

THE UNHOLY
TRINITY
BOOK THREE

FALLON

“THE MADMAN”

ADRIANA BRINNE

FALLON
"THE MADMAN"

FALLON
“THE MADMAN”

ADRIANA BRINNE

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Also by Adriana Brinne

Acknowledgments

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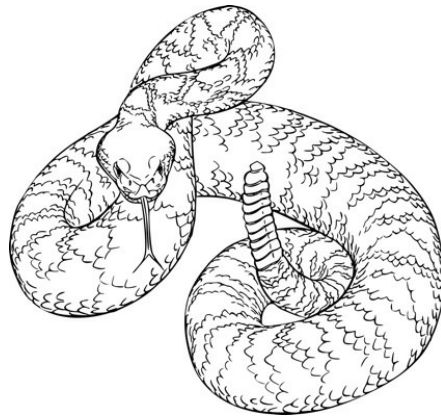
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FALLON “THE MADMAN” (UNHOLY TRINITY #3)
Cover Design by TRC Designs
Cover Model: Shutterstock
Formatting: Adriana Brinne
Editing: Elsa Gomes (bookishaurora)

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DEDICATION



To everyone that has gone to hell and back once or twice.

I see you.

You don't know how strong you are.

I hope Fallon and Valentino's journey inspires you.

It inspired me.

Oh, and to every jerk that made me feel unworthy, fuck you.

PLAYLIST

[Stream on Spotify](#)

- “The Last Time” (Taylor’s Version) — Taylor Swift
- “Half A Man” – Dean Lewis
- “All Too Well” (Sad Girl Autumn Version) — Taylor Swift
- “I’m Not Pretty (Remix)” – Jessie FT. Bebe Rexha
- “At My Worst” – Pink Sweat\$ FT. Kehlani
- “Minefields” – Faouzia
- “Ghost” – Zoe Wees
- “Ciao Adios” – Anne-Marie
- “I’m So Tired” – Lauv
- “Everytime I Cry” – Ava Max
- “You Right” – Doja Cat
- “Killer” (Remix) – Eminem
- “Good 4 U” – Olivia Rodrigo
- “Leave Before You Love Me” – Marshmello FT. The Jonas Brothers
- “Lost Cause” – Billie Eilish
- “Dancing With The Devil” – Demi Lovato
- “Say You Won’t Let Go” — Joshua David Evans FT. Madilyn Bailey
- “Good Without” — Mimi Webb
- “The Difference” — Data
- “Lose You To Love Me” — Selena Gomez
- “My Heart’s Grave” — Faouzia
- “Stay” Female Perspective — Bianca Ryan
- “From The Grave” — James Arthur
- “Keep Me Afraid” — Nessa Barrett

“Breakdown” - G-Eazy FT. Demi Lovato
“If The World Was Ending” — JP Saxe

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fallon “The Madman” (Unholy Trinity, #3) is the story of Fallon Alicia James and Valentino Alexander Nicolasi. It is told in the past, present, and future. It is a standalone within the series, and you don’t have to read the books prior to this one to understand it but it does give you all the details about both characters and some interactions. The book also contains the point of view of some of the other characters in the series.

The story contains sensitive topics that might be triggering for some. It deals with child abuse, mental health, death and substance abuse. **Please keep all of this in mind before starting the book.**

I hope you enjoy Fallon’s beautiful journey with her madman.

WHAT IS THE UNHOLY TRINITY?

The Unholy Trinity is the most notorious crime organization in the United States of America. It was once run by three crime families who joined forces after a war over Detroit City. They each rule over their own family but only one has full control of the entire organization. Currently, the organization is fair game since the Volpe family was extinguished and the Holy Trinity was taken over by the two remaining families and the Irish (O'Sullivan Family) Now, the Nicolasi and Parisi families hold a small percentage of the city while the other half is fair game to the Irish and Russians.

The Holy Trinity is not pure anymore.

It is Unholy.

The Unholy Trinity is composed of the Nicolasi, Parisi and from now on the O'Sullivan family. The Nicolasi family deals in the gun trade, the O'Sullivan family deals in the drug trade and the Parisi handles the more legitimate side of the organization, including the casinos and strip clubs.

For years, the three most ruthless crime families of Detroit City ruled in peace together. The Capo fell from grace and now the others lead by greed and sin.

WHO'S WHO IN THE UNHOLY TRINITY?

NICOLASI FAMILY

Cassius Nicolasi (Benedetto's son, father of Andrea and the twins)
Andrea Valentina Nicolasi
Lorenzo Antonnio Nicolasi (Boss)
Valentino Alexander Nicolasi

VOLPE FAMILY (No longer part of the Holy Trinity)

Lucan Tomas Volpe (Andrea's husband)
Giana Alexis Volpe
Cara Mia Volpe

PARISI FAMILY

Arianna Luna Parisi
Kadra Sofia Parisi (Boss)
Mila Areya Parisi

OUTSIDERS

Fallon Alicia James
Rian Madden
Vitali Solonik
Dion Arnault
Rose Amethyst Bailey
Dove Cecily Greco
Blythe Villin James

TRIGGER WARNING

Fallon “The Madman” deals with many sensitive topics such as child abuse, mental health, violence, death, substance abuse and various torture scenes. Please proceed with caution.

“I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.”

— EDGAR ALLAN POE

BLURB

How do you walk through life with half a heart?

With a bloody and busted organ that has been failing you from the start?

I knew heartbreak before love.

Immense sadness before joy.

Valentino Nicolasi helped me fly and soar above the clouds before ripping the wings off my back.

His love was a slithering and venomous snake that long ago took hold of my heart and soul, squeezing until there was nothing left but dust.

Our love is unconventional.

Toxic.

Venomous.

Tragic.

Us.

Our story started with an Edgar Allan Poe quote and the flash of a camera.

It ended with a lie.

The problem with toxic love?

It never dies.

It keeps spreading until it drives you mad.

He's a dead man.

A Madman.

And he wants me to bleed.

Bleed for my sins against him.

And he's coming for me.

NOTE

I took the liberty to change the timeline from Fallon's kidnapping for the story to progress in the winter time. Please keep that in mind while you read.

I hope you enjoy their journey from pain & loss to eternal love.

PART UNE
FORGOTTEN NYMPH

PART DUE
CRUEL REALM

PART TRE
GOD OF THE DEAD

PROLOGUE

FALLON

They told me they would come for me.
They said I wouldn't be able to escape them, not even in death.
I thought I was safe.

I will never be safe.

Not from them.

Not from him.

Not even from myself.

It's cold here. Quiet.

My head is pounding, my heart is racing abnormally fast, and I can barely keep my head up. I have no idea how I ended up here. All I remember was going into the airport's bathroom before I had to board the plane that would take me to *São Paulo*. One of Lucan's men was waiting outside the door for me, but that's all I remember.

Nothing else.

How I ended up here is a mystery to me.

Everything from that moment forward is a blur. Now, I'm in this cold and dirty warehouse that smells like death and misery and is most likely located in the middle of fucking nowhere. Away from society.

Away from help.

I haven't been able to get a look at the men that hold me hostage. They wear black gear and masks hiding their faces from view.

How do I always end up here?

Did I somehow piss anyone in my past life?

Was I such a horrible person that I deserve the worst this life has to give now?

Haven't I lost enough?

I thought I was finally on the other side and no more tragedy would touch me.

But no.

It's happening again.

As much as I try to avoid them, the nightmares attack me every time these bastards inject me with God knows what, which puts me right to sleep.

This just proves that I will never see happiness.

Happiness has always been fleeting.

At least for me.

It's not meant for women like me.

Freaks.

Different.

I have come face to face with both death and torture more than I care to remember all my life.

I wear my scars as battle wounds.

I wear them proudly as armor too.

Reminders of where I've been, what I've seen and what I've been through and endured.

I always knew this day would come.

Nothing they do can scare or hurt me more than what I've been through before.

My wrists and ankles are bound with tight ropes. My hands hurt and are constantly moving in a useless attempt to get free, but the movement only causes the tight ropes to burn my already broken skin.

Andrea must know that I'm missing by now, right? Lucan's man must have noticed and might be looking for me.

Maybe there's hope.

The door to the warehouse opens loudly, and a tall man enters, walking casually towards me like there's nothing wrong with this scene. Like there's nothing wrong with a woman bound and gagged to a chair, covered in bruises and blood. The stranger is covered in all black just like the others but what's strange is that he left the door open behind him.

The strange man walks towards me, slowly as if he's prolonging this torture.

He'll have to do better than a couple of blows to my face and ribs. That is child's play compared to the beating my heart, body, and soul have taken.

He reaches where I'm at and tilts his head to the left, studying me. All I can see are his taunting black eyes and his sick mocking smile. "Cheer up, sweetness, you have company," the twisted bastard forcefully grabs my chin and tilts my face until I'm looking at the open door.

His voice is familiar.

The Italian accent is hard to miss.

No fucking way.

Oh, shit, Andrea must be in danger as well. Shit, I have to find a way out of here.

My mouth is covered with a piece of cloth that smells like death. I have had to swallow the urge to vomit once or twice since I regained consciousness.

The asshole keeps my head firmly in place, not allowing me to move it freely. I do as he says because the last time, I fought one of them, I ended up with a busted lip and a broken finger.

"Let's begin, shall we?" The sick bastard laughs as if this is some fucked up game to him. I guess it is. "Oh, here is our guest of honor now." He smiles so evilly I only feel rage and the urge to skin him alive.

I pay him no mind and wait for the someone they brought with them to appear.

Oh...no.

No...no...no.

There, in the middle of this disgusting and cold warehouse stands Lucan's right-hand man with my precious boy.

My Romi

One of the assholes carries Roman as his dogs barks the place down. The small puppy is as cute as it is scary.

A-fuck-of-a-lot.

That's not the typical puppy a baby would choose to take home from the pound. The dog was a present from his uncle Lorenzo. Of course, the animal would be just as scary as the one who chose it.

I must do something.

Roman shouldn't be here.

I try with all my might to fight the restraints, but it is useless. There's no getting out of here without help and help is not coming anytime soon.

But the moment I see my fearless boy wake up and look around with fear in his eyes is when my heart breaks for the millionth time in this lifetime.

The remaining pieces of my heart become pulverized as I come to terms with the fact that the purest soul in this fucked-up world will be hurt and touched by this god-awful day.

Please God, you failed me more times than I can count. Please don't fail me now.

Let my sweet boy get out of this.

Take me instead.

A little more trauma won't make a difference to me.

Who am I kidding? What-the-fuck has God done for me before?

Nothing.

So, I leave the useless prayers to the naïve and do what I do best.

Survive.

My body is weak.

I have no control of it.

I try to stay awake and fight against the ropes burning my skin, but I can't help it. I go under and lose all consciousness.

I am disoriented when I wake up again, the moment I feel rough hands on my mouth. I can't see the person before me clearly. "Who are yo—" Their scent is familiar but before I can figure out who the stranger is, I feel a sharp pain on the right side of my head.

Everything turns black.

All I feel are strange hands carrying me out of that place.

Little did I know that I was escaping one hell for another.

The very worst.

One made for me.

PART ONE

FORGOTTEN NYMPH

Do you know how beautiful you are to me?
Your scars and even the blood on your hands.
Do you know that my day starts and ends with thoughts of you? Your voice
runs through every corner of my brain.
Do you know that life is not worth living if you're not here?
There's no point to it all.
Come back to me.
Come home.

FALLON

SAVE HAVEN

“I miss you every day.” – F
Then

“You’re such an ugly freak.” My tormentor pushes me down on the bed before climbing on top of me. He’s so much stronger than I am, and after the fifth time of this happening, I quickly realized I couldn’t escape him.

I am weak.

I don’t like this game.

He says it’s fun, but it never is.

It makes my heart hurt.

The first time I told on him, mommy said boys will be boys and to get over it. I wanted my new brother to like me, so I went along with his game. But his games became a little bit more twisted and cruel every time we played. It started with him pushing me and calling me names. Then it gradually became worse. He likes to smack me around and shove food down my throat now.

It makes me cry.

It hurts.

I’m always hurting since daddy left.

“You’re one of a kind, Fallon James. Don’t you fucking forget it.” Daddy always said that I was one of a kind, but lately, I don’t feel like that at all. I miss him. I wish he were here.

“Open up, freak!” I feel wet and sticky hands on my cheeks trying to pry my mouth open. The moment he succeeds, I have what I think is a loaf of bread with grape jam inside my mouth.

*He just laughs at my expense.
Laughs when I struggle.
Laughs when the tears fall, and I choke on them and the food.
I hate grape jelly.
I hate the color purple.
I hate his laugh.
I hate him.
Sometimes, I hate daddy too.
For leaving me with the monsters.
I don't react and just let Caleb spread the jelly covered bread on my face.
If I react, it'll be worse.*

It always is.

He uses different cruel tactics to make me fear him. I used to fight back until he began to up his game. Like now.

My body becomes paralyzed when I feel his right hand on my neck. Looking up, our stares collide, and a painful chill runs through me when I witness the evil in his eyes and the sick and cruel grin on his face.

I learned how vindictive he was when he first hurt me, but this side is new. This is the look of a person that feeds on others' misery and pain.

I try my best to snap out of it, but fear keeps me paralyzed, and I can't fight back. If he wanted to kill me in this moment, nothing would stop him.

A loud bang startles Caleb and makes him look up and puts a stop to the abuse, but he'll do it again. He won't stop. My stepbrother quickly pushes himself off me, leaves the bed, and hides his jelly covered hands behind his back. He always does that when we're no longer alone. Mom doesn't care, so why even bother to hide the evidence of his crimes against me?

The door to my room opens with a loud clang and there my mommy stands looking suspiciously at both of us. Then, the moment she sees Caleb's fake smile, a look of sick adoration crosses over her eyes. She enters the room and rubs my stepbrother's head lovingly before walking to me. I try cleaning the jelly off my face with the back of my hand before she reaches me.

It is futile.

She sees it and I know what's coming next.

Mommy stares at me with disgust and disapproval. "Seriously, Alicia. Can't you stop fucking eating? You're obese for a child." She spats angrily at me before grabbing me roughly by my arm and dragging me to the closet.

It terrified me before but not anymore.

It's quiet there.

No one hurts me.

She shoves me inside the tiny space, and I fall to my knees. In a second, I am surrounded by darkness. All I hear is Caleb's low giggles and the sound of my mom spewing more venom.

"You're one of a kind, Fallon James. Don't you fucking forget it." You lied, daddy. I blindly feel for my green blanket that makes me feel less alone in the dark. Daddy got it for me. If I concentrate hard enough, I can still smell him on it. It is green with small green aliens on it.

Maybe it's daddy's fault that I am so weird.

Maybe it is his fault that I ended—

A soft knock on my bedroom window brings me back to the present.

I hate the painful memories.

I hate that I was so weak back then.

You hate yourself.

The mocking voice in my head says before I tune it out.

Shit.

Don't go there, Fallon.

Not today.

I look at my reflection and tightly secure the pins on either side of my space buns so they will stay in place all day. It might be a childish style for some people, but I don't care. There's no way I'm looking like everyone else at that hellish place. I'm in the process of adding the last pin when I hear whistling from outside my window.

He's home.

I turn away from the mirror, walk to my window and smile.

The genuine smiles are reserved for him.

"Zig, you're finally back." I push the window open and find him staring right at me with the brightest and most genuine of smiles.

I missed him.

He's all I have.

Ziggy has been my safe place since I arrived in this city and moved to this shitty neighborhood. He's the only good thing about this side of town. There are gangs, criminals, and awful people like my stepfather and Caleb.

Ziggy is heaven sent.

I love him dearly.

“Rebel, did he touch you again?” A worried frown takes over his handsome face the moment his eyes train on the right side of my neck. *Shit, I forgot to cover the bruise.*

Ziggy is in his late seventies and the kindest man I know. The first time I met him, I was a sad and lonely child. The first day I moved to this house of horrors and experienced how cruel humans can be.

That’s why I don’t particularly like humanity and prefer my comics and romance heroes instead.

Superheroes are awesome.

Fantasy is always better than reality.

Anyways, back to Ziggy, I knew I could count on him when he dried my tears and gave me my first chocolate donut in years. My mother didn’t allow sweets before dad died, and it got worse after he was gone, and it was just us.

There was no one there to save me from her vile words and cruel actions.

That’s why I am thankful for Zigs.

He might not know the severity of my fucked-up problems, but at least he provides a haven for a little while. Nobody knows of our unusual friendship because I won’t risk this fucked-up family hurting him in any way to keep me in line or hurt me.

They can’t hurt you if you don’t have weaknesses. I remind myself.

“It’s nothing,” I shrug and wave his worry off. I can handle them. I’ve been doing it for years. I learned how to cope.

My vices help too.

“You’re sick.” The ugly voice whispers.

I am.

I am slowly killing myself, and I don’t even know how to stop. I’m too far gone.

Ziggy frowns, but before he has the chance to say anything else, I interrupt him. “Did you bring me something from your trip?” He always brings me a souvenir every time visits his daughter, Judy, and her children.

He never fails.

Sometimes it is a sugary treat and other times a vintage comic book. He gave me my first, and I’ve been hooked ever since.

“What have I told you about asking for things? It is not polite.” He smirks up at me, and I can’t help but smile. The best part of my morning is him.

“Come on, dude. We’re family.”

“That we are, Rebel. That we are.” Ziggy smiles and pulls out something

from behind his back. “Capture every beautiful moment, dear. Treasure it like I treasure you.”

Oh, wow.

It’s a vintage polaroid camera.

A vintage 70’s Polaroid Land Camera to be precise.

Not like those trendy ones that every influencer has. I don’t have social media, so I’m not really in touch with the trends, but sometimes, when I sit for hours in the library, I look up things on the internet just so I’m not that oblivious to what’s going on and what kids my age are into these days.

God, I don’t even have a phone.

I don’t have anyone to call so I guess it would be of no use to me.

All I need is my music and my books.

“Zig, this is too much.” I know he was desperately searching for it but couldn’t find it. I can’t take it from him.

“I got what I needed from it, darling.” He offers it to me. “It is time for that baby to see the world through different eyes.”

I know what he means.

He never lets me forget.

He wants more for me.

I want more for myself, but I don’t see a way out.

I have no one in my corner.

No one cares but him.

But Ziggy is older, and he will eventually leave me too. My heart aches every time my thoughts go there. Besides, he doesn’t have a chance against my demons. They will win eventually, and there will be nothing left of me once they do.

“Thank you, Zig.” I whisper back as I run my fingers all over the camera. It’s beautiful. “I’ll take good care of it. Promise.”

“I know you will, my girl.”

We smile at one another.

“Get in the car, Alicia. You’ll be late.” My mom’s obnoxious voice interrupts our moment.

“I have to go, Zigs.”

“You’re precious. Don’t you forget that and don’t let those spoiled shits tell you otherwise.” He playfully taps my nose before lifting himself on his tippy toes to kiss my forehead. “Don’t forget your medicine.” He whispers softly.

My heart melts.

In moments like this, I believe Dad sent him to me.

“Love you, dude.”

“Love you more than pecan pie, rebel.”

“Love you more than comic books.”

I blow Ziggy one last kiss before turning away from my window and picking up my old backpack from the bedroom floor. The thing has been with me since my first day of kindergarten, and there’s no chance in hell I’ll ever part ways with it.

Dad gifted it to me.

Mother honks three more times clearly exasperated with my tardiness.

Oh, well.

I walk to the shattered mirror hanging on the wall and make sure everything is in place. My hair is safely pinned into two space buns at the top of my head, and the Holy Trinity Academy uniform is clean, without a stain.

I am wearing all my Captain Marvel’s wristbands and my Slytherin socks.

What a hot mess.

That’s for sure what the rich and pretentious kids at that academy will think.

I take my glasses out of their case and put them on.

Now I’m ready.

Lets’ see what this day has in store for me.

I’ve become so good at hiding my pain and scars that sometimes I forget they’re there.

Sometimes, like today.

Let’s pretend we’re okay.

To get through this day.

To get through this life.

I got me.

I got Ziggs.

I will be okay.

FALLON

FALLEN

“Have you seen Batman in the same room as me? No? Then think about that.” – F

Then

Holy balls.

This place has got to be a joke.

Mother dropped me off a couple of minutes ago and hightailed out of here so fast. The tires screeched so loud that all the kids at the drop-off area took notice. Mother was probably too ashamed to be seen in a crappy, old race car that’s not to the standard of the elite that attend this school.

There’s no way my deadbeat stepfather and my druggie mother can afford the tuition here. Hell, they couldn’t even afford the uniform of the academy. There has to be more to it. They’re not that generous, and my mother would die first before doing something generous for me. She would do it for Caleb but never for her own daughter. After years in Belleview High, now she enrolls me here.

So, it begs the question, why now?

Why this place?

Holy Trinity Academy.

Where every kid is either the offspring of a politician, celebrity or just rich as hell. Everything I am not. The moment I step foot in this place, I feel all eyes on me.

Curiosity.

Judgment.

I’m not being paranoid. The judgment is evident in their rude stares and

snickering. I bet they're wondering who let the riffraff inside the expensive walls of their kingdom. I don't blame them. I don't come from old money. Just dirty money. We have shit to our name. Everything we had to our name died with dad, and mother had to spread her legs for cash once or twice. That's how she met my stepfather, and that's how my nightmare started. Mom was spiteful before. Always behind dad's back, but after she married Rufus, she got bolder. She was mean, but now she's always drugged out of her mind and cruel, so very cruel.

Crueler than before.

I'm lost in thought when I feel someone coming at me fast, but I'm too late to stop them. The person hits me on my right shoulder hard, making me stumble forward and miss a step. Thankfully, I'm able to find my balance before falling face flat on the concrete floor. I hear laughter all around me. I raise my head and come face to face with a group of girls and one guy. All of them with different facial expressions on their faces. From annoyed to amused. Three blonde girls that look almost the same and their sidekick boy toy.

Oh, great.

They reek of bitchiness and drama.

"Watch where you're going, weirdo!" One of them spits at me before turning to face her friends again. They all laugh at my expense, but it doesn't faze me. I've been to hell and back more than once and survived. Bruised and with pieces of my soul missing but I still didn't fall apart and even if I did, I won't ever let it show. These vultures feed on insecurities and fear, two things they won't get from me. Not some brainless wannabes with a superior complex. Yes, I am judging them right back.

I stand there in the middle of a laughing crowd, avoiding everyone's eyes as I grip the strap of my old book bag that hangs across my chest. "You got this," I tell myself. "You've survived worse things than the mistreatment of a bunch of entitled jerks and their judgment." I whisper to myself.

I take a step in the direction of the academy's main doors but a chill running down my spine halts my step and freezes me on the spot. The feeling is paralyzing and creeps in slowly. I've never felt this way before. I grip my book back tighter and turn to look over my shoulder. There's nothing unusual. Just kids walking in all directions, trying to go on about their day.

It's cold today. The sky is grey, and it feels like a storm is coming. I shake the feeling off and look straight ahead.

Weird.

I make my way inside the academy's walls and still feel that unnerving feeling in the pit of my stomach. *Keep your head down, Fallon. Keep to yourself and you might get out of this unscathed.*

Focus on the endgame.

Freedom.

Just keep swimming, Fall.

FALLON

BAD ONES

“I guess we weren’t meant to be.” – F

Then

The bell rings and I breathe easier knowing that I’m almost done with this day. Other than whispers behind my back and judgmental looks, nothing eventful has happened. Once you master the ability to blend in with the background, no one messes with you. These kids are like most entitled brats in this world. If they deem you unworthy or don’t see you as competition, then you’re good. They’ll leave you alone and that’s how I prefer it.

Alone.

You don’t get hurt.

No one comes close enough to hurt you.

I walk through the crowded hall and reach my locker, dialing in the combination. I drop the books I carried with me all morning inside and close it as quietly as I possibly can, to not draw attention to myself. On my way to my first class, I came across a huge library, and I just knew I found my place. The place I would go to hide away until it’s time to go back home because everything is better than home. Even a cold and lonely library.

I keep a tight hold on the strap of Zig’s camera. Well, my camera now. I still need to learn how this thing works. The digital ones are easier, but this one is ancient. I treasure it dearly, though. I haven’t taken one single photo with it because there’s nothing remotely interesting about this place. Sure, it’s extravagant and looks expensive, but it’s shallow. Just like the people inside. Boring, tedious, and ignorant. I am not judging solely on appearances, but I

do judge the things they say. They have no substance, and it's like everyone shares the same brain. No one dares to stand out.

I look around me, and for a split second, I wonder what it would feel like to be them? To be adored by everyone that meets you. To be asked out on dates and be kissed like you're their entire world? What would it feel like to be normal? To have no worries and explore life knowing that someone else has your back?

You weren't born to be like everyone else, Fallon. I sigh. Dad's voice never fails to remind me of this, but he's not here and he doesn't know how hard it is. How difficult it is for me to keep my head above water when the tide is slowly catching up to me.

Every day, I'm drowning in misery.

In loneliness.

I shake my head, willing those thoughts away, and put on my earbuds. Blocking out the noise all around me and the sweet melody of Mozart's takes over my senses. It always makes me feel like I'm floating on cloud nine, and I don't ever want to come back down.

I push the door of the library open and head inside. The cold air hits me first and I instantly feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise. The door slams shut behind me, making me jump in place. "Jesus," I whisper under my breath as I raise my head to look at everyone inside the library. There are round tables that are being occupied by a few students with their noses stuck inside a book. Well, some of them because others are hiding their phones under the table while they type away. Others whisper and stare as I pass them by and make my way to the halls where the books await.

I ignore everything around me and focus on the music and the steps ahead. The first hall has science and history books. Pass. I head to the next one, and with my right hand, I gently run my fingers through the rows of books, loving the feel of it. The smell of them too.

Feels like home.

Wherever the hell that is. I just know that books will be a part of my life forever. I feel it. My father used to read to me when I was younger and every time he read the magical words, I was transported to another world. The world that the author created for us is an escape even if it is only for a little while.

I guess that's why I love them even more so now.

They're an escape from my shitty reality.

Austen, Fitzgerald, Bronte, Tolstoy and all the greats. Maybe that's why I'm unusual, and I feel like I don't truly belong anywhere. I feel like I'm from another time, and now I'm stuck here, where no one is an old soul.

Only lost ones.

I make it all the way to the last hall in the library, hoping to find a quiet place to sit by myself with no distractions. When you've been trying to stay afloat almost your entire life, you don't really care to make long-lasting bonds. Not when I'll only drag them down with me.

It's not fair to others.

Not fair to me.

Leave before they leave you, Fallon.

They don't care.

They will hurt you.

They will leave the moment you drop your walls for them

Don't let them in, I'm your only friend.

Only I love you.

The voice that has been with me for so long now reminds me. I wish I could get rid of the dark thoughts, but lately dark thoughts are all I have. I'm used to them.

Suddenly, an unnerving chill runs all over my body as soon as I find myself walking through the last hall in the library. The sign reads traditional literature. Bingo.

I'm almost to the end when I'm startled by a shadowy figure sitting in the corner almost obscure to view. Black clothes only help the person blend in with the shadow and don't ask me why I do what I do next, but I walk towards him.

I know it is a him.

The figure is tall even when sitting down, and under the black hoodie, I can spot broad shoulders if I squint enough to see. Everything about him screams run and hide. A dark vibe surrounds him in the dark, and I can't imagine what it will be like to see him in the light.

Since I was a little girl, I have always felt attracted to odd and weird things. I asked my dad for a pet snake when I came home from school one day after I noticed almost every kid in my class took their pet dogs and cats to show and tell day. Don't get me wrong, I love my cat, Eyre—dearly but, I still wanted something different.

Dad never got the chance to get me a pet snake. When I feel myself start

to tear up, I will myself to stop and concentrate on the odd boy sitting quietly just mere steps away from where I'm standing. I don't know what drives me to do so, but I step forward in his direction. I walk closer until the shadows are gone, and all I see is him. I stop and stare, almost enthralled with the stranger. How could I not when I've never seen someone like him before? Beautiful is not enough of a word to describe the being before me. Regal and almost majestic, like a dark and cruel fae. I should turn away because everything about him screams dangerous, but my feet betray me, and I keep walking in his direction like I have no control of my body. It's like my soul recognizes his, and finally after all this time, they meet again.

Turn around, Fallon.

It's not a good idea.

It won't end well.

Nothing for you ever does.

Pale skin and even paler hair. I want to see his eyes, his face but his head is bent low while he reads a book. The strange feeling in my gut grows intensely, and I almost feel the need to reach out and touch him and see for myself that he is real. That I am not imagining him. Absently I bring my new vintage camera to my face and, before thinking things through, I press the button and snap a photo of the stranger. To my utter embarrassment the flash goes off and alerts him of my presence.

Oh, no.

He must think I'm a creeper.

Great, Fallon. Just great...what a great first impression.

I stand frozen as he stares at me with a bored expression on his devastatingly beautiful face, but the feeling is too intense. I'm the first one to break eye contact when the polaroid photo begins to eject from my camera. His eyes travel to the photo and before he gets any ideas to take it from me, I grab it and tuck it inside my uniform's blazer.

I gravitate towards the abnormal, sue me.

The stranger rewards me with a devious smirk.

My heart beats abnormally fast, and my palms begin to sweat. It always happens to me when I'm nervous or embarrassed, and what happened here embarrassed the hell out of me. Before I can make myself look even dumber, I turn to leave. There's no way a guy that looks like him would ever be interested in befriending someone like me.

Quiet.

Shy.

Weird.

Poor.

I shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but I'm pretty good at reading people, and this guy reeks of money. Now in the light, I can spot his Gucci sneakers, dark designer jeans and even the plain black hoodie doesn't seem like the ones I own.

This one comes from good money. I know it.

They don't mix with us mere mortals.

I need to leave and hope he forgets about me the moment I leave his presence. I do just that and give him my back. Maybe I can find another hidden corner where I can spend time, unnoticed and unbothered.

"Run along now, witch." A dark and low whisper. I stop dead, but I don't turn around. My breathing slows, and the nerves fade away just by the melodic sound of his voice. His voice is beautiful, just like the rest of him, and I have to fight the urge to close my eyes and just let the sweet sound filter through me. Just like my music. It calms and centers me. *Huh.*

I don't miss the challenge as well.

Run along now, witch.

His voice might be mocking but I can read between the lines. His words are almost sad.

A lost soul.

Like me.

I face him once again and stare directly at him. His face has no emotion on it, and he just sits there without blinking. It should worry me how this guy stirs so many emotions in me in just a matter of minutes, but somehow, I am not afraid. I should be, but I'm not.

"That isn't very nice." Those are the first words that leave my mouth. *Awesome.*

"I'm not nice." Again with the low and raspy voice. *Almost...sweet.*

"You should be. You never know what the other person might be going through."

"Huh."

"W-what?"

"You're one of those."

"What do you mean?"

"The type that wants to make the world a better place."

“It shouldn’t be this rotten.”

“It’s a cruel one, better get used to it.”

“Don’t I know it.” The words leave my mouth before I have a chance to think better of it. Nobody can know my weaknesses. They’ll eat me alive here. Don’t let the real you slip out because they’ll notice. He’ll notice, and he seems like the type that never misses anything.

So, I transform myself like I always do and always will... to survive.

I adapt.

I school my features and harden my voice.

No weakness.

The moody stranger is staring at me again with a bored look, but I can see through it. His gaze is intense, and it feels like he wants to cut me open and see what’s inside. To decipher the chaotic mess that I am. *You don’t want to do that, beautiful boy. You don’t want to get lost in the dark abyss that I am.*

“Uh, well,” I fidget with the camera trying to find something to help with the uncomfortable silence. “I guess I’ll leave you to your book. Nice choice, by the way. It’s rare to find a fan of Poe these days.” Still, he says nothing, and I take it as my cue to leave.

“I was never really insane except upon occasions when my heart was touched.”

He says quietly, as he keeps reading and ignoring my presence. He quoted Poe, and my heart skips a beat. Not because his words make me swoon but because of the meaning behind the quote. It is my favorite. The one that was tattooed on my father’s chest right next to the first letter of my name.

He says nothing else –so this time, I turn to leave for good, but he stops me again.

Run, Fallon.

“Stay,” he says, and I feel it right there.

Two souls intertwined.

Our worlds collided that day and nothing was ever the same.

He changed me.

He made me stronger yet weak for him at the same time.

I found my voice.

My home.

My heaven.

All in the beautiful lost boy with pale skin and dead eyes.

I should have known that it wouldn't last.
That he would rip my already broken heart and crush it in his cold hands.
Leaving me to bleed and die on his kingdom's floors.
Alone.
Always alone.

VALENTINO

AT MY WORST

**“I would have lay down
my life for you.” – Val**
Now

She’s here.

I feel and smell her.

Her scent is everywhere.

Her fear fuels me.

The smell of it was so very sweet. Alluring and intoxicating, even. Maybe only to a sick fuck like me.

Before, her fear did things to me. Made me sick to my stomach, but now? Now it makes me feel in control. It excites me to no end. The room is covered in darkness, the only light coming from the moon, visible through the main window where she is huddled in the corner. Shaking in fear or it might be from the cold.

I like this feeling.

Here, I don’t feel out of control.

Here she doesn’t have a hold over me.

Me in the dark and her afraid of what lurks behind it.

I step inside the cold room and pull the demon mask down to cover my face. The room is dark, and she won’t be able to see my face. I don’t want her to know the man behind the mask once I remove the blind from her eyes.

The weight of my boots makes the wooden floor creak. She whimpers, now noticing someone is in the room with her. The anticipation of what’s to come is like an adrenaline rush.

And her fear? My very own aphrodisiac.

I once loved her with every fucked-up part of me, but now? I only like to fuck with her. It makes me a sick fuck, I guess. Years of suffering the loss of a sweet dream hardened me. She ruined, me and now I'll pay the favor back.

I stare at her whimpering down on the cold floor.

She was brought here yesterday. Here to this remote cabin in the woods. A place I had built just for her. Here, no one will ever find her, and no one will hear her screams. Her screams of fear and pain are for my fucking ears. The room contains a full-size bed, a bedside table, and a chest. The fucked-up thing? It's an exact replica of her teenage room back in Detroit. She never had much before, only a bed too small for her and a few pieces of furniture.

A tiny tank for her snake and a small and old bed for her cat.

That's it.

That's all she had.

She was always strange like that. A minimalist compared to all the bitches I knew before her.

I removed the door from the bathroom before she arrived at the cabin. Fuck her privacy. I could've been fucking heartless and made her shit and pee all over herself like a wild animal. Like someone of her caliber deserves. Instead, the bathroom has all the essentials she needs. A toilet, sink, and a shower.

The entire room has built-in black curtains that give the illusion of darkness with a small gap, allowing a sliver of light to penetrate through. The room is always cold, fucking freezing because I keep the room temperature at sixty degrees. It is cold but not enough to do serious damage.

Heartless.

That I fucking am.

She made sure there wasn't anything left but a bleeding hole in my chest. The years apart did nothing but feed my need for revenge. My all-consuming rage grew stronger when all I wanted was to forget, but I couldn't not when she walked through life like she didn't stomp on my heart and set my world on fire, leaving me there to burn.

I don't want her to die, no.

I want her to suffer.

To feel cold and alone like I felt the moment she betrayed what we had and left me on my own. Left me to my pain. She took her beautiful chaos and left me to drown in the endless and torturous silence inside my head.

I make my way to the middle of the room and shiver not from the cold but the thrill of her quiet whimpers. I look at her, really look at her, and I'm transported back to the time when she was everything to me. My head begins to pound slowly at first until the pain fully takes over.

Her.

Always fucking her.

Making me feel.

Love.

Sadness.

Pain.

Chaos.

Her.

Fallon Alicia James.

Once my sweet heaven and now my very own angel of death.

My Lilith.

Making me sin for her.

Making me lose myself in her.

I fell from grace for the girl she was before.

I am a shadow.

I am no one.

Nothing belongs to me anymore but my rage.

It's the only thing I have left.

Back then I did whatever needed to be done to keep her safe from my world but now we're back here.

And she's never been in more danger.

I am the nightmare she created.

The worst one she will ever face.

You still love her.

I don't.

You can't love when you don't have a soul.

A heart.

A conscience.

I shove away the thoughts of the past so far down they can't choke me. They can't steal my breath or make me feel.

Feel for her.

Never again.

I walk over to where she is hunched on the floor and squat down until

we're almost face to face. I was always taller than her. She is small compared to my six feet. Her breath comes rapidly, but she whimpers quietly until the only sound in the room is her heavy breathing and the rain falling fast outside.

She sits with her knees pulled up to her chest and her bound wrists wrapped around them. Fallon shivers, tucking her face deeper into her knees and wrapping her arms tighter around her body to fight the cold.

It is futile.

The moon shines brighter and allows me to take her in. I never stopped seeing her all these years. She was always present, haunting me. Haunting my life and my nightmares. Light pink hair falls over her shoulders and down to her breasts. I fucking hate that. This is not the girl I once fell in love with. The light pink looks almost red with all the blood coating it. She hasn't bathed since she was brought back here from the filthy warehouse where those fuckers held her in. There, she was bound to a chair covered in blood and bruises.

I loathe the feelings—the vision of her beaten and bound in that filthy place—stirs inside me. I despised how weak she makes me feel, even now when all I feel for her is hatred. I'm the only one that gets to fuck with her, the only one that gets her tears.

I don't want to hurt her body. Her body will eventually heal. I want to own and consume her mind until all she sees and feels is me. Until the pain is unbearable, and the thoughts won't allow her to move on. I want her stuck in the same endless cycle of sorrow, like the one she left me in.

I move closer, taking the time to study her closely. We haven't been this close in years and what I see disgusts me. I hate the girl she became. She's one of them.

One of the people who once judged and belittled her.

The weak and hopeless.

The ones that change to please everyone else.

The ones too afraid to be themselves.

Her body is skinny, and there's nothing left of the curves that used to hug her body. The beautiful curves that used to drive me wild. She completely transformed herself into someone I don't recognize. Gone are the superheroes shirts and the funny socks. She wears designer clothing and expensive jewelry. She looks like my sister. I guess there's nothing wrong with that shit, but it is not her. It's wrong for her. She hides behind all that crap.

“Why are you doing this?” The source of my never-ending torment exhales and whispers weakly. I should leave her wondering. Maybe mess with her and make her guess who’s behind her tragedy. Torment her a while longer, but the fucked-up train left the station, and there’s no stopping it now.

“That’s the first thing you want to ask. Not who I am? Ask for my name?” I speak freely because she won’t recognize my voice. My brother managed to crush my vocal cords the day we fought one another five years ago. The day that proved to everyone else how right Benedetto was all along about my brother and me. I’m the defective twin. The disappointment. *“Thank God there was another one of you. The better half.”* Grandfather’s mocking words still linger, but they no longer burn. Nothing does lately.

My voice is barely recognizable and nothing like what it once was. It’s rough and almost beast-like.

Ugly.

Defective.

Abnormal.

“What does your name matter?” She angles her body in what I think is an uncomfortable angle and cowers. “Besides, I’m sure you won’t give yourself up so early in your sick game.” Her voice sounds scratchy and small. She’s afraid. I look at her sensual heart-shaped face and full pink lips. Like the girl I once knew, but the hollow cheeks and dark circles under her pretty eyes are new. She was beautiful before in an effortless. She didn’t need much of anything. She didn’t even have to try to be the center of someone’s world. Even when she tried to fade away into the background, it was useless. The essence of her was addicting. Everything about her, even her chaos, made me weak for her. Although her beauty captivated me, what really did it for me was her unusual brain and the way she saw the world, how her green eyes used to shine brightly every time she picked up her old camera or read one of our favorite books.

When she quoted a phrase we both loved.

When she would look at me as if I hung the moon and the stars in her dark sky.

Fuck.

No.

I need to keep a straight head because it would be so easy to fall into her web of lies once again.

Focus on your rage.

On what she did to you.

To us.

I hang on to the tainted memories of us and her betrayal.

It fuels my rage.

“You have it all figured out, huh?” I hiss but try to refrain from saying what I really want to say. All the things I’ve been holding onto for years. How I wish she would fight me. How I hate that I still care. Moments of weakness come and go when I’m this close to her. “Tell me how it feels?”

She remains quiet. It’s fucking with my head that there’s no spirit in her. I anticipated everything but this. A shell of the girl she was before she was taken. Before I stole her and brought her back to the underworld with me.

“Stand the fuck up,” I hiss, dragging her by her arms as I straighten to my full height. She stumbles, almost falling to her knees and a hiss of pain escapes her lips.

I’m hurting her.

Good.

She fucking destroyed me.

No sense in wasting time.

The life she had is now over.

She is no longer free.

Her life is no longer hers.

She’s now owned.

Owned by me.

“Can you take this off?” Fallon reaches for the dirty piece of cloth covering her eyes. She’s still down on her knees before me, no longer human. The girl I used to love was a fighter, even in her silence. Even when she hid from the world, she had fire in her. The fire is no longer there.

I need it.

I crave it.

I need that part of her to come out so we can play.

“Say please,” I taunt.

There’s a long pause. Neither of us speaks. The only sound is the erratic beat of my heart. I swear if I can concentrate hard enough, I can hear it.

“Fuck you.”

Ahhh, there it is.

A little bit of fight.

She’s still there after all.

This I can work with.

I can hurt this woman without remorse.

I roughly grab her by the hair and pull her all the way up until she's standing before me. In the dark. Her blindfolded and me with this fucking mask on.

How hard we fell.

Fuck, we're still falling into a pit of despair with no way out or end in sight.

"There's the bitch I know and loathe." I spin her around so hard and fast she has no opportunity to react to the meaning of my words. I shove her face against the wall, pressing my body to her back. From this angle, I can smell her, and like the weak fuck I am, I inhale her in. Everything that is her.

Her smell.

Still the same as it once was.

Sweet honey.

Her bound wrists don't allow for her to fight my hands off her body. I wish she would fight me viciously because that shit turns me on. I imagine all the ways I would fuck with her and every time it made me hard as fuck.

"Please," she says with gritted teeth before a sob breaks out as I pull her hair harder until her head is resting back, almost touching my shoulder. I lean in closer to her neck and bring my mouth to her ear. "Down here, in this hell with me, you don't have free will."

Fuck, I'm hard.

I'm sick.

Her pain thrills me.

She trembles under my touch.

"I know it's you," she whispers, leaving me speechless. I suck in a breath before releasing it and calming the storm inside my head. I hate myself for how weak her soft voice makes me feel. I should hate her... fuck I do hate her.

I need to leave.

This is enough for today.

I don't answer her.

"It is you, isn't it?" She says louder with more bravado than before. "You were a lot of things, lost boy, but I never pegged you as the cowardly type."

And that's what does it. What triggers me.

I abruptly step back from her body.

“You’re just like your bitch of a father.”

“Turn around.” I spit out, but she defies me and stays in place. Her back to me and her forehead to the wall. I grab her roughly by the back of her neck, turning her until her face is to my chest, and yank the blindfold from her face.

I give her my back and walk to the light switch before turning the lights on. It takes her a moment to adjust to the light, before defiant green eyes meet mine. They shine in contrast to the dark circles on her makeup-smearred face.

Her confused expression tells me everything I need to know. She might have an idea of who I am, but she’s not sure.

Maybe it was a guess.

Maybe she was hoping it was me.

Could it be?

Does she believe I’m her savior?

That, I am not.

I am the man that took her from all she knows and will strip her of everything she owns.

She raises her shaking hands to touch me, but I take a step back. Fuck no.

I need to kill the seed of hope in her before it grows.

Slowly I take the mask off, because what’s the point of prolonging this?

Let her see what she caused.

What her betrayal did to me.

Broken.

Scarred.

Empty.

Filled with hate, starving. What fuels me now is revenge.

Make her pay for her sins against me.

Against the girl I loved more than anything and anyone else.

A shocked gasp escapes her parted mouth as her eyes roam my face.

I know what she sees.

I see it every fucking day.

A scar down the right side of my temple caused by my twin’s ruthless assault. He broke the skin the time we went up against each other for the title of boss. A broken nose that never healed quite right. The snakes and the other haunting tattoos all over my skin.

Nothing of the clean-cut boy she once knew.

A monster.

Death.

A man that stays in the shadows because there's nothing left of what he used to be. Fallon broke my heart, and my family broke my fucking spirit.

Because of it, I lost my soul.

Once I was the boy that gave her the very best of him, flaws and all, but he died with his dream. With the girl he believed she was.

I am mad.

Dead inside.

Now all I can give her is my worst.

FALLON

MAYBE

“You made me this way.” – Val

Now

The strange man, my captor, roughly yanks the blindfold covering my eyes up to my forehead. I try to focus, but all I see is darkness. It’s almost impossible to see him clearly. The moonlight coming from the window only does so much. The silhouette is there, though. Hunting me. Mocking me.

Tall and strong.

Huge.

This can’t be my Alexander.

He’s not yours anymore, remember?

He will always be mine; I think to myself. The two sides of me struggle for power over my sanity. It is a constant battle when it comes to my very own Judas, Valentino Alexander Nicolasi.

I remain quiet, trying to put the pieces together of how the hell I ended up here and why. Why, after all these years that we were dead to each other, he comes back? Why the hell now? *Why can’t you release me from this torment, Valentino?*

I’ve been feeling your loss since the day you broke my naive heart.

Haven’t we bled enough?

Suffered enough?

Haven’t we torn one another to shreds?

We’re toxic.

We were doomed from the very beginning.

“Why do you hide in darkness?” I have a strong feeling the man behind the mask is him, but I’m not too sure. I need to see. I haven’t seen him in years since he decided to leave without a trace. No notice. Nothing. No one knew where he ran off to.

“Don’t you know that’s where monsters like us reside?” His voice. The proof is in this man’s voice. Valentino’s voice was angelic, like music to my ears. The voice of this man is rough. Like he smokes a dozen cigarettes a day.

Valentino hates me, and I know he would like nothing more than to see me suffer, but what reason does this strange man have to hurt me? What sins did I commit against this man?

I don’t know this monster. Who is he? Why did he take me? What does he want?

Shit, Fallon.

Your nine lives are about to expire. What if you’re sold to the sex trafficking market? What if this man chops you up and sells your organs to the highest bidder?

Shitting hell.

I try to calm my nerves and breathe.

Breathe, Fallon.

In and out.

Slow and steady.

Once I successfully calm my breathing and focus on the situation, I’m able to think clearer. Something about what he said makes me believe he knows me. Maybe a delusional fan of Andrea? I’ve encountered a couple of those before from time to time. I’ve always tried to stay in the background but being the best friend of one of the most successful and influential fashion designers in the world doesn’t allow me much privacy. Also, I have a vlog and podcast business online.

Oh, hell.

This place is too quiet, which means we’re isolated from the world. I don’t hear busy streets or a city that doesn’t sleep. It’s eerily quiet. No one will be able to hear me scream, and if by some miracle I escape this man I don’t think I will make it very far. All the crime documentaries of psychos stealing people show how they plan every detail of their sick and twisted plan beforehand.

Maybe if I get him to talk and figure out what he wants, I can find something that could help me make him sympathize with me? Something that

can make me trick him into believing that I'll be compliant and give him what he wants.

The question is, what does he want from me?

"You think I'm a monster?" That's it, Fallon. Keep talking and buy yourself some time. I squint, trying to get a better look at the beast of a man, but I fail miserably. He looks to the window and then slowly turns my way. My heart is racing with both fear and anticipation. My brain is trying to figure out why.

Why, why, why?

I was just with Roman in that dirty and abandoned building, prepared for the worst to happen, and I ended up here. *Who's behind all of this?*

Then I remember the last movie I saw with Andrea. It was about a girl who got kidnapped by her neighbor, but she didn't know what or who was behind it all. He kept her blindfolded, but the young girl kept asking questions. Maybe she did it to figure out who he was, or maybe she just wanted to buy herself some time.

So that's what I do.

I ask him questions.

I buy myself sometime to figure out how to stay alive.

Something he said before bothers me. Me? A monster? I am not a saint, but I've always kept my head down and walked through life taking the punches and never fighting back.

"I know you are," he hisses my way but remains frozen in place. "You, my poisonous witch, are the very worst of them."

My breath hitches and I feel dread crawling in the pit of my stomach.

Did this man just call me a witch?

Witch?

Only one person used to call me that.

Finally, the man turns, and a shocked gasp escapes my bloody and dry lips.

Oh, God. No.

Oh, no, no, no.

Not you.

Never you.

There, in the corner of this dark and cold room, stands my lost boy. Angry and scarred.

No longer my lost boy, but a scarred man.

What happened to you?

This is what's left of the boy I once loved more than there are stars in the sky.

Loved him as deep as the sea and as infinite as the galaxy.

Valentino Alexander, who did you become?

“What’s the matter? The cat got your tongue?” A low and mocking chuckle comes from him and it pains me. “Or maybe it’s my stunning good looks?” Once that is something that he would’ve said to make me laugh, but now it’s all tainted by his mocking voice and hateful tone.

I take him in, and it feels like we’re back to the day we first met. Him hiding in the dark, covered in black but that’s where the similarities end. Back then I felt the dangerous energy surrounding him but not the darkness and hollowness in my chest when I look at him now.

The fear.

For what he’ll do to me.

Fear for him, mostly.

Even when he hates that I do. When he can’t admit it to himself. I know him better than anyone. The Alexander I knew was tormented by the chaos in his head. It was a dark and painful place for him. The demons he battled before are still dancing in his eyes. I can see them tormenting him now.

He could never hide them from me.

His demons used to dance with mine, but everything’s changed now. Our demons are on opposite sides.

Rivals.

Enemies.

Ready to tear each other apart.

His beautiful longish pale blonde hair is gone, replaced by a black buzz cut. He looks like his twin. Exact replica. He’s torturing himself by becoming what he hates most. He doesn’t have to say it. I know. I can see it. He might hate me, but God knows he hates himself the most.

Valentino stays silent and I just stare at him. From this close, I can see him better. Black snake tattoos cover his entire neck, giving the illusion that he’s being strangled by them. The tattoos are cleverly positioned to cover the gruesome and huge scar on his neck. From this distance, if I look closely, I can see the painful-looking scar. I don’t want this image of him. I just want to remember the beautiful boy that broke my heart, not this tortured man with dead eyes. There’s nothing there.

What little remained of my heart deteriorates at the sight of him and his scars. My beautiful boy is forever lost to me. I made peace with my scars. I learned to live with them, but his? Not my perfect boy.

He's no longer perfect.

He was never truly yours.

He proved that to you when he so recklessly played with your heart.

The ugly voice in my head mocks my pain.

The voice is not wrong.

The stranger before me is no longer a boy but a man.

A man that hates me.

A man that wants me to suffer.

I know it.

It is written in his hateful gaze.

His ocean eyes are empty, and they don't sparkle like they used to. Even when he hated me our last year of high school, he still loved me. He looked out for me then, even when he didn't want anything to do with me. I felt his love even in his hate. Now, as I look into his cold eyes, I find nothing there. Empty. Cold. Only madness. A madness that screams that I'm in for a world of hate. Something that scares me and breaks my bruised heart at the same time.

Where did you go, Alexander?

I hate him for his deceit. I blame him for what happened but still... I wouldn't wish such pain on anyone. Not even the ones that broke me. *Has he had enough?*

I look away because I can't stand the sight of him. It hurts my heart and that's something I swore he would never have access to again. My heart, even if deep down I know he kept a part of it for himself. A part of my soul. I don't want him to figure out how much he truly affects me.

He laughs.

A mocking laugh.

It sounds all wrong coming from him.

I need to be away from him.

I can't do this.

Not again.

"Why, Ale—"

"Shut your goddamn mouth. Don't you ever call me that."

"That's your name!" I shouldn't provoke him because God knows what

this man is capable of now.

“Fuck you, Fallon. You don’t get to call me that anymore.” I don’t miss how he calls me Fallon instead of Alicia. It was our thing before. He was my Alexander, and I was his Alicia.

It burns.

How can I still feel for him?

“What happened, then?” I try and reason with him, knowing damn well that this is it. This is our end. “Why are you doing this?”

“It is quite simple, witch.” He grabs my chin tenderly. The kind gesture only serves to frighten me more. I don’t know what to expect. I think I see something flash behind his eyes, but I’m tired and emotionally drained to try and figure out what. Maybe I might’ve conjured it. He roughly releases my face and makes a move to leave. “Because I can and because it is time for you to feel the same way I did for so many years. It’s time for you, Fallon James, to bleed for your sins against me.”

“Have you gone mad?” I blurt out with a disregard for my safety. That is the wrong thing to say because he completely stills right in front of the door. *Good. Get mad, baby. I’m mad too. I’m hurt.*

It might be suicidal, but something deep inside urges me to push his buttons and test his limits. Valentino looks over his shoulder at me. “You should rest because from now on, you won’t have a single peaceful night.” He opens the door and steps a foot outside the cold room. “If you don’t eat the food, the rats will have it,” with those parting words he leaves, trapping me inside.

I now know I won’t be able to escape his wrath and punishment. The boy I once loved knew my fear of rats and the dark, and yet this man has bound my wrists in this cold and dark room where rats might crawl all over my skin once I fall asleep.

I shiver.

For the first time in years, I am truly afraid.

No one can truly hurt you like the ones you love can.

Only they know how to break you.

So, yes, I am afraid.

Afraid of the man I once loved with every broken piece of me.

The sad thing is, deep down he still owns my soul.

I look at the moon outside and wonder if things would’ve turned off differently if I

had just listened to the dark voice inside my head that told me to walk away from

him that first day at the library.

The voice that told me I wasn't good enough for him.

I was young and foolish.

I thought for once life would've allowed me that piece of happiness.

How wrong I was.

I should've walked away.

Maybe it wouldn't have ended this way.

Maybe he would've been someone without so many demons. A husband and a father like Lucan.

Maybe I wouldn't have ended up here.

Maybe I would've found my happy place in someone else.

Maybe...

VALENTINO

POE

“So sorry you can’t relate.” – F
Then

Normal people bore me.

It has always been this way. I guess that’s why I have always gravitated towards my twin brother and Kadra Parisi. The other kids in the families think like everyone else, but not Lorenzo and Kadra.

My brother sees the world in red. Always searching for that high that makes him feel something, while Kadra sees it in black and white and only feels love towards her sisters. I, on the other hand, feel way too much, and it is a fucking curse— let me tell you that.

I wish I could turn a switch off like Lorenzo. Maybe it would stop the voices inside my head from taking over my sanity. I feel too much, see too much and dammit, I just want it all to fade away.

The academy’s bell rings.

Students start pouring in, and I walk past them, paying them no mind. I keep my head down and concentrate on my words. They know no to bother me when I hold my journal in hand. The last time someone touched me while I was writing I couldn’t stop myself from reacting. It wasn’t fucking pretty.

Now they know to leave me alone.

Even my twin waits for me to raise my head and come back to reality before he speaks to me.

I make it to first period and find my seat at the back of the classroom where no one can bother me.

I hear everyone settle in their seats around me – always fucking around

me. Caging me like an animal because that's exactly how it feels like to be around these people. Shallow creatures who only care about what their daddies brought them back from their latest business trip. Only care about the latest trend that's making everyone famous on social media, and what to wear, and who to ask to the fall dance.

No one truly cares.

It's all a popularity contest.

My skin starts itching when I feel their eyes on me like I'm a piece of meat and their whispers reach my ears, making my head spin.

I hate it here.

All chatter stops. "Ms. James, how wonderful that you decided to join us." Mr. Gonzalez's deep and imposing voice assaults my ears. "Please take a seat."

Ms. James.

That's new.

I raise my head just enough to see the intruder. My heartbeat slows, and the whispers become murmurs I hear from far away. It's all her. *Concentrate on the words, Val. When things get loud just focus on something, anything that centers you and keeps your feet firmly planted on the ground.* My father told me that the last time he was sober.

The strange girl from the library.

The fascinating creature with clothes too small for her body, an old backpack, and demons the same as mine dancing in her eyes. Green eyes framed by black and thick lashes give her an innocent yet, at the same time, temptress look. The glasses only add to the nerdy girl look she has going on, but it makes her seem... real somehow.

She's shorter than most girls here. Maybe it's the fact that she doesn't wear high heel boots like the rest, but some dirty old white converse. Fascinating. Her hair is black as the night and done in a style that I've haven't seen in years, and something most girls in this academy would never dare to do. Two small buns at the top of her head, and the rest falls in waves down her back. Colorful bracelets decorate her arms, and cat socks are on her feet.

Chaos.

A mess of colors.

All I see when I look at this girl.

Fuck.

I watch as she quietly nods and keeps her head down as she passes everyone, trying to get to her seat. She's almost to the end of the row when a fucking asshole with a death wish trips her, making her stumble and almost fall into me. She's quick and catches herself before she does. A look of exasperation crosses her beautiful face before her eyes meet mine.

Everything is a blur, fades away. All except those vivid green eyes of hers.

Someone clears their throat in the distance, making her release me from her hold and look away. I feel somewhat agitated because I wanted to stay there for just a moment longer. Lost in her stare, where all I felt was a right sense of belonging, calmness and peace.

She turns away from me, but her scent lingers.

Honey with a pinch of vanilla.

"Ms. James. Did you manage to do the assignment I sent you last night?"

"Yes." Her sweet and low raspy voice washes over me like warm water on a cold winter day. I would stop and listen to her all day and never get tired of it.

"Good, then stand up, introduce yourself to the class and go ahead and share with us your favorite literature quotes and why you chose it." Mr. Gonzales walks to the front of his desk and crosses his arms waiting for the new girl to stand. Everyone turns her way but me. I don't move. Somehow sensing the girl is already nervous enough and the last thing she needs is more eyes on her.

I see you.

"I-I'm Fallon." Once again, I am held hostage by her sweet voice.

Fallon James.

Uniquely her.

"What quote did you choose, Fallon?" Mr. Gonzalez's voice is no longer intimidating. Maybe he notices the nerves coming from the girl in waves.

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." She clears her throat before continuing. "It's a quote from *The Raven* by Poe."

"Interesting choice, Ms. James. Why did you choose that one?"

"The *Raven* is considered, by many, a poetic masterpiece, but that's not why I chose it. It would be too cliché for me to choose a poem based on its popularity in pop culture nowadays. I chose it because I could feel the main character's intense sense of grief or maybe it's just in my head. Who knows?"

Poe explores the wars every human experiences at least once in their lives and how, we as humans go through these battles alone and never come out unscathed. A little bit bruised and maybe a lot of damage remains inside our hearts and minds.”

The room goes quiet and so does my mind. Only her words remain. Her tragically beautiful words coated in pain. I see it. I see the way she nervously avoids contact, as she expresses vulnerability in a room filled with strangers. The way she tries to make herself look small so she doesn't attract much attention but how can she think that? When in a room filled with Cathia's all I see is her.

“Fucking weirdo!” A snooty voice says before low chuckles follow.

“Mr. Brant, to the principal's office. Maybe he will find your childish behavior funny. Everyone else I suggest you settle down and open your notebooks unless you want to join Mr. Brant.”

Everyone else settles down and does as they're told.

I feel uneasy.

I hate what the little asshole said to her, and I feel the overwhelming urge to make him regret it. I shouldn't care. I shouldn't feel anything towards this girl because I know firsthand how feeling for someone else leaves you broken. At least in my family, it does.

“Take a seat, Ms. James.”

I watched her through it all, and not once did a tear fall. It was like she was lost inside her head, where no one could hurt her. She takes her seat, and all the while, all I can think is what it would be like to be stuck there.

Inside her head.

With just her.

Her lovely chaos.

Stuck inside the world she created for herself.

FALLON

VENOMOUS

“He painted my world black.” – F

Now

Morning comes, and the room doesn't seem so cold anymore. My head is pounding due to a sleepless night. All I could think of was my tormentor, Valentino, and this new side of him that terrifies me. I spent the whole night tied to the bed, in the freezing cold with nothing to give me warmth when the temperature dropped. Thoughts of my situation and Roman haunted me all night. I still feel trapped in this state of what-the-fuck is going on.

I hurt him, yes, but he ruined me.

Aren't we even?

I guess not by the tone of his voice and the dead look in his eyes.

With the sunlight shining through the window, I can see my surroundings better and what I see steals my breath from my lungs. It chokes me so fiercely that I have difficulty trying to catch my next breath. Chills run down my back, paralyzing my bones. I can't move my body, even when my mind is screaming to let go.

The room he trapped me in looks exactly the same as the one from that house of horrors from my childhood. Everything is the same, from the plain beige walls to the small bed and closet in the corner. No pictures or silly posters adorn the walls. No cute bedding, just a plain gray one and one pillow.

God, I can't breathe.

I'm back where I swore I would never return.

Fuck you, Valentino.

Fuck you for knowing my weakness. For knowing how they hurt and still choosing to use them against me.

But what pushes me over the edge is the tray he brought in with him last night. I didn't want to touch anything he was offering just in case it had any drugs—or worse, poison, because the man that is holding me hostage here is one monster I don't know if I'll be able to conquer. I need to eat, though. This won't end well for me. I need my routine. The one that keeps me healthy and brings me comfort.

Did you ever really get rid of us? Such a naïve fool, you are. I hate the cruel voice in my head. Always mocking and cruel. It has the power to cripple me.

I look at the tray of food again. A small piece of bread and a glass of water. Someone else would be grateful for this food and would happily bite into the bread to relieve the pain of hunger in their belly but not me. This specific meal triggers horrific memories that made me who I am today.

Broken.

Caleb's abuse and my mother's control over my weight did a number on me.

Bread and water.

A meal made to keep me alive but punish my body for not being the right size.

“For fuck's sake, Alicia. Eat the damn bread and be fucking grateful I care enough to stop you from gaining any more weight.” Her cruel words and Caleb's mocking laugh take hold of my mind, and that's when the control I had on my sanity breaks.

Roman's fearful gaze staring back at me.

The past and present collide, and I feel myself going over the edge I've been standing on for years. I don't know how I find the strength to get up from my position on the floor with the painful ropes holding me back, but I do. I grab the food he left behind for me with shaking hands and I throw it at the mirror he perfectly positioned me in front of. The glass cracks right in the middle, and sharp pieces fall to the floor.

I don't stop there.

No.

I let my weak body guide me forward even when the restraints around my ankles and wrists don't allow me to move any more. Still, I do, only causing

more hurt to my skin and bones.

It's all too much.

The hurt of my past and present collide.

Is this what he wanted?

See me unhinged?

See me break?

Then let him see then.

Let him witness how very broken I am after life shit on me time and time again without mercy. Let him see how little he knew me and the damage his lies did to my mind.

My heart.

The hardest part of living is to make it seem easy. Make it seem like I had my shit together and hide how I was drowning every hour of every day, and the only thing keeping me afloat was Andrea and Roman's love.

They're not here, though.

I breathe in slowly, then close my eyes to control the panic and the dizziness taking over. I hold tight to the old ropes keeping my body tied to the bed and concentrate on my breathing. I come down from the high of rage and fear. Once the episode passes, I slowly fall to the floor again and hug my knees to my body.

Don't let him win.

He sees.

Now he knows the demons he's up against.

I am no longer in his heart.

Only his mind, and there, I am hated. But there's something else too. Something between us.

A dark thing.

A venomous thing.

I feel it inside me, inside my stomach, my chest, taking a hold of my sanity. I have felt it since the first day I laid eyes on him.

After calming my breaths and finding a steady heartbeat, I close my eyes and think. Not about the why's or how to escape this place. I think about him, of all the ways to bring this new monster to his knees.

VALENTINO

FACADE

“You made me who I am. You fed the monster.” – Val

Now

I have no delusions about the darkness that’s swimming inside my soul. It is a black abyss, a hole so deep and so dark, it could consume me. It could swallow me whole. Sometimes I wish for it. For it to end.

What-the-fuck was that all about?

I watch her through the camera I had installed in the attic that serves as her room. Watch as she throws the plate of food and glass of water at the mirror and completely shatters it. *You ungrateful little b—* I stop mid-sentence when I witness her go from wild rage to complete silence. She throws herself to the floor and shuts down.

Like a switch went off.

A minute ago, she was screaming and almost trying to break every bone in her body while trying to fight the ropes holding her back, and now, she’s huddled on the floor with her head hanging at an uncomfortable angle between her thighs.

Rage bubbles in the pit of my stomach, and I can’t hold back the need to punish her for being so damn stubborn.

So ungrateful.

If she thinks death will free her from me, she’s so fucking wrong.

I’ll follow her there too.

Death is an easy sentence to pay.

She needs to live with the consequences of her transgressions.

She needs to feel everything now that I don’t feel anything at all.

I'm furious that the game I'm playing is now backfiring on me. The moment I start to feel for her, take pity on her, is the moment I lose.

My throat closes, and I stand. I must forget. I just have to fucking forget the memory of what we once were because it wouldn't change anything. I just need to stop letting it control my actions when it comes to her. This tug of war between the girl I once loved and the one who broke my heart with that one hateful decision is not making this easy.

I make my way to the dresser, opening the top drawer, taking out some dark jeans and a long-sleeved V-neck T-shirt. Black. It is all I wear these days.

In the kitchen, I grab a beer and open it, taking a sip and looking at the food supply. It'll last us through the winter.

Taking a seat, I look out the window. I can see the white snow falling fast tonight. The temperature will drop and we're in for a freezing night. My thoughts go back to her. No sound comes from the room. There was one thing that bugged me, though. That kind of nagged at me. She never ate much back when we were together, and now, she won't go near the food that I leave for her.

Did I ever really know this woman or was she just what I wanted her to be? Did my sick mind create this perfect creature that could do no wrong? Was I that sick?

Fuck.

Once I finish in the kitchen, I clean up. Once everything is in perfect order, I grab a chocolate donut and a bottle of water before heading towards her room. The moment I open the door, the cold inside gives me chills. Looking around for her, I find her sleeping, huddled into herself on the floor. I set the water and the chocolate donut down on the floor right in front of her.

"Eat."

Fallon slowly opens her eyes, lifts her head, and stares back at me with rage behind them. Good. *We're on the same page then, baby.* Hate me. *It'll make this easier.* I ignore the bit of conscience that gnaws at me, and I push it back down into its box and lock it tight.

She didn't have a conscience back then, so why should I now?

"I'm not hungry." She looks up at me with both rage and sadness swimming in those soulful green eyes of hers.

"Liar."

"I said I'm not fucking hungry!" She knocks the glass of water with her

foot, causing the water to spill all over the floor.

What a mess.

How I hate them.

I watch as the liquid spreads on the floor, and I lose it.

I grab her cheeks so violently that it leaves her no option but to open her mouth, and once she opens wide, I shove the donut in her mouth. Panicked eyes meet mine, but I don't care. I'm too far gone.

She keeps pushing me.

"P-pleaseee." She tries to say with a full mouth. A tear falls and the heart that was frozen in my chest drops to the floor. Fuck.

Ignore her.

Carry on.

Don't let her take control over you once again.

She'll finish you this time.

I'm taken back by the intense feeling of guilt I feel as I watch her cry and spit the donut out like it burns her mouth.

What-the-fuck is going on?

I squat down to her level and stare at her body. I notice things that I missed before. Too skinny. Bags under her eyes. It is to be expected for what she's going through, but something still doesn't seem right here. "Starving yourself to death won't set you free."

"A-Anything but that, please."

Please.

Where's the fight?

Her tearful gaze meets mine, reminding me of the sweet girl that could bring me to my knees with just one tear.

My Alicia.

My girl.

Shit.

I'm losing it.

Her eyes.

Her fucking eyes always did it for me.

They held me trapped inside and prisoner to her every time.

I can't let her have control over me again.

I won't survive it.

FALLON

WITCH HOUR

“She put a fucking spell on me.” – Val
Then

Horror nights.

The thrill this time of year gives me makes me feel alive when all I ever feel is dead inside.

This week has been hell and it just started. My first week in a place I’m looked down on and deemed an outcast. No one gave me a chance. I don’t have people bullying me. I guess I was lucky, but I’m left alone. They whisper about me, but they don’t bother to acknowledge my presence.

I’m beneath them and I guess I shouldn’t complain.

That is what I wanted.

The same can’t be said about my home.

It’s suffocating me.

I need to run.

Run away.

I rode my bike for miles and kept going until I took a sharp turn and ended here.

The academy’s yearly Halloween Horror Night.

I chained my bike among the SUVs and sports cars. I swear there are only rich people vehicles here. My dirty and beatdown bike stands out among the lines of expensive cars of the rich and spoiled. I was so desperate to leave my house that I didn’t even dress up appropriately for this weather or location. I look down at what I’m wearing, a Gun N’ Roses black hoodie, cut-off shorts, and black boots. The night is chilly, and I am not dressed for this weather but

fuck it. I want to feel something, even if it's the freezing cold.

"Be brave, rebel girl."

I'm tired of being brave.

So, very tired of holding on to a life that is slowly killing me.

I let my feet carry me forward and follow the smell of buttered popcorn and the sound of laughter.

I miss both things.

Eating junk food and genuine laughter.

There's no laughter in my life anymore.

Not ever since—

"Watch it, freak!" A jerk I recognize from school yells at me when we bump into each other.

I flip him off and continue my way through the sea of people enjoying themselves with their friends on this unholy night.

I keep exploring the Halloween carnival and notice the tents that offer live music, junk food, and a small arcade for the kids to play and win spooky prizes. Ahead of me, a small child is sitting on her father's shoulders as he tries to win her one of the stuffed animals on display.

On nights like this one, I hate him the most.

I keep walking, not really knowing where I'm going. I only stop once I reach the Ferris wheel in the center, covered by the moonlight.

The moon is full tonight.

They say the unholy creatures of the night come out to terrorize the living on the full moon of All Hallows' Eve.

My stomach makes a grotesque sound.

I should eat something, but the odd feeling in the pit of my stomach makes me feel nauseous, and I know I won't be able to hold anything down. Not even the sweet taste of cotton candy is appetizing. Besides, she would be able to tell. She has a way of finding out when I fall out of line and indulge myself. It's not worth the pain that comes after.

I keep walking and stare at the couples making out and laughing together like they don't have a care in the world. How would it feel to be that free? Kids running around, yelling, and their parents running after them.

They seem... happy.

I don't remember what happiness feels like.

What being alive means.

I only exist.

I find myself at the end of the creepy road, and there, I see a sign.

Haunted Maze.

Enter if you dare.

At the bottom of the sign, it reads in small letters to not go alone in case you get lost.

I'm already lost, so what does it even matter?

Alone, too.

I enter the maze and for a brief second, I wish to get lost in there forever and never find my way out.

A couple of teenagers stumbled out of the maze holding onto each other, and laughing their asses off, not scared at all. After they leave, it gets eerily quiet, and for a moment, I contemplate turning back and finding my way out of this carnival, but what waits for me at home is worse than what lurks inside this maze.

Just like that, I decide to step inside, and walk slowly, letting the moonlight guide me through the walls decorated with fake spider webs and terrifying monsters on every corner. Out of nowhere, a man wearing a demon mask comes out of the shadows, but I don't even bother screaming or running away. Monsters don't scare me, not really. I keep walking and notice blood covering every inch of the walls and children dressed as ghosts waving at me from behind a glass wall.

I shiver.

I admit that's creepy as hell.

Keep walking, Fallon.

You're almost to the end.

Suddenly, I feel the presence of someone behind me. The feeling of someone's eyes on me, don't ask me how I know, but I just do. It's that tingling feeling on the back of your head you get when someone staring at you from the shadows. From where you can't see them, but they clearly see you.

I hurry my step and continue walking in search of an exit. It can't be far away since I've been here for about ten minutes, if not more.

The scent of cigarettes hits me, and I look back over my shoulder to see if the person that hides in the shadows is behind me or following.

Crap. I might not be afraid of monsters, but humans do scare me and a fuck of a lot. My stomach sinks and I pause my steps, my chest rising and falling, steady but quick.

“Who’s there?” I bite out. When I don’t get a response, I stare at my surroundings and ask again. “Get lost.” I hope my voice sounds threatening and not worried at all.

“You’re scared.”

His voice comes from somewhere behind me. I move in circles, trying to see where he’s hiding, and that’s when I notice him. Standing in the dark, the only light around him is that of the moon and the small embers from the tip of the cigarette he’s smoking. The first time I met him was two days ago in the library of the academy. He didn’t say much, but it was enough to make an impact on me. He had an air about him, so elegant and almost regal. You would never guess that the rich and proper guy wearing designer clothing and expensive jewelry would have such a nasty and deadly habit.

I hate smokers.

“I’m not.” I raise my head and let him see how very little he scares me. Unnerves, yes. But am I afraid of him? No.

I’m just about to turn around and find my way out when he moves from the shadows as the last of the cigarette smoke dissipates into the air.

There’s something dark lurking behind his cold eyes.

Something deadly.

Terrifying almost.

The sick part?

It intrigues me.

I felt it in the library and here’s that feeling again.

It’s like I know this guy from another time.

Somehow, we’ve crossed paths before.

Maybe in another life or maybe I’m just too crazy.

“Tell me something, witch.” He walks closer until we’re both facing each other.

The wind blows, and the loud noise of the carnival fades into the background.

“What?” My heart thumps against my chest.

“Why are you all alone here of all places?” He paused and then continued. “On a night like this one, where terrible things can happen to girls like you.”

“Girls like me?”

“Good girls.” He rasps as he gets closer and closer to my chest. “Girls that follow the rules and stay in line, too afraid to walk in the dark.”

Walk in the dark.

“I’m not afraid of the dark.” I bite back. “That’s all I see.”

I didn’t mean to say that.

It slipped out.

Maybe because I am tired of pretending, tired of holding back.

“Huh.” That’s all he says before pulling back and walking away.

“Wait.” I call out to his back.

He stands there for a moment, quiet and still, almost like he’s not breathing.

“What’s your name?” I don’t know why I care. Why did I ask?

The slow rise and fall of his chest are the only indication that he’s breathing. He doesn’t move or say anything for a few seconds. I think he will refuse to tell me or even ignore my question but that’s not the case.

“Alexander,” he whispers darkly.

What a beautiful name for such a haunting boy.

“See you around, witch.” He says and begins to move once again.

“Why do you call me that?” I’ve been called names all my life. The vilest things anyone can be called, but somehow the thought of him mocking me... hurts.

I think he’s gone.

I’m all alone again.

It’s like he was never here, just a figment of my imagination.

Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me again.

It’s Halloween after all. Scary things happen all the time. Inexplicable things.

“Your eyes,” a soft and almost angelic voice sounds from the shadows.

Alexander.

That is his name.

VALENTINO

SAVIOR

“Not even Batman could get me out of this one. Maybe Superman.” – F
Then

Fallon Alicia James.
That is her name.

Being the grandson of one of the founders of this academy gives me access to whatever the hell I desire and what I desire is to know more about her. I tried social media first because this generation is all about the popular apps, but there’s nothing about her on the web. Nothing at all and it surprised the fuck out of me since all the girls in this place are posting shit on a daily.

Not this girl.

She’s a ghost.

After finding out her name and her address, I felt this strange sense of duty towards her, a duty to protect this stranger from the wolves that roam free in this place. Hell, even in that shitty part of the city she’s from. Most lowlife criminals reside there, and after I saw her house, I felt even worst. How-the-fuck does someone like her afford to go to one of the most elite schools Detroit has to offer? It makes no sense.

I’ll find that out too. Eventually. I can’t seem to get enough of her, especially after last night. I ended up at her house instead of going to the Halloween Costume party at the Volpe mansion with my brother. Instead, I found myself lurking in the shadows of Fallon’s house. I was just there to see where she came from, but the moment I saw her run out of her house like her life depended on it and riding her bike God-knows-where, I had to follow.

I needed to make sure she was okay.

That she was safe.

I trailed behind her with my lights off so I didn't spook her all the way to the carnival. Once she made it there safely, I kept following her. It's fucking embarrassing how this girl has turn me into a stalker, but my feet had a life of their own and they kept following her.

I'm fucking up so bad.

This is not the plan.

This will only end badly for her.

For me as well.

I'm already in too deep.

I barely know the girl and I'm already fucking everything up just to keep her safe.

You have a job to do, fratello. Lorenzo's words mock me.

That rage and frustration, that sense of hopelessness is what made me confess to her in the middle of the haunted maze. How her eyes do things to me.

Make me feel things I shouldn't.

I crave to have those eyes look at me every day and tell me all their secrets.

Fuck.

I grab my keys from the bedside table and head to the door. I will see her again soon, and as much as I hate to admit it, I have been counting down the hours to catch a glimpse of her again.

I hiss when I feel subtle pain in my knuckles. Looking down at my fucked-up hand, I vividly remember the asshole that called her a freak and then pushed her in the carnival and how he fell to the ground with a couple of slaps to the face and a kick to his groin. Motherfucker won't look so prim and proper today, and it fucking satisfied me to know that he won't be going near the girl again if he knows what's good for him and his family.

Once I'm outside the mansion, I start my bike and head to the academy.

Fuck, I'm in too deep and every day I'm drowning in everything that is Fallon James.

Shit.

And it's only been three days.

VALENTINO

POLAROIDS

“Capture every moment, my dear.” – Ziggs

Then

The girl is tiny.

Her clothes are two sizes too small, and she never eats. Only sits in the cafeteria by herself with a bottle of water. *Can she even afford the food here?*

The noise in the cafeteria fades into the background as I watch her put her headphones back on, grab her backpack and head for the doors. I wait a few seconds before I follow her out.

Don't ask me why, but I do.

I can't seem to stop thinking about her.

Is she happy?

What is she reading today?

My mind wanders to thoughts of her every second of the day, and it is dangerous.

My life will ruin her just like it did my parents.

Just like it has ruined me.

I quietly trail behind her. Not that she will be able to hear me with her headphones on. She enters the library, of course.

At lunchtime, the library is deserted.

She has it all to herself.

My feet lead me to her and that's when I find her. Hidden by the darkest part of the library, in the hall that is always vacant because no one dares to pick up a literature book or one of the classics. She's in the exact same spot

she found me in last time.

My spot.

Oddly, I don't mind.

FALLON

Every time I open a book or a comic, I'm transported to another world, completely disregarding the one my body is currently in.

That's what happened now.

I was so enthralled by the words written on these pages that I was oblivious to the fact that I am no longer alone.

I sense him before I see him.

The smell of mahogany mixed with vanilla reaches my nose, and I know it's him. No one smells or even feels like him.

His aura is dark, but somehow comforting.

I put the book down on my lap and turn my face to the left, and there he is. A black turtleneck sweater covering him from the cold of this library. He has his eyes closed, his arms propped behind his head, and his lips curled in a smile.

There was no one here when I first entered the library, only the librarian, but she was too busy on the phone to notice my presence, so I just kept walking to the last hall, the one that washed me with a sense of security I haven't felt in a long while. The spot where I first met the moody and beautiful boy, and here he is now.

He could've demanded I move, yet he chose to sit quietly next to me without interrupting my reading. Since my first day here, people have stared, mocked, judged, and whispered behind my back, all because I'm new, or maybe it's the fact that I don't fit in their world of the elite. My uniform doesn't fit right. I don't own a Gucci bag, nor do I drive a Mercedes Benz. I don't even own a phone, for God's sake. Because of this they believe I am not worthy. The joke's on them because I no longer care what anyone thinks of me. Not when my own mother thinks of me as worse than filth.

"Why are you here? Shouldn't you be with your friends sitting at the popular table?" I'm not being catty. I genuinely want to know why he chose

to be here when I know for a fact that he's one of the popular kids in this place. How do I know this? Well, I notice him everywhere he goes, and every time he enters a room. *How could you miss someone like him?* He's larger than life, even when he doesn't say a thing, even when he doesn't acknowledge your existence. I guess it makes me a fool, huh? It's not only me, though. I see him watching me too. I don't think he knows I've caught him looking my way instead of paying attention to his peers or writing in his journal more than once.

Is it weird that I can't help but look his way? Maybe. Some might say I'm obsessed, and maybe I am. I'm obsessed with the way he makes me feel without even saying a word. Just by the way he looks at me. Like I ground him, maybe I do. But how ironic that my feet leave the ground every time he looks my way. It's like I'm floating away. It's as exciting as it is terrifying. How quickly someone has so much influence in my life without saying much.

He'll see you for what you are soon. Better not drag him with you. I will the stupid voice away and look at the quiet boy sitting beside me.

He says nothing.

So, I take the hint and just sit quietly reading my book.

It's a book explaining mythological creatures and Greek mythology.

Sirens.

Nymphs.

Gods.

All more interesting than humans.

The book I'm currently reading talks about sirens and Christian beliefs. I first learned about sea creatures when my father showed me the Little Mermaid. I loved it just as every little girl has at some point in their childhood. But unlike a lot of children, I gravitated towards the villain in the story instead of the hero.

Ursula.

Was she born evil, or was she made? If so, then what made her that way? As I got older, I started reading more about villains and the scary beings that lurk in the dark. What society deems wrong and immoral has always been interesting to me. Nowadays when we think about sirens, we imagine beautiful women with tails instead of legs. Women who swim in the sea and sing beautiful melodies. But if you look into the history of them, you'll learn how they were believed to be creatures of evil, who lured innocent sailors to their death with a bewitching song.

“The handmaidens of goddess Persephone.”

“What?”

“They were given the body of birds and were given the task to search for Persephone when she was abducted by Hades.”

“How do you know this?”

“How come you don’t?” He finally looks my way with mirth sparkling in his sometimes-dead eyes. If I thought he was beautiful before, I was mistaken. This right here is what beauty is. The spark in his eyes and the small smile on his face gives him a boyish look.

I smile back.

A genuine smile.

Because for the first time in a long time, I feel like I fit in somewhere.

With him.

Right here.

Away from the noise and surrounded by lovely literature to feed our souls.

“Have you read this one before?”

“I have.”

“I wouldn’t peg you as one to read about mythology.”

“I read about almost everything.”

“Do you read smut?”

“All except that.” He grins.

I laugh, and I’m shocked when a low chuckle escapes him, and I don’t even know if he notices it. It’s like he’s come alive right here with me.

“Can I see?” He points to Ziggy’s polaroid camera.

“Sure, go ahead.” He grabs the camera from my bag and pulls the lid off. I watch him inspect the old camera before bringing it closer to his face.

Oh, no.

Before I have time to cover my face, he takes the photo.

“W-why did you do that?”

“It seemed fair.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have photos of me, so it seems fair that I have one of you.”

Heat covers my cheeks, and I instantly look away from his intense stare. *Don’t go there, Fallon. You’re from two different worlds.*

It doesn’t seem like we’re so different when it’s just the two of us.

“Carry on.”

I look his way once again and he has his eyes closed while clutching the Polaroid photo in his hands.

Settle down, stupid heart.

We can never be.

My demons will eventually scare him off.

The scars on my body will turn him off.

I'm damaged goods.

He'll realize this soon.

With a confused heart, I do as he says and continue my reading, but I can't concentrate. Not really.

Especially when he reaches for my hand.

It takes me a second to understand what's happening, but I close my hand in his.

Why did he do it? I don't know, but what I do know is that I've never felt more at home.

Here, away from the world, with this silent and mysterious boy.

It's too good to be real.

Eventually, I'll wake up.

I always do.

FALLON

ENDGAME

“Do you remember our sweet memories together?” – F

Now

A sweet melody from my past wakes me up from a deep slumber. My eyes are heavy as I try to open them fully, but I fail. I'm too tired.

What day is it?

How long have I been here?

I don't even know anymore.

Valentino hasn't visited in days.

I did notice how the ropes were gone, and there was nothing bounding me to the bed. Did he come at night and free me?

I also didn't touch the food he left for me, so now he is punishing me.

How long can a human survive without water or food? It's been what I think is two days since I last ate something. Since the day I was taken from the airport. My body is weak and so is my mind. I'm too tired and I have no strength to fight him off when he comes. Because he will.

Maybe if I behave, he will have mercy on me.

Highly doubt it.

What did I do to him that excuses this behavior? That makes him think this cruelty is well deserved. He lied and made a fool out of me.

Out of the love I had for him.

Gave me a home in his heart and then kicked me out like I meant nothing. Like we meant nothing.

I lost everything that night except my sanity, but here he is again, trying to steal what little of it is left.

I'm tired of fighting.

I'm exhausted.

Mozart's Requiem sounds in the speakers all around the room on repeat. The melody brings both painful and beautiful memories that I spend years trying to erase to the surface of my mind.

Our song.

Strange but true.

The first time he listened to Mozart was with me during detention. That day, I was minding my business, walking to my literature class, when suddenly I was pushed into the lockers by Logan Beauregard. He was the minion and loyal follower of the three blonde replicas that used to mock me back then. He hated me from the first time he laid eyes on me, just because I was different. Just because I didn't want his disgusting kiss. The moment his front was pressed to my back, I panicked, and I attacked without thinking about the consequences. I slapped him hard, and instead of him being punished for attacking me, I was the one that got detention for putting my hands on him. He triggered something in me that day, and I had no choice but to react.

So, I got sent to detention, and he went on with his day like what he did wasn't wrong. I was in the classroom alone when Valentino came in with a pleased look on his face and sat next to me. We spent hours listening to my playlist without speaking. That's the thing about Valentino and me. We never really needed words between us. Our love was in our actions.

Reckless and young, sometimes stupid, but it was beautiful, nonetheless.

My broken heart beats slowly but steadily in my chest, reminding me of what it once felt like to be loved by him. I did love him once, and then I came to hate him as much as I loved him. With the same ferocity.

I'm brought back to the present when a loud noise sounds from outside the door. Then it swings open and in walks my tormentor. I've been too tired lately to pay attention to the little details of this new man before me. Most of the time, he comes to me at night when I can't see him clearly, just the shadows of his face, but now in this new light, I can.

My heart clenches.

He looks like the Devil incarnate and nothing like the celestial being he was before. He still has those mesmerizing blue eyes that looked empty. There was a spark there once, but now, all I see in them is hatred. Hatred towards me.

He has a perfect five o'clock shadow, and I hate it. I hate that he's covering himself.

Scars.

Flaws.

The snake tattoos around his neck and chest. Valentino hated being compared to his twin brother, and now he looks like a replica of the youngest twin. But if I thought he was beautiful before, that image holds no candle to what he looks like now. Before, he was stunning, the picture-perfect good boy with a bad boy vibe surrounding him, but now he's all man.

Dangerous.

Ruthless.

Reckless.

I hate myself for the way my dumb heart skips many beats when he's nearby. I abhor the way I feel the urge to clench my thighs together to find some relief between my legs every time Valentino looks at me like he doesn't know whether to strangle me or fuck me.

Because I know he thinks about it. It's sick, but I think about it too. In my delirious state I replayed all the times that we were together and the way he always was a contradiction. He loved me dearly but fucked me like he didn't.

His dead eyes narrow as soon as they land on me. I know he's struggling with what to do next. Valentino can be ruthless, even cruel, but every time he causes someone else pain, it eats at his soul. It takes away a part of him. That was the boy I knew but this man, the man he grew to be, is a mad one.

Does he plan to keep me here forever?

Will he let me walk away?

Alive?

"I won't tell you again that you need to fucking eat. If you don't behave, you'll leave me no choice but to feed you through an IV." He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at me like I'm a puzzle he never could decipher.

I guess that was my fault.

I only showed him the pretty parts of me back then.

I never shared my brokenness with him.

Not wanting to be force fed, I stand up a little in bed.

"What's your endgame? Are you going to kill me? Because if that's the case than do it now and end my fucking misery."

"Ahhh, but that's the easy way out, don't you think, witch?"

Witch.

Such hatred in one word.

I was once his witch, his best friend, and now he only sees me as his enemy.

I think hard about what I could've done to him but can't come up with anything that I've ever done to deserve this. Yes, I ran from him after what happened. Did he think what he did and said was okay?

“What did I ever do to you, huh?”

“It's funny how you act like the victim when you were the one to fire the first shot.” He comes closer, and his voice sounds harsher, and his eyes look crazed, but he remains quiet. It frustrates me to no end.

“I fucking loved you! You were my entire goddam world and you used me. You mocked me like everyone else in that shitty place.” I tell him everything I'm feeling in the moment, not holding back. I tell him all the things I wanted to say but never had the courage to before today. “You betrayed me, Valentino, and now, after all this time you still want to torment me some more? Wasn't ripping my heart out of my chest and stomping on it enough for you?”

My breathing comes fast, and my hands begin to shake. I feel out of control, and I hate it. I hate myself for being so weak. For loving this man even when he hates me. Even when all I was to him was a pawn in his sick family's game of power and corruption. I see something flash in his eyes before he conceals it and moves forward. Slowly, and like a predator, he hunts me as I move backward. I poked the beast, now let's see how far he's willing to go.

I stop in the middle of the room and let him catch up to me. We're chest to chest now. So close I can smell him. The mix of cigarettes and alcohol on his breath hits my nostrils, and I inhale him in just like I used to do when we were together.

Back then, his scent grounded me, but now? It makes me feel out of control.

That's a dangerous thing for someone like me.

His eyes narrow, and his nostrils flare before he grabs my neck and squeezes hard, cutting my air supply. I struggle, fighting him off, but he's too strong. I can't breathe, but I still fight him with the little strength I have left. I slap his face repeatedly, but it does nothing to deter him.

I'm going to die.

I'm going to die by my once lover's hands.

"I'll make you remember, Fallon. You might've forgotten because it meant nothing to you, but it meant the goddamn world to me, and you ruined it. You ruined us too."

What is he talking about?

We stand like that, watching each other, breaths coming fast, my chest heaving against his with the effort to keep taking in air as he squeezes it out of me. I feel dizzy and about to lose this fight when his hands leave my neck, and his eyes meet mine. Searching for something, I don't know what. I see the battle behind his eyes. I see it in the way he looks at me. The way his eyes drop to my lips. Sexual attraction is a thing of the body, not the mind. Not the heart. You don't need to love someone to sleep with them. That's what most people say, but not me. I could never give my body to someone that doesn't hold a piece of my heart. My soul.

There is more between us. Something else other than hatred. Something different.

He's slowly killing me and my heart with his ruthless actions. Something that was once pure is now tainted by painful memories, confusion, and hate.

We stay like that. Our eyes locked, and then I feel him. I feel his cock at my belly, hard and thick and ready.

He is aroused.

I can work with this.

Let's see how far he's willing to go with this game of his.

"You get off on this." My voice somehow a controlled whisper. Not wanting to sound weak. "You like it. You like watching me squirm and feeling how powerless I am against you."

He grins and pushes his cock against me once as if to say yes, yes, he did.

"I guess you never really knew me."

"Oh, I knew you and you can act like I didn't, but it would all be lies, wouldn't it, Alexander? Because I know you better than you know yourself, and that fucks with your head." I taunt him knowing nothing good can come out of it but still doing it anyway. I have nothing left to lose because all I ever had I gave to this cruel man. Even when we were apart, part of me still stayed behind with him.

He bares his teeth like a wild animal ready to strike.

In the next instant, he circles my wrists with his hands and draws my arms over my head, leaning down so his forehead rests against mine.

“I told you not to call me that ever again,” he whispers.

His eyes roam over my face and settle on my mouth. Watching me like he doesn't really know what to do with me now that things aren't going according to plan. I guess he thought it would have a different outcome. That I would stay down on the floor and not fight every time he shoves me down. I get up every time life throws me down, bruised and broken, but I never stay down for long.

“What are you going to do about it, lost boy?”

I swallow and feel my nipples hardening against the fabric of his shirt and hate myself for it.

Hate my body for it.

“You're playing a dangerous game.” He brings his mouth to my ear and nips it before whispering. “Your tears make my cock hard just as much as your fight does.” My body shivers as I feel him lean his face down to where my pulse throbs against my throat and slide his tongue over it. One long, drawn-out taste to tell me he knows I am terrified. He knows how fast my heart is pounding, and he knows, that despite the bravado in my talk, I am afraid of what he might do next.

What he doesn't know is that, despite my body's reactions to him, I won't give in so easily. I refuse to cry or beg for mercy. That's what he wants. He torments me, yes. He is fucking with my head, but the only way out of this is by remaining sane and figuring out what his endgame is.

Valentino brings his face to mine again. His right cheek dimples when the corner of his mouth turns upward as he looks at my slightly parted lips and flush skin. He thinks he's won. How wrong he is.

Before I have time to think this through, he leans his head in and kisses me. How disturbing that my body remembers his? My lips still remember his full ones. My tormentor takes my lower lip between his, and I hear him moan as he sucks on it. I stand there, in his arms, feeling my body go limp. He's enjoying this.

And when I tilt my head back, he kisses me full on the lips and slides his tongue inside my mouth, and I bite down hard. Damn well knowing I'll pay for it. I feel warm blood coat my own lips as I listen to his low chuckle.

I pull back from his face and stare at his mouth. His tongue is bleeding and already swollen.

I expected outrage and a hard slap to the face, but not this.

Calmness and laughter.

What am I up against?

“You’re a bitch.” He lowers my arms, twists them behind my back with one hand and wipes the blood from his chin with the back of his other hand. I don’t move. I’m frozen in place by the revelation of this new man. This monster and the way he intrigues me more than he scares me.

How very sick.

He turns me, so he stands behind me, then walks me toward the chest where, without a word, he unlocks and opens it. Without warning, he takes out a set of cuffs—and in one swift movement—he throws me on the bed and climbs over my body, trapping me with his.

No.

He wouldn’t.

He wouldn’t force me.

He wouldn’t dare.

You don’t know him anymore.

Valentino releases my wrists, takes hold of one arm and attaches the cuff to my wrist before fighting me for the other and binding them together. I meet his eyes and find nothing there. I know what he is doing. He is showing me who’s in control. Who’s in charge. He releases my arms and hovers over my body, looking down at me. First my face, my eyes, then down over my breasts and belly, and to my covered pussy. There, his gaze hovers, and when he moves to position himself between my legs, I freeze.

Don’t do it, Alexander.

When his eyes meet mine again, I realize what he wants from me. He wants me to fight him. He wants an excuse to carry on with this twisted torture.

Seconds pass before I feel his cold hands on my inner thighs, roughly trailing his fingertips up and up until he makes me squirm in place. His thick fingers begin to play with the hem of my panties, but his face looks like he’s sick. Like he ate something bad. He’s still a walking contradiction.

“So, this is who you are now? A rapist.”

I say it, and I feel like an idiot, regretting the words the moment they leave my mouth. He deserves them, so why do I feel sick to my stomach the moment his blue eyes clash with mine?

And I see it then.

The pain.

The anguish.

The hurt.

But then he blinks, and it all fades away.

He's angry now.

Valentino stops but doesn't remove his fingers from between my legs. I thought he'd say something, but he remains silent. He just watches me for a long time, as if he wants me to know he holds all the power. That he owns me. That he could do whatever he wanted to do to me. And then he pushes himself off the bed, heads for the door, but before he turns to leave, I ask him what's been eating at me since the day he brought me here. The one thing that could change everything.

The one thing that will prove to me that he is completely gone.

"How could you leave him there? All alone, a defenseless little boy?" Because as much as I hate Valentino for a lot of things, the one thing I will never forgive or forget is how he left Roman at the mercy of those cruel men.

He turns my way abruptly, with a confused look on his face, but before I can figure out what that was all about, he turns and leaves without saying a word.

I'm left alone again, more confused than before.

I sit up in bed, look at my cuffed hands, and wonder if there's any possibility that the boy I once loved more than anything is still there underneath all that madness?

What is it about him that has held me captive to his love and hate throughout the years with no chance of escaping?

Suddenly, a thought pops up, and I know what I need to do.

I need to break down his walls and find freedom.

That's my endgame.

Even if it kills me.

It just might.

VALENTINO

A FRIEND

“Break down my walls and come on in.” – Val

Now

“Well, hello there, baby brother.” My twin’s mocking tone irks me even through a fucking phone line. I guess everything will annoy you when you’re a miserable fuck.

“I’m older than you and you fucking know it.”

“Semantics.”

“Bullshit.”

A low chuckle sounds from the end of the other line. I’d rather eat shit than ask my brother for anything, it would be less painful, but I don’t know where to go, who to ask. I can’t call our father. I can’t exactly show up at his house after all these years.

No one has seen me.

Not even my twin.

I wanted it that way, and I still do, but I need to know.

Her words are on replay in my head like a broken record.

How could you leave him there? All alone, a defenseless little boy?

The fuck was she talking about? I noticed the vulnerability and the hope in her tone. Fallon’s naive heart was showing in her face the moment she asked me that question. I hated that. I can’t stand the way she looks at me. Like I need help and she can save me. It makes me feel out of control.

I need to know. I hate not knowing.

It fucks with me.

Before I call the man, whom I ordered to retrieve her from the warehouse

and find out why-the-fuck he left things out, I need answers from someone I know would never lie to me.

My twin is a lot of things, but a liar is not one of them.

He won't spare my feelings by lying.

That's not who he is.

"Was there someone else in the warehouse the day she was taken?"

I don't need to say her name.

He knows.

Silence follows my question, and after a few seconds, he puts me out of my misery and answers me.

"Yes." That's all he says, angering me more.

My skin itches and my head is spinning. What-the-fuck?

"Who?"

"Your nephew, Roman."

One sentence changes everything. One sentence takes me back to a time I hoped to forget. I tried my damn hardest to do so.

What did I do?

Roman.

Roman.

Roman.

His name keeps breaking through my walls and has been doing so since the day I found out about his birth. Since the day I saw him from afar on a warm summer day in New York.

"If you weren't already fucking dead, I would end you, *fratello*." My twins' harsh words have no effect on me. His threats don't faze me. Nothing he can do to me will hurt me.

Not really.

"Is he okay?" I say it so low that I don't really think he heard me. The line goes quiet, and I just know that for my brother to stay silent, something must really be troubling him.

"You left, Valentino. The families don't owe you shit. Not even answers." The line goes dead after that.

Shit.

I know this.

I fucking know I left, but I just want...

It doesn't matter now.

I hate the fucking world. I hate the cards that we were dealt. I fucking

hate the families and everything that has to do with dirty fucking money. I hate that in some way, I'm still bound to it. I hate myself even more because, deep down, I enjoy spilling blood from time to time when it's asked of me.

I don't like how my chest feels tight when I think of the little boy with eyes too big for his face and a smile that brightened my darkest day without even trying.

Dropping my phone on the desk, I open the last drawer and grab the frame hidden under all the mess.

His newborn photo.

Looking at it is too painful, so I stash it away, where I don't have to see it every day. Reminding me of the world I'm not part of anymore.

Light brown hair and chubby cheeks. Does he still look the same? Has he changed a lot throughout the years?

Fuck.

I never meant for this.

Not for him to be hurt.

I feel this overwhelming need to fuck shit up. If I didn't hate myself enough, this would do it.

I left him there.

He was hurt because of you.

He could've been kill—

Ring, ring, ring.

Putting the frame back down on the desk, I reach for my phone.

Blace calling.

Just the motherfucker I needed to speak to.

I answer the call, but I don't say shit, waiting for him to speak first. They know the deal. "Boss, a girl is snooping around your sister's place. Should I take care of it—"

"Tell me something, Blace. Was there someone else at the warehouse when you arrived?"

The line goes silent for a second.

I wait.

I know the answer.

I knew the viper men couldn't be trusted because most of them are disloyal dogs from the other side of town, trying to make a name for themselves. Trying to take a part of the city for them. Trying to take back what Benedetto stole from them and what my brother is now the boss of.

The vipers.

Fallon's stepdaddy's legacy.

His gang.

Now a part of the Nicolasi family.

Lorenzo put a bullet in the head of most of the members, but some of them jumped ship real fast once their leader was taken out. This one proved to be useful time and time again, but he fucked up the moment he forgot to mention a child was there.

A fucking child.

An innocent.

My nephew.

I might be gone and fucked up in the head, but kids are and will always be off fucking limits.

Fuck, this fucking headache is crippling.

On days like this one, I wish I wasn't clean.

Just one little pill, and it'll all be well.

I'm so fucked.

How could you leave him there? All alone, a defenseless little boy?

How could you leave him there? All alone, a defenseless little boy?

How could you leave him there? All alone, a defenseless little boy?

Her voice punishes me, and I can't stop the memories from attacking me full force.

Then

I don't like blood.

Not like my brother does.

It's messy and someone is always in agony whenever there's blood involved.

"P-Pleassse..."

I close my eyes to block out the man's pleas for mercy, but it does nothing. I can still hear his shallow breathing and hisses of pain.

"I can't help you. I'm sorry."

"Mercy, *bambino*." The man bleeding on the floor begs while reaching

his hand out to me.

I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry.

I can't.

I want to tell him, but no sound comes out. The words are stuck inside my head.

Defective little shit.

He was right.

There's something wrong with me.

That's why mommy left us with dad.

I'm the reason why she doesn't want us and only kept our sister.

"Ahhhh." The man, Marcello, tries to move but his broken leg won't allow him. He is one of the men that keep us safe whenever we go outside these walls. I like him best out of all the men in suits. He never treats us like nuisances and doesn't mock my silence. He even jokes with my twin, and Lorenzo doesn't let just anyone in, but Marcello is different.

He cares.

He's the only one that does.

I replay all the times he has sneaked books inside my backpack, so I could have something to read while I'm in school. My favorite reads. The books dad got me for my birthday, but grandfather would take them away if he found them.

Books are for women, not for future capos.

They make you weak, boy.

They give you knowledge, mio figlio.

Be brave, Valentino.

The voices of my grandfather and father blend inside my head, and it drives me mad. It pains me.

Not thinking about it, I step forward and drop to my knees in front of a bleeding Marcello. His breaths are coming short, and he grimaces in pain when I try to remove the ropes around his neck.

He screams in agony.

I'm trying to be gentle, but the ropes are breaking his skin.

I can't do this.

"I-I need to find—" I don't get to finish my sentence because the basement doors are thrown open.

"Valentino."

My entire body freezes, and my heart stops. His voice sounds menacing and nothing like the tone he uses when everyone else is around.

“Come here.”

My legs are shaking but I still find the will to stand up from the floor and walk towards my grandfather. A few steps and I’m standing in front of him.

“Grandfather, he is—”

Smack.

I’m thrown back by the force of his hand on my cheek. A stinging pain surrounds the entire right side of the face.

He slapped me.

It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last.

I remain on the floor, and I don’t dare let a tear fall. It will only anger him more. The punishment is worse when I cry or beg for him to stop.

“You want to help him, Valentino?” My grandfather’s deadly tone booms inside this closed space.

I don’t answer him. One time I answered back, and he gave me a busted lip. So, I stay silent and stare at the blood running down Marcello’s body, forming a puddle next to my feet.

The silence that follows is defining.

“Get up!” One moment everything is dead silent, and the next my grandfather is yanking me by the neck and putting a gun in my hands.

No, no, no, no.

“Please, grandfather. No.”

“You’re too weak, boy. It’s about damn time you learn how to be a man. A man of the three families.”

“I don’t want to!”

He squeezes my neck harder, and I can’t help it. I wet my pants.

He will kill me now.

“You little shit. See!” He pushes me forward towards Marcelo and positions the gun in my hand, aiming towards Marcello’s head. “Wetting your pants like a fucking pussy.” His cruel words replay in my head, and it’s hard to breathe. It’s hard to think.

There is no way out of this.

I should’ve never come down here. I should’ve stayed inside my room and inside the safe world my books created for me.

Nothing hurts me there.

I brought this on myself.

A split-second can change someone's life forever. That's what dad said in one of his many drunken ramblings.

Is this what changed my brother? Did grandfather make him do this too? I block out the noise, my only friend's terrified whimpers, my grandfather's shouts of anger, and only concentrate on the blood on the floor.

Red.

Thick.

Messy, so very messy.

"It's okay, *bambino*." Marcello's voice brings me back, making me look into his eyes. There's so much blood on his face. His eyes are swollen just like the rest of his face. Barely recognizable, but I can still see the subtle grin he always offered me when I silently communicated that I didn't want to be disturbed and the way his eyes were always bright when he brought me my favorite candy.

It hurts my heart.

It hurts my mind.

So I close my eyes. I don't want this face to be the one I see when I close my eyes after I'm done committing the most heinous crime.

Killing a friend.

My entire body begins to shake in anticipation of what's to come. I count to three.

One

Two

Bang.

A life is gone.

Faded away.

Warm thick liquid splashes all over my face.

My grandfather laughs and ruffles my hair like I just did something honorable. "Good job. You're a man now. A respectable one." He chuckles, pushing me forward towards my dead friend, and turns away. "You should be more like your brother."

He laughs some more.

Cruelly and unapologetically.

He keeps laughing all the way to the door.

All the while, I'm frozen in place, blood on my face, gun in hand, and my friend dead on the floor.

The door closes behind my grandfather, and only then do I let the tears

fall.

Marcello.

VALENTINO

THREE HUNDRED SIXTY-FIVE

“It is both a blessing and a curse to love her so very deeply.” – Val
Now

One split second does change a life.
Ends one too.

That day was the first day of my hell. Things weren't exactly perfect in that house but after that day, everything changed.

I became just like my brother.

While killing made my brother feel like he was on top of the world, it made me feel like mine was ending with each kill.

With each clip I emptied on someone I came to trust, on friends, and even enemies. It hurt all the same.

Until I stopped feeling all together to get through that hell.

Until her.

Until she showed me that there's heaven in chaos and hell in silence.

The woman trapped inside this hell I created for both of us showed me once upon a time that there's more to life than blood, money, and power. That I could be more. That I was more, but it was all a lie, wasn't it?

I'm a monster now.

One who thrives on others' misery.

One who enjoys each kill.

I turned into my brother.

I'm nothing like the boy I once was.

My phone rings, but I send it straight to voicemail and shove it inside one of the drawers of my desk, but once I look down, I see them.

Our past, stacked neatly in a pile of papers.
I can't look away.
Many emotions and thoughts run through me as I stare at them.
365 letters for every day she was away.
Disgusted with myself, I grab the letters and slam the drawer shut.
Let her witness what she did.
Let the sickness infect her too.
Let her bleed my words.
Our past.
My reality.
We can never go back.
There's only one ending here.
There's only one way I will be able to breathe again without this agony
spreading through my veins.
Only one way to silence the painful chaos in my head.
Maybe when this is all over, I'll be able to be who I once was or maybe
it'll leave me even more fucked-up than before, but regardless of it all, it
ends.
It all ends with her.

VALENTINO

FALLON ALICIA JAMES

“For you I would risk it all.” – Val
Then

“Who’s the new girl?” I don’t bother looking up from my phone to answer Lucan’s intruding questions. Since the moment she arrived at the academy, she has been the center of everyone’s attention. It doesn’t matter how hard she tries to blend into the background. Someone like her will always find herself front and center. There’s a genuine and sweet light radiating from her, and since the moment I first saw her, I’ve had this urge to bask in it.

She’s not only beautiful in an effortless way, but there’s something tragic about her too. Maybe it’s the way she tries to hide and never be seen when people are around, or maybe it’s the way she smiles as she flips the pages of the book she’s currently reading like the world inside the book is better than the one she’s in.

Fuck, it’s plain and simple.

It’s her.

Beauty is her.

I should stay away.

I really should for both of our sakes, but she keeps pulling me in without even saying a word. She thinks I don’t see her sneaking glances my way whenever we sit in silence reading, or in my case, pretending. Ever since that day in the library, I haven’t been able to read a single page. All I do is think about her because whenever thoughts of her creep in, the demons inside my head fade into the background.

The nightmares are less frequent.

All I dream of is her.

How fucking sick, no?

We barely speak, and we don't know each other, not really, but it doesn't feel that way when we're together.

I found peace in her chaos.

The girl might be quiet and an introvert, but I see her. Truly see the girl that hides in the solitary library and behind her nerdy glasses.

I see a girl that's not afraid of the dark.

A girl that will willingly dance with the devil every night and rejoice in his wicked ways.

It's there in the way she loves dark and depressing-as-fuck poetry.

The way she sits quietly next to me for hours just reading a book while I write in my journal.

"The fuck is wrong with you lately?" Lucan snaps from my right, giving me no choice but to give him my attention, making the thoughts of her fade away. Not completely because lately, she's everywhere.

Feeling eyes on the back of my head, I turn and meet her green ones. Enchanting green eyes behind those cute as fuck glasses. I had never found the quiet and nerd type sexy, but this damn girl has taken my every thought hostage.

It's maddening.

It's embarrassing how all I do lately is wonder if she's okay. If she's eating, or if she's sad. The girl walks through the halls with her head cast low, trying to hide from the world, but I see her.

And unfortunately for her, I'm obsessed with everything that is her.

The crazy hairstyles.

Her weird love for tragic poetry and superheroes.

The secondhand uniform that doesn't do her beautiful body justice and those damn nerd glasses.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I've jacked off to thoughts of her wearing nothing but those glasses, on her knees for me on the library's floor.

Shit.

Get a fucking grip, man.

She's... different.

The kind of girl that's for a lifetime, not just one night.

My brother and Lucan keep talking, but their voices move to the

background of my mind.

Fuck.

They can't know.

Nobody can know, for a matter of fact.

We can't have weaknesses.

I'll only bring tragedy to her life, and by the looks of it, that's something she knows a lot about.

Tragedy.

I can see it in her.

Demons, same as mine, dance and wreak havoc behind those enchanting emerald eyes.

You can have her...

You can have everything...

I shake my head, stuffing my hands inside my black hoodie. I leave Lorenzo and Lucan behind as I charge down the hall towards my locker. The moment I pull my locker door open, something falls to the floor. I bend over to pick it up, and I'm surprised to see a polaroid photo of me.

Shit.

This girl.

Quiet and sweet but reckless with her heart.

Why would she want anything from me?

Is she like the rest of them?

Does she want me because of my money? My name?

Maybe she likes the idea of me?

Something deep in my gut tells me she's not like the rest. She's just... her.

I look down at the square photograph that I hold in my hand and see myself. I try to think of when she could've taken it without me noticing, but I come up with nothing. The photograph is of me in a hoodie covering my face, journal in hand, looking down at the pages.

I could say that it pisses me off to be photographed without my consent, but that would be a lie. Something about her being as obsessed with me as I am with her in so little time makes me feel like a king.

Like I'm all she fucking sees.

I turn the photo around, and I notice writing in black on the back.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before. – What do

you dream about?

What do I dream about?

I didn't dream at all until you walked into my life with your shy stares and your beautiful green eyes.

I shut my locker and tuck the photo safely between the pages of my copy of Dante's *Inferno*. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand, feeling her before I see her. I can't help but look over my shoulder and meet her eyes.

Emerald green eyes, a mix of fear, wonder, and a challenge staring back at me.

What a walking contradiction this girl is.

I'll peel off all your layers and set you free.

I shouldn't keep you.

I should save both of us from a painful ending—because it will end. It's not a matter of if, but when.

Nothing good lasts for long.

No one stays.

They all leave.

I hold her eyes until I find my way inside the cafeteria.

I've become addicted to her eyes.

I am never the first option.

I always blend into the background when my brother is around. I am the eldest, but somehow, my twin brother was always the center of everyone's world, and I selfishly want that.

I want to be the center of her world because she has become the center of everything to me.

My world.

My thoughts.

My every fantasy.

Fallon Alicia James.

FALLON

Brrrrrr.

My stomach growls for the third time today. I usually have a handle on

this, but I forgot to take my protein bar this morning, and there's not one vending machine inside this building.

Not even a damn water fountain like most schools have. I guess Holy Trinity Academy is above all of that. There's only the food you buy from the cafeteria that looks like a five-star gourmet restaurant. I'm not being sarcastic. It really looks like something you see on elite schools in TV series.

How the hell I was allowed inside these walls is still a mystery to me. I need to find out soon before I get too deep. Mom would never do something out of the kindness of her heart.

Not for me.

She's working an angle, and I need to find out what it is.

Why isn't my stepbrother here as well?

Why just me?

Loud chatter and laughter interrupt my thoughts, and I focus on the room before me. I walk inside the cafeteria and look around. I don't usually step foot inside this place. Usually, I'm hidden away at the library, waiting for the next class to start.

Everyone is seated by cliques. Yes, even the nerds have their own cliques. Nerds don't look like they used to back in the day or how they're portrayed in movies. Now, they're rich and popular, just with a higher IQ than everyone else and a snooty and a holier than thou attitude.

I'm relieved to see that Miriam, the lady that serves the food, is here today. She's been missing the past week since her kid had an ear infection and had to stay home from school.

How do I know all of this?

Because instead of trying to fit in with the student crowd, I decided to befriend the faculty. From my teachers to the janitor.

They're safe.

They don't ask questions.

They don't judge.

Weird, I know.

"Sweet pea!" Miriam smiles brightly at me as I approach the food counter from the side. I don't intend to step in line to buy food. I just came in here to see if there was any possible way I could persuade her into giving me a bottle of water and a small cup of fruit.

I'm embarrassed.

I can't afford the food here, and I'm tired of my stomach hurting all day

because I haven't eaten anything. Last night I packed my lunch, but once I got here and opened my bag, the protein bar and the bottle of water were gone.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened.

Caleb.

Mom would never waste her precious time going through my backpack. She would have to care, and she doesn't.

It was him.

It wasn't enough that he slapped me around the night before and I have to use makeup now to cover the bruises but he had to pull this shit too.

When will this end?

"Hi, Miriam!" I offer her a sincere smile, which she returns. "How's Evan doing?"

"He's much better now that I got him on antibiotics. I swear dealing with a sick kid is not easy, but I'm glad it's over, and he's back to his happy and healthy self."

My heart hurts every time I hear the love in her voice and see the adoration on her face every time she mentions her boy. I had that once. Someone who loved me. Who cared.

"You're in luck, my girl."

"How so?"

"Here." I see her pull a small card from her apron and hands it to me.

The cafeteria coupon card.

The silver one.

A whole year worth of breakfast and lunch.

"B-but how? Who?"

"That I cannot tell you, but take it, love." I hate how she looks at me. I know what she's thinking. Poor girl. She needs to eat. She needs to take better care of herself.

I know this.

I can't help it, though.

Shaking those thoughts away, I grab the card and feel ashamed.

I know I shouldn't.

I should be grateful that someone was kind enough to buy me food for the entire school year, but I feel so low.

I hate depending on others.

I hate that now I have no choice but to eat here. I can't throw food away

when so many kids go hungry in a day. I would be rude to return it and I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. It had to be Miriam.

I can't throw her act of kindness in her face just because I have issues.

"Thank you."

A sad smile takes over her pretty face. "I wish it had been me, sweet pea, but when I went to fill your card with money, it was already taken care of."

If not her, then who?

I don't know anyone else that would do this for me.

I quickly tell her what I want from the menu, not wanting to hold up the line.

"Here." Miriam hands me a tray with a bowl of fruits, water, and a muffin. "Eat." She gives me a stern look and shoos me away.

Grabbing the tray safely in my hands I turn around and face the room. I search for an empty seat, but I see none. I walk until I find an empty table next to the trash and the exit. Perfect. If shit goes south, there's a quick escape.

Placing the tray down on the table, I take my old cassette player and put the headphones on, tuning everyone and everything out.

Looking down at my plate of fruits, I start to count seven fruits and take them out. The less I eat, the better. If I gain a pound, mother will have a cow.

My music takes me away from this world as I dive into my plate. I am blissfully unaware of my surroundings until strong hands pull my headphones from my head down to my neck.

Rude.

Who would even bother to—

Looking up, I come face to face with the most beautiful blue eyes.

Alexander.

"Y-yes?" Smooth, Fallon. Real smooth.

Without warning or manners, he pushes the chair right next to me back and sits down. No tray, no nothing, just the Polaroid photo I took of him in his hands.

I thought I wouldn't have to deal with this today. I planned to go home and think of a reason why I would take a photo of him, ask him what he dreams about, and leave it inside his locker like a creep. An excuse that makes me look less creepy. I don't think it exists.

I don't even know why I did it. I was having a shitty morning, and then I saw him, standing side by side with his twin and friend, looking out of place.

Like he would rather be anywhere else. I didn't like the solemn look on his face. It makes me feel restless. After witnessing how beautiful and addicting Alexander's smile is, it would be tragic not to see it every day.

I wondered what he likes.

Does he have any goals or aspirations?

What does he dream about?

What is he writing in that journal of his?

So many questions and I needed answers like I needed my next breath. You might think I'm weird, right? That I've only talked to him a handful of times. That I don't even know him, and he doesn't know me either, and yet once I close my eyes at night, all I see are his eyes and his wicked smile. The one I've noticed he doesn't share with anyone else in this place.

Just...me.

Maybe you think I'm sick.

Maybe I am.

After years of being mistreated by my mother, years of shoving myself into the background, now that I know what it feels to be seen, seen in a way that doesn't hold judgment, I'm addicted to the feeling.

Alexander sees me, and I should push him away. I should save him from my head, my emotions, but he insists on coming back.

He's a... friend.

We have so many things in common that it's almost unreal that I met someone like him. Now my only goal is to leave this place and find a hidden and cozy cabin in the woods somewhere where no one can see me. No one can bother me.

Just me, my demons, and dreams.

I can't afford a friend.

Besides, my stepbrother wouldn't allow it if he ever found out. He ruins everything that brings me joy.

"Your eyes."

"W-what?"

"That's what I dream about." He says it like it's nothing. Like he just didn't leave me speechless.

What do I say to that?

Think, Fallon.

He's lying. The ugly voice that won't leave tells me. Confusing me. Making me doubt.

It has to be a joke of some sort. Maybe he made a bet with his popular friends. A bet of who can bang the heavy and poor girl first.

My head pounds.

My heart aches.

Center yourself, Fallon.

Think of Zigs.

His love for you.

His dreams for you.

It does it every time. It makes me come back from the dark and lonely corner that torments me in my head.

Ziggy.

Shit, did he notice how fucked up I am?

“You don’t have to do this, you know?” I act like I’m not embarrassed as hell.

“Do what?” His dark eyes focus on me, and it’s almost impossible to look away, but somehow, I manage to. I stare at the plate of fruits in front of me instead.

The voices in my head and my issues with eating. That’s one evil I’ve known my entire life. I’m used to it, but I don’t know what might lurk behind his intentions.

“Befriend me for a joke. What are they making you do? Sleep with the new and weird girl?”

I look up, and my breath hitches the moment he grabs my chin in his cold hands.

So cold.

“Fuck you.” He whispers so softly that you can barely believe it’s an insult. “If you want me to go away, just say so. I’ll leave you to enjoy your pity party, love.”

No.

Don’t leave.

I want to say.

When you’re around the demons seem to flee. They’re there but I don’t pay them attention as much as I do when I’m alone.

“Sorry.” I mumble.

Weird.

Awkward.

Fucked up.

I'm such a catch. Maybe he's just as fucked up as me. Because who would want my company? My emotions are usually all over the place.

I hear him laugh softly, but he says nothing else.

I forgot we are surrounded by people. How does he manage to pull me away from reality and into a little world of our own making? Just like my music and books do?

I'm in deep waters.

I cannot start something that will end. Something that might end up breaking both of us.

But looking around the room at everyone staring our way with a mix of bewildered and hateful stares, I notice how little it matters to Alexander. I just know that this is the beginning.

The start of something beautiful but tragic.

The beginning of us.

The end of me.

My vices have become my lifeline.

Alexander has become one of them.

I'm addicted to everything that is him.

God, the Devil, whoever claims me. Help me because I am addicted to this boy.

Beautiful lost boy.

I feel my cheeks heat, and I know soon after he'll be able to tell. When I'm embarrassed as hell, my damn body betrays me. I turn pink all over.

"Would you rather eat an uncooked cow or be eaten by a lion?" I blur out all of a sudden like the awkward individual I am.

Twenty questions.

It always helps me get out of extremely awkward situations.

"Get eaten by a lion."

What?

"You'd rather die such an excruciatingly painful death than eat raw meat?"

"Well, it depends, really. Am I just eating uncooked meat? Or am I killing the cow myself and then eating it? Because if that's the case, I would rather be eaten by the lion."

He goes back to writing in his journal and I want to know what he writes about so bad.

"That's sweet."

He would rather die than kill a defenseless animal. Ugh, why does he have to be so kind?

“Not really. I don’t want that shit all over me, so yeah, I’d rather die.”

“That shit?”

“The blood.”

Oh... wait, what?

That’s not kind at all. That’s just weird.

“I see that I ruined the noble perception of me you just conjured inside your little head. I’m not sweet, Alicia. I detest blood, and honestly I hate everything with it.”

“Do you hate animals?”

“Yes.”

Uh-oh.

“Do you hate humans?”

“Very much.”

Uh, what?

“Do you hate me?”

“No.”

My heart skips an idiotic beat.

He just said that he hates all living things, and that should definitely concern me because who the hell hates puppies and kittens? But here I am, blushing like a six-year-old girl because he hates all things except me.

We stayed quiet after that.

He keeps writing in his journal without a care in the world, and I stay listening to my music, blissfully unaware of the whispers and judgment surrounding us at this precise moment.

I don’t know how much time has passed, but I notice kids scattering outside the cafeteria and leaving their friends behind.

It’s time to go back to reality.

Bummer.

It is nice and safe here.

“Meet me outside after school.” He looks at me with a stern look without giving me a chance to decline. “Be there.” With that, he walks off. I don’t even have time to think about it. I turn to look over my shoulder and see him exit the cafeteria. It doesn’t escape my notice that almost everyone is staring at me, mostly the girls, some with curiosity and others with hateful stares.

Meet me outside.

My mind tells me to run in the opposite direction of him. Run and hide from someone like him. Someone that can own my soul with just one sorrowful stare and a soft-spoken word.

My heart, on the other hand, beats faster, almost beating out of my chest, wanting to follow him.

Stupid heart, don't you know that boys like him are not meant for girls like me?

Mother has warned me off boys like him many times before. I'm not good enough for a boy from the good side of the city.

Well, good thing I don't listen to a word she says lately.

She's messed me up enough.

I'm doing this one thing for me.

I'm... living again, not just existing to survive.

Maybe Alexander is just what my heart needed.

Another chance at life.

FALLON

TWIN FLAMES

“Will you love me in the dark?” – Val
Then

Sixty seconds.
Is he waiting?
Fifty seconds.

He won't be there.

You're a joke.

A game to him.

Twenty seconds.

God, shut the fuck up. Just for today. Just let me have this. Just one day where I don't wish to end it all. A day to live.

I wish I could kill the voice in my head that keeps pulling me down, trying to get me underwater. One day, I'll drown.

Not today.

Briiiiiing.

Students rise from their desks and hurry outside the classroom. Laughter and loud chatter sound all around me.

I grab my backpack and exit the classroom without a glance backward. I ignore everything and everyone and head to my locker. I left my camera there, and I need to get it before I head out. Once I enter the combination and pull the locker door open, something falls to the floor beside my feet.

A small piece of paper.

I quickly bend down and retrieve it from the floor.

What do you dream about? - V

Why did he sign the note with the letter V? Weird. I still smile to myself, even when a small part of me doubts this. I tuck the piece of paper inside my favorite book and close my locker.

He's waiting...

Pushing the doors of the academy open and stepping outside, I am greeted with heavy rain falling down hard and no Alexander in sight.

I feel disappointment take root in my heart. I'm used to it, but it still stings.

I look up at the sky, and all I see are grey clouds. I'll have to walk to the nearest bus stop in this rain so I can get home. I take a step forward, leaving the spot that's shielding me from the rain, and I'm instantly soaked.

Maybe if I—

My thoughts are interrupted by the loud roar of an engine. I don't know what makes me stop and turn the way the sound came from instead of rushing before the rain gets worse, but I do.

There's a guy straddling a matte black Ducati with two green stripes on the sides and wearing a black helmet with the visor up.

And there he is.

The most intriguing creature I've ever encountered.

My every dream wrapped up in white-blond hair, blue eyes, and an old poetic soul.

Alexander.

He screams something in my direction, but the loud noise of the rain and the crowd won't let me hear him.

My pulse slows as I stare at him, looking my way reaching for something on the other side of his bike. Then he looks my way again and sticks his hand out, offering me a green and black helmet.

Does he always carry two helmets with him? I think to myself. This is the first time I've seen him on a bike. All the other times, he was in his white Range Rover.

I could ignore him.

I could keep walking and save us both from inevitable heartbreak, but for once, I do something for myself.

Something reckless.

For once, I don't listen to my mind and follow my heart.

I run to him.

Once I reach his bike, I grab the helmet, put it on, and climb behind him.

Hanging on tight to his wet body.

Since I'm feeling reckless and not at all like my usual cautious self— I hold him tighter and shout the answer to his question.

“I dream about your smile!” I feel vulnerable, and for the first time since my father left me, I don't hate this feeling. I embrace it. “I dream of you smiling all the time. Smiling for me.”

He says nothing, and I don't expect him to.

I wanted him to know my truth since he gave me his today. I wanted him to know that I care.

He revs the engine, and in a second, we're out of the academy's parking lot and on the road.

Maybe it is the freeing feeling of being in the back of his bike or just the feeling of being with him that makes me feel... free.

I'm on cloud nine.

I don't ever want to come back down.

But I know that eventually, I will.

I'll enjoy this feeling as long as I can.

It's crazy how this stranger makes me feel like I belong.

I belong somewhere.

Anywhere as long as it's with him.

An amusement park.

Well, it's the same location they used for the academy's Halloween carnival a week before.

The rain has settled, but the gray clouds remain, giving the evening a chilling air.

The last time I was standing in this exact place, I wanted to die. I wanted to disappear into thin air and leave everything behind. Every scar I carry, every tear that has fallen, every single painful memory replaying in my head twenty-four seven. I wondered how it would feel to be like everyone else, surrounded by their joyful laughter and almost picture-perfect appearance and life.

Not today.

Today, I don't want to die.

Today, I don't feel like leaving everything behind.

Today, I want to experience life.

Today, I want... more.

That's the beauty of life. Some days you're at your lowest, and other days you're flying so high you don't ever want to come down. It is a dangerous game to play. He makes it all go away. When I'm with him, life doesn't suck as much as before.

I pray this feeling never goes away.

"Where did you go?" The soft, melodic voice breaks through my thoughts. "You always do that, and I want to know. Tell me, witch, where do your thoughts take you?" I turn and stare into those blue eyes that at night almost seem to glow.

How could someone be this perfect?

So beautiful?

"Would it sound too crazy if I told you my thoughts take me to another world?" I push my glasses up my nose and grin at him. "This one isn't that great." I laugh awkwardly, but his face has no emotion as he stares down at me. I think my attempt at a macabre joke failed, or Alexander has no humor whatsoever. I think the latter. Okay, I am not very good at small talk or expressing myself. That's why I rather have my nose stuck in a book than deal with day-to-day human interactions.

He says something under his breath, straightens his back, and grabs my elbow, dragging me forward. He has longer legs than me, and I find myself struggling to keep up.

"Nobody is here." I keep walking, trying to keep up with his fast pace while looking at everything around us. There is no one here but us and the men and women working the rides and food stands. Halloween is long gone, and we're almost done with fall. The rides should be long gone by now, no?

"There are perks to being me, I guess."

"What do you mean by being you? Who are you?"

"You don't know?"

"You're Alexander, the mysterious boy with cold hands and soulful blue eyes." Oh, God. Why did I say that? Why do you blab things without thinking them through first, Fallon? It is not that damn hard. I might as well give up and accept the fact that I am one weird and sometimes awkward individual. Okay, most of the time. To save what little dignity I have left, I turn my face away from his and stare at the Ferris wheel instead. God, it is so

beautiful. It stands so high that I bet it would feel like I could touch the moon while riding in it.

The air is chilly, but somehow, even in this skirt with no sweater to cover me from the cold, I feel warm.

I never feel warm, not even on sunny days.

This is new to me.

All I've experienced since I've first met this boy is new to me.

Life doesn't feel so lonely anymore, and how ironic that someone that is clearly so lost and lonely himself is the one that makes me feel this way.

"Don't." He says in an eerily calm tone. "Don't turn away from me when you're vulnerable, Fallon. It is...refreshing."

"What is?"

"To befriend someone like you."

Befriend.

So we are friends, then.

A witty remark is on the tip of my tongue, but I decide not to push it. I don't want him to shut me out like other times. I want to stay here, in this moment with him. So instead, I opt to ask him more questions, just to keep him talking. To keep myself enveloped in the warmth and peaceful feeling his voice provides.

I never thought anything would ever be as breathtakingly beautiful as the mysterious and melancholic melody Moonlighting Sonata and evoke such emotion from me, but his voice does.

Darling boy, you better run before I fall in love.

My heart is not a safe place for you.

It's broken and sometimes hollow.

I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Get out of your head, Fallon. He is waiting.

I look up, and indeed he's waiting for a response.

"You keep saying girls like me. I might just take offense."

He shrugs in an unapologetically way.

"Someone as magical as you." He looks at me with an intensity that makes it hard for me to catch my next breath.

"Magical?"

"You, Fallon Alicia James, are magic."

Fallon Alicia James.

He reminds me of dad. The way my father would make me feel special

when the world made me feel otherwise.

“There’s nothing magical about me, Alexander.”

“Call me, Valentino.” He says as he stares down at me with darkness in his eyes. “You don’t see it, do you? You really are fucked up, babe.”

“Hey, that’s not nice to say to someone’s face. Be a decent human and say it to my back.”

Suddenly, something that feels a lot like magic happens.

He throws his head back and laughs. A deep belly laugh that vibrates through my bones and freezes me on the spot.

I stand there, watching him laugh and wait until he’s done, even though I wish he would laugh forever. Even if it’s at my expense.

I’ve never felt this way.

Never thought I would.

“Don’t ever stop.”

With a rare smile still on his face, he gives me his full attention again.

“Stop what?”

“Laughing.” I reach for his hand. “You’re the magical one, Valentino Alexander.”

He looks down at our hands with a strange look on his face, and I think I messed up. Maybe I was too blunt, or maybe I freaked him out. My worries leave the second he grabs my hand tighter and pulls me to him.

“Say it again.”

“What?”

“My name.” I feel his hot breath on my face, and I feel things I shouldn’t. I don’t even know him, and most importantly, he doesn’t know the real me. Not really. The me that will undoubtedly make him run for the hills. “I like how it sounds on your lips. It doesn’t feel like a burden.”

It doesn’t feel like a burden.

Who exactly is he?

Burden?

I give in and give him what he wants because when he asks in that way, I feel like I would hand him the damn moon and stars if he just asks for them.

“Valentino Alexander.”

He smiles again. A bright and ear-to-ear smile.

Perfect, just like him.

Settle down, heart. We can’t keep him.

“You are extraordinary, witch.”

Just like my father used to say to me.

Did you send this angel to me, dad? Why now?

I stare at our joined hands and ask him what I have been wanting to ask since he said it.

“How do you know my full name?”

“I read your student file.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know everything about you.”

“You could’ve asked me.”

“I could’ve.”

That’s it?

That’s all he’s going to say.

“You have a beautiful name.”

“And you have a king’s name.”

“I’m no king,” he says with a blank expression and his usual bored tone, shutting down any more talk about kings.

He’s a puzzle I’m eager to decipher, but I’m hoping he doesn’t do the same. Unlike him, all my pieces are broken and not even close to perfect.

He walks me to one of the concession stands that serve corn dogs and cotton candy. My stomach makes a noise, and I try to conceal it with a fake cough. “Tell me something, Fallon Alicia James.” Positioning himself behind me as he takes one of the pink cotton candies and hands it to me. “Do you believe in twin flames?”

Twin flames.

“I-I don’t know.” I tell him truthfully, with a shaking voice. He’s too close, and his hot breath close to my ear causes chills to run down my neck and all through my body. “I haven’t given it much thought, to be honest. It’s never crossed my mind.”

Until now.

“I do,” he says as he takes a small piece of the sugary treat and touches my bottom lip with it. I am going to pay for this later. *I am breaking all the rules for you, lost boy. Please don’t break me.* I open my mouth and take the candy he’s offering, leaving me no choice but to close my mouth and lick his fingers. I turn my head around to see his reaction, and I don’t miss the way his nostrils flare and his eyes darken.

I like his sweet side, it’s one I don’t see a lot but that darkness and danger that surrounds him really does something to me.

I like his darkness.

It makes me feel when all I've felt lately is empty.

"I believe we each have a soul that loves every fucked-up part of us." I release his fingers and watch in fascination as he sticks them in his mouth to taste the remains of the sugary treat and...me. "Once you find them, you feel a transcendental bond with them. It is almost like an awakening."

"Have you found your twin flame?" I ask him nervously because suddenly, the atmosphere feels heavy. It feels...like the start of something.

"I have."

My heart drops to the floor.

Is he saying what I think he is?

Does he have someone else?

Am I stupid to think he might be talking about me?

I wait for him to say more, questions plaguing my brain.

But he says nothing.

He gives nothing else away.

He hands me the rest of the cotton candy and walks away.

"Come on, witch. We only have a couple of hours left. Once the clock strikes midnight, it's all over."

I stand there with the candy in hand and watch him walk towards the arcade.

Once the clock strikes midnight, it's all over.

I don't want this night to end.

I wish I could have the superpower to freeze time—but sadly, I'm a boring muggle.

Not him, though.

He's larger than life.

Silly, naive girl. Don't you know this will never last? The ugly voice manages to sneak back inside my thoughts the moment he's away from me. I shove the hurtful voice to the back of my brain and follow my heart this time.

I walk towards him.

Towards the danger to my already busted-open heart.

Valentino Alexander.

VALENTINO

HER WORLD

“You’re the bright light at the end of the tunnel.” – Val
Then

“**Y**ou’re not really good at this.” The sweetest laugh escapes her pretty mouth as she concentrates on her goal. Squirting water from the water gun until the clown reaches the top and declares her the winner.

She has won four times in a row.

The first time she won because I was too busy staring at her with brows pulled down in a frown and her tongue sticking out in concentration, trying to beat me. I’ve been around beautiful girls and women my entire life, but there’s something about this girl. Her long midnight black hair is always up in a different and quirky style every time I see her. I would like nothing more than to let it loose around her face and run my fingers through her soft midnight strands. Her pink lips are full and pouty, in a way that physically pains me not to bend down and kiss her every time she’s near me. Her emerald eyes are what dreams are made of. They hide secrets. I’m not oblivious to the way she is an expert on turning the switch off and on every time I look at her, but again... I see her.

The most beautiful part of her is her laugh.

Her laugh does things to me. Things I don’t want to think about too much since I know I don’t deserve her. I don’t deserve to be a part of her magical and strange world. A world I would gladly get lost in if it meant I could live inside her forever.

Everything fades into the background as I stare at her bending over the

counter and giving it everything she has to the game.

I held my first gun at the age of eight. I know how to handle them, and this game is child's play to the things I've done.

I could easily beat her.

I could win her the prize if I wanted to, but I gladly lose just to watch her beautiful eyes light up and be this happy.

"Oh, come on, dude." Fallon stares at me from the corner of her eye for a split second before turning back to spraying water directly to the clown's mouth. She's about to win. "I am quite embarrassed for you, my friend."

My friend.

The word friend coming out of her lips about me feels all kinds of wrong. It burns, but I'd rather be her friend than nothing at all.

A life without her sweet chaos will be a bland one.

Boring.

Empty.

So very tragic.

She's the rain after every storm I face inside my head. She's the sun shining down on me, warming my bones after a freezing cold night when I'm fighting with my vicious demons.

Is it too fast?

Maybe.

Who the fuck cares about how fast my feelings for her have taken over my life, my sanity, my every dream when I've been slowly dying inside for years, and this girl with tragic eyes makes me feel like I've come back to life?

My twin flame.

The other part of my soul.

I've finally found you.

I'm afraid to lose you.

I'm afraid if I keep you that you'll be ripped away from me and ruined.

I can't have anything for myself.

I don't know how to win this game, but I'll try my damn hardest if, at the end of it all, you're there waiting for me with open arms to stitch my tattered soul back together.

I don't need time to tell me she's a forever kind of girl.

She's the kind of girl you give everything up for.

A buzzing sound indicating that she won the game breaks me free from my thoughts.

“Here,” she says in a timid voice and shoves something my way. I stare down at the girl who’s been plaguing my every thought since the first day I laid eyes on her. She’s looking up at me sheepishly with a twinkle in her eyes and a softness that wasn’t there an hour ago. She’s comfortable around me. She feels safe.

I grab the stuffed black snake, and the moment I do our fingers touch slightly, sending a wave of heat and electricity through my body, and by the way her eyes widen, I know she felt the same.

“Why the black snake?” I let the feeling of her touch envelope me in its calming warmth. She doesn’t pull away from me, nor does she hide her eyes like she usually does when shit gets real.

“I love them. I find them very fascinating. People tend to be afraid of them, but I don’t see them that way. Once snakes shed their skin through sloughing, it means rebirth, transformation, immortality, and healing. Snakes symbolize eternity and the renewal of life.” I listen carefully because never until this very moment have I thought about snakes in such a way. Not until her. She makes even the most vicious of animals seem beautiful. How she manages to do that, I don’t know, but it is fascinating to witness. *Will she see me the same when she finally meets my demons? When she witnesses the severity of my broken mind?*

Will she still see me as beautiful when she realizes I’m just as vicious and traitorous as the snake?

I remain quiet staring down at the stuffed snake that I’m holding in my hands. I’ve been given plenty of valuable and expensive things throughout my life, but this is by far the one that means the most to me. Somehow, I feel like this means something to her, and it is her way of letting me inside her world. My silence is making her doubt her sweet gesture. I see it by the way she bites her lips and pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose. It is a nervous habit I’ve become very fond of.

It’s.... endearing.

“I always wanted one, you know.” She whispers as she looks down at the toy.

“A stuffed animal? Here, keep it then.” I offer it to her.

She laughs and pushes the stuffed toy my way again. “A pet snake. I always wanted one, but my father never got around to it.” There’s a sad look on her face now, and her voice shook the moment she mentioned her father. I want to ask her, but I don’t want to pop the blissful and peaceful bubble she’s

inside of tonight. She's smiling and slowly showing me sides to her that I'm fast becoming addicted to.

I will buy her a million damn snakes if it brings that smile of hers back.

I let out a small sigh and force a half-smile. I don't like smiling. I hate it, but I'll do it if it means she will smile back at me. "Come on. There's one more thing."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"F-for being you."

"I'm not good, Alicia."

"You are, to me."

Only her.

"And why do you insist on calling me that?"

"That's your name."

"My middle name and one I don't particularly like."

"I do." I say truthfully while holding onto her hand and leading her towards the next destination. "Besides, I bet everyone else calls you by your first name, and I don't want to be like everyone else."

I don't miss how she holds onto my hand tighter, and a small smile lights up her face.

"Okay."

"Okay. It's settled, then."

"Yeah, I'm your Alicia, and you're my Alexander."

She says, rendering me speechless.

I'm your Alicia and you're my Alexander.

God, or the Devil, whichever gives a fuck about me at the moment, please don't let me fuck this up.

Let me keep her.

FALLON

"Wow," I breathe in and whisper as I stare up at the night sky. It is clear, and all the stars are shining brightly down at us. From up here, my problems seem so small, and the possibilities of a better life, a healthy one, don't seem so out

of my reach. From here, I can almost kiss the sky and touch the stars.

He's given me this.

Without even knowing it, he's making everything better, if only for one night.

"Yeah." I turn to my left and find him staring at me with that infuriating blank expression he sometimes wears.

We're safely tucked inside a wagon, built for no more than two people. The Ferris wheel is the last stop of the night, and I'm kind of sad it is almost over. The ride is almost over, and I wish we didn't have to go back down and face reality. I wish we could stay here in our own little world, talking about literature for hours and staring up at the sky, losing track of time.

What a beautiful life that would be.

"Do you mind?" I was too busy, lost in my naive thoughts. I didn't notice him reaching inside his pocket and grabbing a joint. God, why does he have to be so unbelievably sexy, even when participating in one of the nastiest of habits?

"I don't, but you should."

"How so?"

"Those aren't good for you."

"A lot of things are bad for me, babe. That doesn't mean I will stop doing them." He lights the joint, wraps his full lips around it, and slowly inhales. I stare at the ember lighting up half of his face. "I was right about you, you know."

Right about me?

"What does that mean?" I ask him without looking away from the ring of smoke he just blew up towards the sky.

"You're one of those girls that want to make this fucked-up world a better one."

"Is that so wrong?"

"Not at all." He removes the joint from his lips with one last drag and makes a move to throw it away. I reach for it before he does, making him turn his head my way with a curious look in his eyes.

"I'm not the good girl you think I am." I don't know why I tell him that. Maybe because I feel bold at this moment. I feel free to be myself and not hide behind false pretenses to keep myself from being hurt. Maybe he won't be disgusted by my scars, and maybe he won't judge the fucked-up mess inside my brain.

I bring the joint to my lips and take a small drag, but of course, I can't even do that right because one moment I'm trying to be sexy, and the next I'm coughing like a lady who smokes ten packs a day. Embarrassing. That's how I must look and sound.

He laughs.

He laughs and takes the joint from my hands. I try to find my breath, and once I'm settled, I stare up at him again.

I'm blindsided by the vision of him.

His white hair shines when the moonlight hits it, and he looks like a vengeful God. Dangerous. Reckless.

Alexander takes one drag and bends his head my way. He doesn't have to say it for me to know what he wants. I lean into him and give in to temptation.

The moment I'm close to his mouth, I open my lips, and he exhales smoke rings right into my mouth. I inhale it all. I inhale everything that is him.

Beautifully dark.

Sinfully dangerous.

Silent.

I let this beautiful and mysterious boy breathe life into me.

Because that's what it feels like.

It feels like he is giving me life, feeding it into me.

This time I don't choke nor cough.

I'm about to pull away and move back to my seat when I feel his strong hand on the back of my neck, pulling me forward.

Roughly.

Savagely.

I shouldn't like this.

It feels unholy.

But I do.

It makes me feel like I'm living and not just existing. Passing through life without enjoying what it's all about.

We stare into each other's eyes for a second, and I swear I see something flash behind his, something a lot like pain.

I feel the urge to ask him what's wrong when his lips crash down on mine. Hard and punishing.

I've never been kissed this way before. When I was younger, sure, I had

boys kiss me, but this is unlike all the others.

This feels final.

It feels like his lips are the last lips I'll ever kiss.

I give in to the moment and shut my mind off. I won't let my baggage ruin this for me. Whatever happens tomorrow, I'll deal with it, but tonight I'm just a normal girl kissing the boy she likes.

Alexander takes my bottom lip between his and bites me. I feel a sharp sting, but only for a moment because soon after, pleasure follows and takes over my body. I curl my toes not from the cold but from the heat of his kiss.

Cold hands run down my back causing goosebumps to rise, and then I feel them on my thighs.

Oh, God.

Without him even touching me down there, I'm already wet, just by his lips on mine. Holy hell, just by one simple kiss. He'll notice and probably think I'm a complete dork.

Who gets wet just from a kiss? Is it normal? A million thoughts run through my mind, but it all fades into the background when Alexander pulls my skirt up and breaks our kiss to look into my eyes.

"Have you ever been touched here before?" He whispers, and my body shivers when I feel his fingertips on my skin.

"N-no."

"Tell me to stop." He looks down at me with a savage look in his eyes. Like an addict about to get his fix. "You have the control here, baby. You can stop this at any moment. I promise I won't be mad."

There's a soft expression on his face now. He's letting me know that I'm in control. He doesn't know what that means to me. I don't have control over my life lately, but he's giving it back to me now.

The thing is I don't want him to stop.

I want him to show me what I've been missing all my life.

I want him to show me how to laugh freely again.

I want him to show me how to live again.

I grab his hand and position it exactly where it aches since the moment he puts his lips on me and his hands on my body. "Don't stop."

Something a lot like lust flashes in his eyes, and then I feel his cold fingers slipping my underwear to the side and rubbing me there.

"Fuck, you're drenched for me." I can't find the words to answer him since I can only focus on his hands rubbing my wet sex. "Does it feel good,

witch?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” His fingers rub me faster, and all I can focus on is the tingling sensation in my neck. He’s touching me like he owns me. “Now, let go for me.”

I do.

I come so hard and so fast, I lose my breath. There’s a ringing in my ears and I can’t focus my vision. It was that intense.

I came all over his fingers while we rode the Ferris wheel at night. I hope the guy that runs the ride didn't witness it, but something tells me he can imagine what goes on when two teens are alone in a ride like this one at night.

Once my breath goes back to normal, I’m able to focus on him. I turn his way and find him licking my juices from his fingers one by one.

I’ve never seen anything hotter.

Oh, holy balls.

“Fucking sweet.” He murmurs to the night as he lights another joint, and I can’t help but feel satisfied.

I feel soft lips on my temple.

Sweet, so very sweet.

“I can’t let you go.”

“Then don't.”

FALLON

MISSING HALF

“You’re everything I ever wanted.” – F
Then

“I’m guessing you got my address from my school records too?”
How much does he know about me?

It should bother me that he has all this information on me, but it doesn’t. Not really.

After we rode the Ferris wheel, it was getting really late, and it started raining even worse than when we left the academy. We hopped on his bike, and we rode for an hour until we ended up back here.

My house of horror.

Back to reality.

How I wish I could ride on the back of his bike forever if only to avoid coming back here.

The only good thing about this neighborhood is Ziggy.

I need to check up on him soon. It’s been days since I last saw him. I’ll check on him early in the morning tomorrow before I go to school.

Alexander grabs my hand and helps me down from the bike. We’re both soaked from our hair to our toes. My hair is sticking to my face and neck, and my glasses are fogged, making it difficult to see.

I hand him his helmet back, but he refuses. “No.” He gently shoves my hand away. “Keep it with you, for next time.”

“So, there’s going to be a next time, then?” Thunder breaks through the sky, and rain falls faster down on us.

If I stay here too long, water will trespass my backpack, and I’ll risk my

camera and photographs getting ruined.

“Yeah, witch. Get inside before you get sick.” He reaches his hand forward and removes a wet strand of hair that was stuck to my bottom lip. A rush of electricity runs through my chest, and I can’t hide the look of awe that crosses my face. “Meet me right here in the morning,” he throws a leg over his bike in the sexiest of ways, making him look like a bad boy even while wearing designer clothes and his white-blond hair sticking to his forehead, giving him a boyish look.

Everything about him is contradictory.

From his preppy black clothes to his bike and gross smoking habit.

It’s like there are two sides to him fighting for control.

I’ve seen his brother around the academy. Lorenzo, I think it’s what a girl that is completely obsessed with him called him. They’re identical twins, but they couldn’t be more different.

My Alexander is quiet, and I always find him in the shadows, whereas his brother is loud. He’s always around a crowd of followers, with girls hanging on each arm, dying to ride his fun pole. I’m not being a judgmental asshole. I’m just stating facts. There are always girls trying to be his girl for the day. He’s the center of attention, whereas his twin blends into the background.

They’re so different. From the color of their hair, their styles to their friends. Lorenzo is always hanging around a tall guy with brown hair and blue eyes. Lucan, the captain of the chess team and student body president. I don’t know much about him since I really don’t care to know. About any of them, really. I didn’t plan on making long-lasting relationships.

Alexander was unexpected and I’m breaking my number one rule.

Don’t get attached.

Too late.

Suddenly, I hear the loud roar of an engine and I instantly know who it is. Caleb.

“Oh, okay.” I step back from him, but I don’t give him my back. I keep walking backwards towards the left side of the house, where my bedroom window is. I can’t exactly go in now that Caleb just arrived home. I need to sneak in and pray to God nobody noticed my absence. “Hey, Alexander.”

“Yes?” He pushes the bike forward using his feet. He’s avoiding making noise.

“Would you rather have super strength or the ability to control time?”

“I rather have the ability to control time.”

“Huh, I thought so.”

“You did?” He smirks at me before kicking the stand of his bike.

“Yeah, you don’t strike me as a guy that cares about physical strength. You, controlling time? That I see.” I’m almost to my window, but I keep talking to him instead of climbing inside and sheltering myself from the rain and avoiding my mother or stepbrother finding out that I was out this late. “If you have the ability to control time, then you’ll never die.”

“I don’t mind dying, witch.” He’s almost to the other side of the street, “Want to know the first thing I would do? I would pause the clock and never end this day with you.”

Fuck, there goes my heart.

His poetic soul is the missing half of my damaged one.

My back hits the side of the house. I quickly open my window and gently throw my backpack over it, making sure not to break the camera.

I turn around in Alexander’s direction and watch as he pulls his visor down and speeds out of the street, leaving smoke and the promise of tomorrow behind.

I climb inside and make sure my door is locked. I perfectly position a chair under the knob, making sure it won’t turn and give Caleb access to me.

He hasn’t visited me in days. Something more interesting must’ve caught his attention, and for the time being, I’m safe from his cruelty.

I walk to the bathroom and discard my wet clothes in the hamper.

I look at myself in the mirror, and for the first time in years, I don’t see my demons staring back at me.

I see him.

Also, for the first time since dad left and I met true evil, I fall asleep and not one nightmare haunts me.

Only he does.

Valentino Alexander.

VALENTINO

VICES

“I love you.” – F
Then

The moment I enter the mansion, I feel the atmosphere change. The Nicolasi mansion has always felt more like a prison than a home, and it has nothing to do with the dozens of men in suits, carrying guns and guarding this place.

It has everything to do with the head of the three most notorious crime families in the state, hell, in the country.

Benedetto Nicolasi.

The man I once looked up to more than I did my father. The man that gave my brother and me attention and everything we ever wanted when our own parents failed us.

I know now that attention doesn't mean affection.

He just cares about his precious legacy and his two successors. I didn't know that then, not until the night I met true evil.

An evil that was always lurking on every corner of this cold mansion and kept spreading until it caught up to all of us.

An evil that lives inside our grandfather.

The man that killed my mother.

The heartless being that drove my father to his perdition.

The man that made us.

All of us.

A fucked-up drunk and a junkie.

A soulless monster with a thirst for blood.

And me.

I'm a dangerous mix of both.

The worst of them.

My dad gave in to his pain, and my brother gave in to the mayhem.

I'm still holding on.

I have it under control, or so I thought.

I thought I could live this way forever.

Now, everything is a fucking mess inside my head.

All because of her.

The most dangerous addiction.

Out of all the shit I do and could kill me, I'm pretty sure Fallon Alicia is the only one that can do some serious damage.

Walking to the window of the main room, I look outside and find Madden, my grandfather's right-hand man, talking on the phone.

There's something off with him.

He's Irish.

Italians and Irish don't mix in our world.

I watch him for a couple of seconds before he moves to the other side of the house, and when he's out of sight, I shrug out of my wet jacket and drop it to the marble coffee table.

I search for the only thing that keeps me somewhat sane and makes me feel. I look inside the right pocket and grab a clean syringe. I watch my reflection on the window as rain begins to fall again. My blue eyes are nearly black, and there are new dark circles under them. A sting erupts in my arm, and the burn spreads down my veins. I breathe in through my nose like I've done countless times before and count down to five.

I'm addicted to the burn.

I hate the cold, but that is all I have ever known, and I can't fucking shake it. It's a part of me.

One I hate.

I have every intention of heading to my room and shutting myself inside until tomorrow comes. When I'm halfway to the second step of the stairs, I hear him calling for me.

Grandfather.

Fuck.

The day I was made, before any of the other kids in the family, was the night I met the Devil.

Not my grandfather.

My reflection in the mirror.

Every day I'm losing a piece of my soul to this life. I'm losing the battle between my sanity and my urges. I hate that sometimes I crave the rush that taking a life gives me. Every day since that day, I have wished for death, until now. Now all I wish for is her.

I shouldn't.

I'm no good for her like this fucking drug is bad for me, but I'm selfish. I enjoy how my vices make me forget the world outside.

She does the same.

I love the way she makes me feel.

Like I can be more than the monster I see staring back at me every hour of every day.

More than the demons that spread sweet poison inside my brain.

"Valentino!" His exasperated voice hits my ear, and like a dutiful trained soldier, I give in and find my way inside the dining area.

There I'm met with the boss, sitting at the head of the table and my twin sitting at the other end.

My twin has always had a death wish, and every day he's becoming more reckless. He loves to push buttons, and I fear for the day that our grandfather decides not to put up with it anymore.

Now, he is Benedetto's mini-me.

I know the truth.

Lorenzo is far worse.

I walk to the chair on the right of grandfather and sit down. There's already a plate served for me, but if I'm honest, I'm not hungry.

Not for food anyway.

For my vices.

For the noise and chaos that is her.

I pick up the fork and take a bite of the marinara pasta and wash it down with a glass of wine. I know better than to disobey orders or show disrespect, and sitting at a table without touching the food or drinking the wine, is a clear sign of disrespect.

I do it to avoid the shit that follows when Benedetto is pissed at one of us for not being good enough.

I couldn't give two shits about respect.

"Where were you today?"

“School.”

“Do you think I’m a fool, Valentino? Do you think I’m unaware of every single move all of you make? Fucking try again.”

“I was on a date.”

“A date with whom?”

“Available pussy.” My throat burns like I just spewed acid. She’s so much more, but nobody can ever know. Not if I want to keep her with me and keep her untouched by this life.

He stays silent for a second and bites into his meatball. I keep my head down and count to ten to try and school my features. He can’t know. None of them can know she means something to me.

Something more than a willing wet hole.

“Fallon Alicia James. Deceased father and drugged out whore of a mother.” Sarcasm drips from every word that leaves his mouth about my girl. “Low-life criminal stepdaddy and a whole lot of trash baggage. Tsk tsk.”

My world spins, and it has nothing to do with the effect of the drug. It’s the clear threat in his voice. I know him, and he knows there’s more to it.

“Didn’t care enough to ask for her life story. I just cared about getting my dick wet.” If I didn’t hate myself enough before, I do now. *What’s one more demon, anyway?*

“She means nothing to you, yes?”

I shrug and stare him right in the eyes. I can’t let him know how I truly feel. He’ll only twist it to his advantage and make us both pay.

I harden my features and show him no weakness. I give him nothing. “Don’t know how else to say that this chick is just some pussy. I got bored. She’s new. What can I say?”

He smiles, and I hope for both of our sakes that I was convincing.

“Then I have the perfect job for you, boy.” Something about his tone makes it feel like what he’s about to ask of me is different from all the jobs before.

“What is it?”

“Your way to prove yourself to the families. To prove that you’re able to lead them. Your task.”

My task?

I was fucking made when I was an eight-year-old kid. *What the fuck is he playing at?*

I completed my task. I killed an innocent man.

I was forced to murder my only ally in this house, and after that, I killed every man my grandfather deemed a rat.

Lorenzo doesn't know all of this, though. At least I don't believe he does, so why is grandfather speaking about this now?

I go along with whatever this is because, for some reason, I get the feeling he's trying to prove a point in front of my twin.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Capo." I say through gritted teeth. I hate the look of satisfaction that crosses his face whenever he gets away with belittling me. He knows by now that I don't respect him, nor do I care for this family. This is all a game to show me who holds the power.

"I need you to infiltrate the girl's family and find me something useful to get Timothy Banks in my pocket. I want to deal in the streets, and right now, he runs them. He's profiting in my territory, and that's something I simply cannot allow, but I know that he has a big following with those lowlifes he calls Vipers. I can't just swoop in and take over without retribution, so that's where you come in, my dear boy. Find out their weaknesses and be fucking useful."

Motherfucker.

Killing is easier than what he just asked of me.

I can't think straight.

All I can focus is on her face, on how it makes me feel something other than self-hate and regret, but if I go along with Benedetto's orders, then that's all I'll ever feel whenever I think of her.

Self-hatred.

Regret.

Like I used her.

Like a fucking failure because I couldn't keep the girl that has taken ownership of every dark corner of my mind, who's gotten so deep inside me, and who's running through my veins like sweet venom. The sweetest poison.

I try to focus and think of how I could possibly do both. Keep the girl and do my duty.

One thing I am sure of, there's no winning this battle against my grandfather. Not now, at least.

I have to watch my steps, hers too until the time comes.

Until the capo of the Holy Trinity falls.

“You’re in so fucking deep, you can barely see a way out, huh?” My twin’s unfeeling voice breaks through the fog inside my head. I look his way and find him staring down at his phone with a frown on his face. That’s unusual for my twin since the only facial expression I ever see on his face is a mocking grin and a psychotic clown smile from ear to ear whenever he causes someone else pain.

I was too busy thinking of ways to do what was asked of me without hurting Fallon. So focused on finding a way out of this mess, I didn’t notice when grandfather left the room. Not until my twin decided to bring me back from the dark space inside my brain.

He’s always fucking doing that. He knows I like it better there, well until now. Now all I want is to be present, at the moment. With her.

“Don’t know what you’re referring to.” I say before taking the last sip of my wine. I shouldn’t be mixing alcohol and the shit running through my system at the moment, but who the fuck cares? My brother is right. I’m in way too deep already. I can’t let go of her, but I’ll also feel like the scum of the earth if she finds out and believes I got close to her only because of my Capo’s orders. Because I wanted something from her other than her heart, her soul, and her everything.

“No, don’t play dumb now, Tino. It doesn’t fucking suit you.” Lorenzo raises his glass of wine to his lips but doesn’t take a sip. He just stares at the red liquid with a demonic smile and a twinkle in his eyes. One thing about my brother is that he loves the color red. Red wine, blood, and redheads.

“I’m tired, and honestly, brother. I don’t have the patience for your shitty mind games.” I rise from my seat and start to walk in the direction of the main entrance when his words stop me dead in my tracks.

“You won’t be able to keep her.” His words are not cruel. It’s the truth, but they cut me deep. Only my twin knows what buttons to push.

“Will you tell on me?” I don’t turn around to see his face. I stay rooted in place, waiting to see where my brother’s loyalties lie.

“I won’t.” The moment those words come out of his mouth, I release the breath I’ve been holding. “I will tell you this, brother. Girls like her get eaten alive by monsters like us in this world.”

“It’s not like that.” Maybe if I say it enough, I’ll sound more convincing. “She’s fresh pussy, and you know how I love the chase.”

This time I look over my shoulder at my brother. He’s still sitting at the end of the huge table by himself, like a lonely king. That’s when I realize that

this will be our future if I don't take control of my life now.

Sitting at the end of a table, eating alone and a house surrounded by wolves waiting for us to fall so they can take the first bite and claim the throne.

It's that, or we'll end up like Cassius.

And that's just fucking sad, but at least dad found heaven for a short amount of time before he was sentenced to an eternity in hell.

"She's fucking hot. Do you mind if I tap that ass once you're done with it?" There's not a hint of sarcasm in his tone. He's dead serious, but I know better. I know my twin loves mind games. The sick bastard enjoys torturing the mind of others until they break or give in to his demands, or in this case, I give in and tell him what he wants to hear.

I hold back the urge I feel to turn around and make him regret ever referring to her in such a crude way like she's anything short of a fucking queen. A beautiful fallen angel sent to me to silence my ravenous demons.

I do what I've always done.

I shut down.

I shrug and walk away but not before answering, "Do whatever you fucking want. You always do, no?"

With that said, I walk to the entrance and step outside of the mansion again. I need to think of what I'm going to do next.

I should let her go, but I refuse to give up this feeling.

I refuse to give her up.

The cold air hits my face as I step outside and walk to my bike. Hopping on without thinking twice about it, I speed out of there and let my heart guide me through the night. For the first time in years, I followed my heart instead of my fucked-up head.

Shit, my head has been betraying me from the fucking start.

I ride my bike all the way to the other side of town. All the way back to her.

My safe haven.

My new friend.

My downfall.

My girl.

FALLON

MIXED SIGNALS

“The first crack in our perfect glass.” – Val
Then

R *iiiiiiing.*

The loud and annoying sound of my alarm wakes me up from the best sleep I’ve had in years. Right after I got home last night, I took off my clothes and showered in hot water. I am not risking getting sick. I can’t afford it, and it will only raise questions.

Turning in bed and reaching for my alarm clock, I notice that it reads 6:00 AM. For the first time in a while, I am excited to see what the day has in store for me. Maybe it’s the fact that I feel more like myself lately, or because of him. He’s coming to pick me up and take me to the academy.

I can’t help feeling butterflies in my stomach, rapidly flapping their wings, rapidly causing a storm in there.

Get a grip, Fallon, I think to myself. But it’s not long before my good mood is threatened by the voices.

You foolish girl. Do you actually believe any of this is real?

Shut the fuck up.

Not today, Satan.

I push the covers off my body and get out of bed. He’s coming soon, and I need to leave the house before the others wake up. Mother usually wakes up in the middle of the day as soon as the drugs wear off. My stepfather, Tim, is almost never home, and Caleb, well he wakes up late too but sometimes when he’s feeling vicious, he wakes up early just to ruin my day.

I am not giving him the chance or the satisfaction.

I quickly take a shower, and once I'm done. I walk to the closet and grab the uniform. I only have two skirts and two shirts, the one I wore yesterday is soaked from the rain.

As soon as I'm dressed, I walk to my window in case Ziggy is waiting for me outside. He wakes up at the crack of dawn, the same as me, but I don't find him standing outside my window. What I do find is a large, clear terrarium sitting on my small wooden desk.

I walk closer to it, bend down and when I do, I find a beautiful black snake inside. I am instantly in awe, and not for one second do I wonder who did this. Nobody besides my father knows about my love for snakes and how much I've wanted one since I was a kid.

I have one now, and it's all because of him.

My beautiful boy, who, without even realizing it, is keeping my head above water and maybe someday the tide will no longer catch up to me. Maybe we'll make it safely to the shore.

I open the lid and watch as the baby snake slithers through the fake mini-plants that came inside the tank. Without hesitation, I stick my hand inside and let it sense me, sense that I mean no harm. The moment my hand reaches the bottom of the terrarium, I feel the baby snake begin to size me up, and when it decides I am not a threat, the snake stays still so I can grab it. I take her out of the tank, bringing her closer to my face.

God, it is truly magnificent.

I don't think most people would call her that, but to me, she is.

Yes, I decide to refer to her as she.

I hear a noise outside that startles me, but I keep a firm hold on the snake, so I don't spook her. I lean towards the window, and Ziggy parks his beat-up truck in his usual spot.

He was out late.

I make a move to put the snake inside the tank, but I notice a small, folded paper stuck to one of the fake plants. Keeping the snake tucked safely between my fingers, I reach for the piece of paper and open it.

143.

143?

What does that mean?

Is it the name of the snake?

Is that the amount I owe him for the pet snake?

It doesn't make sense.

That's when I realized that after he left me here last night, he came back in the middle of a rainstorm to leave the snake for me.

My heart beats wildly in my chest.

The rational part tells me that this is insane. This is going way too fast. There is no way genuine feelings can grow in a matter of days, but the part of me that believes in super heroes and witches and magical beings, doesn't care.

I don't want to think.

I just want to feel.

Looking down at the snake slithering up my hand to my arm, I realize something. Love, affection, and friendship have a way of slithering inside your heart and brain without us even noticing it.

Smiling, I set the snake down and make a quick mental note to choose a name for her. It's inhumane to keep calling the lovely creature 'it' or 'she'.

It needs a unique name, just like her.

Once she's safe inside the tank, I close the lid and sit down to brush my hair. Today, I feel like wearing it down, so I do. I let my hair fall from the messy bun I slept in, and it falls in natural black waves down my face and shoulders. I look at myself in the mirror, and I don't recognize the happy girl staring back at me. Tilting my head, I look closely, and the dark circles under my eyes are gone, making my green eyes seem brighter.

I missed you.

It's been a while.

The happy girl I once was has been hiding from everyone, even herself but here, she is, right in front of me.

Again, all because of him.

I found my person.

My one.

My flame in this cold world.

I rise from the chair, grab my bag, my books from the desk, and make my way to the window so I can climb outside. If I go through the front door, I risk the chance of one of them waking up, and honestly, I would rather walk miles in the pouring rain than have my junkie and cruel mother take me to the academy.

There's just so much my dignity can take.

I don't care about what others think of me. I accepted a while ago that this is my reality, but it doesn't mean that I'm okay with everyone seeing

how bad I really have it. I don't want anyone's pity, especially from that place. Not that I believe they would sympathize anyway.

I blow a kiss towards the direction of my new friend, the snake, blow one to Eyre and climb outside. The rain has stopped, but the gray clouds are still there, covering the sun.

I look around and see no sign of Alexander, so I decide to check up on Zigs. Walking towards his window, I rise on the tips of my toes and see him already in bed, still in the clothes he was in yesterday. I tap the window hard two times to make sure he's breathing, and when I see him move in response to the noise, I let a small breath slip free.

He's okay.

I grab my back from the floor and walk back towards my window to wait for Alexander there. Looking down at my watch I see that it's almost time for first period. Where is he?

I told you, girl. He's not coming.

I try with all my might to stay positive, but as minutes fly by fast and there's no sign of him, my heart falls to the floor and all the happiness I manage to get a hold on this morning slips away like it was just a cruel fantasy.

See? Only I love you.

I don't want your cruel love. I snap back.

Shaking my head, trying not to think much about it and how silly I feel, I head to where my bike is parked and hop on. If I hurry, I might make it on time.

The whole way to the academy, I think of his mixed signals, and I wonder if maybe the voice in my head is right.

Is this a game to him?

Am I just a new plaything to keep him busy until something better comes along?

Is this a cruel joke?

FALLON

NEVER MEANT TO BE

“It will always be you.” – Val
Now

Memories.

How they haunt me.

The snow is falling hard and fast tonight. The window is covered in white, and I can barely see outside. Watching the snowfall covering everything in sight It's the only thing keeping me sane as I gather my thoughts and think of how I'm surviving this man I once loved more than I loved myself.

Maybe that was where I went wrong.

I made him my everything and after everything ended, I was left with nothing but my pain, regrets, and blood on a filthy wooden floor. I rub my chest where I feel a sharp pain and try to ease it, but nothing helps, not even the breathing technique Dr. Elliot taught me so long ago.

I look down at the letter in my hands and think of how I was so naive. How could I think he didn't care? His actions showed me the opposite, but that's the thing. Valentino Alexander Nicolasi wasn't a man of many words. Now, I realize that someone that doesn't care wouldn't write such beautiful and painful words, would they? Valentino left me on my own again but this time, he left a letter behind. A box full of them.

My heart hurts because, yes, this is a fucked-up situation, and I won't ever make excuses for him. Keeping me here and leaving my Roman behind with those men is something I don't think I'll be able to forgive, but I also know that there's more to this.

There has to be.

Why keep me here, torment me with the past and not kill me or cause me physical pain?

Why is he doing all of this, from playing our song, to sharing the words of a lost boy and now the words of a broken man?

Yes, the torture is cruel and painful, but I also remember how it felt. How it felt to be loved by him.

He was always writing in his journal, no matter the time or place. He used to spill his guts to a blank page and now, I get to be inside the dark place that is his beautiful and tormented mind.

The things he went through as a child at the hands of the mafia. How cruel his grandfather was, and trust me, I knew how cruel, but I never thought it would extend to his own family.

To his grandchildren the same boys that were left without a mother, and the only parent they had was a drunk that was too busy drowning his sorrows to stick it out for his sons.

I love Cassius, the version both Andrea and Roman are lucky to have, but I hate the idea of who he used to be to Valentino.

Even after everything Val has done, I still feel for him. For the kid that had it just as bad as me growing up. The only difference was he could hide behind his money and his family's prestige, and I was drowned by the shame of mine.

God, when will I be free from the ghost of him?

The ghost of my past.

When will I stop caring for him?

I would think that kidnapping me, chaining me, starving me, tormenting me would make me stop holding on to what we once were, but no. Here I am trying to understand why.

Why do all of this when all he needs to do is kill me to end his misery?

This time he had the decency to have mercy and leave me with clothes to shield me from the cold and food other than energy bars and water. In fact, after the last time he was in here, things took an unexpected turn. His cruelty lessened, and he disappeared. He hasn't visited the room since he left, and I can't help but wonder where he ran off to. Did my comment about Roman fuck him up just like I hoped it would?

I wanted to hurt him just as much as he is hurting me.

We ended badly, but I kept the beautiful memories we both shared close

to my heart to light my path whenever I got lost inside the dark web of insanity that is my mind. I still looked back at those memories, real or not, and smiled through the pain, but his actions now are tainting them.

I was wrapped up in lies and half-truths, and still, I loved him.

We all had vices and different ways of coping with our demons. I was so caught up in the high of his love and how it made me feel that I didn't notice how sick it was to make someone else your entire world.

I was young.

I fell in love with a broken boy who put the sun in my sky after a thousand days of rain. When my world was loud, he could wrap me up in the silence and peace I so desperately needed when I lay in pain.

How could we have fallen so hard when we really didn't know each other?

Not really.

We just scratched the surface of who we were, but we never got too close to each other's demons. Maybe deep down, we both knew that our love was never meant to be or meant to last.

It ended with a lie and a bleeding heart.

And after all that has happened—the tears, the pain, and the loss—I'm still held captive by him.

A shiver runs through my body as the temperature in the room drops. I cover myself with the blanket that he left for me one night when he snuck in while I was sleeping.

He's gone all day, but I feel him at night.

The smell of him, the same as before, still lingers when the door closes behind him every time he leaves, and I wake up in the morning.

I know it's not a dream since I haven't had one since I was sixteen years old and crazy in love.

Now, all I have are nightmares.

Of him.

Of what could've been.

Of the demons that won't leave my side.

I've been trying to pick myself up, piece by broken piece, but I never seem to be whole again. I fail every single time.

Andrea's friendship saved me.

Roman gave me hope that not all days will be dark, and the sun will always shine in the morning.

But I still feel hallow.

There's an empty part of me that I could never fill.

Him.

God, always him.

Opening the carton box that sits on my lap, I grab another letter and prepare myself to go down the rabbit hole of his mind. I'm a masochist. This is so fucking painful, but I need to know. I need to piece together the puzzle that is the madman that is currently entering the cabin, trying not to make noise. He fails every night.

I know every time he arrives.

I hear his footsteps all over the hall, coming my way. I hold my breath when the footsteps stop just outside my door. Maybe he will come inside this time when I'm awake, and I won't miss him.

"Just come inside. Talk to me, and let's end this once and for all." I whisper under my breath. I said it so low that I know he must not have heard it from all the way outside the door. I still hold my breath and wait for him to make the move.

I'm disappointed but not surprised when I hear his footsteps walk away. Looking down at the box once again, I pick one of the oldest-looking letters and open it.

The paper looks wrinkled as if it was crumbled inside his fists.

My heartbeat slows when I read the first sentence of a letter from fifteen-year-old Valentino.

My tears fall, and I don't wipe them away. I let them fall for the boy he once was and for the girl that loved him more than life.

I cry for the kids we once were. Ones that got caught up in the sick agenda of a heartless man and cruel mother.

I cry for them.

For the future they could've had if only they wouldn't have let go of each other's hands.

VALENTINO

WEB OF LIES

“Just come back, yes? You’re all I need in this life.” – F

D ear Alicia,
Yesterday, I woke up wanting to die.
Want to know why?

Do you even care?

Let me tell you anyway.

I realized that I loved you more than you loved me, and you know how I figured that out? Because if you did, you would’ve fought for me. You would’ve remembered the person I was with you but instead, you ran.

You ran away.

You let go of my hand and didn’t even look back.

You turned the page and left me there, forgotten.

Like a book that entertained you for a while but wasn’t memorable enough to remember a passage or the characters. I am slowly dying inside with every second you’re away from my body.

I need to see your face.

Feel your warm touch.

Hear your soft laugh.

I need you.

If you just come back, I know we could make it work. If only you would listen to my side of the story, maybe I could heal your heart.

Maybe you can give my heart back.

Come back to me.

It’s too quiet.

I'm losing to them.
143.

VALENTINO

MY GIRL

“I don’t want to be just another girl to you. I want to be your everything.” – F
Then

“O h, look. Your little friend looks delicious when wet.” The mocking voice comes from my twin, making me lift my eyes from the book I’ve been trying to read for the past thirty minutes but couldn’t, since all I can think about is her beautiful face filled with disappointment when she realized I stood her up.

Fuck, it’s been driving me mad just thinking of hurting her in any way. I hate myself for making her feel like she means nothing because that’s probably how she feels at the moment. What kind of asshole kisses a girl, makes her come, and promises her tomorrow but doesn’t show up?

Me.

I am that fucking asshole.

I couldn’t exactly get on my bike and find my way to her when I am most likely being watched now that grandfather suspects she means something to me. I needed time to figure out how I could make this work, how I can keep her and buy myself more time with her.

There are still three more years before he steps down as boss.

Two years without her is an eternity, and I’m selfish. I need her more than I need air. Fucking cliché, but it’s the truth.

I couldn’t text her because she doesn’t have a damn phone. Who doesn’t have a phone these days? My witch doesn’t have a lot, by the looks of it.

I’ll give her everything.

She won't have to watch from the outside. She'll have everything she ever wanted, and I'll make sure she never goes without.

I just have to keep her alive to see that day.

"Man, that's rough." Now it's Lucan's voice that breaks through my thoughts, making me look his way and find him staring ahead.

What I see makes me feel like the biggest piece of shit.

Exactly what I am.

My sweet girl is riding her bike in the pouring rain, with her beautiful long hair sticking to her face.

Fuck.

Fuck.

My chest aches as I look at her hop off her old bicycle, securing it to the rack before walking my way.

I'm standing in the middle of the academy's entrance with my twin and Lucan on either side of me.

Even wet from the rain, with her hair sticking to her neck and face, she looks like the most stunning creature on this rotten earth.

Keep walking.

Don't give everyone the satisfaction of seeing you this way.

I hope she walks away from me, even if it feels like a thousand sharp objects stabbing my chest.

It takes every ounce of power I possess to rip my eyes from hers and give her my back. I ignore her like she means nothing. Like she's just one more chick in this place. I feel her glare burning holes on my back, and I'm surprised to see disappointment in my brother's eyes.

He's always been all kinds of fucked up. Sometimes I feel like he's in my corner, and other times it feels like he's my toughest rival. When it comes to her and her safety, I'm not risking my brother getting inside my head and learning all the secrets I share with the beauty currently walking inside the building, thinking she means nothing when in fact she means every-fucking-thing.

She holds her head up high and enters the building without a glance backward. I'm proud of her, yet I feel like I might lose the best thing that's happened to me in a long time if I don't get my shit together.

"Aren't you going to follow her, brother?" Lorenzo tells me as he hops off the stair railing and walks my way. Sometime between Lorenzo taunting and me being lost in thought, Lucan left our side.

I shove my journal inside my bag and walk towards the entrance. I don't care to stay here and participate in my brother's mind games. I'm tired, I haven't slept, and all I want is to be near her.

I give him my back and head inside, thinking of how I can find my way in her good graces again.

It will be a long day.

For fucking sure.

FALLON

"Alright, class, don't forget to turn in your assignment before the day is over. This is the last extension I will give you." Mrs. Cleo says right after the bell rings, letting us know that the class is over.

I've been inside my head and in my feelings the entire morning. There's this dark cloud over my head, and I'm sick of it. I'm trying to quiet the thoughts, but all I can think of is how Alexander stood me up and then gave me his back like he couldn't be bothered with me.

I hate how much power he has over me.

He might have hurt my feelings, but I won't show it. I won't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me hurt.

I stand from my desk and head out of the classroom towards my locker. Once there, I notice him standing in front of his own, reading quietly like nothing has happened. Like nothing has changed.

I don't know what comes over me. I don't like confrontation, but I also won't hide from him. I want to know what changed between last night and this morning.

What did I do wrong?

I walk towards him and don't stop until we're face to face. Everyone else in the hallway fades into the background until all there is us.

"You never showed up." I'm proud that my voice doesn't shake or give up my nerves.

"Something came up," he shrugs and keeps reading his book.

"Oh." I see him looking from the corner of his eyes at the kids around us. Is he ashamed of being seen with me? What about what he said yesterday? "I

get it.” I’ll save myself the embarrassment and cut my losses now before he makes me look like a desperate idiot in front of everyone. “It’s okay to befriend me in secret, but I’m not good enough for you to be seen in public with.” Yeah, I’m not torturing myself any longer.

I step backward, looking at him once before turning away and going to my safe place. He doesn’t stop me. He doesn’t say anything at all, and that’s when I know that the voices in my head weren’t wrong.

It’s just a game.

Nothing good ever truly lasts.

VALENTINO

SWEET MELODY

“The sweetest angel was sent to save me from hell’s burning fire.” - Val
Then

I ’m not good enough for her.
Maybe I never will be.

You know that lethal voice that hammers inside your brain until it ruins your entire mood? Well, I’ve had that bitch with me since I was a kid. It’s been my only companion lately, and I managed to silence her with the sweet sound of Fallon Alicia’s laughter and her poetic murmurs when she’s lost in one of my favorite books.

I drowned the ugly thoughts with all that is her.

Her smile.

Her gaze.

Her laugh.

She’s not laughing, nor is she smiling today.

I don’t blame her.

I brought this on myself.

But how can I explain my life and what it means for her if I don’t stay in line and follow orders?

A good man would let her go, but again, I am too fucking selfish. I need her chaos to keep me from drowning in the maddening silence inside my head and the hatred in my heart.

She’s fixing me without even trying.

I don’t wake up asking for death anymore.

I have had more dreams than nightmares lately.

Today, I haven't thought of my vices.
Haven't felt the urge to use.
Not when I have a new addiction.
One that won't kill me but is still dangerous.
Her.

I watch as she walks through the halls with her head stuck inside a book, not even noticing what's going on around her. Inside her own little world. A world I want nothing more than to get lost in and never find my way out. I trail behind her like I'm chained to her, and every move she makes, I follow.

It's fucking sick with how obsessed I am with her, and truthfully, I don't care. I've never felt more like myself than when I am with her.

She walks inside the library, and the doors close behind her, right in my face. The library was my sanctuary and only mine. No one really comes down here. Nobody even knows about the last hall that holds the classics and poetry books. People in this place have no taste, but it serves me.

That is my corner.

Was my corner until she came barging in and made it her own.

It's ours now.

Dark, cold, and away from everyone else.

Our own world.

That's how it feels to me.

I let my feet guide me to her.

I should turn back, but my feet have a mind of their own and lead me right to her. For fuck's sake, it feels like she put a spell on me, and all I see and crave is her.

Nothing else matters.

Nothing exists but her.

"Leave." I turned my head, looking over at her. Her hair has dried, and it has a natural curl to it. Long black hair, wild, and untamed falls down her shoulders, making her look like a lioness, a contrast to how she usually looks with her hair tamed and glasses on.

She pulls off every look.

Every time I see her is like I'm meeting a new side of her.

Some might think that she's trying to be trendy or even unique by not settling with just one look, but I know better.

I see it for what it really is.

She's lost.

She's figuring out who she is.

In a world where everyone is trying to fit in and change their appearances to conform to society's idea of perfection and acceptance, there's Fallon.

Not wanting to fit in.

Staying in the background, trying to tame all the chaos that is her.

She's a mess.

A perfect one. The kind of mess I don't mind.

She doesn't come from old money, not even good money. She wears old rags, rides a broken-down bicycle, and comes from a really fucked-up part of the city.

Still, I want everything.

All of her.

To own.

To protect.

To...love.

She's hunched over on the library's floor, messing with her ancient camera, and has some polaroid photos spread around her lap and floor.

See? A beautiful mess of contradictions.

"You're being rude, witch." I say in a low voice but loud enough for her to hear. I look up from the mess on the floor and find her angry gaze shooting daggers at me. If looks could kill, I would be dead and buried six feet under. I find her mean mug cute as fuck, and not intimidating at all, but I refuse to laugh or mock her. Not when I can tell she's fragile. Jokes, even lighthearted ones, can sometimes do serious damage to a fragile heart. I walk closer to where she's sitting with her back to a shelf and drop down beside her. I feel her tense beside me, but she stays frozen in place, not acknowledging me at all.

She huffs but carries on with what she's doing. She's cleaning the lenses of her old camera, and I start to wonder where she got it from and what it means to her. I've never met anyone that treats an object with so much care like it means everything to them.

I could get her the best equipment. The best in the market right now, but I know she won't accept a handout. Not from me, and besides, I know from experience that nothing, not even something trendy beats a classic.

"Well, you have a place out there, your majesty. Save the shadows for the outcast."

Now that gets me angry.

Where does she get off thinking that I care to have a place anywhere else but at her side? If she's not there, then I don't belong.

I could tell her that, but something holds me back.

"Do you really believe that?" I ask and make a move to grab one of the polaroid photos from the floor. It's a photo of an old man smiling up at the sky.

It's beautiful how she captured the emotion the man was probably feeling at that moment. She's extremely talented. The photo she took of me shows a dark vibe coming of me, and I know because I remember what I was feeling at that moment. The night before I was tasked with torturing a man that owed money to the family.

Number 45.

Forty-five men and women, and I only just turned fifteen.

"What am I supposed to believe when one night you kiss me and the next day you bail on me, ignore me like I mean nothing, and turn your back on everything you said before?" She whispers so softly, and her voice breaks at the end. She stands up from the floor and bends over quickly, picking up all the photos, even the one I hold in my hands. She snatches it away and stands to her full height. "I won't be your dirty little secret. I refuse to let you treat me like I'm nothing. What was it? You got bored of popular Barbie and want to sample the weird outcast, is that it, huh?" She's angry now, and she's spitting venom from those beautiful lips of hers.

I came in here in peace because I'm at fault, but if she wants war, then I'll give her war.

I quickly get on my feet, and before she has time to step a foot outside of the hallway, I grab the back of her neck and push her until her back hits the row of books. A small gasp leaves her lips, but she gives nothing away. No fear. Nothing besides fury and excitement.

Baby girl is just as sick as me.

We can't deny what runs through our blood, even when we pretend to be everything we are not.

Venom.

Poison.

Chaos.

Hers drives me mad, and mine is her addiction.

It's as simple as that.

"Shut the fuck up. You know nothing." I bend down until my nose

catches a whiff of her scent. Sweet and fresh. Nothing special about it, but it's delicious. Running my nose and lips softly over the sensitive skin behind her ear, I bite hard enough to leave a mark but not enough to break her skin.

Her body trembles under my touch, and it gives me a sick sense of satisfaction, knowing she's trembling from want and not out of fear.

My girl.

She was made for me.

"Why leave me hanging this morning? Why did you not show up and leave me no choice but to ride my bike in the rain? Is this all a game to you?" She roughly yanks my hair back leaving me no choice but to stare into her eyes. "End this now."

Now, I'm furious.

Her words trigger me.

They scare me if I'm honest.

I can't lose her.

I refuse.

I free myself from her grasp and trap her between my body and the wall of books behind us. I yank her bag from her hands and gently set it on the floor beside us. I rise to my full height and stare down at her, showing her everything.

How her words make me feel.

Out of control and like an untamed animal ready for his next hunt.

Her.

"I want you so fucking much that it physically hurts me. I can't eat. Sleep is sometimes hard to find because I stay up thinking of you and find myself counting down the hours so I can see your smile again." I slip my thigh between hers and spread her wide. I wait for her to push me away and tell me to stop. She will always have control.

Seconds pass as we stare into each other's eyes.

Both our hearts sync in rhythm, dancing to the beat of the song of this lust we share.

I feel her warm hand on my chest, and I'm prepared to step back. I'm disappointed because I want nothing more than to get drunk on the taste of her lips. Both of them.

"Why, then?" She whispers softly while staring into my eyes, and I swear she can see through my soul.

"I don't know how to keep you." I give her my truth, a half-truth. "He

will take you from me if he finds out just how much you mean to me.”

“What do I mean to you, Alexander?” Her hands cup my cheeks, and that’s when I feel it. Even when it’s impossible. My heart breaks for the second time in my life as it makes room for her.

Take it.

Make it whole again, witch.

“Every-fucking-thing.” I blurt out like an idiot. This is not how I wanted her to know, but I know deep down, If I don’t let her in, I will lose her.

“Kiss me.” Her hands stay on my cheeks, trapping me. “Show me just how much you really want me.”

And I do.

I take her lips in mine.

I kiss her with everything I have.

With all the good and the bad inside me.

I could gladly drown in the taste of her lips.

“I want to keep you for myself, take you somewhere away from everything, and keep you safe inside,” I confess against her mouth.

Her scent drives me mad. I breathe her in. Honey mixed with fresh mint and something a lot like heaven.

I never felt like I belonged.

Not in my home.

Not in the family I was born into, and not in this place filled with people too focused on their own shit that they don’t see anything else.

They don’t care.

But here? Surrounded by old books, the cold and dark hallway hidden away from everything, with her, I feel like I’ve come home.

Here I can be myself and fear no judgment because my sweet girl, who loves literature, old photographs, comics, and unusual things, is the same as me.

An old soul shackled by society's standards of normalcy, wanting to be freed.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she whispers between kisses. We devour each other like we’ve both been starving for years.

“What?”

“Going away with you.”

My heart beats wildly inside my chest as I process that. I’m not lying when I say I wish I could take her away and keep her to myself.

Call me fucking disturbed. I honestly don't fucking care. As long as I have her in my corner, I'm good.

Take her away.

Lock her up somewhere no one will dare take her away from you.

Maybe the fucked-up part of me is right.

Maybe the only way to keep her safe and with me is to get away from it all.

I sure as fuck won't miss this city. My brother is on a path of self-destruction, but he can handle his own. My father left me a long time ago, so why the fuck should I stay bound to this life for him? The only person I would truly miss is Kadra.

She would understand, though.

I'll lose my inheritance, a title I don't want, and I'll have a target on my back, but I will gain so much more.

Her.

Forever with her.

It'll be worth it if, in the end, all I have is her.

"Do you mean it?" I step back and stare into her eyes. "If the time comes for us to run, would you hold onto my hand and not let go?"

Big green eyes, framed by black glasses, stare up at me as if I hung the stars and moon for her.

Same, baby.

Both her warm and soft hands are on my face as she looks into my soul, or that's what I think happens with the way she stares intensely at me, adoration dancing in her gaze, with how she doesn't look away.

"I won't let go. I will never let go as long as you're right there with me."

This is it.

There's no going back.

It is set in stone.

She's mine, and if I have to leave everything behind and take her away with me to keep my family away from her, I will.

If it comes down to it, which it will. I'll choose her.

I'll always choose her.

A groan slips free from my lips. "Say the words, witch."

Her breath hitches when she feels the touch of both my hands wrapped around her delicate neck.

"Alexander." Her soft whimper of pleasure makes me rock hard, and my

heart beats fast. That's the only name I want her to call me until the end of this ride called life.

"I know, baby. I'll make it better." Lifting her skirt up, I grab her left leg and wrap it around my waist. In one swift move, I yank her skirt up her thighs, and it bunches around her waist.

I take her mouth again. This time, sucking her tongue like a savage, like a starved man.

"Wait," wrenching my lips away, I stop.

I look up at her when I notice her entire body become tense. I find her looking at me with red cheeks and biting her lower lip.

I can tell by her body language that she's uncomfortable. Shit. I want her so much that I'm fucking this up.

I take my hands away from her body and start to move back, but she stops me by tightening her leg around me.

"We don't have to do anything, babe." I mean it. I could gladly go without sex because she's worth it. I'll have major blue balls, but worse things could happen. For example, I can lose her. Yeah, no. I'll take blue balls for all eternity over losing my girl.

"I-I don't look like them." She looks away when she says those words. I hate the vulnerable way she says it. Like it matters to me how she looks. *Like I'm that shallow. What demons do you face all on your own, witch? Let me in, and I'll slay them all. Maybe I'll let mine loose to take care of them too.*

I tighten my hands on her neck and make her look into my eyes. I need her eyes. I need her to believe every word out of my mouth because it's the honest to God truth.

"You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I am obsessed with the way you light up my dark days with your shy smiles. The way your green eyes sparkle when you read a line from your favorite book. The way you fit perfectly in my hands. You. Are. What. Dreams. Are. Made. Of."

Seconds pass, and I hold my breath, waiting for her to push me or pull me closer to her. *Come on, baby. Why won't you see yourself the way I do?*

The library is quiet. The only sounds are of pages turning and our shallow breaths.

No one ever comes to this side of the library. No one but us.

I wait for my words to resonate with her and ease her anxiety. This happens at her pace.

And then she smiles that fucking smile of hers that could make the devil's

day. Wrapping one hand around my neck, the other going to her skirt, is the only signal I need.

She wants this just as much as I do.

I'm starving.

I unhook her arms from my neck and ignore the frown that takes over her face. Dropping to my knees before her, I run my hands up her thighs until I reach the top of her black underwear. I can't help but smile when I see the small superheroes on them. Only she would make that shit hot and endearing at the same damn time.

"Cute." I tell her before I slip her panties down her legs and stand to my full height again. She stares at me with confused eyes as I reach behind her and grab one of the books from the row behind her. I grab the first one I see and hand it to her.

"W-what are you doing?" She stares down at one of my favorites like I've lost my mind. I have. I'm gone for her.

"This is what's going to happen." I gently rub my fingers through her folds and find her drenched. So hot and wet for me. A small whimper escapes her puffy mouth. I keep my eyes on her while at the same time shoving my fingers coated in her juices inside my mouth. The moment her taste reaches my taste buds, a loud groan leaves my lips.

Fuck.

This is what heaven would taste like.

I twirl my tongue around each finger and watch as her eyes bulge out of their sockets. This would be kind of funny if I wasn't on the verge of coming in my pants just by the vision of her spread-out before me like a five-course meal and at my mercy, ready for me to take her. "You need to be really quiet, yeah? We're not alone, and as much as I wouldn't mind everyone hearing you scream my name. I rather not have anyone coming here and finding me on my knees with my tongue inside your cunt."

Her eyes glaze over, and her nostrils flare when the dirty words leave my mouth. *Yeah, she likes this.*

"Now, open the book and flip the pages until you find the one with the black highlights."

She does exactly that as I drop to my knees once again, spreading her thighs and lifting one over my shoulders.

Fuck, looking at her now. Book in hand, spread and bare for my eyes only is driving me insane with the need to put my hands and tongue on her.

I begin to trail kisses all over her thighs as I wait for her to find the page. I keep my eyes on her, never looking away but continue running my lips and tongue all over her skin except her pussy lips. *Shit, hurry up, witch. I'll come in my pants before you find the damn page.*

I need to feast on that pussy.

“Now, this is the point. You fancy me a mad—” Poe’s words slip from her mouth, and that’s when I spread her pussy lips with one hand, running my tongue slowly at first. Letting her get used to the feeling.

“Ah!”

“Shhh, be quiet.” I suck on her clit hard, releasing it with a loud pop. Fuck, her taste is so sweet and intoxicating. “Keep reading, and if you stop, I’ll stop.”

“That’s evil,” she frowns down on me, but I see the challenge in her gaze. *Yeah, baby. Play wicked games with me.*

“Read.”

She does.

She reads all my favorite quotes from the chosen book. She stutters but never stops reading out loud.

I stick my tongue inside her cunt and eat her like I’m a starving predator and she’s my willing prey.

It can’t get better than this. Me on my knees with the girl of my every fantasy reading poetry as I eat her pussy and her juices run down my chin.

I don’t stop licking her as my thumb finds her clit and flicks it, making her stop reading. I stop what I’m doing and chuckle when I hear her curse under her breath.

“Heard that.”

“They who dream by day are cognizant—” she continues reading, so I keep on circling her clit, driving both of us insane with the need to come.

The moment I tease it between my fingers, she’s a goner. Her whole body starts to tremble with the force of her orgasm, and she comes undone around my tongue, but I don’t stop. I flatten my tongue and lick her two more times. Taking everything she has to give.

Such a good fucking girl for me.

Fuck, yeah.

“Sweet poetry.”

“Huh?” Her body has come down from the high and her eyes try to focus on me.

I love this look on her.

I did this to her.

Only I ever will.

I fix her skirt but keep her panties shoving them inside my hoodie. I rise from the floor and once again grab her face in my hands. She stares at me like I'm a God. And fuck me, it feels so good.

I kiss her mouth and shove my tongue inside hers. Let her find out how fucking good she tastes. Now that I had a taste, I'm an addict wanting to get his next fix.

How ironic.

Releasing her mouth, I step away from her body and look at her. She looks beautiful and fucked. Her lips are puffy and cherry red because of the force of my kiss.

"You and I make sweet poetry, witch."

She smiles shyly at me, and it sobers me up.

Grabbing her chin in my hand, I make her look at me.

"I want you more than I want to see another day. More than anything, but my family is dangerous, baby." I can't tell her the entire truth, but I can give her this. "If they find out what you mean to me, they'll use you against me to keep me in line."

"What is your last name?"

"Nicolasi." I give her that much. "Valentino Alexander Nicolasi."

"One of the founding families."

I nod.

"I knew you were royalty." She jokes, but I don't find it funny. "Wow, no wonder you can't be seen with someone like me."

I grab her face harder. "My name means shit to me and it shouldn't make you feel less. You are worth far more than every single one of them and their filthy money." It's true. She's priceless.

"So, what you're telling me is that you want to keep us a secret?"

"Just until I find a way to get out."

"Will you tell me everything when the time comes?"

"Yes."

"Will you promise to always be truthful with me, even when you think the truth will hurt?"

"I'll tell you everything, but not right now. I'm risking your life just by sneaking around. If I tell you the truth, then you'll have a target on your back,

and I'm not risking it. I'd rather leave you alone."

"Don't." She hugs me tighter to her body. "Stay with me."

"Even when I'm gone, baby."

I hug her tighter and inhale the scent of her hair. It grounds me.

"Petunia."

"What?"

She removes her face from my chest and looks up at me with a bright smile on her face. "Thank you for the pet snake. For Petunia."

Petunia.

Yeah, it fits.

Kissing her forehead, I whisper the number running through my head ever since I met her.

"143."

"What was that?"

"Figure it out."

And we stayed like that until it was time to leave and face reality. Tomorrow doesn't sound so bad now that I have her to look forward to.

VALENTINO

“Every innocent soul I’ve claimed has haunted my dreams.” – Val
Then

“**W**here the fuck you’ve been?” My twin says loudly from his spot next to the black SUV.

“Why are you here again?” Lorenzo never comes along whenever Benedetto gives me a job. Suddenly, my brother is coming along. They’re keeping tabs on me and think I’m too dumb to notice. I see everything. “You can leave.”

“The hell I am.” He says as he grabs more ammo and straps it to his chest. At only fifteen, my brother has more tattoos than most made men in our family. It started with a woman’s eyes on his neck, and now he has almost every part of his body tattooed. Looking at him now, the differences between us are only increasing as the years pass. Even though we are identical twins on the outside, we couldn’t be more different on the inside. He’s everything I hate, and I am everything he despises. Maybe that’s why it’s hard to get along lately. We don’t have common ground anymore.

He hates me.

I see it in the way he stares at me when he thinks I’m not looking. I can’t fault him for that. I made sure to change my appearance to distance myself from him. I love my brother. I do. He’s the other half of me, but one day we’ll have to choose sides, and I know his loyalty lies with Benedetto and the families. My brother won’t choose me.

So, I decided to slowly break every bond we share before he breaks me.

I feel everything, whereas my twin feels nothing at all. I wish I was more

like him at times. Maybe then I could survive this life.

Maybe I wouldn't keep count of my victims to punish myself.

Maybe I could be normal.

I stay silent as he finishes loading the guns and hiding his favorite knives inside his socks.

"I'll go through the back door, and you check the perimeter and make sure no one comes inside." My twin hates following orders. "I counted three men guarding the gate and two standing outside the main entrance of the mansion." I finish loading my gun and walk forward towards the back entrance. "And brother?"

"Yes?"

"Don't make a mess."

"And where's the fun in that?" he laughs like a lunatic, running towards the front gate to handle the men there.

Shit, I'll have to clean his mess again tonight. *Why is it so hard for him to follow simple instructions?* It's not that fucking difficult.

Cocking my gun, I keep walking forward with it raised high in case someone comes out of nowhere.

Right when I reach the door, I feel a presence at my back. Turning around with the gun in hand, ready to shoot the person, I find my twin with blood and a sick smile on his face.

How the fuck did he take care of them so fast? How can he even stomach it? I do this out of duty and obligation, but he enjoys this shit.

"Bitches went bye-bye." Lorenzo says with a grin on his face and a dreamy look in his eyes. My twin was not made like us. He was born this way.

He winks at me and steps forward, ready to raise hell, but I stop him with a hand to his bloody chest. "You're no fun, man."

"This shit ain't fun."

"It is to me."

Yeah, I bet it is.

I walk up to the intercom and press the button. "Yes?"

"Delivery for Mr. Spencer." We got a tip that the bastard ordered food from the local Chinese joint. It was the perfect opportunity to get past the first gate. This bitch has more security than the fucking president, but we took care of them. Lucan took the guards from the first gate out. Lorenzo this second one, and now the only ones left are the ones behind this door. Yeah,

we're still kids, but with an army of men at our backs. The Nicolasi and Volpe men took care of most of the men guarding the outside without being noticed.

The metal door buzzes.

It was too easy to infiltrate this place. Most men underestimate teenagers, and that's exactly why we are here. We were taught how to handle a gun and a knife before learning to ride a bike. This is all we've known, and that makes us even more dangerous than grown made men. We were made by the Devil himself.

It's easy when they think you're not a threat. I'm good at that, making people believe that I'm just a normal kid. I learned to be what I needed to be, to anyone and everyone, so that I could survive. I adapted to my circumstances and that's why grandfather finds me useful. I'm a chameleon. I can make anyone believe anything I want.

As I walk right onto Spencer's property, the two men guarding the entrance approach us with their guns raised, pointing them straight at us. I would have had a bullet between their eyes before they could even blink. Another man comes out of the corner of the dark room and points his gun at me.

Foolish.

I have the upper hand.

The idiot didn't even try. He could've ducked or hid behind the wall, but nope. What did he do? He came in waving his gun like the imbecile he is and came face to face with death. The man falls against the marble table and slumps to the ground.

They make this too easy.

Sighing, I lift my gun and step over his dead body, and head to the family room.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." My twin sings as he follows me through the house.

Lucan stayed behind, keeping guard just in case more of his men arrive. We have exactly ten minutes to get this done before more of his team starts to worry and come check on him.

Seeing movement in my peripheral vision, I turn and shoot at the man.

He's alone now.

At our mercy.

"What do you want?" Spencer yells.

“Show yourself, and we’ll tell you.”

“You think I’m stupid, boy?” I do, I really do. I don’t tell him that, though. “The moment I do, I’ll be dead.”

He got that right.

“You’re dead either way, might as well make this easier on you,” I say in a lethal voice. “See, my brother here shows no mercy. He tortures for fun, and you have exactly five seconds to come out before he goes find you and shows you his very impressive knife tricks. You may as well come out before he cuts you into tiny pieces and sends your body parts as gifts for each of your kids.”

“You’re fucking sick!”

“Five.” My brother starts counting down to one, but before he reaches three, the man moves into the hall, gun in hand and sweating like a pig in an oven. Poor bastard.

Number 48.

“What the hell do you want? We had a deal. Your boss agreed. I get to run shit on this side of the city.”

“You failed to mention that you’re supplying to the Russian and Irish families. Imagine our surprise when we were told by one of your associates. He was eager to sell you out, you know.” The man freezes.

Lorenzo steps behind him and waves his gun in the air. “One question, love. If you answer correctly, then we’ll let you walk free.”

Spencer narrows his eyes at both of us, but he doesn’t hide the fact that he’s scared shitless. Imagine a grown man being terrified of two fifteen-year-olds. Pathetic.

“Did you or did you not sell info about our deals to the Irish?” The man gulps. Lorenzo is just fucking with him because we already know he sang like a fucking canary to the one that offered the highest cut.

“Look, you little shi—”

Bang.

One bullet ends it.

“Wrong!” My twin sings as he watches the blood ooze out of the man, forming a river on the floor.

His grin turns lethal.

“Shit, this is my favorite part.”

I shake my head and lower my gun. “Let’s bounce.”

“Give me a second.” He bends over and takes a photo of the dead man on

the floor with his phone.

“You are one sick individual, brother.”

“You’re one to talk.” He smiles brightly before tucking his phone back in his pocket and heading for the door.

I follow him.

I claimed three souls today.

Three more ghosts to haunt me at night while my brother sleeps like a fucking baby. I fall victim to my vices to cope with this shit. To cope with the truth. I hate doing this just as much as I love it, deep down. I’m messed up.

Once outside, Lucan steps forward, gun in hand, and raises his eyebrow at us. We’re all covered in blood. Fuck, I hate this shit on me.

“The bosses wanted him alive.”

“They said to shut him up. Well, the bitch ain’t talking now.” Lorenzo shrugs and wipes the blood off his face.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I dial his number. “It’s done.” That’s all I say and hang up.

I hand the keys of the van to Lucan. “Take the car and go get cleaned up. Wipe the car clean too and throw the guns away.” I turn away from them and walk towards my bike. I hear them bickering from a distance.

My twin whines about, and I quote, not being able to use his knives on the dead man and how he didn’t get to show off his new tricks. His friend, Lucan, responds. “Crazy bastard.”

I’m almost to my bike when my brother shouts at my back. “Where are you going?”

“The killing made me horny.” I lie.

“I’m sure it did.” He laughs sarcastically. Ignoring his jab, I hop on the bike and start the engine, drowning out their voices. I feel the guilt rise, and I want to be far away from this place and my brother before it comes to the surface.

I need to see her.

I need to wash my sins away with her touch.

I drive through the city, speeding like a madman in a hurry to get to her.

I shouldn’t let her see me this way, but I need her to see me for what I am. I need her to tell me that this is not all I am.

That I can be better.

Better, for her.

FALLON

BROKEN HEART

“You’ll always be safe with me. Safe inside my heart.” – Val
Then

I drop the mice inside Petunia’s terrarium and watch as she sizes her prey. I find this fascinating; the hunter and its prey.

A buzzing sound coming from my desk drawer makes me look away from the tank and follow the sound.

My heart beats wildly, knowing it’s him.

Yesterday, Alexander surprised me with a smartphone. I’ve never owned one and I’ve never found them useful since I don’t have anyone to call, but he insisted I needed one. He used guilt to get me to accept it.

I don’t want handouts, but things that come from him don’t feel like handouts anymore.

Opening the drawer, I grab the phone and unlock it. I’m getting used to the new gadget. Once I unlock the phone and go to the home screen, I see a new message. It’s from him.

Alexander: Open your window.

I quickly put the phone down and hurry to the window, but I don’t see him. It’s too dark outside, but I open the window anyway. I do it as quietly as I possibly can, trying not to wake mother or Caleb.

As soon as I open the window, Alexander is climbing inside. The room is covered with darkness as well. The only light is coming from the digital clock on my night table.

It’s one o’clock in the morning, and the whole house is silent.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I needed to see you.” There’s something off about his voice. Alexander never stutters. He’s always in control of his emotions. I watch his silhouette come closer, and I don’t back away, even though my entire being is screaming that something’s definitely off.

I turn to my right and turn on the small table lamp so I can see him better. The moment I do, my entire body freezes. He is looking straight ahead and what scares me the most is the look in his eyes. There’s nothing there.

Dark, I can handle, but hollow eyes and an empty soul is new territory for me. He looks lost, just waiting for someone to find him and bring him back.

I take in his form. He has blood splatter all over his white shirt and sticking to his messy white hair.

I don’t know how I manage to take control of this situation. Maybe it is the fact that he looks like a defenseless little boy, or maybe it is the look in his eyes that springs me into action.

I take his cold hand in mine and guide him through the dark until we make it inside my bathroom.

There, I let go of him and turned the shower on. Turning back, I notice he hasn’t snapped out of it. I need him back.

I need my beautiful boy back.

I step closer to him, and he instantly slams his eyes shut and shoves his face into the crook of my neck. I let him take the comfort he needs from me and put my arms around him.

In the short amount of time I’ve known him, I’ve met the many sides of him. The quiet and brooding side, his wild side while he rides his bike. I’ve also met the sweet and caring side, and now, this one.

The side I’ve known has been there since the moment we met. I stare into those eyes that hold secrets and pain. I see it now.

I smooth my hand up and down his back in a soothing gesture and feel him shaking. I try to comfort him in the only way I know how and the only way he’ll allow me, without feeling like I pity him.

Stepping back from him, I lift myself on the tip of my toes and pull his bloodied shirt over his head, leaving him bare. His eyes are unfocused as he stares at himself in the mirror over my head. I take in his disheveled hair with spots of blood on it, and my heart hurts.

What kind of demons haunt you?

Not once do I wonder if he’s a horrible person that killed or hurt someone. No, my mind doesn’t go there, and maybe that’s fucked up, but I

don't believe someone that enjoys hurting others would react in the way he is now.

He's in pain.

"Will you let me help?"

For a moment, I think he didn't hear me, but then he nods and steps back, removes the rest of his clothes, and steps inside the shower.

There's nothing sexual about this moment.

It's just me and him and his pain.

"I killed them," he confesses before sliding the shower curtain closed and shutting me out.

I take a moment and let that sink in.

I killed them.

I think about it and go over it in my head, all the while he's cleaning the blood off his body.

I decide to let him shower in peace, closing the bathroom door behind me when I leave. I walk towards my bed, lay on it and stare at the tank keeping Petunia safe inside.

I think back to all the moments we share and the conversations we've had.

The first time I saw him and the way my heart almost burst out of my chest. The way I felt like I knew him before we even said one word to each other. How he made me feel safe when I haven't felt that way for a long time.

The kisses.

The way his cold hand fits perfectly in mine.

Petunia.

The meals he bought for me. I know it was him. Who else would do that for me?

I let the moments we share take over my thoughts, and I wait for him to come to me.

Almost fifteen minutes later, I hear him shut the water off.

I turn my head his way when I hear wet footsteps on the floor. His head snaps in my direction, and his eyes hold me in a trance. How does he have the power to do that to me every single time? I don't know.

His eyes lock on mine, and I see the way they study me. Maybe trying to figure out if I'm scared of him after his confession.

I am not.

I've met true evil, and Valentino Alexander is the farthest thing from that.

I'm not delusional. I won't make excuses for him, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt before I judge him.

I'm not a saint.

I, too, am the villain in someone else's story.

I killed a man.

I was so busy figuring out the mess in my head that, at first, I didn't notice how he's only wearing his boxers as he walks closer to me.

I look down at what I'm wearing and suddenly feel insecure and worried about what he might think.

Can he see them? I gulp, suddenly feeling the urge to cover myself and hide, but I don't. I breathe in and count to five.

In and out.

Once I feel the anxiety leave my body, I pat the spot next to me, gesturing for him to sit.

He takes a step towards me, and I try not to ogle him too much, but it's hard when he looks like that. For a teenage boy, Alexander is truly beautiful in a way that's not in your face. He is lean and strong with a face that could make any woman fall for him without him even having to try.

He's... too perfect to be real.

His blue eyes flicker with something as his lips part. "Are you afraid of me now?"

"No." And I mean it.

He tilts his head, sizing me.

"You're lying." He whispers and walks closer to the bed. I sit up straight and wait for him to reach me.

"Come here, and I'll show you how you don't scare me at all." I whisper, trying to get through to him. He's not all the way here with me. *Where did you go? Get out of your head and come back to me.*

He takes another step forward.

"My first kill was at the tender age of eight." He whispers harshly but stays frozen in place. "Number one was my only friend." There's no emotion in his eyes as he confesses something as horrible as that.

I don't move.

I can't breathe or think. I just stare at him and beckon him to come to me, but he ignores my plea.

"Tonight, my number went up to forty-eight." One more step. "Forty-eight souls I've claimed, and I'm only fifteen. I remember all of them and

their exact words the moment I pulled the trigger or used my knife before I ended their lives.”

“That’s a big number.” I say like an idiot but, honestly, what’s there to say? I see something flash in his eyes but, just as quickly, it fades.

Two more steps and he’s standing above me. I stare up at him and instantly come to the conclusion that this is no monster. Not one I should fear, anyway. The only monster that terrifies me sleeps two rooms away, and Alexander doesn’t even know.

Water droplets fall from his hair and land on my thighs, making us both look down. I’m wearing a white, oversized shirt and white panties.

Plain and simple.

Boring.

Nothing to get excited about, but he proves me wrong when he finally shows some emotion. His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare.

He desires me.

He wants me even though he’s probably holding himself back from taking what he so desperately wants.

Me.

And God help me, I feel the exact same way.

We’re sick.

We both know it, and this proves it.

He comes in here, covered in blood, and confesses to killing more than forty people, and I don’t run away kicking and screaming for my life.

Without thinking, I grab hold of his hands and pull him to me. He doesn’t fight me. He comes willingly, staring at me like he wants to strangle and devour me all in the same breath.

That doesn’t sound half bad.

“W-will you hurt me, Alexander?” I cut to the point and make sure to call him by the name I prefer. I love his full name, but there’s something about Alexander and Alicia that feels like it’s meant to be. It feels right. “Will you kill me like you did those people? Will you add me to your list?”

He tries to pull away, and I see that I’ve made him angry, but I hold my ground. I need to get through to him because there’s no chance in hell I’m losing him to his demons. I might be losing the battle against my own, but I refuse to give him up.

He stands frozen, and for a moment, I believe I’ve lost him, but he surprises me by falling to his knees in front of me. He lets go of my hands

and takes my face in his.

That's it, lost boy. Come home.

I lean into his touch and kiss both of his hands. The same ones that claimed a life today.

“Listen to me very closely, Alicia.” He croaks. “I would rather rip my heart out of my chest and stick my knife in it before hurting you. You needn't worry about that. Fucking ever. You'll always be safe with me.”

Rip my heart out of my chest.

Stick a knife in it.

You'll always be safe with me.

I let those dark and very sweet words wash over my body, making the beat of my heart go wild. *Settle down, heart.*

“Why did you tell me you killed those people?” I ask, keeping my voice low. I need to know that he trusts me. That he knows I won't betray his trust in me. “I could easily go to the police.”

“Because I need you to know. I need you to understand how fucking wrong I am for you.” His whispering is haunting, but there's so much vulnerability in it too. “I want you to know all of me.”

I shake my head, and a sad smile plays on my lips.

“I've come to terms with the fact that nothing you could tell me can scare me off. It's immoral and kind of twisted, but I want all of you despite everything you told me tonight.”

“I won't make this easy.”

“I don't expect you to. Besides, nothing good ever is.” I answer instantly.

I hold out my hand, and he takes it in his.

“I want all of you, including your wicked demons.” I am still waiting for his response and listening to his rapid breathing.

Then he grabs my neck and I suck in a breath. He takes my mouth roughly with his and hauls me up as I wrap my legs around his torso and kiss him like I need him to breathe.

He sets me down on the bed and pushes me all the way until my back hits the mattress.

The lights are off, enveloping us in darkness. I can't see him clearly, but I can feel him. The moonlight comes through the window, but that's it. Not enough to get rid of the darkness in the room.

We don't break the savage kiss. I feel him slip his hand under my shirt. I fight with all my might not to freeze as he touches me so intimately and

passionately, and thankfully, he never reaches the place that causes me the most shame.

I am thankful for the dark because there's no way he will feel the same about me in the light. If he sees me for me.

He confessed.

He shared some of his secrets, and I'm still hiding mine.

Tell him and see all his promises fade away, foolish girl.

Someone like him with so much sorrow in his heart deserves only beauty. He doesn't deserve ugly, and that's exactly what he will get if I open this Pandora box of insanity that is my mind and busted-up heart. Hopefully, he won't ever know. He deserves a night of pure peace after so much war raging inside his mind. I can't promise him forever, but I can give him this. A few hours, maybe another month or two, just a little longer.

We know this is bad.

We're both so fucked up.

He hates himself, and I can't even look at myself in the mirror at times.

How are we supposed to be someone else's heaven when all we know is painful hell? How can we love someone the way they're supposed to be loved when we can't even care for ourselves?

Now, I know his family is just as fucked up as mine. The only difference is that he hides behind power and a good family name and me? My family members are lowlifes, and nobody cares for us down here.

All my worries go out the window when his sinful mouth starts trailing little kisses on the corner of my mouth, his hot tongue teasing me and driving me mad. God, his taste. He tastes like heaven and hell all in one because that's exactly what Alexander is to me. Heaven and hell wrapped up in a perfect and beautiful package.

He keeps kissing me, leaving a wet trail down my chin until he reaches my neck and bites down hard, but the moment he does, his hand comes up and covers my mouth, stopping the loud moan that slips free.

My arms instantly wrap around him, and I pull his semi-wet body closer to mine. I want to feel him on me. His wet skin on my dry one. I want all of him. His beauty and his ugliness too. Everything that makes him. Both demons and angels. Since the moment I've met him, he's given me a reason to look forward to another day. I dream and make plans for my future, and lately, all those carefully laid plans include him.

I want him, always.

You, naive fool.

This will end.

I don't entertain the dark thoughts and focus on the feel of Alexander's skin and the taste of his kisses.

I will never get enough of them.

He removes his hand from my mouth and drops a soft kiss on my lips. When he pulls away, I open my eyes and watch how the moonlight coming from the window shines on him, making him look like a creature of the night. Something out of a fantasy romance book. He's too damn sexy and beautiful to be one of my superheroes. Yeah, a God of war or maybe a vengeful fae.

He hovers over me, and the look in his eyes only serves to fuel the fire raging inside. His cold hands pull up my shirt over my head, helping me get it off. Once it's off, he drops it to the floor and grabs hold of my hair. I'm waiting for him to pull on it or something like that, but he gently takes my hair out of its confines and uses his fingers to comb through it. So sweetly. I watch as he plays with the dark strands. "You're so fucking beautiful. Sometimes it hurts to look at you. Like the sun."

"The sun?"

"Yeah, after a cold night, all I want is to sit and stare at the sun for hours, but after a few seconds, I have to look away. It hurts to look at it for too long." He whispers while releasing my hair and grabbing my face in his hands. "You shine so brightly, and you don't even realize it, baby."

I don't have the heart to tell him that he's wrong.

That there's only darkness inside my mind.

I will bring him down with me if I'm not careful.

I lean into his touch and stare into his blue eyes that hold the moon and stars for me. I kiss him. I kiss him with every broken part of me and secretly hope he can piece me back together.

We kiss like we've been starving all our lives. My tongue meets his, and our breaths mix together. He nips my bottom lip before taking it and sucking hard on it.

I feel it.

I feel myself getting wetter down there.

Just because of a kiss.

That's what he does to me.

I drop my hands from his face, letting him lead the kiss, and run my hands down his chest. He's lean but athletic, the total opposite of what I

thought was hidden under his clothes. He's not as tall and built as his twin and friend, but that's the only difference. He's lean and strong in his own right. He's all I see in a world of typical bad boys.

Valentino Alexander hides his wickedness under expensive clothes and equally expensive jewelry. I run my hands slowly down his chest, over his stomach, and I stop just before I reach the waistband of his black boxers.

He groans the moment I stop, making me laugh. My blood is racing in the most torturous way at the thought that we'll both be naked soon, exploring each other's bodies, and I have no clue what I'm doing.

While I'm exploring every dip and groove of his stomach, he looks down at me with desire written all over his handsome and tortured face.

I don't know how he does it. How does he make my heart stop and bring it back to life at the same time?

He's patient with me and allows me to learn every part of his body, even when I can't really see all that much. I just feel.

Feel all of him.

I run my fingers over his collarbone and find his cold silver chain, the one he's always wearing under his clothes. I've never seen it, but I feel it on him every time he draws me close. I keep running my fingers across his broad shoulders, tracing the lines and muscles on his chest just like I did his stomach, and when I've had enough, I slip my fingers under the waistband of his boxers and find him hard.

So hard.

The moment my fingers come in contact with his groin he freezes. "Alicia..." It's barely a whisper. I hate that name, the name my mother chose, but I love it on his lips. He's changing everything for the better, and I've become addicted to this feeling of rightness whenever he's with me.

His name on my lips sounds like a melody. Like one written by a tortured genius for the one he loves. Was that too much? Yeah, maybe, but that's exactly how it makes me feel inside whenever he says my name. Warm and like I've come home after years of being lost. Just like when I listen to my favorite melodies and read my favorite passage in a book.

Somehow, I don't hate the idea of his hands on my skin. The thought of it made me feel nervous, but now that it's happening, it doesn't make my skin crawl like when true evil touches me.

I bring his body closer to mine until I don't know where he starts, and I end. His hard groin rubs against my wet panties, causing me to spread my

legs wider and invite him in. I ache for him.

Painfully.

He looks down at me. The shadows in his eyes have been replaced with bright light. And right there, I know I've fallen in love if I wasn't already.

At this moment, I fall so hard for Valentino Alexander. Because in his eyes, I see myself. I see the girl I used to be and not the one that mocks me whenever I look at myself in the mirror.

I see beauty.

Light.

Strength.

I see the real me in him.

I'm young. I'm tainted by the ghosts of my past, the demons of my present. I'm not the typical beautiful and popular girl. I'm just starting to figure myself out but right here, right here, in this moment with him, I find myself.

It may last an hour, a day, or maybe a month before my demons come knocking again, but I rejoice in this feeling.

For tonight,

I am found.

He kisses my forehead softly and inhales. My entire being shakes at the feeling of his kiss. So intimate. So sweet.

"I want you to be my first everything. My first kiss. My first time. My first love." I whisper as I stare into his eyes, letting him see the truth in mine. I'm asking a lot from him without giving more back. I will. I will be better for him. For myself. I'll make us whole again, but I need time before the illusion he has of me shatters with the truth of how broken I really am.

I close my eyes and wait for him to say something.

Anything.

This vulnerability I feel doesn't bother me like it used to.

Not with him.

He says nothing, and it makes me a little nervous. Did I say the wrong thing? Does me being a virgin scare him? Turn him off?

"I-I know you're experienced," I take a second and continue, "and I might not get it right the first time." Again, the silence is killing me. I raise my head and see a small smile on his lips. "It's not funny." I whisper.

"I'm not smiling because I think you being a virgin is funny. I'm smiling because nothing gives me more pleasure than knowing I will be your first."

He digs his fingers into my thighs. In a possessive gesture. “Do you want to know a secret, witch?”

“W-what?” I look down at where his fingers lay close to where I want him—no, need him—most, and swallow hard. Why is this so hot? His possessiveness.

“You’ll be my first, too.” He whispers before slipping his fingers inside my panties and sucking on my neck, roughly sinking his teeth in, making me clench my thighs together, trying to relieve the ache down there.

God, how I wish he’d hurry.

“Where’s your camera?” He says, breaking contact.

“Ah, next to Petunia’s tank.” I point to where it is, and he quickly leaves the bed, grabs it, and just as quickly is hovering over me once again, but this time with my camera in hand.

He points it towards me and snaps a photo, giving me no time to prepare or even pose for it. I’m always behind the camera, and I’ve never wanted to be on the other side. I like to capture beautiful moments and beautiful people, and here I am doing the opposite because of him.

I feel uncomfortable at first. Not really knowing how to act. I’m not the girl that instantly knows how to pose for the camera and look cute.

“You don’t have to if you don’t feel comfortable.” He whispers ever so gently and moves to lower the camera, but I stop him.

There’s something about this moment, that although makes me feel nervous as hell, also makes me feel very empowered at the idea of taking a step forward towards loving myself again and shutting out the ugly noise that always manages to break through the good days.

“It’s okay.” I lower myself into the mattress again and look up towards the lenses. “Go ahead.”

And he does.

He snaps picture after picture.

He starts with my face. With one hand he holds the camera, and with the other, he caresses my cheek, all the while snapping a photo. Then his hand drops to my neck, and there’s something really intimate and erotic, not to say possessive, about the act of taking a picture of his hand around my throat.

Again, it should scare me, but all it does is turn me on more, become more enthralled with this boy with a chip on his shoulder and a softness he only reserves for me.

“Ale...” Oh, God. It aches.

“I know.” He whispers, but not once does he drop the camera. He keeps taking shot after shot while touching me in all the right places, except where it hurts. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful.”

When he says it, I actually believe it.

“So are you.” I say shyly because it’s always difficult to accept compliments. No one except him and Zigs ever say nice things to me.

I’m slowly getting used to it. For them, I’ll try.

I’ll try to be better.

Having enough of this torture, I snatch the camera from his hands and turn it his way.

He has no time to fight me off or hide from view because I quickly take as many photos as I’m able to. Something inside me tells me to take the photos and save them for myself.

I take photos of his body, his neck, and hand but never his face. As much as I would like to remember this moment and how he looks at me, I rather not.

Something in my gut tells me I’m making the right choice. Besides, whenever I look back at these photos, I’ll know.

I’ll know it was him and I’ll smile because I loved him.

Reaching his arm out, he puts the camera down on the nightstand and turns back to me. I lay there and wait for him to make the first move. I’m not ashamed to admit that I need his guidance. I don’t know what I’m doing.

“Are you sure about this?” He looks down at me, almost expecting me to say no. To bail. I won’t. I sit up on my knees and reach for his boxers. Without breaking eye contact I slip the boxers off, revealing his thick length looking angry and so very hard.

For me.

I did that to him.

A sense of pride takes over my body.

He wants me just as much as I want him.

I don’t know exactly what I’m doing, but I’ll act on instinct, and right now, that instinct is telling me to touch him, so I do. I grab his dick and start gently stroking him, and the second he feels the contact of my hands fisting his dick, he throws his head back and lets out an animalistic growl that sounds almost like a beast ready to eat its prey.

I’ve never felt more alive.

I stroke him harder and faster while licking and nibbling his neck. I enjoy

doing that to him and how he sounds when I pleasure him, but then he steps back and pushes me down hard on the bed. Without warning, he slips my panties aside and settles between my legs.

I loved how he made me feel back at the library when he licked me down there. He's doing it again.

I feel warm and wet lips on my pussy, spreading me with his tongue.

Oh, God. So good.

The sensation of his mouth is almost too much to handle. It drives me insane.

I raise my head and stare down at him, looking up at me while sucking and licking me.

The way he moans like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted makes me even hotter. The way he slurps my juices, drinking me in.

I'm almost to the point of sweet release.

"Keep going. Don't stop," I beg him. I throw my head back, gripping his hair and keeping him in place.

"Fuck, baby," he says between licking and sucking. "I'm so addicted. It's almost sick how bad I want you. How much the taste of you drives me insane." He slaps my pussy before spitting on my lips and going down on me again. My muscles charge with a need so strong, I can't take it anymore. He senses my need to come and stops.

No.

No.

No.

That is actually mean. I was so high with pleasure and almost to the point of release when he took it away.

He lifts himself with his elbows and settles between my legs. I can feel his hardness poking my thigh, and I get wetter just with the thought of having him inside of me.

I should be scared that it will hurt.

I should also be nervous, but I'm not.

I'm eager for it.

I want to feel the hurt.

I feel his naked chest on mine, both rising and falling in shallow breaths, completely in sync. I swear I can hear the beat of his heart, and it is music to my ears. "Make me yours," I tell him.

Tipping my head back, he plants a soft kiss on my lips, stealing my breath

and keeping it for himself. “I heard it hurts. Well, it will hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you, so stay still.” I do as he says and lie there, still.

“Good girl.” He grins wickedly at me before dipping down and taking one nipple between his teeth. He sucks both breasts gently while slipping his hand down my stomach until he reaches where I ache the most. He strokes me gently like every time before and sticks a finger inside but quickly removes it. “You’re so tight, baby.” He positions himself, and I watch as his body pumps with heavy breaths. He’s nervous. He might know how to touch me, but this is new to him too.

I wrap my arms around him and let him know with my eyes that I am ready.

That is all he needs before pushing inside of me, making me cry out in both pain and pleasure.

Nothing could ever prepare me for this. It feels like he’s tearing me apart, but just as I’m about to push him off me, I feel soft fingers stroking me there and gentle kisses on my neck.

I take a deep breath and loosen up my muscles. The moment I do, the pain lessens.

“Are you okay? Was it bad?” He says with so much vulnerability that I can’t help but smile up at him and kiss the side of his mouth.

“I’m okay. You can move now.” He sinks all the way inside, burying himself deep. The pain subsides, and it starts to feel good.

There’s no pain, only pleasure.

I spread my legs wider, and he goes in deeper. My hands go around him again, and I urge him forward. Once he knows I’m good, he begins to pump faster, making me moan out loud.

The only sounds in the room are our heavy breathing, my moans of pleasure, his grunts, and the sound of our sweaty skin slapping.

He doesn’t hold back anymore.

He takes what he needs from me but makes sure he gives as good as he’s getting. I roll my hips to meet his thrusts, and that makes him hiss.

God, he looks like a beast.

Like a mad king, taking what he wants from me.

Throwing my head back in ecstasy, a loud moan almost slips free, but he puts his hand on my mouth, efficiently shutting me up. “Be quiet, baby, or we’ll wake up at the damn house.” He teases and carries on with his movements, never breaking rhythm.

I playfully nip his hand and watch as his eyes narrow and his nostril flare. Uh-oh. I've provoked the beast.

His thrusts become faster, and my eyes roll back when I feel him hitting something. I don't know exactly what, but all I know is that it feels amazing.

"You feel right inside of me."

He thrusts inside faster and deeper, making me arch my back, giving him more room to sink further into me.

Oh, God.

It's happening.

I'm almost there.

My moans become louder. I sink my claws into his back the moment I feel a tingling sensation down my back.

He thrusts one more time, and I let go.

The feeling is so intense that Alexander swallows my moans with his kiss, and I ride the orgasm. I clench my thighs out of reflex, and he growls, arches his back, lets out a feral growl, and finally comes.

"That was... perfect." I whisper dreamily after we both come down from the high.

He snorts.

He actually snorts.

"You're such a dork."

I laugh.

We both do.

He is still inside of me with his head on my naked chest. "I could listen to this forever."

"What?"

"The beat of your heart. It calms the storm inside." He whispers and traces invisible figures on my body. I swear I feel him write his name on me.

I raise my hand and stroke his head.

"Hey, Alexander?"

"Yeah." He mumbles sleepily.

"If you weren't born into that life. What do you think your future would look like?"

"You."

"What?"

"I see you in it. In this life and the next. When I see my future, I see your face."

Settle down, heart.

“A mini you too.”

A mini what?

He hugs me tighter and mumbles.

“Everything my twin and I didn’t have.”

I’m about to ask him what he means when I hear him snore softly.

He fell asleep still inside of me.

I maneuver myself to grab the sheet and cover us both with it.

He can’t stay here all night, but I don’t have the heart to wake him after the night he had.

I lie there with him on top of me and think of what he said.

Everything my twin and I didn’t have.

Sweet boy.

I wish I could give you the world.

Moments later, I, too give in and fall asleep. Hoping this night could be the first of many.

The first of forever.

Hopefully, this time, I can keep him.

Hopefully, my heart won’t break in the process.

FALLON

DON'T LEAVE

“Holy balls. I didn’t see that coming.” – F

Now

In the back of my mind, I always knew we had an expiration date.

I wished for forever.

Forever was not in the plans.

Not for us.

We were both fucked in so many ways. We got so caught up in the feeling of belonging to someone that we didn’t see or feel anything else. Only each other. We were completely oblivious to the outside world and how one day it would tear us apart.

My heart knew it would end, but I hoped it wouldn’t be so painful. That night we both breathed life back into each other. I never felt freer than when I was with him.

More beautiful.

Just more.

I count 365 letters.

One for every day I was away.

I never got them.

He never sent them.

Why?

This could’ve all been avoided if he had told me why, but he just let me believe a lie rather than fight for me.

For us.

For the beautiful life we could’ve had.

I look down at one of the Polaroids he took of me that night. I remember exactly how it felt to be captured in such a vulnerable moment by the one that meant the world to me. For a while, there I was, walking on clouds, and nothing could touch me.

Until I saw through his lies.

Or so I thought.

He kept one for himself.

Why?

What am I missing here?

Why did you lie, lost boy?

I put the letter back into its envelope and shove it inside the old box. He gave these to me for a reason. A man that only wanted me to hurt would just hurt me and get on with it. Finish this.

End this sick cycle of hurt, but instead, he let me back inside his mind. He left me alone with his words, left me to read every single painful letter.

Yeah, sure, he knows they'll hurt. The memories choke me. The knowledge of what he felt when I left makes my chest ache.

He doesn't know, though.

How I went to hell and back for him.

For my heart.

If only he knew how I walked through fire for him, even when I hated him. I loved him enough to sacrifice everything for him.

Shaking my head, I rise from the spot on the cold floor and make my way towards the window.

The snow is still falling so beautifully onto the trees, covering everything in white. I don't know how long I've been here, but by the looks of the weather, I can tell we've entered winter.

Has Christmas passed?

My heart burns when I think of my family: Andrea, Roman, and even Mr. Nicolasi. We created our own traditions. It's something I never had as a child and always look forward to once the holidays begin.

The tree trimming and decorating.

The *coquito* Andrea makes for me. It's basically eggnog but with more flavor and alcohol.

The look on Roman's face when he wakes up on Christmas morning and finds the tree surrounded with presents that Santa left for him.

I sigh as I stare up at the moon.

At least they'll have Lucan with them this year.

I hope he treats them well and realizes how blessed he truly is.

I saw it in his eyes the day of their wedding. While Andrea was fuming about the union, Lucan had a genuine smile and a peaceful gaze. Unlike when he first met her.

Bang.

The loud noise makes me turn away from the window and walk to the middle of the room. I'm barefoot. The wooden floor is cold as hell. Yeah, we're in winter.

I remember this feeling, this painful cold, whenever I plot my escape and realize that there is really no way out of here alive. I will freeze to death out there, and that's if a wild animal doesn't get to me first.

Earlier, I woke up hearing loud footsteps on the hardwood floor. Right next to the door, there was a bag filled with hygiene products, warm clothes, and some books.

Some new ones and some of my favorites.

He's slowly beginning to treat me like a human instead of an animal like when he first brought me here.

Thank God for small favors.

After I took a long bath, I slipped in some clothes to keep me warm from the cold, brushed my tangled hair and my teeth.

Yes, I feel human now.

I know he's back.

Soft music was playing in the cabin, and I could hear him downstairs opening cupboards and drawers like a mad person. It all stopped about half an hour ago.

He's been in and out all day.

What the hell is he doing out there?

I try to come up with something, but I come back blank. I knew, well, I thought I knew the boy, but this man is new territory for me.

I take a step forward and stumble, almost falling to the floor.

Dammit.

Not now.

Please don't fail me now.

I have had shortness of breath all day, but I've been able to control it. I've been fine for five years, but I knew this would happen.

I don't have my meds.

My diet here is shit.

My stress level is through the roof.

I knew all of this and kept silent. He wouldn't have believed me. Why would he? All we did was lie.

Not one soul on this earth knows.

Not even my best friend.

Demons haunt me every day. Throw in a heart defect. Who would want to deal with all of that?

Everyone has their own issues, and I was tired of being a burden to others. So fucking tired, so I kept it to myself.

Until now.

Congenital heart disease.

A type of heart disease that I was born with. CHD affects the way a normal heart works.

I had surgery to repair my heart when I was quite young, but I wasn't cured.

There is no cure.

There are long-term effects, and I will always deal with my disease, but with surgery and a healthy lifestyle, I can live a long life.

You see, I was born with a broken heart. My broken heart not only caused me pain but my parents as well. Well, my father. My mother found out she got a defective kid and not the perfect baby she wanted, and the animosity towards me began, but she was clever and acted like she loved me.

The years of abuse proved otherwise.

Shit.

Suddenly, I feel lightheaded and my vision blurs.

No, no, no.

The last time this happened, I was a teenager, and my heart literally broke inside my chest.

My body feels heavy, and I can barely take a step without feeling dizzy. I can't stand up straight either.

I try to make it to the bed, but I feel too weak.

One step.

Two steps.

I collapse.

My back hits the cold floor, and I hiss in pain. Before unconsciousness takes over, all the people I love flash through my mind.

Andrea.

Roman.

Ziggy.

Dad.

Alexander.

I think of how I won't get to see them again. My last memory with Roman is him crying silently in a strange place, with cruel men keeping him from his mother.

I'm sorry.

I should've taken better care of myself.

I'm sorry.

I should've told them I loved them more often.

I'm so sorry, Valentino.

For breaking both of our hearts.

My eyes close, and I see him.

The rare smile of the boy who stole my broken heart and the image transitions into the man he is now. A man who hates me.

A man who will be glad I'm gone.

Maybe not today.

Maybe not tomorrow.

But someday.

My time is borrowed.

VALENTINO

It happened so fast.

One moment, I'm watching her hunch over my secret thoughts with sadness in her eyes, and the next, she's clutching her arm and falling to the floor.

I don't think.

I never do when it comes to her.

Even after everything.

Even after all this time.

She fucked me up.

I drop everything and hurry down the hall to her. My heart is racing, and sweat breaks out.

Fuck.

I reach into my sweatpants' pocket, searching for my phone, and dial the only person I can count on.

“What’s wrong?”

I never call, not unless I’m in serious shit.

“I need help.” I bark while hurrying my step down the dark hall. “Bring Adryel with you.”

I hang up, fucking praying she’ll get here in time.

A fucking ambulance will take about two hours, maybe more, to get here. My cabin is in the middle of fucking nowhere.

Fuck.

Once I reach her door, I bust inside, and find her lying on the cold floor.

The dead heart stops beating in my chest.

Time stops.

All I can see is the image of her so fragile, lying deathly still.

I’ve never been more afraid.

Not of men.

Not of my demons.

Right this second, I am terrified.

All I can think about is losing her for the second time.

Losing her forever.

I breathe in and push through the fear and spring into action.

“I-I can’t b-breathe.”

I take her in my arms, noticing how cold she feels and how her lips have turned blue. Shit. What’s wrong?

“I’m here, baby. I’m here.”

I pick her up from the floor and gently lay her down on the bed.

Ring.

Kadra calling.

“Tell me you’re almost here. I don’t know what’s wrong. Fuck I can’t lose her. Not like this. Not again.”

“Calm the fuck down and tell us what’s going on.” I hear the distant sound of a helicopter. Fuck, she won’t get here in time.

“She collapsed while gripping her arm like she’s in pain.” I look down at the girl—no, woman – who has the power to ruin me once and for all with

her departure from this world, and I feel true fear. “She says she can’t breathe. She’s so cold, and her lips have turned blue. Doc, what the fuck do I do?” I snap at the man.

The robotic voice of the man comes through the line. “Go find an aspirin and shove one down her throat if you have to.” I reluctantly leave her side and run to the other side of the cabin, where my room is, and search through my bathroom cabinets for an aspirin.

“Is she having a heart attack?” I ask, knowing this will change everything. I’ve been going through hell the past couple of days, coming to terms with all I’ve done. How miserable I am.

My nephew.

My family.

Fallon.

All of it kept me up at night.

Now, here I am, the thing I’ve been craving for years, her suffering and pain is happening.

Why don’t I feel victorious?

Why does it feel like I am losing everything?

“I need to examine her, but by the looks of it, she could be.” His cold tone pisses me the fuck off.

Nobody is at fault but me.

Did the anxiety and fear cause her to be ill?

Was it the cold?

Maybe the first day I kept food from her?

Fuck.

Did I cause this?

I run as fast as I can to reach her. I find her exactly where I left her, struggling to breathe but she’s colder now.

I take her face in my hand and shove the aspirin down her throat. I yank my shirt over my head and slip in next to her on the bed.

I take her in my arms and instantly feel her shivering and her body growing weaker.

“Come on, stay with me, yeah?”

Don’t leave.

I hate you.

I love you.

I’d rather spend the rest of my life fighting with you than not having you

here with me.

“We’re almost there. Hang on. Keep her talking, and whatever you do, don’t let her fall asleep.”

Adryel hangs up and leaves me alone with my dark thoughts and the person that means the most to me, hurting in my arms.

Don’t leave me.

I tried to let go of this hate.

I really tried to move on and leave the memories behind, but then when I saw that paparazzi photo of her kissing another man, something broke inside my head.

It wasn’t whole, to begin with, but that was all I needed to go over the edge.

I needed her to hurt the way I did.

I do.

My fucked-up mind concluded that I’d rather have her than be forgotten.

That would truly be the end of me.

VALENTINO

LOVE AND HATE

“Would you stay? Even when I’m gone?” – F

Now

It took twenty minutes for them to get here.

Twenty minutes, where I had to gently tap her face to keep her from falling unconscious. She’s still shivering, but her breathing is even, and her heart is not racing anymore.

“T-this bringsss backk memories.” I still when I hear her soft whisper.

I’m able to breathe easier because we can discard her having a heart attack. I’m no doctor, so what the fuck do I know? It has to be a good sign that she’s able to form a sentence, no? She managed to speak.

I hold her tighter to my body and inhale her scent. The memories we shared— good or bad—always made me feel like home.

How fucked up is that?

Even at our ugliest and our worst, I still felt like I wouldn’t want to be on this fucked up ride with anyone else but her.

“Shhh...” I push her hair back from her forehead and hush her. “Rest and save your breaths.”

She sighs, but like every time, she doesn’t follow orders. I need silence. I need to gather my thoughts and figure out my next move. I need to make sure she will be okay. I need... fuck what do I need?

Her...

I ignore the thought because I can’t do this now. This is so fucked up. I’ve been hating her for far longer than I have loved her, and I don’t know anything else. I’ve been dead-set on making her pay for what she did that

now that she's in pain, I don't know how to feel.

Love Fallon Alicia James.

Hate Fallon Alicia James.

Be without her...

Fuck.

I don't know what to do.

A metal door slamming shut startles her and snaps me out of my thoughts. *They're here.*

I untangled myself from her body, and I instantly hate how her loss makes me feel. I don't want to feel. I either feel too much or don't feel anything at all.

The lesser of two evils.

I lay her down gently and leave the room, not looking back. There's a heavy feeling in my chest I can't decipher, but it's there.

Something changed between us during the days I left her alone, and something definitely changed tonight. Watching her so vulnerable, so hurt did things to me.

Just like before.

When we were everything to each other.

"Do you want the good or the bad news first?" The ex-con doctor says without looking at me. He remains hooking the IV to Fallon's arm. The moment he got here, he took over.

After years in prison, he still remembers how to be a healer. It's something that you don't easily forget, but it is something he never wanted to do again after what he did to that man. He owes me, so he had no choice but to come down here and help.

The tone he used makes me wary.

"What's the good news?"

"It was not a heart attack."

I let out a sigh of relief, and my entire body relaxes, just thinking that maybe I won't lose her after all.

"What was it, then?"

"Anxiety attack." He turns away from Fallon and looks at me over his shoulder. Kadra remains silent, watching near the window.

Anxiety attack?

It sure as fuck seemed more serious than that. Not that anxiety attacks are not serious, but she scared the shit out of me. I thought for sure she was

suffering from a heart attack. I'm a bit confused, but I guess it makes sense. After what she's been through, from being abducted then taken again. And brought back here and what I've been putting her through.

Fuck.

For years, I've been surrounded by nothing but darkness and cold, completely numb for the sole purpose of not feeling anything at all.

I always felt too damn much.

When a normal human feels sad, I feel that twice as fucking hard. Everything was too intense. Maybe because I was robbed of my innocence and everything I loved. I've been losing for a long time and never quite grasped the concept of winning. I never won until her. With her, I felt like I won the moon and the stars, the whole damn sky, but she ripped it away from me.

She claimed to love me through everything, but at the first sign of trouble, she shut me out without giving me a chance to fix what was broken.

She ripped the already cold and battered heart off my chest and ran away with it to wherever the hell she ran off to back then.

I looked for her the first few weeks she was gone until her mother had mercy and told me what went down.

What broke my fucking heart once and for all.

She ended us with a letter.

A fucking letter.

Those same feelings that were choking me that day try to rise, but I shove them back down to where they can't torture me.

Even after everything she did, I still protected her.

I still kept her safe from afar until she drove me mad.

Looking down at her now, so vulnerable and lost, I wonder why it is so hard for me to let go of her. Let go of the idea of the girl I once fell in love with. It's fucking clear that it was all an illusion. Nothing was real. So, why the hell am I still trapped inside her chaos?

I should've never brought her here.

Killing her will only free her of her misery and bind me to the hurt of her loss forever. I'm still losing. Shit.

She's here now.

Down in this hell we both created. We're both hurt and miserable, but that will end as soon as she goes back to her life.

My sister is waiting for her.

My nephew loves her.

I feel a sharp pain in my hollow chest whenever I think about it.

She's at the highest peak of her career, and she'll have that asshole waiting for her to be her knight in charming armor, waiting to pick up the pieces of her I've destroyed.

Fuck.

She'll move on with life, leaving me inside the pages of her tragic past.

Fucking witch, putting a fucked up spell on me, and I'm still here bound to it. I'm a freak show.

There's no way I will ever find peace again.

All because of her.

"She looks terrible, Valentino." A soft and harsh whisper penetrates through my thoughts.

I turn the way the voice comes from.

Kadra Parisi, the only woman I allow to get too close. My confidant and the bane of my existence, at times. Sometimes I wonder why I didn't fall for someone like her. Someone who understands and shares the same demons as me. A beautiful and strong woman who knows what she wants and doesn't play games.

I envy her.

She turned her scars into weapons and her pain into armor. She rose from the ashes while I'm still burning.

So again, why couldn't I have fallen for her?

My friend.

Someone that knows what it's like for me inside my head. Someone with the same scars and past as me.

I had to fall for the outcast girl from the wrong side of town, who has held me captive since the first moment I laid eyes on her and trapped me in her web of lies.

An ordinary girl with weird hairstyles, eyes too big that held what I believe were the same demons as me. One who understood every book reference I threw her way, one that showed me heaven when all I've seen is hell.

She was perfect for me, or so I thought.

Life showed me how wrong I was.

Perfect doesn't exist.

She was flawed, and I was too caught up in the dream of her that I didn't

see what lay beneath her fake smile.

Did I see what I wanted to see?

Was I craving peace so badly that I completely disregarded the fact that she acted off sometimes? I thought it was cute, a quirky trait, but was it more?

Did I ever really know the girl?

The room becomes too quiet, and I concentrate on Fallon's abnormal breathing and the rise and fall of her chest.

"What's the bad news?"

"These kinds of high-stress levels and conditions you're keeping her in are not good for her weak heart." The stone-cold man looks over at me with disapproval written all over his face. Where the fuck does he come off so judgmental? Has he forgotten the monstrosity he committed?

Her weak heart.

"What do you mean by weak heart?" She's completely healthy. She never showed signals of being sick before. Is this new? Was I blind? Why didn't she tell me this before?

Who are you, Fallon?

I let you inside the madness that lives inside my head, and you kept me in the dark. I only knew part of you. Was it the part you only wanted people to see?

What the actual fuck?

"When you first called and informed me of her symptoms, it all pointed to a heart attack, but now while examining her, I concluded that it was not a heart attack but an anxiety attack." He recites the words like a damn robot. "Sometimes people tend to get confused because of the similarities between the two, but the increase of heart rate, hyperventilation, trembling, and her not being able to walk or keep her head up was caused by the panic attack. However, to discard any possibility that the episode had anything to do with her heart, I checked her over and found the scar of her open-heart surgery. I have no moral high ground here, but this is inhumane even for people like us." With that, he puts three bottles of pills on top of the night table and heads out without saying anything else.

Three things stick with me.

Scar.

Open heart surgery.

Inhumane.

Thinking back to all the times we were intimate, I never saw her completely naked in the light of day. We always had sex in her room at night with the light dimmed, and other times, it was on our private corner in the academy's library.

I never saw it.

How well she hid everything from me. I never even notice.

Did I ever really know her? I don't think so.

And that's when it hits me.

We went in blind, both hoping the other would fix the shitty existence we had.

How toxic.

Selfish.

Us.

VALENTINO

HELLBOUND

“Love me through the pain, yes?” – Val

Now

“Didn’t I tell you, you would regret it?” My only friend says from where she’s sitting across the room from me. I don’t look her way, keeping my eyes trained on the fire burning intensely on the fireplace. This place is my pride and joy. It was meant to be a safe haven, but I tainted it with this sick plot of revenge.

To the outside, world it might look like an ordinary cabin in the woods, but once you step a foot inside, it’s an entity of its own. Big enough to fit a big family, their hopes and dreams, and so much more. It’s not finished yet, and it needs some remodeling, but nonetheless, it’s the place we dreamed of having when we were kids. A cabin far away from society, where we could hide away and be ourselves. I had it built with her in mind. All I’ve been doing for the past five years somehow always ended up being about her.

Where did I go wrong?

I loved her so goddamn much, enough to leave everything I’ve known all my life behind. Somehow that love transformed into something ugly. Selfish, even. I turned the love she freely gave, the love I felt for her and made it all about me.

All I thought about was how she made me feel.

How she silenced the demons in my head.

Me.

Me.

Me.

Was I too damaged to love her properly? Wholeheartedly?

I felt like our love was enough to withstand anything life threw at us. Not once did I take a step back and realize that maybe being each other's everything was not healthy. Maybe we were too young. Too naive.

Maybe it was toxic.

She didn't deserve a love like that.

No one does.

"I don't want to hear it."

"That's the problem, isn't it, Valentino?" She whispers dully while playing with her knife. The one she always carries, the one that means the most to her.

I look at my only ally, my friend. Her long dark hair tightly secured in a slick back ponytail. She doesn't wear it down any more like she used to when we were young. When we were kids, she used to always wear it down, like a curtain hiding her stunning face. All the Parisi sisters are stunning, but there was always something more to Kadra Sofia. Maybe it was the fact that she looked nothing like everyone else in her family, or maybe, it was the fact that she never tried to be like her sisters. She knew who she was and what she wanted from a very young age. Her cat-like, yellow eyes used to shine brightly like the sun. Before, she, too, met evil at a young age.

Unlike all of us.

Kadra has met the Devil twice.

Gabriele Parisi, her father, and that little bitch Beauregard. They both took her innocence in the cruelest of ways, and to this day, I wish I could've done something. I wish I could take her pain away by taking that motherfucker out. I can't do that. She won't allow it, but I do share her pain. I made it my own. Even though she would gladly kill me before she let me fight her war.

I would do it in a heartbeat.

Back then, she was my only friend. To this day, she's still the most loyal friend, even when we rarely see eye to eye. That's the beauty about us. We don't have to agree, but I know she would lay down her life for me, and I would do the same for her.

It's an unspoken vow.

I would've done the same for Fallon, once upon a time, before she stopped being my heaven and became my hell.

Kadra continuously taps her heels against the hard floors, waiting for an

answer. I'm trying to figure out a logical answer to give her, but there's nothing I can say to explain what I'm feeling at the moment.

She lost her innocence in the most violent and inhumane of ways, and maybe my pain is nothing compared to hers, but I did lose everything that day.

My girl.

My dreams.

My everything.

"How did you do it?" I ask while looking down at my hands. The same hands that have killed and tortured many souls throughout the years. The same hands that worshipped her body years before are now the main cause of her suffering.

"How did I do what?"

"How did you turn your pain into power? I'm drowning every day in mine." I give her my truth. I don't have my shit together. I'm not as strong as her. As strong as my brother and the others. My pain and torturous childhood have always ruled my life. Dictated my every move.

I'm a slave to my demons.

"I let my rage consume me but never control me. There are only two people that deserve to feel what I felt, and they'll get what they deserve, but I refuse to let this hatred I feel inside of me hurt the ones I care for." I can't help but look into her eyes while she tells me what I wanted to ask but felt like I never could. Maybe if we didn't speak about it, then we could pretend it never happened, but shit doesn't work like that. We can't outrun our demons. They're always there. Ever present. "We don't hurt innocents, Val. I'd like to think that you're better than your grandfather. May he burn in hell."

"I am nothing like him." I whisper, trying to convince her or me, I don't know.

I am nothing like him.

"You hurt her heart back then. You lied, did you not?"

"To protect her."

"Do you really believe that?"

"What the fuck does that mean, Kadra?" I try to keep my temperament in check, but I feel myself losing control and failing. "I did everything I could to keep her safe!"

She turns my way and looks into my eyes, holding me captive. "You lied to keep her. Did you protect her from her home life? Did you protect her

from the Devil?”

What the fuck?

“For fuck’s sake, Val. Did you ever really know her? Did you see the marks of evil left on her body?”

Did you protect her from the Devil?

Marks of evil.

“I knew that I loved her. I knew that my days started and ended with her. I knew that she could have ripped the heart out of my chest, and I would’ve picked it up from the floor and crawled back to her with it in hand if only she had asked. I knew that I wanted fucking forever with her, and she fucked it all up. She broke my fucking heart.”

“I guess karma got her, huh?” Kadra stands up from the chair and walks my way. All I can focus on is the click of her heels and the sound of burning fire. “The thing is, Valentino, her heart had been broken long before you got a hold of it.”

Her broken heart is failing her now.

“I did love her.”

“She loved you, too.”

Loved.

She could never love me now, and I don’t expect her to. Not after all we’ve been through.

“How did we fuck up this bad? How did we end up here?” I asked myself these questions every time I let my thoughts drift to her.

“Love is messy and sometimes fucking lethal. You were young, and you were both broken, just in different ways. You wanted to find a home in each other. You both expected the other to fix whatever was broken inside of you, and that’s where you went wrong. You can’t expect someone else to fix you. You have to do that shit on your own, and then maybe you’ll be able to give them the very best of you. The person the other deserves.”

“When did you become an expert on love?”

“What? Like that shit is hard.” She shrugs and moves to leave but not before looking back at me. “It’s not too late, you know.”

“For what?”

“For forever with her.”

“There’s no way she will ever want forever with the man I am now.”

“Why the hell not? You are heaven-sent, Valentino. You always were.”

Heaven sent.

More like hell-bound.

I refrain from laughing because the last time I laughed at something Kadra said, I got a knife to the thigh. “She deserves better than me, even if she fucked me up like no one managed to do before. Not even Benedetto left me this broken.”

“If you believe that, then there’s really nothing left to say.” She moves to walk out again, leaving my mind reeling. “Oh, and Val?”

I don’t look her way.

I keep my eyes on the fireplace, watching the flames dance.

“Yes?”

“If you believe there’s no hope for you two, then set her free. Women like her weren’t meant to be caged.”

The door slams shut behind her.

I’m alone again with my thoughts, and the woman I both love and hate with the same intensity is just a few doors away from me. A broken shell of the woman she’s been for the past couple of years.

It takes me a second to realize what she said.

Set her free.

I can’t.

I don’t know how.

PART TWO

CRUEL REALM

I tried to let you go.
I tried to move on and turn the page.
I couldn't.
Your ghost won't let me.
We might seem wrong to the outside world, but to me this love is perfect.
It's us.
You're inside of me.
Sweet poison.

FALLON

SCARS

“Bad words are for people that have nothing productive to say.” – M
Now

My mother used to tell me I was cursed.
Her tone was always vindictive. Her purpose was to hurt me. But that doesn't change the fact that after a while, I started to agree with her.

I was indeed cursed.

I brought tragedy to their lives since the moment I took my first breath. By the time I was a year old, my dad was taking out loans and drowning in debt, trying to fix my broken heart. I never felt like a burden to my dad, but my mother saw me as nothing but an inconvenience. She used to complain about dad favoring me. I believed he did since there was no love lost between them, but he was doing what a good parent does. He was giving everything he had, and even what he didn't, to save my life. So that I could have a better life, have a fighting chance. He sacrificed everything for me to live, and I've been taking it for granted this entire time. I let my mother, my past, and my demons stop me from living the best life.

Sad that it took this to make me realize that.

My head is pounding, and I feel a little groggy, but other than that, I feel okay. I'm a little tired, though. So very tired of it all.

I'm tired of feeling empty, even when I am so blessed. Who in their right mind would feel alone when they have wonderful people who love them and a successful career? I made something out of myself even when all odds were against me. The fucked-up, lonely girl with a crappy home life made it. I

chased my dreams, and I did love it for a little while. I travel to the most beautiful places, meet all kinds of people and I get to photograph them. I get to capture the beauty that is nature and mankind.

I did what Ziggy dreamed for me.

I followed in his footsteps and continued his legacy.

I feel so damn ungrateful whenever my mood turns dark, and the demons of my past take my joy away. No one in their right mind would complain, but I still feel empty.

It's him.

It has to be him.

Back then, I didn't have anything, but I did have Valentino, and not once did I feel empty. Now that I have everything I always dreamed of, I feel hallow.

I don't have him.

The one person that sets my soul on fire and makes my heart beat wildly in my chest. The one that paints my world in color when all I ever see is black and white.

I open my eyes, finding it kind of difficult to focus on one thing. After what seems like hours of sleep, my eyes are sensitive to the light. It takes me a couple of seconds, but I do manage to open them and see clearly.

I'm not in the room he kept me in initially. This one is larger and warmer. The first thing I see is the skylight now covered with snow. *How beautiful.* There's a wooden desk in the corner of the room, with a big shelf filled with books right next to the window. The room is simple, nothing fancy, and painted black, but somehow that makes it perfect. I never gravitated towards shiny and expensive things. Instead, I adored antiques and nature's colors.

"How are you feeling?" I follow the melodic whisper, and there he is. Sitting on a chair next to the bed, hunched forward with his elbows on his knees, staring right at me.

How am I feeling?

How do I explain when I don't even know myself? I do know he's asking about what happened last night.

"Better than yesterday." I tell him the truth. My head hurts still, and I feel weak, but I do feel better.

"You scared me."

I scared him?

So now he cares?

I thought he would be glad to be rid of me without having to pull the trigger.

“I didn’t think you cared.”

He looks down at his hands and says nothing. I thought he would be happy or at least gloat, but there’s nothing that gives me the impression that he feels happy about what happened to me.

“Why didn’t you say something?” There’s a rough edge to his tone, and for a moment, I feel paralyzed by his question. *Does he know? My secrets? It can’t be.* There’s no way for him to know. I’ve never told a soul.

“What do you mean?”

“Your heart condition.”

I close my eyes and breathe in.

I do feel ashamed that I never told him about it. I never let him completely inside my world. If I’m being honest, I thought he would leave the moment he found out I was a girl with a whole lot of baggage. It wasn’t fair of me. I know that now.

“You know.” It’s not a question. Last night is still a bit blurry, but I do remember the doctor. He must’ve told him about my scar.

Valentino nods but says nothing.

“You already know, so what’s the point of repeating what he told you?” Maybe it is the callous way I say it, but I can see it rubbed him the wrong way.

“I want the fucking truth, Fallon.” He says calmly, but I know he feels anything but at the moment. “Don’t you think we’ve lied enough? Why-the-fuck didn’t you tell me before!”

“Because I wanted you to see me for me and not for my scars!” I see that I surprised him with my outburst, but I’ve been holding back for years, and my God, does it feel amazing to let go of my secrets.

“I never knew you at all, did I?” The way he says it hurts more than a knife to the heart. He might have lied, but he did let me inside his world and shared his darkest secrets with me. All the while, I never let him in and see me for me. I just wanted him to see the girl I was without the scars and demons, but now I realize they were a part of me. A part he had every right to know. “Will you tell me now?”

He takes me by surprise. I look at him and notice his usual frown is gone. He’s not looking at me with pity. I don’t want that. That’s part of the reason why I hide most of my baggage from the people I love.

I have a choice to make.

I can keep lying, or I can set myself free.

I can finally let go of the past, and maybe it will be a step forward into a better life, one where I don't have to lie or hide.

So, I do.

I tell him everything I failed to say before.

I tell him how I was born with a heart defect that drove my parents into debt and how it killed my father.

How I killed my father.

My best friend.

The bills from the hospital and surgeries piled up, and he had to take loans, which he couldn't pay after, and then he owed dangerous men money, and one of them shot him in the head and left him for dead.

I told him how my mother hated me so much that she took it out on my body. How she managed what I ate and how much I ate. I was not even ten years old, and I already had an eating disorder that only worsened my condition from time to time.

All the while, he says nothing but looks at me with pity. The one thing I never wanted from him. This is why I keep my demons to myself because, once people know, they start seeing and treating you differently, and for once, I wanted to feel normal. So, I pretended I was when I first met him.

"Did I fail in making you feel safe enough to confide in me back then? Didn't you feel the need to open up to me when I laid my sins on the table for you to see the real me?" He's angry now. He has every right to feel betrayed because I took everything he had to give and didn't share half the things he did.

"I didn't want to be that girl! Not with you. Not the broken and pitiful girl that had a crappy home life and a heart condition. I wanted you to see me for me and not for any of that, so yeah, I fucked up by failing to be transparent with you, but for fuck's sake, Alexander, I knew the moment I told you this, you wouldn't see me the same way."

"You know shit." He spats but remains eerily still. "I would've loved you regardless, flaws and all."

Loved you.

Past tense.

"You made a joke out of me. A joke of what I felt for you." The only thing I can think to say.

“To keep you safe, but you lied to me. You lied to keep me out of your world.”

“That’s not true.”

“The fucked-up thing is that was not even the worst part. I could’ve forgiven anything.” He laughs, but there’s no joy in the sound. It sounds all wrong. “Anything but what you did out of spite. You killed it. You killed us.”

I look at him like he’s grown two heads because what the hell did I do to him to warrant such hatred? Besides lying about my family and how fucked up everything was back then. What the hell is going on? I’m mad now. How dare he paint me as the only villain in this twisted story. “Don’t even try to spin this, Valentino. You know you lied to me and used me for your sick games. For a goddam bet!”

He abruptly stands from his chair and shakes his head in a way that means he’s done. “You won’t ever admit it, will you? Do you even care?”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one that killed everything we once had.”

“Yeah, I fucked up, but you’re a murderer too, Fallon.” He walks to the open door and steps outside the room without another glance back. “Rest because once you’re healthy, you’re free to go.” The door shuts behind him.

You’re a murderer too.

My head is pounding, and I honestly don’t know what to think. What to believe? This is one seriously fucked soap opera.

Then I think back to what he said before he walked out of the room.

You’re free to go.

I’m free.

He will let me go.

I should be happy, but why does it feel so wrong?

FALLON

OUR DREAMS

“Well, fudge. I love you too.” – F

Now

It's been two days since we last spoke. Since he told me his intentions of setting me free.

Today, I feel much better, and my mind is clearer. I can't think straight now that the effect of the medicine has worn off, and Valentino is nowhere to be found. What happened was scary for me, but it changed something in him.

I've never had a panic attack. I guess I was used to bottling all my emotions, every bad thing that ever happened to me. My mind decided I couldn't do that anymore. It was a wake-up call.

This morning, I woke up with a purpose. I don't want to be a victim anymore. I sure as hell don't want to be chained to the past. I stayed up all night thinking of a life where there is no him, and I decided that's not a life worth living. It made me miserable to think of a world without him in it. The past years I lived without him, but it was painful. I couldn't move on. Either Valentino swims with me, or we'll sink. There's no other option.

There's no one else for me.

His last letter put everything into perspective.

Today, something changed. Not only for me but for him, too.

The moment I opened my eyes and got out of bed, I found clothes neatly stacked inside the dresser. A warm breakfast waiting for me, and my sweet cat, Eyre, snuggled up against me. I missed her terribly. I hadn't worried about her because I knew Andrea would take good care of her. I also woke up

to a brand-new snake in its tank, sitting next to the window and my camera at the foot of the bed.

My old one.

The one Ziggy gave me.

The one that means the most to me.

The one that captured all my beautiful moments with Valentino Alexander back at the Academy.

Back when we were in love.

Something has definitely changed.

He told me I was free but brought all of this down here for me.

Beautiful, complicated man, what do you want from me?

I do my best to finish my breakfast, the one he cooked, by the looks of it. He burnt the toast. *Bless his heart. At least he tried.* Once I'm done eating, I put the tray aside and get out of bed with Eyre in my arms.

“Bestie, I'm glad you're fine. How's Roman? Is he okay? How about Andrea? Has she killed her husband yet?” I whisper to my baby, but she always replies to me the same way, a lick to my hands and a soft purr.

I walk with her in my arms walking towards the window, where the new snake is inside its tank. This one is not Petunia, my heart sinks when I think of her, but it's beautiful, nonetheless.

My Petunia died that Christmas night with all my hopes and dreams. I never knew what I did wrong, but she, too, left me that night. I put my fingers inside the tank and let the snake get used to my warmth and touch, just like I did with Petunia years ago.

I never wanted to replace her, so I never got another pet snake after her, even when I moved to New York. Shaking my head, I drop Eyre gently on the floor and decide to take a quick shower. Today is the start of something. I can feel it.

I'm done existing.

I thought about my future after the last scare. I thought that was it. That was how my story would end, but now I know better. I'm the writer of my story, and only I can decide where the story will go. I'm done letting my ghosts and my demons rule me. If one day my heart fails me, I want to leave this world knowing I made this man's days better, not worse. I want to be the reason for his smiles. The ones that he only shared with me. I don't want to live in the past. I don't want to hold on to old pain.

Valentino always said I was his witch. That my eyes did something to

him. That I bewitched him.

Well, right back at you, baby.

You put a damn spell on me.

I am so crazy for you. It is not even healthy.

Love or hate, it tastes the same. When it comes to that man, there is a thin line between the two. I want everything.

All of him.

Call me insane.

Call me toxic.

Call me whatever you want, as long as I get to be his.

Because he has always been mine, even when I hated him.

Hate me all you want if it makes you feel better, Alexander. But let me love you anyway.

He left the door open.

After I got out of the shower, I quickly put some warm clothes on, and some snow boots he left for me. I head to the door and walk free of that room.

I have lost count of how long I've been here, hidden away from society. Here, in this beautiful hell, he created for himself. For me. It is beautiful.

It has a haunting but modern vibe to it. Not too fancy or flashy, but more like a dark aesthetic of old and artistic things.

Just like us.

I walk through the hall, and I instantly notice how the temperature is not cold anymore. Not like it was before, but it is still a bit chilly. I am now seeing everything up close, and I'm left speechless. I can't find the right words to express how stunning this place is. The ceiling is high, and it feels like it's touching the sky. The windows are covered in snow from the outside. There's a huge black fireplace in the middle of the living room, and the walls are not just walls but built-in bookshelves like the ones in the libraries.

I spin in circles in slow motion while I take everything in.

He did it.

He made his dream come true and one of mine too.

Our dream house.

Hidden away from the world, surrounded by nature and classic literature.
Even when you hate me, you love me too, lost boy.

You hate that you do, and maybe this is why you did all of this.

To kill the dream of us.

To kill our love.

Are you sick with it too?

I walk around until I find the kitchen and there, I see a phone. His? Did he leave it behind? If so, then why? Does he want me to call for help?

I should.

I should definitely call for help and leave him, but I won't.

I know I won't.

I want to finally peel off every hauntingly beautiful layer of his. I want to finally see and experience all that is him because I fell in love with the lost boy, and I know I could fall madly in love with this broken madman too.

I believe there's one person for everyone. Yes, we can fall in love more than once throughout our lifetime, but we won't ever feel the same way about every single love.

All loves are different, and I don't want to feel what I feel for him for anyone else.

It is selfish, I know, but I'm too far gone, and I've always been. The reason why I'm not able to move on or find another love is because my heart is not my own.

He claimed it years ago.

With every soft word.

With every vulnerable moment we shared.

With his truths and even his lies.

When he showed me heaven, and even when he made me crave hell.

So, I pick up the phone, noticing there's no lock or security code. Very reckless and bold of him to assume I wouldn't go through his things.

I'm nosy.

Sue me.

I need to know everything about this new man so I can beat him at his own game.

He wants me to remember.

I never forgot but, apparently, he is trying his best to forget. I'll remind him how good we were until we both fucked-up and tainted our love.

He told me all his secrets back then.

I need his truth about what happened that night, and I'll give him everything.

Every painful detail and broken memory.

Only then will we both be able to heal and maybe, move on from the ghost of our past.

My truth will most likely break him just like it did me, but I'll be here to put every beautiful piece of him back together.

I open the messages app and type a quick one.

Me: It's me, Fallon. I promise I am fine. It's a long story. One I will tell you once we meet again, but I need you to trust me, okay? I need you to do nothing. I will find my happiness and come back home. Promise, soulmate. - Cap

(939) 787-671-9963: I will have Dionysius trace this number unless I get proof of life. - Black Widow x

I smile the first genuine smile in weeks, and a tear falls. I didn't lie when I said Andrea is my soulmate. She was heaven-sent to keep me from falling over the edge. She's my angel. She saved me when she showed me true love and friendship. The love of a sister.

She gave me Roman and even Cassius.

She gave me a life worth living. One I didn't appreciate because I was too busy dwelling on the past and holding on to the pain.

I will be the one they can come to when they need a laugh. I will be their safe place when the world outside gets too dark.

I'm tired of being a dark cloud.

I want to be someone's sunshine, for once.

I open the camera app, snap a selfie and send it to her with my favorite emoji, the one that's our inside joke. The alien emoji. Andrea used to say I'm out of this world strange and the alien emoji stuck.

(939) 787- 671-9963: My beautiful girl. I have so many things to say. I want to hear your voice. I want to hear from your lips that you're okay. I don't even mind the mascara running down my face right now. I love you. I prayed for this. Call me tonight or I'm sending Lucan to get you from wherever the hell that little asshole took you. Forever, Cap. Xo

Me: Forever, BW. X

Before I put the phone back down on the kitchen table, I notice the date.

December 24th.

I feel my heart beat faster in my chest and try to calm it down by taking

deep breaths. I don't like this time of year. It reminds me of everything that I lost.

The dreams and hopes that died that Christmas Eve years ago.

Shaking my head, I put the phone down and continue exploring the house until I find the front door. Opening the glass doors, I step outside, and I welcome the cold of winter. I'm transfixed by the snow covering everything from the trees to the cabin. Turning around, I get a better look at the cabin from the outside. It is even more perfect from this view, surrounded by trees and covered in white.

It's built with black bricks and dark glass.

Hauntingly beautiful.

I close my eyes and inhale.

I felt it then.

Wrapping me in winter's kiss and the sun shining down on me.

Home.

I'm home.

The birds are chirping, and the wind is blowing wildly all around me as the snow keeps falling like a white blanket on the ground. I look down at one of the small pine trees, and an idea pops up.

Maybe it is time for new beginnings.

And what better time for it than now.

The only way to erase the ugly memories is to create new ones.

It is time to rewrite our story.

No longer a story of loss but a story of true love.

The story of us.

VALENTINO

THE CLEANER

“Ho, Ho, Ho, motherfuckers.” – L

Now

Regret.

After years of feeling nothing but hate and bitterness, the not so strange feeling is confusing.

I had it all mapped out, and now I don't know what my next move is. I don't know what to do after having only one goal for so long.

Make her pay.

Make her regret ever killing us.

Now, I come to find out she's been paying for it ever since, and even before we even met. I never really knew her, and that is what fucks me up.

I had this idea of a girl that made my world less bloody and more chaotically beautiful. I could smile just thinking about her, and I felt immense joy in the peace I felt when I was with her.

Thinking about it now, subconsciously, I used her just as much as she did me. I know I loved her. I know my dreams revolved around her, but I also realize now a big part of it was what she did for me.

She made me feel warm when all I ever felt was cold.

I felt like maybe my life wouldn't be so damn bloody and miserable if she was there to give me peace.

Shit.

This is fucked up.

“You cleaned up nice, brother.” I look down at what I'm wearing and resist the urge to fucking frown. The sick part is that he's not being sarcastic

at all. My twin actually believes everyone looks better covered in blood. I hate this shit on me. It suffocates me, and I feel like I need to peel my skin off if I have it on me for too long. I was in the process of going back to the cabin, to call it a fucking night after I got done cleaning the horror scene that my twisted brother left for me when he called and asked for a meeting.

The Cleaner.

After losing the title of boss against my twin, I wanted to leave. That was what I hoped for, to just to leave this fucking family and be free. I could never be free, not really.

My brother killed my tormentor, took his place, and showed me mercy in the only way he could. He gave me freedom, more than any Nicolasi heir ever had. It was conditioned, but it's still something.

I am free to do as I please.

I am not a soldier.

I do work for them, but only when my brother asks. I am bound to the Nicolasi name, but I don't own the Unholy Trinity shit.

I clean up the murder scenes. I hide the fucking evidence and make it look like nothing ever happened.

Lorenzo is one twisted motherfucker. He gave me what I wanted, but the shit I sometimes have to do for him would give most men nightmares.

Blood.

So much fucking blood.

"Cut the shit, Lorenzo." A sultry and dark voice says from behind me. I look over my shoulder, and Kadra walks in wearing all black. She nods once as she passes by me. "Val."

"What is this about?" I walk to the corner of the room and find the mini-bar. Lorenzo took over all the Nicolasi businesses and got rid of Benedetto's ghost. May he burn in hell for all eternity.

This joint is all his. It used to be a church. I don't know how he got it in his possession, but he did, and now it is a nightclub and gentlemen's club.

Only my twin would turn a holy place unholy and name it The Bleeding Thorn.

"The dog is out of its leash thanks to your brother-in-law, and he's been sniffing around our territory like he has every right to do." Lorenzo snaps while pouring himself a drink.

"He's the head of the O' Sullivan family, and your brother gave up his family's spot to him. He has every right to be here, whether we like it or not."

Kadra says calmly while scrolling through her phone with a frown on her face. She never shows emotions, not when my brother is around or anyone, for that matter. “Besides, don’t tell me you’re afraid of the Irish.” She mumbles distracted by whatever she’s looking at on her phone.

My twin becomes eerily still and smiles evilly at Kadra. Fuck no. I know that demented clown face. He’s about to spew venom and aim to kill.

I would be worried if it were anyone else, but Kadra has always been able to handle herself and fight back. She fights dirty and shows her sharp claws.

“I’m not and will never be scared of a wild dog, love.” She takes a sip of his drink and puts the glass back down on top of the black desk. “You should be, though. I heard he has a thing for young and sheltered mafia princesses.”

He said it.

Kadra’s whole demeanor changes, turning rigid and alert. “He will never get close. That I promise you.”

“Tsk, tsk.” Lorenzo laughs. “Oh, sweet and naive Kadra. The beast is closer than you think.” My brother’s mocking statement lingers.

I step in before things take a dark turn, and I’ll have no choice but to clean my brother’s guts from the walls.

“Why the fuck did you call me back here, Lorenzo?” Asking me to attend a meeting is pointless and, to be honest, a fucking bore. “I’m tired, and I want to clean this shit off me.”

Both sets of eyes turn to me. One stares with curiosity and the other with malice. The only two people besides Fallon I’ve ever let close enough to see me. The real me, one was by fate and not fucking choice.

Unfortunately, we shared a womb.

The silence in the room is loud.

Then I hear the distinct sound of a drawer opening, and I watch my brother take two wrapped boxes. One the size of a shoe box and the other the size of his hand.

“Merry Christmas, my lovely family.” He smiles, a childlike smile, at us as he hands out gifts like he’s Santa Claus from hell.

“It’s not Christmas yet.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is thank you, love.”

Kadra snatches the gift and stands. “I can’t believe you made me come here for this.” she whispers before walking past me and leaving.

This is odd, even for my brother.

The door shuts quietly behind Kadra, and only then do I move towards

my brother and open his gift. I never know what to expect from my twin. One time, for our tenth birthday, he gifted me the finger of one of Benedetto's men who used to slap us around. He was proud-as-fuck of that gift, but to me, it only served to remind me how bloodthirsty my baby brother is.

He has no morals, no humanity when it comes to our enemies. I guess it helps him now that he's the boss of one of the most ruthless crime families in Detroit.

I rip the red wrapping paper off the box, and I'm not surprised to find a shoebox. I used to like expensive shit when I was younger, and Lorenzo always gifted me clothes or jewelry. I still enjoy dressing up for certain occasions but not like before. My face is as fucked up as my soul, so what's the fucking point of dressing like I just got off the catwalk wearing the latest Armani clothing line?

"I know what you did and why you did it."

"What are you talking about?" I don't take my eyes off the box. Shit. It's heavy, and I don't doubt for one minute that there could be human remains inside.

"You threw the fight."

Oh, that.

Lorenzo has always been ruthless, but I was angry. So fucking angry, and that gives you superhuman strength, I kid you not. But I didn't want this life. I still don't, and he does. He has always wanted the crown of thorns Benedetto wore.

I never did, so even though he thinks I was being selfless, I was not. I did it for myself, and it worked out since my brother would've gone off the edge, and so would have I if I was the last man standing and he fell at my feet.

"How did you figure it out?"

"Come on, brother. I might be a lot of things. Evil, heartless, and selfish most of the times. I definitely wouldn't have done what you did, but I ain't stupid. You weren't giving it all you got, for fuck's sake, you're a savage fuck when you want to be."

"Maybe I didn't want to be then." I shrug, clearly uncomfortable with this shit. We are not close, not anymore, and I'm okay with that. I know he cares for me in the only way he knows how. I was mad at him for so long, for all the times he threatened Fallon's life back then, but maybe he was right to do it. She would've ended up dead just like the other unfortunate souls this life of ours has claimed.

“You were always smarter and more deserving of better things, Tino. You’re too good for this shit. Get out and find yourself. You’re drowning, man, and you’re giving me no choice but to drown with you, brother.”

I think this is the most we’ve spoken the past five years. I always resented him for becoming just like the monster that used to torment me. Every day, I lost him more and more to our grandfather and this life. He became one of them, and I tried my best to distance myself from him. I even changed myself, so I wouldn’t look like the ones I despised the most.

The ones that haunted my dreams and gave me nightmares from the time I was eight years old.

I look up and meet my twin’s eyes, the same shade of blue, with the same secrets. I think back to the days when my twin was my lifeline, and I hate the feeling of regret I feel rising in my gut, in my dead, cold heart.

You left him, too.

We lost the chance of a normal life. We didn’t get to have a happy and functional family. A mother that loved us and would shelter us from the cruel world and the evil home we grew up in.

We only had each other, and for a while, it was all I needed. I thought it was all he needed too, but the demons in his head were welcome. He thrived with them, unlike me. Mine drowned me in their sickness.

They still do.

They were only quiet when Fallon enveloped me in her warmth and her addicting chaos.

Fallon.

Another wave of regret.

Fuck.

She would be warm in an expensive building, surrounded by the love of the ones she cherishes. She could be enjoying this holy night with her best friend and her family.

With my family.

Shit.

Shit.

Since the first night I brought her back, I’ve been fighting with these feelings that, are slowly and painfully, taking over my conscience and soul.

I was so lost in my head that I forgot my brother was here, waiting for me to react to his statement.

One thing bothers me, though.

You're drowning, man, and you're giving me no choice but to drown with you, brother.

"I'm in so deep, and I see no way out." I spill my truth, the one I've been trying to avoid. The thing that's keeping me up at night. "I lost sight of what's the right thing to do. It all looks the same to me. I'm fucking miserable, and it's not only her fault. I'm as much to blame. I caused this shit, too."

A long silence follows, but after a few seconds, my twin speaks.

"I need to tell you something." There's no emotion in his tone, I know I won't like the shit that will come out of his mouth.

"What?"

"About the night she left, and how you never saw her again until senior year."

"Yes?"

"She heard what you said."

"W-what?"

I've thought about that night so many times through the years, and I never could piece together what went wrong. I heard everyone else's version of the truth, but never hers. She didn't stick long enough to give me that. After everything, she didn't give me a reason why.

This is so fucked up in so many ways.

Her truth.

Mine.

It's all a web of fucking lies, and we're both to blame.

Wait a minute.

"You knew she was there, and you didn't say a fucking word?" I feel rage, towards my brother, towards Fallon, and myself. "You knew how hard I tried to find her. All I went through thinking that she was just another bitch that used me and didn't care."

"You were in deep, man. You had a fucking assignment, and you knew the stakes. I did what was best for her when you failed to see how fucking close to getting his dirty hands on her Benedetto was."

"You did what was best for her or your damn self?" I always knew Enzo was selfish and completely disregarded everyone else's feelings, but never mine. Not with me. I thought he had my back, but I guess grandfather's crown meant more to him than I did.

"You were so in love with her, man, that you didn't see what I did from

the outside. I saved her fucking life, and if I had to be the villain instead of you, then fucking be it.”

I don't know what to believe anymore. Nothing makes sense.

Fallon was sick.

Has always been sick.

She had it bad back then.

Her home life was shit.

I fucked up by only thinking of what her love did to me. I never paid attention to what my type of love and life would do to her.

“Tell me.” My head pounds and my heart beats erratically. *Is this how she feels? Will her heart fail her eventually?*

Fucking fate is one cruel bitch.

I stand tall and wait for my twin to confess the sins of our past.

He gives me his truth, and for the first time in years, I don't feel so lost. Maybe I can fix the mess I made of my life.

Of hers.

“Hear her out. I promise you there has always been more to her story.” he tells me before turning around and sitting back down on his chair.

I hold his gift under my arm and turn to leave.

I need to breathe.

I need to know.

Motherfucker.

Did the punishment fit the crime? Yes. What she did fucking ended me, but fuck do I even know the truth? Was I so consumed with rage that I didn't see anything else?

Before I turn a corner, he says one last thing.

“Once you find yourself, come back to me and fight me like a man. Give it all you got and let me take you down with fucking dignity.” My brother spits out before the door slams shut behind me.

I guess I was selfish as well. I only thought about my pain and my regrets. It never crossed my mind that maybe my pain was not the only one that mattered at the time. He felt it, too, in his own way.

I fucked everything up.

Every relationship.

My twin.

My sister.

My nephew.

My family.

“You ruin everything you touch.”

“Useless.”

“Just like your father.”

Even after so many years, his voice still haunts me.

They still burn.

Fuck!

All I ever wanted was to make him proud until he took my innocence and forced me to take a life. Forced this fucked-up life on me.

All to fuck with my parents.

We never meant anything to him.

We were just little puppets to entertain him and play his sick games.

Shaking my head, trying to get rid of his torturous voice, I walk past my twin’s men until I find the exit of the club. Once outside, I close my eyes and breathe out.

The air feels lighter now.

Our relationship won’t ever be what it used to be, but maybe we could get past everything that we’ve done. Every lie we told. Lorenzo took the first step, and I owe it to him to meet him halfway.

Maybe it will take months or maybe years, who knows? But a relationship with my brother doesn’t seem so far away.

One demon down.

There’s plenty more to go, but he gave me this.

He took a burden off my shoulders.

He’s setting me free in his own way.

“Boss.” A gruff voice yells from behind me. I turn and see one of my men, Blace coming my way. The motherfucker needs to explain a lot of shit to me. First, why the fuck did he leave a child behind the day he rescued Fallon, and why the fuck he stay quiet about it.

I’ve been so caught up in Fallon that I completely forgot this bitch, and I had a score to settle.

The moment he steps up and stands before me, I punch him in the fucking mouth, making him stumble back and fall to the wet ground.

“What the fuck, boss?”

“I will ask this only once, and you fucking better tell me the truth, or I’ll chop you into pieces and give your remains to my brother’s dogs.” I squat down, drop Enzo’s gift to the ground next to me, and grab him by the neck.

This bitch has always been useful and eager to please me whenever I ask for shit. I don't need security on me, but I pay my men to keep my family safe from afar and run the streets for me. Benedetto wanted to wipe out the gangs' running drugs and doing illegal races from the bad side of town without getting involved. Before my twin murdered his ass, grandfather took out the entire street gang, the Vipers. Now, I have the men that chose to follow me instead of dying. This one is one of them. He is getting too fucking comfortable, and maybe I need to remind him who's in charge in case the asshole has forgotten. "The day you took the girl from the warehouse, was there someone else with her?"

I loosen up my grip on his neck to allow him to speak, focusing on the pulse of his heart, beating frantically, and notice how his eyes don't focus on mine. He's looking everywhere else but at me.

"There might have been a kid there, but, boss, you told me to get the girl and get out." He rushes out, trying to catch his breath.

"What was the first thing I stated before you swore loyalty to me, huh?" I'm strangling him again, and if I'm not careful, I could crush his windpipe. I'm so far gone that I don't give a fuck. I just want someone to pay, and the motherfucker who could've saved a five-year-old from lifelong trauma is as good as any.

He stares at me with bloodshot, eyes and that's all I need to know that this asshole is on something.

"Answer me." I remove my hand from his throat and slap his face twice. Now I have his blood on me too. Fuck.

"We d-don't hurt innocents." He says before I release him and stand back up.

"That's right, motherfucker. So, tell me why you proceeded to leave without taking the baby boy with you?"

"Why the fuck do you even care?"

Wrong thing to say, bitch.

I'm beginning to think the men I employ are not very bright. This one has always been odd to me, and not in a fucking good way. There's the way he's always asking questions he has no right to ask. His smile is fake, and there's an evil glint in his eyes every time I look his way.

And now, looking back at him, I notice something I didn't before. I was so caught up in my own shit that I completely missed the snake tattoos on his neck and arms, almost exactly like mine.

I know snake tattoos and all that shit are in now, or so I see all over social media, but to me, they mean something. The thing is that him having the same tattoos as me rubs me the wrong way.

The only reason I keep him around is because he's always delivered when I ask anything of him, but maybe I should start paying closer attention.

I've been blind in the past, but my eyes are wide open now.

For the first time in my life, I'm making my own rules. I'm unshackling myself from every ghost and every hurt of my past.

I'm fucking tired of being mad.

There has to be more to life than this fucking emptiness I feel.

More than this darkness that consumes me more every day until I'm far away from the light.

But I need to handle shit first.

Crouching down, I grab a chunk of his hair and pull it all the way back to an uncomfortable and painful angle, causing him to scream in agony.

He acts like a tough guy. They all do, but motherfuckers like this one are weak-minded, and that makes them inferior to me.

To us.

You need more than physical strength to do the shit we do.

And although my head is a fucking mess, and it has always been this way, I've endured. I'm still fighting, even when I wish to end it all. Even when I lost my friend. When I lost my girl. When I lost —

“Do you want to die tonight, Blace?” I keep hold of his hair with one hand and squeeze his neck with the other. I don't give him time to answer, smashing his head back into the concrete. Hard enough to scare him, cause a concussion maybe, but not damage his brain.

“N-No,” he groans, grabbing his head to protect himself from my anger. Am I being too harsh? I don't think so. You don't fuck with kids. Especially ones related to me.

“Remember this next time you hide shit from me or feel the urge to run your mouth.” With that said, I leave him on the ground, moaning and grimacing in pain.

All I can't think about on my way to my G-wagon is how, even when in pain, his eyes showed no emotion.

Blank.

Nothingness.

I need to keep my eye on him.

On all of my men, for that matter.

If one of them dared to hide shit from me, then what can I expect from all the other wild dogs?

It only takes one bad apple.

I climb inside my car, drop Enzo's gift on the seat next to me, and speed the hell out of there.

I've left Fallon alone long enough. She has had time to recover, and now I can set her free.

That's the one thing she's always wanted.

To be free.

VALENTINO

OH, HOLY NIGHT

“I see you. I’ve always seen the real you.” – F

Now

The ride from the city to the mountains was a long one. It did give me the chance to gather my thoughts. There was a lot of shit I needed to figure out before I saw her again. Now, I’m driving through the snow on my way to her. Just thinking about her there in my sanctuary does things to me. It shouldn’t. God knows I should feel nothing but rage towards her but fuck it if I don’t still feel something other than hatred towards Fallon Alicia.

Pulling up at the cabin, I take it all in. I love this place. How separated from the world it is. It makes me feel like I’m in my own world, and nothing from the outside can touch me.

This is all I wanted growing up.

What I dreamed of, and now I have it.

It’s lonely, though.

It was supposed to be my escape, but I turned it into a prison. I was used to the agonizing silence and solitude until I forced her back into my life, and she turned everything upside down again.

Inhaling, I turn off the engine of the G-Wagon and narrow my eyes, studying the snow falling on the windshield. Owls can be heard, hidden in the trees. The wind is blowing hard tonight, and a peaceful, heavy silence falls, surrounding me, enveloping me, erasing all thoughts of why I’d just left the city, of how I just spent the night cleaning someone’s guts from a floor.

You can’t find this sort of comforting silence anywhere else but here in the mountains. This peacefulness doesn’t exist in the city. This thick,

impenetrable silence, created by the trees and mountains. The sound of the wind, the rustle of the leaves, the distortion of all other sounds from the world outside. Goosebumps spring down my neck as I open my door, stepping out of my truck. I take a step forward, entranced by the sight of it all. Snow squelches over my black boots as I stand in the middle of my property. I breathe in the air and let the sweet silence envelop me.

The silence is welcome after the day I just had.

I turn to the passenger door to grab my brother's gift, when the soft melodic sound of Beethoven reaches my ear. Once I have the gift in my hands, I shut the car's door and walk through the stone path that leads to the main door.

She will see you for what you truly are. The traitorous voice invades my thoughts, but I ignore it. There's no point in hiding who I am. I never hid this side of myself before. She has met the monster covered in some else's blood.

She saw the broken boy with a tainted soul.

The monster my grandfather's hate created.

The ruthless man that I am now.

She has met every single side of me.

Walking up the stone path, climbing the three steps that lead to the cabin's main door, I notice the music getting louder. She must've found my phone with my classics' playlist. One I made for her but couldn't bring myself to admit it. When I left my phone behind, I hoped she would call for help. I hoped she wouldn't be here once I got back.

Why won't you leave?

I am the cause of your misery.

Did you lose your fight?

Did I break your mind?

Somehow, that doesn't make me feel like I hoped I would when I started all of this. I guess I hadn't come to terms with the fact that breaking her means destroying myself.

We are intertwined, her and I.

Always have been and even the years couldn't change that.

Fuck.

As soon as I open the cabin doors, I'm taken back by the bright lights surrounding the living room area. Usually, the only light in that room comes from the fireplace, but tonight there are candles all over the floor. Even more on top of the fireplace and some sitting next to the windows.

I step a foot inside, drop the shoebox onto the living room table and shrug out of my black winter coat.

It's warm here.

The air smells like cinnamon, and the cabin looks like a... home.

Did she do this?

Why?

I don't have to wonder long because she steps in my direction, and I find myself fighting the urge to close my eyes and capture this image. The way she looks tonight feels like I'm being transported back in time.

There she is.

My Alicia.

The girl that stole my already broken heart when I was fifteen years old and crushed it in her not so innocent hands. There's no trace of the woman that she's been the past five years. No designer clothes, expensive jewelry, or colorful hair.

The pink is gone.

I had Kadra retrieve some of her things from her apartment, her clothes, her camera equipment, her pets, and anything a woman might need.

I guess Kadra thought hair dye was a necessity. Who the hell knows how her mind works lately?

I don't know why I made all of it happen, really. She won't be staying here long, but I wanted to see her one last time.

The girl she was. The one I loved madly.

My moon, stars, my damn galaxy.

She opted not to wear any of the clothes in the bag. Instead, she's wearing a white sweatshirt of mine. She's never looked more like mine, even if it's so far from the truth.

I remain quiet as I take her, in not really knowing what to say. That's bullshit because I know all I want to say to her. All I want to ask her, but the words won't come out.

She steps forward, and I subconsciously take a step back. Fallon freezes in place, and I see worry and self-doubt written all over her face. "A-ah, please don't go."

I close my eyes, breathe in, and my entire heart beats wildly after years of slowly dying in my chest.

Her voice always calmed the rage inside.

The demons weren't so loud.

It's been years since I last heard her stutter.

My girl.

I'm about to tell her that she's the one that needs to go. She needs to run and end this now because I won't be able to do it. I never told her this, but out of everyone I knew back then, she was the bravest and strongest person I had ever met. When I look to my left, I see a small pine tree with candles all around it giving the impression that it's a Christmas tree. I walk towards it, because I need a few seconds to gather my thoughts and find the courage to tell her that she needs to leave. That she's free to go back to her life. Without the ghost and threat of me holding her back.

Fuck.

Why does my chest hurt?

One thing about Fallon that I couldn't get enough of was her ability to surprise me. Nothing ever did back then, but her. The small pine tree, which she must've chopped herself, is decorated with polaroid photos of us.

Photos she took of me that I wasn't aware of. In some, I'm smiling. In others, I'm looking at something, completely unaware that she was there. Right then, I noticed how different life would look with her. In the photos I'm looking back at her, I have a genuine smile on my face. The ones where I'm looking at everyone around me, I look lost and fucking depressed.

Is this how I look now?

Miserable?

Then, there are the photos of us.

Holding hands.

Making silly faces because it always made her laugh.

There's also a photo I took of her with her head lying on my lap on the library's floor while she read to me.

"I should hate you." I hear her whisper. "God, I should really fucking hate you for everything you've done, but you know what, Alexander?"

Alexander.

Fucking witch.

One whisper of that name has the power to bring me to my knees.

"What?" I was almost afraid to ask, but I waited long enough. I tortured myself many times, wondering why my love wasn't enough for her? My twin's revelation put a lot into perspective, but there are still many secrets between us.

Painful ones.

Ones that are too cruel to forgive or forget.

“I can’t. I’m not able to, even though I’ve tried my best to convince myself that I hated you. I know the truth now.”

“Say it.”

“I can’t hate you. It’s impossible to hate you when I love you so goddamn much. In death, because that’s all I wanted to do back then, you’re the one that made me feel the most alive.” Her voice breaks at the end, and I fight the urge to turn around and comfort her. “I’m so afraid that I won’t ever find a love like the one we had for a little while.”

“You should leave,” the words burn my mouth like acid. I want to be selfish and tell her to stay. To shine her bright light on me, envelop me in her warm colors, and guide me home. To her heart. The one that was broken long before I got a hold of it, and without knowing, shattered with the mess I made. I want to ask her why. Why she did what she did and destroyed me, but what’s the point now? What if her answer hurts even more than the ‘truth’ I was told? “You were too good for me. All I did was love you in the dark, and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry for not being brave enough to love you how you deserved.”

“You were fifteen.” she whispers ever so softly.

“It’s not an excuse.”

“Turn around and face me, dammit. At least give me that.” Her voice rises. “You owe me that after what you’ve done the past month!”

I give in and turn her way.

I regret it the moment I do. Tears pool in her green eyes, but I see determination there, too.

God, baby. This is so fucked up. Why can’t we get this right?

Why is it so hard?

“When was the last time you were truly happy?” she whispers brokenly without looking away from me. Her green eyes hold me hostage. “Put aside your hatred and resentment towards me just for this moment, and be honest with me, please.”

“Andrea’s birthday party. The one Benedetto threw for her.” I give in. I was broken and so fucking hurt, but that night with her, I felt like myself again.

Fallon frowns, clearly wondering what I meant.

“It was the last time I held you in my arms.”

“H-how?” her voice trembles a little, and she moves a step forward in my

direction. “I don’t remember being with you that night.”

“Of course, you don’t.”

“All I remember is seeing you with your girlfriend and being so mad. I was hurt, and the only thing that made it all go away was alcohol.”

“Yeah, I figured you were drunk. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have let me so close to you. I wouldn’t have held you if I knew you would remember it the next morning.”

“Why’d you do it?”

I can’t do this now. Fuck.

I walk past her and flop down to the sofa, next to the fireplace. I have a headache from hell, but if the only way for her to leave and save us both from more misery is for her to say her peace, then so be it. Dropping my head to the heap of fluffy and warm pillows behind me, I tell her, “I wanted to have you in my arms one last time.”

I watch as Fallon walks my way but doesn’t sit on the opposite sofa. She stands before me looking so fucking beautiful and perfect that sometimes I wonder who the fuck created such beauty. She’s heavenly but so fucking tempting that it can’t be holy. I reach for the coffee table next to me and retrieve a joint. I tuck it between my lips and cup the tip with my hand, lighting it. “How about you, Alicia? When was the last time you were truly happy?”

I don’t know why I’m torturing myself. She, unlike me, went on with her life. Chased her dreams, dated other men, and created a little family with my father, sister, and nephew. She must’ve had the most beautiful and happy memories.

She peers from under her wet lashes, looking shy for the briefest moment. “When we shared our last kiss. Our last everything.”

I exhaled a ribbon of smoke upward, trying to conceal how her words affected me. How they bring my dead heart back to life. “Then why?” I notice the edge in my tone. I ask her the question that’s been tormenting me for years, clicking shut my zippo, and placing it back on the black wooden table.

They say one moment can change the course of our lives forever, and this moment right here could break or make us.

I feel it in my bones.

I watch as she pulls my white shirt over her head and stands before me, completely naked. The shadows of the burning fire dance around her skin,

giving her a glow that makes her look like a mythical goddess.

My eyes trail every inch of her skin, and the hunger inside me feels like a caged animal. I don't know whether to bend her over the sofa and fuck her so hard that she'll never remember anyone else but me or if I should take her slowly and drive her insane with need. I take another drag of my joint and notice her hands clenching on either side of her body and her posture becoming rigid.

And that's when I see them.

Her story. Her past. The one I was too caught up in my own shit to learn.

Scars.

Cigarette burns.

Knife cuts.

I've never been more ashamed than in this very moment.

How selfish I was.

So blinded by my own traumas that I didn't see past them to notice the pain my girl carried in her heart. Her body.

"I'll give you my truth because I'm tired of carrying this baggage that won't let me find peace, and if by the end, you still want me gone, I'll leave."

She comes closer to where I'm sitting and straddles me. I waste no time putting the joint out with one hand and dragging the other up her naked and smooth thigh until I'm touching the curve of her ass. We both watch my tattooed hands caressing the scars on her body.

"I was twelve years old the first time I cut myself," she says quietly, wrapping her arms around me, her small fingers playing with the chain around my neck. Her broken revelation makes me want to shove a knife in my chest because that shit would hurt less than hearing all of this. I will listen to her truth because we owe this to each other. I gave her my demons years ago, and now she's letting me inside her world. I know I won't be the same after this. If she survived this, then I can listen.

I don't think twice, and I kiss her lips softly.

I don't know why I do it. I shouldn't, but when it comes to her, I lose all common sense.

Just one kiss.

Fallon is vulnerable right now, and she needs to know that even with all the shit that has happened between us, she's still the most beautiful thing in my world.

"You've always been beautiful." I push her wet hair over her naked

shoulder, allowing me to see all of her. “Nothing can change that. Not even your scars. They make you who you are.”

I allow her a moment to take everything in and gather her thoughts. I won't push her for the truth if it causes her this much pain. I've done enough damage as it is. Whatever she's comfortable telling me, I will listen.

“I never saw myself as ugly or fat. My father made me believe I was the prettiest girl, and for a while there, I believed him. I didn't think there was anything wrong with me until my mother pointed out my first flaw,” she takes a deep breath before continuing. “I was born with a heart defect, and she took it as her not getting the perfect child she wanted. I wasn't perfect, far from it. She never let me forget that.”

I want to tell her that she's wrong. So fucking wrong. I want to tell her that she is fucking perfect and always has been. The scar on her chest and thighs don't change that. Those scars are battle wounds of a young survivor.

She's like me.

She's always been just like me, and that fucks me up even more.

How many scars did I add to her heart?

Motherfucker, every word out her mouth hurts.

They fucking burn my soul.

But this moment is not about me. It's about her, and it's about time I start listening. I keep quiet and let her say whatever she needs to tell me to release the demons that haunt her. I need to know. I need to know what I didn't know then.

“You don't know what it's like to look at yourself in the mirror and hate the person staring back at you. I didn't see what others did. I just saw the calories and a number on a scale. I became a slave to the dark thoughts in my head. That's what scared me the most. The voices in my head told me how unworthy I was and how no one would want me because I was fat and ugly. They whispered the harshest words, and I believed them all because the one person that was supposed to love me unconditionally taught me how to hate myself.”

I listen to every painful detail about her childhood and how her personal hell began. She tells me how her father was rarely home because he was working two jobs and doing other sketchy things to pay her hospital bills. How her mother took advantage of his absence and abused her both physically and mentally. I hold her tighter against me as she purges every horrible memory out of her system and lets me carry the burden. Her pain. In

this moment, I make her demons my own. I want to fucking slay them all.

“Whenever I acted out of line, she would either starve me by locking me inside the closet in my room or by putting a lock on the fridge so I wouldn’t be able to get food.”

I hate myself.

I hated myself before but even more now.

All I can think of is finding her mother and making the bitch suffer for every single scar Fallon has on her body and her fucking heart. I swear I’ll make the cunt feel what Fallon did, twice as fucking hard.

“Then daddy died, and everything turned darker, and she became bolder. She remarried, and with that marriage, I not only gained a criminal stepfather but a cruel stepbrother, too. One who hated my guts from the first day he laid eyes on me.”

I take everything in and hold myself back from getting in my car, driving into the city, and spilling their blood.

Once she’s done, she takes a deep breath and avoids looking into my eyes.

“I told you I was a freak.” I hate the insecurity that’s coming off her and the slight tremble of her voice. It pains me knowing she lived through that. I mostly hate myself because I didn’t make it better. I let her walk-through fire on her own, and that’s a hard pill to swallow. I always knew I didn’t deserve her, but this just proves it.

“Nah, baby.” I drag my lips along her delicate neck, slow and gently. “You’re a survivor.” I’m ashamed to say that I let outside factors get in the middle of this. Of us. Running my tattooed hands up her arms, I notice how her nipples become erect at my touch.

I was never good with words.

That’s why I carried the damn journal with me at all times. I can never find the right words to say, and right now, whatever I say can break her. This is trauma. This is a part of her, and if I’m not careful, I can fuck this up more than I already have.

So instead of giving her words, I’ll show her what I feel. I’ll show her how goddam beautiful and perfect she is to me. How wrong her bitch of a mother was. I’ll kiss every scar until she learns to see them as battle wounds, not as imperfections.

“You always made me feel like I wasn’t invisible. Like I mattered. Like I belonged.” She sits back down on my lap and stares into my eyes. Her

fucking eyes always did it for me, but somehow, now, they're even more addicting. "Give me this before you change your mind. Give me this before you set me free. Just give me tonight."

She tilts her head, reaches for the night table, and grabs another joint from my stash. I watch as she slowly puts it to her mouth, lights it, and exhales the smoke right in my face. "I don't do soft anymore." I tell her, watching her in fascination as she puts the joint in the ashtray next to us.

"I don't want it soft. Not tonight." Fallon wraps both her hands around my neck, pulling me closer until we're nose to nose. "Tonight, I just want to feel like I belong here in this beautiful hell you created for yourself. I want you to remember how good we felt together. I want to feel like I did when I was happy before this all ends."

Before this all ends.

"Alicia." I whisper her name like a prayer. Like it's my religion, and in some fucked-up way, it is. She brings me both peace and chaos. The girl she was back then made me feel like I could be more than just a trained monster. The woman that she is today has the power to bring me back to life.

I push her back a little and admire her naked skin. Her tits are full and round. Her nipples are light pink, so perfect that I almost feel my mouth water just with the thought of sucking on them. I feel her shudder with pleasure when I cup both tits, rolling the plump skin beneath my scarred fingers and staring at her like I want to eat her alive.

"You still drive me insane, witch." I hiss.

"Show me. Don't hold anything back." She thrusts her tits in my face, making me lose every ounce of control over my self-restraint. I hold her back with one of my hands wrapped around her neck. From this view, it almost seems like the snakes on my skin are choking her. It's fucking sick and beautiful at the same time. Just like this moment. I brought her here to make her pay for breaking my heart, for the one thing she did that I know I could never forget. I heard part of her story, the one she didn't share before now, and yes, I was wrong, so fucking wrong, but so was she. She killed a part of me. The most beautiful one just because she heard me calling her available pussy. Did she have the right to leave and hate me? Yes. Does the punishment she delivered fit the crime? No. I can't move on until I hear her confess. So yes, this is fucking sick because, even though, I want to wrap my arms around her and show her how goddam beautiful she is to me, I also feel the animalistic need to wrap both hands around her neck and make her pay

for the sin she committed against me. *How is it possible to love and hate someone so much at the same goddamn time?*

We both watch my tattooed fingers feathering, skimming her ribs as I take one of her nipples into my mouth, sucking on it savagely like I'm a starving man. There's a look of fascination in her eyes like all the times before. I bite the tip of one of her breasts, making her throw her head back and moan in ecstasy. It's like music to my ears. Her grinding her dripping pussy on my dick makes me harder. Pain always made her go wild, even when we were both kids and didn't know shit about what we were doing.

We did what felt right.

"It's fucked-up, right?" she whispers while I brush my thumb over her blushing nipple. "How right this feels." Her hands skim my face in the places where blood is still coating my skin. I see her face pull into a frown as she stares at me.

"It's not mine." I slap her tit, making it jiggle beautifully for me. She winces in pain and grabs my head, pulling me closer to her. "Does it bother you? That I have someone else's blood on me while I'm seconds away from fucking you?"

She releases my head and looks down at my eyes.

Fierce.

Wild.

As obsessed with me as I am with her.

My cock is so hard. I think I am going to shoot my load in my pants like a goddamn teenager.

"I'm not afraid of the dark when I'm with you, Alexander." Fallon smiles down at me wickedly before pulling my zipper down and pulling my dick out. The contact of her cold hands makes goosebumps rise on my skin. So fucking good. Her touch. Her smell. Her fucking taste.

I feel a sick sense of satisfaction seeing her completely naked while I'm still fully clothed.

"Did someone else erase my touch from your skin?" Now, she's the one squeezing my neck with her cold and delicate hands, grinding her wet cunt on my dick. Her tongue explores the spot where my pulse rests, just below my left ear. Her hot tongue is driving me fucking insane, and I'm trying my best not to lose control and bend her over the fucking sofa, impaling her with my cock. "That's okay. I'll make all of their touches and kisses go away until there's only me." I wrap her long, newly dyed black hair around my fist and

pull it back until she's looking into my eyes.

Cold blue meets warm green.

"There's only ever been you." I don't know why I give her the satisfaction of knowing she was my first and my only, but I do. I tried many times before because all I wanted was to erase her fucking imprint on me. But every time I tried to fuck a random bitch, I saw her fucking face staring back at me, making me feel like I was somehow cheating on her.

Suddenly, feeling angry, I shove my hand between her thighs and squeeze her pussy hard, coating my fingers with her juices. "Did you? Did you give this pussy to someone else?" I let the possessive words roll off my tongue as I slip two fingers inside her cunt, playing with her arousal. She's so wet for me. Only for me.

"No one. There hasn't been anyone since you." My body goes still. My breathing slows when I hear the answer, I've been reluctant to hear. I look up at her, and she looks like she's about to cry. Why aren't tears as appealing to me as they were a couple of days ago? They fuck with me now. I hate the tears running down her perfect porcelain face.

I roughly bite her neck and curl my fingers inside of her, finding the spot that drives her mad. "God, yes," she inhales sharply. "I never forgot the way you made me feel. Whole and wanted," Fallon admits.

I'm about to fucking come just from the way her tight pussy feels around my fingers. The way she's squirming in my lap while her juices coat my hand and fall on my thighs.

I don't want to know this right now.

I'm so fucking lost.

I hate her.

I love her.

I want her gone.

I want her to fight for me.

I want someone to fight for me.

Before she goes over the edge, I stop my pace, remove my fingers from her pussy, and without giving her notice, I lift her, and drop her down on my cock.

The sensation of her tight pussy strangling my cock is pure bliss.

The way she clenches and throws her head back with a loud moan is maddening.

She's the sweetest addiction.

“Fuck me,” I whisper into the crook of her neck, feeling her whole-body quiver under me as she rides my cock. “Ride me hard, baby.”

“Oh, God,” she whispers.

“God isn’t here.” I bite her neck and slap her ass cheek before using both of my hands to spread her open. What a sight we must be.

Two broken people with a past as dark as our souls.

My tattooed hands, covered in dried blood, spread her ass cheeks wide as my cock fucks her tight cunt. In and out. Like an animal staking his claim.

I don’t slow my pace as I fuck her mercilessly, drowning in her cries of pleasure. Fallon doesn’t stop riding the fuck out of me while peeling my shirt off in a hurry. Once she successfully removes my shirt, she throws it on the floor and continues fucking me. She rides me like a madwoman while holding onto the chain around my neck. She roughly yanks on it and brings my face closer to hers. I take the opportunity to lick her lips, urging her to open her mouth for me, and when she does, I shove my tongue, inside making her moan and suck on my tongue.

Fuck.

Sex with her was like a drug to me. Once I got the first taste, I couldn’t wait to get my next fix.

“Fuck yourself on my cock, babe.” I grit out while she tightens the hold she has on my chain, almost to the point it’s hard to find my next breath.

“Alexander,” she screams my name. “Don’t stop.”

“I like it when you scream my name.”

“You make me feel deranged with lust,” she whimpers, just as I slap her ass cheeks repeatedly, trying to leave a red mark. It makes her entire body shudder under my bloody hands. She lets out a little yelp. One I stifle by shoving my wet fingers inside her mouth.

“Taste yourself on me.” she sucks my fingers clean as I continue to fuck her like a savage. A starving man hungry for more of her. All of her.

So fucking tight.

So wet.

All for me.

Fallon moves on top of me, sucking on my fingers, fucking me just as hard as I’m fucking her. Her sweaty skin glistens, and the sound of her wet flesh slapping against my thighs is driving me fucking insane. She grunts every time I enter her, scratching my back as I slide deeper into her. Fuck, the look on her face makes me want to fuck her harder until all she sees and feels

is me. Her hair is no longer wet but dry with a slight curl to it, just like she used to wear it before changing her entire appearance. She was beautiful then, and she was just as beautiful when she wore crazy outfits and dyed her hair. I miss the nerdy vibe she used to have.

She's screaming louder and coming down on me hard. I thrust harder, faster, more violently, trying to shake off the feeling accompanied by the tingling in my balls and the tightening of my muscles. She, in turn, scratches my back harder, drawing blood, screaming my name like she's having an out-of-body experience.

I fuck her.

But she fucks me, too.

"I'm coming, Val, I'm coming, I'm coming," she chants but doesn't slow her pace.

"Scream for me, baby," I say, wanting to hear what I do to her body. Just for tonight, I want to feel like it belongs to only me. Her body. Her mind. Her heart, but especially her beautiful soul.

Only for one night.

In my quest for revenge, I lost sight of what matters most. In this insane need to cause her the same pain and heartache she did me, I forgot how right she feels in my arms even if our love has always been complicated. Even when our love only shone in the dark.

How is that normal?

I'm a masochist.

This moment right here proves she is too.

My head is so fucked.

I'm drowning, but right now, she's the only thing keeping me afloat.

"Baby," she moans into my neck, completely pliable, and she fucking comes, clutching my dick like a vice and shuddering like fucking crazy. "Hurt me. Take it out on my body, on my skin."

I fuck her slowly as she comes down from her high, and when she does, I lift her up, position her on all fours, wrap her long hair around my fist and pull on it hard, making her arch her back, and then I slam back inside her sensitive folds. Fuck, she's fucking gorgeous. I watch as my cock slams in and out of her cunt, and I can't take my eyes off her round ass. I slap it hard, fascinated with how one touch — a rough touch— makes her quiver in pleasure.

I was never this rough with her back then, but she needs to see and feel

who I am now.

“Harder,” she groans.

I give her exactly what she wants. What she needs. I slap her ass harder, and the sound of my palm hitting her cheek hangs in the air. A red mark is already forming around her left cheek. I'm becoming addicted to this feeling. I hate how much I love inflicting sweet pain on her. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

“Hit me harder,” she yelps and pushes her ass back fucking me faster. I hate how little control I have over my emotions when she's near me. I'm a fucking wreck, but in this moment, I stop thinking and just feel. Feel her. What she does to me.

I slap her ass repeatedly at the same time as I fuck her. In sync and not missing a beat. My dick is so fucking swollen and ready to explode at the sounds of ecstasy she's making.

“Do you like it when I slap you, huh?” I grit my teeth, trying to force the tingling on my lower back from rising to the surface. A release is happening soon, and fuck, I want it to last. In a moment of insanity, all I can think about is that I wish I could live inside this woman forever. Submerge myself in her chaos, and feed on it without the worry of how painful it will be once it ends. Because it will. We never last. There's always something in the way. This time around is my fucked-up head and obsession with the past.

“Yessss!”

“Valentino.” Fuck, that name sounds wrong on her lips. I fuck her harder, pushing her head down on the sofa's pillow and pounding into her without mercy.

“Say it again.”

“Val—.”

“I'm not Valentino to you. Say my fucking name.” I don't slow my pace. She's not running the show, no matter how good it feels to have her tight pink pussy milking my cock. “Fucking say it.”

“Alexander. Alexander. Alexander!” I hear the smile in her voice but can't see it. Fuck. This obsession will take me to my grave.

Thwack!

Thwack!

Thwack!

Three more slaps to her ass, and I'm a goner.

Just in time, I pull out of her body, spilling my cum all over her back and

ass. She lays there, unmoving, as I watch my cum run down her ass cheeks and mix with her juices.

Fuck, so hot.

Once both our breaths become normal, I step back and tuck myself back inside my pants. Fallon turns and sits forward on the sofa staring back at me with a small smile on her face and a fire that looks just like the one burning in the fireplace, but it doesn't last. One moment she's staring at me as if no time has passed, and the next, she looks at me like I just murdered her scary-looking cat.

I knew she would regret it as soon as she came down from the high of sex. Maybe now she realizes there's nothing worth loving in me.

She stands completely naked and walks towards me with a blank look on her face. One I can't quite decipher.

One step.

Two steps.

She's in front of me with one hand to my heart, just where my most painful tattoo lays. Fuck. I shouldn't have let her take my shirt off. I don't mind her looking at the scars on my neck, not even the snake tattoos can hide those, but that tattoo on my chest will let her see. She will know.

Will she confess now?

Will she share the most painful memory?

The reason why I hate her.

The reason why, to this day, I haven't been able to move on.

"H-How d-did you f-find out?" Shock takes over her expression, and tears pool in her emerald eyes.

"Your mother and my grandfather told me what you did." I can't help how fucking bitter and enraged I sound. I could forgive everything, except this one thing.

I wasn't being fucking dramatic when I said she killed our love.

She did kill it.

My heart.

My baby.

There, on my chest, two tiny feet rest with the date of her death. It could've been a boy, but in my head, every time I mourn that baby, I see a baby girl. My baby girl. Black hair, big green eyes, with her mother's smile. Nothing of me. All her.

Fallon drops at my feet and sobs uncontrollably. I should let her and do

shit to comfort her, but my goddamn conscience won't allow me to let her suffer while knowing her heart is not strong enough.

Fuck.

Who would've known that the girl I loved most in this fucked up world turned out to be a vicious monster?

I pick her up from the floor, drop her softly on the sofa and wrap a warm blanket around her shivering, naked body.

"Now I know," her sullen expression remains on my tattoo. "Now I know why you've done all of this. I never quite understood why you would hate me when you were the one that lied and broke my heart, starting a fucked-up chain of events that ultimately led me to my ruin."

I walk to the other side of the room where the Christmas tree is and sit down far away from her. I need to breathe and push back the pain this memory brings back. Every time I think about the baby, all I remember is how fucking vindictive she was. How was the girl I fell madly in love with capable of killing out of spite? To make me pay for breaking her heart when that was never my intention. All I wanted was forever with her, but I fucked up. My brother and other factors played a part too, but I don't blame them. Not anymore.

I blame us.

I reach for one of the Polaroids that hang from the tree and bring it closer. It's the one of us sitting on my bike, looking at the stars. I turn it around and find a message in her handwriting.

The day I knew I wanted forever with you.

Fuck

Fuck.

Fuck.

"Tell me why." I whisper, wanting to know once and for all. Maybe the only way I can kill this sick obsession is by allowing myself to have closure. "Tell me why you did it. Was it to get back at me? Did you hate me that much?"

"I did hate you. So goddamn much. For using me and taking advantage of what I felt for you to get close to my fucked-up family. I hate that I was just a task to you when you were the fucking world to me." She laughs like a lunatic. *My God, how did we let it go so far?* "But listen to me closely, Valentino Alexander Nicolasi," There's a hard edge to her tone. She's no longer smiling. "I went to hell and back alone. You know nothing!"

“Then fucking tell me! Tell me what the fuck happened that night. Why the fuck did you leave without letting me explain?”

“I had no choice.” She looks away from me and stares into the fire. “The Devil came for me that night. The same night you ripped my already broken heart out of my chest and left it for dead.”

The way she says it makes my own heart stop in my chest, and my entire body becomes cold.

Frozen.

Waiting for her to finally reveal all her secrets.

In this moment, I know that I won't ever be the same after this.

Are we both unredeemable?

Are we too far gone?

I don't know anymore.

I just know that tonight this all ends.

This sick cycle of pain and regrets.

“Once I give you my truth, you have to decide. You either keep me or let me fucking go because I can't do this. I can't be the only one willing to fight for us.”

I hear her, but I'm only able to process one thing.

Keep me or let me fucking go.

FALLON

BROKEN DREAM

“My heart was broken long before you came along.” – F
Then

Two lines.

Two pink lines.

How did this happen?

Okay, I know how it happened, but what do I do now? Staring down at the pregnancy test I peed on a couple of minutes ago, I can't help but feel both joyful and terrified at the same time.

A baby.

A baby at this age.

I have nothing to offer but my love, and maybe that should be enough, but it isn't. Not really.

You'll get so big...

He won't desire you...

For the first time in a long while, I don't pay attention to the cruel voice. It doesn't bother me as much as it used to before.

A baby.

His baby.

One I made with the most important person in my world. The one I love the most.

The one currently waiting for me at the academy's library. The one who on a stormy night while we rode through the city on his bike, confessed how he only ever imagined himself being a father after he met me. He wants what he and his twin didn't get to have. A family.

He'll be excited at the news. I know it.

Everything's been going great lately. We still see each other every day, even if we're always hidden away. Inside our own little world. Our secret.

Now that it won't be just the two of us, I know he'll be over the moon happy. I'm terrified because what do two teenagers know about taking care of another life? But I'm certain that if someone can do it, it is us.

We're the best team.

Always the best team.

Valentino Alexander and me.

Looking outside my window, I watch the snow fall. There's no one home tonight.

It's Christmas Eve. And instead of spending it alone, looking out the window and wondering how it would feel to celebrate this joyful holiday with someone I love or friends that care about me, I am, for the first time in a long while, spending it with someone who cares. Someone who wants me.

I used to love Christmas Eve, even more so than Christmas Day. My dad would put me in a Christmas pajama and help me prepare the cookies and milk to leave for Santa. He would tuck me in and wait for me to fall asleep before he left for work. I always pretended to be asleep. I wanted to stay up and wait for Santa Claus to arrive. Most kids would want to catch him in the act just to see him and be in his presence, but not me. All I wanted was to ask him to make my daddy's life a little bit easier. He could take my gifts if he just granted me that one wish.

A wish for my daddy.

I never caught him or got my wish. I guess that was when I realized Santa wasn't real.

Santa Claus wouldn't be making our lives easier.

I stop myself before I get depressed and look at myself in the mirror. I'm wearing a green, short dress that I paired with my white dirty converse. It's not much but it's all I have. I let my hair down and put on a little bit of blush and mascara I had stashed in my drawer, hidden from my mother.

I shrug on Alexander's jean jacket that looks huge on me but adds to the style, plus it's his. It gives me comfort to wear it. It makes me happy that he gave me something of his.

Taking one last glance in the mirror, satisfied with how I look, I go to get my backpack from the bed and head to the window.

I'm almost there when my room door opens and my entire. My body

freezes, and cold sweats take over my body.

No.

There's not supposed to be anyone home.

They never stay home on the holidays.

I'm always alone.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you, too, little sister." The mocking voice says from behind me. He's back. God, no. "Where are you running off to?"

The door closes shut behind him, and I know this won't end well. For me, at least. It never does.

"C-caleb you are h-home." I hate how I stutter every time he's near. I hate that I show him how terrified I am of him. I hate that he's here.

"N-no s-shit." He mocks me and laughs cruelly. The same laugh that's been haunting me for years.

Having no choice, I turn around and face him. He looks unhinged tonight, and what makes my heart drop to the floor are the photos he's holding in his hands.

The photos Alexander took of me the night of our first time. I hid them. I know I did. *How did he find them?*

I watch him take one step forward, then two steps more with a predatory smile on his face. The same one he always has whenever he tortures me. I should turn around and leave, but I'm petrified like I always am when he comes to my room. This is his effect. What he causes whenever he's around.

Fear.

Paralyzing fear.

"I knew you were a fucking freak, but this goes to show how perverted you really are." He lifts his right hand with a photo and taunts me with it. I try to snatch it from him, but he pulls back laughing. "Ah, no. I think I'll keep this for myself. You look fucking disgusting. You make me sick, and I think mommy dearest would love to see what her pig of a daughter is up to."

I need to run.

I need to get out of here before he hurts me like he always does. I'd rather feel the pain of his fist than his cruel words, but with the human growing in my belly, I can't risk it.

"What do you want?"

He steps forward in my direction and grins. God, I hate him. I hate how weak he makes me feel.

"To watch you cry." The sinister look he gives me makes me put one

hand on my stomach. Thankfully, he doesn't notice or figure out what I'm protecting.

"Why? What did I ever do to you?" I'm trying to buy time by keeping him talking.

"I don't need a reason, really." he shrugs, like being this cruel is fun to him. "I just love fucking with you. I love how weak you are and how pathetic you look when you cry. You were born to be prey."

I hold back the tears and move back towards the window.

One.

Two.

Three.

It is now or never. Stay here and risk him hurting me or run towards my safe place.

Thankfully, the window was already open, and it only takes me one second to climb out of my room. But in the process, Caleb snatches my backpack and it falls to my bedroom floor the moment I'm out the window.

No.

Ziggy's camera.

Daddy's books.

My heart breaks for the millionth time in this lifetime, knowing that I won't ever get them back. He'll ruin them, just like he does everything else, but I can't risk him hurting my baby.

With tears in my eyes and pain in my heart, I pick my bike up from the ground and mount it.

I need to get to Alexander.

He'll keep me safe.

Us safe.

I rode in the cold for almost ten to fifteen minutes, but I made it safely.

I drop my bike and run towards the library. It's late at night, but somehow, Alexander has access to every code, and that's how we have these nightly dates in the academy's library. Once, and even twice a week, we meet here at night. Sometimes, we read in silence, and other times, we have sex. Sometimes we do both, and that's how we got here. That's how I ended up pregnant at sixteen.

I climb the steps to the main entrance, step inside and run through the halls, trying to find my way to him. I take a sharp turn, and there's the library's door. It's slightly open.

He's already here.

Thank God.

The pregnancy test is burning a hole through the jean jacket.

I take a moment to wipe the tears off my face. I'm in the process of doing so and catching my breath when I hear him. Alexander.

My entire heart leaps, knowing I'll be with him soon. He'll make everything go away. Like he always does.

He shuts the world up for me.

The voices.

The pain goes away.

I take a step forward but freeze when I hear the exact same raspy voice but louder and mocking.

I peek from the door and see them.

Alexander and his twin, Lorenzo.

I don't know him.

I don't know his family.

He has kept me separate from it all to protect me from them.

His brother seems ruthless, and maybe that's why he keeps me away from all of them.

From his friends as well.

I'm about to turn to give them privacy when I hear it.

The words that break dreams.

Break hearts.

Break me.

"She's just like every other hoe in this city, man." My beautiful boy laughs, and it's a laugh that makes my heart still and chills my bones. "Starving for my cock, and ready to spread her legs for a Nicolasi." Their cruel laughs echo in the library.

"I'm impressed, brother. You are the first one to complete the task. Not going to lie I had my doubts that you would be able to get close to the girl without catching feelings, but here we are. You got the intel grandfather needed to get. The Vipers are in his pocket. Her cunt of a stepfather had no choice but to step down. Shit, man, it was a fucking bloodbath. You missed it."

What?

What is happening?

What is he talking about?

With shaking hands, I cover my mouth so that I don't make a sound. I need to know. I need to know what I was to him. A game or a means to an end?

Silly, girl. I told you this would end...

I try to think back to our time together, and despite a feeling in my gut warning me about his intentions, nothing he said or did ever felt like he was lying. Like he was playing me, but I guess that shows how good he really is.

I hate myself for all the tears that are falling down my face.

I hate myself for not listening to the vicious voices in my head that told me this was all a game.

That I meant nothing to him.

"I couldn't leave her side. The bitch has been clingy as fuck lately." There's no emotion in his voice. So unlike the boy I fell in love with. He might never show emotion towards other people, but when it came to me, I always felt love through his meaningful words. "I do wish I had been present to witness all those low life scums lose their lives. The gang leader, Timothy Banks, was one cocky motherfucker."

Is Tim dead?

Valentino Nicolasi used me to get close to them. I was just a means to an end. The only way they could infiltrate my stepfather's business from the inside. I feel shame knowing that because of me, other people are dead. He freely walked around the house when no one was there, and I was most likely sleeping, thinking he was next to me.

What an idiot.

I told you I'm the only one that loves you.

You hurt me, I shoot back.

Like mom.

Like Caleb.

Like Alexander.

It's then I feel something inside of me snap.

Shatter like broken glass that cuts me from the inside.

Making me bleed.

I'm used to pain. Have been almost all my life, but this pain is excruciating. It's the type that breaks a human.

Broken.

Ruined.

Pregnant.

Alone.

My hands instantly go to my stomach, and I touch the spot I imagine my baby growing. *What do I do now?*

His family is dangerous, and so is he.

I mean nothing to him, and what if he takes my baby? What if his family makes it all go away? I can't trust anyone anymore.

I don't know where to go, but what I do know is that I need to run. I need to keep us safe.

Ziggy.

I can always count on Zig.

I can hide away with him until morning and figure out what to do next.

I take a step back, ready to leave this tainted place. He ruined it. He ruined us, and I don't care to hear anything else. I heard enough. The moment I turn to leave, blue eyes, the same as the one that hold so many lies, stare back at me.

My heart stops in my chest, and I hold my breath as he holds my gaze.

Fear runs through my body.

What will they do to me?

I always thought Alexander would be the one person that would never hurt me, but that was just a silly girl's dream.

A dream that is now broken.

Burned and tainted by his deceit.

Lorenzo Nicolasi stares at me with no emotion on his face.

Nothing.

Indifference.

He says nothing.

He doesn't even blink, and I take that as my cue to leave.

I run like my life depends on it because it does now that I'm pregnant and the father turned out to be a monster.

The ugliest one.

The most ruthless.

The one that eats hearts.

I find the exit, hop on my bike and ride all the way home as snow begins to fall faster than before.

All the way home, I'm looking over my shoulder, making sure no one is following me. That's just my mind playing tricks on me because he doesn't care.

It was all a game.
How could you, lost boy?
How could you play with my heart?

I feel sick to my stomach.

I reach my house after an almost fifteen-minute bike ride. I drop my bike on the ground and make sure that no one hears me. I'm almost to Ziggy's side window when I not only remember he's away for the holidays, visiting his daughter but I also that I'm missing my backpack with my most prized possessions. I look back at my house and see no cars in the driveway and all the lights are out.

My mind is telling me to leave it. They're just material things that can be replaced, but that's the thing, they can't. They mean something to me and are the only things I have left of the people that I love most.

Against my better judgment, I climb the window and make my way inside my room. I look down at the floor and find them there.

My ruined memories.

A broken camera and ripped pages of my books.

My father's.

Ziggy's.

Caleb destroyed them like I knew he would.

I bend over and retrieve the ripped pages and shove them inside my backpack. The camera has a broken lens and missing parts, but hopefully, I'll be able to repair it.

I'll try my damn best to.

I won't give him the damn satisfaction.

I pick the camera up from the floor and all its broken pieces, just like my goddamn heart, and shove it inside the backpack. I hurry, not wanting to risk getting caught or staying inside this hell a moment longer. It will be my last time stepping a foot inside this place.

I adjust my back, and the moment I'm about to turn and walk back to the window, the door to my room opens.

So silently that it's barely audible.

Shit.

“You ungrateful, little bitch. After all I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me? By getting fat and pregnant?” Her cruel words don’t cut me tonight. I’m numb.

Besides, this has nothing to do with me being pregnant and everything to do with her projecting her traumas and failures onto me. She worked so hard all her life to be the perfect daughter, student, wife, and it never gave her what she wanted. In her mind, she was a failure, ultimately making her give up and not try enough as a mother. She failed miserably. Mother looks furious when she steps closer to where I’m standing next to the window and reads my posture. She knew I was about to leave.

I was so close to being free.

I put that dream on hold because Valentino Nicolasi gave me a new one. A sweeter dream until it became this. A nightmare.

Mom keeps walking towards me like a predator sizing its prey. She’s a bitter human being, and that type of human doesn’t rest until everyone is as fucked up and miserable as them.

She roughly yanks my hand pulling me towards her and away from the window.

From my escape.

I try to pull my hand free from her grasp. “Mom, stop! Please, I want to leave!”

My chest is about to explode. I want to scream and make everyone hurt just like I’m hurting. Tears spill down my face in a constant stream.

“You are not going anywhere, Alicia,” she shouts in my face, yanking me further. When I look down, I see one of the pregnancy tests I took. I took two just to make sure and in my haste to escape my stepbrother’s cruelty, I left one in the trash without hiding it better. “I knew I should’ve aborted you. You’ve been nothing but a fucking headache and disappointment since the day you were born!”

“Just let me go, mother. You don’t even want me here. I’m doing us both a favor.”

“Don’t do me any favors. Because of you, my husband is dead, and I’m losing everything.”

“I didn’t do anything!” I try with all my might to pull my arm from her painful grip, but she won’t give in. For the first time since my mother’s abuse started, I’m afraid. I am terrified of what she’ll do.

I was right to be afraid.

It takes only one split second to change the course of your life forever.

It took one lie to break a heart.

One betrayal to shatter a dream.

One second to end a life.

All I remember was falling and everything going by in slow motion. Her emotionless face watching me fall after she slapped my face so hard that I lost my footing on the wet floor.

She does nothing to keep me from falling.

I reach for the window, trying to catch myself from falling, but it's too late. Once down on the floor, I feel her kicking me repeatedly on my stomach and face in a ruthless attack, then everything goes black.

It will never be colorful again.

Just black.

I woke up with blood between my legs and a dead heart inside my chest, and my freedom no longer in my reach.

One year.

She locked me in the basement of our home for one year. I think she never intended to keep me there for so long, but I didn't give her a choice. I fought and I screamed. I did what I should've done before. She controlled the amount of food I ate and if I had a 'fit' like she referred to them as, then she would starve me. I lost so much weight that when I got out of there I was an entire different person. I became someone I no longer recognized. My demons and grief took over, and not a day went by that I didn't think of everything I lost that night.

I became a slave to my demons.

After a while, I just succumb to them because why fight against the tide when eventually we will all drown?

It's just a matter of time.

I spent three hundred and sixty-five days in darkness and solitude with only my mother's cruel words to keep me company.

I thought of all the ways I could make Valentino pay for all he did to me, but once I realized he never truly cared, nothing I wanted to do to him would affect him.

Would make him regret using me.

So I did the only thing that helped me stay afloat.

The only way for me to free myself of my mother's abuse and the painful memories. Kill the girl I used to be.

The girl that was drowning. The girl that believed her salvation was in someone else.

That Fallon died in that cold and lonely basement.

In that house of horrors, with the baby that never stood a chance.

I became the daughter my mother always wanted.

Loud.

Opinionated.

Charismatic.

I lost weight and became a slave to her hurtful diets.

I shed my old skin and with it every trace of the girl I used to be.

I no longer cared.

I got so good at pretending that I was okay, that, eventually I started to believe it.

May the stupid and naive girl I was rest in peace.

Valentino Nicolasi might have broken my heart that night,

but my mother ripped it out of my chest and shoved a sharp knife inside it.

Months later, another part of me died when Ziggy's heart gave out.

There's so much a heart and fragile mind can take.

I was left for dead.

I was reborn.

I became someone he hated.

I became a fake.

FALLON

THE TRUTH

“I am madly and irrevocably obsessed with you.” – Val

Now

“**N**ow you know my truth.”

Okay, maybe I didn't tell him everything but he knows what matters. I don't want to rehash my time locked up in the basement. Maybe one day I'll tell him everything I've endured but not tonight.

There's a long silence, and then Valentino becomes enraged. Starts yelling incoherently and smashing everything in sight. He punches a hole into the wall, shatters the floor-length mirror on the other side of the living room, a vase, and breaks one of the coffee tables.

I know better than to try to stop him.

So, I sit there quietly, with my heart in my hands, and let him release all that pent-up rage and frustration he carries in his heart.

I had years to come to terms with my pain and loss, but he's been holding onto it, letting it fester inside his soul.

He thought me the villain in his story, and all this time, I was a victim.

That's who I've always been, a victim.

I no longer want to feel this way. I want to live with no regrets. No pain.

I am tired of it.

I could hate him for my entire life and stay bitter and lonely, or I can love him through all of this.

I had a choice, and I made it.

I'm not going anywhere unless he looks me in the eyes and tells me to go. Until he tells me to leave and never come back. That he doesn't love me.

I watch as he walks forward and drops onto his knees in front of me, taking my face in his bloody hands. I notice how he broke the skin of his right one. "I-I'm so sorry. God, baby, I'm so fucking sorry."

He looks up at me with tears pooling in those icy blue eyes. Nothing has ever hurt more than losing our chance of forever but seeing him cry does things to my heart.

I wipe one tear away and watch as he drops his head on my lap. We stay like that for a while. No talking. No words between us. Just the sound of his uneven breathing.

The clock on the wall strikes midnight.

It's Christmas Day.

I've been surrounded by love the past five Christmases, but tonight I feel like I'm whole again. Ironic since we're both a mess of emotions and bitter truths.

He keeps repeating the words 'I'm sorry' over and over again.

How were the lies others manufactured stronger than the truth of our love? Was it that we were too young and felt too much too fast?

Now, he knows my shameful truth. For so long, I've blamed myself for what happened. For not being strong enough. For being stupid and going back to that house.

Tonight, I forgive myself.

I was sick.

I was a victim of abuse.

I was a lonely girl that lost her loving father and didn't even grieve properly because I would be punished for it.

I was the girl who fell in love with a guy that made her feel everything and helped her avoid the chaos in her head. A girl who used a beautiful boy as an escape, even though she loved him more than life.

A girl who made that boy her everything when the woman she is now knows that wasn't healthy at all.

I should be my everything.

I should love myself first.

Tonight,

I forgive myself.

My heart feels lighter now that I don't have to carry this painful truth all by myself.

Now, he can take half of this pain.

It was our unborn baby, after all.

We both lost so much and were so fucking stupid back then.

I forgive myself.

I forgive him.

I'm not cured.

But I took a step forward in the right direction tonight.

Now, I need him to make a choice.

Swim or sink, baby.

Rubbing his head softly, I start to hum the same melody that used to keep him calm. Shivers run through his body when I grab his chin and make him look up at me.

I need him to know.

We made mistakes, but we were kids back then. Now we're adults, and it's time we act like it. I'm taking back the reigns of my life.

"I kept so much from you back then. You have to understand that it wasn't that I wanted to hide who I was. It was just that I didn't feel like that girl with you. I lost my father when I was a young girl. My mother abused me, both mentally and physically. Just because I loved sugary treats a little too much for her liking. She used to deprive me of food sometimes when the scale pointed out that I gained weight, and because of it, I developed an eating disorder that made me starve myself, even knowing it was slowly killing me. On top of that, my heart is not as strong as it should be, and I'm at risk." I take a deep breath and continue before I lose my nerve. He needs to know me. The real me. The one I didn't show him back then because I was too afraid that the dream of him would fade away. Because guys like him would never fall for someone like me. That's what I used to believe. Now, I know better. "I have so many demons, Valentino. Demons that have the power to cripple me and ruin my entire day. I'm not the sweet and preppy girl that lights someone's world. I'm a dark cloud. That's who I've always been, and I'm tired. I'm so tired of it. I don't want to be miserable anymore. I'm tired of feeling hate in my heart."

"I'm —

I stop him before he goes any further.

"No. I'm done with apologies. You fucked up so fucking bad, but so did I." I hold his stare, showing him what's in my heart. "Now, tell me something."

"What?"

“Would you rather drown in self-pity and regret or swim to the surface holding onto my hand until the rest of our days?” I whisper before getting up from the sofa and exiting the living room. I didn’t lie when I told him that I’m done feeling this way.

I forgave him.

I forgave myself.

Now, he needs to do the same.

He needs to choose.

Swim, baby.

We have a second chance.

Swim.

VALENTINO

BURNED BRIDGES

“Fuck me. This is all fucked up.” – Val
Now

Demons.
Sick.
Abuse.
Starved.
Her mother.
Her father.
Her life.
Beautiful girl, what did I do?
I left you alone to walk through fire all on your own.
Years, I’ve wasted years hating you when you were a victim all along.
How could I claim to love you more than anything when I failed to protect you?
My God, all you lost and all in the same night.
All you’ve been through.
The baby.
Her imprisonment in that house.
I believed my grandfather, your mother, everyone over you.
Over the love I felt for you.
I still remember how fucking miserable I was when I learned of her betrayal. How reckless I became with my life. The numbers of the souls I took increased and after a while I began to enjoy it. Better hurt them than to feel that all-consuming pain.

Motherfucker.

I brought you back here to cause more harm. To make you pay for leaving me in the past. For daring to move on with your life while I stayed back, watching from the sidelines with a broken heart. I'm a sick fuck.

So fucking stupid.

How do we come back from that?

How do I even look at her without wanting to rip my goddam heart out of my chest and throw it at her feet, begging for forgiveness?

She forgave me too fast. Too easy.

She should hate me.

She should leave and find someone who deserves her.

Someone who isn't as fucked up as I am, but I'm a selfish man. I've always been selfish when it comes to her. Even when I hated her, I didn't want to share her with anyone else.

"Would you rather drown in self-pity and regret or swim to the surface holding onto my hand until the rest of our days?"

I couldn't face her like the coward I am. Not until I'm closer to being worthy of her forgiveness.

That's why I'm here today.

I'll give her the entire universe if she wants me to.

"What are you doing here?" Lucan shuts the door to his penthouse behind him. I get it. I'm not trustworthy. I don't fault him for thinking it. I respect the motherfucker. We were never that close. He was always more of a friend to my brother than me, but right now, he's the only one that can help me.

"I need you to tell your wife that Fallon is safe with me. I'll take my own life before I hurt her ever again." That's a fucking promise.

"Why won't you come inside and tell her yourself?"

"I'm not there yet." I look him in the eye. "I-I didn't know he was there. I would've never left him behind."

"I know."

"How?"

"Your twin came by the moment he found out you took Fallon."

"Why didn't you say something? Why did no one come to her rescue?"

He shrugs. "I found out about it a week ago, and by then, I concluded that there's no one else for you, motherfucker. I saw the way you used to look at her back then. Like she hung the moon and stars for you. The shadows in your eyes were gone, and you even smiled often. She did that. I guess I hoped

you could do the same for her now. She was drowning, even when she was surrounded by all this love.”

“I hurt her.”

“We just can’t help ourselves, can we?” He laughs but sobers up the moment he realizes I’m not laughing. “Man the fuck up, and give her new memories. Give her fucking forever.” Lucan slaps my shoulder and turns to go inside his apartment.

I turn around to leave, but his voice stops. “And once you both get your fucked-up lives together, come back and fix your family. Your father misses you. My wife needs a brother like you, and my son wants to meet you.” With that said, he shuts the door on me.

Fuck.

I burned so many bridges that it will be a fucking hassle to rebuild them.

But I’ll do it.

For them.

For her.

For myself.

FALLON

RARE LOVE

**“I fucked us up big time.
Do I even have a chance?” – Val**

Now

Murder.

You never think about it until it affects your life.

My father was murdered by a loan shark. My surgeries weren't cheap, and dad got himself into trouble so I could live a better life. A healthy one.

He didn't.

I'm partly responsible for my dad being gone. I think I'll always see it that way, but I'm trying.

I'm trying not to be so hard on myself.

I killed her too.

The girl I used to be.

Valentino's Alicia.

She was naive and too trusting, even when she was hurt the most. Fallon may have been standoffish and cynical, but she was strong. A steel wall. She protected the girl I was before. The girl with a fragile heart.

I guess as the years passed, I lost my identity. I didn't know who I was. All I knew was that I was hurting and the girl I was with Valentino reminded me of every hurt of the past. Fallon, the fake persona, kept me afloat and fighting.

Still, I miss the girl I was before. The one that dreamed about mythical creatures and enjoyed getting lost in a book or listening to Mozart and

Beethoven for hours.

I miss all of it.

I'll slowly find my way back.

My alarm sounds, and I'm brought back to the present. Valentino left again after everything that occurred last night between us. After everything was said, I retreated to my room and haven't seen him since. All I know is that he left early this morning on his bike.

He left me his phone again.

Without saying it, I know he's giving me the freedom to do as I please.

I called Andrea and wished her a Merry Christmas. We talked for hours while we both cried like babies. I let her know I was safe and unharmed.

She also told me that Valentino showed up at their apartment and talked to Lucan.

I smile, knowing he's trying.

He's swimming.

I get out of bed and start my day. It's almost noon, but it was an emotional two days. I'm exhausted, but at the same time, hopeful for what's to come.

I walk to the kitchen and open the fridge, trying to figure out what I can eat. He doesn't have much here, and there aren't any treats. It's all healthy foods. It's working for him because he looks strong and so different from the lean boy he used to be.

He has muscle on top of muscle, a sharp V cut, and huge biceps. He doesn't look freakishly strong, but he does look like he can break you with just one punch to the face.

I grab a bottle of water and a bowl of fruit. I really miss funfetti mix pancakes, even the burned ones Andrea used to serve Roman and me every morning. I loved them even though after I finished eating them I felt horrible. Not only because most of the times she would burn them, but because I always felt like one little pancake would make me gain weight. It has always been a struggle for me. I'm trying. I really am.

Closing the fridge, I head to the counter but stop when I hear someone knocking on the door.

I stay rooted in place, not knowing what to do. Valentino wouldn't knock his own door, and there are no neighbors around from what I discovered from my walk outside when I explored the cabin.

Two more knocks.

Harder this time.

“Shit. Open up. My balls are freezing.”

Valentino? Did he forget his keys? I hurry to the window and take a peek outside. There is a man, covered head to toe in black except for the red beanie on his head. No snake tattoos.

Lorenzo.

I contemplate opening the door for him, thinking of how dangerous this man is. I never understood what other women saw in him. In the academy, they would fight for his attention like he was God’s gift to mankind when, in reality, God didn’t have anything to do with it.

He’s all the Devil’s work.

After coming around to help with Roman several times, he and I learned to cohabit for both Andrea’s and Roman’s sake. She needed help and protection, and Lorenzo offered a lot of that.

I never fully trusted him.

I still don’t, but there has to be a reason he’s here. I hurry back to the kitchen, grab the knife I used to chop the fruit and hide it inside my jeans.

I return to the door and open it. He stands tall and strong. The exact replica of Valentino. Back then, you could easily tell them apart because Valentino had white platinum hair, but now they look almost identical. To stranger, it would be almost impossible to tell them apart, but there’s an aura this man carries. A dark one. He smiles, but it’s never friendly.

He has added more tattoos to his neck, and he still has piercings. A small diamond earring on his nose and several tiny hoops on his left ear.

“Are you going to invite me in, love?” A shiver runs down my neck the moment he whispers so darkly.

When I remain quiet, he says, “Very smart of you.” he laughs, looking into my eyes as if he can read me with one look, and maybe he can. I wouldn’t put it past him. “Never invite the Devil in.”

“You won’t hurt me.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

“You won’t do that to your brother.”

Something flashes in his eyes, but he quickly recovers. I saw it. Love for his brother.

I hold my breath, and fear rises to the surface when I watch him shove his hand inside his jacket. Maybe I gave him too much credit. Maybe this man is soulless.

I release my breath the moment I see that what he pulls out isn't a gun or a knife but a small black box.

"Merry fucking Christmas or whatever the hell you celebrate," he drops the box on my hand and turns to leave without saying anything else. I open it and find a small green diamond ring.

What is this?

A ring.

"Wait!"

He stops missteps and turns my way.

"I don't understand."

"He planned to give that to you for Christmas. The night he asked you to meet him inside the library."

"W-why then? Why did he say those things?"

"To protect you from me." Lorenzo shrugs like it's nothing.

"From you?"

"From his family." he takes a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lights one, and puts it to his lips, blowing smoke up into the cold air. "Our grandfather was onto him, and weaknesses in the Nicolasi household were not allowed. What do you think would've happened if you guys continued seeing each other? He was never going to allow it, especially a romance between one of his heirs and a non-Italian girl from the wrong side of the city."

"I was so—"

"Save it, love. I really don't fucking care what you have to say. Just bring my brother back to life. Back to me." he continues his way towards his car but stops again. "Oh, if you fuck him up again, I promise you I will take a one-hour long bath in your blood."

With that creepy as fuck threat, he gets inside his car and drives off.

Closing the door, I walk to the nearest sofa and sit down. I look down with blurry eyes at the beautiful and unique ring. It's an intricate design. From afar, it looks like a normal white silver band with a green diamond in the middle, but if you look closely, the band has numbers engraved.

143

That's when it hits me.

I= One letter.

Love is composed of four letters.

The word 'you' has three.

A sob escapes me when I remember all the letters he gave me back at the academy were signed with the number, even before we said I love you.

All the letters he wrote but never sent also have the number 143.

Even when he hated, me he loved me.

I smile through my tears.

Yeah, this love is not normal.

To some, it might be insane.

They might not understand why we keep coming back to each other after all the hurt. The lies. The stupid miscommunications.

They don't have to understand.

All they need to know is that no one has ever loved someone as much as I love him.

I loved him when he was all I had.

I loved him through the pain.

I loved him when my heart was shattered and I didn't know if it would ever work the same again.

I loved him then.

I love him now.

I'm pretty sure I'll love him even when I'm on the ground.

With that, I hug the jewelry box closer to my heart and rest my head on the sofa's pillow. I fall asleep thinking of all the ways I can bring him back.

Fully back to me.

FALLON

SECOND CHANCE AT LOVE

“You're my lobster.” – F

Now

I'm woken up by the clatter of dishes and the sound of banging pans coming from the kitchen. I fell asleep waiting for Valentino to come home, and it is nighttime now. He was gone all day.

I feel disappointment creeping up for a second, but then I remember how I had years to come to terms with the loss. He not only has to mourn what we could've had again but also deal with the feelings it all brought back.

The judgment he cast towards me.

The lies he believed.

Let go of the wrong version of the truth he was fed by my mother and his grandfather.

I get up from the sofa, following the noises and the smell coming from the kitchen. The sizzling of the stove, the smell of appetizing food, and strong spices. Once I enter the kitchen, I find him there. For a moment, I'm taken back by how different he looks, and I suppress the urge to close my eyes and count to three to make sure this is real and not a torturous dream like the ones I've had countless times throughout the years we were apart.

“I tried to keep it down to let you sleep, but as you can see, things took a dark turn.” he jokes softly, almost insecure.

God, please let me have this.

As long as I can.

Just this one thing.

If all I had in life was Valentino Alexander, it would be more than

enough.

Opening my eyes, I find him still standing before me like no time has passed, but it has. My soul recognizes his, but he's a different person now.

We both are.

Does he like the same things?

Who is he now?

There's a thrill in getting to know him all over again.

A fresh start.

A new story.

A better one.

It's both scary and exciting.

His hair is styled differently. His tattoos give him a bad boy look. One he didn't have before. When he was young, he looked ethereal and elegant, and now he looks like a savage.

Wild and rough-looking.

The boy he was had an air of danger surrounding him, but the man he is now is dangerous. It's written all over his face. His mannerisms. The way his eyes take me in like he wants to swallow me whole.

The scars he carries don't make me sad anymore. I see them for what they are. Battle wounds of a brave and ruthless warrior.

Now, I need to help him heal the ones in his heart.

Looking around us, I take in all he did while I was napping. The table in the middle of the kitchen is set with a centerpiece of black roses and lit white candles.

He did all this for me.

I must've slept hard because I didn't even hear the front door opening.

There are candles all over the kitchen and the living room, too. What surprises me the most and makes my heart dance with joy is that he decorated for Christmas and added gifts under the small Christmas tree.

There are tons of gifts.

It's kind of beautiful and melancholic the way this gives me flashbacks of a simpler but perfect time.

Christmas with my dad.

He would make us dinner because mother was always too busy or taking beauty naps, as she liked to call them. Just to avoid us.

Better for us anyway.

I didn't need anything else.

Dad would make us a crappy dinner, would watch me open gifts, and stay with me watching reruns of White Christmas until it was time for him to leave for work.

I always wondered why he never asked for the day off. He seemed to always be in a hurry once he left our house. He worked so hard, but I know he also got himself into some trouble just to keep up with the house bills and my medical bills.

How I miss him.

He deserved better than what he got.

I shake the sad thoughts away and only think of the good.

Things that make me smile.

“You did all this for me?”

“Yes,” Valentino doesn’t look up from the stove, where he’s mixing a pot. The vision of him in the kitchen is both sexy and hilarious.

“Why?”

“Last night after you left, I stayed up all night, beating myself up for all I did. For every fucking shitty thing I did and how stupid I was. I—”

Walking closer, I interrupt him. “You don’t have to keep torturing yourself. I told you I —”

“I do,” he leaves his spot next to the stove and walks towards me. Taking my face in his strong palm, he gives me no choice but to look at him. “I’m so fucking sorry, sweet girl. I’ll most likely keep apologizing for the rest of my life, but I also realized that I will never find the right words to express how fucking sorry I am. The words don’t exist. Nothing will ever be good enough. So, I’ll spend the rest of my life showing you. Showing you how deeply I regret everything that happened, the things I said and did. I promise you, Alicia, I will make every scar that I put in your heart fade away. I will erase every ugly memory and give you the most beautiful ones. I fucking promise you that.”

I’m stunned. I swear this is the most he’s ever said to me, and with every word, he takes my breath away.

Without giving me time to process everything and respond to his vow, he pulls my face closer to his and kisses me. Successfully stealing the breath from my lungs and lifting my feet off the ground.

He takes me in his arms, enveloping me in everything that is him. The good and the bad. His beautiful soul and his dark mind.

I’m consumed by his kiss.

Addicted to him.

Poison.

It's what comes to mind whenever I think of him.

It spreads through my bloodstream and infects all of me.

If his kiss is poisonous, I don't want the cure. I would gladly die from it. I know he feels the same. I only want to stay in his arms, safe from the world outside.

He breaks the kiss first, smiles at me like I'm his entire world, then goes back to what he was doing before I walked in. I watch him chop some tomatoes and drop them on top of the pasta.

"It smells delicious. What did you make?" I sit down on the table as soon as he walks towards me with both plates in hand. The smell of burned bread dissipated in the air is replaced by the delicious smell.

"Spaghetti and meatballs," he sets both plates on the table and joins me. "It's nothing special, and I burned the garlic bread." he looks over at me, and I can't help but laugh. Valentino doesn't look mad or annoyed, just amused.

I sober up and stare into his eyes. "I'm sorry. It's just that it's so weird seeing you this way."

"What do you mean?" He opens a bottle of wine and picks up my glass to pour mine first.

"It's just that I never would've imagined you knew your way around a kitchen," Picking up the fork, I take a small bite. Oh, God. Delicious. "Whenever I think about you, I think of the boy you were back then, and I have to remind myself that you're a different person now."

"I am." A solemn look crosses his face when he looks down at his plate. Taking his hand in mine, I make him look at me. This moment feels intimate. It feels like two lovers going on their first date. The snow is falling outside. The cabin is covered in the glow of the fireplace, candles, and Christmas lights, giving a peaceful atmosphere.

Very romantic, too.

"There's nothing I want more than to get to know you all over again. Despite everything, I hold the memories of who you used to be close to my heart. Now, show me who you are now. Give me your light, dark, good, and the bad. I want it all."

"You forgive too easily," he murmurs.

"Not really." I shrug. "I cursed your name throughout the years and even went as far as to wish your dick would fall off." I tell him honestly while

chewing on a meatball. The irony.

He laughs.

A deep belly laugh that makes my stomach flip. I look at him and wonder about the dimples that used to show whenever he smiled with his entire face. They are still there, hidden under his dark stubble. I stare at him now while he smiles. This is what I missed the most.

His rare but genuine laugh.

The one that stops time and makes me feel like I'm home.

Where I belong.

With him.

All throughout dinner, we both talk, and he smiles often. We drink wine and get to know each other again, the only way we know how.

Our way.

With a would you rather game.



“This one is from my sister.” He hands me the medium-sized box wrapped in expensive-looking Christmas paper. Of course, it's hers. I was able to differentiate the ones he got me himself just by the awkward newspaper wrapping. *Bless him, he tried.*

After we ate the food he prepared, he led me to the living room to open gifts.

He's trying.

I know it's illogical for me to think it'll be sunshine and flowers from now on. It won't. It's us. Nothing has ever been easy, but it sure will be worth it.

There's a pile of opened gifts all around us. He got me new photography equipment. He also gifted me the same books I carried with me throughout my childhood and teen years, the ones Caleb ruined that night, and I never got around to replace. During dinner, we talked for hours about everything and anything, and he asked me more about that night. I told him how I lost more than just him and the baby. In some way, I lost a part of dad and Ziggy too.

Thankfully, I was able to repair Ziggy's camera and jumpstart a successful photography business and career with it, but I can't say the same

about my precious books.

No amount of glue could repair them. They were annotated by my father. He left notes for me within the pages. Tears threaten to fall when I open one of them and notice he too wrote quotes for me.

I don't know how he knew to get me the same exact books my father gave me before he died. Call it fate or just luck. Whatever it was, I was deeply touched by his sweet gesture.

Beautiful soul.

I wish he saw himself the way I do.

That's why I spent all morning looking through my photos of us and making him his present. I felt bad not having anything for him for Christmas, but I'm in the middle of nowhere and have been here for weeks now. I decided to make him something instead, and hopefully, he'll like it.

"Here," I hand him his gift. "It's not much."

He looks down at the book I'm holding towards him and takes it from my hands.

"A photo album," he says while staring intently at it.

"Told you it wasn't much."

I gathered all our photos together and made a photo album with the dates and things I loved about that day. There are photos I took of him without him noticing. One of us together, and I even added one of me holding the pregnancy test I took so long ago in my hands. I don't know why I took the photo back then, but I'm glad I did. For an hour, I thought my entire world would change for the better. I would no longer walk alone through life, and there would be someone there who would love me unconditionally. It was a short-lived dream, but I will carry it with me forever.

"Thank you," he whispers roughly as he looks through it. There's wonder in his eyes. They're no longer dead. *Come on, beautiful man. Find your way back to me.*

We remain quiet as he stares at all the photos of us and reads every message under each photo. It's nothing extravagant, but it's the story of us.

Our beautiful and complicated love.

After we're done opening gifts, he gets up from the floor and hands me the last one. It's a medium-sized box with red wrapping paper. It reads, From Lucan.

That man...

It's not that I hate him, okay, I used to because he reminded me so much

of Valentino at the time. I thought he was just a rich jerk that did whatever he wanted without caring for anything or anyone else.

He grew up to be an ass to anyone but my best friend. I see the way he looks at her. The same way I used to look at Valentino. Like the world started and ended with him.

There's no one else for them.

Truthfully, I've never met two people more perfect for each other.

I tear the paper and open the box. Art kit for couples it reads. *What in the hell is this?*

Suddenly, I see Valentino chuckling from above me, and I realize why.

A sex and art kit.

It doesn't right out say it's a sex kit, but I've seen the trend on social media amongst couples.

With the kit, you make a completely original artwork by having sex on a white canvas while covered in paint.

Opening the box, I pull out the materials inside. The first item is a cotton canvas. The safety measures read that it's washable and the paint, with your choice of color. Next, is a protective plastic floor cover, which comes in handy because who wants to ruin their floors after banging on them covered in paint? The last items are two pairs of disposable slippers, a shower sponge, and four small bottles of washable paint.

Love has always been a huge contributor to art. All types of art. Photography, music, paintings, etc. Some of the best songs, images, and paintings were inspired by the intimate act of sex.

I'm not shy when it comes to sex or trying new things.

We can turn the erotic act into art.

Choosing the black paint, I stare into Valentino's eyes and smile.

Heart beating fast.

Erratic breaths.

He reaches forward and chooses red without taking his eyes off me.

We take our clothes off while the other watches, and then we both squirt the paint all over the white canvas and our palms.

We touch, kiss, nibble on every inch of each other's skin, covering ourselves in both black and red paint.

The act is intimate and erotic. I've never felt this way before. Only ever with him. He touches me like he knows every inch of my body. Like he never forgot, and I do the same.

That's how we spend the rest of our Christmas night.

Right there, surrounded by Christmas lights, candles, and the fireplace where we tore our clothes off, used the paints to create art with our bodies, and had wild and passionate sex.

After we were done, the white canvas had a beautiful mess of black and red.

"Now that is Art." Valentino says with a glint in his eyes as we both look down at the mess of red and black decorating the canvas.

This is us.

Our bodies made art.

What a beautiful night.

I lay my head on his bicep and close my eyes. My body is blissfully tired and spent after going at it for two hours straight. I feel a little bit uncomfortable with how sticky my skin feels, but I've never felt better.

Closing my eyes, I hug him tighter to my body, inhaling his scent. This is my home. I belong here. He belongs with me.

There's no one else I'd rather walk in the dark with than with him.

No one else.

Always him.

VALENTINO

A STORY OF LOVE

“You can find my love there between the pages written in pain.” – Val
Now

You know that dreadful feeling in the pit of your stomach that lingers every time things are going well? It’s there to remind you that it could fade away or slip through your fingers at any given moment.

Last night felt like a dream to me. It still feels like it wasn’t real. I woke up countless times throughout the night to make sure she was still sleeping peacefully next to me.

It’s fucked up.

I fought my feelings for her for so long that now I’m giving myself the chance to explore them again. I’m scared of fucking shit up again.

She forgave me so easily.

How is it possible for someone that’s known heartache and loss from a young age to show compassion when she was shown none?

She can say I’m deserving of her all she wants, but I know the truth. I will never be good enough, but I’m in too deep. I’ve been drowning in her chaotic and deep ocean for years. And there’s a reason why I’ve never gotten over her.

Even when all I saw was black, glimmers of green always slipped through.

Fallon reminds me of the color green.

I never thought much about the color.

Until her.

Until she walked into class with her crazy hair and big green eyes.

The color green symbolizes tranquility, which is fucking ironic because this woman has always made me feel both calm and on edge at the same time if that's even possible.

Her beautiful chaos somehow brings me peace in this war within me.

Last night, I came to terms with losing the war I started. I could never separate sex from emotions when it came to Fallon Alicia James. It was impossible then, and nothing has changed now. The first night we kissed, and I almost took something that wasn't freely given, all those buried feelings rose to the surface. From then on, it was a matter of time before I gave in. So, I stayed away until I witnessed firsthand how fucking painful it would feel to lose her forever.

Nothing is perfect.

It won't ever be that way with us.

Most of the time, I can't decide if I want to kiss her, kill her, or fall to my knees and beg her to keep me in her fragile but beautiful heart forever.

Stretching my arms out, I feel the spot next to me empty. Only for a second, I feel anxious, but I remind myself there's nowhere for her to run without me finding her because I will find her every time.

The only way she'll be rid of me is if she asks me to leave.

To leave her alone for good.

I won't like it, but I'll do it.

For her.

Anything she asks of me. I'll do because she deserves it after the shit I pulled and everything she's been through.

Seconds later, I hear her turn on the shower.

She's here.

It was not a dream.

She chose to stay.

Sink or swim, Valentino.

Sink or fucking swim. With her.

I fall back on the bed and reach blindly for a joint that sits on top of my night table and my zippo. Bringing the joint to my lips, I light it up. At some point in the night, I couldn't fall back to sleep and took a shower to clean off the paint from last night.

Fuck, that shit was hot.

I didn't know making art could be so damn fun. Maybe that's why Volpe loves it so much.

God knows what the fuck the creep does with his arty shit and my sister.
I shiver just thinking about it.

I really don't want to know that shit.

I lie there for a few minutes, smoking and thinking all the ways to right my wrongs. I waved the white flag, and I'm hoping everyone else will be as open to forgiveness as my girl.

"Where did your thoughts take you?" Her raspy and sensual yet innocent as fuck voice whispers as she exits the bathroom and walks toward the bed with nothing but my black-bath robe on.

She's always been beautiful. Her crazy hairstyles and silly superhero clothing made her look silly, not going to lie, but that was her appeal. Endearing and uniquely her.

Then I watched from afar as she ditched her style and slowly started to morph into Andrea. My sister is beautiful, but she's not hiding behind all the shit she wears. That's just her. Fallon used all the expensive clothing and makeup to hide the girl she once was.

The one that got hurt so damn bad that she retreated into herself, so no one else could hurt her.

I see that girl now.

Staring back at me like no time has passed.

Like we're picking up right where we left off.

Her long black hair is wet, and from here, I can smell my shampoo. She has no makeup on, and she's never looked more enchanting.

I'll take her anyway I can have her.

Crazy hair and all.

"I was just thinking how beautiful you are."

She stays in place and looks at me with a small smile on her face.

"You were not."

There's a moment of silence, and it crosses my mind how this is new territory for both of us. Not just me. It's not fair to let her take the first steps every time.

"Come here." I pat the spot next to me.

She doesn't come my way immediately. Instead, I watch as she slowly unties the cotton belt on her waist, exposing everything except her breasts.

She stands there, watching me with a challenge in her pretty green eyes. I sense she wants control by the way she's torturing me. It is torture. The way her bare pussy is exposed, and all I want is to have my tongue deep inside of

it. Fuck her with it. Her taste is as intoxicating as it is addictive. I watch as her nipples peek out of the bathrobe. I want my mouth on them, too.

“I want us to learn each other’s bodies, minds, and hearts again.”

I don’t take my eyes from her naked flesh. I’m not even sorry. I can’t look away. “Not our souls.”

“Our souls were always connected. Never apart. In a past life, this one and most likely the next.” She says it with so much conviction that she manages to steal my breath, and again when she drops the robe to the floor, revealing herself. All of it to me. I lose the tiny amount of self-control I’ve been holding onto since she stepped out of the bathroom, looking like every forgotten dream I’ve had.

“Come here, Alicia,” she doesn’t hesitate and glides towards me until she’s straddling my legs. Bringing her face down to mine, I kiss her softly, making her sigh. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

Her gentle lips brush back and forth against mine before saying, “I know.”

“I’m fucked up, baby. The... The man I am now is one you should fear. I sometimes can’t contain the beast inside.” I lower my gaze, suddenly fucking ashamed of who I became after I let the demons my grandfather planted inside my head for years take over. “I-I can’t sleep at night because all I see when I close my eyes are the faces of the people I’ve killed and tortured throughout the years. The fucked-up thing is that, deep down, a part of me enjoys the thrill of it. I always thought I was better than my brother when, in reality, we were bred by the same devil, and the only difference is that Lorenzo gave into the fire, and I’ve been fighting it all my life. He enjoys it. Every kill makes him stronger, but not me. I’m fucking weak.”

Gentle hands grab my face, making me look upwards. “Don’t hold back, baby. The only way to kill your demons is to set them free and take back control. As long as you bottle everything inside, they’ll have power over you. Trust me, I know. I don’t want you to change who you are. I just want you to own it. Good, bad, it’s all the same to me. A little blood on your hands doesn’t scare me, nor do your demons. Let them free, and we’ll fight them off together.”

“I fucked us up big time, huh?”

“We both did.”

“I—”

She shuts me up with one gentle brush of her lips on my forehead. Right

then and there, I feel my black heart fight off the restraints it has had around it for years and set itself free. “No more talking of the past. Let it die. Let’s write another ending to this wicked and beautiful story.” She grins seductively at me, but I see glimpses of the shy girl that I fell in love with, and that only drives me wilder. I have the best of both worlds. The shy girl and the vixen.

“I’m not a knight in shining armor, babe. I’m the dragon.” I whisper, wanting her to know that I’ll try my damn hardest to give her my best, but it won’t be easy. I’m too damaged. I don’t trust myself not to hurt her heart again, even when all I have is good intentions going forward. “I’m not Lucan.”

“And I’m not Andrea. We’re not them. They complete each other. They’re what the other is missing, but you and I, Alexander? We were written in the stars. You’re the other half of my missing soul.”

I let her words wash over me like a warm shower after years in the freezing cold. I let her words grab hold of my soul. Gently tucking her hair behind her ear, I stare into the window of her soul. Her eyes.

How was I so blind before?

Her eyes tell her story.

A story of loss, love, and strength.

In her eyes, I can see through all that is her.

Her addicting chaos and her pure soul.

“When did you do it?” I feel her feather-like touch on my left peck, where my most painful tattoo lays.

“The day I went looking for you and your mother told me what you did. Benedetto confirmed it the moment I went home looking for more answers because, deep down, something told me it was all a lie. But fuck, I was so hurt. I was so consumed by hatred towards my family. Towards you, but it was mostly hatred towards myself. I fucking failed you.”

Her eyes look sad as she lays her hand flat on my chest.

“I only got to love it for an hour before the dream was so cruelly shattered by my mother.”

“I hope the bitch is rotting in hell.”

She frowns and looks into my eyes without removing her hand. “How did you know? I didn’t tell anyone.”

I stare at her with ‘like, really?’ expression.

She only laughs.

“I like this.” She slowly runs her hand all over my chest, driving me crazy with need. The need to own her. “After the one on your chest, this is my favorite,” she touches the black snakes around my neck. “Although I hate the symbolism of them.” Fallon frowns but doesn’t stop touching them. She looks closely and sees the hidden words. No one can tell unless they come closer, and no one has gotten this close but her, only ever her.

Valerie

Cassius

Lorenzo

Andrea

Alicia

Five snakes for the five of them.

“I know your story with your grandfather, but you never mentioned your relationship with your parents or your relationship with your twin. You were always apart back in school. Even different on grades.”

“Not much to tell, really. Benedetto ruined all of them like he did me. He made us believe mom left us and didn’t care for us because she only kept Andrea and never came back for us. The only person that could’ve told us differently was our father, but he was too fucking drunk to even pretend to care most days, and by the time he sobered up, it was too late. I didn’t trust anything that came out of his mouth, still don’t, if I’m being honest. Lastly, my relationship with my twin was and still is complicated. Lorenzo grew so hungry for power that he withdrew from me with every year that passed. I also kept him at a distance, too afraid of ending up like him. We were one fucked up and tragic family.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t have that love in your life back then.”

“It is what it is.”

“It shouldn’t be,” she whispers softly while looking into my eyes. *Fuck how can someone be this beautiful?* “Every kid should know what real love is at least once in their life. They should know what being safe in someone’s arms feels like. That feeling didn’t last long for me, but I treasured my memories with my father dearly.”

“I did have that once.” I wrap my arms around her back and pull her closer to my body. “You taught me what love is.”

“And pain.”

Grabbing her chin, I force her to keep her eyes on me. I always need them. “And pain. I want to feel it all with you, love, hate. Every damn thing,

as long as you're on the other end.”

There’s a smile on her pretty face, but the tears in her eyes fuck me up. I don’t ever want to see her cry for me again. Not even tears of joy. It fucking burns.

So, I kiss her.

I kiss every scar.

Every part of her body she hated before. I show her with my kisses how fucking perfect her body is to me. I’ve been a fucking addict almost my entire life. I was addicted to the way books made me feel, then the drugs I loved, how the little white pills numbed the pain. Then she came along. She was and still is the most addicting drug of all. One I don’t ever want to quit or go a day without.

“Mine...” She was kissing me before I could tell her the same. That she was mine and I’m not losing her again. That only death will take me from her. The boy I used to be was in way over his head, but the man I am now, scars and all, will burn cities down for her, and I will not blink, not fucking once at the destruction and chaos around me. Nothing can stop me from loving her.

“Call me fucking obsessed, but baby, I can’t get enough. It won’t ever be enough.” I tell her between kisses. Slipping my hand between her naked thighs, I cup her pussy, making her gasp. “You’re so wet for me already.” I circle her clit and watch as her eyes flutter and her nostrils flare. I love what my fingers do to her. The way her breathing becomes haggard, and her body trembles under my touch.

I arch my neck to meet her gaze. “Do you want it slow and gentle, or do you want a good hard fuck?”

“Fuck me hard, and don’t hold back,” she whispers in my ear, making my dick rock hard. Just one dirty word out of her mouth and my cock is ready to pound the fuck out of her. I gently lift her until my dick is perfectly positioned at her entrance. I watch, transfixed, as she grins wickedly down at me while holding on to the headboard. Before I decide what to do next, she sits on my dick, making me throw my head back in pure fucking ecstasy.

My cock is buried deep inside her pussy, being strangled, and fuck, if she keeps riding me this good and hard, I’ll be meeting God today.

“Fuck!”

“Do you feel that? How perfect we feel together?” She kisses me, not giving me a chance to respond as she fucks me like she owns me, and she

does. She so fucking does. The feel of her weight on top of me, and the way she's whispering my name while she's riding the fuck out of me, is driving me wild.

Fuck, so good.

The sounds she's making.

Her tits bounce as she moves up and down on my dick, and I love how her wet juices are running down my legs. With one hand, I slap her ass, urging her to fuck me harder, and with the other, I grab the back of her neck, bringing her closer, and take her lips in mine.

Our tongues fight for dominance as I push every single inch of me inside of her. I give her all of me—and like a champ— she takes it all and fucks herself harder.

“Fuck, baby.” I don't know what sex with anyone else feels like, but after being inside her body, I don't ever want to know any other.

She stills my fucking breath and takes all my word and I'll gladly give them all to her.

Even hot and dirty sex with her feels special. All because it is her.

My Lilith.

My siren.

My bewitching creature.

My extraordinary Fallon James.

“I don't ever want to leave your body. I don't ever want to know anyone else. Just you. Always you.”

There she goes stealing the breath from my lungs. Maybe it's the way she's fucking me or how deep I feel her words in my soul. I meet her thrusts and fuck her harder.

The only sound in the room is our heavy breathing and the captivating sounds of our skin slapping together and meeting halfway.

“You're strangling my cock, babe.” I take her lips in mine and swallow her low whimpers. “That's one greedy pussy.” The bed rocks underneath us as she fucks me faster. She looks like a lioness. Feral. Taking what she wants from me. Her round breasts sway as I pound into her, and the moment I wrap my lips around one rosy nipple, I feel her pussy clench around me, and I watch in awe as she comes on my dick. “Fuck, yes, baby. Give me everything.” With a groan, I bury myself even deeper than I was before.

“Oh, God. Yes.” There she goes with that holy shit again. God abandoned me a long time ago. He's not here, and especially when I'm doing wicked

things to her. He would be appalled by all the sinful shit I want to do to this woman's body. Although, at times, I do wonder if he does exist. If he by some miracle gave me her. This woman is as equally holy as she is unholy.

I watch her come down from her high and begin to ride me softly. I take the opportunity to flip us over until she's under me. I press my lips to her neck and wrap one of her legs around my waist. Her heels dig into my ass as I push and shove inside of her tight pussy.

"Come for me, Alexander. Fill me up with everything that is you." I stare down at her and find her biting her lip while she runs her hands through my hair.

Her voice.

Her face.

The way she's looking at me like I'm her God and more.

That does it.

I'm gone.

I close my eyes and throw my head back in pure bliss. Not even a second later I'm coming with a hoarse cry and spilling my cum inside of her.

Shit.

I forgot to wrap it up, but I'm not even sorry.

I want everything with her.

Every. Fucking. Thing.

FALLON

WORTHY

“Happiness is all you'll feel.” – F

Now

It was dark and late when I found myself walking down the hall to his small office a few hours later. He kept me a prisoner in his room all day. We mostly talked for hours, but half the time, we spent it learning each other's bodies again.

I haven't heard the ugly voices once since I found my way back to him.

I haven't felt like I wasn't good enough. Like I was a fraud. Even the loss of what could've been doesn't hurt like it used to.

That's all him.

The moment I decided to stay here in this beautiful, secluded cabin, away from everything, I started to feel like myself again.

Like happiness is not that far away.

The moment I decided to take control of my life set me free.

And even though he helps, I can't count on him to be happy with myself. I have to do this on my own. Suddenly, seeking out help doesn't seem as terrifying and shameful as before.

When I look into his eyes, I can see something damaged in him too. Something he has hidden from the people around him. He hides behind his intimidating silence and hardened gaze. I saw something different about him today. He's finding his way back to me with every step he takes. He's trying. I have to give him that. There's so much guilt and regrets in him, too. But he's not allowing that to get in the way of what he wants, and what he wants is me.

I find myself smiling whenever I think of how damaged we both are, yet, somehow, we love the hardest. We love with the same intensity we hate. There's no middle ground with us. We're perfectly imperfect together.

And it makes my heart happy seeing how he's trying. He's trying his best to be the man he thinks I need. A better man than who he really is. He's wrong. I just need him. Fucked-up demons and all. I also can't ignore the self-hatred coming off him in waves. His rigidity. The quiet way he moves. The almost inhuman blankness I've seen in his gaze when he stares into the distance. Those small details are all bigger pieces of the puzzle. And it's difficult to ignore the dread taking shape deep in my gut whenever I think I could lose him to the empty and quiet chaos inside his head.

I remember back then when uncomfortable situations threatened him, he actively avoided them. He dissociates from everyone around him, shutting himself off as a defense mechanism. I recognize these behaviors because I've used them myself. Therefore, survivors of trauma often find a bond with each other. Like attracts like. We are both dysfunctional in our own ways. He doesn't have to say a word for me to understand the pain he hides behind those blue eyes. I can feel it every time I look at him.

That's why I find myself walking through his place. The place he hid himself away all these years. Trying to find something that helps me understand him better. After we fell asleep, he startled me awake, screaming in agony. Shouting for someone to come back to him. He sounded like a young boy trying to hold onto his only sort of comfort.

A solitary tear slides down my cheek, and I swipe it away, squaring my shoulders and blowing out a breath. None of that matters. He's fighting now, and we've made it this far. Everything is going to be okay.

I walk down the narrow hallway and find myself standing in front of the one room I've not been inside of yet.

His study.

I could ask him to share all his secrets, but I know he won't. Not of all of them, anyway. The ones that haunt him. I saw it in his eyes. He wants to move forward without killing the demons of his past. Why is he holding on to them? Do they make him stronger? My demons only make me weaker and afraid.

Or maybe, it is just that. Maybe he's afraid, or he doesn't trust me yet. Not fully. I can't fault him for that. I wonder, though, if maybe he feels like he must carry them on his own because he doesn't want to burden me.

Burden his family. There are so many questions, and to help him find peace with himself, with his father, brother, sister, and nephew, I'll need to dig deeper.

There has to be some sort of answer inside this office. I turn the knob, to my surprise and relief, the door is unlocked.

Stepping inside his office, the first thing I notice is how cold it feels here. No photo frames are hanging on the walls. There are no windows to let the sunshine through or to see the moon at night, shining between the darkness of the mountains.

The only thing that lets me know that this room belongs to him is the countless books on a beautiful black wood bookshelf. I walk towards it, and I feel the memories rushing back. I haven't read a book in so long. Haven't even wanted to until now, until I remembered how special they made me feel. How less alone I am when I find myself inside the world every author creates.

The last book I read was a wonderful retelling of Hades and Persephone from the perspective of Hades. Their story has been done many times before, but this version broke my heart with every line. The author gave us a different ending. Persephone brought nothing but pain and chaos to Hades' life and left him for dead once she was done with him. It was a stunning tale of love and hate, with no happy ending. I felt all the emotions while reading it, and when I turned the last page and there was no happy ending, I was shattered. I went on that journey with both characters, and the author had the audacity to not give them a happily ever after, but once I took time to digest the words, I understood what he did. He showed us how people meet for a reason. Sometimes we meet someone that changes the course of our lives, others come to share their lessons and others their blessings, but sometimes that's just it. They are just a chapter of our lives and not our happy ending. Sometimes there are no happy endings. It was a hard lesson, but I understood it. Sometimes, the present is all we have. Sometimes we don't get to have forever with the one we want.

A.A. Turner.

She bleeds her words onto the pages, and it shows. I can feel what she felt the moment she wrote her book. All her books. I have them all back in my apartment. They're precious to me. Somehow, while reading them, I felt like I was not alone. I was not alone in my pain.

Alone in a world that sometimes feels so lonely and cold, even when

surrounded by the ones you love.

I turn away from the bookshelf and find my way towards his desk. There, I see a torn and black-shoe box with countless unopened letters inside. Stepping closer, I take one and see that it's addressed to my little prince. In fact, they all are, and the handwriting is a feminine one.

The letters look old.

I look around the desk for something else and I find a ripped paper with red ink.

Now you have your answer.

She loved you. – L

Who is she?

A woman?

His mother?

He never told me much about his family back then, and now he's so closed off to the topic that I don't even bother bringing it up, afraid he will shut me out.

That's what broken people do.

If they feel attacked, rejected, or judged and like they can't handle their emotions, they shut everything and everyone out.

I want to know everything that lives inside his head. His dreams, nightmares, regrets, his memories, everything, but I won't invade his privacy in this way.

I found what I was looking for.

Not every answer but something.

The mystery of his mother is one that haunts him.

I only know the truth of who she was by what the media portrayed of her and what Andrea has told me. Her truth.

I want to know Valentino's version of the truth.

Deciding to walk away from the letters and carefully ask him instead, I shut the door of his office behind me and find myself walking towards his room instead.

He's in the same position I left him in. The sunlight shines through, and I'm able to see him in his most vulnerable state. When all his guards are down, and it's just him.

Looking at him now, I don't see the madness, sadness, or anger.

He looks peaceful in his sleep.

Deciding not to waste a second more, I grab the camera he got me for

Christmas and take a photo of him. I'll capture every moment because, if one day I forget how happy I felt at this moment, I want to remember, and I'll have these to look back on.

You'll smile again, Valentino Alexander.

Smiles and laughter are all you'll know.

Happiness is all you'll feel.

Both of us.

We are worthy.

We are worthy of love.

Worthy of happiness.

Worthy of life.

Swim with me, baby. The shore is not far away.

Fight the tide and meet me there.

VALENTINO

MY SOUL

“I want you in every fucking lifetime.” – Val

Now

First comes the click of the camera, then a shutter sound follows as it expels the photo.

I didn't remember how much I missed it until now. My clever little stalker. Always sneaking around and finding creative ways to get a shot of me. I heard her earlier taking a photo of me while I pretended to sleep. She's been doing that often. Taking photos of me while she believes I'm not paying attention.

I rise from my knees and turn her way, reaching behind my back for the rag I have in my pocket. Wipe my hands on it to get rid of the oil and dirt from the bike.

I quietly watch as she looks around my garage. Apart from my study, this is where you'll usually find me when everything gets too quiet. When I need a distraction, this is where I go. After spending two days locked inside my room fucking her all ways to Sunday, I thought it would be best to let her rest. Her pussy took a damn good beating if you ask me.

Fallon walks around, staring at all my babies. My brother has cars and one jet, I have my bikes. Some are old, but most of them are new. I find them in junkyards and try to rescue them. People tend to discard what they no longer find useful or what they think is beyond salvation.

They're lazy.

I take the time to bring these babies back to life, and when I'm done and I hear the loud noise of the engine, it gives me peace. Gives me satisfaction

when all I felt was emptiness.

All my machines are well taken care of. I keep up with their maintenance religiously. I came down here to work on my latest acquisition, a black and silver Triumph Daytona 675R. It was expensive as fuck, but that baby is drop-dead gorgeous, and I had to add it to my collection. The machine is what dreams are made of with its 675cc, 12-valve, in-line 3-cylinder engine that can generate a power of 126 *bhp*.

I came down here to check the oil and tighten the chains of some of them. Kadra brought her Ducati for me to check the brakes. It's been giving her shit. I told her she needs to keep up with its maintenance, but her unbothered attitude every time I bring it up just annoys me. The last time I told her she needed to take it easy on her bike, she just shrugged it off and told me if it gave her trouble, then she would just buy another one.

I told her to bring it back here.

I'm taking care of it since its owner is such a shithead.

"You still have it."

I watch her stand near the garage door with the helmet I gave her back when we first met.

The black and green one I bought just for her.

"Yes."

"If you wanted nothing to do with me, then why would you keep it?"

"Haven't you noticed that I can't get rid of you? I can't let go even when I know it's the best thing I could do for you."

"Nope," she walks towards me with the helmet in one hand, pulling me closer with the other. "Don't you dare let go. We haven't gone to hell and back more than once just to give up now," she whispers softly before placing a gentle kiss on my chin.

This witch...

I wrap my arms around her waist and press a soft kiss to the top of her head, inhaling her sweet scent. She's always been tiny compared to me, even back when we were kids. Now, she looks fucking small compared with my size. Her head comes up to my chest, and for me to properly kiss her, I have to bend down to her level. I don't mind it at all.

"It's warm outside today, and the sun has melted the snow."

"Hmmm."

She steps back and looks at me with a mischievous grin on her face.

"What?"

“There’s something I always wanted to try, but we never got the chance.”

“What is it?”

She looks at my favorite bike. The matte black with white and gray stripes. It was a gift from my dad for my fifteenth birthday. It means the most to me because it was something I really wanted back then, and he got it for me. For just that night, he was sober enough to care and remember the only thing I ever asked him for as a child.

I wanted that damn Kawasaki Ninja H2R.

That’s my baby.

My pride and joy.

The one I ride on lonely nights when I want to escape the useless noise.

I’m so fucked.

I hate the silence, but I also can’t stand the noise.

That’s why I love being on my bike. The loud roar of the engine silences the outside noise, and while I’m riding, I feel at peace.

Free.

I look down at her and find her watching me with curious eyes, and there’s also a wickedness swimming in her green orbs. She’s waiting for an answer.

Shit.

She steps back, walks towards my baby, and straddles it like she’s been riding her entire life.

She looks good-as-fuck on it.

She always did.

Especially when she rode on the back of my bike with her schoolgirl skirt, making me want to rip it from her and fuck her at the same goddamn time I rode through the busy streets of the city.

“On one condition.”

“And what might that be?”

I tell her.

Her eyes grow big, but the wicked grin on her face tells me all I need to know.

She’s game.

Ten minutes later, we're in the middle of the solitary road leading up to my property. No one ever comes here. This place is far from the city, just how I wanted it to be. Away from it all. The noise. The people. The unnecessary and boring chaos of mundane everyday life.

No one bothers me down here.

"Dude, pay attention." Fallon snaps. "I don't want this monster to fall on me. Death by bike, that's not a glorious way to die. I won't see Valhalla."

"Hate to break it to you, witch, but there's no such thing as Valhalla for us mortals." Her outraged gasp makes my mouth twitch. She's still such a fucking nerd. Even when she was trying to act tough-as-fuck, she couldn't hold back the comic book lover and Harry Potter nerd. I was never into that shit. In my opinion, it's very fucking overrated. I'd rather read the classics and work on my bikes, but that shit made her smile, so I'll deal with it. Back then, I learned the basics so I could hold a conversation with her apart from talking about books and music. I wanted to learn her language, and like it or not, that's what she loves.

Snakes.

Weird cats.

Classic literature and comic books.

"So, what's next? You'll tell me *Hogwarts* doesn't exist? That's the muggle in you, Alexander." She smiles at me with the most blinding fucking smile.

A nerd with a broom who says spells and has a birthmark on his forehead. Yeah, very interesting. Not.

"For your information, I outgrew my Harry Potter phase, although I have a weird fascination with you know who."

"Who?"

"You know who. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

I stare at her like she just lost her damn mind.

"Never mind," she sighs, spreading her legs wider, ready to mount the bike.

"Reach over and grab the right handle with your right hand, then place your left hand on the left handle."

She does as she's told and mounts it without further direction. Good. Until here, we're safe. It's easy. I don't know why I find myself nervous-as-fuck. I don't want her to hurt herself, but most importantly, hurt my baby. She had to choose my favorite and the most expensive one.

Shit.

I spend twenty minutes teaching her the basics before she's set to go.

"Don't yank on this too hard because if you do, then the front brakes will lock up." I keep my hand on her back, trying to keep her steady while helping her find her balance. "Your right foot controls the rear brake."

"Okay, let go. I got it."

I don't want to.

I don't want to let go of her and watch her get hurt.

"I can do it. Trust me," she whispers and pulls the visor down. So damn cute.

I reluctantly let go as she presses the start button, making the engine turn over and start to idle. Then she goes and finds the kickstand and kicks it up with her left foot until it's tucked underneath the underbody of the bike. She pulls the clutch lever, presses the shifter down to first gear, releases the clutch slowly, and gently twists the throttle. I watch with my heart on my throat as the bike gains forward momentum. She puts her feet up on the pegs and takes off slowly.

Good girl.

I watch as she expertly maneuvers the bike like this is not the first time she's ridden one.

God, she's fucking perfect.

How did I ever think life could be exciting without her? A life worth living?

I stay there and watch my favorite person ride my favorite bike. I could do this for hours and not get tired of it.

Once she's done, I jog towards where she stopped and mount the bike with her at my back. I rev the engine and carefully speed up out of there. The ground is wet from the melted snow, so I can't go at full speed like I'm used to.

Her hands tighten around my body when I make a U-turn. I missed this. I didn't know how much until I took her and brought her down here with me. I missed all of her. All of it.

I don't ever want to miss her again.

I loved her.

I hated her.

Now, I want forever with her.

Good and bad.

Every fucked-up part of me needs her to survive.

My heart

My mind.

My fucking soul.

The one I lost, and she found.

She's everything.

I can't lose her.

Not again.

Not ever.

VALENTINO

PROMISE? PROMISE.

“Iron man never broke a promise. You shouldn’t either.” – F

Now

The sun didn’t stay long, and soon after we decided to drive back to the cabin, snow started to fall once again.

It’s winter.

I don’t usually ride my bikes in this weather since I tend to freeze my balls off, but I made an exception today for her.

“Thank you.”

“It was just a bike lesson, babe.” I shrug like it’s no big deal. It really isn’t. She did well. More than that, actually. She did great for a beginner.

“Why do you do that?” she takes her helmet off and puts it down on the floor next to where I parked the bike. “Why do you act like what you’re doing means nothing?”

“Come on, Fallon. I know we’re trying here, but we can’t forget the fact that I took you from a shifty situation and brought you to this hell as a prisoner. We can’t romanticize it.” I don’t know where that comes from, but it’s been bugging me. I want her with me. I want to do this with her, and I’m all in, but there’s no way this will work if we pretend like all of that didn’t happen. I want her to remember who she once loved and fall for the man I am now.

“I haven’t forgotten, trust me, but I put it past me. I’m well aware that I was a prisoner here, and yet, you showed me more freedom than anyone has in my entire life. The life I made for myself made me a slave to it. I didn’t even notice until I was in too deep. You set me free. I no longer feel the

heavy-weight of the chains that have been holding me back for some time now.” She lets out an exasperated sigh before continuing. “I have issues, and so do you. I know this. I don’t want to pretend like we’re magically cured because we have each other again. I don’t want to make the same mistakes. I don’t want to base my happiness on you. I want to work on myself, but I would like to do that with you right by my side.”

The vulnerability in her eyes as she stares at me makes me weak. When she looks at me that way, I would give her the world if she asked for it.

“Every step of the way, till the very end.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. Forever, sweet girl.”

Fallon smiles and moves forward towards where I’m standing next to my Ducati. She wraps her hand around my neck and pulls me down towards her face. I’m lost in her eyes that I don’t hear what she’s saying.

“What did you say?”

She smirks.

Her eyes twinkle the same way they do before she’s about to act real fucking naughty.

My sexy ass nerd and my wicked vixen, all in one pretty-as-fuck package.

“There’s one more thing I’ll like to cross off my list of dirty fantasies.”

“You have a list?” I’m left speechless because I knew she was a freak underneath, but the things this woman has done to my body the last couple of days could make Satan himself blush.

“I do.” Nibbling on my chin, she stands on her tippy toes and whispers in my ear what she wants me to do.

Fuccccccck.

My entire body heats the moment she whispers the words.

Right there, I drop her ass on my favorite bike, spread her legs wide, and eat her pussy like I’ve been starving for years and just now am able to feast.

I lick her from her asshole all the way up to her pussy lips and repeat the process, driving her insane. She holds a chunk of my hair and fucks herself on my tongue.

Her body shakes.

Her moans grow louder.

I’m hard as a fucking rock, and when she throws her head back and screams my name, it takes everything I have not to cum in my pants like a school fucking boy.

When she's done, she gently grabs me by the back of my neck and lowers herself until we're face to face, and she kisses me to taste herself on my lips.

I created a sex monster.

Shit, yes.

"It's your turn."

She returns the favor.

I fuck her face like an animal and watch as she chokes on it before swallowing every bit of my cum.

Fuck, so good.

I think I'll lock her ass up in my room and never let her leave my bed.

I can't get enough of that ass.

Never enough.

VALENTINO

NORMAL

**“Who the fuck is normal nowadays?
We’re all just a bad day
away from a mental institution.” – L**

Now

There were times throughout my life when I wondered if I would ever be normal again. If I would have no trouble falling asleep, no nightmares haunting me. If I would be able to see blood and not feel like my skin was crawling.

I wondered if my brother and I were the consequences of our parent’s abandonment and our grandfather’s cruelty. We were. I didn’t quite grasp the idea back then because all we knew were corrupted minds and broken souls. I saw my friend Kadra and her obsessive need to wash her hands and never be without her gloves. I knew there was something wrong with her. Her sisters weren’t normal either, not by any means. One was always missing, and the other never showed any emotion, not even when she fell and scraped her knees. Just as fast as she fell, she would get right back up and carry on as if nothing happened, even with bleeding knees.

The Volpe children seemed so damn perfect that I almost believed them. Almost. They were broken, too. I saw it in the way Giana avoided everyone like the plague at gatherings like she had one foot in and another out the door ready to get the hell out as soon as she was able to. The youngest one, I didn’t have to look far to know she was seriously messed up. I saw the way she looked at my brother, and if you knew my twin, you would know that he’s not the savior in any little girl’s fairytale. He was the monster ready to feed

off her heart, and the sick part is that I was sure she would give it to him on a silver fucking platter.

We were all each other knew for a while. That city is sick. Corrupted, and I wouldn't call it normal. I knew what normal was when Andrea walked into our family's home, uninvited and unwanted.

I didn't hate who she was, but I despised what she represented. She seemed like every other happy fucking kid with a good childhood and happy memories.

All Lorenzo and I didn't get to be.

Get to have.

The only parent that gave a small amount of shit about us was too fucking drunk and high because of her and our mother to give a damn.

I never understood how the most savage man I knew growing up, my father, was a slave to his vices. Then, as my demons grew stronger, I began to understand. The only thing that would quiet them for a small amount of time was the drugs. I could breathe easier when I was killing myself.

After years of bloodshed, torture, chaos, and war, I came to the conclusion that I was never meant to be normal. Maybe it was not in the cards for children like us.

Children of chaos and blood.

Maybe that's why she didn't fight hard enough for us.

Maybe she saw what she birthed. Saw us for who we are.

Bloodthirsty monsters and broken souls.

Because even though what I've done fucking tortures me, somehow, it makes me feel like I'm in control. I don't feel like the scared little kid that his grandfather smacked around when no one was around to witness his cruelty and his hatred.

I was my father's son.

I still am.

We both feel too much.

We both fell from grace for the woman we loved, but he drowned in the chaos he created, and I'm trying not to lose myself in mine.

I'm fucking trying to stay afloat for her.

My mother didn't get that chance.

All the answers I've searched for when I was a kid are here.

In every letter she wrote.

All addressed to her little prince.

I hated her, and I'm ashamed.

I know how her story ended and how mine might end one day, too. I don't want to know. My siblings got tested, but I'd rather live my life not knowing that one day my memories will fade with the wind, and all I'll have left are questions and a deep state of confusion.

Fuck that.

Fuck that evil disease for being so damn cruel and taking everything for her because although I resent her, I can't help but love her too.

I loved her when I saw her on the news.

When I walked past the stores and her face was plastered all over the walls.

I couldn't escape her.

The world adored her, and my father would mention her in his drunken slurs. There was no way for us to forget her name.

Stop seeing her face.

She was everywhere.

The most vicious of my demons and the one that cut the deepest.

So you see? I don't hate my sister. I just hate how she had what we didn't, and that might make me an envious little shit, but I couldn't stop feeling that way. Not when I thought she grew up with love and colors all around her, and we only got the color red.

Blood.

Pain.

Hatred.

Envy.

How can you expect normalcy from kids that never knew what that word meant?

Money.

Pussy.

Power.

That's all we know and for my brother that might be what fuels him but for me it means shit.

What matters most to me is sleeping soundly in my bed, with a heart too big and a soul of a warrior. I always looked at her and found strength. I wanted to be better for her, and for a while, I was doing great. The voices weren't as loud when she was around, but when she left, all I could hear were the whispers and the loud silence that would cripple me whenever I gave in.

Fuck, I hate the silence just as much as the noise.

And tonight, I realize something that I knew deep down but never gave too much thought to because I was feeling way too much at the time and all at fucking once.

It's a fucking curse.

For me to be able to keep her without fear of hurting her heart, I need to let go of this rage.

I need to rid myself of it.

My mother.

My other ghost.

I grab one of the letters I left open and read the content inside.

Maybe my imagination is playing tricks on me, but the letter smells like what I would think she would smell.

Feminine.

Sweet.

Her.

Valerie Turner, known to the world as one of fashion's most influential designers and a loving mother to her heir. The world moved on fast after she left. That's why I hate it. The rich and the famous. All of them hide behind facades, not showing everyone who they really are.

I don't know her.

I never got the chance.

Benedetto took everything from us.

Hearts.

Souls.

Sanity.

Innocence.

Family.

Every-fucking-thing.

Now, I'm taking everything back and giving it to her.

My witch.

My one.

She doesn't deserve half a man.

Good or bad.

Sane or fucking mental.

She's fucked.

I'm hers.

Everything I am and have is hers.

This painful battle of walking down memory lane gave me a purpose.

Fix my shit so I can keep her.

I pick up the letter and begin to read the words of a mother to a young child.

The words of the woman who broke my heart without even knowing it.

Or maybe she did.

Who the fuck knows, really?

VALENTINO

LITTLE PRINCE

“I love you. You’re in my heart.” – V

Little Prince,
I should probably start this letter by answering why. Why didn't I fight for you? Why didn't I try harder to keep you with me?

But for you to understand, I need to start from the beginning. Our beginning.

My sweet, Valentino Alexander.

Your name holds the most meaning to me.

I was having a hard time coming up with names for you both, and even in the delivery room, I still didn't know what to call you, so I waited until I saw your face to choose a name.

The moment you came into this world, on a dark night in October a minute before your brother, I knew my heart would never be the same. It expanded to twice its size to make room for you both. You didn't cry. You didn't make a sound, and my heart stopped for a moment because I instantly thought the worst.

I lost him.

The agonizing pain took over my heart for only a second until you were placed in my heart, yet you still didn't make a sound.

So still.

So quiet.

Such a sweet boy.

I had you in my arms for a minute before the storm that is your brother decided that it was his turn to enter this world.

You, my heart, were the calm before the storm.

So different, my boys.

I held you, and I thought to myself how much you looked like me, even when your father said you were all him. I didn't see it, apart from those big soulful blue eyes. I looked into them, and I saw myself in them. No words can come close to describe how much I love you. I need you to always keep this in mind, even when I have no right to ask this of you.

Your name was a play of my own name.

Valerie.

Valentino Alexander.

My little prince.

You were so small compared to your brother and sister.

My calm before the storm.

Out of all my babies, you were the one that gave me the most peace. Even now, as I am writing this letter with a broken heart, I still find comfort in your name. In all that you are.

Andrea was my most difficult pregnancy and the one kid that kept me up all night. Lorenzo was a crier, too, and would go on for hours until he got what he wanted, cuddles and milk. He was my crazy baby.

But you were different. You, my little prince, would lay happily and so quietly while I held you in my arms every time.

You gave me peace in a time when we were in a war zone. I miss you.

I miss your eyes looking up at me and seeing the world through them.

I hold so much hate in my heart.

I shouldn't.

I know I should be grateful that you're both safe and with your father, but I can't help feeling resentment towards that family that took half of my heart and stomped all over it.

There are two holes in it, and no one will ever fill it. I bleed for you both.

Every day.

There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about you.

I wonder how you're doing.

Are you safe?

Are you healthy?

Happy?

Do you hate me?

I don't blame you.

I've written countless letters, hoping they'll make it to you one day.

Even though I hate making appearances on social media and making my life public, I do it so you can see me. In some messed up way, you'll be able to see me, and maybe you can see the love I feel for you, the pain I carry in my heart while you look at me from afar.

I stayed away to keep you all safe.

He won't ever accept me.

You're all a pawn in his sick games of power. I saw the way he looked at you both the day he came for you. He didn't see his grandbabies. No, he only saw soldiers.

Puppets.

Two boys he could shape into the son he lost and the one he never got in your father.

Monsters.

Ruthless.

I wanted better for you.

I wanted you to grow up in the world I built for all of you.

A world where you only know happiness and dream in color.

Do you dream in color, my sweet boy?

I hope you do.

Hoping that you're both happy is the only thing keeping me sane.

I saw you.

I couldn't take this pain anymore. I had to see you both, even if it was from afar. I just needed to see that you were both okay. I went to your winter wonderland recital for school. You both looked so dashing in matching reindeer costumes.

Your brother kept taking his red nose off his face and throwing it at one kid sitting next to you both.

I laughed so much looking at my crazy baby being a little brat. You sat quietly next to him, watching the show with curiosity and wonder. I was in awe that we made such beautiful boys. I was so tired of looking at you from afar. I just needed more.

I was stupid.

I was reckless.

I was so damn desperate.

You slipped away from the class, and I followed you outside the theater. Please don't do that. Don't wander away in a place where you can get lost in

the sea of people. I need to know where you are, even if I'll only be watching from the sidelines.

You walked towards the water fountain, but you were so tiny that you couldn't reach it. I approached you and asked if you needed help, and like a good boy, you said you don't talk to strangers, but I saw it in your eyes. In those baby blues that melt my broken heart.

Deep down, you knew you were safe with me.

I told you I was a friend of your dad's. I'm sorry I lied. I was desperate, and at that moment, I was being selfish.

I just wanted to hold you.

You thought about it and agreed to let me help you reach the fountain. I grabbed you in my arms, and for a second, I thought about taking you both with me. I thought about snatching you both and how we could all be a family, but how naive I was.

That was but a dream.

A painful dream

They'll always find us.

They'll hurt you to get to your father.

I put you down, and you smiled up at me with the brightest smiles that made my heart burst inside my chest.

God, I love you both so much that I can't stand faking these smiles. It hurts. Being away from you both hurts. Trying to put on a brave face because your sister deserves happiness hurts too.

It's a lose-lose situation, whichever way you look at it.

That night, I got home and found one of his men inside my penthouse where your sister and my parents were sleeping soundly. Somehow, your grandfather got word of my whereabouts that night.

I knew then that for all my babies to stay safe and breathing, I should stay in line, even when my entire life was falling apart.

I was dead inside. The only person keeping me sane was a beautiful baby girl that reminded me of both of you. She could never replace you in my heart. I need you to know this.

No one can.

I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough.

Brave enough.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

I live for you.

I breathe for you.

My little prince, I hope you feel the love I hold inside my heart for you through these painful words of a mother that only dreams of her boys at night.

Maybe one day, we'll reunite.

Maybe one day, I'll hold you tight in my arms until everything is alright in my world again.

Maybe one day, your love will fix my broken heart.

I'll love you until my last breath,

Mommy

A lone tear falls from my cheek onto the paper.

Valerie Turner.

My mother.

The woman I've loved and hated for so long. The one I blamed for everything wrong inside of me. I blamed everything that happened. It was easier to blame and hate her than to love her.

Loving her was and still is too goddamn painful.

I just didn't fucking understand how two people that loved each other so much could be so unlucky, and then I think about how goddam cruel and evil Benedetto was. He loved to play mind games until you had no choice but to bow down to his demands.

I played his games for years just to keep my brother safe.

Then to keep my girl alive.

Until I had nothing left to fight for.

I shove the letter back inside the box and leave the room.

I feel like I'm suffocating, and I need to ground myself. I need her.

She can make this ache go away.

Once inside my room, I stare down at her sleeping peacefully on the right side of the bed. She's naked, and seeing her like this, in my bed...This woman has changed my entire world more than once, for the better and on time for worse, but it was all her. Only she has the power to do that. I look at her full breasts, her slightly rounded stomach, her pale, flawless skin right

down to the V between her legs. It drives me mad.

She's stunning.

She's perfect in my eyes, but I've seen her reaction every time I touch a certain area of her skin. I didn't see it then, but I do now, and there's no unseeing it.

I force myself to focus on the damage. Because it's not quite flawless skin, is it? Not really. I see the healed scars. Not too bad, but still, the fact they are there at all pisses me the fuck off.

Some of them she did to herself under the influence of others' cruel words, and some were given to her.

I know a knife wound when I see one.

Everything she said about her life with her mother makes me wish the bitch was still alive so I could carve her like a pig at Christmas dinner. I wouldn't stop until her blood was staining my face so I could show my girl that I slew that monster and it won't ever haunt her again.

Fuck, I fucked up big time, but I can still make things right. I can give her the life she deserves and slay all her demons.

Starting with him.

The stepbrother.

The one that even now, years later, makes her tremble and feel distress. I saw the way her eyes glazed over the second she mentioned his name.

Caleb.

I never knew the motherfucker, and I didn't even know the bitch existed. When Benedetto gave me all the intel I needed to get close to her, he never, not once, mentioned a stepsibling. That's something I would've wanted to know, and maybe that's why the sick son of a bitch kept it to himself.

My brother was right. It fucking kills me to admit it, but he was. I was into deep. I couldn't see anything but her and the future I already planned in my head.

I'm not a fucked-up kid anymore.

I'm a man.

A big bastard that will make things right.

I look down at her and imagine young Fallon scared and grieving the loss of her only protector and her mother not being any sort of comfort but a source of pain. A beautiful and shy girl, tormented by a sibling who projected his self-hate onto her.

I see the girl so damaged by the actions of others that she lost the sense of

who she was and started hating what she saw in the mirror. Started believing their lies. I imagine her malnourished, in a constant state of fear and stress.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I focus on my rage.

Rage at my grandfather.

Rage at her mother.

At her stepbrother.

I let it fuel me and give me a sense of what I need to do. *I swear I'll make things right, baby.*

I slip my shirt over my head, dropping it to the floor alongside my sweats, and pull up the bedsheet so I can join her side. The moment I lay next to her, wrapping her in my arms, I instantly feel better.

I can breathe easier.

Fallon turns in her sleep, using me as a human pillow. I don't mind it. Not at all. I wish we could stay here forever, but someday soon I'll have to share her again with the ones she loves.

The one she misses.

The ones that miss her.

My sister.

My nephew.

Her followers.

I press a soft kiss to her hair and inhale her sweet scent.

"You don't need to save me, baby. I've come to love and equally hate the bloody chaos inside my head." I whisper as I inhale her sweet scent.

Her eyes flutter open for a second before she falls back to sleep.

I love her.

I never stopped, even when I tried my hardest to.

I am who I am.

I hope that after she gets a taste of the monster they created, she will still choose to stay.

This monster would lay down his life for her.

Love her or hate her. There's nothing I wouldn't do to keep her inside my world.

Closing my eyes and tucking her closer, I fall asleep safe with her in my arms.

I dream in color that night.

I dream of my Alicia.

I dream of my mother.

Both women broke my heart but are slowly putting the pieces back together, even when one of them is far away and never coming back.

FALLON

FAIRYTALE

“Dance with me in the dark?” – Val

Now

Christmas has come and gone fast, and tonight we ring in the new year. It's also been a week since we decided to give this a chance. He has asked numerous times if I wanted to see Andrea, but I told him no every time. I want to go to them once we're both solid. I want to be a better sister and friend, a better aunt. Not that I wasn't before, but I know they were all worried. Even my Romi. I didn't need to say much, and he was there offering me his love and comfort. He sensed that I needed them. They were my crutch. In some way, I used them to get out of my head. To not be so lonely anymore.

I love them endlessly.

Loving Roman hurts at times.

It reminded me of what I could've had.

A sweet kid like him.

It broke my heart.

Loving him is bittersweet. I want to be better for them. They deserve a Fallon that isn't so broken.

Valentino and I have spent days getting to know each other again, and every little thing I discover about him feels like knowing him for the very first time. Sometimes, I find myself staring at him, thinking about how different yet the same he still is.

There's a boyish charm underneath all that hardened exterior. I know what he does for his brother. I might've tried and stayed away from him for

years, but I always found myself asking about him. He isolated himself from his family, yet he still deals in their businesses.

We spend the day together but, in the evening, he leaves, and when he comes back there's always blood on his face and clothes. He never says anything, and I never ask. He takes a shower and comes to join me in bed.

We spend hours upon hours talking and making love. Sometimes, we get rough with each other too.

Smiling, I finish tying my hair in a sleek high ponytail and look at myself in the mirror. I hear Eyre purring from the window. Maybe she sees him out there, waiting for me.

My heart swells and beats abnormally fast.

Settle down, heart. He's not going anywhere.

I look at my reflection, and it's unreal how different I look. There aren't dark circles under my eyes, and the smile on my face is not the fake one I perfected when I was young. The changes are not only on the outside but inside too. I haven't heard the voices that mocked me. Mocked my body and manipulated me into hurting myself. I don't keep track of what I eat. I'm not cured by any means, but maybe this is a step forward to get the help I need. I'm happy.

When you're truly happy, you glow.

Bitterness doesn't take root in your heart.

God, when was the last time I was this happy? My father made me happy, but still, nothing was ever stable. Happiness was always fleeting until now. Now, I'm holding onto it, and I'll fight to keep this feeling in my heart.

Tonight feels magical, and it hasn't even begun. Valentino came out of his study after being in there for hours. He asked me for one thing I miss about my childhood. A memory that meant something to me. That made my heart happy.

I told him the story of how my father would take me to the local ice rink every year. We would spend hours on the ice, and I would perform a routine for him. That was one of our many traditions. We put on the skates and danced while everyone else faded into the background. It was just us.

It was always just us.

Once I'm done, and I'm satisfied with how I look, I pick up Eyre, kiss her on the head, and drop her on her spot near the window. I leave the room and find my way to him.

The temperature dropped tonight, so I'm covered head to toe in warm and

heavy clothes. I open the door to the cabin and head outside. The first thing I see is white lights hanging from the trees everywhere.

It takes my breath away.

It looks like a scene straight out of a Hallmark Christmas movie.

Snow on the ground and covering the pine trees in white. The lights give a magical touch to this beautiful moment. The wind blows, and the moon shines brighter tonight.

I look down and find more lit candles creating a path to walk on. *Yeah, straight out of a fairytale.*

He did this.

He did this all for me.

Keep swimming, beautiful man. You're almost there.

I follow the candles, knowing they'll lead me to him. There, on this beautiful night, with candles and the moon illuminating us, I find the man that has stolen my soul and kept it for himself, decked out in black and with skates on, in the middle of the pond, waiting for me with a soft smile on his wickedly handsome face.

For a second, I feel déjà vu. My mind wanders to the first time he smiled at me in the library all those years ago. How it made my heart skip a beat and lose my breath. His smiles were rare, but my God were they beautiful.

He is beautiful.

Even now, with tattoos and scars on his body and demons dancing in his eyes.

Valentino is ethereal.

I close my eyes and capture this moment inside my mind. I wish I had my camera with me.

“Come here, witch.” I blink, his voice drawing me back to the present.

I walk towards him with my heart on my sleeve. I still love him. I never stopped. It won't ever stop. This love is forever. No matter the space, time, or distance, I know my heart will always beat for him. Even when it was broken, it kept a steady rhythm for him.

Valentino is music to my heart.

He's poetry.

He's mine.

I made the mistake of not letting him inside my world entirely. I let my pain and insecurity steal years with him, but I'm here now. I'm better and stronger than before, and maybe it wasn't our time.

He was the right one, but I was too damaged. He was damaged too, and we didn't know how to navigate this crazy and twisted love.

We're not kids anymore.

I know what I want.

I don't have a family that fucks with my head every chance they get and brings me down. I have a beautiful family that lifts me up and is the best hype team.

My team.

My humans.

We're doing this right.

We're getting it right.

There's nowhere but up for us.

I smile.

A huge and sincere smile up at the sky.

I hope you can rest easy, daddy. I'm truly happy. I look for the North Star and imagine my two favorite men waiting for me there. My daddy and my Zigs. I hope you're both proud of me. It took me a while, but I found my home.

I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice I'd reached where Valentino was waiting for me.

"Sweet girl." His thumb presses against my lower lip. "Will you dance with me in the dark?"

I grab his hand and hold it close to my cheek while he looks down at me. "Is this what you were doing all afternoon?"

"I owed you a date," he says before handing me a pair of white skates. "I know this is not much, but—"

Holding my index finger to his lips, I stop whatever nonsense he's about to say. "This is everything." It is. It means everything to me that he's working on himself and us. It hasn't gone unnoticed how he's trying so hard to make this work. He's erasing the ugly memories of us by replacing them with the beautiful ones we're making now. I drop to the cold ground and put the skates on. Once I'm done, he lifts me, and I'm on my feet, gliding across the ice.

We both hold onto each other's hands as we dance in circles across the ice. We dance with no music on.

We made our own.

We lose track of time in each other's arms as we dance on the ice in the dark.

The only reminder that we rang in the new year are the fireworks lighting up the sky in the distance. We both look up at the same time a pink firework explodes across the night sky. "Happy New Year, baby." My person whispers while staring down at me. All I can see are the shadows casting a low glow on his face and his brilliant smile.

I soak this feeling and moment in. I'll keep it close to my heart.

"Happy New Year." I wrap my arms around him as he lowers his head and kisses my lips softly. Snow starts to fall as we hold each other tightly and share a sweet kiss.

Just like that, we say goodbye to the past year and hello to new adventures and the many memories ahead.

We'll be okay.

Yes, we will.

As long as we stay like this.

Holding onto each other and dancing in the dark to the song of our love.

Because we love each other.

He loves me.

He doesn't have to say it.

I feel it.

There's not a doubt in my mind.

VALENTINO

FREEDOM

**“I love you.
I don’t want you to end like me.” – C**
Now

I knock three times on the strange, black glass door.

I wait for him to open the door, but I’m thinking this was a bad idea. Maybe I should leave and do this on another —

“Oh, hello. You must be Valentino. Your father has told me so much about you.” The warm and kind words come from the sweet-looking lady opening the door of my father’s new home. I take in her demure posture, her blonde hair in soft waves framing her round and delicate face. She must be around the same age as Dad by the few smile lines I spot around her mouth.

“Can’t say the same about you, ma’am.” I didn’t mean for it to come out as rude. I’m just stating facts. I didn’t know my father was living with a woman. I might not have had a relationship with him of any kind lately, but I’ve kept my eye on him after his accident. There’s something that doesn’t sit right with me. Even drunk, my father was the most ruthless motherfucker I knew after Benedetto.

He does have a soft heart. A heart that is not meant to be part of this kind of life. I saw it in him every time I looked into his eyes, every night he came home drunk on his ass and covered in someone else’s blood.

I saw myself in him, too.

My father’s son, that’s what the young and strange-looking girl called me.

“Ah, yes,” she laughs awkwardly and moves aside to let me in. I step inside the strange home and take a look around. Even though it looks strange-

as-fuck on the outside, with the dark paint and antique design, on the inside, it feels like something we never had before.

A home.

It feels like a home.

Bitterness creeps in.

I move towards the living room area, and I can't help but notice all the pictures in frames around the room. On top of every table and even the fireplace.

There are photos of Andrea's son, Roman, at every stage of his life. He's a fucking cute kid, and I feel guilt every time I think of him. Will it ever go away? Is his young heart scarred? Did our mistakes fuck the kid up? I blame myself, even when I hadn't been aware someone was with Fallon that day.

I move around, looking at all the photographs. Ones of Andrea as a kid with our mother. I also feel guilt and shame for feeling resentful of them. Envious of the type of man our father became for them. He got better for her but never felt the need to do it for Lorenzo and me.

I'm surprised he even has photos of us.

I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice the lady leave the room or my father come in. I smell him before I even see him. He smells the same, yet different somehow.

Dark spice and tobacco.

I keep my eyes trained on the frame with a photo of me on my first day of school. I remember feeling anxious because I was not going to be in the same grade as Lorenzo. I was always more advanced, so I skipped a grade. I didn't want to leave my brother. If I'm being honest, I also didn't want to be on my own.

We were alone all the time at home.

"You were so brave that day." I hear my father say from behind me as I feel him getting closer. "You wouldn't let go of Marcello's hand." A sad chuckle leaves his lips.

A deep sadness settles in my heart when I hear my friend's name. Not a night goes by that I don't dream about the last time I saw him.

The way the light left his eyes as he begged me to help him, and I just stood there watching his life slip by.

"You weren't even there." I turn to face my father. "What do you know about that day?" Many emotions wash over me like cold water. I haven't seen him face to face in years. He has tried to contact me on many occasions, but I

didn't want to hear anything he had to say. There was no point in me hearing his excuses. I didn't care for it. Deep down, I know that I just didn't want him to fix me. I didn't want his help because if I let him in, then I would've had no choice but to let go of the hatred in my head, and until recently, until her, that hatred was what kept me alive.

It gave me a purpose.

"I was always there. Maybe not in the way I wanted to. In the way you needed me to, but I was always there, son."

Looking at him now, it is hard to imagine that the man before me was once a ghost. A drunk and a drug user. A man so lost and hurt that he sought comfort in unhealthy vices. I am my father's son. He was in critical condition after being shot in the chest and badly beaten by Lucan's enemies. And even though I have my issues with my father, I would never wish him harm. I didn't want to lose him, and the thought of that unnerved me at the time. I didn't want to feel anything, and the idea of burying Cassius shook me to my core. Maybe I'm an idiot, and there are no redeeming men like us, but somewhere deep down, where I buried the little boy I used to be to protect him from this world's cruelty, that boy wanted his father to be alright. Even when the man before me fucked up, abandoned us, even when he was in the same house as us, I still felt the need to keep him safe. To make sure he didn't leave me like everyone else had done.

He looks nothing like the man that we knew before. There is still sadness in his eyes, but there aren't dark circles under them anymore. He seems bigger and healthier, too. I frankly wouldn't recognize him if I saw him walking down the street in passing. He chopped his dirty blond locks, and he's now sporting a short beard and wearing suits. Fuck. Yeah, this is a new man.

A man who cheated death.

A man that isn't done with life just yet.

"What does it matter now? What's done is done." Fuck. *Why did I even come here?* Because you want to be better for her, and for that to happen, you need to heal. I take a deep breath and look into his eyes, the same as my own, even down to the demons and secrets we hold. "No. I came here because I'm done feeling this way. I'm done being a prisoner of this hatred that's deeply rooted in my soul because of the choices you both made. I want to be fucking free."

I tell him as I walk closer to where he is standing. The truth sets people

free, and there's nothing I want more than my freedom. I've always been shackled to my demons. To the pain inside the heart of a little boy who just wanted to feel like he belonged, who craved a safe place only his family could provide. A mother. A father who was there and would fucking care. A family.

Cassius' eyes lower to the ground, but I don't stop there. There's peace in freedom, and I yearn for both.

The only chaos I crave is hers.

"You fucking checked out because of the love of a fucking woman. You bailed on us because you didn't get your happily ever after with the woman you loved. Guess what? You had two young boys that didn't have the chance to know their mother. Two boys that grew up believing we weren't enough. We weren't worthy of her because if we were, then surely, she would've kept us and not let us go so easily, right? You're so fucking selfish. You abandoned us like she did."

"She didn't abandon you, s—"

"We know that now, but we didn't then. All we knew were the lies Benedetto spewed, but you were too fucked-up to even notice we were slowly dying inside, and we hadn't even turned fucking ten." I'm seething. I've always been the calm and collected one between my brother and me. He was the loose cannon, and I always thought things through before acting. Now, it seems the tables have turned. I guess when you have years of resentment and hurt bottled up, there's only one way to let it all go. To explode.

"I'm sorry."

"Is that it? You're sorry?" Un-fucking-believable. Turning away from him, I make a move towards the door. I hear another door slam shut in the distance. I guess the strange woman heard everything. I'm kind of sorry I even came here and brought my baggage and dumped it all over her. I clearly don't belong in this world. Not the world my father created for himself after finding a reason to sober up. My twin and I weren't a good enough reason, I guess.

Shit.

There's too much shit between us for me to carry this on.

"I'm sorry I came here. I'll leave."

"Sit the fuck down, Valentino." I'm stopped by my father's harsh tone. I look at him over my shoulder, and the sadness in his eyes seem to have taken

a back seat. All I see is determination and anger in his eyes.

I feel the urge to disobey him and get the fuck out of here. Instead, I take a step forward in the direction of one of his couches and take a seat.

For her.

You're doing it for her.

For peace.

For the little boy who just wanted to know why.

“I love you, son. There were so many things I did wrong in my life, but you three are the greatest gifts a man could ever receive. I was young when I met your mother, and I thought I had it all figured out. I thought that love would be enough to conquer everything life threw at me, how wrong I was. When you're ready to listen to my side of things with an open heart, I will tell you all you need to know, but I can sense that you came here to say your peace and look for an answer to why. Why did I leave you both to fend for yourselves? I wish I could give you a better reason, but I can only offer my truth. I loved, and I lost. Your mother's pain and losing her love didn't drive me to drink and numb myself with all I could find to make it all go away. I fucking failed my family. The woman I loved was raped by my brother, and then my goddamn father threatened my daughter if I didn't stay in line. Power was all that mattered to him. Keeping me in line to show me who was in charge was a huge part of it all. When your mother got pregnant again, I prayed for a girl because there was no way Benedetto would be interested in the baby if it were born female, but then God blessed and cursed me at the same time with twin boys. My little boys weren't even a day old and already had a target on their heads. I was the rebel. The fallen heir of the Nicolasi family. A disgrace to the name, and Benedetto found the perfect punishment for me in you both while also gaining two soldiers. Two heirs to make what my brother and I broke right again. He hated your mother, and deep down, he hated me too. I rose against him, and I paid dearly for it. I couldn't let him hurt my children. He had already tried with Andrea, and I knew that no matter where we ran off to, he would always find us. I was just one man against an entire organization. It was a suicide mission, and I wasn't willing to risk you, so I stayed in line. I did what was asked of me. I chose my kids.” His voice breaks at the end, and I can't help but look away from his eyes. The pain in them threatens to swallow me whole if I stare for too long. “I failed all of you, and every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was your mother's brokenhearted face staring back at me while I ripped you from her arms. I see

Andrea's teary eyes looking up at me from her crib as I said goodbye to her. To be the father she deserved." A tear falls from his eyes as he pounds his chest so hard, I swear I can feel the force of it. "When I was alone, all I could hear were the cries of my boys, longing for the touch of their mother. As you grew older, the demons became more ruthless, and the hurt was too much to bear. I was weak."

He takes a seat right next to me, but I can't find the words to tell him what I'm thinking. I don't know what I think. All I know is that the apple didn't fall so far from the tree.

Love is complicated.

We always think of it as this fulfilling feeling that gives life meaning, but when it ends, it's fucking painful.

Love is not easy.

Love hurts.

Love changes people.

Love brings men to their knees.

Love kills.

He sighs before saying, "I just want to fix what I broke." My father stares into the distance before carrying on, "You are the reason. Not just your sister, but you and your brother, too, are the reason why my broken heart still beats inside my chest. I had to lose it all so I could understand. I woke up too late, but I am no longer asleep, going through life just existing. I'm here, and I don't ask for anything. I don't ask for your love. I don't ask for your time or attention. All I ask, hoping that is not too much, is for you to let me be part of your world in whatever way you're comfortable with." He turns his head, and our eyes collide. "Do you think there's room for me in it?"

Everything he just told me runs through my mind on a painful and torturous loop. Forgiveness is easy to ask, but it is so goddamn difficult to give.

My girl did it.

The woman she is has suffered just the same as the girl she once was, and she still found it in her beautiful heart to forgive me. Forgive herself.

I haven't told her this, but she's my hero.

Out of the two of us, she's the strongest.

The bravest.

The fucking queen of my dark and broken kingdom.

I see it now, though.

Both my father and I were just hurt boys in the shadows of a man.

Flashbacks of all my memories with my father run through my mind as I think of how to respond to him. I remember the bad. The situations I blamed on him. It all plays in my head like an old home movie. I also remember the time he gave me my first bike. And the times he gave me books when grandfather told him not to give me worthless gifts that did nothing to toughen me up.

I remember all the times he came home drunk on his ass, with blood on his hands. I took care of him every time. I washed the blood off his skin and tucked him into bed. All things he should've done for me but was too intoxicated to even take care of himself, let alone his two boys. How ironic that I was there to help him when his monsters were at their worst, but he never noticed I was going through the same. I could tell him now. I could tell him all that happened and break his heart even more than it already is, but what's the point? What good would it do? He'll feel even worse than he already does, and there's nothing he could say to erase the memories. To take away the pain.

I rise from the sofa, walk to the door, ready to leave this conversation behind. I got what I wanted. It won't be perfect with us, but now I feel free of his ghost. He doesn't haunt me anymore.

The questions no longer have a hold over me.

I'm free.

Once I reach the door, I stop and look over my shoulder at him. My father has always been a mystery to me. I don't see him the way others did. There was always a monster in chains trying to free himself, but my father was strong. He kept it on a leash.

I also know there's so much more to him than he lets on. I see a father wanting to right all his wrongs, but I also see the monster behind the man.

A monster wanting to be let out to play.

It's eerie how alike my brother and I are to our father.

My soft heart.

Lorenzo's sick urges.

We inherited it all from him.

I don't know if it's a curse or a blessing.

My soft heart has caused me a lot of heartaches, and my brother's urges have driven him over the edge.

Looking him straight in the eye, I tell him the truth. "I didn't do this for

you. I came here for myself. I did it for me. I owe you nothing.”

He nods once, says nothing, and stays frozen in place.

“I under—”

“See you around, dad.”

With that, I walk out of my father’s house feeling a lot lighter than when I arrived. Things might never be how he wants them to be, but at least I reached a place where I can stare into his eyes and no longer feel hate.

There’s power in forgiveness, and I’m done feeling helpless.

I want a strong mind and a whole heart, no longer bleeding through its cracks.

For her.

For us.

For me.

Once I’m outside, I feel eyes on the back of my head. Looking over my shoulder, my eyes clash with green eyes almost identical to the ones that steal my breath with just one look.

She’s behind one of the windows of my father’s home.

The strange girl that appeared at the cabin.

It was dark that night I couldn’t see her.

Now in the light of day I can.

Short midnight black hair and a round face that looks almost identical to my girls’.

What the f—

Ring. Ring. Ring.

My eyes leave the girl for a second to answer my phone. I take the call without looking at the caller ID first. “What?” When I look back to the window, the girl is no longer there.

“Boss, we have a problem with a few of the men.” Blace’s voice booms from the other end of the line. I’ve been too caught up in my own shit to I check up with my men. They’re running the streets for Lorenzo under my supervision. They haven’t given me a reason to doubt their loyalty in the years since we took over, but I guess things are about to change. There’s always one rotten apple in the bunch.

He goes on to tell me how they’re questioning my leadership. I don’t fucking blame them, really. I also don’t give a fuck. The only reason I’m doing this shit is because my twin asked me to, and I also didn’t want a fucking bullet to my head, not just yet. That was then.

“I’ll handle it.”

“How’s Fallon, boss? Did you make the bitch pay?” His tone is mocking, and it rubs me the wrong fucking way. This is the second time in less than a month that he’s gotten comfortable enough to talk to me like my fucking equal and has forgotten his place.

It takes me but a second to realize my mistake.

I never told him her name.

Blace.

The eagerness in his eyes the moment he delivered her to me.

How he forgot to mention there was a boy in the warehouse where Fallon was held captive.

The snake tattoos are the same as mine. I just thought he was a weird fuck who was really fucking loyal to his gang, the vipers. I think of how he told me about my men to distract me. *Why today? Why not tell me before?*

Fuck.

I dial my phone and call her, but she doesn’t pick up.

I try three more times and nothing.

Shit.

Fuck.

No.

Baby.

I dial the one person I know will come to my rescue no matter what.

“What the fu—”

“I need you to get to the cabin as fast as you can. She’s not safe.”

With that, I hang up.

I mount my bike and speed out of there like a bat out of hell.

Leaving my father, the strange looking girl and my past behind.

Ready to fight for my future.

I’m not losing you.

There’s no ending for us.

Hold on, baby.

Hold on.

This is one demon I’m eager to slay for you.

I failed you twice.

I’m not failing this time.

PART THREE

GOD OF THE DEAD

Once a weak man. Now I have risen from the ashes of my terrible past. I have
unshackled myself from my crippling fears.
The poison in my veins has spread like an intoxicating, burning flame.
The venom bleeding from your tainted soul is now flooding my mind.
There's no other explanation as to why I've gone mad.
A love so strong it could never wilt like a dead rose.
In the deepest depth of my soul, it's where an angel with a broken heart like
you belongs.
Come down from heaven, and I'll rise from hell.
We'll meet in the middle, in a sinful and doomed kingdom called Earth.
Where innocent angels come to play with us, the terrible hellions bred by the
God of the dead.

Note: From now on the story is told in the present and future.

FALLON

MONSTERS

**“Fight. Fight like hell
and come back to me.” – F**

Consciousness comes slowly. It’s like I’m in thick fog at first. I haven’t slept this much in years. I’m always up with the moon, but lately, all I do is rest. I guess sleep comes easy when you’re not afraid of what awaits you in your dreams. I blink, my eyelids heavy, and slowly open my eyes to find the spot next to me empty.

You know when you’re happy but feel like everything will eventually turn into an epic cluster-fuck?

Yeah, that’s how I feel right now.

Because it’s been so peaceful these last couple of days, so happy, so wholesome. I’m terrified something will go wrong. I don’t want to stop feeling this way.

Where did he run off to?

I notice a small note lying on top of his pillow. I reach forward, wanting to know where he went.

Went to take care of one last ghost. I’ll be home soon. - V

Home soon.

It’s crazy how in a short amount of time, I’ve come to think of this place as my home. Foolishly crazy, I know. We’re moving too fast, but time slows down for me whenever he’s around. Life was always worth living when he was by my side, and I don’t want to spend another day, month, or a year apart. Ziggy used to say that when life revealed your one true love, you had to hold onto them and never let go. No matter the hardships.

True love might come more than once in a lifetime. I truly believe there is more than one true love out there for all of us, but in the story of my life, I want to say that I only ever loved him.

Maybe I'm still naive.

Maybe this will end.

I don't know what the future holds if I'm honest.

I've always feared change.

Uncertainty.

I don't do well with it, but as long as I have them...

My beautiful broken man.

My soulmate and best friend, Andrea.

My boy, Roman.

I'll be okay.

I know we'll be okay.

They gave me a home when I was left with nothing.

They showed me love.

True love.

When I had lost all hope in it, after years of heartbreak.

Valentino Alexander Nicolasi has been both the hero and villain in my story, but I love him despite it. He showed me how to dream in color when all I saw was black. He showed me how to love a broken heart and mind. He built my dream home despite hating me and convinced himself he didn't love me. Yet, he still did this for me.

He fucked up.

He hurt me more than once.

I won't ever forget the things he did and said, but I forgave him. I fell in love with him for who he was at the time. Demons and madness danced in his eyes, and I still fell for everything he was. I tried to move on. I tried to live life, but I learned the hard way that living a life without him is not a life worth living.

I climb out of bed, still feeling the effects of last night. I'm still sore, but I feel him every time I walk. I bet that's what he wanted when he took me so hard. I swear they heard my screams in heaven.

I reach for my phone sitting atop the night table and check the time. It's still early to call Andrea, so I check my social media instead. I've been avoiding keeping up with my social media accounts since I've been disconnected from the world, and if I'm being honest, I don't miss it all that

much.

I love communicating with others who love photography, but I hate how sometimes it all gets twisted into something dark. Something ugly.

I stopped being Fallon James, the vlogger-photographer social media influencer, when people started thinking of me as Andrea Turner Nicolasi's sidekick. I don't mind people believing that because I love her, and I would do and be anything she needed from me, but sometimes people take it to cruel levels, so for the sake of my mental health, I take social media breaks from time to time.

Opening my favorite social media — the one I used the most for my personal account— I post a photo of last night. It's dark, but if you look closely, you'll be able to see the Christmas lights on the trees and the discarded ice skates on the wet ground.

I'm not very good with captions if I'm being honest. I'm very awkward when it comes to them. I don't even know what catchy phrase to write, so I usually settle for my favorite emoji or a quote to describe the photos.

I quickly type a quote from my most recent read. *I found peace in chaos and my home in hell.* - A. A. Turner

It's one of my favorite quotes from the novel. The author doesn't have a lot of books published. I discovered their work and instantly resonated with the way they saw the world. I could feel the agony bleeding through the pages and the torment he, or she, must've gone through at some point in their life. It's quite inspiring how pain was turned into poetry.

I post the photo and close the app. I'm not the best influencer, and I honestly didn't sign up for the job, but here we are. Some people genuinely love the photos I post, and others just love the idea the media has portrayed of me because my friend is one of the most famous fashion designers of today.

I quickly open my gallery app and scroll through the photos I've taken of Valentino since he gave me this phone.

I thought about posting one but instantly thought better of it. This is all new and difficult enough. Adding the scrutiny of social media or having the media make assumptions would only taint what we have. It would turn it into a circus. He's never been comfortable in front of the camera or with a lot of people around, and now he's even more guarded than before. I can't do that to him. I will protect his privacy and respect it as long as I'm able to.

Most of the photos I've taken of us were taken after we had sex. What all

the photographs have in common is how happy I look. I even look beautiful with messy hair, swollen lips, and bruises on my skin. I've never felt as beautiful as when he fucks me like a madman. He fucks me like he wants to own every single part of me.

I sometimes feel like he wants to erase every single touch on my skin before his.

I smile as I come across a photo of Mozart—my new snake— wrapped around his right bicep and Eyre resting on his chest. He looks peaceful even when he's frowning. I can see the twitch of his upper lip. He wanted to smile.

I save the photo as my wallpaper and continue looking through more of the images I took of my time here. I know he notices me taking pictures of him, but he never complains or asks me to stop. I took a photo of his tattooed back while he was sleeping peacefully on his chest. He has a huge skeleton face with one bleeding eye and a snake coming out of the other. On its, head there's a crown. It gives the impression that it's crooked, almost falling off. You would think the piece would transmit sadness or the illusion of a fallen royal, but the small smile on the skull's face makes it seem at peace.

It's truly beautiful and sad at the same time.

How different this man is from the young boy I fell in love with. While Lorenzo had the tattoos, piercings, and rough look, Valentino looked ethereal with untouched skin and expensive clothes. Now, they both look almost identical, but his brother still looks like a demon out of hell while Valentino looks like a fallen angel.

My fallen angel.

I smile when I find a photo of him writing in his journal and flipping me off at the same time from a distance. I remember how he went outside for a while, with his journal in hand. I was looking at him through the window and took the photo. I capture every moment that makes me feel something. Happiness, sadness, anger, confusion, it doesn't matter. I capture it because it means something. It makes me feel.

Feelings are beautiful, even ugly ones.

I also have selfies of me making silly faces while my head is on top of his lap. That one I sent to my friend because she's been asking for daily proof of life.

However, my personal favorite is the one of him with his tattooed hand wrapped around my throat. It's a little bit sick and twisted, but it's exactly how we are. This love is not easy. It's not perfect, and it took a dark turn for a

while, but it was always present in some shape or form. There's a thin line between love and hate, and we're proof of it.

I close the app and throw my phone under the pillow. I head to the bathroom and take a quick shower. Once I'm done, I put some warm clothes on since it's colder than usual up here today. In the bag of clothes Valentino brought me from my apartment, I found my favorite pair of mom jeans. I put them on along with a black turtleneck sweatshirt and some white socks. I quickly pull my hair into a messy bun and head downstairs to get something to eat.

I grab a bottle of water and some green grapes from the fridge before I sit down at the kitchen table. There's a peaceful feeling in the air as I look around the cabin from where I'm sitting. I've never felt so at home at all the places I've lived before in all my life. Not like how I feel here. Safe. Happy.

But there's also a tight feeling in my gut, like a pressure I can't shake. The feeling of something being terribly wrong.

It could be my imagination or the nerves I've been feeling lately because of the crippling anxiety of having this dream ripped out of my hands.

I'll feel better once I know he's okay. I drop the spoon, straighten my spine and reach behind me to my back pocket for my phone when I remember I tossed it under the pillow. The moment I step down from the stool to go find my phone, the distinctive sound of keys jingling outside the cabin's door stops me and makes me exhale a sigh of relief.

He's home earlier than I expected.

I round the corner just as the front door opens. "Babe, I swear I was just about to —"

My entire body freezes in place, paralyzed.

My heart drops to the floor when I lay eyes on the person standing inside my safe place.

Not my savior.

Not my monster.

The one person that could get in my head and break my spirit with just one cruel word. The one that looked at me long ago and decided I was worth nothing to him, and all I deserved was to be hurt, humiliated, and degraded.

Caleb.

The one person I thought I would never see again after I left Detroit and abandoned the girl I was before. I never looked back. My mother never contacted me again until she saw me on TV and decided I was finally worth

something. She never had the chance to use or hurt me again. Eventually, she died, and although I mourned the mother and woman that I wanted her to be, I didn't shed one single tear for her. I didn't even go to her funeral or visit her grave.

I had no mother.

But Caleb was always on the back of my mind as an ugly reminder. A cruel memory. I never, for one second, imagined he would find me again.

He didn't bother before.

Run, rebel.

I'm tired of running, Ziggs.

I'm done being a victim.

I can drop to my knees and cower before this demon, or I can slay it.

Stay with me, witch. Don't go.

I'm not leaving without a fight, Alexander.

Thinking of my options, I discard calling for help. By the time I run upstairs to get my phone from the bed and call for help, Caleb will have the upper hand. He'll succeed in doing what he came here for.

Valentino might not be here to slay my last dragon, but I hear his melodic voice in my head, drowning out the demons. His voice washes over me like warm water on this freezing day, vanishing every fear and giving me strength.

This disgusting human being hurt me time and time again when I was an innocent kid who had her world turned upside down by the loss of her adoring father and was left in the hands of her heartless mother. I let all the words and things he did and said to me come forward to the front of my mind after years of me shoving them away so I could survive in the only way I knew how. I let them fuel me and give me the strength I need to give him one hell of a fight. The one I was too scared and hurt to give him before.

I blame most of my trauma on him and the loss of the beautiful life I could've had with my unborn child. With that, I feel the rush of adrenaline overtake my body and senses. I step back, turn quickly, and run to the kitchen before he has time to grab me.

But he doesn't follow.

"Long time no see, sis. Aren't you going to invite me in?" His words might seem friendly, but I hear the underlying threat. The vindictive tone.

He laughs, and the cruel sound reminds me of the past.

Once I'm in the kitchen, I grab the longest knife Valentino owns, the one

we used to carve the Christmas turkey. With it in hand, I face Caleb. No nerves or fears are controlling me now. I'm running on adrenaline.

"I'm hurt, sis. Is this any way to greet your brother after years of not seeing each other?" His smile drops, but the twinkle in his sadistic eyes remains. I look at him, and somehow the years have done nothing to him. He still looks like he did before, only he has added more tattoos to his skin. Tattoos that look identical to the ones Valentino has inked on his body. He looks like a twisted mirror of Valentino.

"You're nothing to me, Caleb." I keep a tight hold of the knife behind the kitchen counter. "You better leave before my boyfriend comes back." I try to scare him off, but assholes like this one don't scare easily, and something tells me I just made the chase a whole lot more exciting for him.

A huge grin takes over his face as he slowly crosses the threshold and closes the door behind him.

"No, no, sis. We both know your savior won't be joining our reunion anytime soon, and by the time he comes, all he'll see is your blood staining his walls and your dead body buried under six feet of snow."

He looks around the cabin, and I hate it. I hate that someone so evil gets to experience the beauty of this place. Gets to taint it. Just his mere presence taints what this place means to me. My safe place. He moves to the living room and walks towards the Christmas tree that is still in place, shining with the memories of our journey. The polaroid photos.

My breath hitches when I see him grab one of the photos and turn my way with a disgusted look in his cruel face. I know that look. That look has haunted me for many nights. It's the look he had before he dropped the act he put up for my mother and let the real vile creature out to cause me pain.

"Why, after all this time, are you coming back? What the hell did I ever do to you?" I try to stall, so I can think of a way out of this. One where I'm not the one buried in the snow, but the asshole is.

"That bastard took everything from me. They killed my dad and took all that was his for themselves. All that was meant to be mine. All because of his grandfather's greed and your bitch of a lover's obsession with your ass. I was counting on him to finish the job, you know – but now I see your filthy cunt still has a hold on him." He tears up the photo and throws the pieces to the floor. I watch as they slowly fall on his feet. "I don't get it. I fucking don't. What is it about you that makes him act like a fucking pussy?" He walks my way but stops when he notices I'm holding something behind my back.

“Drop the knife, Fallon.” His voice is mocking. He always said my name with unwarranted venom and cruelty. I never knew what I did to him, and after years of letting it consume me, I came up with only one explanation. People like him don’t need an excuse to be cruel to others. It feeds their ego and makes them feel important and powerful when, in reality, they’re nothing. “You don’t want to get hurt.”

I don’t miss the threat.

Even though I’m afraid this will be it for me. I am no longer a prisoner to my demons. I think of Andrea, Roman, Valentino, and the life I always dreamed about but never dared to hope of having because hope was a cruel bitch to me. Love and happiness were fleeting until I met them. The thought of never seeing their smiles and hearing their sweet laughs gives me the strength to go on and face this last ugly memory of the past.

I raise both hands in the air as a sign of surrender and step forward slowly. I walk his way and give him exactly what he wants.

My fear.

My tears.

My humiliation.

If I learned something throughout the years of pain and heartache, it was to transform into whatever helped me survive at the time. I became the weird and eccentric girl just so I didn’t have to witness the look of pity the real me would’ve received. The mistreated and poor girl. The heartbroken girl who loved old music, classic poetry, and being behind a camera so no one could see her. Now, I finally see the truth. I am both. I can be both. There’s no shame in pain. I am still the girl that loves her camera, old music, and poetry. I am also a woman that likes to dress in a way that makes others uncomfortable because it is not the norm in their world.

I am me.

I think of my father and Ziggy and let sadness take over me until tears well in my eyes. The moment one falls to my cheek, Caleb smiles triumphantly. See? Demons like this one feed off the pain of innocents to satiate their egos.

“P-Please don’t hurt me.”

His nostrils flare, and his smile grows wider as I move towards him with my hands in front of me. I don’t look like a threat, but I am. I am no longer afraid of this asshole that just won’t go away. The moment I’m standing right in front of him I don’t hesitate to reach for the small pocketknife that I

stashed on the waistband of my jeans, pull it out, and plunge into his stomach. I know it won't do serious damage, but it just might give me enough time to run and find one of Val's guns from his home office.

Caleb sways to the side, looking down at the knife in his stomach with a sick grin on his face. "You conniving little bitch." With a low grunt, he removes the knife from his stomach and points it my way. I give him my back and make a run for it, but the knife wound only serves to fuel him because one second, I'm on my feet, trying to find a way to call for help, and the next, I'm being pulled back by my hair. He doesn't speak as he holds me captive. Caleb turns me around and shoves me harder against the wall.

All I can focus on are dead eyes and cruel smile. How can someone be this evil? Hold so much unwarranted anger towards me? I was never cruel to him, but he made it his mission to torture me just because he could. Just because he was a miserable piece of shit. They tend to say hurt people hurt others to excuse the behavior of assholes, but I don't care. You would think that a victim would know not to hurt others the same way they were hurt.

His ruthless fingers twitch around my neck, squeezing the life out of me. Endless hatred flashes in his stare. The pain in my neck burns, and I can't breathe, but I remain quiet. I don't beg. I just claw my nails into his forearms. I fight with all my might to push him off me, but he's too damn strong. Still, the fight doesn't leave my body and if I don't do something soon, the air will surely leave my body.

"Not even a day after my mother's body was in the ground, your whore of a mother was riding my father's dick in our home." He runs his nose along my sweaty cheekbone. He murmurs, "Then you came along, and there was just something about you that irked me. It was so easy to fuck with you just because I could. Your mommy gave zero shits about you." He laughs like he finds the fact hilarious. "Then, without even lifting a fucking finger, you get everything. The scholarship to one of the most prestigious schools in the country. You got him, and if that wasn't enough, you got my father murdered, and everything he worked for was taken from me." He pushes the knife deeper into my skin, not enough to slice my neck but enough to cut me. I hiss when I feel it. The trickle of blood coming off the wound.

He's delusional.

Has always been off his rocker. I saw it when I was young, in the way he would watch me cry and sit there feeling no guilt. Only pleasure and giddiness.

God, this hurts. I can't shake him off.

But then two things resonate.

A scholarship?

After the year she kept me locked in the basement. Mom snapped at me one day and mentioned how I was an ungrateful little bitch (her words), and she didn't get what someone found so special about me to pay for my tuition. Before that, she told me she was making the sacrifice to send me there so I could be someone. Just like the pretty girls that went there. (Again, her words.) I honestly never believed her ass. My mother would've never wasted her drug money on me. On something that would benefit me, so yeah, I never took her seriously. I always thought that my stepfather, Timothy, paid for it, so they would have a reason to cross over to holy territory. There were no rules against that.

I also think back to the other thing he said.

You got him.

Him?

Valentino?

What does he have to do with Caleb's insanity? He sounded jealous and resentful. A flashback hits me of the night that everything went to hell when Caleb found the photos of me naked with a guy's hands on my body, touching me lovingly. He couldn't have known the hands belonged to Valentino. I do remember the face he made when he saw them. He seemed disgusted, but that wasn't anything new. He always told me how he found me disgusting and how ugly I was, so I just thought it was because of that, but maybe he knew. Maybe somehow, he knew I was with Valentino back then, but how? They've never met before, right?

I'm brought back to the moment when Caleb pushes the sharp tip of the knife to my cheek. "I wonder if he'll still want you after I'm done with you." The gleam in his eyes lets me know that this is it. He's enjoying this too much to stop now. He'll end me. There's no doubt in my mind.

I think about everything he's said and done to me in the past, and I let it fuel me.

"Get off of me, you sick son of a —" I struggle against his hold, all while the bastard squeezes a little harder. I blink, trying to keep my eyes open, but they start to become blurry. My nails dig deeper into the skin of his face as instinct makes me fight. I thrash in place as his hand tightens. I can't breathe. I can't speak.

I'm going.

This can't be it.

This can't be the end of me.

I've been unlucky since I came into this world with a broken heart. I've been fighting ever since that very first day, and now I'll go just as I came into this world.

Alone.

I'm sorry, lost boy. I tried to fight.

I tried so hard to turn my bad luck around, but you can't really fight against fate, can you?

My instinct makes me fight harder, but he's too strong. His hate fuels his strength, and it would be almost impossible for me to get out of his hold. I'm dizzy, and I'm struggling to focus on his face. He squeezes harder as my eyes bug out with horror, then reluctantly flutter shut. For a second, I think this is it, I'm dying, but I feel hands leave my throat. My knees give out, and I fall to the floor, gasping for air.

My throat burns, and my head is spinning, but I still manage to open my eyes to see the bastard squatting before me with a smile on his face and the bloodied knife still in his hands, taunting me.

He didn't want to kill me that way. He just wanted to show me how easy it was for him to end me.

I don't know what makes me do it. Maybe it's the adrenaline and survivor rush I feel coursing through my body at the moment trying to keep me alive, but the moment he stands up, I reach forward and squeeze his dick as hard as I can, and I swear I feel something pop. I feel a sick satisfaction as I hear him shout in agony and fall to the floor. I don't loosen up my grip and squeeze harder. This is my chance. If I could just get the knife that fell to the floor the moment he went down. I quickly scurry over to it and get my hands on it, but the bastard won't give up. I feel his hand grab a chunk of my hair, but I don't let it stop me. I fight through the burn on my scalp.

"You fucking bitch, I was planning on taking it easy on you, but now I'll carve you up and send you to him in pieces." He spats at my face as we both struggle for power. He lands a punch to my stomach as I kick him hard on his face. I see blood trickle from his nose. If I'm going down tonight, so will this horrible human being.

We both stay on the floor fighting, and I try with all the strength I have left to plunge the knife into his chest, but he's stronger. He has me trapped

under him with both of his tights keeping me in place.

“You won’t get away with this, you know?” I clench my teeth as the pain from his grip on my wrist tightens. “He will find you, and not even the devil that created you will keep you safe from his wrath.”

I won’t cower.

I’m not the girl he used to torment with his nasty words and cruel actions.

Maybe I’m not perfect, but I’m stronger. So fucking strong, and no one will ever take that from me.

I’m a survivor.

Always have been, and I always will be, even after I’m no longer here.

Caleb throws his head back and laughs loudly. God, how I wish I could shove the knife into his goddamn heart. I try to fight him off, but it’s useless.

One second.

He stops laughing, but the smile doesn’t leave his face as he looks down at me.

Two seconds.

He raises the knife.

Three seconds.

This is it.

I love you, Valentino Alexander. I promise we’ll get it right next time. I’ll find you. I think I always will.

I shut my eyes and try to breathe through my nose, my entire body shaking with fear. Fear of dying. I used to welcome it when all I felt was the tragic loss of everyone I loved and lost in the past. When all I wanted was for the never-ending pain to leave my heart and the demons in my head to scurry away. Ironic that now I fear it. I fear the eternal silence and the hollow place I’ll go to once I leave this earth because as much as I would like to see the men I loved most in my life again, I don’t want to leave the other half of my soul behind.

Bang.

It all ends.

FALLON

RUTHLESS DEMON

“Bye-bye, motherfucker.” – L

There’s a ringing in my ear, and my head is spinning, but I still don’t open my eyes. I don’t want the last thing I ever see to be his face.

The pressure from Caleb’s body leaves mine, and I’m able to breathe again. I feel a warm substance on my chest, and without thinking about it, I look down and see blood between us, but I feel fine.

It’s not mine.

Caleb fell on his side, clutching his left shoulder, and that allows me to move away from where he’s lying on the floor. With gritted teeth and sluggish movements, I force myself to my feet. Swaying a little, clutching the wall behind me, I tip my chin to look at the person who just walked through the cabin’s door, guns blazing.

My savior.

My human.

Looking like a possessed demon more than an avenging angel.

The angel of death.

Valentino.

The shakes leave my body as I stare into his blue eyes that now look almost black with the fury swimming in them.

I swear his eyes are sending me a message with how intently he is staring at me.

You’re safe.

He’s here.

I watch in slow motion as he crosses the threshold and comes inside,

shutting the cabin's door behind him. Trapping us here.

In a heartbeat, the gentle look he saves just for me fades away, and in its place, all I see is raging fury. Hatred. He seriously looks like a savage demon out of hell that has come to claim a soul.

Caleb's soul.

"Son of a bitch," he clips as he charges forward like an angry bull staring in my direction.

"I'm okay," I tell him honestly. I'm fine now that he's here. I tried to hold my own, but if he hadn't appeared the moment he did, I know I would be dead right about now.

"Fuck," Caleb groans as he tries to get up from the floor. I can see the blood trailing down his white shirt, making a mess on the floor. Valentino got him good. He has multiple wounds.

In the blink of an eye, Valentino grabs a fistful of Caleb's hair and punches him in the face multiple times. Relentlessly and without mercy. I can hear the sound of bones breaking, and I should feel some type of way about seeing the man I love beating someone within an inch of their lives but screw that. The bastard deserves this and more. May God forgive me for thinking this way, but better him than me.

Valentino is ridding the world of another scumbag that feeds off others' misery and pain.

I remain with my back to the wall as I gently rub my neck to try and ease the pain from Caleb's abuse.

Valentino doesn't know half the things the man in front of me has put me through. I didn't want to rehash the pain of the past, but how can I move forward when I'm holding on to the ugly memories of my past?

With every grunt and hiss of pain that leaves his mouth, I feel like justice is being served. I will be able to breathe soon. once I know this cruel being won't get to me ever again.

I stare at my monster in all his unhinged glory, and in a twisted way, I know he will never let anything touch me ever again. I search his face, and I see rage, but I also see the agony beneath it. He feels guilty. He's blaming himself.

He didn't know.

How could he know when I didn't even know myself?

I thought I left Caleb in the past, where he belongs. He never tried to contact me before. He never came after me. He only appeared now that

Valentino came back into my life.

“Get up, motherfucker.” Valentino grabs Caleb by the neck and lifts him from the floor like he weighs nothing. Caleb is muscular and lean but can’t be compared to Valentino’s size.

Staring at them now, I figure it out.

The murderous look on Caleb’s face when he saw the naked photo of me and who he assumed was Valentino.

How he was the one that told mother I was pregnant.

The way his tattoos mirror Valentino’s.

I know obsession when I see it.

“Argh!”

Punch.

“You.”

Punch.

“Sick.”

Punch.

“Bitch.”

Crack.

I stand against the wall, fighting my instinct to protect someone I love and my better judgment of not interfering because that’ll only anger Valentino more.

I can’t just stand here doing nothing, though.

I walk to where Valentino dropped his gun and grab it. I’ve never shot a semi-automatic handgun before. But I’ve seen this type, and I’ve acquainted myself with one thanks to Cassius making sure both Andrea and I will be able to defend ourselves if the need arises.

I watch as Valentino throws one more punch and wraps his hand tightly around Caleb’s neck, not letting him up off the floor.

One second can change everything.

Caleb’s face is covered in blood with visible bruises, and his eyes are already swelling. He’s barely recognizable, and even though I can tell he won’t be lasting long, Valentino doesn’t stop the ruthless attack. It’s like he’s lost all the self-control he was holding on to and has completely let go and succumbed to his urges.

I watch in wicked fascination as Valentino uses one hand to keep Caleb in place and the other to shove the knife into his chest. I don’t look away, and I don’t cover my eyes like I would’ve done before or if I were any other sane

human. I should feel pity, but I don't. He's not an innocent person, and this is what someone like him deserves.

A painful death at the hands of the one that I love most.

Maybe this is his way of making it up to me.

Who knows, but what I do know is that I've never felt safer and it has all to do with the madman currently ripping the heart out of my once tormentor's chest.

I don't take my eyes off the scene as I watch him, covered in blood, knowing how much he detests it. The feeling and even the look of it. His aversion to blood is no joke. You wouldn't know seeing him now.

This moment right here is like we'd been in a dark place for years, and we're only just finally getting out of it.

As I take in the scene before me, I become transfixed by the way Valentino handles a knife. He's carving Caleb's chest as if he's trying to get to his heart.

I remember the stories Lorenzo told us one night about what he could do with a knife and a smile. Deadly with his fists and worse with his knife, Valentino proved he is not a man anyone wants to cross.

With one last flick of his wrist, I watch as he plunges the knife deep into Caleb's chest, and his body falls backward onto the ground with a loud thump.

This is a scene straight out of a horror movie, and Valentino looks like the American psycho.

Blue eyes are trained on me, assessing the situation. I know he's trying to find a look of horror or disgust, but he will find none. At this point, he could have murdered the Pope, and I would stand on trial and lie for him.

I walk around them in a circle and stand behind Valentino's back as he remains on top of a semiconscious Caleb. I'm shocked to find his eyes trained on me and his bloody lips turned up in a cruel smile, even when he's clearly seconds away from dying. There's so much blood. There's a huge gash on the left side of his chest, where Valentino stuck the knife in.

I shift in my feet, keeping my face blank, not to show him any weakness. Nothing. The last thing he sees will be my face.

"You can breathe easy now, baby. This demon won't ever hurt you again." Valentino turns my way, pulling me down on the floor where he's kneeling, surrounded by blood, next to an almost dead man.

Caleb doesn't exist anymore.

He will soon be forgotten while I get to live the rest of my life, surrounded by the support and love of the ones I cherish the most.

Without a second thought, I drop down to my knees, grab hold of Valentino's face and bring it closer to mine before I kiss him. Showing him what I feel at the moment.

Love.

Joy.

Gratitude.

Relief.

I give him my everything, and I don't care that I have Caleb's blood on me. It makes me feel victorious.

We won.

We've conquered every demon.

His grandfather is dead and gone, so is my mother.

Caleb felt half of what I did thanks to my savior and now he too will be a distant memory.

A bad dream that will surely be overshadowed by the beautiful memories I'll create from here on out.

"Hey, witch. Will you love me even when I'm gone? Even when all you'll have left are our memories and the pictures on the wall?" Valentino says with pain written all over his face and a frown.

I look into those baby blues that are no longer empty but hold so much emotion. I'm confused by it.

I can see the love shining through them, but I also see pain.

"I will love you even when the sun sets, and the stars no longer shine in our sky." I kiss his bloody cheek softly and make a move to hold him when a loud hiss of pain escapes him. There's a barrier between our bodies, a sharp object not allowing me to pull him closer to my body.

Chills run through my body, holding me hostage. My eyes follow his until I'm staring at his stomach. My breath hitches, my entire body freezes, and my heart breaks for the millionth time in this lifetime.

A knife.

A knife to his gut.

So much blood.

His blood on me.

I can't breathe.

It doesn't look like a scrape. By the amount of blood coming off the

wound and his haggard breaths, I know this is not good.

No.

No.

Baby.

No.

God, no.

Not you.

Valentino falls backward and lands right next to a now-dead Caleb. I didn't even notice he took his last breath. Now, my heart is in danger.

My lover.

My enemy.

My friend.

My ally.

My everything.

Without thinking, I take off my shirt and put pressure on his wound. I can stop it if I press it hard enough, stopping him from bleeding to death.

“Baby, look at me. I need you to kn—”

“No, don't say it. This is not it. This doesn't end. Remember?” I don't let him utter the devastating words. I don't want to hear them right now.

Just his heart. Only the healthy beating of his heart. His laugh.

But he's not smiling.

There's sadness written all over his face.

“Y-you won't ever-r be alone.” He whizzes out, and blood spurs in his mouth. “I love—”

I grab his hand with my free one and bring it to my lips to kiss it softly. “Shhh.” I drop my head until our noses are touching. The tears I tried to hold back are now falling on his cheeks. “Not like this. Please don't say it. You'll be okay. You'll see.”

Where's the phone?

I can't leave him here all by himself, and I'm not strong enough to carry him to his truck to find some help.

God, not him. Please.

My heart stops the moment I don't hear him breathing.

“Please don't leave me.”

“Please, stay with me.”

“This is our second chance. Come on, hold on to me.” With one hand on his stomach, making sure there's pressure on his wound, I bend down again

and stare into those soulful blue eyes. “You slew every monster.”

His eyes are slowly closing, and his lips turn up in a weak smile. He says nothing.

My heart beats fast, and I find it hard to find my next breath.

It’ll just take a minute to climb the stairs and find the phone.

He could be dead by the time you come back.

Shit.

Just when I’m about to lose all hope, the devil’s favorite plaything enters the cabin with a murderous look on his face.

His twin.

I’ve never been more relieved to see him in all the time I’ve known him.

With my love’s blood on my hands and tears on my face, I turn to his brother. “Please.”

LORENZO

MY SKIN AND BONES

“Monster of mine.” – C

“I ’m sorry I didn’t make it in time. I’m so fucking sorry, Tino,” I whisper, hoping that somehow he’s able to hear me, but hope has and will always remain the cruelest bitch. At least to us.

I’ve never been afraid of death. Hell, sometimes I even welcome the bitch, but the fucking idea that the other half of me could die makes the ache in my chest grow intensely.

The beeping of the machine opposite of me is giving me a headache and taunting me with the knowledge that he’s here, but not really.

He’s stuck between life and death. Not gone completely but not here either.

A coma.

A deep sleep.

This motherfucker pulled a Snow White on me, and for the first time in my entire miserable existence, I have no clue what to do next.

It’s been two days.

Two motherfucking days since I arrived too late. I don’t have nightmares. I am a nightmare. Somehow, whenever I close my eyes, I see my brother lying on the ground, bleeding to death.

If I hadn’t arrived when I did, he would surely be dead and buried by now.

I’ve tried to focus on other things, so I don’t think about my brother being out of my reach. There’s never been a motherfucking day where I wasn’t able to see him, at least from afar. The years he stayed back in Detroit, I had eyes on him, and when he decided to take his girl and hide from the world, I was

still there.

Now, here we are.

My skin and bones. My brother is lying on a cold hospital bed with a tube on his nose, breathing life into him, and other shit monitoring his improvement.

There's been none.

The fucked-up thing is that this is the most peaceful he has looked in years.

The last time I saw him unconscious was when we fought for the position of boss, and the idiot didn't fight back. He took it like punishment as if he deserved it, and if someone deserves heaven and not hell, it's my brother.

We both have our demons.

The thing is that I enjoy playing with mine. That's why when I made sure he was stable, I left this place and went back to the cabin.

The motherfucker that betrayed my brother paid dearly for it but not enough. Did I finish the job of ripping the heart out of the little bitch who had big enough balls to fuck with Valentino? Yes. *Check.*

Did I give my brother blood? *Check.*

And what does the little asshole do? He doesn't wake up.

He looks paler than usual, frighteningly. Nothing scares me, but him leaving me makes my hands itch. Makes me want to plunge my knife in every heart I come across.

I failed him.

I've been failing him since we were kids, and I have no one to blame but myself. I knew that motherfucker was sketchy as fuck. I knew I needed to handle it, but I swear to fucking Satan that I didn't know he was part of her family. I knew someone was hurting her, but I kept it to myself because I was selfish. I chose my brother over her life. Over her wellbeing.

I will always choose Valentino.

Do I always do the right thing? Fuck no.

Am I the asshole that wouldn't release him of his duty to us? Yes.

I know my brother because we were bred by the same monster.

I know how his mind works.

He hates the silence in his head and welcomes chaos.

That's why he fell for her.

They share similar scars.

Their demons used to dance with each other in the dark.

Valentino is a good man deep down to his very core, but like every man, he is weak. We feed off chaos, and we need to cause pain to feel something other than hate.

Valentino, like our father, tried to be normal, tried the good guy route, but it didn't come so easy for them.

I don't fucking care to be the hero in anyone's story. I much rather be the villain, causing pain.

It's the only way to survive in this fucked-up world, where angels are going back to heaven, leaving us, the hellions, to rot down here with our sins.

"He'll wake up soon." A soft husky voice whispers from the other side of the room. My eyes leave my brother and turn her way. She looks different. Broken but also strong at the same damn time.

Fallon Alicia James.

My twin's poisonous obsession.

The one responsible for his good days and some of his worst.

This woman is a puzzle, one my brother became obsessed with trying to piece together, but there were missing pieces before. It was impossible to do. I remember her as the girl with glasses too big for her face, weird hairdos, and a shy smile. The one who stole my brother's heart and showed him softness when all he had back then were insults and broken bones directly from our grandfather. Then I remember the girl she became to fool everyone into thinking she was okay. She transformed herself into someone that cracked jokes and had a sharp tongue. I see now that she's both.

The sweet girl with more demons than most grown men and the vixen that drives my brother mad.

Too much trouble if you ask me.

He'll wake up soon.

How do I tell her that I can't feel him? It's fucking weird, and some of the things people say about twin intuition and all that shit are made up, but not this. I've always felt a connection to him, even when he was away. Even when he was mad. I don't feel it today.

Most normal people would come up with a lie to give her comfort, but compassion has never come easy to me. The truth hurts, but in the long run, the lie is the one that does the most damage. A truth can heal, but the lie stays with you. It changes you. If you let it, it could even destroy you. I'd rather speak the truth, no matter how many bitches I offend. How many hearts I break.

I open my mouth to tell her the truth. “There—”

A slow intake of breath leaves Fallon’s mouth. “Is that Cara? When did that happen?”

I follow her gaze to the TV, and there she is.

My doll.

My little monster.

Walking down a red carpet, the same color as her hair, holding hands with another man.

That little manipulative—

I turn the volume up just enough to hear but not enough that it disturbs my brother.

“Growing social media sensation turned supermodel makes her first red carpet appearance, accompanied by a mystery man. The lovely couple was all smiles as they posed for the camera, and we couldn’t help but notice a huge diamond on her ring finger. Does this mean what we think? Is the young supermodel engaged to be married?”

It takes everything in me not to grab my gun and shoot the fucking TV. Cara Mia Volpe.

You wanted my attention.

You have it, baby girl.

You’re going to regret this.

“I saw the way she used to look at you. God, I couldn’t see back then what she saw in you.”

My eyes never leave my Mia, watching her through the TV, but I’m all ears. I don’t particularly care for anyone’s opinion of me. I’m me, and if someone doesn’t like it, they can fuck themselves in the ass with a crowbar.

“But I see it now.”

“What do you see?”

“The heart behind the monster.”

FALLON

THE STORY OF US

“You can’t leave me. This is not our end.” – Val

I find myself singing my favorite Taylor song under my breath, in a cracked, breaking voice.

It’s been seventy-two hours since that godawful day.

Seventy-two hours since I haven’t seen those baby blues staring back at me. I haven’t heard his voice. Haven’t felt the touch of his skin on mine or tasted the sweet taste of his lips.

After the accident, he lost almost forty percent of his blood. At that stage, his heart couldn’t properly maintain blood pressure. His organs started to fail without an adequate amount of blood and fluids. He passed out and slipped into a coma after being brought back to life twice due to cardiac arrest.

It’s been horrible.

I’m scared.

I’m scared he’ll let go.

Swim, baby.

God, this hurts.

I would rather have him hate me for the rest of his life and live than the other way around.

Every time I close my eyes, I replay everything that happened.

Caleb’s appearance at the cabin and his cruel intentions.

The fight.

The struggle for the knife.

Me thinking it would all be alright. Confident in the fact that everything would be fine because there’s no one from my past left.

How naive I was.

Nothing is ever that easy for us.

Then it all becomes blurry as I relive the moment he looked at me with goodbye on the tip of his tongue and a knife sticking from his stomach. I still feel the blood that poured from the wound staining his shirt in my hands.

Now, here I am, holding his hand, hoping and praying he doesn't let go of mine. He looks so fragile with wires, tubes, monitors, and machines all over him.

I hate this.

I hate this for him.

I'm back in the city with the people I love holding my hand and showing their support, but all I want is to turn back time and go back to the cold and beautiful cabin with the man that owns my soul.

He doesn't belong here. He doesn't deserve another fucking scar. He deserves beauty and happy days. Not this.

Not this cold and plain room in a hospital.

"Fallon." A strong and feminine voice whispers from behind me. I look over my shoulder, still holding onto his cold hand, and find the middle Parisi sister and Valentino's only friend, Kadra, holding the door open for me and gesturing for me to follow her.

I know of her, but I don't know her. Not really.

I know what happened to her.

If anyone understands Valentino's pain, it would be her.

I don't want to leave his side. I haven't left since the moment Lorenzo flew us here alongside the paramedics. I've been back two days, and I haven't even seen my nephew, Roman, but I did get to hug Andrea. This was not how I imagined our reunion, but I was grateful to have her during this time.

Kadra is not the first one to visit him.

His brother and father were here too.

I bend to kiss his forehead, and my heart clenches when I feel him grow colder than before. "See, lost boy, they're all here for you. Come back to us. Come back to me." I can't hold back the silent sob that leaves me when there's no response like all the other times before.

He'll come back.

He's the strongest person I know. We were written in the stars, and love stories like ours never end. There are sad chapters, but in the end, there is

always a happily ever after. I know this. I know him.

Even when he hated me, he didn't leave me alone.

I kiss his hand one more time before I stand from the seat and follow Kadra outside, leaving my heart behind in that white and cold hospital room.

"Come," she grabs my arm, and I don't dwell on how awkward this is. We've barely spoken two words to each other before, but I guess this is what tragedy does. It brings people together. I grab her hand and let her guide me. Her hand is small and steady.

She leads me to a waiting room. No, a chapel. The hospital chapel. Front row facing a wooden cross, lit by the stained, colorful glass in burning hues of yellow and crimson.

Kadra doesn't kneel in prayer but stands tall and strong with her back to the cross. It's weird seeing someone like her here in the house of God. All his children are welcome here, is what everyone preaches. The Lord loves all his children but Lorenzo and Kadra have tested him lately.

It's a miracle the small chapel hasn't gone up in flames.

It feels weird.

I haven't been inside a church since my father died.

That was the last time I visited the Lord's home.

If I'm blatantly honest I don't believe in God. In an all-mighty vengeful God that stands by and watches how his children are being slain by monsters by the hour. I do not.

I don't consider myself an atheist, but I don't see eye to eye with religion.

But today, I kneel for him.

Today, I believe in something—a force bigger than us with the capability to bring me back my Valentino.

I plea.

Desperately.

Intensely.

Sincerely.

Please.

Don't take him too.

I remain kneeling on the floor, praying to anyone that hears me.

Minutes seem to pass before Kadra Parisi clears her throat and hands me what I think is a bible. I didn't see this coming.

I never thought of her as a holy woman or a believer of the sacred word of God, but when I take the heavy book in my hands, I notice it is not a bible

but a proof copy of someone's manuscript.

"The words of a stubborn man in love." She says before she turns to leave. I frown when I read the title and the author's name.

Blasphemous by A. A. Turner.

Why would she—

The loud clicking of heels hitting the floor stops. "I don't believe in love, but you two almost make me want to believe there are happy endings after soul-crushing tragedies."

The chapel's door slams shut as soon as she steps outside the small room.

Looking down at the book, I open it and flip the pages until I see the dedication. My bruised heart skips a beat.

To the one that I hate. To the one that I can't help but love. The woman that owns my sinful and depraved soul. Come home.

A tear falls onto the page, but I can't help but smile through the pain.

The man I love.

The man that has my heart in his cold hands.

My twin flame.

My soul.

A beautiful man with many stories to tell. My Valentino is A. A. Turner.

I laugh like a madwoman as tears fall. I cry, and I laugh inside of God's home.

He did it.

He's an author.

He writes beautiful stories of lost humans that find their home in the shadows and the valley of broken dreams.

I will never get tired of learning new things about you, Valentino Alexander. Come back to me and surprise me with a new side of you every day.

Come back.

JANUARY

A BLEEDING HEART

FEBRUARY

A BROKEN PROMISE

MARCH

BLOOMING HOPE

FALLON

JUST THE TWO OF US

“I don’t want a happy ending. It ends. I want a happy forever.” – F

Months pass.
He clings to life. They tell me not to get my hopes up, that some people stay in a coma for months, even years. I don’t care. I don’t believe in much, but dammit, I believe in him. In us. Morning, night—hours, days. It’s all a blur to me.

This feels like a never-ending nightmare. I hate it here. I hate that he’s here. There’s cafeteria food I don’t even taste. Hard chairs in the hall where I sit while his family has time with him.

I’ve spent countless hours in his room. Things beep and hiss, whir and pump, and drip. I find myself alone with him day in and day out. The nurses come and go, but nothing seems to change. There’s improvement, but nothing major. He won’t wake up.

The hospital seems even sadder at nighttime. It’s eerily quiet on this side of it. The blinds are shut, and the fluorescent lights are always the same, dimmed. The room is white and void of all colors. The Christmas decorations are long gone.

I drop my camera down on the bed. I haven’t taken a single photograph. My muse has gone, and I don’t think I’ll be getting it back as long as he’s in a coma. Nothing interests me anymore. I’m sitting on the chair next to his bed, holding his hand. He’s no longer intubated. He’s breathing on his own.

That’s an improvement.

“Beautiful man?” I whisper. I talk to him every day, and nothing changes. He lays there looking so peaceful that it hurts my heart. *Why won’t he come*

back? “Can you hear me? Are you here with me?” He doesn’t move. But I feel it. Feel him. He doesn’t move, or stir, or twitch. What I feel is...him. His spirit, watching from somewhere. Feeling me. Hearing me. I know it’s my silly hope. But I feel him listening to me. “I’m not ready to say goodbye,” I whisper. “I know it’s selfish of me, baby. I know you’ve been fighting your whole life, and you’re probably tired. I should tell you that it’s okay if you want to go. That your departure will kill me, but I’ll understand. I should be selfless and let you go. But we’re both selfish. I’m the same as you. I...I don’t want you to. I want you to come back to me. Please. For me.” I choke. “I want more time. More memories. More memories to capture with my camera. More of your poetic words. More magic. More everything with you, and nothing at all. Just you and me.” My voice cracks, and I hear myself break. “Please,” I whisper.

I cry, holding onto his hand.

“Please,” I repeat. “Please come back to me.” I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heart. The steady rhythm gives me hope.

How long I’m there, I don’t know.

Just come back.

I don’t want to do this without you.

I can’t lose you, too.

Not you.

Never you.

FALLON

REAL LOVE

**“A love like ours?
There’s no stopping it.” – Val**

I *love you, witch.*

Alexander? Where are you? Can you hear me?

Soft and warm hands grasp my shoulders. “Fallon, come on.” Andrea. I blink awake and find myself back in hell again. A world where I don’t see his eyes and don’t feel his love.

Looking around the room, it’s still all the same. I’m in the chair next to his bed, slumped forward on the bed, Valentino’s novel in hand.

I read to him.

Beep...beep...beep...beep

I want to drown out the noise of the machines keeping him alive. I should be grateful for them because the sounds mean he’s still alive. The sounds are just as reassuring as they are haunting.

My eyes leave Andrea, and I look at the man that has been haunting me for years and is now just being stubborn. He won’t wake up. Doesn’t he know there’s a beautiful life waiting for him? Does the place he is at feel better than our reality? This is driving me insane, and I hate how sometimes I feel myself losing hope.

He’s the same. Thinner and pale. I don’t like seeing him this way. It hurts.

My friend pulls at me. “Fallon, babe, come with me, please.” I stare at her—dark circles under her eyes, hair in a loose bun, slacks with a matching white sweater.

“Where? Why?” There are nurses behind her, waiting. Her father,

Cassius, is behind them, waiting outside the room. “They want to do some tests.” I stand up and frown her way. “Tests?” I look their way and find the doctor with the nurses. He’s wearing a white lab coat, stethoscope around his neck, and he’s carrying an iPad. An older Latino male with thick-rimmed glasses. He looks at me, at Valentino, at the monitors, and then his iPad.

But says nothing.

“Come.” She pulls me back from Valentino, and I allow myself to be drawn out of the room. The nurses instantly jump into action, turning off the machines, disconnecting the tubes and leads, but they keep them in place. They don’t remove them. I watch as they wheel him out of the room and down the hall. The doctor follows them, making notes on his iPad.

One of the older nurses pauses at a set of doors, taps a keycard, and then they’re wheeling him inside and away from me.

Andrea, Lucan, Lorenzo, Cassius, Kadra... we’re the only ones in the waiting room. It’s silent. A TV is playing a rerun of The Big Bang Theory, but not even my favorite nerds can cheer me up.

“Why are they running tests?” I ask. “Did they find something? Is something wrong?” Cassius clears his throat, opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. His eyes are red, with dark bags under them. He looks... distraught. Broken. He tries again. “He believes he should be waking up by now.” I’m not following. “They’re going to scan him. Just to see what’s going on.”

An hour later, the doctor tells us what I’ve known all along.

Vitals are normal.

He’s healthy.

He’s just in a deep sleep. A profound state of unconsciousness.

The doctor believes Valentino is there. He’s not brain dead. He’s healthy but unresponsive to the outside world.

Stubborn man.

Wake up.

There’s so much to live for.

FALLON

DON'T LET GO

“Don’t walk into the light, motherfucker.” – L

Time spent praying and talking passes sludge-slow and in a fast-forward blur. “Fallon.” Cassius says from beside me. He’s sitting on the other side of the hospital bed, fidgeting with something in his palm. I rub the sleep from my eyes, sit up straight and look his way. “Yes?”

“Do you love him?” I nod without hesitation. “So much it hurts at times.”

His knowing eyes search mine. “His mother passed, as you know. Much too young, much too soon.” There’s sadness in his voice, but not like the other times before when he mentioned Andrea and the twins’ mother.

“He loves her even when he doesn’t want to. I know it.” He nods and has a faint, sad smile on his face. “Our love was pure and real, but it was hard. Love shouldn’t be that hard. It felt like all odds were against us. When she passed, I knew nothing in our world would ever be the same. She was my daughter’s everything and a ghost that haunts my sons.” He opens his hand, revealing the diamond ring Lorenzo gave me not long ago. He must’ve gotten it from the cabin where I left it behind. I haven’t thought about it since. “I remember the day he got this for you. He didn’t see me, but I was there. He looked so young— too young for that kind of commitment, but there he was, in one of the Royal stores with his credit card in hand, buying a diamond ring for the girl he loved. I was so damn proud. Because I knew if my son was thinking about forever with someone, it meant that he knew love. Real love, and even in a deep state of addiction, I still loved them. I still wanted what was best for them. Valentino, he’s the most like me, but the better version. A stronger version of myself.”

Valentino's father grabs my hand in his, and I notice for the first time in years how different he looks from the man he was when I first met him. He somehow looks younger. I guess that is what sobriety and a healthy lifestyle do to you. I'm glad. Cassius is a good man, a scary man, but he loves his children. I see it. "Don't let go of him. Fight for each other. Sometimes love is a battlefield, but make sure you're always on the same side. Don't lose what you found. True love is hard to come by." He hands me the ring and looks back at his son. "He's survived worse. This won't be the end of him."

He rises from his seat, walks towards me, and lays a soft kiss on the top of my head before stepping back. "I'm glad you're home. I'm glad he got his head out of his ass and did right by you."

With that, he turns to leave but not before I tell him, "He loves you, too, you know."

Cassius blinks. "I don't deserve them."

The sadness coming off him in waves is tragic.

Who am I to judge? He made some shitty decisions, but he found his way back, and that's what matters in life. Finding your way back to the light, to the ones you love.

Cassius leaves, shutting the door softly behind him.

I unclasp Valentino's chain from my neck and slip the engagement ring through the chain before putting it on again.

"Our story is not over yet, babe." I grab his hand, and I don't miss the subtle movement of his middle finger.

Just like him to give me the finger when he's unconscious.

I smile, trying hard not to get my hopes up because, just like the movies, it doesn't mean much when a patient moves a finger. Still, I press the button that connects to the nurse's station and hope to God things will look up from here on out.

VALENTINO

I LOVE YOU

**“Not even God
can keep me away from you.” – Val**

“**T**hose who dream by day are cognizant of many things.” I listen to the poetic words of Poe coming from the sweetest melodic voice.

Then she softly whispers my words.

The words of a man in love and in pain.

Hold onto me,

Wrap your chaotic soul around my broken parts and let me go deeper into your world.

Feel me slithering inside your fragile heart as my toxic love burns your lungs with each exhale of my name.

My words on her lips are music to my ears.

Everything is blurry, but I concentrate on her voice. My name is a whisper followed by a sob.

“Alexander...”

It’s her.

My girl.

I’m surrounded by darkness, and everything is silent except for her voice guiding me through the dark.

I hold onto her words. I follow her pleas.

Her voice drags me upward, away from the dark, cold nothing, and into the blinding colors.

“I figured it out, you know. After all these years, I cracked your code. 143. I love you.”

With violent, crushing suddenness, awareness returns in full.

Fallon.

The library.

Her room.

The cabin—our bed... The Polaroids. Her on the back of my bike. The cabin. The loss. The pain. Our love.

It all replays in my head like a beautiful and tragic movie.

Making love to my beautiful girl in the middle of my living room, surrounded by a dying fire, as snow fell, and the outside world faded around us.

Glimpses of Fallon, and her sweet voice, whispering: “Valentino, I know you can hear me. I love you. I need you. I want you. Come back to me, baby. Please.” She sounds so tired, so sad. I could hug her and kiss her and tell her I love her and let her rest with me. If only I could find my way out of this darkness. *Wake up, motherfucker.*

Up.

Find a way out.

“I love you, baby. Come back.”

She loves me.

God and the Devil know how deeply I love her.

Why can't I answer her?

Why can't I find my way back to her?

Did I die? Am I a ghost, trapped in nothingness and forced to listen to her sad voice but never see her, never speak to her again?

I feel pain, though.

The pain is a good sign—it means I'm alive. As long as there's pain, there's a possibility. I drown in the raging ocean of her sweet chaos and cling to a spark of hope.

FALLON

FOREVER TOGETHER

“See, my love. We fit perfectly together after all.” – F

The machines hooked to him start beeping rapidly. The noise startles me.
What is happening?

I watch as his chest rises and falls. I settle his hand over mine. “Valentino?” Another finger twitches. “Val?” My voice cracks. “I’m here. Come back now.” Another twitch. I feel his finger tightening against my hand. “Come back to me, baby.” A subtle movement, then another finger twitches. “That’s it, beautiful man.” I kiss his hand, careful to avoid the IV insertion near his wrist. “Come back to me. I love you, Valentino. Wake up and...and when you’re better, we’re going to get married. In a creepy and lonely castle, like the ones you like so much. You and your brother and your father—I’ve adopted him as my dad, too, by the way—and Andrea and Lucan. They’ve been here the whole time. Roman has played you all the latest TikTok videos and has even asked about you. He made you a drawing. He’s so talented. It’s unreal. They’re all here for you. Don’t you see? They all love you. Even your psycho brother.”

Twitch, and then his whole hand squeezes mine. “Yeah, that’s right. You and me, babe. We’re going to get married and live happily ever after like all my romcom books. I’m thinking of changing my name but keeping mine only for business purposes. What do you think? I could hyphenate. Fallon James-Nicolasi.” I kiss the back of his hand again, the snake tattoos there. I keep talking to him because maybe he’ll follow my voice and find his way back.

Please just come back.

His hand tightens around mine.

I don't think twice before I'm using my other hand to press the emergency button to call for a nurse. This is an improvement. There's hope. I feel it.

While I wait for the nurse to appear, I bend down and kiss his head.

"Nicolasi," I hear. It's a hoarse whisper followed by a groan. "Fallon Nicolasi."

My heart skips a beat.

Everything seems to fade away.

I step back and look at him.

Thank you. I say to whoever listened to my prayers.

His eyes are open, blue, and perfect. "Hi," I murmur.

"Hi." He squeezes my hand and looks into my eyes. "You read to me."

I nod, trying to hold back the tears. Tears of happiness.

"I heard it." His eyes close again as if he's still so tired, that talking and keeping his eyes open takes great effort. "It drew me back to you. I followed your voice."

I sob. "You came back to me." He repeatedly blinks, trying to adjust to the light after months of being asleep. He did it. He's back.

Valentino squeezes my hand in reply. Then, with obvious effort, he kept his eyes open and trained on me. "I-I love you, witch."

I laugh.

Not because it's funny but because I'm filled with joy at this moment. I feel like my heart will burst in my chest.

"Good, baby. Because you're stuck with me."

Valentino smiles, "Good." His eyes search mine, blue and fiery with love. "I want you to be forever mine. I want to be your everything." He raises his hand, takes his time, and touches the ring hanging from my neck. With effort, he pulls it and holds the ring on his palm. He recognizes it immediately. "How did you get this?" He says while holding the ring between his finger and thumb.

"Your brother gave it to me and told me everything back in the cabin, the day you went to the city. Then your father found it after the incident and gave it to me."

He nods and holds my hand while looking into my eyes. I can't believe this is real. He's here. He's with me. He came back to me.

I watch as he takes a deep breath. He still looks weak, but the small smile

on his face makes my heart settle. Everything will be okay.

Where is the nurse?

“Fallon, I love you. Marry me. As soon as I can leave this hospital, marry me. Please.”

I choke on a sob, nodding. Holding my left hand out to him, I say, “Hey, I asked you first.”

“Yeah,” he whispers, throat thick, eyes burning. “Yeah, you did.”

He heard me.

I bend over him and touch my lips to his. “I love you. It’s crazy, but I do.”

“Not crazy,” he clutches my hand and gently pulls me down towards him. His lips brush mine. His eyes meet mine while footsteps echo in the hall.

“We have forever together, now,” he whispers to me and smiles.

“Forever together,” I murmured back. “I like the sound of that.”

EPILOGUE UNE

TATTOO

**“Your bitch is hot. A little bit crazy,
but hot.” – L**

Lorenzo grins at me. “Are you sure about this? If you divorce the bastard, this will be a bitch to remove.” His hand with the tattoo needle hovers about an inch over my left hand.

I don’t know why I chose him to do this. He scares the hell out of me. Even when we’re on good terms, he still manages to freak me out from time to time. Okay, I’m lying. Lorenzo creeps me out all the damn time. He’s the best, though.

“Shut the fuck up. If you ask her one more time, I’ll shove your tattoo gun up your ass.” My husband snaps at his brother from his seat next to me. My husband. How surreal it is to say that. We got married a month ago, in a small chapel in Vegas. A man dressed as Darth Vader married us, and both Kadra and Andrea were our witnesses. We both agreed we didn’t need a big fancy wedding. That’s not our style.

I look at his hands, and a feeling of pride takes over me when I see my name tattooed on his ring finger with a black snake, posing as a wedding band. It came out beautiful. Lorenzo is a great tattoo artist. I knew he gave Valentino most of his tattoos, but today I saw for myself how talented he is.

They continue bickering, and I roll my eyes at my brother-in-law. “I want mine to mirror Val’s but make the snake with the white.”

My brother-in-law looks at me with a bored expression on his face. God, it really creeps me out how similar they look now with the tattoos they both share. The only difference is that Valentino got rid of the black hair and dyed

it light blue.

A harsh voice sounds in the distance, and I follow it. The TV is on, and senator Kenton is giving a press conference. I don't miss the tall blonde bombshell standing by his side looking every bit like the ice queen she was when I first met her.

Arianna Parisi.

I haven't seen her since Andrea's eighteen birthday. I never really knew her. I only know the person she showed the world, but I know well how we tend to harden our hearts and build iron walls around it just to save ourselves from heartache and hide who we really are. She might be an ice queen and I think that hasn't change but there's something in her eyes now that there wasn't before.

A light.

A sparkle.

Maybe she—

“Out of all the designs you could ask for your first tattoo, you ask for this shit? What's up with the snake fetish?” Lorenzo drawls as he keeps outlining the snake. “What's so special about the ugly little fuckers.” I find it hilarious that he shivers every time he mentions snakes. “I mean, they're fucking ugly, and those bitches are poisonous.” He mumbles but doesn't look up from the drawing.

Both Val and I grin at each other as he holds my hand the entire time. I look into his eyes, and the pain from the need fades away.

That night I tattooed his name on my body, then we went back to the cabin. There we hid away from the world. It was just us.

We made love for hours, and when we were done, and I put my head on top of his chest and listened to the sweet beating of his heart, I knew I was home.

He gave me hell, but he showed me heaven.

Twin flames.

That's what it's called.

He's mine.

My soul.

My heart.

My everything.

He gives me the world, and I try my best to fill his world with love and magic every day.

“I love you.”

“Forever?”

“And ever, babe.”

Nine months later, he gave me the greatest gift. My heart grew two sizes, and life got a whole lot more chaotic.

The most wonderful chaos.

He gave me twin flames.

EPILOGUE DUE

VALENTINO

**“Daddy,
Kael is being a doo-doo head.” – Poe**

Years later
“Dada!” Our son totters up to me, wobbling on unsteady legs, and falls against my shins, clinging to my pant legs and grinning up at me.

“Up.” I pick him up, toss him gently up in the air, and catch him against my chest. “Hi, Bud. Did you get it?” He has one chubby little fist clenched tight. “Got it.”

“Let me see.” He frowns. “Mommy’s wing.” He means mommy’s ring. Vade Alexander Nicolasi has got to be the cutest kid in this motherfucking world alongside his sister. I’m not biased. He really is one gorgeous kid. He’s all his mother, while Poe is all me.

Our kids.

Our reasons.

“Do you remember what you have to do?”

He thinks long and hard before he nods. A man of few words, my kid. “Will Poo go? He can't pronounce his sister’s name yet, so he calls her Poo. Even when we correct him, he still refers to her as Poo. Little shit he is. “Now, show me what you have to do once we join mommy and your sister?”

He sighs as if the weight of the task is too heavy. “Oh-kayyyy,” he grumps. His little fist opens and reveals two wedding bands. One black for me and one white silver for his mother. Yin and yang. Vade looks at me expectantly.

“We marry now?” I laugh and kiss his head. I never thought I would feel

this happy again, this full of life and love. My witch and twin terrors fill my life with happy moments and meaningful days. There's not a day that goes by that I wish for death. I don't have dark thoughts anymore. I'm not perfect, and I'm still fucked in the head, but I'm fully theirs.

Their protector.

I will lay my life down just to keep the smiles on their faces.

Fallon and I got engaged at the hospital the day I woke up from a deep coma, and we decided not to wait any longer. We flew to Vegas, eloped, and months later, she got pregnant with the twins. We decided to postpone the wedding until they were old enough to experience the day with us.

The days after I woke up from the come were tough on me, but she was with me every step of the way. She never left me on my own, and even now, we're inseparable. Some might think of us as unhealthy with how obsessed we are with each other, but I don't really give a fuck. We're happy. She smiles all the time now and only cries when she watches the farewell episode of The Big Bang Theory or when she reads one of those depressing as fuck books, tearjerkers she calls them. She also cries when the kids do nice things for her or tell her they love her. My girl didn't have what we have now back then. We both never had that. A family.

Now, here we are.

After years apart, heartbreak, pain, misunderstandings, and mistakes, we still found our way back to each other. Back to life, and in the process of that, we got blessed with the missing parts of us.

Mini versions of us.

Vade and Poe.

"Yeah, bud. Let's go marry, mom." Vade is a mini version of his mother. He loves bugs. Bikes and loud cars. He loves it when I read to him. He laughs and dreams in color. We made sure of that. He has a good life. Fallon and I make sure our kids believe in fairytales and Santa Claus. That their lives only consist of magical moments. Poe, unlike her brother, hates it when I read to her and instantly falls asleep. The only thing she reads is her mother's comic books. She's full of joy, wonder, and an impossible amount of boundless energy.

Having had enough, Vade wiggles in my arms, and I put him down. He stands there at my feet for a moment, looking around, hands clasped at his chest. He looks up at me and smiles just because. That's all his mother. Sweet as can be.

But then the little hellion switches gears. He spies his twin sister, lets out a positively evil little cackle, and takes off at top toddler speed, hands outstretched. Poe sees him coming at full speed and lets out a high-pitched screech before she too runs off to the garden.

I follow their laughter until I spot them standing next to their mother.

It takes me a moment to catch my breath. Just like every time I lay eyes on her, she steals the breath out of my lungs.

Just at the sight of her, my world spins on its axis.

My dream and nightmare all in one crazy, chaotic package.

A dream come true.

My woman.

My everything.

My witch.

Standing there wearing a long silk black gown, her hair newly dyed silver, and a crown of flowers on top of her head. She looks like a dark fairy, a siren, or some fucking mystical creature. The perfect balance of the girl she was and the woman she grew up to be.

Weird.

Sweet.

Brave.

Mine.

The woman who gave me the most precious gifts. My blessings.

Our children.

Poe stands next to her, wearing a black dress, her short black hair curled at the ends, and a tiara made of flowers sits at the top of her head. She looks just like her mother today, even though she's a mini version of me. From my hair color to the biggest blue eyes I've ever seen.

My daughter is a mini fairy.

My baby fairy with doe eyes and a shy smile.

I don't worry about our children.

They don't know pain or misery.

All they know is love.

"Daddy!" She ducks her brother's advances and runs towards me with her hands raised above her head. My heart skips a beat. We made her. We made them. Twins.

Half and half.

I scoop her up in my arms as I near the mother of my children. My best

friend. The love of my life.

Vade holds onto his mother's arm with a big goofy smile on his face. And I know then that I did something right in my past life to have such a perfect blessing in my life. Such beauty close to my dark heart.

I am no saint.

I'm a sinner.

I'm still the cleaner of Detroit city.

I've claimed more souls than the Grim Reaper, but when I get home, I'm just Dad.

I'm a protector and a lover.

A small chubby hand slaps my left cheek, trying to get my attention. I stare into my baby girl's eyes, and I can't help the small smile that takes over my face. "Up." She points her small index finger to the sky, making me look up. Snow is starting to fall.

This city is hauntingly beautiful with its gothic vibe. Almost everything has gothic architecture and art.

Cologne, Germany.

Fallon was invited to showcase her work in one of the most prestigious art galleries in Europe. I'm so fucking proud of her. She turned her pain into beautiful and inspiring art. She's been working tirelessly for months, and it's now paying off. She woke me up one night and told me she wanted to do something more meaningful with her life. I saw it in her face how lost she was at the time. She opened up, told me her idea, and like everything she does, she had my full support.

She posted her story on her social media. She opened up and let millions of strangers inside her world. A world where not everything is as perfect and glamorous as social media paints it to be.

She got recognized thanks to my sister, but she wanted to do better with the platform that she didn't ask for but got stuck with.

That same night she received thousands of messages from people who could relate to her struggles, and that's how her Imperfect Creatures project came to be.

It all started with a social media post, and it has grown into what it is today. An art gallery showcasing hundreds of photos of different types of men and women from all around the world. Some are portraits and other full-body shots. Whatever the person is comfortable with.

This morning, both she and my sister signed the final papers on a new

charity. They're advocating mental health through art and fashion.

It's been a success with all the support from the media. It became something bigger when Hollywood's latest sweetheart, Cara Mia Volpe, shared about it. Lucan's sister has become an overnight sensation and is taking Hollywood by storm.

Looking at my wife now, I can't help the pride that swells in my chest. She was indeed one of those girls.

One that changed the world.

She certainly saved mine.

"We did it." She whispers as she scoops Vade off the ground and sits him on her hip, hugging him to her chest. I meet her in the middle and take her lips in mine. Both our kids squished between our bodies. Fallon breaks the kiss and smiles brightly up at me. "We didn't drown. We made it to the shore."

I kiss her, quickly, softly. She shakes her head, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I love you, Mrs. Nicolasi." I pass a thumb across her cheek. "I can't fucking wait to share all my days with you in this lifetime and the next."

"Daddy, bad word." My daughter whispers between us, pushing her small fist upwards, making grabby hands at me. She wants candy. Every time one of us curses in front of the kids, we have to give them a prize. We opted for candy instead of money. My nephew and Fallon's Godson, Roman, is already breaking my bank with how much money he gets out of me every time I see him. I grab Poe's little hand, bring it to my mouth and gently bite her like a monster, making her break into a fit of giggles.

Music to my ears.

The best sound, and the sweetest melody, is their laughter.

"Here you go, mommy." Vade sticks his hand out and reveals our wedding rings. "Do you want to marry dad, mommy?" We both laugh at that. Fallon smiles down at our son and gives him her hand. Vade doesn't wait a second before pushing the white band up his mother's finger.

We share a knowing smile.

"D-do you daddy want to marry mommy?" A sweet voice whispers shyly. My best girl. I give Poe my hand and watch as she does the same as her brother and successfully pushes the ring up my finger. When she notices that she succeeded, she smiles up at me.

Fuck, this is life.

I almost lost this.

I almost lost heaven while holding onto my hellish past.

“Fuck, my balls are freezing. Couldn’t you bastards choose a warmer location?” A loud voice booms from my right, and when I turn, I find my twin standing there with a smile on his face. My brother might be a sick motherfucker, but he shows up for me. For my wife. For my kids. He might not say it, but I feel it when I look into his eyes. He feels. He feels more than he realizes. He’s capable of love, and he is worthy of it, too. Even with his scary-as-fuck attitude, my kids don’t fear him. They love their uncle. Especially my girl, Poe. They have a bond, and I’m never jealous. I’m glad. My girl is melting the Devil’s heart.

“Watch your mouth. Little ears are present.” My friend and brother-in-law, Lucan, says as he joins us with my nephew and sister in tow.

“Pick up your balls from the floor, why don’t you?” Lorenzo claps back before stepping forward and snatching my Poe from my arms.

They flew thousands of miles to be here for Fallon. For us.

The wind blows, and I look up at the sky. There are gray clouds, but I see the sun peeking through them, shining down on us.

Instantly, I think of her.

My mother.

She’s watching over us.

I didn’t know her.

I longed for her.

I cried for her.

But with every letter I read, I get to know more about the woman she was. With every letter, I feel the love she had for all of us. She didn’t get the chance to hold me in her arms again, but I feel her in every hug I give my children and in every gentle touch.

I look around me and say a silent prayer. Not to God, but her.

Thank you.

Thank you for sending them to me.

Feeling small hands tugging on my black slacks, I look down. There, I find my nephew Roman smiling up at me. He doesn’t say much, and he doesn’t need to. The final piece of my heart healed when this little boy ran up to me the night I mustered up the courage to visit them and try to build a relationship with him and my sister. She welcomed me with open arms. They both did.

“I’m fucking starving. Let’s get something to eat, yeah?” His father,

Lucan, says before he scoops his son up and sits him on top of his shoulders.
“What do you kids want?”

“Pizza!”

“Cotton wandy!”

Vade and Roman shout at the same time. Then Poe mumbles something, but I can't quite hear it because she has her face shoved into her uncle's neck. Her voice is muffled. I can barely make out the words.

Lorenzo's face softens, and he shouts. “Chocolate cake it is.” Both Vade and Roman groan out loud, annoyed with Poe. It's all bullshit because those two love chocolate cake.

And that's what we do.

We all walk side by side in the streets of Cologne, looking for a bakery.

I take my wife's hand in mine and hug my kids tight while I listen to the ones I love laugh and joke around us.

I made it.

I got my happy.

I think of my grandfather and how he made my life hell just because I was different from him.

Fuck you, motherfucker.

You didn't ruin us like you did our parents.

We're still standing.

We're stronger together.

We're loved.

We found heaven.

Yeah, I found heaven in the heart of a witch.

I look at her again and tell her with my eyes what I'm feeling.

I love you.

She mouths back, *I love you more.*

Yeah, this is fucking heaven.

The wind blows, snow falls while we walk side by side. I found her two times in this lifetime, and I'll find her in the next.

My heart.

My girl.

A rare beauty who stole my black soul.

My witch.

BONUS CHAPTER

FALLON

“My kids are my legacy.” – Val
THE TWINS ARE 7-YEAR-OLDS

“I don’t want to look silly, mommy.” My six-year-old whispers as she looks up at me while I’m adjusting a matching green elf headband on her small head. I finished adding the last pin to hold the headband in place and look down at her. My girl is as beautiful as she is eccentric, from the silly hairdos she loves to her mismatched socks. I love seeing the world through my twin babies’ eyes. Everything feels new and exciting, nothing like when I was growing up after dad died. My babies know only magic and wonder. We make sure nothing bad touches them and if something ever does threaten their hearts, I’ll be there to pick them up from the floor and help them in every way I can. I would pulverize anything and anyone that ever tries to hurt them. When I was young, I didn’t have the strength to fight my demons, but for my kids I’ll become the very worst one to keep them from harm.

My Vade is resilient, strong, and reckless at times. I both love and fear how much he acts like his uncle at times. I want him to be able to handle whatever life throws at him, but I also want him to grow up to be a good man. Luckily, he has the best man in this world guiding his every step.

My Poe, though. She’s a dreamer.

She’s shy and sometimes gets lost in her head. She’s the perfect combination of both of us. I hate how she sometimes hides from the world and is afraid to speak her mind. I would never change her. She’s too good for this world. She’s magic. They both are.

I drop down to her level, so she knows that we're equals. I'm her mother, but I'm also her friend. I will always have her back. No matter what.

Grabbing her chin, I make her look at me. Her brilliant blue eyes, just like her father's stare into mine, and I feel my heart stop dead in my chest. The three of them have the ability to steal the breath out of my lungs and make my feet leave the ground.

"You, Poe Vaeda Nicolasi, are magic. Don't you ever forget that." She smiles shyly at me and kisses my nose. She gives the sweetest kisses. "Be silly, my love. The world needs more laughter. It needs more extraordinary humans like you."

I wait for her to respond, but just like her father, words are not her strong suit. He has no problem writing them down and becoming a bestselling author and kicking ass in the charts with every release, but when it comes to telling people other than us how he feels, he just freezes. He shuts down.

Poe is so much like her dad, even when he convinced himself that she's all me.

Feeling her small arms around my neck, I release the breath I've been holding. For so long, I've been dreading the day that my issues would affect my kids, but it hasn't happened. The voices in my head used to tell me how I would drown the people I love in my misery. It was wrong. I got help. I'm still fighting every day to stay afloat for my humans. They deserve a mommy and wife that doesn't give up. That fights against her past trauma. I get up every day, look at their faces and find the strength to keep evolving into a better me. A healthier me.

"I love you more than chocolate cake, mom." My daughter whispers in my ear, successfully melting my heart for the millionth time since she took her first breath.

"I love you more than comic books, sweet girl." And I do. I love her more than life itself. Love both of my babies.

I hope you're proud of me, dad.

I made these perfect creatures.

I hope you're happy, Ziggy.

I have a good life.

The best life.

As I hold my daughter tighter to my body, I close my eyes and imagine the girl I was before. The one who spent years being abused by her mother and begged to end her misery daily.

I'm taken back to that time, and for the first time in years, I don't shove the memory back. I let it rise to the surface. It doesn't hold power over me anymore.

Past

"Spit the food out, Alicia," Mother snapped without taking her eyes from the wad of cash in her hand. Money doesn't come easy now that Tim's gone. She has to work harder for it, and I mean longer hours on her back with her legs spread wide open.

I keep chewing, not giving a fuck what she wants. I lost count of the days I've been here, and after the first two beatings, I no longer feel anything. My heart's dead. My mind is broken. I tried to hold on, but the moment I heard Ziggy's loud groans of pain over the phone, I just lost it.

She's keeping me in line by threatening him. He's a defenseless old man that means the world to me, so I'm holding on for him. The first and only time Ziggy called the police to report me missing, mother came down and tortured me by having me listen to Caleb hurting Ziggs. From that day on, I've been doing what I'm told. I heard her on the phone with someone, fighting over me. I don't know what that was all about, but when she ended her call, she told me how I'll be back at the academy in a couple of days.

She told me the date, too.

It's been a year.

A whole year since my heart was ripped out of my chest by both my mother and the boy I loved more than life itself.

So today, I feel reckless. For her to act this way and tell me I'll be back at school after all that she's done is unusual. There has to be more to it.

I keep chewing while I look her way.

I pick up another piece of bread. I hate it, but it annoys her. It's a win in my book.

"I said to fucking spit it out!" Mother growls as she comes my way.

"Fuck y—" The moment the back of her hand meets my cheek, it sends my tired body to the ground with a loud thump. After that, everything becomes blurry as mother grabs my wrist in a painful grip and drags me

across the floor.

The clicking of metal is all I can hear as she adjusts the cuffs on my wrist and binds me to the wall. I watch as she throws all the food and sugary treats she brought down here to torture me in the trash and dumps her hot coffee all over it, successfully ruining it.

“God, I fucking hate you, Alicia. You have no idea what an inconvenience you are.”

I know.

She has told me so since I can first remember.

Mother looks at me over her shoulder and whispers harshly, “I don’t know what he sees in you. What makes you so fucking special. You are not.” With that, she turns the knob and steps outside the basement door.

I release a breath the moment she’s gone. I’ve endured worse than this. One day I’ll be free of her. Of Caleb.

I’ll be free of everything that’s keeping my head below water.

One day I’ll have a good life.

The best life.

I’m brought back to the present by the loud laughter of a seven-year-old with dark hair and green eyes identical to mine.

My little prince.

Looking down, I find my twins staring up at me with bright smiles. Each of them holds a small, wrapped box with a bow on top of it.

“Merry Christmas Eve, mommy.” One shouts and the other whispers, making my heart swell with pride and joy.

I grab both of them and pull them closer to my body. “What’s this? I thought we agreed we wouldn’t open the gifts until Santa left his own under the tree.”

Vade scoffs.

Poe smiles.

Vade knows Santa is make-believe, but like the sweet and protective kid he is, he never told his sister. He’s the protector of her dreams.

“This is from daddy,” Poe whispers and drops her box on my lap.

“And this is from us,” Vade grins and hands me the other box.

Opening the one Poe gave me, I find green diamond earrings. Beautiful ones. This man has bought me every stone known to man. I treasure everything he gives me. The expensive jewelry, the sweet words, and the thoughtful gifts.

I proceed to open the next box. The one Vade gave me and what I find inside makes me tear up.

A silver locket with a photo of my babies inside.

“I-I love this so very much.” I manage to say. I gently drop the jewelry on the bed and haul my kids into my arms. “I love you both so so so much!” I kiss their beautiful faces.

“Yuck,” Vade groans, but I don’t miss the smile on his face.

I release them and grab my gift for the three of them from inside my pocket. “Here, take this to your father.” I shine the box in their direction before Vade snatches it from my hand and runs out of the room to look for his dad. Poe stays behind.

“Mommy, tell me the story of how you met daddy.”

Our story is a long one. Painful too, but so damn beautiful

Looking down at my girl’s small hands tightly holding mine, I smile.

“Once upon a time, there was a lonely princess trapped in a dark castle, she created for herself inside her mind and a ruthless dragon who destroyed her every wall...”

I tell her our story without the dark parts. Maybe one day I’ll tell her everything, but as for now, I’ll only tell her the good things. The beautiful moments. The moments that led me to this day. To this life with them.

“Witch!”

We both look up the moment we hear Val’s shout of surprise.

There he is.

Handsome as ever.

Strong.

Healthy.

Happy.

Him.

“Is it true?”

“Yes.”

“What’s true, mommy?”

“What’s going on?”

I hear my twins say at the same time.

I smile wide and watch each of their faces as I drop my right hand to my stomach.

“Merry Christmas, my loves.”

The twins seem confused, but my husband knows, and his blinding smile makes my heart beat fast.

Settle down, heart. This is our life.

Seven months later we welcomed our newest little monster.

Cassian Antonnio Nicolasi.

A carbon copy of his father and his uncle.

Our dream is complete.

Our children.

Vade, Poe, and Cassian.

The very best of us.

THE END

FOR FALLON AND VALENTINO.
CONTINUE READING TO FIND OUT
WHICH CHARACTER GETS THEIR STORY TOLD NEXT.

Please consider leaving a review. For baby authors like me they're so helpful
and mean the world.

Thank you.

UP NEXT

UNHOLY TRINITY #4

CARA

“THE KING”

CARA AND LORENZO’S STORY IS NEXT, SET IN CARA (UNHOLY TRINITY, #4) A BEST FRIEND TO LOVERS, SECRET ROMANCE & MORE!

AFTERWORD

If you made it this far, thank you.

Thank you for taking a chance on my words.
Taking a chance on Fallon and Valentino.
Their love is not for everyone but it is theirs.
They're perfectly imperfect together.

Please, if you or someone you know ever needs help, follow these links to get more information and seek help. You are a survivor. You are loved. You are worthy.

You are not alone.

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

<https://www.nami.org/help>

ALSO BY ADRIANA BRINNE

[Andrea “The Beginning” \(Holy Trinity, #1\)](#)

[Lucan “The End” \(Holy Trinity, #2\)](#)

[Unholy Night \(Unholy Trinity, #2.5\)](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mami, I love you. Thank you for believing in me even when I feel defeated. Even in my dark days I find strength in you. Te amo.

Gisele, thank you for everything you do for me. From your friendship and from all the advice and beautiful teasers you make for the series. I am so thankful for everything you do to help me and for our chats. Love you!

Elsa, you are a rockstar! Thank you for believing in me and helping me when I had no one in my corner. You are truly special and I am so lucky to have you with me on this journey and so grateful for you. You made my books so much better. Love you so!!

Emma, you are amazing! Thank you for reading this book twice just to help me make it better. I am also grateful for you!

Thank you to everyone that has taken the time to read, review and share my books. You have no idea what it means to me that you took and keep taking chances on my books. Readers, bloggers, tiktokers & bookstagrammers, thank you for all you do. I don't do paid promotions, all my promo comes from you guys. Thank you for all the hard work you do. I am forever thankful.

Thank you all for giving Valentino and Fallon a chance. I hope you enjoy their story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adriana Brinne is a new author who fell in love with reading from a very young age but never felt brave enough to share her words with the world. She was born and raised in a tropical island surrounded by only beauty and water called Puerto Rico. She is a full-time IT engineer, and in her downtime, you can find her reading new adult by her favorites, reviewing books, and watching The Big Bang Theory.

She has a love for all things dark in romance and almost every trope created except cheating and death trope. She hates them and you won't catch her writing or reading about them. The Holy Trinity characters are screaming to have their stories told and she plans to do so. You can expect from her all the feels, strong girls, and asshole heroes that worship them.

You can connect with her on Facebook www.facebook.com/adrianabrinne or join her reader group. [Unholy Ground](#)

