do now except hold on for the ride while disassociation splits me in two.

The blackness seeps into the corners of my vision, and I blink. Then I'm in the cemetery.

Wait.

How did I get here?

Fuck. I don't remember. That's not a good sign.

I rack my brain, trying to answer the question, but my memory is slow to respond. I remember something about this morning and something about a fight. Then, like a hard slap to the face, it comes back to me with a full-body shiver—the blood bath that smelled like my father when he bled out.

Unclean.

Vile.

Just like him.

Hordes of bugs crawl across my skin, and I cough and choke down the urge to vomit. I sit on the ground next to the open grave I'd dug for my angel and look at the blank back of an old headstone slowly being swallowed by a blanket of moss.

Do not throw up, Killian.

Push it down.

Don't think about the blood.

DO. NOT. THINK. ABOUT. IT.

If my father hadn't accidentally offed himself, I'm convinced he would be embarrassed for me right now. He was covered in blood by the time he got done with my mother. It splattered his face, stained his khaki pants, and soaked the front of his shirt. Then, after he slipped, he was drowning in it, quite literally. The human body holds between one and one

and a half gallons of blood, and he was drenched in it by the time he was done bleeding out.

Do. Not. Motherfucking. Think. About. It. You. Dumbass.

I blink at the back of the gravestone and try to come to my senses. I look down at my hands to make sure I didn't do anything I probably wouldn't regret doing anyway during my time away from reality. There are no cuts on my fingers, though, and no dirt beneath my fingernails. Nothing indicates I've been doing anything except residing in the cemetery like a complete creep.

I hate when I disassociate.

Did my father disassociate too? Was he gone when he was ranting about how my mother tempted him and how God demanded her head? Was he as out of his mind as I am?

Goddammit, it fucking seems like it.

The unwelcome realization makes my stomach roll over again. I don't want to be anything like the damned bastard. He was a sperm donor, nothing more.

I blink out of reality again. Only this time, when I come back from wherever it is that I have gone, I'm not somewhere new. I'm still in the cemetery, only this time I'm standing between the graves.

Don't disassociate, Kill!

Don't forget.

Keep it together!

I don't know why I even bother to think the words. Much use any of them do at keeping me planted firmly in reality. Even worse than my fear that I'll turn into my father is my fear that one day I'll blink out of existence and not come back.

Where do I go when I'm no longer here, and what takes my place? I grimace and clench my teeth at the thought.

It's dusk now, and I'm standing beneath the dark canopy of the surrounding forest. I swear I hear the thunderous cackle of

God laughing above me, mocking me.

With yet another blink, I'm in the mausoleum, surrounded by the huge marble bricks that comprise the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. I lay on the concrete bench in the middle of the space, graves labeled with old metal markers on the walls on either side of me. I look around, sitting up as I do, and the jacket beneath my head falls to the floor.

Wait ... when did I go get a jacket?

Is it from Saint and Gabe?

I grab it off the ground and like a certifiable weirdo, take a whiff. It smells like Gabriel, fire and cigarettes. Even if he washed the thing, he'd never get the smell out. It's definitely Gabriel's. The boys always take care of me when it gets bad.

My stomach pinches, and I blink at the four walls surrounding me, stray leaves rustling in the wind near the entrance.

How long have I been out here?

When was the last time I ate?

I need to get back to campus and up to my room.

I walk out of the mausoleum and into the night. An owl hoots somewhere above me, and I don't bother to try the doors at the rear of the Academy. They'll be locked this time of night. I'll have to get inside the hard way, so I climb the eastern face of the building, my fingers hooking into the indents between the stones. The climb is difficult on a good day, but I'm exhausted right now. By the time I surface on the roof and heave myself across the shingles, my shoulders ache and my legs are shaking. I follow the roof line beneath the light of the moon, and a couple of minutes later, I drop to the stubby stone ledge that leads to my room. Four steps and one almost fall to my death later, and I enter through the window, sweaty and exhausted.

"How long was I out?" I ask Saint, shrugging Gabe's jacket off my shoulders and dropping it into my desk chair.

“About twenty-four hours,” he remarks in a bored tone as he flips the page of the book he’s reading. “I bribed roll call with a hundred-dollar bill from your desk.”

“Thanks,” I murmur as I stagger forward and collapse on my bed.

A moment later, a granola bar and a bottle of water bounce off my belly and land on the blanket beside me.

“Thanks,” I say again, unwrapping the bar and engulfing it in two bites.

“Welcome,” Saint remarks, flipping another page.

“Where’s Gabe?” I ask as I grab the water, unscrew the cap, and begin to chug the entire thing.

“Probably with his girlfriend,” Saint says, sounding completely ambivalent to our conversation.

“What time is it?” I ask him.

“Nine o’clock,” he says, not even checking his phone. He’s like a vampire with an internal clock that’s never wrong.

As sleep beckons me, I realize I’ve missed my time with Millicent. We were supposed to pray together again today, but I missed the session. That’s an unexpected first, but that’s a problem for tomorrow because I can barely keep my eyes open right now. As I lay on top of the bed, still fully dressed, I shut my eyes and let a thankfully dreamless slumber take me.

MILLIE



I don't like the pills they make me take every morning. They catch in the back of my throat and leave a bitter taste in my mouth for hours after I swallow them. If I don't eat fast enough, they make me nauseous, but I guess it's better than being taken back to the doctor the students around here call the Butcher. At first, I didn't understand why they called him that, but now I do. He cuts up students, dissecting them with the precision of a butcher in a meat shop.

I remember being in the chair, the guards holding me down as I panted against the towel over my face and sucked in hot, humid breath that never filled my lungs.

And the water dripping into my mouth and turning off the spigot to my oxygen.

And the realization that the scary doctor was going to drown me.

Dr. Boucher is a mean, vile man, and if Daddy knew what he has done to me ...

On second thought, he does know, doesn't he? No one can deny that I've left voicemails, so many of them I've lost count.

Daddy, he tried to drown me.

Daddy, he's going to kill me.

Daddy, it was scary. Please let me come home. I don't think I can survive this place.

I've told him all about the Academy in my voicemails, and still, he never returns my calls. I even borrowed Avery's phone after the Headmistress limited me from using the ones on campus more than once per day. Maybe Daddy doesn't believe me, or he thinks I'm a *compulsive liar* just like the doctor said I was. I know one thing, though, that what the doctor did was real, and he hurt me just like he's hurt so many others. I thought it was a nightmare at first, that I imagined the whole thing, but then Avery asked me what was wrong, and Gabriel said that waterboarding is Butcher's way of introducing himself to the new students.

The doctor probably thinks his medieval methods ensure I won't cause any problems, and to be fair, he's right. If he wants me to take the pills, I will take every last one of them in hopes I never have to see his face again. I'll swallow them no matter how nauseated they make me feel after. One morning, I actually threw up as I waited in the cafeteria line for my breakfast tray. The guard closest to me cursed and sneered. Then he made me clean it up myself, him and his buddy laughing as I did.

Weeks ago, cleaning up my own vomit from the floor would have made me cry, but not now. I just wiped it up, all the while trying not to be sick again. This place is changing me, and I'm starting to understand the anger I sense radiating from Killian. It's inside all the students, but with him, I think it's the strongest. It burns like blue fire beneath his eyes and radiates off him even when his expression is perfectly blank and ambivalent.

We're cattle, and he knows it. Heck, maybe all the students do, and I was just the last sucker to realize it. This place is milking us—or our parents, rather—for all we're worth.

It's a sin to hate, I know that. Leviticus tells it best.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you should love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

I'm not sure I care though.

I hate this place. I hate the butchering doctor too. And there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Daddy would say hate is the Devil's way of tempting me, but I don't think I care what he would say either. My father sent me to this hell. Then he refused to let me leave, even when I begged him to allow me to come home. Now, he won't answer my calls at all, and he's abandoned me entirely. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that the only person I can count on in here is myself. Well, me and maybe the blond-haired god with a truckload of cult trauma I don't understand.

On second thought, I don't think I can count on Killian either. He didn't show up on Friday, and I needed him then, more than ever, because each day is scarier than the last. I don't want to need him, but I do. I can't deny it. His hug—or was it my hug that I forced on him?—got me through this week. When he held me in his arms, his chest solid and warm against me, I felt strong, like his strength somehow transferred from him to me in our embrace. It felt like Dr. Boucher couldn't hurt me again as long as Killian held me.

Heck, maybe it's a good thing he didn't show up on Friday because I don't know what's worse, the idea of the Butcher trying to drown me again or the thought that I need the touch of the Devil to help me survive this circle of Hell.

It's like there's another person inside my head now, taking up all my brain power. The other person is slow, and I don't mean that in the bad way that sends jerks guffawing with their laughter. I mean that the other person crowds my brain and makes my thoughts slow to form. Everything is delayed now. My words hesitate before they come out of my mouth. I can't think straight anymore, not without effort, and it's as though the pills are a separate entity that thinks for me, taking me through the motions.

Wake up.

Dress.

Eat.

Class.

Repeat.

I'm lucky that Killian isn't in my classes, or maybe I'd be tempted to sit next to him just to feel the glow of his strength radiating onto me. For the most part, I can avoid him. I eat quickly and early in the dining hall as soon as it opens. I go to class, and then I hide in the stacks for the rest of the day, grabbing lunch and dinner from the cafeteria right before it closes. There's supposed to be a nice pool at the back of the Academy that you can go swimming in. Avery invited me, but then confusingly, Willow turned bright red when we started talking about it and excused herself while giggling. I have a feeling she has a story about that pool, but I don't pry.

I've never been to the pool either because after Butcher, the idea of being swallowed up by the water and having it suffocate me scares me. Maybe I should go. Maybe I will. I don't know. I'm more confused now than ever because Daddy still hasn't called me back.

I don't know why he won't talk to me. He said I was supposed to be punished and repent, but haven't I done that already? I've been yelled at, cut open, and tortured, and shouldn't that be enough to atone?

It's all gotten messy and jumbled in my head.

We're supposed to forgive one another, right? Yet Daddy hasn't forgiven me.

As I walk to the chapel, I try not to think about the last time I was in the church with Killian and how he told me he prayed in a different way than me before he touched my chest. It's hard not to think of it, though, because as his hand softly caressed my flesh, I had flashbacks of another time. Only his touches were different than they were back then.

In the flashbacks, the man's hands were smaller and chubbier, and the veins not as prominent as Killian's.

The man's breath smelled like coffee, not cinnamon.

His touch was clammy, while Killian's was sparks of pure fire against my skin.

The man's touch felt wrong, like it was all one hellish nightmare, but Killian's touch didn't. If anything, his fingers on my body felt reverent.

When Killian's hand trailed across my flesh, he stirred molten heat inside of me. That heat clawed at my insides and shredded my breath, so unlike the man's touch, which left me cold and breathless from fear.

If it was all a lie and I'm a liar, then why does my body remember the thing I was told never existed? I'm so confused.

It's almost nighttime as I continue toward the church. My fingers skim over the cool metal of the cross on my bracelet, grabbing it to pinch it between my thumb and my palm. I'm not praying to God or asking him for strength right now, though. If anything, it's a force of habit.

The closer I get to the chapel, the faster my heart pounds. My face flushes with embarrassment until I feel it burning bright against the cold night air.

I hugged him. I embraced the boy who kissed me my first day at the Academy and sliced my hand open the next.

Heck, I did more than hug him. I threw myself at him and didn't let go until I finally stopped sobbing. He allowed me that, which is even more confusing because bad guys are supposed to be bad all the time, right? Well, then why did it feel like he wasn't so bad in that moment, like he was helping me? My heart pounds like it's a hummingbird fluttering its wings as I open one of the front doors of the chapel and walk inside the building.

My eyes adjust to the dim light of the overhead chandelier and the lit candles flickering in votive stands near the altar. I look down the aisle and across the pews and find Killian already there, his hands clasped as he sits near the back, staring up at Jesus hanging behind the pulpit. I know they don't do sermons here anymore, but the way the light hits his

golden hair, turning it into strands of sunlight, makes me think he sure would look beautiful at the front of the church, ministering to the parishioners.

He looks over at me as I walk inside, and my steps falter, my feet tripping over themselves. His sharp-eyed gaze latches on me and doesn't let go. I swear I see the devil in his eyes today before he stands abruptly, rising from the pew. For a fraction of a second, it's just him and me facing each other, unmoving in this holy place.

I'm the first to speak.

"I wasn't sure you would be here," I say, thankful at how calm the words sound coming out of my mouth, so unlike my battering heart.

Why does it feel different today with him?

Why does it feel like something's shifted in the air?

Normal Millicent would be running away by now, but medicated Millicent wants to stick around and see what happens.

He cocks his head a little to the left and blinks at me.

"I will always be here," he remarks, and though his words are calm, they wrap around me and wring the breath from my middle.

He's the first to move, and it's like a dam breaks the second his foot lifts from the floor. He rushes forward, toward me, and when he's in front of me, he pulls me close, flattening my front to his and sending fire sparking through my veins. His gaze dips from my eyes to my lips to my breasts pressed against him before he turns, his fingers brushing my sides as he walks to stand behind me. Without another word, he pushes me down, one hand on each of my shoulders, to my knees, and I fall willingly.

I know I should stop him.

I know this is a path to sin.

But everyone including God has abandoned me here. He's the only constant that remains, always coming back to me.

His shoes shuffle against the floor as he steps closer, his hands still pressing hard against my shoulders. My heart pounds fast now, and my head spins as he shifts, moving his hands to press below my neck and between my shoulder blades. From there, he pushes me forward until I kneel on the stone, my arms stretching out in front of me toward the pulpit.

My breath hits the floor as I feel him drop to his knees behind me, his muscular thighs brushing the backs of my legs.

“And the man and woman,” he murmurs, tracing the line of my spine now, “were both naked and not ashamed.”

Is he quoting the Bible to me?

Why does it feel like that's not the accurate version of it?

And why don't I care?

He adjusts behind me, his legs pressed to mine, and a moment later, he pushes something beneath my skirt and between my closed legs, across my white tights. Whatever he's holding is hard and long, and I gasp as it scrapes across my underwear, catching on the fabric and pulling it over that sensitive part of me.

A flash of someone else between my legs explodes in my mind, and I try to pull away, but Killian doesn't let me. He kneels over me, one hand planted on the stone beside my head, his fingers flat to the floor. He presses the front of his body to the back of mine, banishing away the bad thoughts and giving me his strength with it.

He pulls out the thing he holds between my legs, and I gasp as it slides between my thighs.

This is wrong.

I should stop him.

But then he pushes it forward again, and my entire body catches on fire. He chuckles behind me, hot and heavy against

me, but his laugh is breathy as though he is as affected as I am.

“What are you doing?” I manage as he pushes the object forward again, scraping the sensitive spot beneath my tights. “This is a sin.”

His breath tickles my ear as he pulls it out again.

“Does it feel like a sin, angel?” he asks me. “Or does it feel like I’m saving you from your worst memory?”

I’m so confused.

Are those flashbacks a memory?

Are they lies as everyone else has told me?

“This is a sin,” I repeat, trying to clear my head, but the words are strangled, pulled from my lips as he pushes between my legs again. The heavy weight of the thing he holds hits that spot between my legs, and I shake beneath him.

“The Bible says we can’t lay together, angel,” he murmurs, “but it doesn’t say I can’t help you forget.”

It feels like a cop-out.

It *is* a cop-out, but God, I’m not strong enough to stop him.

Blame it on my abandonment.

Blame it on being confused about what’s true and what is a lie.

Blame it on not feeling alone when he is near.

He thrusts faster now, sliding it between my closed thighs, and I squeeze my legs together, relishing the sensation. Liquid heat builds in my middle as he thrusts over and over between my legs, pushing that weight over the spot that no one should have ever touched before. I’m shaking and sweating, my fingernails trying to dig into the stone floor.

He thrusts it even faster between my legs, his hand hitting my bottom with each thrust. He presses his front against my back, eliminating the space there between us, as he leans over me.

I breathe in his brimstone and hellfire as he pushes harder.

In and out, faster and faster, until the heat detonates inside my belly.

I cry out, my back arching against his, and my neck curving around his shoulder so that as the heavens fall over me, I gaze upon the wooden beams crisscrossing at the top of the church.

Liquid warmth floods my panties as he pants behind me, his heart beating hard but steady against my back. Finally, as I spasm beneath him, he peels himself off me and leans back onto his heels.

“You look like an angel when you come,” he says to me, pressing a kiss to my hair.

When I look back at him, still panting and wondering what it is that we have done, he winks at me and to my horror, holds up a thick metal cross, slick with my wetness.

MILLIE



O h no.

I can't believe I did that.

I can't believe I *let* him do that.

I'm going to Hell. Or at least I think I'm going to Hell.

My thoughts run nearly as fast as I do back to the Academy, and I think I can feel Killian watching me as I go. That's crazy though, right? Surely, he's not sitting on the church steps staring at me as I beeline back to the main campus. Well, he might be, and it makes my heart beat even faster to even consider that I have that effect on him. It's almost romantic in a deranged sort of way, a Chryseum Reformatory Academy way.

Something is one hundred percent wrong with me.

I should *not* be thinking about scary Killian with eyes like blue fire and a touch just as scalding. What I should be doing is asking God for forgiveness and begging him for the chance to repent. I came to the Asylum to atone, and instead, I let a devilish man ...

Say it, Millicent!

Say it. Say it. Freaking say it!!!

There's no true repentance without an acknowledgment of what happened.

Without confession, there can be no salvation.

I know this, yet I can't say it.

I pick up the pace, my shoes slapping the muddy ground. I side-step a low-hanging branch that nearly slaps me in the face. Not that I don't deserve a slap in the face. Maybe it'll help me face the truth, which is that I, Millicent Grace Mintz, let a devilish man with a toothy smile and a tall, lithe body ...

Nope. Can't say it. Good girls don't even think it. I, on the other hand, am apparently not a good girl because I ... I ...

I ... let ...

I ... let ... him ...

Oh for goodness' sake!

I let the devilish man with a toothy smile and a tall, lithe body finger me with the one and only symbol of God's true love!

Oh doubly no.

Now that I've thought about it, I realize that there's no coming back from that. I'm definitely going to Hell. Might as well pack a bag and wave bye-bye to my chances of ever seeing the pearly gates. If my church family thought that lying was bad, what are they going to think of me if they ever find out I did that?

I need to find a new church. Far, far away, where no one knows me, and then I give confessional like a Catholic—because I'm pretty sure Catholics do that—behind one of those privacy screens where the preacher—Pastor? Priest? Whatever Catholics call them—can't see me.

If Daddy found out, he'd probably murder Killian and then tell me I'm going to Hell for what we did. Pastor Bradley would be nicer about it, I think, and tell me I can find redemption if I ask God for forgiveness and open my heart to his guiding light. I sure hope Pastor Bradley's right. Maybe there's a chance to save me yet.

A thought nags me though. If it was so wrong, then why did it feel so right?

See, now this is exactly how I get myself into these situations.

Stop analyzing, Millicent Grace!

Okay, well, at least I'm positive I can't get pregnant from what Killian and I did. I may not know much about sex. In fact, most of what I learned was through the hallway gossip of other students at my old school because Daddy refused to let me ever attend the sex ed. class. He said he believed in abstinence-only education. That it was the only way to true salvation and for my virginity to remain intact before marriage.

Much good it's doing me now.

Still, since Killian didn't, um ...

I breathe out a quick breath.

Since he didn't *climax*, and there was no semen involved, I can't get pregnant.

God, it sounds worse the more I think about it. I *need* to stop thinking about it, but I can't, and I nearly trip over a root overgrown into the dirt path as my brain trips over my words as well.

I had my first orgasm.

And I had it in a church by a golden-haired devil.

A golden-haired devil with a metal cross.

All right, I think I can now say for certain that I'm going to Hell. Sure, I'd like to say that it's not my fault. I'd like to be able to blame it on the meds desensitizing me with every dose and breaking down my walls, making me more and more apathetic with each passing day. I could blame it on my father for abandoning me on the steps of Hell and refusing to call me back. I could also blame it on how he told me my whole life I was a sinner since birth, killing my mother with my transgressions. Heck, I could also blame it on seeing the Butcher's true colors when he tried to drown me in his office earlier this week.

But the truth is, I don't think it's any of that.

What I did was my fault, and I know it. I let Killian touch me because I wanted him to touch me. I enjoyed it. It made me feel not so alone, but ultimately, it was *my choice*. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a coward, and I'll own up to when I'm wrong. As many biblical verses as Killian may tell me to justify it, I know what we did was a sin.

It doesn't matter God betrayed me too, the Bible calls it a sin. Still, I can't manage to feel guilty. Maybe I will later when it has time to set in, but Killian is a constant. He doesn't make me feel inferior or like I'm lacking something. If anything, he makes me feel worshiped and revered.

I was sent here to Chryseum to repent, and I think I've done that. In fact, I'd say I did that a while ago and more than paid for my sins.

Sins.

That's the question, isn't it?

Did the whole world conspire to lie to me? Is my brain lying to me too?

Only one person can answer my question, and I'm tired of him ignoring me.

I need to speak to my father now.

I enter the Academy just before they lock the doors to the courtyard. I take the stairs up to the girls' dormitory and walk through the quiet, lonely halls until I finally reach the room I share with Avery. When I open the door and walk inside, she's painting her nails on her twin bed. It's such a girly thing to do, and I admit I'm a little jealous because my father has never let me paint my nails. I can't wear makeup either. I can't even buy new clothes unless he approves of them first. That's the way it's always been because he said it was all a gateway to temptation.

It doesn't seem like a gateway to anything though. If anything, it's not like Avery's doing it because she thinks

someone is going to be tempted by her bubblegum pink fingernails. I know she does it because she likes the color. It's her favorite one too. She told me so herself. I'd like to paint my nails too, someday.

Not today, though, because I have more important things to worry about right now.

"Can I borrow your phone?" I ask her.

"Sure thing," she says, tipping her chin in the direction of her desk. "It's over there on the charger."

I walk over to her desk and unplug her phone. I'm getting better at using it too, though I don't understand what half the apps on the thing are for. Snapchat? No clue. Instagram? I've heard of it, but I still don't understand why people want to take pictures of their food. It's not like I've never seen a phone before. Other students at my old school had them, but I was never allowed one.

There were a lot of things Daddy never allowed me to have.

Television he didn't approve of.

Books he didn't read first.

The list goes on.

I unlock the screen with a swipe of my finger, just like Avery showed me, and press the telephone icon to make a call. There's my father's contact information, still at the top of the phone's call log, and I see that Avery has him saved as *Assface* in her contacts. It would make me laugh if it wasn't so true.

I'm not sure why I'm bothering to call. He's ignored me for weeks, but I need answers, and he's the only one who can give them to me. The line rings three times before he finally picks up.

Thank God he does, I guess.

"Millicent," he says into the phone.

He sounds tired, and I wonder if he did go on that mission trip his voicemail said he was on because he sounds like he's jet-lagged.

"Daddy," I tell him, my voice crackling at the sound of his.

He cuts me off before I can continue.

"You have to stop calling me," he says, his words flat and rushed with his anger. "Stop lying about the doctor. You can't repent, Millicent, not with one foot stuck in the past."

So he has listened to my voicemails, I realize. He just doesn't care.

I'm not going to lie. It hurts. It feels like an icepick stab straight through my middle, chilling me all the way through.

"I want to come home," I tell him, even though I'm not even sure that's the truth anymore. I'm sure I don't want to be here, but I don't want to go home right now either, and I especially don't want to leave Killian. The thought is terrifying because I've always been a loner. I've never needed anyone, especially not a man. Sure, I've had my church friends. I've had Daddy, but I've never needed someone so much that I've been willing to put myself through Hell for them.

"You cannot come home," he says to me. "You're bad, Millicent!"

It's as though all this rage inside of him reaches its boiling point all at once, and then he's yelling, screaming at me like he's never screamed before. The words are so loud that I have to pull the phone away from my ear, and I can still hear him shouting at me.

"You are always calling me!" he snarls. "Always demanding to come home! But you have to stay there, Millie!" He laughs, but the sound is without mirth. If anything, he sounds dead inside. "Don't you understand? You are temptation, Millicent. You were sent by the devil to tempt me, and I will not have it! You will burn in the fiery pits of Hell for

what you've done, girl, and I will not fall victim to your tricks anymore!"

What ... ?

What is he saying?

My mind whirls, chewing through his words, as Avery blinks at me from her bed. She's no longer painting her nails, but instead, staring directly at me. He's yelling so loud even she can hear it.

I need him to say it.

I need to know it's true so I can finally fucking deal with it!

I choke out the words, tears falling down my cheeks and spilling salt between my lips and over my tongue.

"What are you saying?" I ask him.

I need him to say it, to *admit* it. Tell me I'm not a liar!

When he doesn't answer my question and only the sound of his heavy breathing remains on the line, I murmur my command.

"Say it," I tell me, and he does, to my surprise.

"You were always around," he sneers, the words slithering through the line, "wearing those skimpy little outfits."

It's not my father I'm talking to anymore.

This thing sounds like my father, but even his voice has changed. It's darker now, evil even.

"I wore what you bought me," I tell him quietly.

I'm going to be sick, but I need him to say it, dammit! I need him to admit that I'm not a liar, and I'm not going crazy either. He sent me here because of his own sins, and he needs to say it!

"You were practically begging me for it," he says.

His words would hurt less if they came out with daggers pointed straight at me.

He's finally said it, and I know the truth now. He just confirmed it. I don't belong here. I never did.

Maybe it's his guilt. Maybe he's just tired of pretending or better yet, tired of receiving my voicemails, but that night comes back to me in an instant. This time when I remember, I know my brain tells me the truth.

I lay in bed, and he comes in to say good night then sits on the bed next to me. He hugs me, like he's done thousands of nights prior, but tonight is different. His chubby hands skim over my breasts, his fingers grazing my nipples.

I freeze with embarrassment and try to pull the covers over myself, but he tells me that it's okay. This is what God wanted for us. I was sent to Earth to pay him back for the loss of his wife.

I blink and hope the nightmare will end, but his hands travel even further, under my shirt and over my bare belly. I beg him to stop. I tell him it's wrong. He looks at me, the light of my nightlight reflecting in his eyes and reminding me of an animal looking out from the dark. He tells me that God wants this for us.

He twists the word of the Lord to justify what he wants, and his hands venture further down to the hem of my panties and then over to the place he should never have touched.

I blink again, and my mind is racing. I'm trying to wake up from the nightmare, and when I realize it's real, I try to figure out what I did wrong, the signs I missed I sent him.

Tears pool at the corners of my eyes, and I will myself to move. I sit up suddenly, pushing him off me with both hands, and I run from my room, still in pajamas.

He calls my name as I run through the den and to the front door, throwing it open. He calls it again as I run even faster, the gravel hard and slicing into my bare feet.

I run for miles in the dark over the asphalt road, and I hide when the cars are coming because I can't tell if it's his car from just the headlights.

When I finally arrive at our church, I run up the dirt drive and pound on the door for what feels like a long time until Pastor Bradley finally opened it, bleary-eyed and awoken from sleep in his upstairs apartment.

"Millie," the Pastor had said to me, as I crossed my arms over my chest, hiding my nipples from him with shame. "What's wrong? Should I call your father?"

He ushered me inside as I begged him to listen to me, to not call Daddy. He needed help, I told him. The Devil has stolen his soul, I told the Deacon when he arrived as well.

I was afraid, and the longer I sat there, and the more I heard their whispers from the room over, I was confused.

Daddy was the only one I had in the whole world, and the next morning, he looked at me like he couldn't understand what was going on. He cried when Pastor Bradley and the Deacon asked him what he did. He, of course, denied it vehemently, yelling and puking in the plastic trash can in the corner of the room.

My father said I was disturbed, and everyone chose to believe him over me. How could they not believe him? He was an upstanding member of the church after all. He volunteered at the Sunday bake sales and hosted the yearly fish fry at our home. He paid more than his fair share of tithes every week and went on nearly every church mission, spreading the word of God throughout the communities.

When they pressed for answers, he said I was jealous of his relationship with God, that I'd do anything to get between him and the creator.

And what did all my church family do?

They agreed with him. They said I was disturbed. They called me a liar and convinced me that I had to be one because they said so.

Gripping Avery's phone, I start to shake. My father's still breathing heavily on the other end of the line, but I'm barely breathing as I ask him the question that haunts my dreams.

He said it, but now I need to know why.

"Why did you do it, Daddy?" I murmur.

"Because you wanted me to," he replies. "Now go back to the Hell from which you came, Jezebel."

He disconnects the line, and I stare at Avery. Her mouth is open from shock, no doubt having heard our entire conversation. I feel dirty and unclean, like I've somehow done something wrong, but I tell myself that's not true. I don't care what my father says. It's not my fault.

Without a word, Avery puts her bottle of nail polish on the floor and stands to walk over to me. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me in close. She doesn't say anything as I come to terms with everything I have lost and begin to cry.

KILLIAN



“I hate you,” Saint says to me.

He’s just pissed because I woke him up this morning while doing push-ups. It wasn’t on purpose, but I couldn’t sleep last night. Hell, at this rate, I’ll probably never sleep again. Even after I jacked off two times in the shower *and* once in the mausoleum, it still wasn’t enough. Normally, I’d find a girl to handle this shit for me, but I don’t think any of them could compare to my sweet Millicent.

Every time I close my eyes, I think of her kneeling in my church, her ass pushed into the air in front of me as I desecrated that cross with her climax. She was so wet, and I still see the proof of her arousal shining on the metal of the cross even now.

Hell, I even licked it clean after she left. I would’ve done it in front of her. I preferred that she watch, but she got up so fast after she came that I didn’t even have time to get a taste.

I should have chased her, but even my shadow knew we pushed her far enough. Then I was alone, the light of the candles flickering across the old wood of the deserted pews, and the slick silver cross in my hand. It was fate.

She was perfect when she climaxed. Even now, there’s something so undeniably pure about her, which confounds me. By now, my desire for my target normally starts to fade. Now, I don’t have an issue with anyone being promiscuous, but it’s not the same. Well, again, it’s *normally* not the same. Once the

fresh meat comes all over my fingers or my cock, I just don't think of them as pure and devout anymore, but that's not the case with her. If anything, I'm more enamored with her than ever. If I didn't know any better, I would say the angels cried when she fell from Heaven because nothing can defile this one, of that I'm sure.

Not that I won't try.

I've said it before, but God can never have her. She's mine now, and I'm going to make sure the bastard knows it too.

"Did you hear me?" Saint asks, cutting his dark eyes at me.

What the fuck did he say? Is he still bitching about his lack of beauty sleep?

"I heard you," I quip. "Unfortunately for you, I don't give a fuck."

Saint looks like he's one second from going nuclear and hitting the red button on me, but his lazy ass still doesn't manage to crawl out of bed. Gabriel snorts in my desk chair behind me, entertained by our little spat.

The Devil's honest truth is that Saint can blame me all he wants for his lack of precious dreams, but I know I wasn't the reason both he and Gabe couldn't sleep last night. Well, not for the majority of it anyway, though Saint did finally doze off about an hour ago, and my pushups woke his grumpy ass up about thirty minutes later. Gabriel's been nervously flicking his Zippo all night and definitely wishing he could set something on fire.

Something happened with my Millicent, I guess, from what I've been told by the two of them. The best I can figure is she's coming to terms with me making her come on the cross, which is fine by me. She needs to come to terms with it, and quickly, too, because now that I've heard her cry when she comes, I will never let anyone take that away from me, her included.

Gabe and Saint both spent the night all pissy without their girlfriends after Avery said she needed to be there for

Millicent, and I guess Willow joined them at some point too. So, now, by the laws of these two psychopaths, it's all my fault they didn't get their rocks off with her girlfriends. Thus, I interrupted their routines, and therefore, now we're all fucking awake.

Girlfriends.

Pfft. What a dumbass concept.

You like me. I like you. We're in a relationship now. *Super.*

Jesus fucking Christ. Hey, world, we like to fuck each other would be a better description.

Still ... I don't think I'd mind calling Millie my girlfriend, which is disturbing on so many levels.

My girlfriend.

Well, I mean she is *mine*, and if societal norms dictate that I should call her that, it doesn't bother me. If I called her my girlfriend, though, she might run a lot farther than her dorm room. Best save that for later.

I'll probably play hooky from class today. It's not like any of the professors take attendance anymore. I guess they're too short-staffed with everyone around here dying or leaving. I don't care what the reason is because it benefits me.

"If you kill him," Gabriel mutters, sounding bored as he continues fingering his Zippo like if he keeps doing it, it's eventually going to get him off, "can I burn his body after?"

"Sure," Saint mutters, one forearm over his eyes.

Rude.

I'm right here.

I drop to the floor and start another round of push-ups. My lungs are burning with the fast pace, but if I don't do something soon, I'm going to explode, and I don't think my dick can take any more hand action.

Maybe I'll leave for the church early. Millie won't be there yet, but I hope she shows. If not, I'm going to hunt her down and drag her there myself, preferably cave-man style with her thrown over my shoulder.

Now, that I'm thinking about it, she's probably freaking out because she thinks I'm going to nail her sweet ass to the cross today. The idea is tempting, but it's not what I meant by her giving in to temptation.

I meant sex, but then again, we were very vague when we set up the ground rules, probably because she was literally *in the ground* when we made them.

I really have to put that grave to good use soon ...

My shadow hasn't paid me a visit this morning, which is new because he's normally in my face as soon as I wake up. Then he goes away for a while after the morning pills before he comes roaring back to life as soon as they wear off. I guess he's been satiated for the time being, and he doesn't need to come out and play.

Yay. More Millicent for me.

I'm on number thirty-seven of this round of push-ups, and I'm about to start burpees when Saint mumbles that if he wasn't dead-tired, he'd be cutting me open and playing with my intestines by now. I've concluded that he doesn't do well without seeing his pet on his schedule. Take their girlfriends away, and my friends are ready to make a human sacrifice to the getting-laid gods.

Oh shit.

I think I might be that sacrifice.

Time to go to church!

I stand, dusting off my knees with my hands as I do. Then I walk between our beds to the window. It's barred on the inside, but Saint broke it long ago, so I do what comes naturally. I take out the bolt, remove the bars, and drop the heavy bastards on the floor before I swing open the window.

It's still dark outside, but that's not a problem. Roll call will be in an hour or so, but I'm not worried. Saint can bribe the guards again for all I care. It's not like they seem to mind it.

My hands brace on either side of the window, and I climb out onto the ledge. I suppose to a normal person, being on a little piece of stone six inches wide preventing you from falling to your death would be scary, but not me. I've never been scared of heights. I don't even consider the impending death below before I've moved on, scurrying up the sharp edge of the roofline and across the Academy to drop down the water pipes, just like I always do. My hands find the grooves naturally, and when my feet finally hit the ground with a wet squelching sound from last night's rain, I start for the church.

I cut through the cemetery because dawn's on the horizon now, and it illuminates the last tendrils of fog weaving between the graves, painting them red and gold. It makes me feel at peace, like it always does, but it's a good thing I know where the unmarked grave I dug is because if I didn't, I'd be neck-deep in mud at the moment and pissed off.

On second thought, I need to fill that in before my dumbass gets too excited, and I end up tripping, falling, and probably breaking my neck in less than half a second.

Wait ... has anyone fallen in it yet?

I haven't heard any screams, but that doesn't mean anything. It's not like I've been checking on it every day to make sure I haven't caught any unwelcome visitors. I really should check the grave out sometime, but not right now.

Nah. I don't feel like it.

I continue toward the church, and to my surprise, as I weave through the trees, I spot a light up ahead. It takes my narcissism a solid ten seconds before I realize the light is on *inside* my church. I turned it off last night.

I go from calm to pissed off in an instant. I don't know what motherfucker thought they had a right to come into my

space, but it starts a ticking in my brain and then I'm sprinting ahead, side-stepping the trees. I bound up the front steps and throw open the door at the front of the building, ready to kill someone. My fists are balled at my sides, and my breath comes and goes like I'm a stampeding bull. When I step inside the building, though, I'm surprised to find Millicent already waiting for me. By the looks of it, she's still wearing last night's clothes, her shirt wrinkled and the rest of her disheveled.

She stands when she sees me, and I don't know what she's thinking, but I'm sure as fuck surprised when she runs straight at me and flattens her lips to mine. She kisses me with the grace of a charging rhinoceros, and I tip back on my heels and nearly fall before my arms reflexively curl around her.

I don't know what's going on.

Maybe I should be disappointed.

I'm not.

She tastes like sweetness and the tears that are streaming down her face. Sugar and salt, my favorite combination.

My tongue sweeps into her mouth, plunging and pillaging, and finally, as I hold her to me, she wrenches her head free.

"Is this a sin?" she asks, her big doe eyes blinking up at me.

"You taste like salvation, angel," I tell her, "not damnation."

She frowns, biting her bottom lip before she swallows.

"Daddy says I'm going to Hell," she whispers, more to herself than me.

Then she looks at me and bites her lip again, and I'm certain she doesn't know what she's doing to me.

"Can you make me forget?" she asks.

She doesn't elaborate, and I don't ask. I've picked up enough to know what she's talking about, although it takes

every thread of self-control I have to rein in the rage I feel at her words. Which handsy twat molested her, and where's a good hunting knife?

"I'll make you forget everything before me," I growl, pushing away my murderous thoughts, before I kiss her again.

Then we're stumbling back toward the pulpit, her back turned to God in more ways than one. She doesn't fight me. If anything, she pulls me too, clawing at my clothes, my shoulders, everything she can reach on me.

Two stumbled steps later, and I rip her shirt off, scattering the buttons across the stone floor and shoving it off her shoulders as I take mine off as well. She gasps when she sees me before she reaches out and trails her fingers over the indents in my abdominals.

She blinks at me as I undo her bra, and her breasts spring free. They're as perfect as I imagined, two mounds of pale flesh that overflow my hands. I back her up to the pulpit until she knocks into the wood. Then I slide down her skirt and her underwear and push two fingers inside of her without hesitation.

Fuck me.

She's so tight, her pussy gripping my fingers like a vise. She cries out and throws her head back as I pump my fingers into her, her head knocking against the pulpit with each thrust.

"Killian," she murmurs, and my name is heavenly coming off her lips.

I stop abruptly, withdrawing my fingers and stepping away from her because I can't take anymore.

I need her *now*.

Her eyes open, and she stares at me, her gaze hooded as she watches me undo my belt buckle and push my pants and boxers to the floor. They fall into a black puddle at my feet, and I kick off my shoes and socks with them as well. We're naked in front of each other now, and she's breathing so fast

that the pulse point at the base of her neck flutters wildly. I can almost hear her heartbeat as she tries not to hyperventilate. Her gaze travels from my head to my chest to my belly button and, finally, down to my dick. She pales a little and swallows hard.

“It will hurt,” I tell her because I’m not about to lie. We’ve come too far for that.

She nods and reaches out to touch my stomach again, her fingers soft against my flesh. I place my hand over hers and guide it down to my rock-hard cock. She gasps when she touches me, and I nearly come on the spot.

“I don’t know ...” she begins with a swallow. “I don’t know about birth control.”

“It’s part of the pills they make you take,” I say. “They can’t have students getting pregnant at the Academy.”

“What about diseases?” she asks, as a beautiful blush flushes her cheeks.

“Stay here long enough,” I answer, “and they’ll make you get a check every four to six months. I had mine two weeks ago.”

She nods. “I’m clean too.”

I step forward, gripping her chin in my thumb and forefinger and making her look at me. My dick wants to be inside her, but I want her to say it first.

“What do you want, Millicent?” I ask.

“You,” she says with a swallow. “Make me forget.”

That’s all I need to hear as I grab the side of her face with my thumb pressed against her cheek and bring her close before I growl, “I can’t make you forget, angel. I wish I could. But I can make you scream for me.”

I need her.

I don’t give her time to reply.

I press my lips to hers and wrap my hands around her thighs. Her ankles cross behind my back, and I line us up, her spine against the pulpit. I shove into her, and she screams.

Her nails bite into my back as the son of God looks down at us from the crucifix and watches me as I fuck her like an animal.

She's soaked, and I don't know if it's her wetness or her blood, but fuck, it feels like perfection. She's so soft against me, so pliable, as I grip her thighs harder and pound into her heat. Her nails rake across my shoulders as I take what she gives me and demand more.

"You're so tight," I grunt, bottoming out inside her again. "Fuck, angel. You are mine."

It becomes a prayer.

In. "Mine."

Out. "Mine."

In. "Mine."

"Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine."

We fuck against the pulpit, the old wood creaking and moaning against us, and God, I want to come so bad, but I need her to first.

"Killian," she cries out as I thrust even faster, her back hitting the wood and rattling it. "It hurts."

"Relax," I hiss through gritted teeth. "Let me make you feel good."

I feel the moment she forces her body to comply, and then she's riding me back, rolling her hips against mine as my fingers dig deeper, sure to leave bruises.

I reach between us, and it's a tight squeeze, but I find her clit and thrum it in tune with our fucking. I feel as the walls of her pussy begin to convulse. She screams my name as she comes, and I follow her, sullyng her perfect walls with my cum.

We stand there, her breathing heavy against me and sweat dripping between our bodies. Then I withdraw, carefully setting her on the floor and she looks down as the evidence of what we have done drips down her leg.

Cum and blood, the perfect combination.

I've never been more turned on as I drop to my knees in front of her and slide two fingers up her thigh to push it back inside of her. Her swollen pussy takes it beautifully.

“Such a perfect cunt,” I tell her as she watches me. “Taking our blood and cum.”

I lift my fingers for her to see, still slick with what we've done, and push them into my mouth, licking them clean and moaning at the taste—*pennies, pussy, salt*.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs, going very still before she blurts a question.

“Are you really going to crucify me?” she asks, swallowing hard.

My eyes open, and I stand. I grab her by the chin and make her look at me.

“I'm going to put you up on that cross, angel,” I tell her, “and when I do, you will fucking *beg* me for more.”

Then I kiss her and let her taste the evidence of our sin for herself.

KILLIAN



I don't know if she's ready for it now. I've probably already pushed her too hard tonight, but I can't wait. Not now, when she's opened the floodgates and drained the last drop of my self-control.

She said the words to me, and those words became like an actual thing worming through my body and eating me from the inside out. I need to excise them from me. I need it complete, so they won't be eating me anymore.

Maybe I could have held off if she hadn't reminded me, but then she said crucify, and I was a fucking goner.

She stands there, leaning against the pulpit, out of breath and with splotches of red popping up across her skin from where I held her. She's not ready, but I did warn her, didn't I? I told her it would come to this if she gave in, and she still did it. Then she reminded me of it too.

Crucifixion.

It's all I can think about.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:15 – 17

If anything is ever going to get me smitten—Smotten? Struck with a fucking lightning bolt—from the Heavens, it's

going to be this one. God gave his only son to save us, but I'm about to desecrate his sacrifice.

Millicent fucked up.

I would have given her a break, well, probably. I would have saved this one for another day, but she reminded me, and now it's all I can think about.

Blood trickling down her perfect pale flesh.

Iron nails straight through her palms and the tops of her feet.

Suspended beneath the eye of her Lord.

I'll defile her and in doing so, I'll punish the God who abandoned us both.

"Will you do something for me, angel?" I ask her, and it's a force of habit. I phrase it as a question to give them the illusion of a choice. Make no mistake, there is no choice here, however. I will get what I want, and she won't feel commanded to do it. It's a win-win from my point of view.

Millicent looks up from where she's standing against the pulpit, naked and blood running down her leg again.

"Yes," she says, and to my surprise, I don't sense any hesitation there.

Good. She'll need to trust me for this next part.

"The crucifixion ..." I begin, and I've barely gotten the words out before she turns seventeen shades of red. I run my tongue across my teeth. "It means a lot to me."

I'm playing on her emotions, but I don't care. It's the truth.

I step forward, and it's yet another tactic learned from years in boarding schools and opportunities where I had to learn to get my way. I step closer, and she feels closer to me. If this fails, though, I'm nailing her perfect ass up to the crucifix, regardless of her agreement.

"Why?" she asks me.

I click my tongue. Truth or lie? I opt for the truth. It's a heart-shattering story after all. Maybe she'll let me eat all the tiny parts of hers after she hears it and her heart breaks.

"My father was very peculiar about crucifixes," I tell her, "obsessed even. He would hang them everywhere. You couldn't walk two feet into our home without seeing one. He was always muttering to them, acting like God spoke to him through them."

She blinks. "I'm sorry," she says. "That must've been hard."

I nod. She thinks my story's sad, but we aren't even to the good part yet.

I reach up and brush a stray strand of hair from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear.

"When he killed my mom, he ranted about the crucifixion," I explain. "He said God didn't commit the ultimate sacrifice for my mother to sully the world with her sins, that he had judged her and found her lacking. Then he cut her to pieces with a machete."

She gasps.

Is that the first time I've said it out loud?

Yeah, I think so, or at least it has been since I was seven or eight years old, in the years after it happened when I still trusted the doctors. I'm thinking the times Saint and Gabe got me drunk off my ass from the good stuff stolen from the staff lockers on the fourth floor don't count.

"Do you want to crucify me now?" she asks with a swallow. She nods, answering her own question like she's building herself up to it, like it doesn't scare the shit out of her.

"Yes," I say, "but I don't think you could take it right now. You've lost blood already, and I like you too much to let you die in here tonight."

"You like me?" she asks, and I hear the hope in those words. No one's liked her in a very long time. I'm guessing all

her old friends abandoned her after she got sent to Chryseum. That's how it always plays out. No one wants to be living in the real world and stuck defending their freak friend.

"I do," I tell her, though I don't share that it's a first for me too. Instead, I go back to the task at hand and look at the crucifix hanging on the wall. "I'd like to see you up there, Millie. I won't nail you to it, not tonight."

Not unless you fight me.

She turns slowly to look at the body of Jesus hanging on the walls before she walks, barefoot and still naked, across the stone floor of the altar until she's right there in front of the thing, where Jesus's feet hang down to nearly touch the top of the altar.

She's scared now. I see a flash of fear in her eyes when she turns back to me. I wouldn't be a very good predictor if I didn't notice fear when I saw it.

"Are you up for it?" I ask her.

She swallows. "Will it help you?" she asks.

Probably not. "Absolutely," I say.

She nods.

Thank Christ.

I don't hesitate. I reach for the rope on the second shelf of the pulpit. I've always wanted to reenact it, but I'm glad I waited. I couldn't imagine a more perfect specimen to do it with. I've been prepared for a long time, and it's too late for takebacks now.

"Hands out in the shape of a T," I tell her.

She does, and it's the most beautiful thing I've seen in the entire world, her hands transposed over Christ's, though he's taller.

I start with her right hand, looping the thick rope around her wrist and leaning up to wrap it over the son of God as well.

When I cinch it tight and tie the knot, she winces, but she doesn't say anything.

I go to her left arm this time, and I repeat the process. She's a little too short to get the bodies to line up right, and she has to stand on the fake nails protruding from Jesus's feet to reach an appropriate height, but I'm already fucking rock-hard again. I hope God is watching because she is absolutely stunning tied up like Jesus.

I tend to her feet last, cinching the rope right at the ankles and double-knotting it so I know it is secure. I take a moment and enjoy my handiwork. She is stunning, shivering with the cold, her hair spilling over her heaving breasts, and ropes rubbing her perfect flesh raw. The light overhead doesn't reach her, leaving the right half of her face in shadows, but I don't mind it. She's still perfect. I enjoy the sight for a moment before I stride back to the shelves of the pulpit and carefully pull out her crown of thorns.

I place it on top of her hair, the tied brambles from the shrubs outside pricking her exposed flesh. She winces a little as the first thorn draws blood, and a thick drop rolls down the side of her face to the corner of her eyelid. When it falls further still, it makes her look like she's crying blood, and I take everything I've said back. This is the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

She shakes against the crucifix, her body contorted to match the curves of the replica of Jesus Christ behind her. She shivers, and God be damned, my cock somehow grows even harder.

Her breasts quiver, and she shifts a little so that more thorns prick her forehead and send little drips of blood to stain her blonde hair. If there was ever an angel that fell to earth, I know it was her because hanging on the cross was made for her. I step back and admire my handiwork for a moment. I know the big bastard upstairs sees this now, and it makes me even harder.

Whoever nailed the crucifix to the wall deserves a prize, because the thing holds her with no problem even though all of her is suspended.

I step in front of her, stroking myself root to tip, and her breath pushes between her teeth faster and faster until she's nearly hyperventilating.

There's no turning back now.

I can't wait any longer.

I walk down the steps of the altar and grab my pants off the floor. I pull a knife out of my pocket. I've probably had a dozen of the things, maybe even more, confiscated over the years, but it seems like this semester, the staff finally gave up and let me keep this one.

"I thought you weren't going to hurt me," she says.

"I said I wasn't going to nail you to the cross," I correct, looking at her as I do, "and I have no intentions of going to find either a hammer or nails today, Millicent."

"What's the knife for?" she blurts.

Okay ... do angels talk this much? It seems like she's talking a hell of a lot.

"Just a prick," I reassure her.

It'll be a *little* more than a prick.

Make her bleed! my shadow roars, and I nearly startle. Where the fuck did he come from? Has he been watching this whole time, the kinky fucker?

I ignore him and focus my attention on the beautiful angel trying not to fall apart in front of me.

"Are you okay?" I ask her, because I have to, because I need to force myself to care. I'm never going to get to actually crucify her if she screams bloody murder and gets me sent to the hole until I graduate.

There aren't many things that would end with a student in the isolation ward until they left this shithole, but I'm positive *crucifying a student*, with or without nails, is one of them.

"You need this?" she asks again.

"Yes."

"You want this?"

"Yes."

She swallows and nods her head for what feels like the twelfth time tonight, always convincing herself of what to do next like she's having an internal argument I'm not a part of.

"Okay then," she tells me. "You gave me what I asked for. I'll give you what you asked for."

She doesn't have to say it twice.

I take three steps to the right, unsheathe the knife in my hand, and take the tip of the blade to her palm. I don't hesitate. I push it right across the other scar I left there that was, up until this point, healing nicely, and reopen the wound. She hisses as blood seeps from the fresh gash. I don't let myself enjoy it though. I walk over to her left hand and do the same, and still, she hisses again, whistling between her teeth as she does. Blood runs from the wounds and slowly drips to the altar floor.

Fucking perfect.

I move to stand directly in front of her, and then I kneel on the floor and press the blade into the tops of each foot.

She cries out something unintelligible, but I'm away for a moment. My shadow groans behind me as I look at her delicate feet and think nails would look gorgeous against her porcelain flesh. I watch as blood slowly seeps from the wounds and trails down the tops of her feet to stain the floor.

I can't help myself.

I lean in as she writhes against the ropes, and I press my lips to the wound on her left foot and then the right. She tastes

like desecration now, and my shadow moans along with me as I lean in further, letting God watch the show, and lick her clean. Well, as clean as she can be given that she's still bleeding. I should get points, though, for not making her carry the cross like the real Jesus Christ, but I doubt she'd appreciate my kindness right now. Plus, I don't want to talk. I want to taste.

It takes everything in me to stop, but I climb to my feet, the taste of her still on my tongue and by the looks of her grimace, staining my mouth and teeth. At this angle, I'm still taller than her, but with Jesus behind her back, his head leaning forward and over the top of hers, she's bent forward. I dig my index finger into the open wound of her right hand and hold it to her mouth. She winces as I paint her lips with it.

Blood-stained red, my favorite fucking color.

I push my finger in between her lips to let her taste herself, and she hisses and grimaces a little. That's okay for now. I'll be sure to get her used to it. Right now, I'm listening to the sound of an angel breaking, and I fucking love it.

We don't talk as I step forward and part her legs as best I can, given they're still tied at the ankles to the cross. Then I plant a hand on her ass and tilt her pelvis. I line myself up with her and push inside a moment later.

She screams again on the impale and throws her head back against the cross. The whole thing clatters as I fuck her, and it makes me push her even harder.

I hammer into her tight heat as she bleeds on the cross, and this is better than I ever could have imagined. My shadow writhes and moans beside me, slithering snakes of black disappearing and coming together to form his body. She cries out, thrusting her breasts to the heavens, and I bury inside of her, my balls knocking against her.

Blood.

Cum.

Pain.

Harder and harder, I pound into her, the cross knocking into the stone wall. I squeeze my ass, trying to stave off my release, but I can't. I bury to the hilt and then explode inside her. My shadow roars as we come, and my name bursts past her lips.

We stay there for a moment until she whimpers softly, and I realize I need to untie her.

I pull out, and she winces with another whimper. I look up to find her blue eyes bleary, and she blinks down at me. I snap my fingers in front of her face. I want her back with me. Not in her thoughts or prayers or with her God.

She murmurs the beginning of the sacrament of confession.

“Forgive me Lord for I have sinned.”

Oh fuck no.

I shake her a little, and her eyes roll back a little in her head as she continues muttering words I don't like.

“Why are you praying to him now, angel?” I demand, my hands slapping her shoulders and trying to bring her back to me. “When you worship me now?”

She doesn't even blink.

“Come back to me, Millie,” I snarl, snapping my fingers in front of her face. I won't accept anything less. God can't have her after everything we've been through.

She is now and will forever be mine.

My shadow nestles against her, and I wonder if she can feel the heat of him pressed to her skin like he's a damn cat, *her* damn cat.

She doesn't say a word, and I act quickly. I untie her right hand and then her left. They flop down to her sides as the ropes leave friction marks on her flesh. I have to hold her with one hand to keep her upright as I undo her feet. Then she

collapses against me, and I take us both down to the floor of the altar, sitting her in my lap.

I grab my shirt and start to tend to her wounds, drying them and applying pressure. Then I cradle her on the stone altar of the church as the light from the horizon peeks through the stained-glass windows and sends colors speckling the large room. She holds onto me, and I barely hear her words.

“Are we going to Hell now?” she asks me.

I almost laugh before I realize she’s serious, that she’s pure and innocent even after everything we’ve done. That the good in her can never be erased. I comb the silky strands of her hair and hold her against me.

“The only heaven I will ever know is the one between your legs,” I tell her truthfully. “If there’s a heaven, though, I know it was built for you. You are the most perfect thing that’s ever touched this world, angel, and I’m never letting you go. You are mine now and forever.”

She looks at me, her eyes filling with tears like I’ve spoken some untold truth that she can’t see, but I see it clear as day. One tear falls and it breaks the dam holding the rest of them back. She shatters in my arms, and I cradle her against my chest as she cries.

Maybe this is fucked.

She’s using me to get over her own trauma, and I’m using her too, but I guess that’s the basis for the best of relationships. When your trauma complements the other person’s, and you make them better because of it?

I don’t know. I guess the truth for us is simpler than that.

She is light.

I am darkness.

And without the other, neither one of us can exist.

MILLIE



Maybe it's a sin to be happy with him, I don't know, and I don't care, but I am happy.

Of course, I'd rather be somewhere else with Killian like a warm beach with sand between my toes or an actual school where we would be treated like real students with a future instead of cattle kept alive for a paycheck. Through it all though, Killian is steadfast. He watches me thoughtfully when I pray before meals. He holds my hand while I swallow the vile pills each morning, and he walks me to and from class, though he's started just joining me in them at this point. I don't know if that's allowed, but he hasn't gotten into any trouble yet.

When fights break out in the halls, he's there to protect me, and when guards institute a lockdown and we're locked in our rooms until they determine order has been restored, he's there, jimmying my window open and sneaking inside. My friends are kind, Avery and Willow, but he's my anchor when it feels like I've hit choppy waters and the ocean is about to drown me.

He doesn't pry for answers about my past, though I'd tell him the truth if he asked. I don't interrogate him either. I guess we both feel like our pasts are just that: *in the past*, and as much as the world would like to claim otherwise, they don't define us.

We talk about the future, but I haven't gotten the guts to ask him what all this means for us, not yet. It's only been a

few weeks since I asked him to make me forget, and I feel like it's too soon to tell him that I think he has a beautiful soul, regardless of whether he sees it or not, and that I can't imagine conquering life without him.

It sounds crazy to even think it.

If I said it, I don't think it would scare him. If anything, he'd blink at me, laugh for a solid minute, and then tell me to say he has a *beautiful soul* again. What can I say? It's beautiful to me, at least.

Because he's more than a scary psychopath with a blood fetish and a truckload of religious trauma. He's a protector. He's *my* protector, but he'd protect his friends in a heartbeat too. In his own way, his fight with the Lord is his way of protecting the world. He blames God for everything bad that happened to him and me, and he believes if he can turn a Christian into an atheist, he's done that person a service.

I'm happy with him, even when I feel guilty about being happy like when the new Headmistress tells me I've missed a call from my father and everything comes flooding back again. In those moments, when it's all so overwhelming that I can barely breathe, I feel like I've done something wrong and that I don't deserve Kill. He likes to remind me that I'm too perfect for him, and although I know it's not true, it's nice to hear now and again.

Kill and I are content to spend most of our time in his favorite place, the church, though he likes the mausoleum as well. I told him I thought that after we graduate, he should go to school to be a funeral director because of his affinity for cemeteries, mausoleums, and all-around creepy places. He laughed so hard he fell off a pew and hit his head. Then he laughed even more until he caught his breath enough to tell Gabe that he needed to join him so he could operate the crematorium. Gabe, in turn, informed Saint that he had to join their funeral business, too, so he could, and I quote, *spend special alone time with the bodies*. Saint catapulted over a pew

as Gabe cackled like a maniac, and Killian started laughing again.

I haven't spoken with my father, and I don't plan on it. In addition to leaving messages on Avery's phone and with the Administrative Office, he's also resorted to having Pastor Bradley and other church members reach out to me. I never return their calls, though maybe I should. Avery says I should, at least, and that I should set the record straight and put them in their place. Avery says there's closure in confronting the person that traumatized you, which from what she's told me was, in her case, her mother.

I don't think I have the strength to confront my father though. Daddy was everything to me. He was my best friend, my confidant, the person I told all my secrets to, and the one I begged God to keep safe every night. He was the one person in my life who was supposed to love me unconditionally, even though he didn't. I see that now.

His love came with a price, and a high one at that. I don't blame myself for what happened. I know it's not my fault, but I'm still angry about it. I can't help it. I'm angry at myself for not standing my ground and angry at all the people who failed me and took my father's side. They were supposed to be my friends and my church family, people who loved and cared for me despite not being related, but they all chose to believe his lie. I'm betting they still do, too, because my father would never jeopardize his standing in our church by telling them the truth.

In the rare times I'm not with Kill, that anger nearly engulfs me. Maybe that's what Chryseum Academy does to the students who find this place home. Maybe it makes them angry and hateful, though I'm more of the former and less of the latter. I'm angry at my father and the people who refused to believe me. I'm angry at the vile doctor who runs this place and his minions that roam the halls. I'm angry that the world is unfair, and somehow the majority of the people who end up behind these locked gates don't deserve to be here. They need

love, support, and understanding, but they're given a prison instead.

At least I'm not angry when I'm with Killian. He makes me feel loved. He looks at me like I should be revered, like I haven't done anything wrong. It's so unlike the looks I used to get back home that it nearly undoes me every time, picking at the seams of my sewed-up heart. Everyone was so mad at church when word got out what I had accused my father of, and in the end, they chose my father and looked at me like I was a deranged, disgusting girl. Good riddance I say, though.

I don't want to talk to Daddy.

I don't need Pastor Bradley or any of my old church family.

It's better if I don't think about them because when I do, I control the nightmares. When I dwell too long though, they come roaring back like flames catching new kindling. Last week, I had a nightmare so terrible that I threw up as soon as I awoke. When I finally went back to bed, I woke up thirty minutes later screaming. Avery tried to calm me, and when that didn't work, she panicked, called Saint, and told him to send his roommate ASAP. Killian climbed through my window four minutes later, damp with sweat and out of breath. He instantly settled into bed with me, holding me until roll call began hours later before he snuck out and went back to his room.

The other students say that the Asylum has a way of destroying your faith, but I don't think that's true. If anything, it changes it. I understand that, at least. I'm better off without the old, preconceived notion of the church and Christ instilled in me at a young age. What my father did to me is unacceptable and what Killian's father did to his mother is unacceptable, and I don't think that's the God I want to worship.

I still have hope though. There's a God out there, I feel him in the beauty I spot in the small things, like the fresh apples we had with breakfast this past Monday, the butterflies

bursting from their cocoons and turning the courtyard into a sea of yellow last week, and the sunshine that peeks through the clouds every so often, even when it's supposed to rain. Killian likes to tell me otherwise, but that's okay. One day, I hope he'll see the same beauty I do.

Today, we lay together on a pew in the chapel, the candles flickering in their tiered votive stands at the front of the building near the altar.

"Why do you still pray?" he asks me, petting my hair.

I adjust, lay my head on his chest, and yawn. Who knew Killian Wilsdorf made the perfect pillow?

"Because there's always hope," I answer him.

The truth is that I don't know exactly what I'm praying to anymore. I've become an agnostic believer, I suppose. Something's there, but I'm not exactly sure what it is.

"You're so weird," he murmurs to me, still petting my hair like I'm a puppy and not a person.

I nearly burst with laughter at his words, though, because isn't that just the pot calling the freaking kettle whatever color pots and kettles are nowadays? Black? Blue? Stainless steel?

Parent visitation day is tomorrow, and I'd stay in my room if the guards would allow it. They won't though, and I think Kill's dreading it just as much as I am. He doesn't want to see the extended family who threw him away, and I don't want to see my father.

"Who do you talk to?" I ask Kill, propping my chin up on my interlaced fingers and looking up at him.

"Hmm," he says to me, and I wonder if he's fallen asleep.

"I see you," I tell him. "Sometimes you're murmuring yourself or looking in the wrong direction, and there's nothing there."

His eyes open, and he looks down the line of his nose at me.

“You see that?” he asks, sounding surprised.

“I do,” I say, and he looks away from me, and I follow his gaze to the rear of the chapel, once again finding nothing there.

“You’re doing it now,” I tell him.

He doesn’t look back at me as he answers, “I am, aren’t I?”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” I offer.

“I don’t mind,” he says, still staring at the back of the room.

“Is it your mother?” I ask him.

He shakes his head no.

“Your father?” I ask, horrified at the question. I certainly hope not, and he confirms it’s not him a moment later with another shake of his head.

I play with the cross on the bracelet on my wrist.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“My shadow,” he says with a swallow before his gaze finally returns to me. “Butcher would kill you for that information, angel.”

“I’ll never tell.”

“I know,” he responds.

“What does your shadow do?” I ask.

He snorts at that one.

“The useless bastard mostly just follows me around like a dog after a bone, but he likes you a lot too.”

He winks at me, and I laugh, but as my laughter fades, his face grows serious.

“He wants me to make you bleed,” he tells me, my heart hitting the gas pedal.

“Do you listen to him?” I manage.

Kill shakes his head.

“Sometimes,” he admits, “not always.”

My heart’s pounding so hard that he has to feel it through my shirt and onto his chest by now.

“Are you planning on listening to him?” I ask.

Killian’s blue-eyed gaze dips to my lips and back up to my eyes again.

“No, not today.” He brushes the hair out of my eyes and peers down at me. “I’ll never let him hurt you, angel.”

When he says it, I trust him.

The next morning, we’re required to gather in the dining hall because it’s the largest place on campus. Family members mingle here and there, and there are a lot of them, many students appearing to max out the limit of four people per student.

I don’t expect my father to show. I figure he would want to avoid the chance at a public scene, but I guess it was naïve because as we line up against the wall, boys on one side of the room and girls on the other, I spot my father seated at a white table near the double doors to the cafeteria line.

My reaction is instantaneous and visceral.

I want to scream.

I want to slap him.

How dare he come here!

I don’t know how he does it, but Killian senses my turmoil, and he turns to look at me. He follows my gaze back to my father, and then back to me as one of the guards shouts, “Students sit with your families. You have one hour. If you have no visitors today, remain against the wall.”

Some students roll their eyes and try to leave the cafeteria, only to be stopped by guards directing them back inside. Other students immediately walk to waiting family members. A couple even run toward them, but most of my peers, like me, drag their feet and hope that the floor will open a wormhole and swallow them up.

The people seated in front of us deposited us here like we were trash, throwing us away because we didn't fit what they wanted us to be. By the looks of it, I'm not the only resentful student here.

I walk to the table, making my way around the other families seated at tables, and when I arrive, my father smiles at me. I don't sit, but he smiles, and I notice he looks older.

Good.

What he did should've aged him.

"Take a seat," a guard barks at me, and I choose the one farthest away from my father.

He may be wearing a nice polo shirt and recently ironed khaki pants, but I see him for what he is.

A predator.

I hate him for it.

"Are you happy to see me?" he asks.

Is he delusional? Does he not remember our last conversation?"

"No," I deadpan. I want this over so I can go back to my spot on the wall. "What do you want from me? Why are you here?"

He blinks at me like he's surprised, but I know better than that. His jaw tics and his fingers ball into fists and then release quickly across the tabletop. I know all his tells.

"I just wanted to talk to you," he says with a forced chuckle. "You're my daughter."

I feel the dam holding all my anger back starting to crack. I'm not a violent person, but I want to strangle him.

He called me his daughter after what he did?! Fathers don't do what he did to their daughters!

"You remember that now?" I ask him, cocking my head in his direction.

Maybe Killian's strength is starting to rub off on me because when he chuckles nervously, running a thick index finger across the inside of his collar, the dam holding all the words I want to say fails.

My hands flatten on the table, and I lean forward, my butt lifting from the seat.

"You assaulted me," I say. "Or did you forget, *Daddy*?"

"W ... w ... what ..." he begins.

I don't let him finish. "You don't remember?" I ask him, pouting. "Let me remind you. You came into my room in the middle of the night. You told me that God said it was all right. Is this jogging any memories now?"

"Millicent!" he hisses, his face turning beet red as he starts to sweat. "Quiet!"

I don't care. I want to scream it for everyone to hear. My fingernails scrape across the tabletop as the people at the surrounding tables start to look at us now, students and family alike.

"Keep my voice down?" I nearly shout with a short laugh. "You put your greedy hands down my shorts and molested me, *Dad*. You touched my pussy and said that God sent me to you as a replacement for your dead fucking wife!"

"Calm down!" one of the guards yells, starting toward me, but whether it was luck or Saint's foot, I'll never know, as the man face-plants to the floor with an *oomph*.

I'm heaving now, my shoulders rising with each quick breath, and I can't believe I said those words. I can't believe I

said them to my father. If I wasn't so angry, I'd be proud.

“Stop it, Millicent!” he roars, slamming his hand down onto the table and rattling the entire thing.

“What?” I yell back at him. “You don't want to hear the truth? You assaulted your daughter. You tried to rape half of your own DNA.” I raise my hands for the room. “What? Don't you want them to know how much you loved me?”

The red flushing my father's face goes all the way up to his scalp, and I see it burning beneath his thinning hair as he stands on the opposite end of the table and points at me.

“She's crazy!” he shouts, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. “She's fucking crazy!”

I laugh as more guards start my way, and they're running now, I only have seconds, so I better make it count.

“I'm crazy?!” I scream at him. “You're the one who wanted to rape your daughter.”

The guards arrive behind me on either side and yank my hands behind my back, shackling them in restraints I can't see.

I don't think I care if everyone in this room thinks I'm nuts. Avery was right. It does feel good to confront those who have done you wrong.

“Calling me crazy doesn't make what I say any less true!” I shout at him before I'm thrust forward, the side of my face pressed against the table. And then I say the thing I know will kill him slowly for the rest of his years until he dies of a million oozing papercuts. “You will never atone for your sins, Daddy, no matter how hard you pray because I will always be there, praying harder, begging God to damn you. I'll sell my soul to the Devil if I have to before the gates of Heaven open up for the likes of you.”

The room is quiet now, save for the whispers and the rustling as I'm tied in more restraints. They add a bar between my ankles and something to connect the bar and the wrist hobbles together. I turn my head before a guard pushes it back

to the table again, and I look to the other side of the room. I find Killian still standing against the wall, and he stares at me for a long moment. I think I see pride in his gaze before he looks at my father.

I don't see hate as Killian watches him.

I don't see anger either.

If anything, I see fury and a plan to kill him. As my father starts complaining to a guard about how *psychotic* I am, I'm hoping he does too.

KILLIAN



I need to be smart about it. I can't just kill the fucker here, not in front of all these people. Otherwise, I'm going to end up in jail or worse, the Butcher's isolation ward, being tormented by the realization that I let the man who hurt Millie walk out of here a free man.

My shadow roars beside me, and I echo the sentiment.

The only thing I can think is that everything makes sense now.

How she grabbed me in the chapel and held onto me after I touched her chest.

How she sobbed when I asked who broke her, never answering the question.

Her preoccupation with going to Hell because he told her she'd be sent there for disobedience.

Her choosing me of all people to make her forget his touch because I'm the opposite of this walking tumor.

He hides who he is behind religion and symbols of a higher power, the Bible, the cross, and the church, all used by him to trick her into giving him what he wants.

I told her what I wanted from the get-go. No lies, no propaganda, just her crucified and tempted by me.

I never pushed her for answers after that day in the church when she shattered to pieces and sobbed in front of me.

I just assumed I already knew the answer, like a fucking dumbass.

I figured whichever prick assaulted her was probably some handsy twat from back home, maybe a creeper from school or one of those jocks who think they're hot shit until a girl tells them no.

It never even occurred to me that it could be her father.

Fuck.

Of course, it was. The pieces fall into place now. She told me her mother had died in childbirth and that Millie was to blame for killing her. No one does guilt better than a fucker using it to manipulate—I should know—but I made it clear that her mother's death was never Millie's fault. She cried when I told her that.

Millicent, I'm guessing, probably looks like his dead wife, and the old fuck justifies his sick attraction by saying that she was sent to fulfill the void left by her mother's death. He raised her. He knows all the things that will manipulate her.

Godfuckingdammit.

A little voice, I guess whatever passes for my conscience, whispers that I say pretty things to manipulate her too. Cherry-picking Bible verses, anyone?

Fuck if it's not true, but it's also different. First of all, despite all my caveman shit—and make no mistake, I *am* a caveman for her—I would never fucking rape her. If I were capable of that, I would have done it the first time I tasted her lips. Also, perhaps even more importantly, I'm not her fucking biological sperm donor trying to stick my dick in her.

He used his God to manipulate her.

He called her a liar.

Then he gaslighted her into believing it.

My eye twitches as I stare across the cafeteria at him, but I'm careful to school the rest of my expression. It takes some

effort, but I look away a moment later, trying to be careful not to draw attention to myself. The guards don't care enough to know which students are fucking which anymore, but Millicent and I sit together at every meal. We've been seen in the halls together for weeks. We spend *a lot* of time together, and one of these fuckers is bound to see it.

I can't stare at him for as long as it takes to choose the way he dies, but luckily, I'm not the only one in the dining hall looking at him either. It's hard not to look when you've just watched a middle-aged prick get screamed at in graphic detail for sexually assaulting his daughter.

I'm going to gut this asshole and wear his innards like a necklace. It'll be like a warning to anyone else who thinks about hurting Millie.

Do not touch.

I bite back a grimace as I realize I'm going to get his blood on me by the time today is over. Then I'll have to go full-on cleansing ritual and find a pint or two of devout blood to wipe the vile shit away.

I won't be able to, though. Millie's locked up, or will be at least, on her way to the hole in wrist hobbles and ankle restraints. I need to find a way to end this guy that doesn't result in me being covered in his shit blood. I can't throw him out a window. It's too open. Everyone would see that. If I push him down a flight of stairs, he might break something, but I doubt it would be his neck.

Dammit.

Who am I kidding?

I am one hundred percent going to get bloody when I kill this asshole in a dark corner of the Asylum. There's no way around it.

Fine, if that's the way it has to be, then I will sully myself for her. I will do what it takes, and I'll deal with the consequences later.

My eye twitches again, and my shadow roars loud enough to make my teeth chatter. If he could actually damage my hearing, I'd be deaf in my left ear because of it.

Repress, Killian.

Control yourself.

Breathe, breathe, fucking breathe!

I'm one step away from hyperventilating though as I watch Millicent's father from the corner of my eye. My shadow bellows again, angry that I'm not doing anything. I'm angry too, but I can't let it out, not like he can. If he was real, his roar would shatter the windows of the dining hall and make this whole building rumble.

I need to act, and I need to do it now before the bastard is on a flight back home, headed a thousand miles away from me.

Think, Kill!

Make. Him. Suffer.

As the guards finally manage to get Millie out of the double doors, I tip my chin in her direction. She's going to the Butcher, and I'm sure he'll treat her extra special when he learns of her outburst. She needs to know I'm still on her side. My fingers twitch as I shove them into my pants' pockets, and my shadow's roar is even louder this time as he stands beside me and dislocates his lower jaw to spew black shit out into the world.

There's so much to do and plans to be made.

I could slice off his dick and make him choke on it.

I could castrate him and make him wear his balls like a tail pinned to his ass.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

I could do so much, but my options are limited. This place is packed today, and the guards are milling about, running to kiss his ass and apologize for not keeping Millie under control.

I wonder if the other people in the dining hall can sense the truth. Maybe it hits too close to home for some of them, and that's why they don't even look in his direction, their eyes downcast to their tables instead. Other family members, the women in particular, look disgusted, and I like to think they saw through his bullshit. Millie told the truth, and by the look on my friends' faces, they know it too.

I take a quick assessment. Saint's seated next to Willow and looking at her as she stares open-mouthed and gaping at Avery three tables over. Avery, on the other end, is eyeing Millie's father like she wants to kill him. Gabe assesses the reactions of our friends as quickly as I do, and when he gets to me, he smiles broadly, showing all his shiny teeth, and swallows down a laugh. He's as close to telepathy as humans will ever get. He knows I'm about to take care of it. Hell, maybe if he's lucky, I'll even let him burn the body when it's over. Well, if there's a body left, that is.

I watch the piece of shit who sired the girl I care for from a distance. I pretend to be bored and keep my place against the wall, standing with all the other students who don't have visitors. The guards are still kissing Millie's father's ass, talking on their walkie-talkies, and probably making nasty arrangements for his daughter at his behest. Ten minutes must pass, probably more, before finally, the color of his face has returned to normal, and he leaves for the door.

Lucky for me, the guy who's guarding the entrance doors in the dining hall hates his life.

I look at him and say, "I gotta piss," and he blinks slowly.

Then he blinks some more in the direction of the room, then me, and decides he's not feeling up to leaving the dining hall after the shit that already went down.

"Fine," he says with a shrug, moving out of my way. "Hurry up."

I push the panic bar on one of the doors, sending it swinging open, and start down the hall. I'm halfway down it,

following my target, when I nearly collide with a person coming from an intersecting hallway. She may be the person I would least like to see in the entire world right now.

My fucking aunt.

Shit!

If the guards catch wind of her arrival, they're going to make me go back into the dining hall and sit at a table and play family with her. Then Millicent's purulent boil of a father will get away, and ...

No, that can't happen!

"Killian," my aunt says, sniffing.

Has she been crying in the car?

How fucking pathetic.

"Of course you can't be bothered to show up on time," I snap, and she frowns.

"Our flight," she begins, but she doesn't need to lie, I see it written all over her face. She takes a look at the hall, her gaze lingering on the scuff marks on the walls before it lands on the thick glass of the dispensary windows.

I don't believe a word she says.

Her flight wasn't late.

She just couldn't stand to sully herself by coming inside the Asylum.

"Why don't we talk?" she offers, reaching for my hand, but I avoid it easily, slipping my fingers through hers.

I don't have time for this shit!

"What do you want?" I demand, my voice pure ice, designed to cut her up and leave her defeated on the floor.

It has its intended effect by the looks of it, and she swallows loudly as the color fades from her cheeks, leaving only orange-tinted makeup behind. My shadow shifts beside

me, breathing down my neck as my target turns a corner and starts toward the elevator.

Goddammit!

“I want to make amends,” she begins softly.

I cut her off. On a good day, I don't have time for whatever this is. On a bad day, it makes me want to throw her out of a moving vehicle so I can watch her roll.

“You locked me in mental institutions for over a decade,” I seethe. “You can take your amends and fuck right off.”

“W ... w ... what?” she stutters, but Millicent's father has disappeared around the corner, and I have to get going.

Luckily for me, I know appearances are everything for my dear aunt, so as I walk away, she doesn't create a scene. She's careful not to cry, even though her eyes are glossy with unshed tears. Knowing her, she's probably worried people will see her if she does.

I hurry to catch up to the fucker. I turn the corner and watch as the asshole hits the down button to take the elevator to the first floor. Even though no one is watching, it's an unnecessary risk to join him. I head in the opposite direction and take the steps instead.

My shadow and I run down the stone stairwell, our footfalls silent as we do. I hear the families starting to leave the dining room and trickle out onto the second floor, and I know the guards are distracted, watching the students before someone creates another scene.

This is my chance.

This may be my only chance.

I exit the stairwell, and I don't see him, not until after a long, burning moment, when I spot him at the end of the main hall that leads into the Asylum.

Fuck!

He's getting away!

I need to stop him!

I need to slow him down!

In no universe is this motherfucker leaving my campus. He's almost to the doors, and I'm damn near sprinting now. I call out to him in the nicest voice I have, the one that sounds nothing like me. "Hey, wait up!"

He pauses for a split second, but it's all I need. He stops and turns, his brows punching together as he looks back at me. He's slow about it too, but I've already pulled the knife from my pocket, the one I found hidden beneath a pew one day. I slide the sheath off the blade, and as I step up to Millicent's father, I slide it into the center of his chest, between the ribs. The same blade that cut the palms and feet of his daughter, I'll use to bleed him with as well. It's almost touching.

The pathetic excuse for a man makes a low, pained sound, but I know where I hit. I've punctured a lung, and he isn't going to be screaming anytime soon. I walk him half a dozen steps into the darkness of the adjoining hallway and push him into an empty bathroom. The door squeaks on its hinges as it opens, but no one ever comes in here. Nobody except the students and staff even know it's here, and it has a disgusting history of overflowing toilets every time you try to flush. Even the medicated assholes upstairs who are afraid of baths don't like piss and shit splattered across their pants.

Millicent's father makes another pained sound again, and I shove him further into the room, his back hitting the tiled wall behind him and his head knocking against it with a *crack*.

He looks down at the spot where the blade has been and the blood spilling across his polo, but I don't give him the satisfaction of figuring it out. He blinks at me, confused.

He tries to push away from the tile again, but I shove him back against the tile and raise the blade. I raise my knife to slice him up, while my shadow bellows with satisfaction. The bastard gurgles as I carve a large cross into his middle, slicing his shirt with it. It's not deep, a flesh wound that'll leave a

nasty scar, but I finish it with a deep blow through the front of him all the way to the back. I hope I hit vertebrae, L5S1 if luck favors me today.

If he lives after all this, I want him to never walk again. I want him to roll around in a wheelchair and piss and shit in plastic bags. I want him to never be able to get his disgusting dick to work.

“Who are you?” he gurgles, blood falling from his mouth to stain his clean-shaven chin. He blinks down at the knife buried to the hilt in his front.

“I’m the only God you will ever meet,” I tell him, then I grab him by the skull and slam his head down onto the porcelain sink, knocking him unconscious with a satisfying crunch.

KILLIAN



Adrenaline is a bitch to come down from. I'm shaking and shivering, blood dirtying my fingers and my hands and staining my dark green Academy jacket and matching tie. I stare down at my trembling fingers for a moment, both mesmerized and disgusted. The red liquid dips between the tiny cracks in my skin and seeps down into my pores like it's trying to find a way inside me to corrupt me once and for all.

And make you into the one person you hate more than God: your fucking father.

I yank my knife out of Millicent's father's belly and rush over to the porcelain sink. I turn on the water and quickly begin to scrub my hands and clean the blade beneath the water. I hit the soap dispenser six times at least and clean my knife first, pocketing it a few seconds later. Then I shove both of my hands under the scalding hot water and try to scrub the red poison off me. I scrub my hands even harder as Millicent's father releases a gurgling sound in his sleep.

Or maybe it's his death.

Who cares? I certainly don't, except that the sound makes my fingers shake even more between the running liquid. I don't care that her father is probably dying on the floor behind me, but I wish he would stop making sounds that remind me of his pitiful existence.

I don't need any more reminders.

His blood is already on me, debasing my flesh and trying to poison me.

Get it off!

Scrub harder!

CLEANSE!

I wash my hands, rubbing them together even harder than before, working them raw before I look up at the mirror. In one blink, I take another quick assessment, looking for any proof of what I've done. I zero in on the dark stains on my jacket and tie immediately. To anyone else, it would be hard to see the blood because of the color. Thankfully, none of Millicent's father landed on my white dress shirt, though, or else I'd be walking around the Academy shirtless, and that would raise questions for which I have no answer.

Now, I don't particularly care about getting caught, but I'd rather not end up in jail or in the hole, and with the murder of an outsider around here, it's about a fifty percent chance in either direction. If students get killed, no one cares, but they will care when they find a donor bleeding out on the tile.

I need Millicent out of the isolation ward, and I need her soon. I can't get her out of the hole if I'm locked up in there myself. My brain warns me that no one ever escapes the hole, not before the Butcher decides their time is up, but I ignore the pessimist. I scrub beneath my fingernails, leaving the water set to scalding, and my gaze drops back down to the basin. The water bubbles pink with soap and the fucker's blood before swirling down the drain.

The adrenaline continues to wane from my veins, and it's not my fingers and hands shaking the most anymore.

It's all of me.

Fuck.

I need to control it. I always hated coming down from the high.

When was the last time I hunted someone? I mean that literally, too, bringing justice that God so cruelly failed to deliver. I mentally count the seasons, and I think it's been over a year, but the last one wasn't like this. Last time, I wasn't so rushed or even so angry. I had time to prepare and plan. I made sure he couldn't sully me, but now I'm standing in this cramped bathroom next to a dying man, angrily scrubbing his blood off my fingers.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The guy back then deserved everything I gave him, just like this fucker on the floor behind me did, though he didn't assault anyone. No, the stupid twat tried to kill me instead, proclaiming himself to be Jesus reincarnated. He was oh so offended by the things I got up to in my church that he tried to murder me in my chapel. He almost succeeded, too, but only because—one—I had no idea who he even was and—two—I was asleep on a pew during his murder attempt. His screwdriver missed my carotid artery by about two inches, and that was only because I rolled over at the last second. His screwdriver hit the wood instead of my flesh, and if you're looking for it, you can find the indent he left in the third pew to the left of the altar. I shoved him off me and threatened to break his neck, and the crazy fucker vowed to never stop in his mission to kill me because, according to him, there couldn't be two gods on campus.

I remember laughing. It was like he never met Saint or Gabriel either.

The dude ended up a permanent resident of a psych ward sixteen hours to the south, chemically lobotomized from what I heard. All because I decided to challenge his delusional ass to walk on water like Jesus, and he went for a swim in the campus pool. Turns out, he wasn't the son of Christ reincarnated and he couldn't actually swim, the poor, wet bastard.

I wish I could have just drowned this one too.

I look at myself in the mirror, drying my hands with a paper towel as I do. Logically, I know the soap and water have gotten rid of the blood on my hands, but still, they won't stop shaking. I clench my fists open and close and check my clothes in the mirror one last time, confirming that the blood splatter on my tie and my jacket isn't visible unless someone is very, *very* close to me. Even then, the droplets look like stains, not blood.

I want to strip down and throw them both away. My fingers twitch with the urge, but I can't do that. People saw me this morning, and those people saw me wearing an Academy jacket and tie, just like all males were ordered to do by the staff this morning. Today's family visitation day, and that means the Academy's image must be maintained. It will not go unnoticed if I arrive back upstairs missing two articles of clothing.

Fuck.

I've never felt so unclean, except maybe once before when I wasn't far enough away from the crime scene my father created. It took one slash of the machete by my father's hand for my mother's blood to splatter across my face and into my open mouth. Two slashes, and every bit of clothing on me was speckled with crimson drops. By the time my father slipped and fell, impaling himself on his own weapon and ending his life at the same moment, I was covered from head to toe. When their bodies had cooled and the flies began to buzz, I crawled on my hands and knees out of the cellar and walked for what felt like miles until I reached a neighbor's home. The lady screamed when she looked out of her screen door and onto her front porch and saw me. When the paramedics showed up half an hour later, they thought I couldn't possibly be alive. Then they realized the blood wasn't from me, and a whole lot of other people arrived after that.

I need a scalding hot shower and the blood of an angel to redeem me from the mess I've created.

“Goddammit,” I murmur as the body on the floor makes a noise again.

Is he still breathing?

Impressive, but I don’t care.

I have to get out of here. I didn’t plan or prepare. I reacted on instinct, and now I’m paying the price. There’s no one to cleanse me, and it hurts!

My shadow whimpers, his head ducked beneath the short ceiling of the bathroom.

Cleanse! he demands.

“I don’t have time,” I mutter, cursing again.

I can’t think straight.

Focus, Killian! Focus!

Every part of me twitches, and my brain is fuzzy, impatient to steal Millicent from isolation and bleed her to clean myself.

Bile needles at my esophagus, and I force it back down with a loud swallow.

I’m so unclean I can’t take it. It feels like a thousand roaches scurry across my skin, laying eggs across my flesh and defiling me. I have to keep it together—*Goddammit!*—but my hands won’t stop trembling, and I can still feel the fucker’s blood on me, poisoning me from the outside in.

Get your ass moving, Wilsdorf!

I jerk into action, coming to my senses. I can’t protect Millie if I get caught and end up in prison or being treated like a pin cushion in Butcher’s lab. I have to get her out, though the isolation ward is damn near impenetrable. I’ve never heard of anyone escaping the place. If they could have, Saint or Gabriel would have done it years ago.

Butcher’s probably touching my angel right now, defiling her for something she didn’t do. I can’t stand it!

I grab the cold door handle and abruptly leave the bathroom. The hallway is thankfully still dark and empty, and I wipe my hands across my jacket as I start down the hall.

The invisible roaches scurrying across my skin pick up their pace, and it takes everything I have not to scream.

Millicent's father was corrupted.

Contaminated.

Con-fucking-tagious.

Or at least that's what my diseased brain thinks. This is what hell must be like.

I walk down the hall and take the stairs up to the second floor again.

It's busy with students and parents darting here and there, showing their parents their classrooms and earning brownie points in the form of commissary credits. I slip between the meandering bodies easily, but to my unpleasant surprise as I head back toward the dining hall, I spot my aunt still standing where I left her. She's sniffing, and my uncle stands at her side, his arm wrapped around her shoulders as her fingers shake, clutching a tissue between her hands like it's a big dose of Xanax and not a Kleenex. Speaking of Xanax, I could use one or a hundred right now because if my fingers continue to shake like I'm coming down off a week-long bender, one of these fuckers is going to notice.

The invisible roaches still wriggle over me, and I shove my hands into the front pockets of my dress slacks, desperately trying to not lose my shit. If I curl in a ball and start rocking back in forth, I'd hardly be noticed on any other day, but on visitation days, when we're required to be on our best behavior, well ... in no situation does that end well for me.

Get it the fuck together, Killian! Cleanse later, but for now, REPRESS!

I draw closer to my aunt, cooling my expression I do, and in four steps, I've stopped my twitching. Well, for the most

part anyway. As I walk down the hall, I spot Saint outside an empty classroom, holding Willow's hand. He stands there, tall and relaxed as he smiles at her father. It's not the nice smile he gives to get what he wants, though. This one's a new level of freakshow, and he looks like he's threatening to cut open the inconsiderate bastard and find out what his liver tastes like. He definitely would, too. That is if Willow asked him. Gabe would do the same for Avery, setting fire to anyone who hurt her.

Willow's father swallows beneath Saint's creeper stare, and his flesh colors to a shade of green that reminds me of a bad zombie movie. There are too many people around for him to act on the silent threat he's sending, but still, it appears to have the intended effect.

I notice that, of course, Saint's parents didn't show today. They're both pretentious assholes who essentially disowned him after he was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder. They couldn't bear to know that their beautiful little boy was a legitimate psychopath. I figure they at least could have tried to love him, but then again, maybe it's best they sent him away. His older brother remained with them, and last I heard, the guy ended up even more fucked-up than my friend. They pulled Saint's brother out of some Ivy League school last semester and transferred him to Prodigum University, Chryseum's sister school in Connecticut.

I've heard Prodigum is nicer than Chryseum, but that the people are worse. I'm sure Saint will fit in just fine when his parents send him there after graduation, but the place has some nasty initiation rituals for their new students. In no way is Saint ever letting anyone touch Willow, so I figure he'll be charged with murder and will be acquitted on the basis of mental insanity by the end of his first semester on campus.

I guess if he does decide to off Willow's father today, I'll help him hide the body. Gabe will burn the corpse so there'll be nothing left but ash when he's done.

Speaking of bodies ... I wonder if anyone has found Millicent's father yet. I guess I should have at least kicked him into a stall or something, but I was distracted.

Doesn't matter, I guess. There's nothing I can do now.

I'll just count my blessings that the cameras stopped working three semesters ago after one of Gabriel's disciples set fire to the server room. Once Millicent's father is found, though, the entire campus will be placed on lockdown, and I'll have to figure out a plan to get to my angel.

I continue down the hallway, ignoring the invisible roaches still crawling over my flesh. I pass Gabe's parents next, his girlfriend standing with them. I guess it's expected that Avery's parents didn't show, not after the ass-lashing I heard she gave them last semester. Gabe's arm is around Avery, and they stand there together, no doubt facing off as a joined force against his bastard of a father.

Finally, I arrive in front of my aunt, who brings the tissue she's still holding to her nose and blows loudly, sounding like she's blowing a trumpet in the middle of the hall. My uncle pats her back, no doubt assuring her that her troubled nephew belongs here. I now see that they've brought their twins too, but the two teenagers in front of me aren't cute, cherubic little kids anymore. The boy's gotten chubby, and the girl's even more plain than I remember. They're going to have a hell of an awakening when they're slapped by the real world and realize they are not, in fact, perfect, despite what their parents tell them.

I blink at the four of them, my brow furrowed.

Repress just a little longer.

I fist my unclean hands in my pockets and walk to my aunt. I'm going to need an alibi, after all.

"You're still here?" I ask with a practiced smile. "Still wanting to play pretend family with me?"

"Be quiet!" my uncle snaps at me, his upper lip curling over his coffee-stained teeth. "Be quiet before I make you pay

for that!”

I smile at him this time, and I make sure it’s like the one Saint gave Willow’s father earlier. There’s nothing nice about my expression.

“You sent me here,” I tell him. “You made me into what I am, and yet you still think you’re going to get a punch in?” I step closer, pressing into his space as the tops of my loafers nearly kiss his shoes. “I will slice you open in these halls, Uncle, and there’s not a goddamn thing anyone here can do about it.”

My words are calm, and I probably said too much, but they sure felt nice coming out of my mouth. My uncle pales to match his wife, and the bugs creeping over my skin pump their little legs even faster.

“You’re a freak!” my aunt spews back at me. “You’ve always been!”

I cock my head at her.

“You could’ve helped me,” I tell her. “You could have tried. Instead, when shit got hard, you shipped me off to boarding schools. Maybe I am a freak,” I shrug. “I guess I am, but you turned me into a goddamned circus exhibit and put me in a cage.”

Gabe walks behind me with his girlfriend, and I guess my comment is loud enough to hear because a moment later, I hear him cackle as he walks down the hall.

MILLIE



I shouldn't have said those things to my father, and I definitely shouldn't have said them publicly. I've angered him, and now he'll make sure to have me punished.

I should care, and I suppose I do. I'm scared of what Dr. Boucher will do to me at my father's behest, but at the same time, I don't regret shouting a single word. It felt good to call my father out publicly and to let everyone know exactly what he did to me. I took back what he had stolen from me, my *choice*.

It was my choice to yell all the vile details for all my friends and their family members and dozens upon dozens of strangers to hear.

It was my choice to publicly embarrass him.

Every word was mine, and in that moment, it felt like I was releasing all the pent-up tension and anger I had been carrying around for months. It wasn't there anymore to give me nightmares or haunt me every time I closed my eyes.

I'm relieved, at peace even, as the guards tug me down the nearly empty hallway toward the service elevator. It's hard to walk with my hands shackled behind my back and feet cuffed together, and the jerks don't slow down. I'm skipping, hopping, and trying to catch up as the elevator arrives, and the one behind me shoves me through the double stainless-steel doors and inside the elevator. I nearly trip again because of the

bar between my ankles, but neither of the guards with me seem to notice. Or, if they do, they don't care.

The metal coffin smells like bleach, and it burns my eyes and stings my nostrils, but the guards don't notice that either. One of them pants beside me, his belly pushing against a thick metal belt buckle as he catches his breath. The other pulls his smartphone out of a pocket on the side of his black cargo pants and begins to swipe at the screen, looking bored. It doesn't entertain him for long because ten seconds later, maybe even less, he pockets his phone and looks over at me, his beady eyes examining me. He appears mildly interested at best and downright apathetic at worst. By the looks of him and the bite of bleach burning my eyeballs, I'd prefer it if he went back to his phone.

"I never pegged you for one of the ones to cause a scene," he tells me with a frown and then a shrug. "I guess there's a first time for everything though."

He raises his hand toward me, and I try to back away, but my butt hits the wall behind me. I can't stop him as he brushes the calloused pad of his thumb across my cheek, even though it makes me recoil in disgust. His gaze drops to my lips as he murmurs, "You're full of surprises, aren't you, blonde beauty?"

The other guard in the elevator snorts. I think I'm going to be sick.

"Better leave this one alone," the other guard says. "Didn't you hear what she was yelling in the dining hall?"

He says the words to his friend like I'm not even here, and I wasn't the one who did the yelling.

"Crazy bitch said her dad *molested* her. Went into detail too!" His eyes nearly bug out of his face before he guffaws, his big hands wrapping around his belly as he laughs at my expense. The other guard joins in, and it's like they think molestation is the funniest thing in the world. I wish I could

throw up right now just so I could aim it at the two of the assholes.

“Somebody’s got daddy issues,” the one who told my story manages through his laughter. “What a fucking freak.”

The guard with beady eyes stops laughing for a moment, eyes me from head to toe, and shrugs.

“I don’t know, man. I like ‘em with daddy issues,” he says, while he continues to leer at me. My stomach jumps into my throat, and I’m thinking maybe I will manage to puke on this one.

The guy continues to stare as he adds, “They’re wild in the sack.”

This causes his friend to laugh even more before he repeats his sentiment. “Freak!”

He manages the word on a pant as he slaps his thighs with his hands and his laughter withers from his lips.

I wish he would stop saying the *f*-word, and I’m not talking about the curse either.

I mean *freak*. It gets thrown around a lot around here with some other choice phrases.

Asshole. Bitch. Cunt. Motherfucker.

The students are called so many horrible things by the staff that I barely register the insults anymore, but *freak* gets me every time. Before I came here, I would have blushed a hundred shades of crimson at all those naughty words, but not now. If anything, they just float through my head, barely registering in my brain. *Freak* still registers, though, because that evil *f*-word implies that we’re bad because we don’t fit some ridiculous societal standard of normal. I see goodness in most of the students here.

They call Saint, Gabriel, and Killian psychopaths incapable of redemption, but I know that’s not true. They care about each other, and they care about their friends. Maybe not in the way that the world says they should, but Saint would

flatten the earth to keep Willow safe. Gabriel would scorch the earth to protect Avery, and Killian would stand in front of God himself to keep me from harm.

Not that these guards want to hear that. I swallow my retort at the name-calling. It's the least of my concerns as the elevator slowly climbs. Calling me names is going to be nothing compared to what their boss, the Butcher, will do to me.

As if the elevator reads my thoughts, we arrive at the floor that houses the Academy's solitary confinement units. The elevator comes to a slow, grinding stop before the doors open with a loud buzz that sounds through the tiled hallway.

Well, I think this is the correct floor, at least. The student manual doesn't exactly provide detailed instructions on how to get here.

One of the guards shoves me out of the elevator a moment later, and my feet aren't fast enough to keep up with the hit. I tumble forward, and the shackles around my wrists and the metal bar between my ankles prevent me from catching myself. I hit the ground like a rock.

My nose takes the brunt of the impact with a *crack* and a sharp, shooting pain that nearly makes me cry.

Oooooooooooooooooooooo!

It hurts as the guards jerk me up by my elbows to stand. I blink away my impending tears and see that I've bled from my nose all over the tile. I guess I should be grateful I didn't at least knock a front tooth out or bite my tongue off.

"Ugh, nasty!" one of the guards says before he shoves my shoulder. "Get walking!"

The other stares at the red puddle on the floor and presses the button on the walkie-talkie strapped across the shoulder of his uniform.

"I need a hazmat cleanup outside isolation," he says when the line establishes. "Mintz fell and bled all over the floor."

I don't know why he bothers asking for a hazmat kit. They could leave my blood on the floor, and it wouldn't make much of a difference from where I'm standing. This place looks like a scene out of a horror movie.

Everything is dirty, old, and decrepit, and my heart batters my ribs at the thought that this is the Butcher's home.

I see where they painted the walls of this floor a stark white at some point a long time ago, but the paint is tarnished, chipped, peeled, and stained. It cracks across the walls, splitting the gray rocks into smaller pieces, and hides behind scuff marks and dirt. The doors on this floor don't look any better from what I see around me. To my left and right are huge metal doors with shatter-resistant glass windows and little slots at the bottom to slide trays of food in, I suppose. Maybe they were clean once, but they're all dented and dirty now.

I follow the guards down the hallway, my feet shuffling as I try to avoid a repeat experience. I'm breathing through my mouth, and I can feel the blood pouring like an open faucet from my nose, down across my mouth, and over my chin. I try to tilt my head back, but nearly walk into the back of a guard in the process and give up.

We come to a stop in front of a nurse's station set alongside a gate of corrugated, webbed metal that stretches from one side of the hallway to the other.

"Name," the nurse mutters, chewing on her bubble gum and playing Solitaire on one of those cheap handheld games where you have to beat the computer.

"Mintz," one of the guards answers.

"Reason?" she asks, raising a thin eyebrow but still staring down at her stupid game.

"She started a scene downstairs," he tells her. "Accused her daddy of molesting her in front of everyone. The doc's expecting her."

The nurse nods, but she doesn't appear to be listening. If anything, most of her attention and all of her brainpower seem to be currently devoted to the game of Solitaire she's playing. Without looking up from it, she hits a button beneath her desk, and the heavy metal door in front of us unlocks with a loud click and swings open a fraction of an inch.

A guard grabs the metal handle, pulling the door open wide, and we walk inside.

I didn't think it was possible, but it's even more grimy behind the gate than in front of it. It's like no matter how hard they clean; they can't ever scrape off the proof of how poorly they treat the students housed here.

We walk down the hallway about ten feet, and my heart is pounding so fast now, my mind whirling with possibility. Is he going to waterboard again today, his version of what did he call it? Oh yeah, hydrotherapy. Is he going to do even worse? I have a feeling I haven't seen the worst of the butchering doctor.

We walk farther down the hall, passing more closed doors on either side of us, when someone hits the inside of one of them, rattling the door on its hinges, and screams from the inside. I nearly yelp, but I'm still breathing through my nose as we turn to the right at an intersecting hallway and I'm deposited in the first room on the left.

Dr. Boucher's head glints beneath the overhead light as I enter the room, and he turns to look at me, his astute gaze catching on the blood clogging my nostrils.

"What happened to her?" he barks at the guards.

"Tripped and fell," one of them answers.

It's good enough for him as he steps closer to me and pulls something out of his pocket. My gaze drops to a very long, very thick needle. He pulls the cap off with his teeth and spits it onto the floor beside him. I try to start away from him, but I knock into the metal gurney behind me by accident. I push it into the wall and nearly tip backward over the metal slab.

The old doctor steps forward, a smile creeping over his leathery features like vines stretching in the summer sun. His white lab coat is faded from time, and the stench of mothballs hits me so strongly that I can taste them on my tongue.

I hyperventilate through my mouth as he claims the distance between us, jerks my head to the left, and shoves the needle into my neck.

“I’ve heard you’ve been a bad girl, Millicent,” he tells me, his breath hot and sticky against my clammy skin as he depresses the syringe, and I feel the cold liquid travel down my neck. “My staff promised your father that we’ll rid you of your compulsion to lie. We will do whatever it takes, Millicent. Do you understand?”

“I’m not a liar,” I manage, but just barely because the words are heavy and slow to leave my mouth now. Whatever he’s given me must’ve already started to work. I lean back against the gurney, trying to stay upright.

“There,” the doctor says, “that should keep you on your best behavior for a little while at least.”

He smiles down at me, his teeth too long and thin for his narrow face, but his smile melts from his features when an alarm sounds above and he turns abruptly to the guards and barks, “Whose body did they find?”

As I lean back against the gurney, trying to steady my sea legs, a singular thought rolls into shore.

I hope it's Daddy, and I hope Killian killed him for what he did to me.

KILLIAN



I feel dirty and utterly alone, even though I'm locked up with Saint at the moment. I have been locked up with him for over two godforsaken weeks.

In that time, I've taken sixty-seven showers.

And changed my clothes sixteen times before the guards finally refused to bring me any other clean ones, claiming that there was no way I could be dirty when we were on lockdown and not even allowed to leave our rooms.

I don't know how many times I've scrubbed my skin raw and then kept on scrubbing, trying to get the poison Millicent's father spewed onto my hands and clothes out of me.

Saint took all the washcloths away three days ago because he was concerned about the amount of blood he kept seeing in the shower basin.

It would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic.

I scrubbed so much that I bled and the prince of darkness was fucking worried about me.

I can't explain the pain to him, though I've tried.

I'm unclean, and the invisible bugs still crawl across my skin. I think they've finally defeated me though, and my

shadow too by the looks of it. He never leaves my side anymore, not even after I've taken the meds delivered to our rooms each morning. My shadow simply lays on the floor between my bed and Saint's curled into a ball like a cold dog and sobs.

I understand his pain. I *am* his pain.

Last I heard through a game of telephone and rumors that spread both dormitories before it got back to me, Millicent's father is in intensive care, presumed brain dead from the lack of oxygen. I'm ambivalent as to whether he wakes up.

Part of me hopes she will never have to see the bastard again, but another part thinks it might be good for her to see just how far he's fallen.

I defiled myself to be able to punish him for what he did, but I'll never be cleansed of it now. It's part of me. I feel it every second of every day, weighing me down and turning me into something more animal than human.

Is this how my father felt before he finally lost it and slashed my mother to bits?

Did he think he was diseased too?

Did he kill her in some failed attempt to rid himself of the plague?

If he did, maybe I'd understand. I wouldn't accept it, but I'd understand.

I stopped pacing the floor of the dorm room I share with Saint nine days ago.

I stopped with my push-ups three days after that.

Now if I'm not in the shower, letting the water pelt my flesh until Saint drags me out, then I'm in my bed, trying to sleep through the pain. It wakes me up, or maybe it's my screaming that does, I'm not sure.

I fucking hate lockdowns, and I knew one would come when they found the body, but I didn't expect it to last this

long, Two fucking weeks! For fourteen days, we've been confined to our rooms, not let out for meals or class or exercise. Everything is delivered to us by the staff, and on top of everything, they've instituted hourly roll calls too. Thus, we're awoken day and night, just so they can make sure no one's lost their minds yet and tried to strangle themselves with a bed sheet in the bathroom.

Even if I could figure out a way into solitary, there's not enough time for me to even try to go see Millicent between the roll calls.

Hell, Gabe doesn't even climb through his window and visit, and his room is right next door because staff members are constantly coming and going. It's more than just the roll call. It's the food deliveries, the school assignments they bring to each room, the medications the guards watch you take, the delivery of toilet paper and personal hygiene supplies, and the pick-up and return of laundry.

The cycle never fucking ends.

I pick at a loose thread on the wool blanket beside me, and when I look at my fingers, I see something new, something I haven't noticed before. Black shadowy tendrils wrap around my hands now, running up my fingers and over my wrists and forearms.

When did that happen?

And why can't I be bothered to truly care?

Maybe Butcher got the last laugh after all. He imprisoned us in our rooms, and I can't cleanse the filth blood off of me, so I guess the shadows are going to take control instead.

I've never felt pain like this before.

My bones ache.

My head pounds.

And my skin feels like it's going to slough off of me at any moment and crumble like a plastic bag discarded on the floor.

Even more than my own misery, though, I worry about her. Millicent's been with the Butcher for two weeks now, which is practically an unheard-of time period for any student in this school other than Saint, Gabriel, or me.

But she's not sick like the rest of us or mentally disturbed. The bastard has to know that by now. He can also be certain there's no way she attacked her father when she was already in restraints and on the way to solitary confinement when he was stabbed. Yet, I know secondhand from what Avery texts Gabe and what Gabe texts me, that Millie's not back in her dorm room yet.

She's not built for the things he's doing to her. He's corrupting her beautiful, perfect flesh, and fuck, if that thought doesn't send the inky tendrils slithering up to my elbows.

I feel even dirtier than before, like it's my fault Millie is still locked up in isolation like a damn animal. Maybe it is. I did kill her father after all and start this whole mess.

I lay there in bed, picking at that same loose thread on the comforter and letting the shadows crawl up my arms. I don't know what time it is when an announcement comes through the Asylum's campus speaker.

"Attention, students," a voice says through the pops and crackles. "Lockdown has now ended. Please resume your normal schedules immediately."

"Thank fuck," Saint says, abruptly standing and opening the door to our room. He breathes in the stale air of the hallway like it's better than in here, but it's not. It all smells like gym clothes and sweaty feet.

"Get up," he tells me, looking at my pathetic ass still lying in bed. "We have class."

Class?

What the fuck is he talking about?

Is it morning now?

I can't remember.

He barks out orders, and I follow him through the motions. I brush my teeth, take a piss, and get dressed, in that order. Then I follow him to the cafeteria where I shove cereal into my mouth before we head to class. All the while, I'm wondering what the fuck I'm going to do to get Millicent out of the hole.

Think, Killian! Fucking think!

As I settle at the back of the room for my math class, Saint drops into the seat at the desk opposite me, and then Gabriel slides into the one on the other side a second later.

What the fuck?

They aren't even in this class.

I flex my fingers and watch as the inky tendrils climb up my forearms and across my elbows. Maybe it never was roaches, I think. Maybe it was this shadowy parasite eating me instead.

We sit at the back of the class, and the teacher begins to drone on, but I'm not paying attention. I'm trying to figure out what I need to do to help the girl I care about.

My mind isn't clear though. The days have been hard and the nights even harder. There was no warning before we were escorted into our rooms, and as Saint as I sat on our beds, red-and-blue lights reflected off the windowpane and sent starbursts shining into the room.

Maybe the cops took fingerprints.

Maybe they'll fingerprint all of us soon enough, though I doubt it.

Boucher will never allow it. Right now, a student hurting a family member is a *maybe*, but if he fingerprints us and finds one of us guilty, he's going to have an entire truckload of bad press to deal with. And he wouldn't want that.

Plus, everyone who comes onto this campus signs waivers before they step foot here. The students are Butcher's wards,

not their parents, regardless of the terms *significant brain damage* and *medically induced coma* being bounced around.

“Bro,” Gabe repeats. “I said we’re worried about you.”

What?

I’ve been too busy staring at the inky tendrils climbing up my forearms to notice.

“I need her out,” I tell him in response.

Neither one of my brothers has asked me to confirm what I did. They don’t need to. They know, just like I do how Saint ended the handsy doctor last year and Gabe got rid of the prior Headmistress a couple of months ago.

Saint frowns at me. “The thought has crossed my mind that Butcher might keep her until graduation.”

It feels like his words cut me in two. I can’t imagine it. Graduation is in another *eight* weeks! I’ll be swallowed up by the darkness by the time that happens, and she’ll be fucking dead.

Gabe frowns, looks at me, and says, “Unfortunately, I think he’s right. It’s possible.”

“Tell us how we can help,” Saint says.

“Blood?” Gabe offers, and I appreciate the effort, but they don’t get it.

It’s not about virgin blood anymore.

It’s about her. I need her. I need my angel.

My shadow whimpers in pain, and it’s too much. My nails rake across my desk. I grimace, and when I look up, Willow and Avery have entered the empty room.

When did class let out?

Goddammit, did I disassociate?!

“What are you doing here?” I ask Willow and Avery.

Avery looks at me. “Millie’s my roommate and my friend, and I want to help.”

“And Millie’s my friend too,” Willow offers. “I want to do whatever I can to get her out of there.”

Everything looks so grim right now, and I can’t think straight, not with the fucking shadows clawing at me.

“I can’t think,” I tell them honestly, my eyes squeezing shut on the last word. “I have to get her out, and I have no clue how to do it that doesn’t end up with me getting caught before I even make it into the isolation unit.”

I’ve considered everything.

Or at least I think I have.

The exterior windows in solitary are much too small to climb through.

The only door that opens to the unit is guarded day and night.

Even if a wayward student made it to the floor, they would not make it to the unit itself.

Saint glances over at me. “I think I can get us in,” he says, “but we’ll end up expelled or worse if we get caught.”

No one gets expelled from this place, and they all know that’s not happening. He means Butcher will do what he does best and chop us up into little bits if he catches us.

I look at him. “Whatever it is. I’m in.”

“There’s a tunnel,” he explains, “from the old Typhus hospital days that goes up to the unit. I found it a while ago. It dumps you in the back of a supply closet. The problem is that you’re caught as soon as one of the guards up there sees you.”

“You need a distraction.” Gabriel nods like he already figured it all out. “How big do you want the explosion?”

“Big enough that all the guards will run out of the unit to look,” Saint says. “Then we grab Kill’s girl, and we’re out.”

He says it like it'll be easy, but nothing in my life has ever been easy, and I can't believe it's going to calm down anytime soon.

"Give me thirty minutes," Gabe says, "and I'll be ready." He looks at Avery. "I'll need your help carrying everything."

She nods. "Okay."

"Meet at the old tunnels in room 308 when you're ready," Saint says. "I'll grab flashlights."

Half an hour later, we follow Saint in a single-file line into the tunnels. It smells of stale water as we start up the stairs, and the climb is confusing and long. It's not a straight shot by any means, but eight minutes later, we break apart. Gabe and Avery go to the left. I stay with Willow and Saint, and we go to the right.

"Wait for my signal," Gabe says as they start away, their flashlight shining in front of them.

"What's the signal?" I ask.

He smirks, the light of the flashlight playing against his teeth. "It'll be when you hear the big boom."

Saint, Willow, and I keep walking until I can't hear the chatter of students at all anymore but can still hear the occasional guard yelling at someone as we wait behind the door that leads into the supply closet. Saint checks the time on his phone.

"Any minute now," he says before there's a big boom, like a crack-the-walls, and I hope Gabe didn't just accidentally kill himself or his girlfriend sort of boom.

The campus alarm immediately starts blaring, and we listen as guards rush down the hall toward the source of the explosion. I count in my head.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

It's excruciatingly slow before I reach ten, and then Saint pushes open the tunnel door, sending a pile of brooms behind it clattering to the floor,

"Go get your girl," he says to me, and I don't hesitate.

I rush out of the supply closet and run out into thick white smoke billowing down the hallway and the sound of guards shouting for backup.

I resist the urge to shout for Millie. I know she's not going to hear me over the blaring sirens anyway as I start to jog down the hall, peeking through the glass windows of the doors and finding most of the beds empty. Of the ones that are occupied, none hold Millie. That is until I arrive at my least favorite room of all, the electroconvulsive therapy room. I come to a stop in front of the door and stop walking at what I see through the window. The sight rips the breath from my lungs and makes my shadow scream.

It's just her and the doctor inside the room, and my angel's strapped to the goddamned gurney. I don't move, captive to my horror as Butcher raises a pair of defibrillator paddles and brings them down onto her chest. She convulses on the table, nearly breaking her back as she bends toward the ceiling. In all my years and all my rants against God, I have never felt such rage.

I throw the door open as he keeps the paddles pressed against her. I bolt inside and snatch them from him. A fraction of a second later, I flip them around and flatten them to his chest, sending the volts directly into him. I back him into a wall and hold him there as he convulses and the stench of burned meat fills the room.

MILLIE



What time is it?
What *day* is it?

Everything burns beneath a fiery pain.

I blink up at the ceiling above me, trying to remember how I got here and how long I've been in solitary confinement. It comes to me in pieces.

There was visitation day, and my father sitting at the table in his freshly ironed polo shirt.

Then there I was, calling him out for everything he had done and condemning him in front of everyone.

And ... the Butcher telling me someone tried to kill him.

I wiggle on the table as the old doctor walks over to the defibrillator again.

What is this? The tenth time? The twelfth? How many times have we been in this very room?

More than that, I think.

The butchering doctor has fried the connections in my brain, though. Everything's charred too long, making my thoughts tough and thick.

My skin is burned in spots, reddish marks dotting my flesh and fading from open sores to pink scars. The doctor calls me a liar, but I'm not one. I know it's not about my father anymore or the so-called lies that originally brought me here.

This torture, though, is to punish me. I grit my teeth as Dr. Boucher turns the dial on the machine and flattens the paddles to my chest. The volts hit my sternum this time and send shockwaves drilling through me, down into my fingers and my toes.

My back arches so high, it feels like it's going to break before the restraints at my wrists and ankles give an inch.

I don't care what he demands of me.

I will not lie.

I won't tell him I tried to kill my father, though I think that's what he wants to hear. It's easier that way, I guess. I'm the easy mark.

I don't know how you did it, he had sneered at me. But I'll find out soon enough.

I guess he thinks if he says it enough, he'll believe his own words. That'll make one of us.

"Tell the truth!" he roars as he removes the paddles, and my body falls like a dead weight to the table.

A boom thunders through the building, shaking the walls, and the alarm begins to blare as the power turns off before the generators kick on, and the lights turn on again. There's shouting in the hall and the heavy thuds of people running past the room, but the doctor doesn't even seem to notice. He's too preoccupied with glaring at me.

He wants me to say that I punished my father.

He wants me to admit something I never did.

But I'm not a liar, and I won't be made into one again.

In and out, I blink out of existence. I'll bite off my own tongue before I tell him I had any part in my father's comeuppance.

He says I have an accomplice. Yesterday—or was it the day before—he even asked if it was Killian or Avery.

I don't care how many questions he demands of me. I keep my mouth shut.

"Tell me!" he snarls as his hand flies to the metal table, rattling it beneath me.

Or did this already happen? I don't know anymore. Time is not linear. It's crunchy and burnt, just like me.

The doctor grabs the electroshock paddles again and turns around to press the buttons on the machine. I don't give him the satisfaction of struggling against the table. I know the restraints are tight, the leather leaving bruises at my wrists and ankles.

"Tell me who helped you!" he snarls, spittle flying across my face with his command. The air smells of something burning and the bitterness of stale coffee on his breath.

"I'll never tell you anything!" I hiss back at him, and he raises the paddles again, rubbing them together before they land on my chest.

I feel the moment my heart stops, the current shooting through me.

Then I feel when it restarts, flopping like a fish in my chest.

I'm there for a second and then gone the next, and when I come back down and my back lands on cold, hard metal, I think I see someone with dirty blond hair who shouldn't be here.

He has the doctor up against the wall with the paddles on top of the old man now. His teeth are bared, fury carved into the hard features of his face. I suck in a strangled breath as the smoke turns black in the halls. There's more yelling outside the room as he continues to pin the doctor to the wall beneath the defibrillator paddles. He traps the doctor there for a minute at least until he looks back at me, and I watch as something shifts behind his eyes.

He drops the butchering doctor and the paddles to the floor a second later and rushes over to me.

“Millie,” he says then undoes the restraints as quickly as he can, pulling the leather through the loops. When I’m free, his arms come around me, and he helps me stand.

“I’m getting you out of here,” he says, and I’m grateful for him.

My fingers hold onto him as I fight the urge to break down and sob. I can cry later when I’m safe in his arms and away from the doctor’s body still twitching on the floor.

We’re still in the hole, and the air is hazy with smoke, though I don’t see any flames. I can hear students yelling behind the locked doors up and down the hallway, and I turn out of Killian’s grasp and rush back to the twitching doctor. I kick the key card out of his pocket and across the floor to Killian. He picks it up in an instant and begins to unlock the doors.

One after another, he frees the remaining students, not checking if the rooms are empty or full. Students stagger out of the padded cells as Killian races down the hall, his hands pumping at his sides. He unlocks every door, coughing on the smoke that’s clogging this space, and grabs my hand, pulling me back down the hall and to an open supply closet sparsely filled with brooms, a mop, and a bucket.

I look up, and I think I must be dreaming when I spot Saint and Willow in front of me, standing in one of the tunnels I’ve only heard about.

“Let’s go,” Saint says, scrunching his nose at the stench of smoke. Willow tends to me, looking me over, and grabbing my free hand.

He shouts for the other students to follow, and they do, each grabbing onto the other as we walk into the darkness, Saint and his flashlight leading the way. I trip on a step in the tunnel, and Killian hoists me into his arms. The place smells like mildew, sweat, and smoke, and we come out in front of

the library, the alarm still blaring overhead and the emergency lighting flashing above us.

Finally, the sprinkler system comes on, and I don't know when Gabe and Avery joined us, but we're running again, the students who also escaped the hole following us. Dirty water from the sprinklers hits our faces and soaks our clothes, and then we're outside, and I can finally breathe. I look up and spot a huge fire engulfing where the solitary confinement ward used to be, its heat baking down on us.

It's utter chaos as students and staff rush everywhere, and within an hour, firefighters begin to arrive, along with ambulances and police officers. Killian takes me away from it all, though, tucking me in his arms and carrying me through the cemetery until he deposits me in a cold marble building.

I hold onto him, listening to the sound of his heart, as Willow and Saint arrive with water and towels. Then Avery and Gabriel bring food and bandages next.

Killian feeds me and makes me drink.

He cleans the wounds left on me by the Butcher and bandages them gently.

He makes me feel like I'm the most important thing in the world to him. As the others leave back for the main campus, I sit in my savior's lap.

"Thank you," I tell him, raising my hand to the stubble darkening his jaw.

"I couldn't have done it without help," he tells me. "Saint, Gabe, Avery, Willow, they all got you out of there, angel."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "Thank you for coming for me too, but I mean thank you for what you did to my father."

Killian winces as though he's in pain, and I raise an arm to him, offering my palm.

"Do you need it?" I ask. I don't truly understand, but I know my blood calls to him.

He blinks down at my offered hand for a moment before he shakes his head.

“I’m okay,” he tells me. “I’m okay just having you here. You need to rest, Millie.”

“I don’t want to rest,” I tell him, adjusting in his lap. “I want you. I want to be with you.”

I look around the room. “Where are we anyway?”

“The mausoleum,” he says.

I cough on the word. “Why?”

He smirks, mischief dancing in his gaze.

“I thought I might fuck you here,” he says to me, and I can’t tell if he’s kidding or not.

“Why here?” I ask.

“Because,” he tips his chin at me and lets the words fall across my flesh, “when I do, I want the dead to hear you scream.”

He might as well have sucked the air straight out of me.

“Was that a joke?” I laugh a little. “Did the big bad Killian James Wilsdorf just tell a joke?”

He laughs and kisses the crown of my head. “You’re rubbing off on me, angel.”

His gaze dips to my lips. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I tell him. It’s the truth too. I always feel better when I’m near him.

“Killian?” I add a moment later.

“Yes, angel?”

“Did you mean what you said?” I zero in on the fabric of his dress shirt and the threads stitching it together. “Did you mean what you said about wanting the dead to hear me scream?”

“One day,” he murmurs down to my hair, “when you’re feeling up it, I’ll make you mine between these walls.”

But doesn’t he understand? I already am his, and I need him now. Slowly, I extricate myself from his arms and stand in front of him, leaning forward to undo his belt and the button of his pants.

“What are you doing?” he asks, going still. “I can wait. You need to rest.”

“What about what I need?” I retort, tugging down his zipper and pushing down his boxers to free his hard length. It’s bigger than I remember, and it hits his abdomen with a dull thud.

I bite my lip as I sit on top of him, my knees hitting the top of the concrete bench as my legs settle on either side of his. I push the thin hospital gown I’m wearing off my shoulders and let it fall to the dirty floor.

“Millicent,” he groans as my wetness slicks the head of his cock.

“Killian,” I breathe as I settle on top of him, wincing as I slide down him, inch by excruciating inch. His hands come around to my bottom, kneading my flesh before he bottoms out inside of me with a quick, brutal thrust.

“Fuck,” he growls into my ear, and I relish the way his chest vibrates with the word, as though all of him is on the verge of exploding.

A blink later, he flips us, carefully dropping me to the floor of the mausoleum, the tombs of the dead surrounding us. Dead leaves crunch beneath me, itching my exposed skin, but I don’t care. I bring my arms around his neck and kiss him slowly, relishing the taste of salt and cinnamon on his breath. He moves over me slowly, reverently, and this time is so unlike the ones that came before. We don’t fervently come together in a sweaty tangle of limbs.

I’m not being desecrated by him.

If anything, my body is a temple, and I am being revered.

I cross my ankles around his back, letting the heels of my feet push him on, and slowly, he owns me. He glides in and slides out, each thrust slower than the next until we are one moving thing, our pants and moans filling the chamber and falling from the marble ceiling to echo back to us.

His chest presses hard against my breasts, and the prickly hair on his thighs tickles my bare legs. Strands of his hair fall against my face as we breathe and move as one.

He kisses me sweetly before he moves his mouth to the side of my neck and then my jawline, my cheeks and then my forehead, owning each and every part of me. He treats me like I'm an angel, and as I shatter to pieces beneath him and he thrusts home once more, my name falling from his lips on a growl that roars in the tomb, I know he is mine.

EPILOGUE — 8 WEEKS LATER

KILLIAN



We sit on top of the roof of Chryseum Reformatory Academy, my brothers and my friends in a messy circle atop the slate tiles. Dawn rises in the east, its golden rays cutting through the mist that clings to the mountaintop and bringing light to the dark thicket of trees that surround this unholy land. The cemetery sits vacant off to my left, and the overgrown forest to my right. At my back stands the heavy wrought iron gates and the winding road that leads to the Academy's doorstep. Tomorrow we'll leave this place as free men and women, but for today, we remain.

Millie sits cross-legged between my spread thighs, leaning back against me and resting her head into the crook of my neck. She smells like strawberry ice cream this morning from some body wash Avery let her have, and she plays with the buttons of my shirt. Her glittery purple nails finger one button before they drop to another and walk back up again like the Itsy-Bitsy spider crawling up my chest.

There will be no caps and gowns given out, not today and not tomorrow either. The whispers say we were lucky to be allowed to finish our final semester here after Boucher died in his *unfortunate accident* and nearly burned the school down before the sprinkler system finally kicked in and extinguished Gabe's brutal flames. Without anyone left to run the Academy, the state came in and took over our education. I think I learned more in the past two months than I learned in the past year of classes. Most of the old staff has been replaced, and those who

remained from the Academy's dark ages have miraculously cleaned up their act, probably under the threat of losing their teaching licenses or facing criminal prosecution for the acts they committed.

Falsified records.

Missing students.

The state's auditors have found more questions than answers, and there's enough to keep them busy for the next three or four decades, or at least that's what the student gossip queens have overheard.

The Academy has done a complete 180-degree turn.

The professors on campus take attendance now and actually show up to teach class. They try to teach us and treat us like humans, not cash cows. The guards mind their own business and intervene when someone is a threat to themselves or others. That part's actually been a pain in the ass, though, as it cuts down on my entertainment. The state brought in new doctors to fix us, ones with fancy medical degrees and lots of abbreviations behind their names. I'm not stupid. I don't confess my sins and try to get help, but I prefer the new ones. Their treatment options include cognitive behavioral therapy, meds, and talking our feelings out, which is an improvement from charred temples and meds that burn like liquid fire when they're injected into your carotid artery.

Butcher would roll over in his grave if he could see the Asylum now. That is if he had a grave, but after the fire, there hadn't been anything left of him to bury.

The seniors graduate tomorrow, but our family members won't be coming to celebrate. Some will come to campus to collect us, but that's it. From the hallway gossip, I understand New York has asked Prodigum University, founded at the same time and by the same pair of brothers as Chryseum, to come in and take over operations. I don't know if they've accepted, and I won't be here to see if they do.

I'm free. We all are. Well, almost at least.

My aunt and uncle won't be coming to collect me, not today and not tomorrow. My guardianship expired with the thin piece of paper on my bed back in my room. She can't make me stay here any longer, and right now, my future plans include taking the bus out of this hellhole tomorrow and never looking back.

"Where's everyone going?" Millie asks I play with her hair; the silky strands slipping like water through my fingers.

"My father's expecting me home," Willow says as Saint's index finger curls around the ring of the leather collar around her throat. She doesn't sound thrilled about the idea of going home. I guess if I were her, I wouldn't be either.

"We're going to Prodigum," Saint remarks, looking at his girlfriend as he says it as if the matter is decided, and I guess for him, it is. In no world is he going to let his pet go. Willow smiles at his words.

"I've got some cash saved," Gabe offers, fucking with the lighter in his hand. Avery looks at him from her spot at his side, and something I can't quite read passes between them.

"I'm with you," she tells him before she looks at my angel. "I'm not welcome home after my outburst last semester."

"I get that," I nod. "I'm excommunicated from the family after what I said to my aunt on family visitation day." I continue to play with Millie's hair. "We'll figure it out, angel."

"Why not just go with us?" Saint asks with a shrug.

I don't know if this is some codependency thing rearing its ugly head or what, but did Saint Laurier just ask Millicent and me to go on a damn road trip with him?

"I think you have to apply to be accepted into college," I answer with a chuckle.

Saint shakes his head at me.

"No, not Prodigum," he says. "My father keeps throwing it in my brother's face, too, pissing him off. My dad spent a shit

ton of money on expensive schools to get my brother into Stanford only for him to end up at the same place as me. Only I didn't even have to apply to get into college. Chryseum students are automatically accepted into Prodigum as long as they graduate from here. It's been that way since the founding of the schools."

"Holy shit," Gabe mutters, still playing with his lighter.

"My parents have a townhouse near the campus," Saint says. "You're all welcome to crash there while we figure shit out."

"Jesus, and I thought your pops was only an asshole to you," Gabe says with a snort, rolling the wheel and pressing the button on his Zippo again. He blinks at the orange flame in his hand. "He literally bought a fucking house to keep tabs on your brother."

Avery looks over at her boyfriend. "We can try it out," she tells him, looking so hopeful it's almost sad. "It sounds better than being homeless."

She steals a piece of gum from the front pocket of Gabe's dress shirt as he continues fingering his Zippo, creating the flame and extinguishing it in a fraction of a second.

"How are we going to pay for it?" Willow asks Saint, who shrugs.

"Threats of sullyng our surnames and student loans, I guess," he says a moment later.

Millie is quiet as I continue playing with her hair before she shifts to look over her shoulder at me.

"Is Prodigum as bad as they say it is?" she asks me.

Goddamn, I love it when she looks at me like that, completely trusting my judgment. I don't deserve that look, but fuck, if it doesn't want me to be a better man just to show her that I can be worthy of it.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly, "but I figure it can't be worse."

I look at Saint, trying to gauge what he's heard, but he and his brother are far from close.

"Same shit, different staff," he tells me with a shrug before he lights a cigarette, takes a drag, and blows the smoke over his shoulder and into the wind.

"How ominous," Avery remarks with a short laugh.

"It can't be worse than here," Willow says.

"At least we'll be together." Millie turns all the way around now, blinking at me, and God almighty, she's too pure for this world. That's okay, though. She'll live with me in mine instead.

I look at her, my gaze darting from her eyes to her lips and back up again.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

She nods without hesitation. "There's nothing for me back home."

She's talking about her father still stuck in his medically induced coma, right where he fucking deserves.

"Then fuck it," I tell her with a shrug before I look at Saint. "We're in."

He raises his cigarette in a toast.

"To college," he remarks.

"To transferring asylums," Gabe adds, lighting a cigarette himself.

I think for a minute, staring out as dawn spreads across the campus and scares the shadows away.

"To finally fucking living," I say.

Saint tugs his girlfriend to him by the collar around her throat and kisses her hard as Gabe takes a drag from his cigarette with one hand and squeezes Avery with his other.

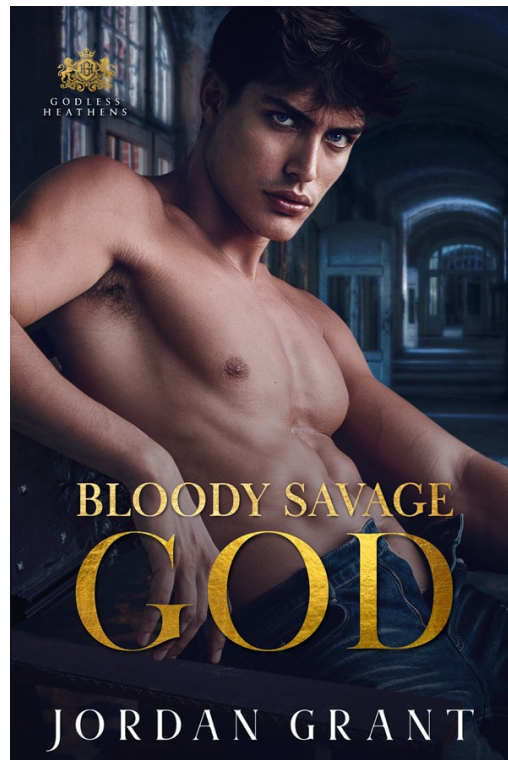
I look down to Millie in my lap. She looks up at me with those innocent blue eyes of hers as the clouds part above us.

Sunlight hits her hair and washes it white.

“To us,” I amend before I cup her cheek, pull her toward me, and swallow the sweetness of her innocence.

GODLESS HEATHENS

Need more godless heathens? Find Saint's book, [Bloody Savage God](#) (Godless Heathens Book 1), and Gabe's book, [Wicked Vile King](#) (Godless Heathens Book 2), at the links below.





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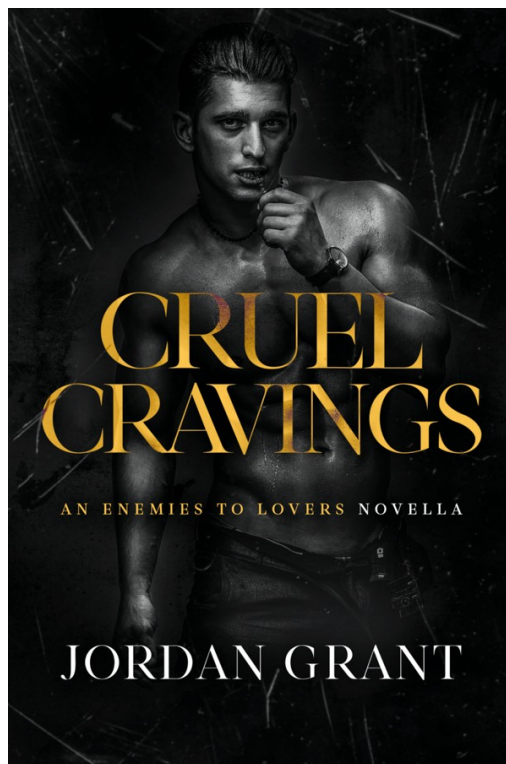
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FREE FROM JORDAN



Subscribe to my newsletter and receive a **free copy** of *Cruel Cravings*, an enemies-to-lovers novella by me. Readers may unsubscribe at any time.

Happy reading!

Blurb:

I met him on my first day at Livingston Prep. I thought he was my friend, but beauty is a cruel deceiver. He orchestrated the (second) worst moment of my life. He is my enemy. Yet his electric blue eyes and hair as black as night haunt my

dreams. His kisses, sinfully sweet, still poison my lips. I am twenty-one-year-old Cora Nambett.

Freshly churned ground covers my father.

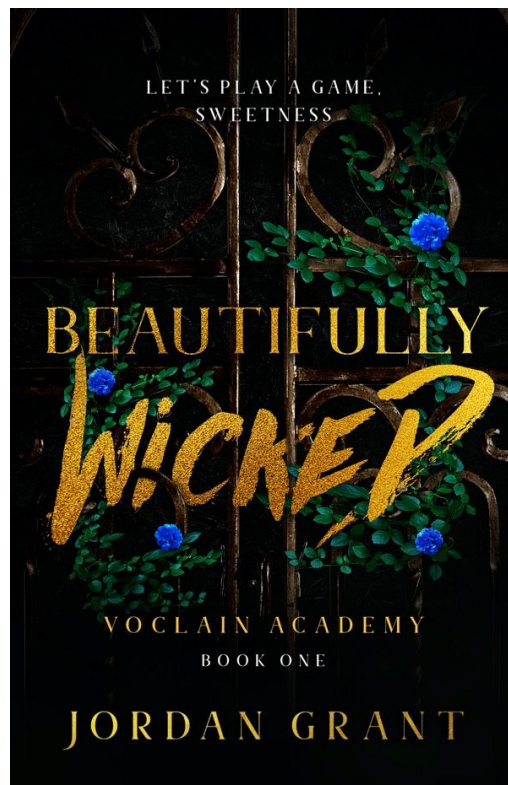
Multiple Sclerosis threatens to paralyze my mother. We are about to lose our home.

Desperation sends me to his door.

Blood will bind my promise to him.

Hate will help me survive.

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A tortured antihero bound to a brutal contract.

A broken heroine with a sharp tongue.

A relationship that could save them both if she'll allow it.

Ian Beckett, according to Harlow:

1. Voclain Academy's drop-dead gorgeous, all-star quarterback.

P.S. Dear Ian: See number one and take the drop-dead part *literally*.

2. Sole heir to a massive family fortune that dates back centuries.

3. Wicked bane of my freakin' existence with a PhD in dirty talk.

P.P.S. Dear Ian: Think of your mouth like a plane door. I'm gonna need you to keep it shut for the duration of our flight.

Harlow Weathersby, according to Ian:

1. Stunning creature with a smartass mouth I want to devour.

P.S. Harlow: Can we stop this already, sweetness? We both know you want me.

2. Blonde angel delivered from heaven straight into my lap.

3. Beautiful girl caught in a game she never wanted to be a part of and doesn't understand.

P.P.S. Harlow: Stick around. I'll teach you the rules, sweetness.

ABOUT JORDAN



Jordan Grant loves all things romance! She likes to write about edgy bad boys and romances that delve into the blur between love and hate. She is an avid fan of all things sweet including red wine and cupcakes (red velvet, please!).

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