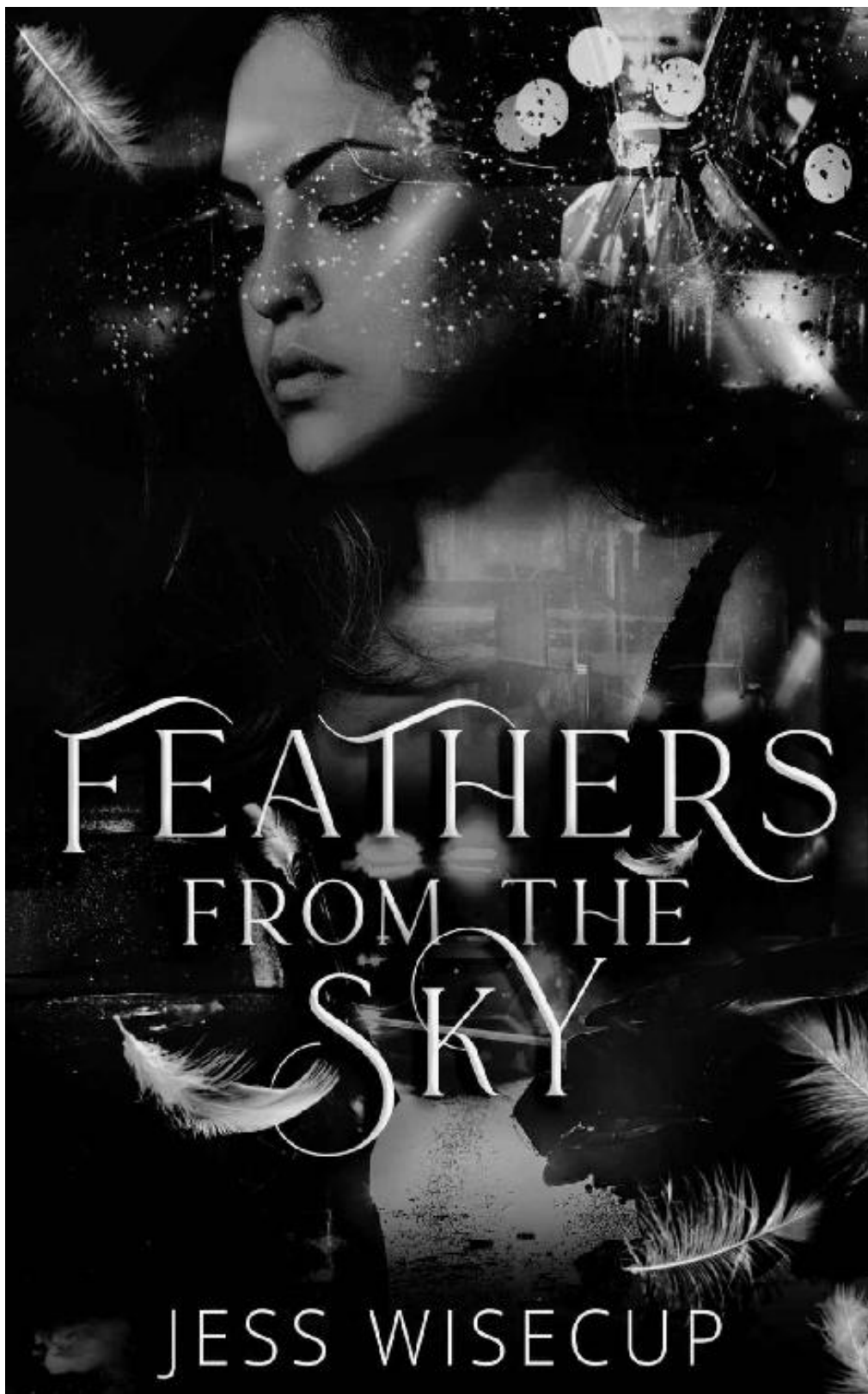




FEATHERS
FROM THE
SKY

JESS WISECUP



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*For anyone who knows that crying is rarely pretty.
And for my Klaroline girlies.*

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ANSI'S LOT

*When he died, he cursed her name
And Ansi to his tomb she came.
Standing watch o'er his foolish greed
No food or rest did she need.
When they heard of treasure hidden
To Ansi's cave, they came unbidden
Einar and Helgi were the first
Her progeny, the ones most cursed.
Hallbara, Geir, and Sif did come
And to her bite they did succumb.
It was Ketill in his desperation
Who lured Agnarr in aggravation.
And in exchange for death most swift
She offered them a precious gift.
If life immortal did they seek
From her neck they need drink.*

THEN

WHEN THE TRUCK SLAMS INTO THE SIDE OF MY CAR, FOR A split second I think it's a bomb going off. The moment of impact is so much louder than you expect. Steel slams into steel, and the sound bends around you, enveloping you in it, traveling into your marrow. Time slows down and speeds up all at once. We are weightless for a moment, gravity allowing us to escape her grasp before hurtling us back to the ground. There is heat on the right side of my body, but it is not fire that brands my skin as glass shatters and embeds itself deeper than a memory. I will live with some of the shards for the rest of my life. Grief and glass will work their way out of my flesh for years to come, angry and inflamed, sharp and piercing.

Tires screech, and there is a high-pitched keening sound I only recognize as coming from me when the air leaves my lungs. Everything blurs as the car spins out, rain and the streetlight's gleam coalescing into watery streaks of light searing into my vision.

When I wake, I'm slumped against the side airbag, and I taste iron. Blurred vision doesn't clear when I blink, and I wonder how it got so bright. Groaning, I reach for Angela's hand in my passenger seat, and I can't find her.

"Daddy?" I whimper, but he doesn't respond. I'm staring up at the streetlight we've hit, and I wonder if it's my faulty vision when I see things drifting in the glow. I want to find my parents, but I can barely keep my eyes open. Gas and the scent of wet pavement are all I smell, and when I close my eyes, I don't yet realize everything has changed.

1

SWEAT-SLICKED SKIN AND THE TASTE OF TEQUILA ON MY tongue have become a symphony of self-pity and the need to forget, a crescendo in angered forte while poor decisions are made in piano. Tonight, it is a soft rustle of our chiffon bridesmaid dresses, both in maroon, hers styled for her slim frame and mine twisted and wrapped to hold both my keening heart and my temperamental chest, failing on both fronts. I reach past her, hand fumbling with the keycard keeping us from the suite on the other side, mindlessly waiting for the click so I can throw myself into her and escape my mind. Soft lips trail up my neck, that slow drag of her lipstick marring my skin. The purple hue marks the ivory skin with a bruise of intention, of choice. Of forgetting.

When she has to help me out of my dress, the fabric pulling taut as it begins to feel like a cage, I will myself not to think. Fate had never been kind to me, her fickle presence bearing animosity at best, and when this date had been chosen for the wedding ceremony, I shouldn't have been surprised. When the music had started and the friend who barely knew me at all walked down the aisle, I banished the squeal of tires on wet pavement; the smell of gasoline and blood pungent in my worst memories was held at bay by a stubborn, self-preserving part of my primitive mind. Focusing on the father of the bride's misbuttoned shirt, the stain of drink wetting the fabric on his stomach, I was able to escape.

But now, in the dark and the quiet, I think about the weather being similar. I think about the smell of wet leather

and the devastating silence. But then she is kissing down my spine and her hands are slipping between fabric and skin, and I focus on the touch, gripping it like a lifeline. I am a husk seeking oblivion. I step out of the tiny slip of lace, and then we are fumbling want on the bed, the crisp white duvet still tucked beneath overly fluffed pillows. She is lust, and I am desire; and where we overlap, I search for something I will not find.

Kissing where her skin meets her bra, I order her to flip over onto her stomach. “I want to look at you,” I say, and she ignores me. Within a short moment, she is the one behind me as I am bent over the bed, and I don’t have the resolve to be frustrated, moaning into the mattress as her fingertips part skin as delicate as my sanity. Though I do not find freedom in the pleasure, I take it with grasping, pleading hands. My gasps are admissions of guilt, my stuttered breathing a plea, and when I break, it is nothing more than a deflection.

In the faint grey light drifting in, I blink at the spinning ceiling and trace a fingertip up her arm thrown across me. She twitches and rolls over, tugging the blanket to cover her shoulder. I do not know if I slept, and my mouth is dry, head already aching. I slip out of the bed and pad over to the bag I’d dumped on the floor before mimosas this morning, gathering up my discarded dress as I go. Grabbing my sleep shorts and favorite hoodie, I search in the clothing for what I’d failed to find in her body: comfort. Slinging the bag over my shoulder, I leave the bedroom, even though there is another mattress intended for me. Instead, I find a place on the sofa beside Hale, snoring softly with his arm over his head. When Maya had lured me with the idea of distractions, I’d had the sense to give him my wallet, and he’d found what he needed to get inside. He doesn’t wake when I settle into the space between him and the backrest, grateful for the deep cushions as I steal his warmth and his blanket.

Hale had attempted to talk me out of this, but I’d already made a promise and bought the dress. I’d balanced her wedding party with the groom’s, and I wondered who decided ranking your friends in order of importance was normal—expected. I’ve never been that person.

When I see his water bottle on the table, I swear, adjusting over him to grab it, hoping his own tequila sleep will keep him from waking. Once I finish the water, I wince when the sharp crack of plastic breaks the silence, and he adjusts, rolling to cage me in his sleep. It is the most peace I have found in these days near the anniversary; my eyelids submit and allow me to sleep in my best friend's arms.



“YOU PUKE IN THE HOTEL, Parsons, I’m disowning you.”

I’m tempted to do it, to get on my knees beneath the fluorescent lights of the lobby bathroom and force myself to get it over with. I hate puking, but if I have a hangover and will end up doing it anyway, my terms are always better. But Hale is walking so fast, a side effect of legs as long as I am tall, and he’s waiting for me on the other side of the automatic doors. I have too little time and too much pride, so I follow, pulling my hood up. I squint against the October sun, wishing I hadn’t left my sunglasses in the Chevelle. The car is in the front row—Aileen, as my dad called her—and the reflection from the hood directly into my eyes is blinding.

“*She’s killing me and robbing me,*” my dad’s rock tumbler voice would say as he puffed on the cigarette he held between his lips, dirt and oil all over his hands and face. I am helping him over the summer after junior year of college all over again. I am searching for the right size socket while he curses beneath the lifted car, and we are happy.

Sometimes people would say, “Come on, Eileen,” to my dad, and he always loved to correct them. The reaction to his car being named after a serial killer didn’t resonate with many, but the electro pop hit sure did. I only refer to it as the Chevelle or just plain Dad’s. Since he died, I’d had the exterior painted the original Tuxedo Black and the interior carpeting redone as well. Even though I’d had to threaten Larry to finish the engine work Dad had already paid for, scoring an

aftermarket Bluetooth head unit in the process, that wasn't the hardest part.

Doing it without him was.

"You need to just get a cord and leave it in the car," I say, as Hale digs around in the backseat for my phone. All I see in the rearview mirror is the pale strip of skin above his pants where his shirt has lifted. "Or get a better phone," I tease, ready for him to start an elitist fight about how I'm part of the reason for the capitalistic hellscape we live in. It's not my fault our phones use different cords.

"I can't find it. Did you leave it in the hotel room?"

"Lose the accusatory tone, Hale."

"I'm going to call it," he says. I notice his eyes widen for a second and his quick intake of breath before he presses the number "4" on his keypad, and my name populates itself.

"What was that face about?"

"Straight to voicemail. Is it dead?"

I slam my head against the headrest, regretting it because of the shooting pain, and try to remember where I saw it last.

"Oh, shit," Hale says, and I lower my head. Maya is making a beeline for my side of the car, walking with purpose. I brace myself for impact, sitting up straighter. She looks exceptionally more put-together than I do as she stops in front of my open window.

"Relax, idiot. I was just trying to catch you before you left." Her smile is breezy, brown freckles looking so fucking cute in the morning sun glowing against her light-brown skin. She stretches her hand out, giving me my dead phone. I am chastened immediately as I take it from her.

"Sorry for sneaking—"

"I've done this before, Gwyneth," she says. "Glad we're on the same page."

I watch her as she sashays away, bag bumping against her jeaned hip, and Hale takes my phone and plugs it in to charge.

I close my eyes—her hands are on my breasts and in my hair, and I taste bile.

“Rejection isn’t easy, *Gwyneth*,” Hale offers, and I snort before starting the car and putting it in reverse. Instead of bothering with my phone, he puts something on his own, blasting the music out of his hands.

I turn out of the hotel parking lot, heading toward I-264. The giant Neptune statue stands guard on the beach as we pass it, and I laugh as usual, thinking about him palming a sea turtle like a basketball. Virginia Beach isn’t too busy at this time of year, not long after tourist season, so it only takes us moments before we are on the highway, taking us west toward Norfolk. I yawn—fucking tired of everything. Late nights, grief, and responsibilities can all fuck right off.

“Do me a favor?” Hale asks, and there’s something strange in his voice. I look over at him, and he won’t look at me. “Don’t look at your phone until we get there.”

“Sasha?” I nearly shout at him.

“Calm down. Your sister’s okay. Just trust me. Wait until we get there.” The glare I give him doesn’t begin to make up for the terror he’d just made me feel. “No one is dead,” he says softly, and I exhale in relief.

I stick my arm out the window, trailing my hand through the cool air as I gain speed on the highway. My fingertips smart, the weather just too cool because of last night’s rainstorm. Hale’s not telling me what’s wrong because he’s waiting for the bomb squad, and I resent him for it.

It’s not fair Hale thinks I need a handler, and it’s not fair for Sasha to be the handler. Sasha’s mother, Angela, was the only mom I’d ever known, and it’s my fault she’s dead. Mothering me is the last thing I should let her do, especially since the two I’ve already had have died.

Minding me is an offense punishable by death.

We spend the rest of the drive in silence, Hale’s leg jiggling as he finds anything to do but look at me. When we get out of the car, I feel like I’m being watched. But when I

look around, I see no one. Hale walks ahead of me, and I decide to check my phone, pulling it out of my pocket as it vibrates. My battery is still in the red, and I see why when my notifications show over a hundred texts and countless messages on social media. For a half-second, I think it might be birthday wishes, but I didn't get that many messages on my actual birthday the day before.

Listening to my friend for once, I shove the phone back into my pocket as the smell of cooking food washes over me. I'm simultaneously starving and sickened. When I see a little girl with a wide grin and hair styled in French braids pop her head over the back of the booth, I am distracted from my body's complaints.

"Penguin!" Charlotte yells, the nickname making me smile as usual, and she tries to wiggle free from Sasha's grasp. When I slide into the booth beside her, she launches at me, accidentally smacking me in the nose. For only being four years old, she packs a punch, and I laugh once I catch my breath.

"I missed you," she asserts, all big brown eyes and serious pout.

"I missed you too, little one. Are you excited to spend the weekend with Sasha?"

She grins as she wraps her arms around my neck. My sister watches the little girl every weekend, sacrificing her own so her friend can work her night shift. As far as I'm concerned, my sister is a saint.

"How's school?" I ask, and the little girl begins to babble about her friends, and I'm only able to make out half of what she says.

Hale sits in the booth across from us, furiously texting, and a frown screws up his brows. My stomach twists sour, and I squeeze the girl in my lap, getting a good whiff of her sweet smelling hair product. I settle Charlotte farther down my knees with a kid's menu and crayons, and just as I'm about to ask Hale what is going on, my older sister elbows me in the side.

“Maya texted me,” she says. “I wish I could say I was shocked.” She arches a perfect brow before pushing her curls off her shoulder. They are a vivid red right now, one of her favorite colors to wear during the fall.

“Shocked about what?” I ask, dancing around what she means. I’m not eager to be scolded, and I know I’m being immature when I say, “All the orgasms I gave her?”

“Christ, Gwyn. Little ears.” She frowns at me before reaching forward and grabbing one of Charlotte’s crayons, beginning to doodle on her menu with her. I hate feeling like I’ve disappointed my sister, but I’m annoyed she’s starting shit with me. “You know what I’m shocked about,” she says, voice low.

“No, I don’t. Because right now it feels a little like you’re...” I pause, glance down at Charlotte, then mouth the rest of the sentence, “*slut-shaming me.*”

“You know that’s not what I’m doing,” Sasha says, rolling up her sleeves and revealing her tawny skin. She prepares for a verbal fight like a physical one. She is pure calculation, and it bothers me she doesn’t seem to feel as deeply as I do—about anything. It is especially irritating she doesn’t seem to be as affected by the anniversary as I am. “I don’t care what—or *who*—you do; I care what you say. You said one thing and did another. I care how you heal. Coping with sex and alcohol doesn’t give me much faith in you.”

“Good thing I didn’t ask to be worshiped.”

My phone vibrates loudly, and Hale tosses his on the table between us, spinning it toward me.

“Hate to interrupt what I’m sure will be a very productive conversation, but this is why your phone—ya know what, give it here. I’ll handle it,” he says, hand held out, long fingers beckoning.

I ignore him, distracted by the picture on his screen. Sasha’s hand is on my thigh in an instant. She murmurs something to Hale about his impatience, and he grunts in return. A man is proposing to a woman on the screen, and my

nausea strikes as the air in my lungs disappears. I close my eyes and see her face screwed up in ecstasy, panting as a bead of sweat rolls down her forehead. I see her naked body writhing on *my* bed. She is pliant and in love, perfectly light and blissful, not bogged down by responsibility and sorrow.

Like me.

The thought is a betrayal, a picked scab of a wound barely healed. I close my eyes and try not to envision what I walked in on all those months ago.

The woman beams at the man as he kneels before her, a perfectly manicured hand outstretched toward him. Her hair is longer than the last time I'd seen it, still distractingly blonde, and she has tears in her eyes.

“Alexa and Josh got engaged,” I say simply. Hale stares at me, and Sasha squeezes my thigh.

“Fuck Alexa,” Sasha says, and Charlotte whips her head to look over at her babysitter, an adorable shocked expression on her face.

“Fuck Alexa,” Hale agrees. “And Josh. Fuck Josh especially.”

Finally, I let my eyes move from my former best friend to my ex-boyfriend. He looks apprehensive, as if he thinks she might say no. As if a woman who throws away a friendship to fuck her best friend's boyfriend would deny him. As if they weren't fucking made for each other.

“Serves them right,” I say. “Wait. Was this—did he propose to her on my birthday?”

“Yep,” Hale supplies, and my stomach hollows out. It is anything but accidental, and the malice behind their actions does what they intended. I am cast back to those pitiful moments in which I begged him to stay. Clinging desperately to keep to him when life was taking the things I feared losing most.

I snatch the phone off the table, Sasha grunting in annoyance because she cannot see it anymore. I snort when I realize he proposed to her in front of the Eiffel Tower, his

sandy hair catching red in the sunset. Right as I am about to give Hale back his phone, I notice where her other hand rests. My mouth goes dry, and my heart pounds in my chest, conflicting emotions battling for dominance in my mind.

“She’s pregnant,” I say, passing the phone to Sasha. “Look.”

My sister is silent as she studies the picture before swiping to the next one. They are kissing, his arm wrapped around her and his ring on her finger, and they hold a tiny onesie with the word “Bonjour” printed on it between them.

“Do you think she had this idea pinned to her ‘Live. Laugh. Love.’ inspiration mood board?” she asks, and I laugh so hard it takes me by surprise. Sasha knows everything about me, and most importantly, she knows exactly what I need to hear in the moment. I take my phone and clear out all the messages of people asking me if I’d seen the news. The same nosy offenders who wait in digital purgatory for a response are the ones who asked me how Dad and Angela died. As if they didn’t see the goddamn articles. They didn’t get an answer then, and they won’t get an answer now.

Vultures.

When another message lights up, I almost groan in annoyance before seeing what it is.

“Alright,” I say, sitting up straighter. “Clarke messaged me again. It’s time.”

“Are you sure?” Hale blurts, sitting up with his elbows on the table. “Didn’t you just say the other day you weren’t ready? Proved it with Maya last night?”

Sasha says nothing, just watches me, and it is her I address. She is the one I don’t want to disappoint. Hale will come around to any of my ideas eventually. But Sasha—if she doesn’t approve, I can’t go through with it.

“I think it’s time to put all the past behind me, don’t you?” I ask, hoping she will agree.

“If you’re certain you can do this,” Sasha says, adding, “By yourself, I mean. I can come with you.”

Smiling, I lean back against the booth. “I don’t think the poor guy would be prepared for two women at a matchmaking photo shoot. Besides,” I hedge, “I don’t need my sister seeing me in lingerie.”

Hale laughs, though he eyes me with worry as I reply to Clarke’s email.

“To new beginnings,” I say as I down the entire glass of water in front of me.

“I FOUND HER. THE HUNTER. I FOUND THEM,” REMY SAYS, sounding exhausted. My brother is never tired. He is boundless energy, and I wish he’d just fucking come home.

“Where?” I ask, ready to haul him in. He won’t listen to me. He doesn’t have to do it alone.

“Shit, I have to go,” he says, but there is something in his voice that plants a kernel of worry in my chest. “This won’t take long. She doesn’t even know what she is, and Bill is already dead. Father won’t keep me out forever.”

This won’t take long.

I shake the memory away. It is six months after that call, and I am staring at my phone in my hand, my thumb twitching over the red disconnect button. I have not heard my brother’s voice since that call, and now, I will never hear it again.

“Roman?” Margot is unusually quiet.

Pressing my thumb down, I disconnect the call and pull up the GPS app to see where Gwyn is. She is still at the restaurant, and I have all the time in the world.

My life is irrevocably changed, and I am breathless. My brother is dead—the blood is still fresh. The delivery had been packaged professionally, the courier gone before anyone could find them to ask questions. It is all sterile and tidy, and it is so goddamn wrong. Remy is chaos and unrest. He is good intentions and late nights, and now he is dead. He was precious and rare. I failed him, and now he is gone.

This is no longer a search for my brother and is now a search for answers. An explanation for how over a gallon of his blood just ended up on my father's doorstep. The human body can lose something like a sixth of its blood and still live. A vampire body can lose even more—but not a gallon.

A wet nose presses into my hand, and I flinch away, storming across the small living room. I can hear the dog get on the couch, and I'm surprised there is room for it. There is no clean laundry being ignored, no box of Hale's art supplies balanced precariously on the arm of the sofa. It is oddly tidy for once, and it pisses me off. It should be disordered hell. Gwyn reminds me of Remy in that way; they are both tragic disarray, with little room in them for cleanliness. It has been odd finding comfort in her storm while I've been searching for him—especially since she is the reason he was even here. I am half-tempted to throw shit around, and I doubt she'd even notice. But her roommate would. Hale is one of those slobs who knows exactly where everything is, and if I made a mess, he'd know. At this point, I don't know if I care.

Though I want to trash the place, it's rare I find this apartment empty, and I won't waste it. Especially now. But I can't focus and won't be able to until Remy's face and voice are out of my head. This is my father's fault. Remy's banishment led him to this reckless end. My little brother is dead, and I should have done more to save him. Should have done more in the past three years. I should have found the hunters myself. But that's clearly not what killed him; Gwyn hasn't had the chance, let alone the ability. Her skills as a hunter are not honed. She is, for all intents and purposes, utterly useless. So what happened to my brother in the last six months since he found her?

I think of his eyes and see my mother's. They aren't focused, unseeing because she is dead. Two sets of green eyes meet me when I close my eyes, both accusatory in their gaze. Shame and guilt pulse through me over my inability to save them. I am on my knees, and I can't control the sound pouring from my lips. If I'm going to find out what happened to my brother, I'm going to have to leave all this emotion behind. So I let it out. I sob, but there are no tears. He deserved better. A

better father, a living mother, and a brother who would have protected him when he needed it.

I don't know how long I've been on my knees when Gwyn's dog rubs against me, his body slamming into me. I pet him absentmindedly as I begin to plan. It didn't take too long for the German Shepard to grow used to me, and it's not surprising her guard dog is as hopelessly unprepared as she is. When she moved out of her father's house and the crumbling wards revealed her to me, it should have been a warning. It still irks me that I didn't find her until she made a mistake she didn't even know she was making. When I'd finally found her, it hadn't even mattered since Remy was nowhere to be found. It had been two months since I'd heard from him by that point, and finding her hadn't brought me any closer to my brother.

I am fisting the dog's fur in my hands, and it nips at me. When I let go, not intending to hurt him, I sit on the couch and stare at the wall, trying to make sense of everything. Uncertainty is not something I'm familiar with, and I convince myself that is the emotion I'm grappling with, that is the reason I can't stop shaking and it feels like my lungs are unable to inflate. I bite down on my tongue, my fang piercing the muscle, and I relish the pain. Forcing my tense muscles to relax, I wait for the puncture to heal, and by the time my phone rings, I'm calm enough to answer.

"Yes, Margot?" I ask, and my friend lets out a breath.

"You alright?" she asks, and she doesn't let the question linger, knowing the answer already. "I checked the traffic cameras. Not a single one caught anything. So whoever delivered it is probably using some sort of magic. Be it teleportation or some sort of illusion masking, I don't know."

"That tracks, considering we haven't been able to pull Remy up on any cameras since the night Parsons died."

"You're not still hung up on that theory, are you? I— Roman, Bill died almost six months before Remy called you. You saw the footage. Bill and his wife died in a hit-and-run, and your Christine was hospitalized for a concussion."

"Christine?"

“You know, *Phantom of the Opera*? You’re the ugly one with the mask,” she says. It’s a weak joke, but I know she does it to give me some sort of anchor. But normalcy is not something I will ever have again, so I ignore her.

“I don’t know, Margot. It doesn’t make sense that he just fucking disappeared after that day. Bill had to have something to do with it.”

She sighs, and I know she’s going to attempt being delicate, but she’ll say the same thing she always does.

“There are a few active demon circles in the area. Do you think he—” she begins, and I cut her off.

“He was clean, Margot. Check his blood.”

“I already sent it off.”

“Of course you did,” I sneer, angry with her for believing the worst in Remy. But wasn’t I the same way? It was my fucking fault he was banished. “He’s stayed away from that demon shit for years. Why would he risk it when he had just found Gwyn?”

“Fuck if I know, Roman. All I remember is you having to rescue him a few times.”

“Years ago, Margot. Besides, that was in Chicago.”

“Because demons don’t talk.” I can hear her eyes roll through the phone. “Maybe he got into some shit with—”

“What demons do you know that operate like that? If a demon got him, they would have been sending us pieces of his body for weeks, trying to milk us for whatever they can. It’s not a fucking demon.”

The line is silent, and I know I’ve reached her limit. “I’ll keep looking. Is there anything in particular you want me to look for?” she asks after a moment, voice softer. She’s put on her kid gloves, and it tells me I need to reel it in.

“Send me everything you have on Gwyn and Sasha after Parsons died and before she moved out of that house.”

“That’s what? Eight months worth of shit? Dude. I haven’t even gone through it myself. I’ve been too busy tracking their every fucking move for the last four months.”

“Send it. Any more information on the surrounding covens too,” I bark and hang up.

Gwyn’s dog pushes his nose between my legs, and I pet him. I scratch beneath his collar, and I notice a metal plate attached to the fabric, realizing it’s a nametag. When I can’t place the name, I pull out my phone and look it up. A huff of laughter escapes my lips, the hellhound from *Ghostbusters* being the last namesake I expect.

“Zuul, huh?” I say as I scratch between his ears. He sits, giving me his paw, and I realize he’s injured—perhaps a sprained muscle based on the wrap on his leg. I knew she took him to the veterinarian this past week and she’d stopped taking him on walks, but I had been distracted by my father. I’m not eager for his impending phone call and find it rather fucking telling it was Margot who called me about Remy’s blood and not him.

I stand, pacing around the room as Zuul follows me, nose in my ass the second I pause.

“Would you quit that? Lay down,” I order.

Deciding to do one last perusal of the apartment, I find nothing. Everything is ordinary. Other than the drinking problem and the obvious untreated depression, Gwyneth Parsons is your average twenty-eight-year-old woman.

Twenty-nine.

Even for her birthday, the anniversary of her father’s death, the most unusual thing she’d done was sleep with a bridesmaid.

“Fuck, who am I kidding?” I mumble under my breath. My best bet is finding some sort of contact from her and her father’s past. I need to use her blood to get past the residual wards hanging onto Bill’s belongings at her storage unit. She doesn’t know what a ward is, considering this townhouse holds no such magic.

It's a shame for her that she ever moved out of her parent's house. After using her father's life insurance payout to finish off her student loans, I guessed it had served its purpose for her. The magic lingers there to an unnerving degree. Even now, four months after she's moved out and listed it for sale, the magic remains, and I struggle to look upon it or remember its existence. The family living there now is especially safe from my kind. If Gwyn knew the moment she moved out of that house it would allow something such as me to find her, to learn every detail about her and her patterns, she never would have stepped a foot outside.

She'd presented herself to me, and she had no fucking idea.

When my phone dings, I'm reminded of the most interesting thing about her when I see her on the move. The GPS on that beautiful car tells me she's driving back from Waterfront. Brunch with her sister lasted longer than it normally does, and I wonder if she's hungover. Considering how much tequila I watched her drink the night before, there's little doubt she feels like shit. I postpone checking the recording app I installed on her phone and pace around the small apartment instead.

I move the picture frame hanging by her front door back the way I found it, crooked. I fix it every time I get there and then undo it by the time I leave. Bill and his daughter are all smiles in the photo, both grinning as they crouch in front of the Chevelle. Angela stands in the background, a towel over her shoulder as she frowns at her husband and step-daughter. I imagine Sasha is the photographer, the picture taken a few months before two of the people in it died, and I wonder why the fuck this man taught Gwyn how to build a car instead of something fucking useful.

It makes no goddamn sense, and that is why I am furious.

Irritated by yet another circular thought pattern, I'm about to let myself devolve into that rather than think about my brother. Instead, I slip my sunglasses on and step outside, Zuul watching me with a cocked head. I'm about to lock the door as my phone goes off again, and I breathe deep before answering.

“Roman,” I answer as I slink around the side of the building to the back lot where I’ve parked my bike. My eyes water from the bright morning light, and I stay in the shade to minimize the throbbing in my head that begins the moment the warm rays hit me.

“Boy,” my father starts, and I roll my eyes. “You did not phone me as you promised,” he says, his crisp accent as biting in my ears as Zuul’s bark. I shake my head. This fucker is angry I didn’t call back, not in agony over Remy.

“I’ve been busy,” I reply, voice cold. I put my helmet on to deal with the sun on my face, hooking up my phone to the speaker inside it.

“Mmm,” he mumbles. “Busy failing to do the one thing you set out to do.” There is a slight slur to his words, and I wonder if he’s blood drunk. “It seems your brother found us before you found him.”

“It would seem.”

“I’ve been busy too, Roman.” He waits, clearly wanting me to ask what he means. I don’t rise to the bait. “Gwyn Parsons?”

I freeze, instantly cautious, but my voice doesn’t waver when I reply. “I’m surprised it took you this long to meddle.”

“The hunter didn’t have your brother, so bring me her heart.”

“Not yet,” I say, bracing myself for the rage I’m sure to have ignited.

“You have been gone too long, son. It’s been six months since you set out to bring your rascalion of a brother home, and he met the end we all knew he would.”

“Don’t start with that. Remy had been doing just fine until ___”

“Until the human died. I know. A shame, since I was considering letting him come back. But we all knew this would be his outcome,” he says, and I don’t understand how he can be so nonplussed.

“Kill her and put an end to this. It is time for you to take your place here.” He sounds oddly patient, and that’s when I realize Victoria must be in the room with him.

“She isn’t the one who killed him. Her father had something to do with Remy’s death, and I can’t compel her for answers if she’s dead.”

Every vampire sent after the hunters either returned with no memory or never returned at all. Not once did we have any evidence of what happened. Until someone bled Remy like a pig. And with Bill dead, I don’t know what to think. This was different. Bill must have done something to Remy before he died—struck a deal or a bargain with someone. Either way, Gwyn holds the answers I need.

“Victoria tells me you don’t think the girl even knows what she is.”

“Victoria can go fuck herself,” I reply against my better judgment. I immediately regret it when he laughs, loud and boastful.

“Bring me her heart. Don’t make me come after you.” When he hangs up, I hit the kickstand with more force than necessary and start the engine, still warm from the trip here.



I AM FLYING DOWN the freeway that evening, high on unearned confidence from the conservative think tank puppet I’d fed from, weaving in and out of traffic like I have a death wish. Perhaps I do. I hadn’t been careful when I disposed of him, leaving him to rot in the alley where I’d stashed him. I’d been waiting for a motorcycle spot nearby, and he took it with one of those shitty little rental scooters, giving me the finger when he swooped in. Dick move.

Footage of Gwyn from the last day had been fruitless, as I knew it would be. The person she slept with is surprising, but a cursory check by Margot didn’t give me anything promising.

In a fit of annoyance and heartbreak and the need to fucking *do something*, I had headed north to Washington, DC. I don't feel like being discreet right now, and I fed sloppily, like a newborn vampire. I don't want any demons or other coven's attention while I figure out what the fuck happened here, so going up to that pit of hell seemed like my best bet. Plus, I was able to open up the throttle on the road.

About to go through the tunnel, I wonder why I did this to myself. I hate driving through it, the pressure of the ocean above adding to the pressure I feel in the rest of my life. It gives me anxiety. And yet, I drove through it to head north and am now forced to drive through it a second time. My phone starts ringing though, and I pull off the last exit before the tunnel to take the call.

"What's up?" I ask my best friend, hopeful she's been able to get me something of value.

"It's gotta be the demons. The coven is too young. Their leader is only two hundred years old. And he's *made*, Roman." I sigh.

"You're right. No fucking way they took him down." If their highest ranking vampire is a two hundred-year-old made vampire, they are no match for a natural born vampire like me or my brother. "What about the Richmond coven I found?"

"Roman," she says, trailing off, and I can imagine her twisting a strand of blonde hair between her fingertips. "There is no shame in addiction. It's really sad, and I don't blame him for trying to numb—"

"I know," I snap, irate. "You're telling me shit I already know. I'm not trying to find an explanation to make his death more fucking palatable. You know I don't give a flying fuck about that. I want retribution. My brother was *murdered*."

"I'm telling you, you're barking up the wrong tree. Gwyn Parsons isn't going to give you answers."

"Not without getting closer to her, no."

"Well, then I guess it's a good thing that photographer emailed you back," Margot retorts, annoyed.

“What?”

“Jesus, Roman. That photographer who went viral with those pictures of her? The sexy ones?”

“Shit,” I mutter.

“Sounds like you need to find a suit. Maybe some Calvin Klein underwear?”

I sigh, hanging up on Margot as I look up at the night sky. My mother is dead at the hand of Bill Parsons and probably my brother too. I’m not eager to bring down misplaced revenge, but with him dead, Gwyn will have to do.

And it seems like the stars have aligned and forced my hand.

PUTTING THE CHEVELLE IN PARK AND PULLING THE handbrake, I touch up my mascara in the rearview, marveling over what Hale did to me. I manage my normal makeup routine just fine, but I can't do winged eyeliner to save my life. Hale's extensive cosplay experience came in clutch. His special effects skills are where he shines, but he's not bad at this either. I chose a sparkly dark purple eyeshadow which transitions into black, and my long lashes didn't even require extensions to complete the look. Deciding on a dark red lip, I wear my favorite shade. I feel great; it's amazing what a full body wax and instant tan will do for one's confidence. I look at the two story industrial building and wonder what company will move into the space beside Clarke. It has been a law office until recently, but now it sits vacant. Unmarked, the studio has tinted windows, and Clarke only opens it for clients. I catch sight of them walking to the front door, so I finish my nervous nitpicking and climb out of the car.

"Stop right there!" Clarke shouts from across the parking lot. "You actually did what I asked you to?" they call out incredulously, beaming as they take in my shiny car.

"It needed a cleaning, anyway. Dad would be appalled I let it get as bad as it did."

"I'll pretend you only did it for me, and it has nothing to do with your dead daddy issues," they say, their boots crunching the gravel beneath their feet, and I snort. I've known Clarke since college, and we have that sort of relationship. Their dad bailed when they were little, so we've

always joked about their daddy issues. I suppose it's my turn now. "Drop the bag, take off your coat, and stand in front of the hood."

"Now?" I ask, surprised they want to shoot without Roman. The nerves which had dissipated while I sat in the car come back in force. I am anxious for a few reasons, and I try to mask my physical tells. I refuse to ruin the nails I'd just painted by chewing on them, and I forcefully keep my hands away from my nose piercing.

"Yes, now. We don't need to wait on him," they say before barking orders at me. "Sit on the driver's side and face me. Legs crossed, hand on the door," they instruct, and I do as I'm told, adjusting my dress to the best of my ability. Not only is it a plunging neckline, tape securely holding my boobs in place, but it has twin slits on either side, nearly going up to my hips. When I'd ordered it, I thought it had some sort of body suit bottom beneath it, but it didn't. I do my best not to flash Clarke as we settle into a rhythm.

They've been taking photographs of me for years, and I am their oldest model. Half the time, I expect what Clarke is asking of me and do it before they tell me. I'm leaning against my hands on the hood, my foot on the bumper and my head tipped back, when I hear the loud rumble of a motorcycle. Wondering if it's him, my stomach flips over, and I have instant regret.

"What am I fucking doing?" I mumble. This feels so reckless, but I try to reassure myself that I can do it, and it will be worth it in the end.

"Alright," Clarke says, putting their camera back in their bag. I sit up, looking over at the man who just arrived on his motorcycle. He is just as big as I imagined—tall and beefy is the only way I can describe him—but that's not what I'm hung up on. I didn't expect him to climb off such a large motorcycle looking like he stepped out of a GQ magazine. He's wearing a dark grey suit, dressed surprisingly well. When he dismounts and pulls his helmet off his head, I am pleased to see he has facial hair even though his most recent images were clean-shaven. His hair tumbles free, loose curls reaching the tops of

his shoulders, and it's like something out of a fucking movie. I know my heart is racing, and I try to relax. Thankfully, Clarke sweeps in and gives me something to focus on.

“Roman, thanks for coming,” they say, striding to the next parking spot with their hand outstretched.

“You must be Clarke,” he says, voice a low rumble I should have expected but takes me off guard nevertheless. Jesus Christ, he has no right to tick so many boxes on my list this quickly. It's not often I feel as if a man is towering over me since I'm pretty tall, but seeing just how large he is, I am surprised. His gaze turns on me, and I am greeted by brown eyes with a bit of a red tint to them. I hadn't been able to tell in the pictures. The color is pleasant and warm, but there is a slight coldness in his gaze. “And you must be Gwyn.”

He doesn't smile, and I don't know why I expected him to. Roman doesn't strike me as a person who would give smiles freely. He dips his head, and I wonder if his eyebrows are naturally that perfect or if maybe I can talk him into giving me his threader's phone number. They're thick, though they accentuate his features perfectly. He is a collection of complementary opposites. His clothing is crisp, and his beard is tidy, while his hair flows with motion as it frames his roughly hewn face. He's breathtaking.

“Yep,” I say, immediately embarrassed at my inability to sound like a normal fucking person because of how nervous I am. “I'm Gwyn, and I guess we're about to see each other naked.” It doesn't earn me a smile; his brow quirks at least, and I wonder what the hell is wrong with me.

“I was under the impression we were going to keep some of our clothes on?” he asks Clarke in a clipped manner, the faintest hint of an accent I can't quite place, and I realize then that Roman Sauveterre is definitely self-employed, the CEO of Serious Business.

“Yes, you'll keep your underwear on,” Clarke chuckles. “For the shoot,” they add, and I am blushing furiously. My skin has always been a traitor to my will.

“Good,” Roman replies, and he clasps his hand together in front of him. “Otherwise I’d be pretty upset I bought special underwear just to take them off.” And then he’s smiling, but there’s something about it which gives me pause. It is not a smile anyone should make the mistake of trusting.

“I want to take some pictures out here for a few more minutes since you both showed up with some cool ass rides,” Clarke exclaims, gesturing to the motorcycle Roman arrived on. “Suzuki GSXR, right?” It’s enormous and considering the size of the Greek god before me, I’m certain a smaller one wouldn’t be able to hold him.

Roman nods and crosses his arms before turning to me. “1970 Chevelle SS?” he asks, and I am grateful for this lifeline. This I can talk about.

When I begin to speak and my teeth hurt, I realize I’ve been clenching my jaw. “Yes. Rebuilt with my dad. Finally finished it about six months ago,” I say, voice breathier than I intended.

“It’s beautiful,” he purrs, eyes running over the lean lines of the body. “All stock?” he asks.

I breathe deep, cautious about how this interaction will go. I try to hide my annoyance. Men always assume I’m bullshitting when it comes to Dad’s car. Granted, I wouldn’t know much if it weren’t for him having taught me over the past few years, but still. It’s the same thing when someone sees you wearing a band t-shirt and asks you to name your favorite songs, as if it’s some kind of fucking test. Men are the world’s most proficient gatekeepers.

“All original except for the radio. I’m a sucker for my playlists,” I say, and I see a hint of a smile again. “It has the 454 big block with the four-speed transmission.” It rolls off the tongue almost as easy as it did my dad’s when he took it to car shows.

Roman makes a little sound in his throat as if he’s pleased, but he only nods. It gives me relief. I don’t have to go through the stupid song and dance where he acts surprised that a little woman like me knows something, and I don’t have to pretend

to tolerate him for the remainder of our time together. Assuaged that it is a simple question of curiosity, I nod toward the driver's side. "Want a tour?"

A smile takes him by surprise, and it is the first expression I feel I can trust. "I'd love that, thank you," he says.

I walk to the driver's side and open it, saving what's under the hood for last, and I'm about to move out of his way when I realize he is standing very close behind me. So close, I can't get past him. I stop myself from telling him he is tall, as if it's something he doesn't know and hasn't heard a million times before.

"You're in my way," I whisper, struggling to find my voice. I'm not usually so quiet, but he is just so goddamn big and this is so new for me. It's intimidating in a way I didn't expect. It's not just that he's tall either. He is thick. I think husky might be the more appropriate word. I am vividly reminded of a video that went viral about a man's tree trunk thighs, and now I'm wondering what Roman's thighs look like. When I realize I'll be seeing them soon enough, I shake myself free from all thought because there is only one explanation for where my mind has gone. And the explanation is that I am losing it.

"Stay like that," Clarke barks out, and I breathe deep. This is helpful. I slip back into model mode and adjust my body, turning to give Clarke the lines they need, placing my hand on the top of the car door.

"Alright, Roman, put your forearm on the roof of the car and lean over her."

His mouth goes straight, as if he doesn't want to do this, and God, I wish we had a drink before we got started. Roman does what he's told, leaning in, but still keeps his distance. With him this close, I can smell him. I don't know why I expected a musky scent or something that smells like a forest—cedar or sandalwood—but he smells fresh. Almost like...

"Is that peppermint?" I ask, giving an exaggerated sniff.

“Maybe,” he says, sticking his tongue out and showing the white candy ring dissolving on it. His tongue is broad and pink and fuck, I am jealous of a mint. His eyes glimmer with amusement. “Thought we might be getting close like this,” he explains. “Is it bothering you?”

“No, it’s not. I’m sorry my breath isn’t minty fresh for you,” I tease, slipping into flirtatious armor. “Hope it isn’t too bad.”

“You smell amazing—edible,” he says, “Like something sweet.”

A clap of thunder saves me from replying, and the swiftly moving clouds push Clarke to direct us inside. When I pick up my bag containing another outfit and my robe, he takes it from me, his rough hand sliding over mine. My stomach is a tightly coiled tangle, but as he holds the door open for me, I force confidence I don’t truly have and let my eyes sweep appreciatively over his body. He’s enormous and attractive to the point of distraction.

When I nearly trip on the way in, I can hear Hale’s voice in my head.

You are so fucked.

THANK GOD FOR SMALL MERCIES.

Gwyn is in the bathroom touching up her makeup and changing her clothes, and I'm grateful for this brief reprieve. My mouth is fucking dry thanks to that goddamn black dress. And it's only going to get worse from here. The way the fabric clung to every one of her lush curves reminds me of the rolling mountains I traversed on the way here, and it gives me the same thrill. The reckless feeling of switching lanes so you don't get stuck behind the slow-moving semi-trucks, the vehicular giants doing their best in the lowest gear while you shoot past, letting the road and bike bring you around the curves the way they're meant to be handled. But when that dress comes off, it's going to be all open highway, windows down and music blasting.

And fuck me if I'm not giving it gas.

Her father killed my mother. An irrefutable fact that I saw with my own eyes, and it's something I will relive for the rest of my days. And if he arranged to kill my brother too, she is the fucking reason for it. But all I'm thinking about is getting her soft body in my lap.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Her life isn't more valuable than Remy's was. Honestly, it's worth less. She could be extraordinary if she only knew what she is. It's disappointing in a way. I had looked forward to a fight from the supposed 'great enemy.'

What I know for certain is she is no adversary when she could've been my greatest yet.

The only thing she has that I need or want is access to her father's belongings so I can see exactly who he sent after Remy. The more I sit with it, the more the idea burrows into my mind and makes a home of it. I just have to get her there.

I spread my arms over the back of the green velour sofa, tilting my head back and forcing out a breath through narrowed lips. Since I'd been watching her for months, I hadn't anticipated reacting to her like this. I want to blame it on my vampire nature: normally, I'd be to the point of attacking her, and the excitement of the impending kill is translating into something else. Something I don't fucking need.

When I hear the bathroom door shut and her heels click down the hallway, I adjust, tugging at my pants, glad my dick finally calmed down. She rounds the corner into the studio proper, and the silky robe she is wearing has come untied, and I see a glimpse of her body and the lingerie she is wearing.

"Jesus, fuck," I mumble as my cock decides it is, in fact, not subdued. I should have known. She doesn't know what she is. Dangerous and forbidden, it only furthers her sexual appeal to me. I inhale as I reason with myself. It makes sense for me to want her body. I've seen it already in the cameras, but nothing is the same behind a screen. It's simple curiosity over what has been my fixation the last half year. Nothing more. And the tantalizing scent of her hunter blood? Designed to lure me in. That's the sum of it.

"Stunning, babe," Clarke says, and Gwyn pulls the robe shut as she glances over at me.

"Why is he still wearing all his clothes?" she whispers, leaning toward Clarke, quietly enough I wouldn't have heard her if I had human ears, so I pretend not to.

"Alright, big man," Clarke says, and I snort. I get comments on my size frequently. Usually I hate it, but Clarke is easygoing enough, they don't bother me. "Take that jacket off and bring it here." We are in the lofted part of the studio

where it's staged for different scenes. There is a large stairwell leading down to the office and storage portion of the place. Clarke gestures to the railing overlooking the stairs, and I follow. The entire back wall of the building is a large window. Though it's overcast, the rain has cleared out, and we face a wall of white clouds. I'm no artist, but I know well enough it will make a good backdrop.

The photographer positions me with a hand on the railing and the other holding my jacket over my shoulder before snapping a few pictures. Despite my vexation with her, I make sure to smile at Gwyn. I'm supposed to be flirting without coming on too strong. Even though I'm confident I could have her on her back before the sun sets, it doesn't bode well for my plan. I need her trust.

She blushes and starts fiddling with the tie on her robe again. Are her hunter senses kicking in for once? My brother was murdered to protect this ignorant waste, and it makes rage rise like bile up my throat. She and hers have taken everything from me.

I did my research, know well enough that hunters have their own Ascension of sorts. Since she never took that final step—clearly, considering she didn't try to kill me on sight—does that mean her senses aren't fully developed? Perhaps she feels more vulnerable without that goddamn dress, and it's tapping into her natural abilities. I want to meet that part of her, to drag it out of her kicking and screaming. Without the information I might find from her father, I have no leads on Remy, and I need to take my frustration out. I haven't had to fight my way into or out of anything in a long time, and the thrill of the chase is taking over.

But I can't do that. I can't scare her off.

"Gwyn, hop on the railing," Clarke directs.

"I'll fall," Gwyn warns, her heartbeat ratcheting up. The scent of her fear tickles my nostrils.

"I won't let you," I say, taking a step toward her. I can tell her face is unaccustomed to not smiling by the twitch of her lips, as if they seek their natural curved position. It only takes

a moment for the muscles to win out, and she gives me a soft smile, her heartbeat calming. Trusting in me to not let her fall.

Poor thing.

Gwyn drops the robe off her shoulders, and now she is fully bared to me. It's only a bit more skin showing than what she revealed in her viral shoot a few months back, but it's about to be in my hands. The grainy images from the surveillance system didn't do her justice at all. The black lacy bra barely holds her tits at bay: one light tug will have her nipples spilling out of the top. I close my eyes for a moment when I catch myself wondering if they're rosy like her mouth. Her stomach is cute—soft and rolled—and I try not to imagine licking it. She wears two garments on the bottom—a lacy thong and a black strappy harness-type item which digs into her lush, round thighs. I am breathing heavily, and I let out a low whistle, hoping it's not too much. Her lips twist in a grin as she tosses the robe onto the ground and kicks off her shoes. Even her black-painted toes are cute, for fuck's sake.

Very little of this is acting. I'm attracted to her, so it's making things easy. I can hate her and everything she stands for and still want to fuck her mouth. Or her tits. Whatever.

Gwyn leans back, putting both hands on the railing. It's higher than her waist, and I know she's going to have a difficult time climbing up there. Still playing the chivalrous man hoping to date her, I raise my hands to her hips, waiting for her permission to touch her. She lets out a breath and smiles.

“Yes, please,” she says after a second's hesitation, cheeks darkening imperceptibly, and I lift her, placing her on the railing. She is a perfect height now—almost as tall as I am. I keep my hands on her soft skin until I'm interrupted by Clarke's voice.

“Unbutton your shirt, Roman,” they instruct, and I do as I'm told, keeping myself close to the railing. When I roll my sleeves up, Gwyn lets out a little gasp.

“Your hands. I didn't notice them before.” I'm surprised when she reaches out and traces over my knuckles. “I like

them,” she says, a fingertip running over the tattoos on my hands and leading up my forearms. The one she’s paying attention to is a snake, the mouth made up of my thumb and forefinger before it twists up my arm to the top of my shoulder. “Does it have a meaning?” she asks, and I step closer, putting my hands on her knees.

“It’s something beautiful I wanted on my body. That’s all,” I say, and her fingers stop their perusal of my skin. I wish she didn’t until she lifts a hand and traces the cursive on my chest revealed after unbuttoning my shirt. I wonder if she thinks it is a lover’s name I wear. Her touch is faint—uncertain.

“What a lovely reason,” she whispers. Clarke is taking pictures, the sound of the shutter going wild somewhere off to my left.

Gwyn grabs my shirt collar and takes me by surprise when she pulls me closer. “I won’t kiss you, don’t worry,” she says, confusing my reaction for something it isn’t.

“I wouldn’t mind,” I quip, and her eyes flick up to mine. They’re much lighter than I thought. There’s only so much computer monitors and physical pictures can capture when trying to see what a person looks like. They are light brown—amber—and almost molten. Like liquid gold.

“We just met,” she says, cheeks turning rosy as she grips my collar hard. Watching her from afar, I knew I found her attractive. It’s the small intimate reactions which have my resolve fracturing. From behind a screen, I don’t know what makes her flush, what makes her heart beat faster. My usual cold indifference when it comes to taking a life for the coven became impossible when I jacked off last night and it was Gwyn I thought of. This only solidifies it.

She is her father’s daughter, and someone has to pay for his sins.

But does she have to pay before I spread her bare and fuck her rough? I can seduce her, and in those heaving breaths of uninformed trust after she comes around my cock, I can compel her to spill her blood for the ward. It might be difficult considering her walls, but as I slide my hands down her

smooth, plump thighs, my dick is doing the thinking, and I decide it's worth it.

Either way, I need her to spill her own blood, and my compulsion will be more thorough if she trusts me.

I grip her hips, sliding my body between her thick thighs, and I remind myself what I'm here for. Her patterns, her weaknesses—none of this will matter once I cut out her heart. It has become an unhealthy fixation, and I regretfully understand the motivations behind the average creeps who obsess over their mark. But I'm not like them. Those obsessions start out of desire—mine started out of the need to find my brother. The heat I feel radiating between her legs certainly won't matter once I'm through with her. Her hands slide down, rubbing along my ribs, and I lean in, inhaling that warm scent at the crook of her neck. I shut my mouth tight so Clarke doesn't catch my lengthened canines in the photos. Gwyn's fucking blood is going to kill me. I'm hanging by a taut thread when my phone goes off.

"Sorry," I say, pulling it out to silence it, and my father's name flashes on the screen. A text waits for me.

You have 48 hours.

Frustrated with my lack of awareness, I close my eyes. I have been behaving without thought the past two weeks, only focused on Remy's murderer. I've been in contact with a sorcerer, compelling humans, frantically searching for more information, and I haven't stopped to think about Björn's orders having a time constraint. He could have tugged on the leash, that blood vow between us forcing me to do his bidding the moment he wanted it, but he has gifted me with an order instead. I need to ask her more questions first. I'm not even close to being done with her.

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I shake my hair out of my eyes.

"Everything alright?" she asks, and I chuckle as I let my eyes roll down her body in front of me.

“More than alright,” I reply, and Clarke comes into view, stomping down the stairs behind Gwyn.

“Keep going. I just want to get some shots of her ass,” they say as they round the bottom of the staircase, walking to a ladder in the center of a lounge area.

A whiff of that sweet blood has me focusing on Gwyn again, her full cheeks burning.

“I’ve never been this naked on a first date,” she says.

“Somehow I don’t believe that,” I respond, and then I slide one of my hands down from her hip to cup her ass. “This okay?” I ask, and she laughs.

“First you insinuate I fuck on the first date, but then you ask for permission to touch my ass? I don’t know how to feel about this.” She squeaks as I squeeze her ass cheek and my other hand roams up her back.

“I’ll admit, it might be wishful thinking on my part.”

She takes a moment to realize what I’m saying, and then she tightens her thighs around me. She sits up straighter and pulls me closer. When she tosses her head back and wraps a hand around my neck, pulling my face down into her ample cleavage, I am surprised for only a second before I press my lips to soft skin, veins visible over the swell of her breast. It takes effort to not break the skin, to taste the heady elixir just below the surface, and I press a sloppy kiss there instead. It isn’t the worst alternative. I know she’s feeling turned on—I can scent it on her. Blood is rushing to her clit; the combination of the mouthwatering scent of her blood and her arousal makes it hard to focus.

I jump when Clarke gives me another order, something about taking off my pants, not even realizing they’ve returned.

“He doesn’t have to carry me,” Gwyn objects, and I realize what Clarke had said. “I’m heavy.”

I tighten my jaw and lift a brow as I unbutton my pants. “I’ll manage,” I say. “Do I look like I’ve ever found anything too heavy in my life?”

“Well, no,” she says, eyeing my arms. She meets my gaze with honeyed wariness. I kick off my shoes and pants in a swift motion, and I step between her thighs again, pressing against her with my erection, impossible to ignore without my pants. She gasps and grabs my biceps, but it doesn’t deter her. “How much can you bench press?”

“If you’re asking if I could bench press you, Gwyn, the answer is yes. I can.”

“Okay, but would you do it while making one of those faces? I don’t want a man to pick me up while his face turns red and—”

I cut her off as I pick her up beneath her thighs, and she throws her arms around my neck. Those soft tits press against my exposed chest, and I rumble my appreciation as my dick twitches a rhythm against that heated triangle of fabric between us.

“Does it seem like I’m straining?” I ask, comfortably wrapping my arms beneath her ass.

“No,” she breathes, leaning back to look at me. “Not from carrying me, anyway,” she says as she bites her lip and gently tilts her hips.

I chuckle as I turn, walking toward the lounge. Clarke waits beside, and I lower Gwyn, supporting her back until I hover over her.

She stares up at me, and I see her need. But I can’t give her what she wants yet, this situation requiring thoughtful manipulation. Something I’ve never bothered with before, and I know it’s because of this need I have to fuck her senseless. I have formed some sort of sick dependency on the woman. If she’s here, still a part of a mystery, I can focus on that and nothing else. Not Remy’s death. Not my father’s conniving plots. She’s a luscious distraction.

“Sit down in the center, Roman. Gwyn, I want you to slide down to the ground. I’ll have you lean against his legs.”

I straighten as Gwyn pushes up from where she lays and gently maneuver around her, adjusting my dick before I sit.

There's little I can do to properly hide it in these tight boxer-briefs. Gwyn slides down to the ground, and her rounded shoulder butts up against my knee. She leans her head against it as I squirm.

"Relax, Roman. I can edit your boner out if you want me to."

I tilt my head back and laugh. "I imagine in shoots like this, they're not uncommon."

"Nope," Clarke replies, and Gwyn chuckles.

Clarke takes photos all while Gwyn's arm wraps gently around my leg, tracing her fingertips over my leg hair. It's rare that I feel something like goosebumps, now that I've been through my Ascension, but she draws them out of me. My skin pebbles, and I shiver.

"Aww, someone is cold," Gwyn says, and she pulls on my goddamn leg hairs. My hand darts out of its own accord, fisting her hair and tilting her head back to look at me.

"Careful," I warn, leaning over her, and her eyes roll as she closes them. She makes a faint humming sound, and it shoots straight to my cock. I realize two things in this instant. The first being I've only ever heard her come silently, quiet whimpers breaking the stillness of her bedroom on late nights. The second? I need to hear those sounds in person.

"Yeah, yeah," she says, mischief lifting the corners of her lips, her closed eyes making her look like a satisfied cat. "You don't scare me." And the line is just a bit too confident to not be something she's said before.

"I should," I reply. She has no fucking idea what she's gotten into. Her eyelids flutter open, and her pupils are dark, blown wide.

"Maybe," is her impish reply. There's a ferality to her I never noticed before. She reminds me of the stray cat near my temporary apartment. It had been sunbathing and lounging near my apartment for weeks, never once begging or seeking attention, content with its station. Gwyn's eyes glint like the

stray's did when I finally offered it food. She is starved, and I can offer her something she wants.

Which means I cannot give it. Not yet.

I loosen my hold in her hair, and my eyes are drawn to her neck, arched so fucking pretty.

“Alright, I think I’ve got enough, and it’s getting a little weird in here, even for me. I’m going out for a smoke, and I have to call Annette. You guys can, uh, relax in here for a while,” Clarke interrupts. And they’re down the stairs a second later. The front door clangs open noisily, and Clarke’s parting words echo. “Please don’t fuck on the sofa!”

I close my eyes, huffing a breath and breaking the trance Gwyn has pulled me into. I sit back and exhale, resting my hands on my stomach. Gwyn gets to her knees, leaning forward to grab a piece of paper off the coffee table as she gifts me with a clear view of her fat ass.

“So, uh, the sheet of questions we’re supposed to ask each ___”

“You’ve got about thirty seconds to put that body on me, sweetheart,” I say, stretching my arms wide across the back of the couch.

“What?” she says, whipping her head around with widened eyes.

“I don’t want another tattoo, but I need something beautiful on my body. Now.”

“Or what?” she asks, cheeks going red as she bites her lip. She stands, not bothering to adjust where her bra has shifted, a hint of her areola peeking out. I let my gaze linger on the peach patch of skin, curious how she’ll respond to the brazen need I let rise to the surface.

“You sure you want to find out?” I ask, and she surprises me by slipping the straps of her bra down.

“How about you look but don’t touch,” she says as she reaches behind her and unfastens her bra, letting it fall down her arms before she catches it, keeping herself covered.

“Twenty seconds.”

She freezes, the tiniest line forming between her brows. She’s not used to someone putting a stop to her bratty bullshit.

“Fifteen.”

She steps toward me as she cups her heavy breasts in her hands, bra a formality at this point, and I swallow the reaction I know she’s looking for. She’s wanting me to concede, to let her continue with the striptease. To beg to see those beautiful tits.

“You don’t want to see my body?” she asks, and there is a fake insecurity there as she tries to make herself smaller by covering up her stomach. It’s the first time I’ve been able to sense any falsehoods from her. She thinks I will scramble to make her feel sexy, to make up for some sort of inadvertent slight in making her think she wasn’t desirable. I’m confident it’s a lie. I don’t even need to listen to her breathing and her heart for certainty. She knows and doesn’t need me to tell her.

“Don’t pretend, Gwyn. False self-doubt is unbecoming. Ten.”

Her mouth opens in a wry smile, her tongue pushing against her cheek as she drops her arms.

It’s unfair how fucking gorgeous she is.

“That could have backfired, you know,” she says, taking another step forward. “What if I really—”

“Five.”

She slams her mouth shut and glares at me.

And then she’s in my lap, and her lips are on mine. She’s groaning into my mouth, my hands on her ass, and I know I’ll get what I want. I’ve made her break her rules, and she is not in control of this encounter.

I am.

When I grip her thong in my hands and pull, forcing the fabric to press tightly against her clit, I hope her stuttering

gasp is enough. Hope it is the gap I need to sink into her mind and get what I want.

“Do you know anything about a man named Remy?”

5

GWYN

“NO,” I SAY, AND THEN I SHAKE MY HEAD. “SORRY, WHAT?”

He releases my thong, and one hand slips down. When his thumb makes contact with my clit, I collapse forward, seeking out his mouth. He tugs my lip between his teeth, and I writhe in his lap. His thumb is rubbing me harder, the fabric between us dampening. My breath hitches, and he uses his other hand to grip my ass hard, pulling me against him.

“Hmm?” It comes out as a low growl as he nuzzles against my neck, his beard scratching against my skin.

“I don’t know,” I say, breathing a laugh. I’m so fucking turned on, it’s difficult to concentrate. Him calling me out is the hottest thing he’s done this whole time. I prefer to be the one who leads things with sex. That way, when I don’t pursue anything further or let anyone pursue anything, it is only because of my actions. But I’m supposed to be wanting something more. With Roman. He is warm and sturdy, and there is so much of him I want to touch. I put my hand on his pec, fingertip on the dot over the *I* in *Alice*, and I roll my head to give him better access to my neck.

I wonder who Alice is.

Beneath the smattering of dark brown curls across his chest, I trace my fingertip over the edge of a raven’s wing. There is almost more ink on his body than there isn’t, and I am curious about each illustration. But it’s hard to think about when he has me like this. Every thought is white noise beside his exhaustive touch. Roman is exacting in what he does.

Every move appears to be calculated with precision to get what he wants. But, despite the erection, I am uncertain if it is me or my body that he wants. I decide it doesn't matter. I am relishing his thick fingertips as they bruise my ass, and I'm panting as I grind against his moving thumb.

It only takes me a moment to admonish myself. I'd told myself to not let it go this far. I'd told Sasha not to worry about me, that I had it all under control, that I wouldn't let myself get hurt. I am already falling back into old habits, and this is the absolute worst time to do it. I doubt my sister expected me to fall apart in his arms like this within a few hours. I wince when I think of the last time I disappointed her.

"Sasha," I say, pushing myself back and grabbing his wrist. I'm panting, and my skin feels hot. The last thing I want to do is stop, but I use my last remaining brain cell, somehow still sober from the lust enveloping me, and I stop myself.

"What?" he asks. His brow furrows, and I try to recall how old it said he was on the questionnaire. Mid thirties, if I had to guess. He lets go of my ass and drags his hand through his hair as he sits back against the couch.

"My sister," I begin, and then I realize I don't even know what the fuck I'm saying.

"You're thinking about your sister while I touch you?"

Heat flames my cheeks. "Well, no."

"We can slow down," he says. "Answer some of those questions?" he asks. His eyes look darker than they did a few minutes ago, a lusty haze over them I suspect mirrors mine.

"I don't fuck on the first date. Or, I'm trying not to anyway."

"Okay," he draws. The look he gives me borders on cruel. "And your sister has what to do with that?"

I sigh, chuckling by the end of it. "I don't want to deal with her judging me."

"Well, we're not going to fuck."

“Okay,” I reply, reaching for the bra I’d dropped between us, and easing myself backward on his thighs. I’m confused by his shift in demeanor and am feeling entirely too naked. I quickly got used to rejection in college. But I learned to be discerning—I only pursue things with people I am certain want me. This is the first time in a long time that the rejection has stung. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, hoping I haven’t ruined everything.

“We wouldn’t have the time.” One hand grabs my wrist while his other tilts my chin. “That doesn’t mean I can’t make you feel good, Gwyn. That I can’t give you what you need.” His hand trails down, distractingly soft, caressing my chest. His fingertips brush over my nipple, already harder than a diamond, and he cups me, lifting my breast as he dips his head.

“And what do I need?” I say, letting my head tilt back as I relax on his lap once more—relieved.

“I can tell you’re used to calling the shots. At least with sex,” he says, lips moving against sensitive skin before he bites down. I arch into him, grinding down on his hard length. “I’ll give you what you need without you having to ask for it,” he says, and then his hand is on my throat, pushing my head back.

I brace my hands on his knees behind me, and he twitches as my hips surge toward him. He groans, squeezing my neck gently as his teeth graze over my pebbled flesh. His thumb brushes against my carotid, and my breath hitches. I am worried briefly—we didn’t discuss this—but find relief when his hand shifts incrementally. Roman knows what he’s doing. He merely holds my neck, the display one of power, and I’m surprised I enjoy bending to his will. His fingertips move, sliding gently beneath the waistband of my panties.

“Would you like that, Gwyn? Or would you rather answer those questions with me?” he asks, and I stop moving only for a second because I know what my answer ought to be. I can hear Sasha in my mind, lambasting me for this wanton display. But if she could see this giant of a man, I don’t think she’d blame me.

“Both,” I reply decisively, and his hand on my neck trails down my body as he chuckles.

He leans forward, the curling hair on his chest brushing against my breasts as he wraps an arm around me. He leans forward, half-standing, as he reaches for the paper on the coffee table while I cling tightly to him.

Fuck, he is strong.

“Alright,” he says, settling back onto the sofa. “Tell me about your family,” he says as he puts the paper down beside him and grips my ass. It makes me laugh because how the hell am I supposed to talk about my family when I’m almost naked in this man’s lap as his erection pushes against my inner thigh? When his head dips forward and he gently pulls my nipple into his mouth, I nearly ignore my idea and give into his offer.

“One step-sister,” I say, gasping as his tongue swirls, my nipple tightening in his mouth. “Dead parents. What else do you want to know?”

He pulls away slowly and sits back. Saliva glistens on his lips, but the look he gives me is solemn.

“My mom died when I was young. There’s nothing like this kind of grief, and I’m sorry you’re familiar with it,” he says as his hands move soothingly up my sides. “How did they die?” he asks, and I’m surprised I don’t hesitate.

“My bio mom died when I was born. My dad and adoptive mom died last year. Hit-and-run,” I say, forcing myself not to look away. Forcing myself to look at him as I tell him the source of the grief which has defined me for the last year.

“Fuck,” he says, his eyes softening as one hand slides up and grips my jaw. “They find who did it?” he asks, and my stomach tightens. It is one of the first questions people ask, so it shouldn’t surprise me. But every time, my heart races.

“No.” I clear my throat. “What about you? Tell me about your family.”

He studies me for a second longer, his eyes dipping to my throat.

“Mom died when I was young. Cancer. My dad’s an asshole who I avoid when I can. That’s it.”

“Only child? No brothers? Sisters?” I ask, and I realize I’m still sitting mostly naked in his lap. I wonder how I went from wanting to go so much further than that to genuinely wanting to hear the answers to our questions.

“Only child,” he grunts.

“I was too for a while. Until my dad met my mom,” I say. “I got a mom and a sister on the same day.” He smiles and slides his hands down my sides, his thumbs gently caressing the creases my stomach forms.

“And you’re close with your sister?” He leans forward, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. It is intimate, and I don’t hate it.

It’s unsettling.

I wipe the sappy smile off my mouth before mumbling, “Yeah.” I put my hands on his shoulders and press him back into the sofa. Leaning forward, I press a kiss to his lips, trying to return to where we left off, but he stops me. One of his hands grips my hip tightly, and he forces me to sit back as his eyes roam over me.

“Christ,” he whispers, dragging his free hand over his jaw, and I mistake it for reverence. “Aphrodite.”

“What?”

“A goddess. Look at you.”

I scoff. “You don’t have to do that. I’m already half-naked. You’ve done the wooing.”

He chuckles as his hand cups my breast before sliding it down over the hills and valleys of my rolled stomach. “I’m serious. The painters and the sculptors were only trying to prepare us for you,” he says.

His expression is brutal, daring me to fight him. His seriousness seems intimidating, but I’m tempted to argue with him, anyway. I know I’m attractive, but calling me a goddess

is a stretch. But as I look at him, I realize something that makes me smile.

“Goddess.” I roll my eyes and chuckle. “Well, you look like what would happen if Zeus fucked a motorcycle—which he totally would, by the way.”

Roman throws his head back and laughs. At this angle, I can see the strong column of his throat, and I am desperate to lick it.

“There’s a joke about chasing tailpipe here,” he says. I snort, unable to help it, and when he grins at me, I’m enthralled. God, he’s handsome.

Annoyed with myself for my dreamy distraction, I push off of him. But in a swift motion, my wrists are in his grasp, and as he pulls them behind me, it causes me to arch my back.

“I don’t think so,” he says, dipping forward and licking a path upward from between my breasts. His nose drags along my skin, and he inhales me as if he can’t get enough. He transfers my wrists into one large hand and slides the other between us, tracing the swell of my lower stomach.

“We only did one question,” I pant, forcing myself to sit still as his fingertip slides beneath my waistband once more and inches lower.

“You want to do another?”

“I think we should, shouldn’t we?”

“One more, and then you’ll let me ask the rest on a real date,” he demands as he lets go of my wrists. I straighten and look down at him. His hand is still in my underwear, and he looks up at me with eyes made of autumn leaves, and I know I’m not going to deny him.

My resolve has fractured so brutally, I don’t know what to do with myself.

“I haven’t been on a real date in over a year,” I say, not sure what possesses me to tell him this. “I’m out of practice.”

“Then I’d say you’re overdue for one. Let me see you again, sweetheart.” His voice trails off into a whisper, and his

sincerity is hypnotizing. I get lost in it for a moment and find myself nodding. He tilts his head, a small smile spreading on his face as he passes me the paper Clarke left.

“Worst thing an ex has done to you?” I ask, swallowing hard. I know I’ll need to answer this question too.

“I don’t want to talk about that while I’m touching you,” he says, his hand in my underwear finally moving again, and he slides lower until his fingertips stop at my clit. They press down, offering nothing more in the way of friction, and I rock my hips. “But she fucked my dad.”

“Oh my God,” I say, trying to still my movements and failing as his fingers slide lower and his thumb presses into my clit. I lean forward, resting my forehead on his shoulder as his hand continues. “I’m sorry he did that to you,” I say, struggling to get the words out.

He shrugs. “I’m not. I wouldn’t be here with you if he didn’t.”

I press a kiss beneath his ear, my hands gently trailing over his chest. “Maybe I wasn’t so far off with my Zeus comment. He was also a philandering fuck.”

He chuckles as he slides a thick finger inside me. I gasp, and my hips buck as I press against his palm. With the way I’m sitting on him, it has to be difficult to maneuver, but he seems to manage.

I don’t love the idea of telling him about Josh, but I figure I should get it over with. My admission is no worse than his. Roman plants a kiss on my neck, so delicate it makes me shiver.

“My ex fucked my best friend right after my parents died.”

“Jesus.” His free hand slips into my hair at the base of my neck, pulling me back from him so he can see me. “That’s fucking evil,” he says, mouth a severe line.

“Clarke thinks I’m doing this shoot to make him jealous.” Roman’s fingers move again, a bit more forcefully than before.

“Are you?”

“I’m not,” I tell him. “Although, if he found out and got jealous, it would serve him right.”

“Good,” Roman grunts, and with remarkable speed, he lifts me and lays me down on the sofa. He leans over me and knees my legs apart. “Now that we’re done with the questions, I want to taste the sounds you make when you come. That alright with you?” He doesn’t wait for an answer as his lips dip to my jaw, his beard tickling my skin. He slips another finger into me, and I arch upward against him. Peppering kisses down my skin, he finds my nipple with his teeth and gently tugs as his thick fingers bring me to ruin.

“Wait,” I say. “This is—I shouldn’t—” I stammer before taking a deep breath, “I told myself I would take things slow.” I whimper as he slips his fingers out of me.

He lifts his head, looking at me with dark eyes and a dangerous curve of his lips. He is beautiful and terrifying. His cheeks are slightly rounded, an echo of boyhood bracketed by his neat beard. His hair looks smooth and silky—dark, but lighter than my own.

“*Why do you want to take it slow?*” he asks, and his tone is strange. Somehow commanding and yet soft all at once. As coaxing as curtains on a breeze, undulating as it pulls air out the window. It urges me to tell him the truth.

“I don’t want to get hurt,” I say before shaking my head and blinking. “I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“*What makes you think I’ll hurt you? Is there something you’re hiding?*”

That voice again. This time it is an ice cold glass of lemonade waiting for me on the back porch, the summer heat making the glass sweat, and I can practically taste the tart. It is unsettling but familiar. It makes my tongue itch.

“I always get hurt if I stay. If I find it in me to want, I’m the one who loses. There’s nothing to hide except how pathetic it makes me feel. How scared.”

I frown, and he climbs up my body, caging me in as he rests between my legs. He lowers himself and presses gentle

lips to mine. A tingle spreads through me. How is it he is so familiar? How do his kisses feel like they come from someone who knows me more intimately than he does?

“Give me three dates,” he says. “Then, if you want, you run as fast as you can.” There is a glint in his eyes, a spark of something I want to bottle. I breathe deep, hoping to clear the fog from the way he’d spoken to me, but his scent envelops me. The peppermint lingers on his breath, and he smells like soap—clean.

“This counts as the first one,” I whisper, looking at him as he hovers over me. My hands are restless, already caressing his biceps. His answering grin tells me he knows he has won.

“Of course, Gwyn.” He sits up, pulling one of my knees up and resting it against his leg. When I reach for his arm, he pins my hand above my head. “Now where were we?” he asks as he leans over and pulls my other hand into his grasp. With one hand, he holds my arms above my head, and with the other, he roughly tugs my underwear aside and drags a finger through my wetness.

I groan, adjusting my hips to better his access. He moves, pressing his knee between my legs for leverage as he bends over me and steals the sound with his mouth. When he slides his fingers inside me, his thumb pressing down on my clit, the sound tearing from my throat is swallowed by a kiss. I feel his answering chuckle on my lips.

I can tell he is studying what I respond to and reacting accordingly. When I push my hips toward him, he increases the pressure, his rough thrusts making me yearn for more. I can imagine being thrown around by this man, and that turns me on beyond reason. There are positions I’ve never been able to try, not confident in my partner’s strength, that I think Roman would handle just fine.

He releases my hands and looks down at me as if what he said about the Greek goddess is true, as if I am some sort of priceless artifact. Even as he fucks me roughly with one hand, the other traces a delicate path down from my neck—over my

breasts and stomach, down my thighs—before traversing up again to put his thumb over my bottom lip.

It's a struggle to hold still the closer I get. I'm writhing, being pulled toward that blissful release of tension, and when a moan slips past, Roman seizes the opportunity. His thumb presses farther into my mouth, and I bite down. When I nip him, he makes a sound I recognize only as need.

"The sweet thing has teeth, huh?" he chides, and I snort.

"I'm not sweet," I say as my panting increases.

"Oh, you don't know how sweet you are, baby." He rips his hand from between my legs, and I whimper, only for him to roughly press those fingertips past my lips. I don't move for a second before I suck on his fingers, tasting the slight tartness which is me.

When he pulls away and slides them inside me once more, I gasp.

"My turn," he says, and then he leans back down to kiss me. His tongue is thorough, trying to taste what I'd sucked off his fingers. He is a mess of saliva and teeth, and I can't stop myself from moaning. His fingers move as they were before but more desperately, needing me to finish as much as I need it. He is relentless, and his thumb presses in just the right spot on my clit. I'm writhing beneath his heavy body as he kisses me, and it feels wrong that I take comfort in his weight holding me down. Feels wrong that I am content to stay beneath him, unable to move. I nip his lower lip and roll my hips against his hand, searching for release.

He bites my lip, hard, and I freeze when I taste iron. I've been bitten during sex before, but never to the point of drawing blood. His body shudders, and his muscles tighten as he takes a deep breath. He buries his face into my neck. I shiver, but I'm no longer teetering on the edge of orgasm.

"Ouch," I say, reaching to rub my lip. "I think I'm bleeding," I say, unnerved by his silence.

When he sits up, he wipes his hand over his mouth but refuses to look at me. "Fuck. Hang on," he mumbles.

A moment later, when he comes back from the bathroom, shoving the hand towel at me, he refuses to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says, as I glance at the white towel in my hands.

“Toilet paper, Roman,” I say, trying to give him a gentle smile, but he keeps his eyes averted, and I notice his skin has paled. “I can’t wipe blood on this nice towel.”

“I’ve got to go. I—I can’t do blood,” he says, and then before I can move, he’s pulling his pants on and running down the stairs.

6

ROMAN

SITTING IN THE PARKING LOT IN A CAR I BORROWED, COERCION assisted, I wait for Alexa Strom to show up to her prenatal appointment. Margot had told me she was scheduled for an ultrasound, so it was likely Gwyn's ex would be with her. I didn't want to seek them out separately, having no desire to speak to such worms for more than I had to. I've already pushed my father's timeline further than he wanted, and I need to get this dealt with.

Meeting with these two allows me to get more information without being around *her*.

When a sensible silver Honda pulls into the lot, I'm relieved to stop my spiraling thoughts. Thoughts of home and my mom and old and new and warm and cold and contentment and exhilaration. Thoughts brought to the forefront by that fucking hunter's blood. I'm convinced I'm still high from it days later, and my teeth have lengthened while I wait.

He drops her off at the door before driving past it to park. She walks inside, already waddling even though she's barely into her first trimester. This is her first ultrasound, and I'm pretty sure that baby is no bigger than an apple.

My mouth waters thinking about apples, and I curse under my breath as I get out of the borrowed BMW. I'd barely had more than a drop, and that fucking blood is killing me slowly. I scan the parking lot, waiting for Alexa to go inside before moving quickly towards where Josh is parking his car. When

he gets out, I wait a respectable few paces away, and he looks at me curiously.

He's narrow and wiry, and I know his running habits are responsible for his form. Everything about him is average, which is why he ought to have been perfect for Gwyn. But he cheated. A lot. I still don't know why. I had already known he'd fucked her friend, but when Gwyn told me at the photo shoot, it finally sunk in just how cruel that was.

Fuck, even thinking her name is making my pants tight and my teeth tingle. If I had known what her blood would do to me, I would have been more careful.

"Hey, man. Can you give me a jump? I called a tow, but they won't be here for an hour," I explain as I gesture to the BMW.

"I actually have to go in to my wife's appointment. Getting a look at my boy for the first time," he replies with a broad smile. Christ. I don't know shit about babies, but I doubt they know the gender this early.

I nod and smile. "Congratulations. Maybe if I'm still out here on your way out, you can help a guy out," I say, and when my eyes catch his, I lace my voice with my vampire influence. "*Do you know anything about Bill Parsons' friends? Where he went, who he associated with?*"

Josh blinks, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. "Gwyn's dad only went to the auto parts store up the street from his house. He didn't have many friends. An old trucking buddy named Charlie is the only person I can think of," he says, voice monotone. He shakes his head, trying to rid himself of the coercion. I hadn't gone easy on him though, and I know I'd have him in my thrall for a few hours if I wanted to.

"*Know anything else about Charlie? Bill didn't go anywhere? Groceries? Out to dinner?*"

"He only went out to dinner when the girls begged him. Gwyn usually picked up their groceries because of his bum knee and Angela's schedule. Charlie only called him once in

front of me, and Bill left the room to talk with him.” Josh’s face relaxes as he gives in to my pull.

“Did Charlie call him on the same cell phone Bill always used?”

“Nah, house phone,” he replies, and I gape at him for a moment. A fucking house phone. In all my research and Margot’s deep dives, neither one of us had even thought about a landline. Gwyn doesn’t have one currently, and Bill used his cell phone regularly. It hadn’t even occurred to me.

I’m in a rush to end this conversation, ready to text Margot with a new lead.

“Anything peculiar about Gwyn? Anything abnormal?” She is nothing close to normal, but they don’t know that.

Josh chuckles as he speaks. “Nothing worth mentioning. Like the rest of her.”

I feel my temple throb. *“That why you left her? Cheated on her? Because she wasn’t worth mentioning?”* I’m annoyed by the grate of my voice.

“I was sick of hearing her cry,” he says, and I can feel his mind fighting against my influence, and I let him speak more freely. “All she wanted to do was sleep after the accident. For months, she barely brushed her teeth, let alone her hair. I had to force her to shower half the time.” He shrugs. “Alexa was there, and she was sick of it too.”

What he said twists my gut into a knot.

“You know what depression is, you dumbfuck?” I close my eyes, painfully pulled into a memory of dragging my brother out of his bed to the shower. I remember the stink of sweat and alcohol which had clung to his skin and his sheets.

I wish I did shit differently.

“Yes,” Josh says, blinking since I hadn’t focused entirely when I’d asked.

“What kind of stove do you have, Josh?”

“Gas.”

“Alright, listen up.” I know he has no choice as I tighten my hold on his mind. *“You’re going to drive straight home. Don’t stop to talk to anyone. Obey all traffic laws. When you get there, I want you to turn on the burners—high. Then I want you to put all the flammable shit in your kitchen on top. Paper towels, dish rags, paper plates. Understand?”*

He nods. He’s lucky I might have use for him later, otherwise I’d just kill him.

“Only after your ceiling is on fire are you allowed to leave.”

When he doesn’t move, I tell him to get in the car as I shoot off a text to Margot.

Bill had a house phone. Someone named Charlie. That’s all I have for now.

You call her yet? Schedule that second date? :P

Too busy telling her ex to set his house on fire.

Wtf. Seriously?

He’s annoying.

Just double checked. They have a cat.

Fuck.

I know they live in a small subdivision and someone will call the fire in the second they see smoke, so the cat will probably be fine. Still. I glance around to make sure no one is nearby, and I use my abilities to catch up to the car leaving the parking lot. When he rolls his window down, I snag his phone from him.

“Before you set the kitchen on fire, take your cat outside,” I order as I text his “wife” about his fears of fatherhood and his impending breakdown. I give her the details of her rideshare driver Josh called to take her home.

He’ll be there at the end of her appointment, waiting in a black BMW.



“THE PHOTOGRAPHER MADE you look fucking hot, bud,” Margot says in opening.

“Clarke posted the pictures?” I ask. Unlocking my apartment, I toss my helmet on the counter. I’d returned the borrowed BMW after dropping off Alexa, and I was grateful to have the bike back. She’d been absolutely fucking useless, and it had felt nice to drown out my thoughts with the roaring engine. I lean across the bar, snagging my phone charger. I’d only called Margot to tell her Alexa was useless, but my phone was about to die—and she showed no signs of shutting up anytime soon.

“Only a few last night. The rest will be posted this weekend, apparently.” Margot whistles. “I mean, Gwyn looks hot as hell, but I already knew that. You sure Clarke isn’t a sorcerer? Sorceress?” She puts on a thick French accent. “Sorcière? What the fuck is the gender-neutral term for that?”

“Whatever the word is, I’m relatively certain they’re a human.”

“How do you know? You bite Clarke too?” Margot asks, voice dipping low. When I remain silent, she knows why. “You still feeling it? *Fuck*, I’m jealous as a dog at a steak dinner.”

“You say the weirdest shit sometimes.” I sigh, rubbing my hand through my beard. “I think it’s passed.”

“You never told me what it tasted like.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No, you said a bunch of weird bullshit about what it was like, how it made you feel. Not how it tasted.”

“It’s the same thing. Gwyn—she tasted warm and cold and like Christmas morning and like all sorts of crazy shit.” I think for a minute, debating on telling her about the overwhelming taste that had set me fucking alight. Made me worry I was

going to suck her dry without stopping. A fledgling wouldn't have been able to stop themselves, and I had to fight every instinct within me. God, the taste of it had nearly toppled everything, and the excuse I had made was pathetic.

A vampire, sick at the sight of blood. Fucking imagine.

“She tasted like apples. Mom’s apple pie,” I say quietly.

“Oh, shit. Roman...”

“Yeah. But that’s gotta be because she’s a hunter, right? She’s *designed* to taste like the best fucking thing on the planet.”

“But that’s only going to make it harder on you than it’s already going to be.”

“Make what harder?” I grit out, having a feeling about where this is going.

“You know, the heart thing. Killing her—all that,” Margot says.

“She’s a hunter, Margot. She’s a means to an end. I get the information I need, and I put her down. Björn can get off my ass about it.” Margot says nothing, and I wish I didn’t need to charge my phone so I could pace. “You know, I don’t think he gives a fuck about Remy. He’s more concerned with her heart.”

“I think your father wrote him off the minute he exiled Remy,” Margot replies.

“Which is such bullshit. It wasn’t his fault—what happened.”

“I know.”

“Fuck,” I murmur, not meaning to get worked up over my father. His lack of grief for his son pisses me off more than I care to think about. Would he have cared if it had been me? “I’m going to drain her of every last bit of information she can give me about Bill Parsons, then I’ll bring Björn her heart. Maybe then he’ll think I’ve proven myself enough.” I don’t miss my friend’s quick intake of breath. “Look, Margot, I know you think it’s a mistake, but—”

“No, that’s not why I made that sound. He’s sending Emile.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I pull out a barstool, slamming my elbow on the counter as I collapse into it. I sigh, rubbing my forehead. “When?”

“His plane landed a little while ago.” She snorts, and I can hear her typing in the background. “A fledgling apparently saw the photo shoot. That’s why he’s sending Emile.”

“Which one?” I ask, knowing I’ve done little to gain the new vampires’ loyalty, but I intend to change that when I return to the coven. Loyalty or fear—whichever one they want to give me—will suit my purpose.

“The guy. Hayden? Brayden? Fuck, I forget his name.”

I hear a vehicle pull up outside the apartment, and I tune my hearing as the car door shuts. When I hear the heavy gait of his footsteps and an unnaturally slow heartbeat to confirm the nature of my guest, I hang up with Margot and open my front door to the man on the other side.

“Uncle.”

“*Mon grand*,” he says, smile lighting up his wide-set blue eyes. I haven’t seen him in nearly five months, but he is as unchanging as he has always been. Though he has been known as Emile for as long as I’ve been alive, I know he has had many names in his millennium here on Earth. Born brother to my deceased mother, he is the only blood family I have aside from my father and my brother.

Not my brother. Remy is dead.

“What brings you here to see me?” I smile as I open the door wide. Though he is an enforcer, he is the closest I’ve had to a father my entire life. “Does Björn not keep you busy enough?”

“Oh, I am plenty busy, but I will always make time for my favorite nephew,” he says without a trace of a French accent. He’s had quite some time to perfect it. “Especially if he is getting into trouble.”

I laugh as I lead him to the couch. He sits down, reclining back and crossing one leg over the other.

“I’m not getting into trouble.”

“A little picture I was shown seems to indicate otherwise.” A nod of his head accompanies a raise of a brow. Before I can refute this, he continues. “Björn grows impatient. He has waited a long time to see the end of this.”

“Then he can wait a little while longer,” I retort, sitting down and leaning forward over my knees. “This is about Remy. She has information, connections. I’m not going to throw that away.”

Emile’s face grows tight when I mention my brother. “I’m just as devastated as you are, Roman. But surely you don’t think her father is responsible from beyond the grave? Parsons is six months gone—thank Ansi and her progeny.”

I shudder, thinking of Agnarr who rests deep below the compound, his immortality gifted by cursed Ansi.

Exhaling, I answer him. “I’m not sure. I’m considering the potential of some sort of fail-safe. Something to protect her should he not be able to. There’s a storage unit full of his personal effects I’d like to get into, and I have a lead on someone named Charlie.”

“And why haven’t you yet?”

“Wards.”

His hands clasp together on his knee, and his lips purse as he looks at me. My uncle has always been quiet, thinking long before he speaks. This is why he is second to my father—Björn needed someone to balance out his quick-burning anger.

“And why have you not used force?”

“Her blood must be spilled by her own hand.”

“Then compel her to cut her heart out and be done with it.”

“I might have questions that need answering.” I hesitated for only a moment, but he interprets it as weakness.

He sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know why you insist on this...this...moral superiority. No one is innocent, Roman. Everyone deserves to die for some reason or another. You are young, but you will learn that, eventually.”

“Regardless of what happened to Remy, I’ll be killing her, Uncle. For Maman.” I don’t hide my irritation. He knows what life has been for me without her and has tried to shield me from some of the worst of it. He knows I won’t let her death go unpunished, even if it’s taken me thirty years. “Björn will get his heart once I get my fucking answers.” I mean it, and I need him to see that.

He stares at me for a moment before nodding. “You honor Alice,” he says. “She would be proud.”

I don’t know if I believe that. She would have expected better from me regarding my little brother. We sit there for a moment, and Emile continues to watch me. Though he seems to understand my motivations, he appears wary.

I clear my throat. “Anyway, at first, I doubted who she was, but now I’ve confirmed it.”

“Did you confirm it before or after you fucked her?” he asks, quiet voice a snake in the grass.

“I did not fuck—”

“I can still scent her on you. That hunter *stink*,” he sneers. He stands, hands in his pocket as he walks toward the electric fireplace. Fingertips trailing across the mantle, he doesn’t look at me. “Don’t lie to me, Roman. I thought you’d grown out of that.”

I close my eyes, remembering my punishment as a child. Standing for days in direct sunlight, the ache in my head would turn into a pounding tempest before night fell.

“I didn’t have sex with her, not that way. I am simply infiltrating her defenses to make my life easier.”

“Keeping Björn happy will be the best means of that, *mon grand*.” He has always called me by the nickname, French for “big guy,” even when I was small and the name didn’t fit. He ruffles his hair, the light grey strands messy as usual. I wonder

if my hair will be grey by the time I settle into my immortal form. I don't take stock of my appearance often though, so it's possible I already have. Margot marked me as being a few years younger than I am on the questionnaire for Gwyn; so perhaps it's finally happened, and I never noticed. There are so few born vampires, it's hard to know when I'll settle.

"I will not apologize for being the only one to give a damn about what happened to Remy. He'll get his precious victory once I get mine," I say, shrugging, a bit too casual to counter my anger.

Emile pauses, his posture tight. He is a slight man, nearly half my size, but other than my father, he's the only one in our coven stronger than me. Though he is my blood and he has love for me, I never let my guard down around him.

"What's your next step then? You know what she is. Go to her, make her take you to the storage unit. Wash your hands of this." He turns to face me before quirking his head to the side. "If you need to fuck her and get her out of your system before you put her down, do it. I doubt your acting abilities, and those photos were very convincing."

"Jesus Christ, I don't need to—"

"Wear a fucking condom. Who knows what she carries." I simply stare at him, but my hand curls into a fist. He's treating me like a kid who found a filthy stray and wants to bring it home. I have no intentions of that. "You know, your father ripped out the throat of a woman I loved once. Imagine what he'd do to the child of Bill Parsons."

I'm not remotely surprised by the callousness of my father, so I don't react. Emile watches me. I catch the twitch of his jaw which tells me he is hungry. Before I can comment on it, he rushes over to me with his vampire abilities and pulls me off the couch.

"Come, *mon grand*. Show me where you prefer to eat. Perhaps we can take a walk on the beach afterward and we can discuss your little problem."

“YOU GOOD?” THE BARTENDER ASKS AS HE PASSES ME A GLASS of water. I mean-mug him for being presumptuous, but take a sip of the water. I need to sober up and schedule a ride home.

“You hiring?” I ask, but he’s already on his way to his next customer. I feel an arm brush against mine and turn toward the man beside me.

“You need a job, babe?” he grins at me, revealing teeth in need of an introduction to a toothbrush.

“Well, I lost mine today,” I say, tossing back my water like a shot, and I narrowly avoid choking on it.

“What for?” he asks, a slight drawl to his accent. He sounds like the old men who have lived here their whole lives. The ones who say “Naw-fuck” instead of “Nor-folk” or “Nor-fuck.” I laugh to myself because the way locals insist on “fuck” is one of my favorite things.

“Inappropriate representation of the company,” I say, rattling off what Donna in HR told me when I was let go from the job I’d held the last five years. It should be a surprise anyone saw the pictures, considering I have a strict rule to not mix social media with coworkers, but it’s not. Because Donna is Josh’s aunt.

And Josh just can’t resist fucking me over.

“You say some racist shit or something?” the man beside me asks, lip curling in disgust.

“No! What the fuck,” I mumble. My phone dings with a text message just as I’m about to explain.

It’s a number I don’t know from an area code I don’t recognize. Normally, I’d look up where the person is texting from, but I don’t know if my thumbs will cooperate.

Hey Gwyn. Sorry I left so quick the other day. Let me make up for it?

I huff a laugh, realizing it’s Roman.

I wondered if u was ever going to hear frog you again.

<frog emoji> Not gonna lie, I was embarrassed. But I’ve decided to get over it so I can see you again.

idk if that deal is till on the table. Convince me.

I think the typos must mean you’re excited at the prospect. I bet you’ve already convinced yourself.

Get over yourself. The typos are thanks to the whose

whittier

WHISKY

Are you out somewhere?

Yep

Want some company?

I wan to go home. But Aileen :/

Who is Aileen? What?

dads car. I don’t want to leave here.

What bar? I’ll drive it/you home.

Oh no mr. Serial killer

I don't honk so.

I take a selfie, giving him the finger and a glower. My vision goes double as I make sure I look decent. Despite my smudged makeup, I decide it's good enough and hit send. The guy next to me leans over, reminding me of his presence with a brush of his fingertips down my arm.

"That your man?" he nods toward the phone.

Laughter bubbles up my throat, and I can't help the cackle that falls from my mouth. I hear a swoop of a reply from Roman, but I'm too distracted. "Definitely not," I say. Mostly naked and close to an orgasm, I should have been disappointed he left. But he did me a favor; I'd let it go too far.

I'm flagging down the bartender for another drink as the man from the bar snags my phone.

"Hey!" I object, and I see Bar Guy add his number into my contacts.

"Let me take you out sometime. I like big girls," he adds as he looks at me conspiratorially.

I don't hide the gagging sound I make as I take my phone back. "No thanks," I say, grabbing my purse and jacket from the back of the stool before moving over a seat. Bar Guy slides over to follow me. I roll my eyes, flagging down the bartender once more.

"Why not? You think you're too good for me?" Bar Guy sneers.

I look down at my phone, ready to leave the car in the parking lot and pull up the rideshare app. I see Roman's text though, and I can't help but smile as I respond.

Is that hanks?

HOW DISD YOU KNOE THAT

I can see that he's typing a response, but I don't see the reply because Bar Guy smacks my phone out of my hand.

"Fucking bitch," he spits at me and sticks out a leg to trip me when I stand. I'm wearing tall boots and I'm already clumsy when I'm sober, so I fall on my ass.

Why is it the worst fucking offense in the world to be rejected by a fat woman?

"Should I be thankful for scraps?" I ask from the floor. I scramble to my feet, and I'm about to slap the fucker as he crowds into my personal space. But then I see a hand grab the back of his neck, and then he is gone.

Stupidly, I blink for several seconds before Roman takes his place in front of me.

"The fuck was that about?" he asks, hands gripping my arms as he bends down to meet my eye.

His thick hair is pulled back into a tiny man bun on the back of his head, and somehow it is both adorable and impossibly sexy.

"How'd you get here so fast?" I wobble on my feet.

"I live a street over," he answers, almost sheepishly. "I recognized it from your picture."

"I'm sorry." Roman tilts his head in confusion. "I am very drunk, and this is embarrassing," I explain.

"It's alright. You're still cute as fuck." He smirks at me beneath those thick, perfect brows. I reach up and touch one, tracing my fingertip over it. I almost regret touching him when he tilts my chin up. His fingers that brought me to the edge and left me wanting are caressing my skin. His touch is so soft, it's almost too gentle. My cheeks, already red from the drinking, heat even further. I don't know what to do with the attention. I'm supposed to be careful, but he is making restraint difficult.

"You have very nice eyebrows," I say, and he chuckles.

"What's the celebration?"

“My unemployment.” I grab my empty glass of water and hold it out for him to cheers me.

“Oh shit,” he replies. “Yeah, I’d say that’s worth getting drunk over. Fuck, I’m sorry Gwyn.”

“You should be! It’s kinda your fault,” I assert, and I accidentally drop my glass. It breaks, thankfully not into a million tiny pieces, and Roman quickly picks up the broken cup.

“Let’s get you home. You can tell me all about it.”

He gently grabs me by the elbow, leading me toward the door. I’m turning around to grab my purse and pay my bill, but he’s already carrying my purse while he puts my jacket around my shoulders.

“My tab!” I shout at him, but he’s waving at the bartender, who nods, and I think that means he paid it for me. “I suppose that’s the least you can do after costing me my job.”

He doesn’t answer as he digs through my purse for my keys. The autumn air is chilly as we step outside, and I put my jacket on properly.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” he says as he holds open the passenger door for me a moment later.

“You drive stick?” I ask, realizing I forgot to ask. He is so domineering and confident, I just assumed he did. I’m already in the car when he answers, and I shamelessly ogle his ass as he walks to the driver’s side and gets in.

God, he’s handsome.

“They don’t make men like you anymore,” I say, a hiccup bubbling up my throat.

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“I don’t know. Tall and scary and painfully hot. Oh, and strong. Like you could lift a cow or an ox or something. You belong in a gladiator movie,” I ramble, finding it weirdly difficult to shut up. “But you’re soft too. Like you could break me or cuddle me. Or both,” I mumble.

He doesn't reply, but his gaze is burning. I almost feel guilty for getting involved with him when he looks at me like that.

"I'm going to fuck this up," I blurt.

"How so?"

I take a breath, making sure I say nothing I shouldn't. This is much more difficult when drunk. I'm profoundly irresponsible for being around him in my current state. I control my tongue, only whispering, "I can't have nice things."

He grunts, and I don't know if it's in dismissal of what I have said or what. I realize I'm not buckled, so I struggle to pull the seatbelt over myself. When I'm done, I'm about to tell him where I live but see he's using my phone for GPS.

"Smart man," I say. "Very serial killer though."

"I figured it would be easier to just press the home button than get your address."

"I'm not that bad." I cross my arms.

"You are, and that's alright. You've had a bad day." I look at him as he drives. He has a strong nose, aquiline, and I am more convinced of the gladiator role than I was before. I watch his forearm flex as he shifts, and fuck if I'm not wet just watching.

Get it together, you moron.

"Care to explain how it's my fault?" he asks.

I harrumph and slide down into my seat.

"Your penis did it."

He chuckles to himself. "I suppose I need to ask for clarity, but it's refreshing that it's my dick getting someone *else* into trouble instead of me." He adjusts the rearview mirror and the necklace I have hanging there falls down from how I'd wrapped it up. The sun glinting on it had made it difficult to drive. Drunk as I am, I sense Roman stiffen.

“Surprised you’re not wearing this pretty thing,” he says, shifting gears.

“Oh, I don’t, uh—” I put my hand up to my throat on instinct, soothing myself before I explain. “I found it in my dad’s things after he died.”

“But you don’t wear it?”

“No,” I reply, offering him no further explanation. I look out the window, willing the lights to wink out so I don’t have to see. They blur as we move, and I close my eyes. The yellow glow of the streetlight is a reminder I don’t want.

We are halfway to my house, and I wonder if time is moving fast or if I am moving slow. Roman sighs as he pulls up to a stoplight, and I look at him as discreetly as I can through my hair. He rubs his beard before turning to look at me, his dark brown eyes almost black in the night.

“So, what did my dick do?”

“Did you not see the pictures?” I ask.

“No, I haven’t looked.”

“Ouch,” I say, turning my head to look out the window again. “That uninterested, huh?”

His hand slides over my stockinged thigh, his pinky sliding beneath the skirt I wear.

“The opposite,” he replies. “Afraid to look, because I’m probably too interested, and I don’t want to see the evidence.”

I suck in a breath, reaching for the old water bottle in my cup holder.

“Well,” I start, taking a deep breath after I sucked down as much water as I could, “this morning, I was pulled in by HR and told that I couldn’t expect to stay employed there if I blatantly starred in and shared pornographic content. Which is such bullshit! Clarke didn’t even post the ones where my ass is out! I’m just as covered as I would be in a swimsuit. No one gave a fuck when Michelle posted all her vacation pictures.”

I tilt my head back against the headrest, and I startle when I realize we are in the driveway of my townhouse and no longer moving.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. Thanks for driving me home.” I reach for my phone, about to call him a car to take him back to his place.

“Don’t apologize. Tell me what else happened,” he says, squeezing my thigh. His eyes twinkle in my porch light, like moonlight on dark water. I’m tempted to gently caress his pretty cheek. He smirks, and I wonder if he knows what I’m thinking.

“The one she showed me was from when you yanked my head back after I pulled your leg hairs.” I giggle, and he squeezes again, hard enough to smart. I laugh harder. “You can see my neck and a whole lot of cleavage, but your giant boner is what she pointed at, so I’m going to blame you.” I glare at him, and he’s still smirking. His face softens after a moment though, and it looks like pity. I can’t help it as I continue to ramble. “They didn’t care when that first set went viral, and the ones Clarke posted back then were far more scandalous. Josh probably only called Donna because you were in them.” I close my eyes and tilt my head back again.

“Josh? Your ex?”

“Yeah. He got me the job,” I mumble, not sure how much time has passed, as exhaustion gnaws at my sensibility. I know I need to get out of the car and seek the comfort of my warm bed, but I can’t help wanting to soak in his company before I ruin it all. Before he realizes what everyone else does eventually.

I am no fucking good.

I watch him as my head lolls against the seat.

“Sleep, Gwyn,” he says. “I’ve got you.”



MY KNEES FALL APART as Roman slips into the cradle of my thighs, his lips pressed firmly against mine. His hard cock rubs against me, my tender flesh sensitive to every movement. He is starving as he rubs his hands down my sides, searching for sustenance in my skin. I open my eyes, and the ceiling is spinning. I gasp for air, inhaling sharply as his hips punch forward and he slams into me. I cry out, wrapping my legs around him. His lips dip to my ear, and his teeth move gently to tug on the lobe. There is a ringing in my ears as shivers race down my spine, and I feel every goosebump. He angles his hips to push deep inside me, and I am melding with him and I am crying and I don't know why.

“Careful, sweetheart. Can't have you falling in love,” he says, his beard rubbing against my neck. I cannot stop the sobs falling from my lips as he continues his motions, and the ringing in my ears gets worse, my head beginning to ache.

“Stop,” I pant, close to finishing, but I can't catch my breath. He pulls away from me, and I am repulsed when I see Josh's light brown hair. He is laughing at me as I stare in horror. I push him off me, and I lay there in the dark, trying to catch my breath. When I open my eyes, he's gone, and it's daytime. Sun filters in through my curtains, and I roll away from it. I can still feel the salty residue of tears on my face—real, despite the dream. I exhale a shaky breath, grateful Josh wasn't real.

I try to be thankful Roman was not real, but I don't know if I am.

I grab my phone and panic when I realize it's 9 a.m. but am partially relieved when I remember I have no job to be at. I rub the blariness of sleep from my eyes and notice I have a missed call and text from Hale.

Why the fuck is there a seven foot tall bikerjack in our kitchen?

I snort at his description of Roman but my eyes widen once the words make sense. I hear Sasha yelling at me in my head and know she's right. Somehow, I'm being more reckless than I have been the entire past year. I sit up, unnerved by my missing stockings and skirt, worried that perhaps my dream was real, but I am assuaged by the same underwear and shirt I'd worn to the bar. Rolling over, I see the other side of my bed is undisturbed. Zuul eyes me from his spot at the end of my bed, curled up with his chin resting on his paws. He casts a wary eye in my direction.

"Don't judge me, pup," I say as I reach over to scratch between those big ears. When I see my bedroom door is locked, I huff a laugh. As if a flimsy piece of metal is enough to keep that giant of a man out. I stretch, grateful for a slow morning, but then grimace when I remember why I don't have anywhere important to be. Other than out in my kitchen, investigating the smell of breakfast which is certainly not Hale's cooking.

I decide to take a quick shower because Roman has changed my plans for the day, and I don't want to go anywhere while I smell like a distillery. I'm surprised I'm not hungover, all things considered. As I let the water roll down my back, I turn on my music and text Hale back.

I didn't sleep with him.

Don't shower text me. Hurry the fuck up.

I smile and do as I'm told, not lingering beneath the water for more than ten minutes. I throw on a pair of leggings and a t-shirt and toss my wet hair up in a ponytail. Rubbing on my moisturizer before I put on tinted lip balm and mascara, I force myself not to do my full makeup routine. A very intimidating man who is more handsome than he has any right to be waits for me in the kitchen, but I don't want to take too long.

When I come out and hear Hale chatting with Roman, I'm surprised. My roommate scowls at me while Roman's back is turned, and I make a face, cringing at the predicament.

"Morning." Roman's low voice flips something over in my stomach as he turns around. He wipes his hands on a dish towel, tossing it over his shoulder, and something primitive in me stirs. He's the rugged man in a Christmas romcom, cooking dinner with his sleeves rolled up to show his bulging forearms. I want to lick each tattoo which graces his skin, and I know I'm fucked. He eyes me appreciatively, gaze going to my hips before he turns to take the skillet off the burner.

"Morning," I say quietly, casting a small smile in his direction.

"You didn't have much in the way of breakfast food, so you get bacon and toast," he says, and I watch him silently as he plates up my food. I don't know if I should apologize to him for last night. I hadn't asked him to come, but he did get Dad's car home for me at least.

"Thanks for bringing me and the car home last night. I'm sorry," I say as I sit beside Hale. "I don't remember falling asleep. Did I not order you an Uber?"

"By the time I got you to bed, I realized you never submitted the request. When I tried to order one, I fell asleep on your couch waiting for it to get here." He looks sheepish as he rubs his chin. "Greg in his red Nissan got stood up."

I'm distracted by his beard, remembering how it felt against my neck and wanting to know its touch on my inner thighs.

"There goes your rating," I joke. "Thank you for getting me inside."

Hale gets up, snagging a piece of my bacon from the plate Roman slides over to me. "I have to shower in like four minutes so I won't be late to work," he says, glowering at me. "Bye, Roman!"

My guest chuckles as Hale leaves, and Zuul bounds into the room, demanding pets and bacon.

“Zuul, calm,” I order. But Roman is scratching him behind his ears and looking at me for permission to feed the dog some bacon. “Just one,” I caution and watch as Roman makes my big baby sit before being given his reward. “I’m surprised he didn’t bark at you. He barks at literally everything and everyone.” I munch on the bacon and make a sound of delight. He made it the perfect amount of crispy.

Roman shoots me a strange look before he showers more attention on Zuul. “Dogs love me,” he says, a magnanimous grin spreading across his face. “I think he would’ve snuggled with me on your couch if you didn’t insist on him coming to bed with you. I gotta admit, I was a bit jealous of him.”

“In my state?” I laugh. “Nothing to be jealous of.” He’s silent as he eats his food, and I rush to fill that void. “I’m sorry. I really try not to drink that much.”

“Don’t be sorry. You had a reason for it. *I’m* sorry about your job.”

He watches me, and I wonder what he sees. Does he see a woman who teeters on the edge of her sanity? Does he see a woman who does everything she can to not feel without the taint of intoxication? I have found different ways to cope the past year, and I prefer this over how it started. I prefer this over what caused Josh to leave. I prefer this over matted hair which Hale painstakingly combed out whenever I let him. I prefer this over the dread of brushing my teeth or showering. This existence is far more palatable than the fugue state I lived in before we sold Mom and Dad’s house. I made a promise to myself when Hale and I moved in together: I wouldn’t ever let this place see me like that.

But sometimes I wonder just how close I am to sliding back into that hell.

“Well, I suppose it’s been fun,” I say. His eyes narrow, and I am jealous of the way his dark lashes gently caress his skin. “I told you I’d fuck it up.”

He laughs and takes a drink of his water. “I’m surprised you remember that. It will take more than a little drunkenness to get rid of me,” he assures me. I feel my smile grow, but

when I remember it's only a matter of time, I bite my lip to smother it.

"Does this count as one of our dates then?" I ask, forcing myself to quit thinking.

"The ride home and breakfast this morning? Sure, I'll count it. That means we're on number three," he says, and his foot nudges mine beneath the table.

"Well, my calendar is open for the foreseeable future. You free today?" I ask, pushing my bare toes up his ankle, and I'm surprised by myself.

Hale's door slams open, and he's only in a towel. His golden curls are a tangled mess, and he looks shocked. "Karma," he says, before grinning widely. "Karma!" he shouts before showing me his phone from across the room, as if I can see it.

"What?" I demand, laughing at him.

"Josh's fucking house burnt down!" he shouts, and I feel my mouth fall open. "When they came to put the fire out, he was outside, holding Alexa's cat." Hale laughs, almost maniacally. "He was covered in scratches and cat piss because he wouldn't let it go. He's being evaluated at a psych hospital."

I don't know how I feel about his glee over someone's mental breakdown. Josh *is* an asshole though.

"Was Alexa home? Is she alright?" I ask, angry that I care at all about my former friend. "The baby?"

"She's fine. She's the one who made the post about it." Hale is laughing as he turns back into his room to finish getting ready. "I'm going to comment on it."

"She doesn't have you blocked?"

"Not on my burner account," he says before the door shuts. Roman chuckles as I exhale a long breath.

Roman's plate is empty, and he watches me with a careful neutrality. The tattoos on his hands look darker in the fluorescent light of my kitchen. The snake on his right arm is

deadly and distracting, undulating its way across skin toughened by the sun, but his other arm is far more intriguing. Covered in greenery with a few sparse flowers, his left arm paints a stark contrast.

“Maybe the devil came to collect early,” he says, a sly grin raising his lips.

“Just a little preview of what he has to look forward to?” I suggest, suppressing a laugh. Though I don’t delight in other people’s misfortunes, I think in this instance, it’s forgivable. I wonder how soon after he told his aunt about my photos that his house erupted in flames. I hope it was instant.

Roman nods before he unfolds himself from the table, rinsing our dishes and putting them in the dishwasher. I watch the way his shirt pulls taut over his wide back, and the domestic picture he paints is fucking dangerous.

“What are you doing today?”

“I’m off, so I’m all yours,” he says, turning to face me as he leans back on the counter.

“I was thinking about going on a hike. My normal hiking buddy is out of commission to nurse a sprained leg.” I nod toward Zuul, who is sniffing the entire kitchen floor for a hint of bacon. “Wanna come?”

“Yeah, Gwyn,” he says, a soft smile on his face. “I want to.”

EMILE ISN'T IN MY APARTMENT WHEN I SLIP INSIDE TO GET clothes for hiking. I text Margot, and my phone rings a second later.

“I haven't found anything of worth, Roman,” she says, sounding disappointed.

I kick off my shoes and pants before digging in the dryer to find a pair of sweats. “I fucking told you though, didn't I?”

“It just didn't make sense! Remy called you *after* Bill died. How the hell—”

“I don't fucking know, but it's definitely Rose's necklace. I checked this morning before she woke up.”

“Did you even sleep?”

“No,” I reply. As if I could sleep after I'd just confirmed my suspicions. Remy might not have found Gwyn until six months ago, but Bill found him long before that. Now, I have proof.

“You said you picked him up on a traffic light the night Bill died, right?”

“Yes, but he was, like, twenty miles away from the accident when it happened,” she says.

I toss a t-shirt on and grab a hoodie. I'm thinking as I'm lacing my shoes, and Margot sighs.

“I hate to say it, but—”

“But I was fucking right?” I blurt, angry that my best friend wasn’t fully on my side until now.

“You were fucking right,” she agrees, and I don’t say anything until she continues. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to you. You need to get into that storage unit.” She sighs. “The house line only ever received calls from burner phones. I’m still working on finding out where they were purchased, but it’s a long shot.”

“See if you can catch him on any cameras that week leading up to Bill’s death. I know you couldn’t find him again after that night, but we didn’t try backtracking. Maybe we can figure out how Bill found him.”

I hang up and pace my living room. Gwyn is waiting outside in her car, and I only have a few moments to get my shit together. Maybe I’ve been asking her the wrong questions. It’s possible she saw Remy and doesn’t know it. He never went anywhere without Rose’s necklace, a token of his guilt and grief in one.

I force myself to consider once more that Gwyn could be involved, and I still just cannot see it. I can’t imagine her doing anything to hurt anyone. Fuck, she even asked about that bitch who fucked her ex. She volunteers at the food bank; she stops her car to help animals cross the road. Gwyn is soft and lacks the hard edges that living this lifestyle requires. I’m going to have to question her more thoroughly just to get this nagging fucking feeling out of my skull, but the only real answer is getting access to Bill’s belongings.

I wash my face and brush my teeth, things I neglected to do while Gwyn slept. She’d woken up for a moment when I put her in bed, but I compelled her to sleep longer so I’d have time. I knew Hale was a deep sleeper, so as long as I stayed quiet, I could search for anything else that had once belonged to my brother.

I shouldn’t have told her to dream of me, though. That had been a mistake, even if it proved how pliant her mind is. When I heard Hale’s alarm go off, I had laid down on the couch as I feigned sleep. But when she started her quiet moaning, I had to

get up and do something else. It worked in my favor, though; the pleasant surprise on her face when she came out was enough to tell me it wasn't often her or her conquests stuck around for breakfast. And when she'd made that goddamn noise when she took a bite of bacon, reminding me of the sounds she made when she dreamt of me, I regretted it once more.

I hear her honk the car in the parking lot as I finish up, and I prepare myself. I have got to get into that storage unit.

Today.

And then I will rid myself of Gwyneth Parsons.



SHE ASKS me if I want to drive, and I can't turn down the opportunity. The car is perfect, in pristine condition, and I appreciate the care that went into refurbishing it. I know Bill did most of it, and I wonder how someone who helped put one of the blackest marks on my soul can take such care of something.

But then, I look at Gwyn as she hums along to the playlist she's put on the radio, and I am only more confused. I'm breathing through my mouth, doing my best to not smell her. Being around her is different now that I've tasted her blood. I'm constantly on edge, and I feel like it would take very little to send me past a point of no return. Everything is exaggerated—I've never craved someone so completely.

"You like this?" she asks, reaching for her phone to turn it up. "I'm obsessed."

Truly, I don't even know what we're listening to, I'm so wrapped up in thought. I pay attention to the low bass line and folksy warble, and I recognize it. When she says she's obsessed, she's not lying. This is one of her favorite songs, and she listens to it regularly.

“I find it pretentious, if I’m honest.”

She lifts her hand to her chest in affront and sits up higher in her seat. “No, no. This song is misunderstood.”

“How so?”

“He’s *intentionally* being pretentious. You must have never met a man who took a course in the classics,” she says, laughing. “He’s singing from the perspective of those guys who will talk all romantic specifically to get into someone’s pants. But, like, it’s somehow sexy when he does it.” She grins.

The past four months I’ve watched her, the smiles have become more frequent, but I can tell it’s more for show than it is real. I have a perverse want to coerce a real smile from her just before I ruin her life. Before I tell her what kind of monster her father was and what kind of monster I am. Before I cut out her heart to end all of this and get her out of my life. I need to rid myself of this hunger sooner rather than later because it’s a liability.

When your life is endless, you have to think long term. Gwyn’s kind have ruined everything I hold dear.

All I can offer her is kindness in death, a gift far greater than whatever Björn or Emile would bestow.

I am drawn out of my daze when a deer darts across the street, and I have to slam on the brakes, stalling the Chevelle. There are no other cars nearby, so nothing hits us and the deer goes on its way. It wasn’t a large deer, but it certainly wouldn’t have left the vehicle unscathed, and I’m annoyed it took me by surprise. I blow out a breath, cursing as I start the car. I glance over at Gwyn, and she is gasping for air as she holds her chest.

I had seen the clip of the hit-and-run. The speed alone when the pickup truck hit them was enough to make me flinch when Margot sent over the grainy traffic light footage. I remember being shocked Gwyn survived at all and hadn’t been surprised to see her parents died on impact.

I pull over, carefully edging into the grass on the shoulder. She needs a minute, and letting her have it will only earn me

her trust and make my life easier.

“Gwyn?” I grab her shaking hand and pull it toward me. I’ve never seen any of her panic attacks in the time I’ve been watching her, but I know she has a history of them. I almost ask if she has her anxiety meds with her, but catch myself at the last second.

“I’m okay,” she says, more for herself than for me. She’s taking heaving breaths, and I turn toward her.

“With me,” I order, and I breathe deeply. She blinks at me for a second, her honey gaze so fragile that I feel sorry for her. She catches on and we exhale in tandem. I count our breaths, and her hand is no longer shaking.

“Sorry,” she whispers, drawing her hand out of mine and running it over her ponytail. She looks out the window, and I see her chin quiver as she turns. “The accident,” she says by way of explanation.

“Don’t be sorry,” I say before grabbing her hand again and resting our arms on the console between us. “You sure apologize a lot.”

She gives a watery laugh, and I know for certain she’s on the verge of tears. “Well, I feel like I should apologize for *that* now.”

“Don’t you dare,” I reply, squeezing her hand. “Want to talk about it?”

“No, I’m fine. The turn isn’t too much farther,” she says, ending the conversation. Every now and then, I’m disappointed Bill is dead because I didn’t get to kill him myself, but I can’t pretend I don’t understand the pain she feels. I only have a few memories of my mother, and her death isn’t one I like to think about.

I put the car in gear and carefully merge back onto the single lane road.

“You know, I never asked you why you applied for the photo shoot. You don’t, uh, seem like someone who needs matchmaking,” she says, changing the subject, and I can tell she’s watching me as I slow down at a blind curve.

I'd already thought about the possibility of this question.

"I don't. Not really," I say, keeping my eye on the road. The last sign for Lake Osman had been a few miles back, and I know it isn't more than a mile down the road. She doesn't come often, but she's been here a few times since I've been watching her.

"Then why did you—" she starts, but I let my eyes rake up over her body and settle on her face.

"I saw your pictures and read your little interview. That's why I applied." I let a smile twist my lips as I hear her heart speed up. "I could ask the same question."

"Clarke is a friend. I'm just helping with their photography project," she explains, blushing, before she hurries to get out her next words. "Not that I didn't want to—"

I laugh and, after I'm done shifting gears, put my hand on her thigh. "Lucky for me you're a good friend, huh?"

"I read your bio," she says, and her hand covers mine. Her palm is slightly clammy, and I can still hear her heart racing as I pass the final sign for Lake Osman. "I got final say, you know."

I'm taken by surprise, and I don't hide it.

"I thought we scored the highest," I say. I wonder how easily this opportunity for proximity could have been taken.

"Well, Clarke didn't tell me that," she says, laughing as she points to the turn. It's a long gravel road leading to the lake, and I cringe at taking this beautiful car on it. I'm relieved when I see an empty parking lot not too far down the way. "Clarke sent over my options, and I read everyone's blurbs. Hale dug through everyone's socials."

I turn into the gravel lot, and she tugs her foot up onto the dash to retie her shoelaces. She has long fingers ending in tapered nails, scarlet nail polish replacing the black she'd worn the week before. The visual of her scratching them down my back assaults me, and I feel my canines lengthen. I desperately focus on what she's saying to force them to recede.

“Hale is like the damn FBI when it comes to looking into someone. Of the five people Clarke showed me, one woman had criminal complaints from her partner for domestic violence, another guy had an outstanding warrant in Ohio, and the other woman had just turned eighteen. No thank you. So that left you and one other person,” she says before sitting up and reaching for the door handle. “You ready?”

“So I get to hang out with you today because of the process of elimination? What made you pick me?” I ask, grinning at her as I push my hair out of my face.

“Look at you,” she says, shrugging. “You could ruin my life, and I’d ask you to do it again.” As she moves, I hesitate for a minute and watch her round ass as she gets out. She has no fucking idea. I’m distracted and considering things I don’t have any fucking sense to consider when the glint from Rose’s necklace catches my eye. My teeth snap to full length, and I nearly hiss in pain.

I snag the necklace from the rear-view mirror, barely keeping myself from ripping it off. It’s a long golden chain with a small unfurling rose as the only delicate charm, and I grip it tightly in my palm.

“Come here,” I order, and she walks around the back of the car, not looking at me as she types on her phone. I step behind her and brush her ponytail out of the way. I’m surprised when I notice the cluster of stars tattooed behind her ear—one of the Dippers. It’s something about her I’m discovering for the first time, and as I gently trace my fingertip over it, she shudders.

“Sorry, I’m sending Sasha my location,” she says. Her sister knowing where she’s at won’t help her if I decide to make today her last. “Why?” she questions, hand lifting to the necklace as she looks down at it.

“It’s a waste hanging in the car when it could be on your pretty neck,” I say, and I lean down to trace my lips over the neck in question. It’s not a lie. I smell her blood through the thin skin over her carotid, and I press my tongue into my fangs as they lengthen.

She bends abruptly, looking into her reflection in the side-view mirror. If I had any doubts she did it on purpose, she dissolves them when she gently presses back so her ass is against my crotch.

“You’re killing me,” I say on a groan, and she laughs.

“I just wanted to see it on me,” she says, surprising me as she turns and puts her arms around my neck. “You’re right. It looks good.”

“Of course I’m right,” I say, my hands seeking her hips, and she smiles up at me.

“Thanks for turning my day around,” she whispers, suddenly serious. I raise a brow, and she is quick to continue. “I just lost my job. Being out with you is better than wallowing in my unemployed sorrow on the couch.”

“Ah, yes. Well, when given those options, I suppose I’m the more appealing one,” I reply, twisting my lips in a rueful smile.

“When given endless options, I think I’d still choose to spend the day with you,” she admits, a blush creeping up her cheeks as she bounces on her feet. The flush of her skin, the tantalizing visual reminder of what lies beneath it, is almost too much to bear.

I lean down, brushing a soft kiss to her lips. I taste the hint of her lip balm, the faintest cinnamon, and it makes me crave her blood all the more. When she deepens the kiss, tentatively biting my lip, I can’t contain the growl that slips up my throat.

I regret kissing her the second she kisses me back. I know how dangerous this is. Feeding is transactional. There is nothing I gain other than sustenance. There is no intimacy borne of the deed, any lust felt when feeding separate from the act itself. But thinking about feeding from Gwyn is different, her blood not human. My self-control is insignificant in the face of this desire, and it’s like I’m freshly ascended once more.

It has been over a dozen years, and yet the same feeling stirs within me. Just that single drop was enough to rouse in

me what I felt for Victoria that day when I finally claimed the power which already pumped through my veins. The dormant curse turned gift was brought to the surface, and I had lost all sense. Newly reborn, I had been a quivering pile of need. Nothing could have stopped me then from taking with my hands and my cock and my teeth what I needed to survive.

If, after just one drop, entertaining the thought of Gwyn's blood sends me spiraling like this, I don't know what would happen if I truly fed. After the photo shoot, I'd kept my distance because I didn't know if I could handle it, and I still doubt my resolve. To think I have myself under control is self-aggrandizing at best.

The hunter's blood running just below Gwyn's skin is the coveted treasure in Ansi's tomb. When she threads her fingers through my hair at my nape, I am the avarice of Einar and arrogance of Helgi, which led them to their deaths. When my tongue sweeps over hers, I am the indolence which led Hallbera to the tomb, taking what we did not earn. I pull her close to me, my hands gripping her flesh, and I am Agnarr's fury and Geir's passion. To indulge in this is to curse myself as the first ones have. Since the moment her blood touched my tongue, I have been Ketill's hunger and Sif's discontent.

Her existence is my curse, and her death is the only remedy.

I turn us, pressing her against the Chevelle, one of my hands leaving her delicious ass to snake up the front of her shirt. She moans, and I kiss her deeper. This is getting away from me, and I can't find it in myself to care. I chase the sounds, hungry for the affirmation that she needs this too. At her core, she is a hunter. Her basest instinct should be to stay away from me as I should stay away from her. Even if her mind doesn't know what we are to one another, her body should. It's in her DNA to keep away from me, but she is the one grasping my hand and slipping it under her bra. She is the one digging her fingertips into my backside and pulling me tight against her. Perhaps her self-destructive tendencies overrule her natural instincts, and she thrives living in the shadow of that beast in her head. The beast which curls her up

on the floor of her shower, her sobs faintly audible from the camera I installed. The beast which left her boyfriend fucking someone else, and left her seeking some sort of reprieve at the bottom of a bottle. If that's the case, both our beasts are hungry, and she won't fall to any beast but mine.

When she hears the gravel crunch of tires in the parking lot, she pulls away from me. Her contented smile feels like an accomplishment. The newcomers break my trance, and I focus on the smell of their truck's exhaust, the breeze blowing the scent over to me clearly. I want to shake my head and clear away the insanity which has clouded my vision, but I don't. I kiss her instead, and wonder if having her once will be enough to tame the beast inside me.

When the answer doesn't come to me immediately, I suspect Emile might be onto something.

I'm so completely fucked.

I'M BREATHLESS AS HE PULLS AWAY FROM ME, THOSE DARK eyes adjudicating me in a way that feels more intimate than what we just did. His mouth tightens into a thin line, and there is a wrinkle between his brows.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, and I’m suddenly cold. I shiver as I zip up my hoodie, and I watch him as he rubs his hand over his mouth. When he doesn’t answer, just looking at me with that expression, I begin to fidget. “Did I do something wrong?”

He drops his hand and shakes his limbs out. “No, of course not,” he says, and I wonder if the small smile on his face is supposed to reassure me. “I just forgot I have some things to do today.”

“Oh?” I tilt my head as I look up at him. “What things?”

“It’s the last day on my storage unit lease. I don’t want to cut our time short, but I have a few more things to unload before they close,” he says. He shoves his hands into his pockets and frowns. “I wanted to spend the day with you. Cook you dinner tonight, kiss you some more.”

I smile, putting my hands on his waist and pulling him closer. “Well, if I get dinner out of it, I think I can let you borrow my car,” I tease. “I imagine it’s difficult to move things on a motorcycle.”

“What if I want to borrow you too?” he asks, hand slipping out of his pocket to cup my jaw. He moves down my neck, and his thumb gently caresses my skin. I try not to gasp, but my

breath hitches, and the twinkle in his eye tells me he definitely noticed it. “I’ll make it worth it for you,” he says, and his tone paints a picture not unlike the one which starred in my dreams this morning.

“Do we have time for a walk?” I ask, glancing over at the newly arrived fishermen who carry lawn chairs as they walk off into the woods. I don’t know what they stand to catch off the path, but I don’t think much of it.

Endless swamp marshes surround Lake Osman, and I rarely wander far from the paths. Though the black bears are generally harmless, I don’t enjoy trying my luck. With the lake at the center, most people take boats out and fish there. It’s the lake I am drawn to each time I come. The quiet solitude of that vast expanse of water with the bald cypress trees standing silent sentry is the respite I need when my thoughts are too loud. Zuul and I used to walk these trails weekly before my parents died, and it took far too long for me to get back out here.

I don’t know why I wanted to bring Roman here, but I did.

“We have time,” he says. “Lead the way.”

“Go pick which trail,” I say, pointing to the wood and glass display sign at the edge of the parking lot. He walks ahead but turns back when he notices I don’t follow. “I’ll be there in a minute. Tossing my phone in the car,” I say.

He nods before continuing to the sign, and I take a picture of his ass to send to Hale.

It’s really not fair, is it?

It takes a moment for the picture to send, and Hale’s response is instant.

Christ, it’s really not. When will you be home?

idk. Dinner time? I probably need you to let Zuul outside for me.

For real?

Yeah, for real. Sorry.

Okay. Be careful. Love you.

Love you too.

Phone safely in my glove box, I jog over to where Roman looks at the trail map. I'm certain he chose his grey sweatpants specifically to torture me. He looks like a model for some giant man's casual loungewear line. I wonder if men know what grey sweatpants do to us. The ones Roman wears are only a little baggy. Tight enough to show his tree trunk thighs, round ass, and thick dick, they're torturous. When he shifts his balance from one leg to the other, I try to remember the tattoo I glimpsed on his thigh during our photo shoot.

It's like he was built specifically to take advantage of each one of my weaknesses.

"Which one are you thinking?" I ask as I approach. I hook my arm in his, and he glances down as if I startled him. "Sorry." I regret it, thinking perhaps he was right, and I do apologize too much.

He hesitates for a moment before wrapping his arm around me and tugging me in front of him. His arms go over my shoulders and he rests his chin on the top of my head. I'm not extremely tall for a woman, but the action makes me feel dainty when I so rarely do. He points toward a spot on the map as his other arm wraps a little tighter around my neck.

"This one." He points to a trail closer to the lake. "It says it's closed for the winter, but I'm feeling like having an adventure," he says, tugging me back against his chest.

"You know, people get lost in this swamp and drown. There's all sorts of stories about it."

"I trust you. You won't let us get lost," he replies, and I squeeze his forearm with my hand. "You know this place like the back of your hand."

I frown, trying to turn in his arms. "How do you know I know the park that well?"

“It was in your bio,” he says, wrapping another arm around my waist as he turns me to face the map. “You came here with your dad a lot?”

“Mmm,” I agree, nodding. “It’s been so long since I filled that out, I must have forgotten.”

He kisses the top of my head. “So, what do you say?”

The trailhead he wants to go on is one I do know extremely well, and an idea pops into my mind. It’s one of the worst ones I’ve had, but it’s something I want, nonetheless.

“On one condition,” I say, spinning to face him in his arms. “When we get there, you have to play a game with me.”

“Deal,” he says, and we step toward the gravel road.



IT TAKES fifteen minutes to get to the path Roman chose, and by the end, we’ve discussed the logistics of our visit to his storage unit. It’s the same place Sasha and I use, and it’s on the way back to my apartment. When he starts planning what to cook for dinner afterward, I’m so caught up in my thoughts, I almost miss the trail marker.

“It means a lot that you asked me about my preferences.” I stop walking when I notice the trail marker.

“What?”

“You know, about dinner? The fact that you asked is nice.”

“Jesus, Gwyn, how low is your bar? Is it in hell?” I laugh, and the lines around his eyes crinkle as he grabs my hand in his, leading me forward. “Why wouldn’t I want you to enjoy dinner?”

I don’t answer as we maneuver around the chain blocking off the path. I’m grateful for the shoes I wear. The loud squelch of mud suctioning to my boot is the only warning I get before almost losing my balance. Roman grabs me and

steadies me, pulling me against him. My hand slips beneath his shirt, and I feel coarse hair over a stomach I want to cuddle into.

“Careful,” he admonishes, and gently releases me.

This trail splits into two sections, and one is far more likely to be underwater at this time of year. But that’s the one I want. It’s dangerous, but so is the reward I have in mind.

We take the easier path first, which is only a small circle through the marsh, and I prod him for information, wondering what he’s willing to share.

“What do you do for a living?” He slows his gait so I can keep up with him without me asking. I do my best not to look into it.

I know by now that he is different from other men, but different doesn’t always mean better.

“I’m a private contractor,” he says as he extends his hand. I take it and step over the chain, grateful for the balance it brings me. “Right now, I’m working as an investment analyst for my father’s company.”

He steps easily over the chain, and when I start walking, he doesn’t drop my hand.

“I don’t even know what that means. I assume it’s different for each business you work with?”

He nods, directing me around the deeper puddles so I don’t step in them. “My dad has a shit ton of investment properties in Chicago. He’s always looking for ways to expand, so he has me look into different properties, market trends, potential opportunities... Things like that to find what will make him the most money.”

It’s a more technical job than I would have expected from him. “I would have thought you were a mechanic,” I say.

He chuckles. “Most people don’t expect what I do. As for cars, I’ve always been a car guy. My uncle and I used to work on them together all the time.”

The admission makes me smile, and I try to picture Roman as a boy, gangly and awkward as he grows into those long limbs.

“My dad was only a car guy in theory until he bought the Chevelle,” I say. Roman laughs, and it’s loud enough a bird startles from a nearby tree and takes flight. “We worked on it together.”

“He’d never worked on a car before and he started with *that?*” His open-mouthed astonishment brings a lightness to my heart. Practically no one talks about my dad, even the people closest to me. Any accidental mentions of him by me or anyone else get treated like a curse. As if by uttering his name, we have broken some sacred vow. Every time I mention him, it seems like Sasha would rather I not speak of him. It’s a source of contention between us. Even though my dad was a father figure to her, Sasha’s birth father is still living, still part of her life. She doesn’t understand.

Roman didn’t know my dad, but giving me the voice to talk about him is a gift. Perhaps it’s easier for him to discuss loss because it’s not so new and raw for him as it is for us.

“Nope,” I say. “Mom was pissed when the tow truck showed up, bringing it into our driveway. It didn’t even run.”

Roman is laughing to himself as he steps over a giant puddle and turns to help me without breaking stride. “Well, he did a beautiful job on it. You did too,” he adds, smile sobering as he looks at me.

My gaze goes to the ground, suddenly overwhelmed. My want for him has turned into this viscous thing. It fills the spaces and adheres to parts of me I barely understand. Roman is the biggest risk I’ve taken in the past year, and the odds of it blowing up in my face are high. And yet, I still want him. The realization that he is the first thing I’ve truly wanted in a long time is startling.

It’s frightening and feels wrong.

I clear my throat and bring the subject back to something easier.

“Do you like it? Your job I mean?”

“Pays the bills,” he grunts, stopping at a small sign that lists facts about the local wildlife.

“Why aren’t you in Chicago?” I ask, picking up a long stick before drawing a smiley face in the mud. This is easier. Safe. Not too deep.

“Needed some space after what he did,” he explains, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Had a friend who used to live here a while back, and I decided to check it out.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.”

I’m still looking at the ground where I draw with my stick as Roman moves behind me and places his hands on my hips. I think it’s my favorite way he’s touched me so far—which is saying something. He makes me feel small and delicate with the way his big hands hold me.

“What about you? What field do you work in? Maybe I can help you find something,” he offers. Truthfully, the loss is a blessing.

“I was doing data entry, though, nothing important. My degree is generic—organizational leadership.” I shrug and turn in his hands. “I don’t know what I want to do. Real estate is actually interesting to me. Maybe I’ll become a real estate king like your father,” I say, grinning up at him.

Roman huffs a soft laugh, warm, minty breath washing over my face. I wonder if he uses his mints in place of another bad habit.

“You don’t wanna be like him, Gwyn. You like having a soul, don’t you?” he asks, and his eyes dart to my lips for a second before he releases me.

As I take a step back, the trees a quarter mile ahead explode in a cacophony of screeches and flapping wings, and dozens of birds take flight. Roman spins, surprised, and peers through the trees to see what might have startled them.

“Do you see a bear?” I ask. It’s not cold enough for them to hibernate yet, and I’ve seen droppings during our walk. It

doesn't surprise me considering this trail is closed, but now I wonder if one is nearby. With Roman being the giant he is, he'll easily scare any away, but still; I have some sense of self-preservation.

"No," he says, slowly stepping back to stand in front of me, almost as if he's protecting me. "Let's go though."

I nod, leading him back the way we came.

As we approach where the trail splits, I walk quicker, beating Roman to the giant branch which had fallen over the path before our little adventure. Walking up the length of the wood, I pantomime like it's a balance beam even though it's less than a foot off the ground. I feel stupid when I get to the end, and the thinning branch snaps just as Roman approaches. My hand shoots out, and I catch myself against a tree on the side of the path.

Roman is beside me in an instant, far faster than he has any right to be, and he's grabbing my hand and examining it before I even have a chance to. "I'm fine," I say, breathless from laughing at myself.

He picks the smallest pieces of tree bark from my hand, and I notice my skin is peeled up a bit. Not bad, the smallest bead of blood surfaces at the cut.

"You're bleeding." He seems annoyed as he frowns at me.

"It's alright. Don't look." When he doesn't move, his eyes darting over my shoulder for a second, I attempt to pull my hand free from his. "I have a first aid kit in the car. I'll be fine."

"You need to be more careful, Gwyn," he replies, voice softer than a moment before. There's a shift in his demeanor, his posture pulled taut. Even though I don't think balancing on a log is the worst thing I've done, the words feel like they have more weight.

The past year, I've been a risk taker, and I don't want to heed his advice. First my parents, then my best friend and boyfriend—I've lost vital parts of me that adrenaline chasing helps me not think about. It's why I fly down the highway with

the windows down. It's why I sleep around. It's why I agreed to a photo shoot with a stranger.

Roman is still holding my hand and looking at me with eyes growing darker the longer he stares down at me.

"If I listened to you," I whisper, "we wouldn't be here now."

He pulls my hand to his mouth, and my eyes widen as he kisses my palm. "You think I'm dangerous, sweetheart?" he asks as his lips press against my injured skin.

"I *know* you're dangerous," I say. "I'm entertaining things with you that I—that I haven't—that I shouldn't—"

He laughs, low, and it's a cold trickle of ice down my spine despite the warmth of his hand holding mine. "I'm dangerous because of how much you want me," he says, and even though it's not a question, I answer it. There's no way he doesn't know how far my attraction to him goes. Too far.

"Yes," I whisper.

He huffs a laugh. "You think that doesn't go both ways, Gwyn? I promise you, you're more dangerous to me than I am to you." He shakes his head and lets go of my hand. "The only reason I haven't shoved you to your knees in the mud and fucked you senseless is because I asked for three dates. Remember?"

My breath catches, and I nod. His eyes dart all over my face, and I don't know what he's looking for.

"I told you after three dates, you could run if you wanted to. And I'm telling you now, this date is over. It's your last chance to escape me unscathed," he says, and it sounds like a plea. As if he wants me to leave, as if I'm hurting him by wanting him.

"What if I want to run?" I ask, holding my breath as his jaw clenches and I see his temple twitch.

"Then—"

"And what if I want you to catch me?"

Silent for only a moment, the sound he makes is a collision as it tears up his throat. He is panting, but he snaps his mouth shut as if he's in pain. Roman glances over his shoulder before turning to face me.

“Run,” he orders, but I'm already moving.

ROMAN

GWYN TAKES OFF, RUNNING TOWARD THE OTHER TRAIL WE didn't take. I am frozen solid, not allowing myself to move for a moment because I don't trust myself not to behave like an animal. My fangs are painful in my mouth, and that small taste of her blood has sent me into a frenzy. I don't trust myself to give into the chase and not kill her right here in the swamp.

Running my hands through my hair, I'm about to chase after her when my phone vibrates in my pocket. When I ignore it and it doesn't stop, I pull it out to see a dozen texts and missed calls from Margot.

Kill order.

Answer the fucking phone.

Emile was told to kill her.

He's on his way. Might already be there.

Fuck Roman!

Pick up the goddamn phone.

I don't bother reading the rest. I had been suspicious of whatever startled those goddamn birds, and I've been on high alert ever since. But that drop of blood distracted the fuck out of me. If Emile is here in the swamp, it's possible he smelled it too.

I call him, and when he sends it straight to voicemail, my mouth goes dry.

My uncle won't fucking help me. He'll follow orders like a good little soldier, and then I won't have access to the storage unit, and I won't have any more answers about Remy. I won't get a chance to fuck her and drink from her, and I'm kidding myself if I pretend I don't want that. Perhaps my uncle is right and I need to get off my high horse. She is good and kind and her sad eyes are like my brother's, and I don't want to put her down yet.

In a last ditch effort, I send out a text message to Margot and hope I've bought myself more time. I glance over my shoulder, half-expecting my uncle to come strolling up the trail behind me, but I don't see him anywhere. It doesn't mean he's not here, so I take off, using my abilities to make my way down the path I saw Gwyn take.

She is nowhere to be found, and my heart pounds a frantic rhythm in my chest. If I'm too late and Emile has already done what he came to do, I don't know what I'll fucking do with myself.

I hear the faintest splash past where the trail dead ends, but I can't see anything out of the ordinary. It's midday, and my eyes always struggle even when it's overcast. But I would notice her bright teal leggings amongst the dark greens and browns. Those pants are going to be the death of me. A few times she got ahead of me on the path, and the way they bunched at her ass had made it clear she isn't wearing any underwear. They're so tight they cling to her, and I want to lick the skin beneath them. I want to cup that dimpled ass in my hands, slap it and make it jiggle, and fuck if I'm not hard thinking about it. Again.

Emile is out there, though, and I need to keep my dick in check. I strain my ears and close my eyes, listening for even a hint of her, and I'm rewarded with the faintest exhale. I frown when I realize it's past the end of the trail.

No, it's where the trail has flooded.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, realizing I’m going to have to pick my way across exposed roots and tree branches, and I wonder how the fuck she could do it so swiftly while I was reading Margot’s texts.

I don’t think the water here is deep, the wide base of the bald cypress’s visible above the water, but I pick my path carefully. For a brief second, I consider alligators might lurk beneath the placid water before I realize we’re in fucking Virginia. I’m pretty sure those ancient monsters don’t live this far north. But there are far more deadly predators in this swamp, and I’m lifting my nose and sniffing like a bloodhound trying to get a scent of Gwyn. I am surrounded by only shallow murky water and giant bald cypress trees growing bigger the farther I go, interspersed with smaller maples. The branches from the smaller trees get in my way, and I have to push past them to follow. At one point, I’m certain I get a glimpse of her, so I keep going. I’m picking my way from rock to downed branch, the swamp debris making a better path than I would have imagined, and I finally am rewarded with the scent of her.

I breathe deep, and it is blood I smell, sweet and tart, that gets me moving faster. It’s too strong to be that small cut on her hand, and rage floods my veins. The thought of her blood being wasted or, even worse, Emile drinking from her, makes my blood boil. But then I see the swing of her ponytail past a tree, and I hear her splashing ahead of me. The thrill of the hunt is getting to me, and I can feel the hunger ripping through my stomach as I follow her.

It’s clear she knows this trail well, picking through it easily. I’m about to give up trying to stay dry and shoot after her, but if I reveal myself now for what I am, everything changes. There will be a time limit on what I need.

I catch sight of her in the distance, and she looks back over her shoulder at me and grins. She’s climbing over a log and those teal leggings are wrapped so tightly around her thick thighs I can’t focus, but then she disappears. I take a deep breath, searching for Emile’s scent, and find nothing. All I smell is *her*. Fragrant and bold, her blood calls to me like a

dying man to confession. It feels like I'm drowning in my bloodlust, and I'm spinning in a circle near where I last saw her as I try to find her.

"You clever thing," I murmur when I realize where she went. The mammoth bald cypress in front of me is the biggest tree I've ever seen. The base is about ten feet wide and nearly as tall as I am.

And it's hollow.

I pretend not to see it, approaching slowly, picking my way carefully so she thinks I'm going around her hideaway. The scent of her only grows stronger, and I begin to salivate. I should grab her and get the hell out of this swamp before Emile can do anything to jeopardize my plan, but I can't stop thinking about the taste of her blood and how beautifully she moaned as she rode my hand. A ripe apple on a summer day, her blood is sweet providence I don't deserve. Every time it crosses my lips and I get a taste, it's like lightning. All too brief and bright, it lights me up from the inside, and I'm still glowing.

I need more, and I don't know if I can stop myself. I hadn't lied when I told her she was more dangerous for me than I was her. The lines of want blur because of her blood, but I'm done lying to myself. I want her—*have* wanted her—since the moment I set my eyes on her four months ago. She makes me goddamn senseless.

I spot her tiny footprint in the mud and smirk before I use my abilities to make my way into the hollowed trunk, counting on her hiding and the shock of my entrance to keep her oblivious for now.

I'm assaulted by the scent of her. Sweet and tart blood mixes with a faint hint of sweat and arousal, and I'm hard before my eyes have a chance to painfully adjust to the darkness. Now that I'm breathing it in more deeply, everything else falls away, and there is only need. There is only *her*.

She screams, and I slam into her, pressing my hand over her mouth to silence her. Her giant brown eyes blink at me,

and I only see surprise. There is no fear in her gaze, and when her fingertips graze my side, I pull my hand from her mouth.

She doesn't have a chance to gasp before I'm kissing her. I'm anything but gentle, and she matches my movements. She's safe from Emile for now, but she's not safe from me. She'd ran from me, wanting me to catch her, and now that I've found her, I'll give her what she wants. Gwyn sweeps her tongue into my mouth and her hands are sliding up my shirt and pulling me against her. I don't even know what I'm doing. I'm pulling at her hips, at her shirt, at her hair, and I am ravenous. My beard rakes over her soft skin, and I know my kiss is searing. I bite and suck and punish as I take this from her, and I wonder if she feels how desperate I am. She cups my jaw with her hand, and I become fixated when I realize it's the injured one. She must have grazed it on something while she ran because the slice has opened up further.

I grab her wrist and turn my face into her palm, kissing the cut, and she frowns at me. I nearly snort when I remember I'm supposed to dislike blood. When I gently lick at the blood there, I don't think she notices. Most of it is dried, and it still bursts on my tongue like that goddamn fizzy candy you get when you're a kid. It's more than I have ever drawn from her, and I feel euphoric. I suddenly think of my brother, and wonder if this is what it felt like for him when he had that deal with the demons. I want to laugh, to smile, to just goddamn exist. When I've got her blood on my tongue, nothing else matters. For a half-second, I'm convinced everything terrible in my life isn't real. Remy isn't dead, and my mom is still alive.

I'm barely able to stop myself from getting lost in that heady sensation, and I pull my mouth from her skin. She runs that hand through my hair, and I'm thankful she doesn't seem to be phased by my reaction. It takes everything in me not to grab her and continue to feast, but I need to touch her more than I care to admit. Her blood has only made it worse, and I find a part of the hollowed-out tree she can lean against. I half carry, half back her up against it and start peeling those leggings from her skin as my lips find her neck. My canines

are out of control at this point, and I gently trace them over her carotid.

I'm playing with fucking fire.

And until I can have her blood like this, until I can pull that thick liquid into my mouth straight from her veins, I'm going to make her suffer too.

She's gripping my cock through my sweatpants as she arches her neck, giving me access to lave her honeyed skin. I don't feel as if my actions are my own, my hands moving across her body without my consent. Her leggings are so tight, I'm struggling to pull them down, so I rip them.

"Roman!" she exclaims, but I'm pulling them off her and throwing them on the ground. Within a breath, I'm on my knees in front of her, and I wrench her legs apart. She's not wearing any underwear, as I suspected, and I swallow hard when I see the plump triangle of skin at the juncture of her thighs. I nearly moan when I think of biting her there.

"What are you doing?" she asks, panting as she pulls at my hair, wanting to bring me back up to kiss her.

"I caught you," I grunt, leaning forward as I cup the back of her knee, lifting her leg and opening her up for me. All I smell is her wetness and that apple pie scent of her blood rushing to that delicate flesh. It's maddening. I don't bother hiding my fangs as they lengthen. She's not able to see them from this angle, and I don't know if I care anymore, anyway. She'll find out soon enough what I am.

Björn and Emile have forced my hand.

"I'm sweaty," she says, trying to pull her leg free from my grip. "You probably don't want to do that." I haven't heard her say anything more incorrect.

"Stop talking, Gwyn," I say, and lean forward. I press my tongue to her clit, and her leg twitches in my grasp. She pushes her heel into my back, her shoes still on, and she makes a sound that thrills the predator inside me. I dip my tongue lower, parting her skin and gently tracing back up. My touch is delicate, and she squirms in my hold. She braces both her

hands behind her, nails clawing into the wood as she tilts her head back.

I continue licking, soft as satin on her lips and clit, and I use my free hand to snake between her legs and cup her ass. I squeeze, and it takes everything in me not to turn her around and bite her fat ass. It's so round and soft, and I want to turn it red. She's panting, and her hips twitch forward the faintest bit, and I can tell she's holding back. She wants to thrust against my mouth, wants me to increase the pressure.

But I won't.

I can't.

I want to drink from that perfect vein on the inside of her leg, suckle at the source of that breathtaking fucking drug beneath her skin. I want to tongue-fuck her while her blood is fresh in my mouth. I need her covered in it so I can lick her clean.

There's a fine line between want and need, and I have certainly tipped over the edge. I am blood drunk in the worst way, and my teeth begin to *ache*.

I lick her slowly, careful to avoid that sensitive spot, knowing it's killing her to be teased in this way.

"Oh God," she moans, and she grabs a fistful of my hair, trying to get her way. I stop my movements, hovering my lips just over her clit, and don't move again. She groans and lets go of my hair, hand bracing against the tree behind her once more.

I chuckle, my warm breath releasing on her sensitive skin, and her hips jerk of their own accord. Using the hand that was massaging her, I trail my fingertips down the seam of her ass, not pressing deep, just enough to tease her. She lets out a strangled sound as I continue moving forward, and I let my fingertips wander. Even though I want to push inside her, feel the warm hug of her cunt, I stop myself. My fingertips rim her entrance, but I don't give in to the thrust of her hips.

"Jesus Christ, Roman," she says, groaning loudly. I slowly lick her clit, applying a bit more pressure, and am rewarded by

her leg shaking.

“You like this, baby?”

“No!” she moans, and I laugh against her skin. Slipping one finger into her, I watch as she throws her head back. “More,” she demands, and I stop moving.

“I’ll train you, yet,” I say and she rocks her hips forward, trying to push me deeper inside her. I pull my hand free from her, and she lets out a scream in her throat. Beautiful frustration. I hope it’s as painful for her as it is for me. More, even.

“Please,” she whimpers, and I take pity on her. I don’t bother being gentle as I suck on her clit hard, shoving three fingers inside her when I do. It is an invasion she responds to violently, her heel digging painfully into my back. I think perhaps I’ve hurt her until she moans my name.

“That’s right, Gwyn. You’re so fucking pretty moaning my name like that.” I’m unable to stop the words of praise I want to give her. The feeling is yellow, bright and sunny. I suck on her flesh and pump my fingers into her, paying strict attention to the cadence of her breathing, I bring her closer to the release she so desperately needs.

That she will not get.

She breathes in, almost a gasp, and then holds it a moment. When she lets the air out, it’s the softest moan. It’s so delicate and far more intimate than it should be. I want to breathe it in. I want to taste those gentle breaths, and I want to collect the rough gasps she’d give me when I thrust my cock inside her. With her blood still running rampant through my system, I think my senses are far more responsive to stimuli. Everything is only making me crave her more.

I’m getting carried away, and when I feel her clench around my fingers, I stop abruptly, withdrawing from her and dropping her leg. She nearly falls over, and I reach up and grip her waist.

“What the hell?” she demands as I pull myself to my feet. “You rip my pants, and I don’t even get to come?”

She's furious, and I get even harder than I already am. I haven't seen her angry yet, and she has so much to be angry over.

She's about to shove me, and I laugh. It took me days to come down from what her blood did to me last time, but I don't think it's going to take as long this time. I wonder if the more I'm exposed to it, the less it'll affect me. Right now, I feel invincible, and she's so fucking beautiful I want to hold her face in my hands and stare at her. But this will fade, and I'll be hounding her for a taste once more.

I don't know why the fuck I'm thinking about it like I'll have it for long. Like I'm not about to hold her heart in my hands instead.

I'm still laughing, not even realizing what I'm doing as I grab her wrists. I lift them above her head and pin them to the tree behind her. Her brows furrow and her mouth drops open, affront and confusion warring.

“What are you doing, Roman?”

This is when I see it in her eyes. The look I've been expecting. I hadn't realized I'd dreaded it until now.

Fear.

And it *incenses* me.

She's trying to pull free, and that's when I hear him. He's not bothering to be quiet, knowing what I'm doing. He has to smell the blood, the sweat, the cloying arousal.

I've accepted my instincts on this. I'm not fucking done with her, but if anyone else touches her, I'll tear them apart.

“What are you doing?” she asks, quieter this time, eyes darting back and forth between mine and her chin trembles. She's fighting as hard as she can against me, and at the very least, I know she's shaken off some of the beast that tells her giving up would be easier.

“Roman?” Desperate, her voice is getting higher, and I know Emile is listening.

I show her my fangs. Her sweet mouth drops open, plump lips still red from our frenzied kissing, but she stays shockingly quiet. Her heart is pounding so fast, I can almost taste the blood waiting for me. She breathes heavily, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she stares at my teeth. Perhaps she thinks she's hallucinating. Maybe she thinks I'm insane. "Are you—are you going to kill me?" she whispers, blinking fast.

"Unfortunately for you, no. I'm not going to kill you," I say, and I hear my uncle curse. "I'm going to claim you." Before he can intervene, I dive forward, burying my razor sharp canines into her neck.

GWYN

I COVER MY EYES, SQUINTING AGAINST THE BLINDING LIGHT after being kept in the dark for hours. I smell like piss, and I'm covered in blood, and I'm breathing the fresh air like I never will again. Someone laughs, high-pitched and loud.

"Fous le camp!"

The laughing stops, and I hear Roman's low voice murmuring something else in French.

My eyes haven't adjusted yet, but I can tell it's Roman who moves in front of the spotlight shining down on me. He's adjusting the sweatshirt he'd so graciously left me, attempting to cover me up. It's covered in my pee, the only absorbent thing in the plastic-lined trunk, and he makes a face as he tries to arrange it on me. While he's distracted, I sit up on my elbow and grab the metal rod from beneath me, all that's left of the jack, and grip it in my right hand. It's the only thing he left in the trunk, and I have no choice.

"Filthy," the other voice says, and I assume it's the person who laughed only a moment ago. "She smells wretched."

"Could you fuck off, please?" Roman snaps, and I hear footsteps moving away from me. I haven't spoken yet, biding my time. I'm finally able to see better, everything coming into focus. It's nighttime, and the tall light shining over us is the kind you see in a store parking lot. After adjusting his stupid fucking sweatshirt, Roman bends down, fumbling around with something, and I decide it's now or never.

I scramble out of the trunk, screaming, as I take the rod to his head, his shoulders, his back, anything I can reach. Judging by his reaction, it can't be more bothersome to him than a fly to a horse's ass, but I do it all the same.

"Fuck, Gwyn!" he grunts, and before I can get past him, both his hands scoop me under the back of my legs and toss me backwards into the trunk. He takes the metal rod from me and throws it before bending over me. He's standing between my thighs, and his mouth is a straight line. Those thick brows are bunched, and he's looking at me like I'm the one who did something wrong.

"Get off me!" I scream, and he's putting a hand over my mouth as a slow clapping sound comes from somewhere in the distance. I'm lucky he didn't bash my head on anything when he unceremoniously threw me back into the trunk.

"Stop screaming," Roman orders, and it's that voice again. It's no longer alluring, pure demand, as if I'm a child being called to task for doing something bad. I make a sound, the scream I attempt to unleash bottling up in my throat.

"Let me go," I say, trying to close my legs and scramble away from him. I'm aware I'm half-naked and in a compromising position.

"You didn't mind me being here this morning." A sharp-edged smile curves the corners of his mouth.

"Is that what you want? You want to fuck me? You could've done that without kidnapping me!"

He laughs, and I hear a snort from his accomplice.

"Emile, I have this under control. Go see to your shit," Roman says, and after a quick conversation in more French, the man approaches the trunk. Roman is still leaning over me, hands clasped tightly around my wrists. He blocks my body, my legs falling to either side of him, and I try to kick him as hard as I can in the back of the knee.

Emile is slight compared to Roman, not much taller than me, if I had to guess. His dark eyes are ice cold and too far apart to be considered handsome. He's not ugly though. Small

and average looking with grey hair, he is nondescript. But when he turns his gaze on me, my heart races. My chest throbs, and I'm grateful when he turns to Roman.

"I don't know if Björn will be amused or furious, *mon grand*. Have courage."

I blink, and he's gone. There's no reason for me to be relieved, but I am.

"I was trying to get you a pair of pants when you assaulted me." He palms my lower stomach, pushing me down as he bends and grabs something from the ground. When he tosses the purple fabric at me, I nearly throw up.

"What did you do with her? Where is she?" I demand. He has the nerve to look confused. "Sasha! Where the fuck is she?" When I try to yell at him, my throat closes up and cuts me off. He swallows, frowning, as he takes the leggings back from me. He looks down at the pants and holds them in front of him, not realizing they're too small for me. Sasha isn't tiny, but she's smaller than I am.

"What do you mean?"

"These are her pants! Where did you get them? What did you do to her?"

"Oh. These were in the—I assume your sister is fine."

"Then how did you get her pants?" I'm sitting up on my elbows. If anyone saw us like this, I wonder if they'd do anything. The way my legs are splayed around him as he leans over me can't look innocent.

"You don't remember letting me in?" His wicked grin lights up his face. "Your father's storage unit. Anyway, thought the pants were yours. Hang on," he says, and he steps to the side of the car.

I don't hesitate. I'm leaping out of the trunk once more, grateful my shoes stayed on after he ripped my pants off in the swamp. We're in a parking lot behind what looks like a strip mall. There are a few cars parked at the far end of the building, and I can't decide if I should go toward them or the wooded

area behind the parking lot. I don't even get to decide before I'm being thrown into the air.

I'm screaming, but nothing comes out. The wind gets knocked out of me as I slam down, and I nearly puke.

"Fuck, I didn't think you'd be this difficult," Roman says, and I pound on his back as hard as I can. He has me on his shoulder, and, despite my surprise at even being able to fit there, he has a dangerously strong grip on me. I'm hitting him and flailing and kicking my legs, and he's entirely unfazed. I don't stop though, and we're almost back to my car when a sharp pain rockets over my ass. Gasping, it's the only sound I'm able to make after he spanks me, and his dark laugh is full of amusement. "Make me do it again, baby." I stop moving completely before he drops me into the passenger seat of the Chevelle.

He's down on his knees, pulling a pair of giant shorts over my shoes and up my legs, moving so fast it makes me dizzy. I'm glad to be fully clothed again, but it doesn't change much.

"Why me?" I ask as he's tying the drawstring tight at my waist. "Easy girls? Fat girls? Stupid girls who trust strangers? What is it?"

Roman scoffs as he turns my legs into the car and pulls my seatbelt across my lap. "Don't unbuckle your seatbelt. Don't try to open the door. Don't do anything that could harm either of us. Now, go to sleep."

Then he's slamming the door shut and walking around to the driver's side. My eyes close before he gets in.



"CHANGE your shirt and throw the bloody one out the fucking window," Roman says, and my eyes snap open. He's holding a shirt over me as we drive along the dark highway. The heat in the Chevelle isn't perfect, and I'm freezing in shorts and a t-

shirt. My arms are moving of their own accord to take my shirt off, and I reach over to roll down the window.

“Bra too,” he says, and I can’t help it when I whimper as I obey. “As perfect as your tits are, this is about the smell,” he explains, and though he keeps his eyes averted, it doesn’t make me feel any better. I pull the clean shirt over my head; it has to be Roman’s because of how it swims on me. Breathing deep, I inhale the scent of the clean laundry. I roll up the window, the frigid air making my teeth chatter.

“Where are we?” I ask as he shoves a fast food bag into my lap. I hadn’t even noticed it. Though I’d like to tell him to go fuck himself, my head is hurting and I’m starting to feel nauseous because of my empty stomach. I know you’re supposed to lose your appetite in situations like this, but my mouth waters instead. Opening the bag, I take out a burger and some cold fries.

“A few hours out still,” he says, and I’m surprised he answers at all, even if his response doesn’t give me anything to work with.

I bite into the burger, and there’s no pickle on it. When I look at the receipt taped to the wrapper, I see it was a special request.

“My burger doesn’t have a pickle...” I trail off, staring at him. “Have you been stalking me?”

His mouth twitches. “Must be a coincidence.”

“You kidnapped me but you asked for no pickle on my burger? What the fuck?”

“You haven’t eaten all day, and I didn’t want a pickle to ruin your dinner.” His dark eyes flash up to the rear-view mirror.

I’m silent as I watch the mile markers flash by. It’s flat on either side of the highway, green fields and sparse trees all I can make out, and I finally see an exit sign. It takes me a moment to place the shape of the state on the sign, chewing slowly on my cold burger.

“Ohio. Why are we in Ohio?”

“Just passing through,” he says, and I roll the window down. I’ve only taken a single bite of the burger, but I throw it out of the car, anyway. If he doesn’t want to give me answers, I’m not going to cooperate with what he wants.

“Really?” he admonishes and then he shrugs. “Well, I guess your stomach can keep growling, because I’m not stopping again. I’m not hungry.” He glances over at me in a way that makes me think he’s lying.

My heart is running rampant in my chest, and I wish I had something else to pull over top my clothes. Ohio weather is far colder than Virginia this time of year, and I’m not remotely prepared for it.

I turn, looking for something in the backseat, and what I see twists my stomach up. My dad’s things are spread haphazardly in boxes and piles over the seat.

“How did you get my dad’s stuff?”

“Look at your hand; see if it helps you remember.”

My left hand has a long scar on it, going from my thumb to my pinky. It’s new despite the mostly healed skin.

“What is this? Roman, what do you want from me?”

He sighs, merging lanes around a semi-truck. “That’s a more complicated question than it ought to be, baby.” He rubs his beard with his hand, and I briefly wonder if it smells like me.

“It’s really not. Answer it,” I say.

“You know what I am?” he asks, taking his eyes off the road. I close my eyes and inhale. Long teeth extend in his mouth, and then he’s biting my neck. It’s still sore, and I reach up to trace the two small punctures on my skin.

“Someone committing way too hard to a Twilight cosplay.”

“Don’t do that. What am I, Gwyn?” He growls when I don’t answer. “*Say it.*”

My mouth falls open, subject to that tone in his voice, and I hear myself tell him the words he wants to hear. “You’re a vampire.”

His smile is a threat.

“Correct.”

“But you were out in the daytime.” I’m breathing heavily, and I bend over to put my head down between my legs. “Vampires aren’t real, they just aren’t,” I mutter.

He sighs, irritated. “The sun only limits the oldest ones. I simply get a headache in direct sunlight.” My breaths are coming faster and faster when he says, “*Relax, Gwyn. Breathe.*”

Strangely calm, I sit up and fold my hands in my lap. “And that’s how you make me tell you things when I don’t want to. How you’re controlling my reaction.”

“Yes. Good, we’re getting somewhere.”

“You drank my blood. In the swamp. Right?” My hand rests on my throat, and the skin is sticky. “Is that how you—you said you were claiming me? What does that mean?”

“You remember that,” he says with a bark of laughter that hurts my ears. “I didn’t know if you would or not.” He wears a satisfied smile, and I swear there is a gleam in his eyes. “It means you’re mine, and I can do with you as I see fit.”

“Why me? Why do you have my dad’s things?” I look out the window, unable to see anything on the dark plain.

“You know what I am, Gwyn, but do you know what you are? What your father was?”

I snap my head around to look at him. “A human. What are you saying? My father wasn’t a vampire,” I assert, crossing my arms.

Roman makes a sound like grinding stone, and it seems like I’ve offended him.

“You’re both hunters. You helped me get into his storage unit so I can go through his shit.”

“No, I didn’t. Hunters? What are—”

“I really don’t feel like explaining wards and magic to you, but I needed you to spill your own blood so I could get into the storage unit.” I stare at him blankly, and for whatever reason, it infuriates him. I watch his jaw tighten and his face transfix into stone.

“Your father killed my mother, and I think he had something to do with my brother’s death, too.”

My breath catches, and I blink as I make sense of his words. “My father? My father wouldn’t—no, he couldn’t have —”

“*Shut the fuck up, Gwyn!*” he shouts at me, and I have no choice but to obey his words.

He’s quiet for too long, and I stare at the side of his face, willing him to speak. If I could talk to him like he does me, get him to tell me what I want him to, I’d be demanding an explanation for everything he said. Forcing him to tell me.

Finally he sighs, adjusting his hands on the steering wheel.

“Cynthia and Bill Parsons, along with a group of sorcerers, attacked my coven almost thirty years ago. They killed indiscriminately. Cynthia saw two small boys cowering in a room with their mother, a vampire. The three of them thought she was going to spare them when she turned around to leave.”

I’m holding my breath, unable to look away from him. My mother died when I was born, so for all it matters, he speaks of a stranger.

“But then your father shoved his way into the room. The boys watched as he swung a blade and beheaded her when she dared to stand between him and her children. Her name was Alice.”

I’m trying to imagine my father thirty years ago, his auburn hair not thinning, his face not lined. The father of my childhood who loved to take me on roller coasters and who taught me to ride a bike was the best dad I could ask for. It’s so incongruent with the picture Roman paints.

“I don’t believe you. Even if my dad is—*was* a hunter...” I shake my head. “He wouldn’t kill someone if it wasn’t in self-defense.”

Roman’s hand shoots out faster than I can react, and his fingertips dig into my thigh as he squeezes. It’s restrained. A warning.

“He would have killed us too if it weren’t for your mother. I suppose killing children was a line she didn’t want him to cross.” He releases me, and I swallow as I rub my leg where he’d grabbed me. “It’s a shame they’re both already dead.”

I shudder. I don’t know what to say to him, if I should say anything at all. His statements about my father simply can’t be true. Arguing with him is a risk, but I take it anyway.

“You’re insane,” I assert. “Please, Roman. I’ll help you find the nearest hospital. They can help you. Vampires *aren’t* real. My—my parents didn’t hurt your family. My dad was a truck driver. He delivered milk to grocery stores. He didn’t—he’s—”

Roman laughs so hard, I see a tear shining at his lashes. The sound is a dangerous promise, and I’m frozen. My instincts are telling me to grab the door handle and throw myself out of the moving vehicle. Road rash and potential broken bones would be safer. But I can’t move.

“You know, sweetheart. You *know* this is real. Swear on that precious sister of yours that you think I’m lying or crazy, and I’ll let you out. Right here, right now.”

I inhale, holding my breath. He’d shown me his teeth, flaunted that coercive power, and I’d witnessed that preternatural swiftness with which he’d caught me and dressed me. There are things I can’t refute—he has proven what he is.

If I swear on Sasha’s life, he might go after her just to prove me wrong. At the core of me, I know he wouldn’t let me go for long. He didn’t say he’d stop the car before letting me out. He didn’t say he’d leave me alone after that. I’m not stupid enough to rely on the word of a man who stuffed me in his trunk.

My trunk.

“I’m sorry my father did that to you,” I say, low and cautious. I’m careful not to anger him, but I see his jaw tic. “But I have nothing to do with that. I’m innocent.” I’m talking to a wild animal, three hundred pounds of cruelty and fury in one body; I have to be careful. “Right? Just like you and your brother.”

“Don’t you ever speak of my brother unless it’s telling me what the fuck happened to him,” he snaps. As he yells at me, I get a glimpse of a sharp tooth. The same fang which had bitten into my skin earlier this morning glints wickedly in the glow of a passing streetlight.

“Roman, I didn’t even know you had a brother until two minutes ago. I don’t know anything about him.”

“*Tell me,*” he says, the gnawing sensation of his words with the command ringing through makes my head ache. “*Tell me what you know about my brother.*”

“He was with you when you watched your mom die. Something happened to him, and you don’t know what. You don’t want me to talk about him,” I supply, blinking hard.

“For fuck’s sake,” he mutters, and he’s silent for a long time.

I don’t know what to do, but right when I think he won’t speak again, he surprises me and clears his throat.

“That little necklace you’re wearing belonged to my brother. I’m going to find out why your dad had it. My brother disappeared six months ago, and I found out recently he was murdered.”

There is no emotion in his voice, but I can tell it’s a carefully curated mask.

“Roman,” I begin, voice gentle. I place my hand on his thigh. Convincing him of my softness and empathy is my best bet at surviving this. Make him feel sorry for me, make him pity me. “My dad died a year ago. Whatever happened to your brother has nothing to do with him.”

Roman's body is tense as he lets me rest my hand on him. He doesn't move, and I wonder if he even breathes.

"I don't think that's true, and you're going to help me find my brother's killer, Gwyn." His lip curls, and though he doesn't bare his teeth at me, I can see the sharpened points, and I shudder. "And then I'm going to cut out your heart."

The organ stalls and I can't breathe.

"This can't be real," I murmur, and I pinch myself—hard. "I have to be dreaming."

He laughs, a smirk pulling up his lips as he takes his eyes off the road to look at me.

"I'm not your dream, Gwyn. I'm your damnation."

ROMAN

THE CITY IS ON THE HORIZON, THE TWINKLING OF LIGHTS JUST visible on this stretch of I-90. Since I'd made it clear to Gwyn I intended to kill her after she helped solve my mystery with Remy, I'd had to make her sleep. Understandably hysterical, rest had been a gift. She'd opened the wound in her neck during her fit, and now I'm having to hold back my thirst.

It's not the first time on this drive I wish I listened to my uncle. Even though he parted ways with us in Cleveland, I can still hear his reprimand. I am nothing but a chaotic tangle of energy now, and he wasn't wrong when he blamed her blood.

Wasn't wrong about my father being unpredictable in his reaction. I'm tempted to call him—to explain before I get there so I can make adjustments to my plan if necessary. But I know he will summon me despite any changes I make, a sharp tug on his noose around my neck. I regret making my blood vow to him every day, but it rubs me raw even more now than it did before. He doesn't care like I do about what happened to Remy, and he's made that abundantly clear.

Regardless of my father's reaction, I am glad to return to the coven. No matter that she was defenseless and ignorant, I'm the one to finally bring in the last vampire hunter. We've had many vampires fail to return since I was a boy, and I am the one to bring an end to this endless hidden enemy. Perhaps it will encourage Björn to Slumber sooner rather than later, knowing between me and Emile, the coven will be well-cared for. Knowing what the coven protects will be cared for as well.

Gwyn twitches in her sleep, her head leaning against the glass. The blood on her neck has finally slowed, but it's still seeping from the wound. I hadn't bothered healing it like I did her hand, and I'm paying for that decision now. She'll be fine, her heartbeat strong and steady, and I don't think it's a fatal wound. But it's intoxicating as I breathe in her scent.

Eyeing her hand in her lap, I notice it is crimson, her attempt at staunching the flow useful in little more than dirtying herself. It's with the speed of my gifts and the self-control of a fledgeling vampire that I grasp her hand and bring it to my lips. She adjusts in her seat, putting less pressure on her shoulder, as I clean the blood from her skin.

It's a dangerous game I play here, teetering on a knife's edge of obsession, but her blood is too precious to ignore. I'm not too proud to admit I can't stand the idea of wasting any of it, even if that means I'm sucking on her fingers while she sleeps.

Fuck.

Part of this might be because of the added threat that she will not belong only to me when I return to the compound. Though I claimed her with my bite, those I'm blood sworn to can do as they please with her. If Björn chooses to share her with the coven, there's little I can do.

Even though I'm bringing back the hunter, fully planning to kill her for the coven, my father will be annoyed I didn't do it the way he asked. He might use my claim on her against me. A hunter's blood shared amongst the coven is one of the greatest gifts he could conceive, winning their admiration with little effort. And if my father does nothing with her, I'm not so sure Victoria will leave her alone. Lording my oath over me is her favorite thing to do now she is with my father, and she won't have any issue drinking from her in front of me.

She'll probably do it naked just to taunt me.

Gwyn makes a sound, a gentle mewling in her sleep, and I throw her hand back into her lap.

The small amount I'd cleaned from her hands was enough to give me focus, and I need to ensure my plan of attack will see me as the victor.

"Hello?" Margot answers on the first ring, and I remind myself to pay her more. Though she wants for nothing, I know she's been saving up to move out of the compound.

"Does he know?" I ask.

"That you're bringing her here? Yes. Emile told him hours ago."

"Of course he did. And his reaction?"

"Well, he said little, but he's having Freddie check the wards downstairs."

I swear, not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. At the very least, he wouldn't prepare a cell for her if he planned to kill her.

"Roman?" I can picture her chewing her lower lip, gnawing at the hot pink lipstick she prefers. "Can I ask you something?"

"You're going to anyway," I say as Gwyn sighs, and her head lolls in her sleep.

"What the hell are you doing bringing her here?" Margot asks. "I don't put it past him to tear her to shreds. Or worse—let the fledglings have her."

"I need her help to make sense of some of this shit," I murmur. "I can't tell what's worthwhile or not. He wrote her a letter in some language I don't fucking know."

Margot makes a noise, and I don't bother to interpret it. She's going to tell me, anyway.

"I sent a cleaner over to the greystone. I'm having it warded too."

"That won't stop Björn from forcing me—"

"No, it won't. But if you can get out of the house before he tugs too hard, they'll protect her."

“I don’t need to protect her,” I snap.

“No,” Margot says slowly. “They’ll protect the *information* she holds, Roman.”

I rub my hand over my face and sigh. “Jesus Christ, this blood... Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’ll take her there now, and ___”

I gasp as pain sears through my stomach, the wrenching tear of a hot iron digging around in my organs. It’s the hardest he’s ever tugged on the reins, and I know it’s just to make it hurt. He didn’t attempt a gentle pull or an even-handed order. He is an inferno of rage that rips through me with an intensity which takes my breath away.

“Roman?” Margot asks, and I hear keys jangling in her hand. “It’s too late, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I won’t make it to the greystone.”

“Fuck.”



“*WAKE UP, AND STAY CALM,*” I order as I kneel beside the passenger door. Margot hovers just behind me, and I’m tempted to dismiss her. As Gwyn’s eyes flutter open, her cinnamon honey gaze flits from me to Margot, and I think the other woman’s presence might make her more comfortable. Either way, my order works, and she doesn’t jerk away from me.

“What are you doing? Where are we?”

“I’m putting you in clothes that actually fit you.” I pull out the leggings Margot brought me. Gwyn is a little bigger than Margot, but I’ve been assured they are stretchy.

“And you think I can’t put on my own pants because?” Gwyn asks, voice trembling, as I tug my shorts off over her

shoes. She clamps her legs tightly together, and I realize her shaky tone is because she thinks I'm going to touch her.

I throw the leggings onto her lap as I take a step back. "Put them on. Do you want a new shirt, or do you want to keep wearing mine?" I give her the option as I hold up the two shirts Margot brought down. They're low cut, so those beautiful tits will be out and so will her neck.

Good. The coven needs to see my marks on her throat.

She snags one out of my hand, and she stares at me for a moment before whipping off my shirt. Even furious and still covered in dried blood, sitting angrily naked in her passenger seat, she's goddamn irresistible.

"This fucking blood." When I turn to face Margot, she's looking past me, and her dilated eyes put me on guard. "*Don't, Margot,*" I growl, unable to stop myself. I don't like using my influence on her, but I couldn't help it.

"Sorry, sorry," Margot says, blinking long and hard. "She smells so fucking good. How'd you drive the whole way sitting next to her?"

I don't confess to licking her fucking hand clean, or the ache in my body I'd withstood before that. I don't tell her I'm addicted and need to taste her again. Preferably now. But I can't put off his order much longer now that we're at the compound.

"*Don't run,*" I order Gwyn without turning around. If she tries it here, it won't end for her like it did at that strip mall. There are other vampires here, and I'm going to be a taut fucking thread when she's around them. If one of them even looks at her funny and jeopardizes my research, I'll rip them apart.

"So, is this your evil headquarters?" Gwyn asks, shutting the door of her car behind her. When I turn around, her arms are crossed over her chest. I've never seen this kind of attitude from her, and I revel in it. "Where you kill innocent people and drink their blood?"

“Something like that,” I say. Margot is about to speak and introduce herself, but I silence her with a glance. She’s bound to be fascinated by Gwyn, and I don’t want her getting friendly with her. I don’t need her making this any harder.

“So I’m not the first person you’ve killed?” Gwyn brings her thumb up to her mouth and chews on the side of her fingernail.

“You’re not dead yet, baby. That comes after you help me.”

“Why should I help you if you’re going to kill me either way?”

“It’s not a matter of if you should. You will, whether or not you want to.” I put my hand on her shoulder to guide her forward toward the bank of elevators. Margot stalks ahead of us, probably upset I cut her off from speaking. I don’t have time for her feelings.

Gwyn is silent, her chin jutting out as she holds herself up with perfect posture. She’s walking to her execution, and I wonder if my order is what makes her so nonchalant.

Margot presses the button and steps into the elevator as she speaks under her breath. She’s quiet enough that human ears wouldn’t hear it, and I hope hunter ears are the same.

“I’ve ported into the surveillance system. He gave her the same cell Remy was in when he was detoxing.”

I swear under my breath. Everything Björn does is a cold calculation, meant to get some sort of rise or send some signal. He clearly doesn’t care for me to find the answers I seek, and he views Gwyn’s information as useless. Just as he’d viewed my attempts to rehabilitate Remy.

I’m distracted, but I see the minuscule flex of Gwyn’s muscles, the slight bounce on the balls of her feet, just as the elevator door is about to shut. I grab her by her hair and bend her backwards. She grips the base of her ponytail as she cries out, looking up at me with tears in her eyes.

“You think I’m going to let you leave?” I ask. “You think there’s anywhere you can go where I won’t find you?”

I release her hair and her knees crash to the ground. She's at my feet and looking down at her shaking hands, and the blood drunk part of me wishes we were in a very different scenario. I'd keep that ponytail wrapped around my hand, and the tears in her eyes could stay, but for a different reason. The thought of her choking on my cock is enough to make me have to adjust the way I'm standing. Sometimes I wonder which curse is worse—my oath to my father or the fact I am so goddamn attracted to her.

We're a few floors beneath the parking garage, heading into the compound beneath Björn's skyscraper. Built to serve one purpose, his building is its own small city. Protecting what lies far below the Chicago soil, we are caretakers of our own immortality. As one of the few living vampires sired by the old ones, Björn's blood oath to protect Agnarr during his Slumber is the reason for this impenetrable fortress.

"Stand up," I bark as the elevator nears our destination. She obeys without me lacing my tone with influence.

She's learning.

"I never should have agreed to that fucking photoshoot," she mutters, and I don't hide my grin. "Fuck, and then I went hiking with you. I was a true crime podcast episode waiting to happen."

A single tear tracks down her cheek, and I follow the motion with a predator's gaze. I'm tempted to lick it, her blood in my system creating a marionette ruled by desire for her, when she angrily brushes it away.

She takes a deep breath, and I put my hand around the back of her neck as the elevator comes to a stop. When it opens and every eye in the mezzanine flicks over to us, the hungry moans of those scenting her blood echo off the marble floor. Margot steps out of the elevator around us, her clacking heels loud enough to serve as an invitation for the coven to fall into upheaval. It's pure chaos as people shove each other to move toward us, shouts of confusion and approval mixing.

"*Stop!*" I command, and considering over half the vampires present have already blood sworn to me in addition

to Björn and Emile, it's enough to stem the flow of bodies moving toward us. They all freeze, some looking at me in admiration, others in fear, and though I've been gone the past few months, it's clear I still hold sway. "The hunter is mine, and if anyone risks her life before I am finished with her, I promise you'll wish for a swift decapitation once I'm through with you. Understood?"

Gwyn is stiff against the grip of my hand. I trace my thumb down the side of her neck, and she shivers. The vampires nod and murmur to one another, but the ones who stand on the upper level exchange weighted glances. Wrongfully assuming I cannot see them, I decide I need to make my point more clear.

"Which fledgeling showed the pictures, Margot?"

"Hayden?" she calls, stepping forward toward the few dozen vampires who stand before us. They're all new, unable to control themselves.

"Uh, I'm Aiden," a man says. I frown because he's so young—potentially not even of legal drinking age. I wonder if his change was voluntary, and make a note in my mind to find out who his sire is.

"You've already potentially endangered the hunter. I need her to find out what happened to my brother, and you almost ruined that for me," I explain. "Come here."

He obeys, ginger hair looking frazzled as he tugs sweaty fingers through it. I remember him from before I left, and he ought to have known not to cross me. I'm sure he's been told even more about me in my absence. I'm an anomaly, and I see his fear clearly on his face. "S-sorry, I shouldn't have told—"

"You'll give me your blood vow. Now." I say, offering out my wrist to him.

"Oh, I—I'm already vowed to my sire."

"This isn't a debate. Drink," I say. Gwyn flinches as the boy approaches, even though he keeps a wide berth. His blue eyes flicker between her and my outstretched arm, and I know he is tempted.

I stare down the fledgeling, and I smirk when I see his decision firmly take root. His bite is gentle on my wrist, and I only give him a few drops before I pull my hand away.

“Are you right-handed or left-handed, Brayden?”

“Right,” he answers, frowning. “It’s Ai—”

“Rip your right arm off,” I command, and his new vow makes him quick to obey. He’s using his vampire strength, and the splitting sounds of popping tendons and cracking bones in his shoulder are revolting. Save for Gwyn’s heaving gasps as she jolts away from the gore, the room is silent save for the blood dripping from the stump of his arm. When he slumps to the ground, she turns in my grasp, refusing to look.

I step over him, addressing the rest of the coven.

“I know I’ve been gone for a time, but I’m here now. If you fuck with what belongs to me, I won’t be as kind as I was to Hayden here.” The words barely leave my lips when I feel a twist in my gut from my own oath.

“The conquering hero returns. Always one for big entrances, aren’t you?”

I turn, looking up at the top of the stairs where he stands, tall and stately. His blond hair is cut short, and he’s dressed only in a robe.

“Hello, Father.”

“Bring her here. Now,” he commands, and there’s no point in resisting. Gwyn begins to shake as I lead her up the stairs, and I order her to be calm. After undermining me in front of the coven, I don’t want to give my father the satisfaction he will get in intimidating her.

“Björn,” my father says, introducing himself with an outstretched hand. She takes it before I can stop her, probably goaded by a non-verbal command, and he pulls her flush against his chest. The possessive part of me unleashes, and I try to pull her away before I realize Björn will rip her apart if he wants to. His loud growl reverberates, and I back off.

He bends over her, pulling her head back so far she's likely to fall. She screams as he pounces, his head dipping forward as he pierces the soft flesh of her neck. She goes limp in his arms, and I notice he bites over my claiming marks. It takes everything in me to stand still. He did it on purpose, and I am enraged.

The sounds he makes start as small sighs, but they grow more lewd as he continues to pull blood from her veins into his mouth. I know exactly how he is feeling, and it makes me sick.

"Björn!" I finally lose my shit, yelling at him as she turns pale. Her fingertips brush the ground, and her eyes have fluttered shut. Björn growls at me, irritated, and finally pulls away from her neck with gasping breaths. When she twists in his grasp, he lets her drop to the marble floor.

"Fucking hell," I mutter, hoping he didn't hurt her too badly. She won't be able to help me if she has a brain injury.

"Do not seek her out," he yells to the people still waiting below. "But if my son leaves his pet unattended, I won't prohibit you from supping on the finest blood this coven has tasted in the last thirty years."

I clench my fist, walking past her even though I want to make sure she's okay. It will only be seen as weakness from everyone in the room.

"Couldn't resist undermining me, could you?" I demand, as quiet as I can.

"We have much to discuss, Roman."



"COME." I'm so fucking irritated, I don't bother looking at Gwyn as I walk past, adjusting the collar of my suit. I nod to Margot, grateful she watched her while I met with Björn. He

knew what he was doing in separating me from her, but my friend was on top of it.

“You were in sweatpants,” Gwyn says dully from the ground beside my father’s office. “Did Daddy make you change?”

Her sass takes me off guard, relieving the tension from the meeting I just had with him. I stare at her for a second, but the scent of her blood is stronger than it ought to be. Pulling her up and moving behind her, I tug her ponytail loose and find the split skin on the back of her head. I swipe at the blood with my fingertip.

“Ow, that hurts!” She winces, pulling away from me.

“You’re bleeding.” I stick my finger in my mouth and suck off her blood, wetting it with my healing saliva, before I slide it over the cut.

“I’ve been bleeding since you *attacked* me at the swamp, you dumbfuck.”

I huff a laugh, turning her down one hallway after another as Margot follows behind us.

“Was I too rough for you, sweetheart? I thought you liked it that way.”

“Fuck you.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re a pig.”

The lustrous designs of the common area of the compound give way to a cold industrial stairwell as I push open the heavy metal door leading down to where Gwyn’s cell is. Margot leads the way, using her abilities to speed ahead of us. I can’t help myself as I oink in Gwyn’s ear, pushing her forward.

The steel door closes behind us, and I dismiss the foreboding feeling I get. Agnarr rests deep below the cells, and I remember how much it unnerved me when Remy stayed here.

“What’s down here?” Gwyn asks, voice trembling. I wonder if she can sense him as I can.

“Among other things? Your cell. *Go.*”

She moves with my influence, clearly not wanting to obey.

“What are the other things?” She plants each foot forcefully, carefully, as we circle down the stairwell.

“Things that would make your escape very painful. I’ll tell you that right now.”

A loud crash from below startles her, and she jumps. Within a second, someone is on her, and I’m yanking their head back, trying to pull them free from her throat without ripping her neck open. She screams but her body still moves forwards, my influence forcing her feet to move.

She’s slipping just as I wrench the vampire free, and I grip her shoulder to balance her.

“Margot!” My voice echoes, and Gwyn is already moving down the stairs, unable to disobey my earlier command. “*Sit down,*” I growl, and she does, her body crashing to the steps. The fledgeling struggles in my arms, and I shove her at Margot the second she arrives. “Put the baby back. Now.”

“The baby?” Gwyn pants, rubbing her neck.

“Fledgeling. New vamp. Must’ve smelled your blood.” I shrug and continue down the stairs behind Margot and the struggling vampire, wondering how long it will take Gwyn to follow.

I’m only one flight down when I hear her move, clearly aware I’m all that stands between her and the rest of them.

ROMAN IS STANDING AT THE END OF MY BED, ABSOLUTELY silent, when I open my eyes. I sit up, scrambling backward, a screech tickling its way up my throat and out my mouth. He's dressed in a casual suit, no jacket, and his hands are in his pockets. With his shirtsleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, displaying the dark ink swirling over his skin, he is the picture of intimidation. He raises a brow, his lips twitching as he stares at me in silence. I don't know what to do, curled up at the head of the bed. The thin sheet did little in the way to protect me from the cold last night, and it does even less now against Roman.

I watch the rise and fall of his chest, instinctively matching my breathing with his to calm myself. It's something I've done for as long as I can remember, and now is no exception. My jaw is aching, clenched teeth in my sleep causing pain to radiate down my neck and up the back of my skull. After a moment, I can breathe again, even if his dark eyes on mine feel suffocating.

"What do you want?" I ask, and he huffs a laugh. I should be frightened of my kidnapper, but all I feel is incandescent rage. "Is this funny to you?"

"*Get dressed,*" he commands, pointing to a stack of clothing on the foot of the bed he must have put there. He turns around, affording me a small amount of privacy, and I pull my shirt off.

"I'm not allowed to shower first?"

“You showered last night.”

“Oh, of course you watched that, you fucking pervert.” He’s silent, ignoring my protestation as I continue dressing. “I took the fastest shower of my life. I probably still smell bad from being shut in a trunk in my own piss.”

He stretches his neck, tilting his head slowly to the right, then slowly to the left. Adjusting his shoulders, shirt stretching over his broad back, he takes a deep breath. “You don’t smell bad. Besides, would you prefer someone else’s piss? Wouldn’t have guessed you were into that.”

I ignore him, moving onto my knees and pulling down my pants before reaching for the underwear and jeans he brought. They’re exactly my size, and the jeans are my favorite brand. I shake my head, a laugh of disbelief crossing my lips. I suppose if one is going to be kidnapped, it pays for it to be someone who stalked you.

“Are you rich or something?” I ask.

“Why do you ask?” He turns his head, and I stare at his profile. He has tidied up his beard since last night, and his wavy hair looks perfectly tousled. I hate him for being so pretty.

“Something tells me Viking Vampire Daddy doesn’t care enough to buy me my favorite jeans.”

His posture stiffens. “I didn’t buy them because they’re your favorite. I bought them because I knew they’d fit you.”

“Still. They’re not cheap.” Jeans that fit my ass without creating a weird gap at my waist are scarce. He could have picked any jeans in this size, but he picked the brand that costs over a hundred dollars each.

“I’m not hurting for money,” he says, turning around when he hears the pants zip.

“I imagine stalking can be quite lucrative. How many others have you stalked and stolen from?”

Roman grins, stepping around the side of the bed to sit at the end of it. I’m still near the headboard, doing my best to

take up as little space as possible. It's a twin and possibly the least comfortable thing I've ever slept on. Although I guess my trunk was worse.

"You're my first, sweetheart."

I tuck my legs up, wrapping my arms around them as I stare at the man sitting before me. He could kill me in an instant. He could probably reach into my chest and pull out my still-beating heart before I could even blink. But I can't help but think about the missing pickle from my burger and the exact right pair of jeans. He hasn't physically injured me other than biting me at the swamp, and he left me alone after throwing me into my cell last night. He has a moral code, and I have to figure out how to exploit it. I have to endear him to me.

"Tell me about Remy."

He balks, physically jolting away from me. "Who told you his name? Don't you say his fucking name."

I gasp, readjusting as I look around the small room, trying to find an escape, even though I know I won't find one. It's smaller than my childhood bedroom and the only furniture in it is this bed. There's a bathroom connected, but he could break that door down in an instant. There is nowhere to go.

"I—I heard you and Margot talking last night. In the elevator." His eyes narrow, a predator gaze moving down to my hands. I'm picking at my nails, and I can't stop myself from fidgeting.

"Was that the first time you heard his name?"

Filled with suspicion, his words are coated in acid as they crest in a wave over me. "No." My eyes widen in panic as he stands, and I back away from him, crowding into the corner where the head of the bed meets the wall.

"When was the first time you heard his name? From who?" I'm fighting against answering, hating how his words dig beneath my skin and root around for the truth.

"You. You asked me about him once before. I—I think I forgot, but I remember now."

He visibly deflates and takes a step back, running a hand through his hair. “You were supposed to forget that. Someone’s hunter blood has come out to play.”

He shakes off the obvious disappointment my answer gave him and walks toward me. Hand outstretched, he chucks my chin as a playful smile crosses his lush lips. “I’ll have to be more intentional with my influence. *Get on your hands and knees.*”

He wants me to fight against it, to give him a challenge. But I don’t give in to what he wants, doing exactly as he says instead. It’s not a position I want to be in, but I don’t want to play into his games. I want him to see me as a person with wants and dreams and fears. Not as a challenge.

The sound he makes could be disappointment, but I keep my gaze averted. He still hovers over me, and I close my eyes as he gathers my hair into his fist and tilts my head up to look at him. “What happened to that woman who took a metal rod to my head? Who ran screaming from me? Who fought against me at the swamp? Who is this on her hands and knees, ready to suck my cock if I told her to? Is this really you, Gwyn?”

I whimper as he pulls my hair. I want to fight him, to fight his influence, but I don’t think it will help me.

“Is this you giving into the beast, baby?” I don’t know if he’s referring to himself in the third person, like some sort of asshole, or if he means something else. “We can’t have that.” He pulls me up by the hair to a kneeling position. “*Fight me.*”

I launch myself at him, shoving at his chest. He’s immobile as a wall, hundreds of pounds of muscle and willpower stopping me in my tracks. My nails rake down his chest, not doing any damage because of how far I’d bitten them down last night. He doesn’t move as I try to punch him in the jaw, only barely adjusting as I attempt to knee him in the balls. I don’t have the strength to do anything to him, and I start to cry as his influence washes over me, making me keep fighting even though I’m doing nothing.

“Please, Roman. I can’t fight you. There’s no point.” I slap him, and he doesn’t react at all. It’s like hitting a statue.

Finally, he grabs my wrists. Instead of ordering me to stop, he holds onto me even as I buck and kick out against him.

“There’s no point in fighting, but there’s also no point in submitting. I will not take pity on you, Gwyn. I’m not going to let you go just because you bat those pretty eyes at me and do everything I say. So, be fucking real with me. *Stop*,” he adds as he lets go of my wrists. I fall back onto the bed, catching myself so I don’t slam my head back into the wall.

My breath is heaving as I stare up at him. I don’t know if I believe him. Does he have such little faith in his humanity?

Or is it that he has too much faith in it? Does he see my compliance as a threat to his resolve? Regardless, it won’t be as simple as doing what he says. It’ll be harder to make him care for me than I had thought. Right now, though, he wants my anger. I decide I’m more than happy to give it to him.

“You want real?” I spit out, rubbing my wrists. “I hope my dad did it. If your brother is anything like you, it’s a good thing he’s dead.”

His right eye twitches, almost imperceptibly, and his beautiful, wicked mouth curves into a Cheshire cat smile.

“My brother was just like you, Gwyn. He got swept up in his storm, that twisted mess of self-destruction you both call home, and it got him killed. But sweetheart, there’s chaos in your sky too.”

He stalks out of the room, and I wonder if it’s all that keeps him from tearing me apart.



WHEN ROMAN RETURNS, I’m grateful to see he brought Margot. I don’t know why, another vampire’s presence not exactly a calming one, but I think she might help keep his temper in check.

While Roman might be what one would expect from a vampire—dark hair, air of mystery, foreboding presence—Margot is the opposite. I wonder if she was a cheerleader in high school. Her heart-shaped face and blonde hair make her look sweet rather than threatening. She wears a t-shirt dress that hugs her hourglass figure, and her sunny smile is such a contrast to Roman’s grim expression that I can’t help but laugh.

“Have a good walk?” she asks, and I take a moment to understand she’s referring to the endless pacing I’ve done since Roman left. I’ve had so much to think and worry about, it doesn’t surprise me that my feet hurt now.

“Would’ve been better with fresh air.”

Roman grunts, dropping a cardboard box to the ground. It says “Gwyn” on the side, and I know exactly what it contains.

“I’ve been through all that stuff. There’s nothing in there about your brother. It’s just old keepsakes Dad collected over the years.”

Roman opens the box, tipping it and spilling its contents on the floor in a pile. There’s an ache in my chest to see Dad’s things treated with such irreverence. I say nothing, not wanting to set Roman off. I know he wants to see me put up a fight, but I’m still going to choose my battles.

“Oh my God,” Margot breathes as she picks up a padded folder from the ground. “Is this you?” She points at a dance class photograph, one in which I am wearing a horrifying blue baseball costume while carrying a giant plastic bat. Puffy sleeves and tap shoes complete the look, and you can see how thrilled I am about it in the picture.

“Yes.”

I watch Roman as he leans over, looking at what Margot holds in her hand. His expression doesn’t crack, and I feel defeated. For a split second, I had hoped this glimpse into my youth might sway his indifference. When Margot sinks to her knees to go through the pictures, Roman sits on the ground across the room from me, his back to the wall. I don’t move

from where I'm perched on the bed. It feels like Margot and the pile of Dad's things are a middle ground, and I'm afraid to approach.

"These are so bad." Margot is laughing as she goes through a stack of old dance pictures, just like the first one. When she bursts into a fit of laughter, I know exactly what she's laughing at, and I can't help my smile.

"Margot," Roman warns, and she flits her hand at him in dismissal. This is the weirdest experience of my life.

"You and Sasha make beautiful kittens," Margot says, laughter tapering off. It was Sasha's first and only year of dance class and my last year. We were twelve, and our instructor had wanted to do choreography for the sad song from the Cats musical.

In the picture, Sasha and I wear cat onesies Mom found at the store and our makeup is over the top. We had even glued whiskers onto each other. It was simultaneously the dumbest and funnest thing I'd ever done in my life.

"Is Sasha okay?" I ask.

The energy in the room shifts, and Margot looks over her shoulder at Roman. His elbows are resting on his bent knees, and he's staring right at me. He doesn't look at his friend as he orders her not to say anything.

"Please?" Sasha will have done everything she's supposed to do. She will have called the police, and she'll be worried sick.

"Find me something in that box, Gwyn, and I'll consider it." He stands, offering his hand out to Margot to help her up. "I'm going to go get some folding chairs or something because I'm not sitting on the fucking floor. Give me something I don't know from this pile of bullshit by the time I'm back, and I'll consider telling you what your sister is up to."

It's a start, and I'm on the floor digging through Dad's things before they even get out the door. This box is mostly full of photo albums and a few personal effects. I'm tossing the photo albums onto the ground, one by one, searching for

something that will satisfy Roman. I shuffle through a folder of old school papers of mine before tossing it back on the pile. Disappointed I found nothing that will satisfy him, I lean forward and pluck the oldest photo album from the stack, opening it up to see pictures of my pregnant birth mother.

Cynthia is tall, about the same height as me, and I take after her in most ways. The black, pin-straight hair is the most noticeable feature, but I share quite a few other traits with her. In this picture, I notice her smile. She's grinning at the cameraman, probably my father, and I trace the swell of her overalls, the rounded belly hiding me within it.

There's another picture of the two of them, my dad wrapping his arm around her while he kisses her forehead. I'm staring at my dad in this picture, his hair combed neatly and his mustache tidy. I can't imagine him killing anyone, let alone a mother in front of her sons. But would Roman lie about that? Neither situation makes sense to me, and I struggle to wrap my head around it. I'm angry at my father for keeping me in the dark. Shaking my head, I flip through the pictures again, looking for any hint that my parents were murderers. There are only a few more photographs of my mother after this one, and it feels like a countdown as I flip through the pages.

It's strange to not have any pictures of me with the person who brought me into this world. We only existed together for a very short time, and it's surreal to think about. The last picture of my parents is them standing in front of the Neptune statue in Virginia Beach while on vacation, Cynthia's hands resting comfortably on top of her belly.

The rest of that page is blank. There's a gap in the album as if time stopped completely. Perhaps it did for him.

Roman comes back in as I turn the page, Margot no longer with him. He sets up a folding table and chairs in the corner before sprawling out on one, his long limbs stretching into the room. I am strangely calm, photographs of my family centering me. They're why I'm in this mess of shit, but I have hope that I will convince Roman I am a victim of circumstance, nothing more. I ignore him, frustrated I found nothing worthwhile for him so I could ask about Sasha.

The first picture of me has to be at least six months later. Probably more considering I'm standing, frowning down at a doll I hold in my hand. I have the faintest wisps of dark hair, and I'm only in a diaper. I look quite serious in all my baby pictures, and I wonder if it's because I understood, on some intrinsic level, the cost of my entrance into the world.

"Nothing?" Roman asks, and I realize, based on the look on his face, that he's already been through this box and knew I wouldn't find anything about his brother. I don't lift my head, flipping forward a few pages to my first birthday party.

Scanning each picture for a familiar face, I find him, and I smile as I peel the plastic from the corner of the album. Freeing the photograph from the sticky paper, I stand and walk it over to him.

"This is my dad's best friend, Charlie. I'm the baby in that picture, so they go way back. We moved away from him when I was young, though, so I haven't seen him in a long time. He didn't come to the funerals, but they talked regularly."

"Yeah, he called on untraceable burner phones," Roman murmurs, and I just blink at him. Of course he already knows who Charlie is.

Roman takes the picture from my hand, looking at the old photograph. I'm sitting in my dad's lap, face covered in birthday cake, and Charlie stands in the background, beaming at my dad. His hair was already greying back then, and he looks like he could be my grandfather.

"*What's his last name and where is he from?*" Roman asks, and I press my lips together, fighting the compulsion.

"Promise," I bite out. Roman raises a brow, and I think he might be impressed. "Won't. Hurt. Him."

"If he killed my brother, Gwyn, there's nothing on this planet that can stop me from hurting him."

"Okay. If he didn't though?" I ask and bite down hard on my lip. He smiles as he watches me wince. His eyes linger on my mouth, and I wonder if he's just waiting for me to draw blood.

“Fine. If he didn’t hurt Remy, I won’t—”

“Palmer!” I yell, exhaling hard. “And Minnesota or Wisconsin or something.”

He pulls out his phone, taking a picture of the photograph in his hands, before he types out a text message. When his gaze lifts to mine, I take a step back. I hadn’t realized how close I stood to him. He reaches up and snatches my hand, pulling me to stand between his spread legs. He spins me and pulls me back against his chest, holding his phone in front of me.

He pulls up an app on his phone, and I inhale quickly when he shows me a black-and-white image of my living room.

“Of course you have cameras at my place.”

It’s Saturday, so I’m not surprised to see Charlotte is sitting in Hale’s lap, watching the out of frame television, while Hale frowns at my bedroom door. Roman clicks an arrow at the top of the page, and the camera swaps to one in my bedroom.

I don’t realize what I’m looking at for a moment, but when I do, a whimper makes its way up my throat.

Sasha is laying in my bed, sobbing into Zuul’s side. Her fingertips curl into his fur, and he nuzzles her head. My heart drops into my stomach, and I feel nauseated.

“How long has she been there?” I whisper.

“Since last night when you didn’t come home and Hale called her.” His words vibrate against my back, and I feel a slight tightening of his arm around me. “You get it now, sweetheart? Why I’m doing this?”

When I feel his breath on my neck, I don’t move. I don’t even breathe.

His hand squeezes my hip, demanding an answer.

“I do. I get it.”

ROMAN

I ENJOY WATCHING HER MORE THAN I SHOULD. A FEW WEEKS into her captivity, we've only completely gone through two boxes of Bill's belongings. I'm making her go through everything with me and explain any context she can give. There's still no word on Charlie Palmer, and Margot isn't hopeful we'll figure out that mystery. After I've thoroughly questioned Gwyn each day, I don't go to my home outside the compound. I spend my time in Margot's living room-turned-office instead.

And I watch.

I think about how we've uncovered nothing useful as I trace the outline of Gwyn's shape on her bed. I'm not sure if it's a nervous habit borne out of the months I spent doing this, but knowing she is there brings me comfort. Watching her on the screen reminds me that the answer to Remy's murder is just a few floors below me, waiting for me to wrench it out of that pretty little head.

There are some things in the boxes which give her pause, usually assigned to some memory of her childhood, and she doesn't enjoy sharing them with me. It's cheap entertainment to watch her clench that sweet jaw, furrow her brows, and ball her hands up into fists as she fights the compulsion. She's getting better at it, fighting me just a bit longer each time, and I get a strange sense of pride from it.

But other than that, she's been the perfect prisoner. Since the moment I showed her Sasha crying in her bed, and I agreed

to show her footage occasionally, it's like she truly understands why I'm doing what I'm doing. I don't let myself entertain the idea that she really wants to help me figure out what happened to Remy. Her curiosity stems from the life her father has hidden from her, and anything she shows me is forced.

A hand claps over my shoulder, and I swear when I knock over my beer. I catch it before a drop can spill, grateful for my abilities or else Margot would have killed me.

"I've been sent to ask for an update, *mon grand*."

"You snuck up on me, Uncle." I scowl at him. "We're about a third of the way done with his belongings. He wrote her a letter about what she is, but he wrote it in a language she made up as a child. Real code-breaking happening here." I roll my eyes.

"Quite pedestrian," Emile says as he steps around me and bends over the desk. His pale face glows in the monitor light, and the fine lines around his eyes look deeper than normal. "You seem to have a comfortable prisoner, Roman."

"She's doing what I ask of her with little effort. No sense in making her last days worse."

My jaw tightens when I hear her in my mind, begging me to tell Sasha she's dead. "*So she doesn't have to wonder. Like you with Remy,*" she'd said.

"I thought your mother's pacifism would have left you the day she died."

"Why waste my time on torture? There's no need when she's being cooperative."

"Cooperative, and yet you have nothing worthwhile. Maybe she needs motivation." He crosses his arms, walking away from the desk. "It disappoints Björn, you know. That you haven't used her as leverage for more blood oaths."

"What do you mean?" I lean back in my chair and take a sip of my beer.

"You don't have as many as me." He shrugs.

“You plan to challenge me, Uncle?” I smirk at him, and he laughs.

“If I thought you’d pose a threat once your father Slumbers, I might.”

We joke, but it isn’t as lighthearted as it might seem to an outsider. The coven belongs to me, and Emile knows it. Though he’s stronger than me, Björn will make him swear a blood oath to me before he Slumbers beside Agnarr. While Emile is more level-headed than Björn, his morality is just as far gone. While Margot and I don’t hunt people to kill, that’s not the case for many in the coven. It will get us caught one day, and Emile is just as stubborn as Björn. I’m better for the coven, and I have far longer to rule than Emile does. But the way he is looking at me currently, contemplatively, I wonder if I should do as he says and make sure enough people in the coven are sworn to me.

“I think it pitiful to use her blood as a lure for it. Disgusting.”

Now I’m laughing. “You really ought to try it. It’s fucking delicious.”

“Can confirm,” Margot shouts from the door to her apartment, a paper bag of groceries balanced on her hip. Emile turns up his nose at the bag. Sense of taste long gone, food repulses him now. “She tasted like dessert. Those rocket pops you get from the ice cream truck as a kid?”

I snort, moving to help Margot put things away.

“I still can’t believe she let you bite her,” I say, not thinking.

“*Let you?*” Emile doesn’t miss a beat, turning his hawk-eyed gaze on me.

“You know Margot asks for consent first.” I grin at him. “I don’t ask though. Don’t worry.”

He sighs, putting his hand on the doorknob to leave. “Put on the pressure, Roman. Björn won’t let you play this game much longer.”

Once he's gone, Margot pours herself a glass of wine and gives me the fucking look I hate. At least she waited until Emile left.

"You fed from her? When? What do you mean you don't ask?"

"Relax, Margot."

She doesn't push me on it, and I'm glad. It had been a weakness. Gwyn had smelled so goddamn sweet, and I had been craving her since I'd had her that first day. She's waffled frequently between anger and resignation so consistently that her sudden vulnerability this morning had taken me by surprise. I had to squash it out of her. There was no room for that shit here, not a single fucking ounce of it. I don't want her to appeal to my compassion. When she forced me to think about Sasha's pain, I knew I'd fucking do what she asked. That was why I bit her.

I needed to remind her what she was in this situation. Prey.

"If you had asked her like I did, I bet she would have said yes."

"I didn't ask her, but she didn't stop me either."

Margot gives me that disappointed pursed lipped smile from her seat at the kitchen bar. "Ah yes, Officer, she didn't say no." She shakes her head and takes a swig of her wine. "Do you listen to yourself sometimes?"

"It doesn't fucking matter, Margot. She's mine to do with as I please." My friend tilts her head back, looking at the ceiling like she's making a plea to the heavens. "I wasn't a monster about it!"

"Well, I suppose there's no way for her to give proper consent, anyway. Not while you keep her as a prisoner." She grins from over her glass. "You'll have to let her go at the end so you can properly have her without being a dick about it. Or, hear me out, you *could* bring your dick into it and you could *have her* have her, you feel me?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, and I want to throw something at her.

“Not happening.” I roll up the cuffs of my sleeves, glancing at the monitor behind me to see Gwyn has decided to take a nap. “Her blood killed mine. You know I can’t let her go when I’m done.”

“Oh, I know.” Margot puts her headphones in her ears and picks up a book to tell me our conversation is finished. I ignore her fucking tone.



“THE FUCK ARE you doing here, Hannigan?” The man jumps, squeaking like a rat. I don’t need to ask why he is sniffing the crack in her fucking door, but I do it anyway to watch him squirm.

“I’m just—It smells so good, sir. I can’t help it. I’d give anything for a taste of it.” He groans, rolling his forehead against the door before he takes a step back. Wondering how he can even smell her out here, my questions are answered as I approach. The cloying scent of her blood wafts toward me, and I’m confused. Unless she got her period—a fucking nightmare to think about handling—I don’t know why she’s bleeding. Pushing past the lingering vampire who can’t control his urges, I unlock her room and barge inside, only for Gwyn to not be in there. The door to the bathroom is firmly shut, and I check the time on my watch. She’s usually ready to begin our work by now. Hesitating, I decide it’s in my best interest to check on her.

I smell blood, she’s suffered from depression before, and she’s been kidnapped by a monster. Though I hear the shower running, my mind leaps to a worrying possibility, and I rap my knuckles on the door.

“Gwyn?”

She doesn’t answer, and I think maybe she can’t hear me over the water, so I open the door. I swear, having forgotten that the shower has no door or curtain, but a half-wall instead.

When our father had put him in this room, Remy had joked that it was so he couldn't strangle himself with the shower curtain or cut his arm off with a piece of broken glass. But it's not Remy I'm watching in the shower, thank fuck.

With eyes closed, she tilts her head back, hair spilling like ink down her back. She's rinsing shampoo out, and I watch an errant bubble slide from her shoulder, down over her ample breast. Shiny and so round, I want to cup it in my hand. It's almost like she moves in slow motion, the way she gathers her hair to one shoulder when she's done rinsing it. She wrings it out, reaching for a bottle of conditioner.

Blinking, I scour her upper body for signs of a wound and find nothing. Satisfied she's not self-harming in the bathroom, a good man would leave. But I've never been that or claimed to be, so I lean against the door frame and continue watching her.

The fluorescent lighting in the bathroom, while harsh, serves its purpose. It allows me to see the shiny silver stretch marks on the sides of her breasts and her hips. Now that her self-tan has worn off, her skin is lighter, but the silver lines on her sides still stand out in this lighting. It reminds me of a type of Japanese art I'd seen while scrolling online. Kintsugi. The acceptance of imperfections, it involves broken pieces of pottery rebuilt with gold to mend the seams, only enhancing its original beauty.

I would guess her heart is the same, a tangled collection of memories and regret, and she's yet to find that which will mend the broken parts. I can relate.

Even in the warm shower, her nipples are hard as she draws a soapy washcloth across her chest and stomach. The bubbles trace a path over skin I'm desperate to touch. I need to get it out of my fucking system. The cloth slides lower, and as she moves it between her legs, I step forward, adjusting so I can see around the half wall.

My gaze immediately finds the source of the blood, and I lick my lips. She nicked herself shaving, and I'm only momentarily irritated Margot gave her a fucking razor.

Confusion swiftly surpasses the irritation as I wonder why she would bother. It takes a moment, but then I remember a text she once sent to Sasha about how body hair makes her brain itch.

The single line of blood has slowly dripped down from her knee, and it's clear she doesn't even notice it. She tosses the washcloth on the tile floor, and my eyes follow the curved line of her legs up to the apex of her thighs, where her hand is drifting.

She lets out the softest of sighs as her fingertips circle her clit. Her heart beats faster, and the knowledge of where her blood is swiftly moving gets me hard.

Fuck, Emile is right. If she's comfortable enough to get off in the fucking shower, I need to put on the pressure. I resolve to do just that. Starting immediately after she finishes, because I'm rooted to the fucking spot. She slides her middle finger inside her for a moment, then pulls it back out to circle her clit.

Her fingertips are moving faster until they abruptly stop.

My eyes seek hers, and she's staring right at me.

"Please, don't," she whispers, throwing an arm over her breasts.

"Don't what, Gwyn?" I step forward out of the door frame.

"I don't know. Just—"

The door to her bedroom creaks, and I don't see him, but I react to Hannigan's intrusion immediately. Fucking leech. He knew I was in here, even if I didn't lock her bedroom like a fool. He's halfway into the shower, and Gwyn has fallen to the ground in shock. His hand wraps around her ankle as I pull him off her.

He's already sworn his oath to me, years ago, so when I shove him against the wall of the shower and tell him not to move, he is still as a statue.

Gwyn's on her knees now, staring up at me and Hannigan, arms crossed protectively over her body. "Thank you." The words are so soft, I wonder if I truly heard them at all.

Hannigan is still behind me, making inhumane sounds of need as I force him to be in this close of proximity to her.

“You’re in a good position to thank me in other ways.” She blanches as she stumbles to her feet. “But we can save that for later. I need to show Hannigan something.”

Before she can react, I’m on her, and I use my strength to hoist her up against the shower wall. Her head is touching the ceiling, and I wedge my shoulder between those luscious thighs. Licking the path of blood from ankle to knee, I give no warning before I bite the inside of her thigh. She hisses in pain, her leg flinching away from me. I groan as I pull that sweet sustenance into my mouth, and Hannigan is shrieking, pulling against the bonds of my influence. Adjusting, I bring both her legs over my shoulders as I suck from the wound I made. She’s still wet, and the scent of her while I drink her blood is making my dick throb.

“Roman!” Gwyn’s hands move lazily, drunkenly, into my hair. The paralytic feeling of a vampire bite is enough to usually make people immobile. But Gwyn and her hunter blood must fight against it to touch my hair like this. She groans and rolls her head back and forth against the wall.

I pull away for a moment, licking the blood from my lips and chin. Breathing deep, she’s intoxicating, and I’m certain I’m about to hear colors as her blood is an immediate hit to my nervous system. “It feels good, doesn’t it, sweetheart? Because you know you’re mine.”

I’m crossing lines I shouldn’t because of that spicy, sweet taste exploding in my mouth and down my throat. She says nothing as her fingers curl into my hair. I lap at the puncture wounds I’ve made on her inner thigh, and she lets out a soft moan. When one of her hands slips down to cup herself, I’m not surprised. I’m more shocked by my immediate possessive reaction. It’s one thing for Hannigan to see her naked; that damage is done. But it’s quite another for him to see her touch herself.

I growl at her, and she stops.

The interloper is falling apart where he stands against the wall, whimpering pleas punctuated with occasional howls of need.

“You see this, Hannigan? She likes it when it’s me hurting her.” He starts panting, high-pitched gasps echoing against the wet tile. “No one else hurts her, you understand me?” When he whimpers, I take it as acknowledgment. “Now, go outside and walk into traffic.”

He obeys, leaving as I suck on her leg, sunlit apple memories setting my taste buds alight as I hum in pleasure. I need to stop, but I don’t want to. I should never have drank from her, never drew her taste past my lips and let it sing on my tongue. Breathing deep, I take one last pull, and then let her slide down the wall.

It took everything in me not to fuck her with my fingers and tongue, and the tent in my pants proves that. I know now that if I fuck her, Margot’s insinuation will come true. I’ll never be able to let her go. Not back to her life with her family, nor to a death I would give her out of kindness.

I’ll keep her forever.

GWYN

I WINCE AS I DAB AT THE PUNCTURE WOUNDS ON THE INSIDE OF my thigh. When Margot bit me, she had licked the wound after, and it had scabbed over within a few seconds. Some sort of healing properties in her saliva, I assumed. Roman never did that for me. Based on how everyone seems to react to my blood, I wonder why he wouldn't. Is it some sort of penance for him? A torture to smell my blood and not be able to have it? But between yesterday and today, maybe he's given that up. I'm still reeling from both interactions.

I'm panting, unable to catch my breath because of the quickly changing emotions I've just experienced. When Roman's gaze had met mine, my fingers frozen, I hadn't expected to see such unguarded lust. I should have felt violated, felt all the things his guarded captivity should make me feel. The harsh invasion that months of his watching and spying on me had wrought.

But I didn't. I felt an ache instead, in more parts of me than I care to admit.

The soapy water runs down my inner thigh, erasing the blood, and I scrub the trace of his touch from my body. I wash away where his tongue had moved from my ankle to my knee, and I wish there was a way to forget the memory too. This is what I wanted, wasn't it? To make him crave me? To make him feel such need for me that I could survive him?

How have I gotten it so turned around?

The attraction was there from the beginning, and there have been so many opportunities for it to be eviscerated. Even so, it lingers. Am I that starved? That fucked in the head? Despite what he's done to me, that profound grief we share arrests me, seizes my logic and squeezes. That desire to do something, anything, to right the wrongs, to undo time and change the past, to bring justice to those we've lost—in that, Roman and I are the same.

Like calls to like, and that should have been a warning to us both.

If Roman feels that existential dread I do, the one that snatches any light and makes me long for the dark, I haven't seen it. He is pure motivation, driven completely by that desire for retribution, and I am envious. Single-minded, the call for vengeance is a fixed idea in his mind, and I'm beginning to think I might be the only thing that could divert him from it.

Shaking my head, I turn off the water and grab my towel. Any fondness I think Roman might hold for me is something I'm making up in my head to keep me calm. My mind suspects my days are numbered and these imaginings are a dying light within the body of a person close to death.

“Hurry the fuck up!”

Roman slams a heavy fist against the door to punctuate his words, and I jump. I lean forward and wipe the steam off the mirror, and start brushing my teeth. I try not to think about how strong his hands are, how they wrapped around my thighs as he feasted on my flesh. He'd been so intimately close to sensitive parts of me, there's little wonder it had turned me on. It didn't help I had still been ready from before.

From when I'd wanted to start the day relaxed for once, unable to take my anxiety medication I so desperately need, and I'd let my fingertips and mind wander. It shouldn't have been to Roman that it went, but it had. I'd thought of the way he'd caressed me in the forest before everything imploded. His demanding touch and rough beard rubbing against my skin is a potent memory I struggle to resist. Hell, I'd even thought of the dream I'd had of him fucking me.

There is no explanation for this, truly. Roman is my villain, my captor, and just because so many of his wounds are mine, we don't bleed the same—him and I. In another life, Roman and I could seek solace in each other's arms and bodies, and the fact I yearn for that possibility is fucking dangerous.

But if I'm going to survive, it's in my best interest to get Roman to entertain that idea, too.

When I'm finally dressed and ready, I take a deep breath before I walk out of the bathroom. I expect the situation might have put him in a foul mood, and I need to be prepared for it. Depending on how it goes, I have a secret weapon. I won't hesitate to use it if I need to.

Roman's laying on my bed, looking over the letter from my father, and I'm furious with Dad all over again.

"You know, I ought to be annoyed he didn't mention my mother in this," Roman says.

"Why would he mention that?"

"Why do you think? To prepare you."

"To prepare me for what?" He smirks up at me, and I roll my eyes. "For you," I say, crossing my arms. My hair is still wet, and I shiver as my shirt becomes saturated.

"For me," he agrees.

"That would distort the pretty image of our life that I've believed all these years." Roman arches a brow when he hears the bite in my words. I pace, grabbing the next box of Dad's things and tossing it on the bed by Roman's enormous feet. "Do you think Mom knew?"

"Angela?"

"She's the only person I ever called Mom, so yes. I thought you stalked me or whatever. You should know who I'm talking about when I say Mom," I snap. He sits up, bristling. "I know Cynthia means something to you or whatever, but she means literally nothing to me. Sucks for my dad that she died, I guess. But I never knew her, and I never will. Angela was my mom."

“Fair enough.” He nods, surprised to agree with me. “I would assume he’d have written about it in that letter—if she was complicit.”

I expected him to put me in my place, but he’s much more subdued than expected. When I notice his dilated pupils, I understand why.

“You’re drunk on my blood, aren’t you?”

“It will pass.”

“Jesus Christ,” I murmur, picking up another photo album from the new box. This one is bright purple and covered in gemstones. I’d taken my time with the first box, poring over every single thing within it. Roman had been equally interested, so he hadn’t pushed me to move faster. The longer I took, the more time I had, so I made excuses to be exceedingly thorough. But now I’m holding more pictures in my hand, and I’m annoyed my dad took so many. He had been documenting a life full of half-truths.

“No. I’m Roman Sauveterre,” he says, and I squint over at him. A smile splits his face, and his eyes twinkle with a carefree mischief I’ve never seen. When laughter escapes me as understanding dawns, it’s genuine.

“Sasha made this for me.” I move to sit beside him on the twin size bed. It’s very small and very uncomfortable for one bigger person, let alone two, but I rifle through the photographs, anyway.

“I wanna know who every person is in every picture,” Roman says, slurring his words a bit.

“Okay,” I say. “It’s mostly just me.”

A toddler in a floral dress with the biggest grin and a wicker basket full of colorful plastic eggs looks up at me from the glossy print. On the next page, I’m a little older and sniffing the tulips in our neighbor’s flowerbed. I’m sitting on a pumpkin bigger than I am while dressed up like a black cat. Dad took a lot of pictures of me back then.

“You look happy.”

“I was.”

There’s finally one with Dad in it, and his thick mustache looks absolutely ridiculous. He’s got a wide-brimmed hat on, and he’s holding me like a football while I smile at the camera. I’m a few years older, but the same flowerbed is in the background.

“Who took this picture?”

“Our neighbors, probably. That’s their tulip bed.”

“What were their names?” he demands, sitting up and pulling out his phone, presumably to text Margot.

“You think I remember that? I was, like, six in this picture. We moved a few years later.” Roman scowls at me. “They’re probably freaking dead now. That was over twenty years ago, and they were ancient back then.”

I move to the next page, and the neighbors in question have me squished between them, our faces pressed up against one another. “They made me call them Nonna and PapPap. I…” Trailing off, I lower the album to my lap.

“You what?”

“I thought they were my grandparents. I didn’t have any.”

Roman snorts. “Me neither, baby. Tough luck.” I glare at him, and I’m surprised when his gaze softens. “Why’d you move away from them?”

“Dad said he got a new job, but it was really sudden. I don’t know. Part of me wonders now if it was because he wanted to keep us on the move. That wasn’t even the first house. Just the first one I remember.”

Roman is silent as I continue slipping into the past.

“There she is!” I grin, shoving a photo at Roman, and I don’t know how the hell I’ve gotten so comfortable with him these few weeks. And he’s being kinder now than usual. It’s like the hard edges of him have slipped away while blood drunk, and that niggling little part of me that wonders about things I shouldn’t has grown more bold. This had been part of

my plan all along, though, and I'm hopeful it seems to be working.

"How does she look exactly the same?" Roman asks, looking down at the picture of me and Sasha in matching braces.

"She has a baby face. It's the big brown eyes."

"You have big brown eyes too, sweetheart," Roman says, and he's so close to me, my heart begins to race. I know he hears it, and I watch his nostrils flare. It's like swimming with a shark. But he's in my cage with me, and I'm not as scared as I probably should be. I know I need to ingratiate myself with him, even if that means doing and saying whatever I need to. But that's easier said than done. Though I doubt he has any sort of feelings for me, at the very least, I think he wants to fuck me.

That much is clear from the erection he had in the bathroom.

I can feel my traitor cheeks flush, so I study the pictures, focusing on each one. He watches as Sasha and Angela become an integral part of my life. He laughs at the cringe Halloween photos of me and Sasha dressed up as different versions of Britney Spears. Sasha has her hair in pigtail poofs, the school girl outfit the hottest thing ever when we were fifteen. I'd chickened out at the last minute, not wanting to wear a stomach baring crop top to be "Slave 4 U" Britney and instead had worn a peach-colored shirt and leggings with glitter sprayed all over it. "Toxic" Britney was better anyway, or so I'd told myself back then.

Looking at these pictures depresses me, memories of just how unhappy I was with my body back then. I wish I could climb into them and tell that Gwyn she was beautiful, and that I didn't need to worry so much what others thought of me. That I didn't need to accept shitty treatment from people because of my size. It would be a gift if I could keep Past Gwyn from trying to keep friends and significant others who didn't give a shit. Friends who didn't invite me to pool parties, girlfriends who would judge me for what I ate, boyfriends

pressuring me to go to the gym. I didn't really figure it out until Josh, who, for all his faults, never once made me feel like my body wasn't desirable. And then he still turned out to be a terrible person.

Or did he?

Maybe my grief was too big, too consuming. Perhaps I'd expected too much when I thought he'd stay through my lowest points. The way he left me was horrifying, but could I expect him to see me through that?

"Gwyn?"

I blink, realizing I'd zoned out while staring at a picture of me giving Sasha a piggyback ride on the beach.

"Sorry." I flip the pages again, not paying attention to the pictures and skimming over the note from Sasha in the back.

"No, no. What was that?" He takes the album out of my hands, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"The note from Sasha? It wasn't anything." I try to pull the photo album back over to me to show him it's nothing of importance.

"Not that. You were upset about something. *Tell me.*" He's frowning, and I bite my lip hard. Roman's frown dissipates and his eyes move down to my lips. I think he must get off on watching me struggle. Sure enough, he smiles as he turns on the bed, leaning back against the headboard. He puts both his hands behind his head, and I can see my blood on the dark grey fabric of his T-shirt. The inside of my thigh begins to ache when I think about it. I'm glaring at him as I fight against his coercion, staring at the underside of his arms. They look enormous from this angle. Truly, everything about him is giant.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, and my eyes water as I bite down harder on my lip.

"Everything you have up there is mine, Gwyn. Don't make it hurt."

As if every decision I've made the past year isn't some form of self-immolation.

"I was thinking about Josh." His influence stops riding me so hard, but I know he won't settle for only that. His jaw drops open the slightest amount, the only indication he might be surprised by my words, before he tilts his head back and chuckles. He closes his eyes and breathes deep.

"Pathetic."

"Yeah, I know."

"You miss him?"

"Did I say that?"

He opens his eyes, looking at me through tiny slits, unmoving. He stares at me like this for a few minutes as I mark indents into my lip, and I finally decide to give in. I'd rather him think me pathetic for any other reason, as long as it's not pining over the man who cheated on me.

"I was too much. I was the reason he left."

This piques his interest, and he sits up, crossing his arms over his chest. "What do you mean?"

"I couldn't handle it after my parents died. I—I'm not like Sasha. She can stay busy and be fine. She still has her dad, too. I...struggled." He nods, encouraging me to continue. I sigh, the desire to fight gone. "I let it consume me, and I shouldn't have expected Josh to be able to handle it. It's too much on someone." Roman says nothing, looking past me at the bathroom door. His lips flatten and his nostrils flare, and I'm reminded once more of his predatory nature. I laugh, and it's hollow. It doesn't sound like me at all. "Anyway, that's the least of my worries. I would rather not talk about it."

I stand, slipping off the bed to grab something else out of the box, but he grabs my wrist and stops me.

"I know it doesn't matter now, but Josh was cheating on you before your parents died. There was a girl he worked with. Mindy or something. And another girl he met on a dating app, too. Alexa wasn't the first."

My jaw drops, and I wrench my arm away from him. “How do you know that?”

“Phone records.” He shrugs, but he averts his eyes.

I take the photo album Sasha made and turn to put it back in the box, not letting him see the tears I’m holding back. I don’t know if I’m angry or relieved or just plain sad, but I don’t need him to see it leaking out of me while I sort it out. A big part of me resents him for telling me at all. It changes nothing, and it’s not like I’m ever going to get the chance to tell Josh he’s a bigger piece of shit than I thought possible. I inhale, kicking myself when it comes out as a snuffle. Once I’ve composed myself, grateful Roman doesn’t seem eager to move from his spot, I grab the cigar box I decorated for Dad one Christmas.

It’s painted blue and black, a night sky complete with stars flicked on by dipping a toothbrush in white paint and rubbing my thumb down the bristles to make the paint fly off. Dad kept it on his dresser and would put his wallet and keys in it every night. It was his command center, and I’m pleased it held up all this time. As I sit it on the bed, I get caught in Roman’s gaze, and I’m surprised to see he looks furious. His face is ruddy, and he’s clenching his hands in his lap.

“Did I do some—”

“No. We don’t have time for sob stories. Get back to work.”

It shouldn’t hurt, but it does. I don’t know what the fuck just happened between us, but I had stupidly thought informing me about Josh’s previous infidelity had been an act of kindness. It was a way for him to tell me, without so many words, that it hadn’t been me. That I hadn’t been too much.

Maybe I was wrong.

I flip open the lid to the cigar box, sifting through unopened bills. Sasha and I had hired someone to handle all the accounts, so I never needed to go through all this stuff.

When I reach the bottom of the stack, I frown as I pull out an envelope with my name on it. It’s in Dad’s handwriting, his

block capitalized letters spelling out my full name.

GWYNETH ANNE PARSONS.

Roman snags it out of my hand before I have a chance to do anything with it. He's tearing it open, and I gasp, lunging forward to take it back from him. He holds me at bay with his elbow as he twists away from me. Roman pulls the letter out, unfolding it, before he shoves it into my face.

"Translate it."

I take the letter into my hands, staring at layers upon layers of letters and numbers in different colors. One set of letters is in red and it goes vertically down the page. The next is blue, and it goes horizontally. There is no rhyme or reason to it, and I stare at it blankly.

"I can't."

"Bullshit. He coded that little letter to you about what you are. *Translate it.*"

I shake my head. "Seriously, Roman. I can't translate this. I don't—this isn't a stupid little language me and Sash made up. Can—can Margot put it through—"

"Just because I don't torture you or treat you like filth doesn't mean you're not my prisoner. It doesn't mean you're walking out of here alive, Gwyn."

"I know that," I snap, shoving the paper at him. He changes between one breath and the next, and I can't fucking keep up. His eyes are still dilated, my blood in his system making him high. Maybe he didn't mean to show me that kindness a moment ago, and he's beating himself up over it. I don't know. But it's not my fault he did.

"You're too comfortable," he says, standing and shaking out his limbs. "You'll translate this or I'll start giving out your blood as a gift. There's plenty who will swear to me just to *smell* you."

I stare after him as he walks toward the door to my cell. It's clear we're done for the day, but what he's asking me to do is impossible.

“Well, when you do that and I *die*, that’s on you. If I’m dead, you won’t be able to figure out shit.”

“You think I’ll let you die, Gwyn?” He turns, running his fingers through his long hair before shoving his hands into his pockets. He’s wearing jeans today, and they’re so tight on those muscled thighs, I’m shocked he’s able to even get his hands in his pockets. “I *will* let them drink if it gets them to swear to me, but I won’t let them kill you. I’ll protect what’s mine.”

I brace myself for impact before I speak. Swallowing, the weight of what I’m about to say is heavy on my tongue. I know exactly what I’m doing. “Everyone you swear to protect ends up dead, though, don’t they?”

He bares his teeth at me, and something like a hiss comes up his throat. His hands are out of his pockets now, and he’s almost panting. His rage is sweltering, and I don’t care. I turn, reaching beneath my mattress.

When I spin around, he’s right there, his breath hot on my neck like he’s about to bite me. But I shove my secret weapon into his hands.

“You’re clearly not very good at protecting people,” I sneer as he looks down at Remy’s journal in his hands. “Guess his blood is on your hands, isn’t it, Roman?”

ROMAN

“WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?”

“Found it.” This hateful Gwyn isn’t one I recognize, her twisted smile a taunt. I grab her by her silky hair, still wet from the shower, tilting her head to the side as I trace my fangs on the delicate skin of her neck. She is warm and slightly damp from the shower, and she feels so goddamn alive. Her pounding heart is a metronome beat, counting the moments since my brother last drew breath. How many times has my own heart beat, how many times have my lungs expanded since he stopped breathing? We both stand here furious and hot-blooded, while he lies dead somewhere, bled out and cold. I need to find his killer, and I need to find his body. Maybe his journal could help.

“Tell me where you found it.”

“Under the mattress.” Her skin is flushed, hot from the shower and her fury, and I have never been more tempted to bite her than I am now. “Your brother probably did some bad shit based on what he wrote in there. Got himself into trouble. My dad probably had nothing to do with it.”

“Don’t you fucking do that.” I don’t know why I’m so affected by her words. Shit, Margot has told me as much for the last few months. But it’s worse coming from her. Gwyn isn’t like this; she believes the best in people. Gwyn doesn’t make snap judgments like that. She wouldn’t read Remy’s journal and automatically assume the worst.

“Do what?” Her hands push against my shoulders, trying to shove me away from her.

“Change who you are to hurt me. It’s not like you.”

She laughs, and it’s unnerving. Her tongue flicks out against her cupid’s bow, clearly debating speaking, before her body shifts, weight on one foot as she prepares to give me attitude. “You don’t even know me. You think you do because you watched me for a few months, but you have no idea, Roman. You’ve made me into this. I’ve done nothing wrong, and you’re making me solve a murder I had nothing to do with.” She shoves at me again, and I grab her wrists. “What do I get out of this?” She’s shouting as she tries to tug her arms away. “Nothing but my death. So, yeah, maybe I do want to hurt you.” She stills, wide brown eyes staring up at me with nothing but undiluted hate. “Maybe you deserve it.”

I release her, pushing her back onto the bed before I turn and walk away. Holding Remy’s journal like a lifeline, I hope it might guide me somehow, even if it means I have to relive what I did to him from his perspective. I run a hand through my hair before pocketing the small book. Now that she’s read it, she knows exactly how I’ve failed my little brother, and even if she’s showing me her rage about her predicament, her last words tell me how little she thinks of me.

I do deserve to hurt over what I’ve done.

“You’re right. All you’re getting is death, but I plan on giving it to you sweet.” I hear her move as if she flinched. “It’s true I was the reason for his banishment, and I regret it each day. If hurling hate at me makes you feel better, sweetheart, give it to me. But not him.” I face her, crossing my arms over my chest, and watch her slink back onto the bed. She puts her back against the wall, taking up as little space as possible. I fleetingly wonder if she’s always done that—made herself smaller to avoid conflict. I decide I don’t care. “If you think I don’t know you, Gwyn, you’re wrong. I know the songs you hum in the shower, the sounds you make when you come. Your fears, your dreams. All of those little parts of yourself you share with others and all the private things you don’t. I

own them, just as I own you. And I know you don't think Remy is the sum of what you read."

She pulls her legs up, wrapping her arms around them as she glares up at me. Even in such a submissive pose, defiance limns her features. Her jaw is tight, her pouty lips are sealed shut, and she maintains eye contact with me, almost daring me to look away first.

"You don't think that about Remy, do you?"

She tucks her chin in, fighting my compulsion, but she doesn't break her stare. Her warm brown eyes contradict so thoroughly with her cold expression, but I can't look away. Finally, she sighs, and her gaze softens, caramel melting on a scoop of ice cream.

"No. I don't think that." Velvet-smooth, her words glaze over my irritation. I can't stand another good person thinking my brother was a lost cause.

"Good, now that—"

"And I don't think it was your fault, either. Remy wasn't being fair when—"

"Don't." I shake my head. "I don't want to hear it." My hand is on the doorknob, about to walk out of the room. I don't need her feeding me lies to assuage my guilt and endear her to me. With Remy, I need her to believe he was good, need her to believe he's worth figuring out what happened to him. Even if it was her father's doing. As far as I'm concerned, if all she feels for me is hate, we're better off. It's easier that way.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "You don't deserve to hurt. You're a good person, Roman—"

That sets me off, and I'm across the room in an instant. Bending over her, I grab her chin in my hand so she's looking directly into my eyes as I speak to her. It is imperative she understands this, so she stops tempting me into the belief she might be right.

"I'm not, Gwyn. I'm not a good person, and it's about time I make you believe it."



“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?” Margot puffs on her vape, tapping her foot obnoxiously on the kitchen floor.

“Emile was right. He has more blood sworns, and there’s an easy way for me to get them.” I’m fucking around on my phone, not looking at her. Margot will do as I say, but she won’t hesitate to tell me what she thinks about it.

“You’re just going to let anyone feed from her? That doesn’t bother you?”

I lock my screen and toss the phone on the kitchen island. My teeth extend in my mouth, the idea of sharing Gwyn’s blood with anyone else an idea that sours my stomach. I’m shaken by my conversation with Emile; the fact that my father might not force him to swear to me is more possible with each passing day. The longer I investigate Remy, the less patient my father is. Between that and my boundary crossing with Gwyn in her bathroom and the conversation we had after, I’m tightly wound. I feel like I’m being held beneath water, dying slowly, and I don’t know which way is up.

I walk over to the monitors and watch Gwyn doing yoga. She’s never taken a single class from my research, and I doubt she knows what she’s doing. She’s wearing leggings Margot sent down, and I’m reminded of that day in the swamp. The way the camera is angled, I get a perfect view of her round ass, and I’m thoroughly reminded of the threat she poses.

“Margot, you know Björn is sick of my shit with Remy. I have to be prepared for Emile to take my birthright. He’s been busy while I’ve been gone, and I need to catch up. If my father sees he has so many more sworn to him, he’ll have doubts about me.”

Margot opens the fridge behind me, then I hear her digging around for a bottle opener. The clink of metal on glass sounds like nails on a chalkboard.

“Why don’t you just let Emile have it?” I turn around, and she laughs at the face I make at her. I can tell it’s an ugly one, shock causing my mouth to drop open while disgust wrinkles my brow. “Okay, okay. I get it.”

Margot doesn’t need me to rant about this again. Emile would continue running this coven like my father has all these centuries, and it’s time for a change. We still must maintain the sanctity of Agnarr’s tomb, protect our immortality, but we have no natural predator. Not anymore, anyway. None that couldn’t be handled with ease. The sorcerers who stood against us when I was a child are long dead, and Bill is gone while I have his daughter safely locked away. We can spread out, actually have lives and families without being encouraged so forcefully to stay within the compound.

“Fine. I’ll make the announcement.” I hear her tapping out the notification blast, and my pulse rockets. I start pacing, thinking about Hannigan’s fucking fangs piercing Gwyn’s neck, and I want to vomit.

“Make sure they’re not already sworn to me, and they only bite her wrist. Understand?” I direct, just as her phone rings.

I’m drawn to the monitors once more, feeling as if I made a mistake. To share her with the coven feels like an insult—to whom, I don’t know. Is it fair of me to keep her from my people when I’ve brought her back to prove I can protect them? When I’ve promised an end to the hunter dynasty which has taken countless people from our ranks over the years? When she takes her hair out of the high ponytail and I watch it cascade over her shoulders on the screen, I’m about to tell Margot I changed my mind. The thought of another vampire with her hair between their fingers is enough to make my jaw clench. I don’t get a chance though, because Margot is grabbing my wrist as she puts her phone call on speaker.

“You ready for the address?” the voice on the other end says as Margot mouths the words Charlie Palmer.



“I REALLY FEEL like we should have brought someone else,” Margot whispers as we pick our way through the trees. Charlie lives in an isolated cabin in Wisconsin, just on the other side of the Illinois border. It’s not off-the-grid, but the only utility he pays for is electricity—through a company name. He’d been nearly impossible to find.

“He’s not a hunter, doesn’t even have wards. We’ll be fine.” I didn’t drive up the two-mile-long gravel path for a reason, though. His license expired about a decade ago, and he already looked a little crazed back then. I can only imagine what time and isolation have done. I thought it best to catch him off guard because of it. A few hours from dawn seems like the best time to surprise him.

Margot whines as her heel gets stuck in the mud. She didn’t dress to go “mucking through the woods” as she put it, so I already promised to replace her fancy shoes. They have a red sole, so I know they’re expensive.

“I’m just going to go ahead so I stop getting stuck,” she says, and she’s off, sprinting through the woods using a burst of vampire speed. My temple throbs, annoyed. She clearly must be irritated with me, though, and I don’t understand why.

Liar.

I don’t pick up the pace to match her, giving her some space. She thinks using Gwyn for the blood oaths is a mistake. A violation. Which she’s not wrong. But I don’t think I can afford to care. I need more people sworn to me, and I need to be reminded of what Gwyn is to me. The woman serves a purpose. I need Gwyn to realize I don’t deserve her pity or her kindness, and it’s futile to hope for mine. She will help me figure out the truth behind Remy’s murder, and she can help me win more vampires to my favor. That’s it.

If only for Remy and every other vampire within my coven murdered by her kin, I cannot allow myself to grow soft for Gwyn. Margot's reaction tells me she has grown fond of the woman, and though I don't blame her, she needs to get over it. My friend knew where this was headed from the beginning and helped me all these months. It's not my fault she's grown attached and can't control her emotions.

A twig snaps behind me, and I spin around, ready even if my thoughts have been distracting. A raccoon makes its way up a tree, and I relax. When I turn to look back toward the house, though, I freeze. There's a high-pitched buzzing sound, and when I hear a wooden door slam shut, I sprint into action.

A shot rings out just as Margot screams, and the sharp tang of her blood hits my nostrils. I dart out past a tree, terrified for my friend, and I see Charlie standing on his front porch. All I can see is the shotgun he points at her. Margot is writhing on the ground at the edge of the trees, and it only takes me a moment to understand why she's not getting back up.

Buckshot. Probably makeshift with silver pellets.

"*Stop,*" I say, loading my voice with influence, but all it does is make him turn the gun on me. I'm farther away, so if he shoots, I might be better off than Margot. "Fuck," I say, when I realize he's wearing noise-canceling headphones. My influence won't work on him if he can't fucking hear me.

"Fuck off, vampire!"

I step closer, both hands in the air as I try to get to Margot. She won't be able to heal until we get that silver out of her. Charlie clearly knows what the fuck we are, and now he's my primary suspect. If Bill would've tasked anyone with protecting his daughter, it would be this fucking guy. Because of that, I'm not willing to leave without answers.

I remember my promise to Gwyn that I wouldn't hurt him unless I knew for sure he was responsible for Remy's death. Those beautiful brown eyes had bartered with her whole heart behind them, and a small part of me is sad to disappoint her. But the moment he shot my friend and turned a silver-loaded shotgun on me, that deal was off the table.

“Just go!” Margot shouts, and I laugh at her delusional ass. She’s stumbling to her feet, those goddamn heels making it difficult, when he turns the gun back toward her. There is no room for hesitation when I put on a burst of speed and sprint toward the man. He’s turning toward me when he shoots, most of it going past me, but I grunt when I feel the sting in my side.

Tackling him to the ground, I take the shotgun and toss it toward Margot. She’s struggling still, but she’s crawling for it as I rip Charlie’s headphones off.

“Did you have anything to do with killing my brother?”

“No,” he spits.

“You didn’t kill a vampire a couple of months ago?”

“Not months ago, no,” he says, laughing. “Try years, buddy.”

Margot screams my name as cold steel pushes against my stomach. I hesitate just long enough that he gets his finger on the trigger, and he shoots me just as I break his neck.

Rolling off him, I groan, pressing my hands to the wound. It’s pure fire, sizzling heat in my gut, but I already feel my body trying to heal. It’s slow because of the silver, but it’ll have to do. “Clean shot,” I say, as Margot stumbles over to me. She pushes me onto my side, and a roar tears up my throat as her hand touches where the bullet went through my skin. I don’t let her see my other side where I can feel the buckshot embedded in my skin as I pull my shirt back down.

“Fuck me.” She winces as she lowers herself to the ground beside me.

“Cops will be here soon. Old fuck isn’t as far out as he thinks.” I stand, and before she argues with me, I sling her over my shoulder. Margot cries out, the jostling probably hurting like a motherfucker, and I make my way back to her car. We don’t have time for me to pick out all the silver from her wounds, and I’m in pain enough myself as it is.

“Did he do it?” Margot asks, and I don’t bother to answer.

GWYN

GASPING FOR AIR, I SIT STRAIGHT UP OUT OF SLEEP. Something startled me awake, and I look around, my eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness. Someone's shadow interrupts the sliver of light beneath the door, and I clamber out of my bed, knowing I have nowhere to hide. There's a scuffing sound as something rubs along the outside of the door, and I hear the key in the lock.

I don't know if I should bother going into the bathroom because that might only make them angrier. After what already happened tonight, I don't want them thinking I'm fighting back. It will only make things more painful.

When the door opens just a crack, I whimper in relief when I hear Roman's voice. It's rough like gravel, and so quiet, I wonder if he was trying not to frighten me. The thought is a thread pulled from a knot inside my stomach I'm not sure is worth untangling.

"Gwyn? You awake?"

His words slur, and I hear him flip on the light switch as he ducks into the room. Eyes burning from the light, it takes a moment to focus as he shuts the door behind him. He collapses backward against it, and I don't understand what I'm looking at. He's covered in blood, and I think he might be drunk off it. My stomach drops, and the peculiar taste of betrayal makes its way into my bloodstream. This time the thread yanks, and I try my damndest not to pull it.

His hair is hanging down around his face, wet with sweat and more blood. I bite my lower lip, attempting to stay silent when I wonder why he looks like this. It's none of my fucking business, and the knowledge won't help me. His eyes are closed and his chest moves slowly as he takes deep breaths. I've never seen him so relaxed, even after drinking my blood, and I don't know what the fuck is going on.

"What do you want?" I demand, and, though his eyes stay closed, his mouth tips up into a soft smile.

"A lot of things, Gwyn. But right now, I want your help." He shrugs off the black leather jacket he wears, and I notice the black T-shirt beneath it is absolutely saturated.

"Take it up with your washer and dryer." I bend over and dig a pair of shorts out of the small pile of clothes Margot has given me. I'd been sleeping in a T-shirt and underwear, but I can tell Roman doesn't intend on leaving anytime soon. "Clean up your own mess."

Despite his drunkenness and the fact he bumps into my bed, I'm surprised how efficiently Roman moves as I find him hovering over me, his face an inch away from mine. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide, and he seems unsteady on his feet. It's my first hint that something more is wrong.

"This is your mess, sweetheart."

When he whips his shirt off, I realize the blood wasn't someone else's, but his. There are a handful of small holes in his stomach and side surrounding a single much larger hole. Everything is bleeding.

"Oh my God," I whisper. Without thinking, I grab him by the shoulders and turn him so he's sitting on my bed. "What happened?"

"Charlie's dead."

"What?" My jaw drops, and my chest tightens. "What do you mean? I thought you couldn't find him? What do you mean he's dead? Did you kill him?" My words are coming faster and faster, and when I clench my fists, stress indents itself into my palm in crescent-shaped accusations. "I thought

you said you wouldn't—did he hurt Remy?" Roman's looking up at me, solemn with a softened brow, and it seems like he might lose consciousness.

"It was self-defense," he says. "Now, can you help me?"

He turns, spreading out over my bed. His feet hang off it, the twin size just too short for his long body. Most of the blood is on his stomach and side, but I see a fair amount up on his shoulder as well. Red fills some of his black-outlined tattoos, and I can't help but mourn the ruined words which once lived on his side. The verse is still there, but I can only make out parts of the French script.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Minor surgery, more or less."

"Roman, I don't—"

"He hit me with buckshot—silver pellets. I can't heal until the silver is out."

I nod, unsure of what to do or where to start. Or if I even should. "Why ask me? You had to pass plenty of other people who could help before you got to me."

He moves his arms beneath his head, and I think he might pass out without answering me. He takes a deep breath and his stomach shudders as he exhales. It's one of the few parts of him that doesn't have ink. It's not flat, but soft, with a smattering of dark brown curls going from his chest, disappearing beneath his waistband. And right now, everything is covered in blood.

He is showing me weakness, and I don't understand why. Roman is at my mercy, and I don't have it in me to do him harm. A deranged desire to place a kiss just above his bellybutton threatens to take over, and I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. He is bleeding on my bed, and he killed my father's best friend. Just hours ago, he apparently followed through on his threat against me, too.

Roman is the thing about this situation I understand the least. Does he feel more for me than lust for my body and my blood? Or does he still see me as someone who should pay for

my father's sins? Is it possible I've made him care about me? Trust me? Why else would he come to me in his time of need?

"I'm already going to have a hell of a time explaining what happened to Margot. Better to not have to explain me, too."

"Margot?" He doesn't miss the concern in my voice, opening his eye a fraction to peek at me. "Is she okay?"

"Aww, the hunter cares about a vampire."

I feel little remorse as I push my finger into one of the small holes on his side. He snarls and instantly tries to sit up, but he's weak enough that when I shove him, he collapses back.

"Please," he gasps. "Dig them out."

"Why should I?" I'm gently sliding deeper into the hole, and I frown when I feel the pellet. I'm going to have to get a second finger in there to grab it and pull it out.

"Margot could've died because of your info." He groans, fisting my sheets in his hand as I shove a second finger into his flesh.

"How am I responsible for you going after people and hurting them?"

"Fuck! We didn't go there to hurt him." Roman is panting, sweat beading on his forehead. "He shot at us before we did anything."

"He what?" I stare at him for a moment before I remove the pellet, in awe that something so tiny could cause so much pain.

"He shot at Margot the minute he saw her, and when he went to do it again, I tackled him. Got some of the spray, and when he pulled his handgun on me, I broke his neck."

I grimace, imagining Roman killing someone with his bare hands. Someone I know.

"Where's Margot?"

"An associate is dealing with her. She's worse off than me."

My eyes trail up to his shoulder, realizing it's probably Margot's blood staining his skin. The wound I just finished is already bleeding less, but he said all the silver needed to go. "I haven't seen Charlie in years. Did—did he say anything? I don't know why he'd attack—"

"He knew about vampires, Gwyn." He hisses as I continue. It has to hurt. It's not like I have giant fingers, but they're certainly bigger than the hole in his side.

"Did you ask him about Remy? With your influence or whatever?" I can feel my pulse, my temple pounding. I'm blinking too fast, and I feel shaky. "If he shot at you, does that mean it was him? Why—why should I believe this all happened as you said?"

"He didn't do it," he says. "We're no better off today than we were yesterday." I exhale, slow and long, as I pull out the second pellet. There's only one more left, and then the big bullet-hole will need to be dealt with. "As for it being the truth, I guess you'll just have to trust me." When I raise a brow, he chuckles, then sucks in a quick breath of pain. "I keep my promises, Gwyn. I wouldn't have killed him after interrogating him. He forced my hand."

For whatever reason, the last pellet is far deeper than the others, and I can tell it hurts as Roman softly moans. Witnessing him like this is dangerous. He's not human, but seeing his physical vulnerabilities after just a few glimpses of his mental ones is enough to make me look at him differently.

Insight is a reckless companion to a tender heart.

When he showed me my sister's reaction to my disappearance, things I couldn't begin to understand before clicked into place for me. Though my relationship with Sasha is no lesser than a full-blooded one, I recognize that there's a different bond to birth siblings. If what I'd do for Sasha is limitless, what Roman would do for Remy has to be the same.

To have this knowledge, to be able to relate to him? It's a torture I didn't expect.

Proving my point further, his voice cracks as he covers his face with both hands. “I thought this was it. That I’d figured it out.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, hardly daring to breathe. My hand stills, fingertips barely grazing the metal pellet lodged in his side. I’m second-guessing everything, and I don’t trust myself. “I’m sorry about what I said—”

“Don’t do that,” he snaps. “You make this so fucking difficult.”

Roman’s hands don’t move, and he stops speaking. My impulse is to get the words out, anyway.

“I’m serious, Roman. You’re a good brother. We’ll figure it out, and you’ll be able to say you did everything you could.” Thinning my lips, I leave my next words unsaid. *And then you’ll kill me.* I hesitate, breath shaking in the silence. “I shouldn’t have said those things when I—”

“I know what you’re doing, and it won’t work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because I wanna get between those thick thighs doesn’t mean I care. You think you can win me over and make me give a shit about you?”

He’s rubbing his hands over his face, and I want to shake him. Every time I think I’ve made some sort of progress with him, he proves me wrong immediately. I jerk my hand, pulling the pellet out, and Roman grunts as he rolls away.

“No. I think the kind of person who would go as far as you have to find their brother’s murderer is capable of kindness and compassion. You think just because I’m nice to you, there’s some ulterior motive to it.” He’s not wrong about that, but a large part of it has become genuine because of what he’s going through. A disconcertingly large part. “You have to have a heart, considering how much you care for Remy.”

“And that’s the fucking problem, isn’t it?” He struggles to sit up, blood oozing from the largest wound. “I care for him too much now and not enough then.” He shakes his head, long strands of dark hair falling down on either side of his face. He

wobbles, blood actually gushing down his stomach, and he looks so pale.

“It’s not your fault,” I whisper, resting my hand on his shoulder. He leans into the touch as his eyes close, and I’m afraid to move. When I step forward, I lift my hand, gently cupping his cheek. I don’t know what I’m doing. The line I’ve created in my mind has shifted. If making him care about me forces me to care about him too, where will that get me? He takes a shaky breath, refusing to look up at me, and makes a humming sound before he shakes my hand off him.

“You wanna make me feel better, Gwyn?” There are dark circles under his eyes as he finally opens them, and his raised brow should have been enough to warn me of the filth he says next. “Instead of saying words that don’t matter, those pretty lips can find better use around my cock.”

It sets me off, and a growl creeps up my throat. “If you want that so bad, force me to do it then. Influence me,” I say, calling his bluff. It’s a confidence I haven’t allowed him to see, and it takes him by surprise. He blinks at me for a second, frozen in place, and I shove him. He grunts as he falls backward, blood still leaking out of his wound, slower than before. “You need me to get the last one out, don’t you?”

After what he just said, I shouldn’t help him. I should make him find someone else to piece him back together. But after everything, it’s probably the least reckless thing I’ve done.

“Went through,” he says, and the fact he won’t make eye contact with me tells me I have gotten to him. “Thanks for helping me,” he grunts.

“I’ll blame that gratitude on the blood loss.” He snorts and then groans in pain. He doesn’t know who or what he wants to be to me, and the best I can expect from him at this point is confusion. My only option is to keep working on him. It’s genuinely for self-preservation, but a delusional voice in my head wants him to see the goodness he’s capable of. And that is the most worrisome thing of all. It’s a special kind of hell for wants and needs to align, because then the lines blur and

you don't know how genuine either feeling is. I need him to want me, to care for me, and to eventually take pity on me.

But I can't pretend his filthy words did nothing to me. Despite everything, I *want* Roman to look at me like that. There's no denying the attraction that exists, especially after what happened between us in the shower. I'm the worst kind of toxic and stupid to want to fuck the man who kidnapped me.

I've lost my mind when I step away, going into the bathroom for a washcloth. It's my last fresh one, the rest in a pile waiting to be washed in the sink. Dampening it, I breathe out slowly. This is a kindness I'm doing to solidify any fond feeling he might have for me, nothing more. I repeat those words to myself as I wring out the washcloth, hopeful that I might believe it, eventually.

I'm looking at myself in the mirror when I realize he could have forced me to help him, and he chose not to. All color drains from my face, and I rush out of the room. He's on his side, so he doesn't see my expression, and for that I'm grateful.

"I'll be gentle," I offer as the warm, damp cloth touches his skin. I watch as his flesh peaks, his body hair standing on end. Leaning over him, I clean his skin of blood the best I can, moving gently near the hole in his back. When I'm finished, he lays there, breaths slow and deep, and I think maybe he's too hurt to realize I'm done. "Do you...need to feed to heal properly?" My voice shakes, and I kick myself the moment I say it.

Roman adjusts, looking over his shoulder at me, and I brush his hair away from his face so I can see him better. If I could cut off my traitorous hand, I would.

"No, sweetheart." The nickname doesn't have its usual bite, exhaustion etching his handsome face. It's not fair he's so beautiful, just like every person I've seen here, and I wonder if that's a prerequisite to being a vampire. "I don't need to feed at all, technically speaking," he says.

“Huh?” He rolls over, muscles relaxing as he settles onto his back.

“I suppose you wouldn’t know, would you? The trade-off for our immortal life is an unquenchable thirst—that’s it. We don’t actually need blood to survive.”

Stilling, I stare at him as my washcloth hovers over his skin. There’s still blood on his stomach I need to clean. I’m staring at the French verse on his side, the ruined words more legible now, but I have no idea what they mean. “So it’s almost like a curse?”

“Not almost. It *is* a curse. To be thirsty constantly, only barely pacified by blood? Unpleasant.” He folds his hands over his stomach before stopping himself, realizing he’d just be in my way. He seems drowsy, and I wonder if he’ll sleep here. It’s probably not even dawn yet. It’s not like I’ll be able to go back to bed, anyway. “But the trade-off is worth it most days.”

“What—what is the point of being a hunter? Your only weakness is that you’re super thirsty. What could I possibly do to stop you?”

“We have other weaknesses, Gwyn, but I’m sure as shit not telling you.” He laughs, and I look away from his smile. “Most hunters had a small amount of training, a few tricks up their sleeve. I shouldn’t tell you this, but with practice, you could resist my compulsions completely.” Raising my brow, I can’t hide my surprise. He’s so confident in his ability to keep me. “And then, of course, your blood tastes so fucking good, it lures us in. Makes us take risks we shouldn’t.”

The bigger hole is all that’s left to heal, and the blood flow has slowed, probably healing from the inside out. Done with his stomach, I don’t hesitate when I reach across him to his shoulder where Margot’s blood still taints his skin. His hair still has blood in it, but I gently tug it out of my way. Roman’s dark brown eyes follow me lazily, as if it’s taking all his effort to focus. I clean his shoulder, the blood almost looking purposeful as it splashed over the foliage etched into his skin.

“Well, since you seem to give away my blood freely anyway, you can drink if you want.” I screech when he pulls me down on top of him, and I recognize how stupid it was to offer myself to him. He doesn’t even wince as my knee crashes into his side, the still healing wounds susceptible to my touch.

“The fuck are you talking about?” His fangs are out, and they’re an inch away from my wrist. The same wrist that had been used all night long.

“You told them they could feed from me.” Whispering is the only way to get the words out without my anger over the violation turning into tears.

He takes my wrist, spinning it as he looks at it. He snarls as he notices where my skin has faint scarring from the recently healed wounds.

“Fucking sloppy. They were supposed to swear...” Focusing on me, he trails off and lets go of my wrist. Awkwardly pushing myself off him, my heart aches from the knowledge he clearly knew what was happening. A small, stupid part of me had hoped he had nothing to do with it. “Emile has more blood sworns than I do, and it could jeopardize where I stand with the coven. I’m using your blood to help rectify that.”

“What does that even mean?” He’s still looking at my wrist, and I cross my arms as he licks his lips.

“We take oaths by drinking the blood of another vampire. I’m sworn to my father, and because of it, he can order me to do his bidding. Think about it. Emile having a lot more vampires who have to do what he says is a danger to me and my place here. Once my dad Slumbers, if Emile has more than me, it won’t matter that my father chose me to inherit the coven.”

He sits up, and I perch on the bed beside him. He leans forward, holding his head in his hands. For someone using me for my blood, he doesn’t seem too thrilled about it.

“I’ll do it.”

“What?” Still holding his head in his hands, he takes a moment to look at me. His brow furrows. “No shit, you’ll do it,” he says.

“I’ll do it without putting up a fight. Most of the vampires today were gentle. I’ll willingly give my blood—no fighting or anything. No need to force me into it.”

“And what do you want for that, Gwyn?” he asks, but I can tell by the faint smile he wears that I’ve surprised him enough that he’s actually considering it.

“Keep me alive until you take over, and then let me free once you do,” I say, and the lines around his eyes crinkle as he smiles lazily. He stands, and I notice him sway on his feet, but he walks over to the door and puts his leather jacket back on.

“That could take decades, Gwyn. You could be eighty years old before my father decides to Slumber. I’m no miracle worker. Your hunter lifespan doesn’t allow for that.”

“Aside from natural causes, keep me from dying, and I’ll give my blood to anyone who wants it. No fight, no fuss.”

Hand on the doorknob, he stares at me. When he tilts his head to the side, a quizzical expression on his face, I know he’s agreed to it whether or not he says it out loud.

ROMAN

IT'S TOO GODDAMN SOON FOR ME TO BE HERE, BUT I'M running out of time. I don't know how long I have, even though Margot is listening to the police scanner from the comfort of her bed. They only had two cops stationed at the crime scene, and it was simple to send them off for a break. An already hungry belly at lunch time is quick to trust someone suggesting a restaurant nearly an hour away. It's just a matter of time until dispatch or someone at the station catches on, so I work quickly.

Charlie's house is a fucking disaster. Covered in dust and packed to the brim, it's a doomsday prepper's wet dream. There's an entire room devoted to canned goods with no organization whatsoever. Towering cans of assorted meats and beans block the blacked-out window, and the dust floating down over it in the beam of my flashlight makes me wonder how long some of the shit has been there. He must have slept on the worn out recliner in the living room, an outline of a body on the cushions clear. Though he paid for electricity and his usage was regular, not a single light switch in the main level of the house is operative. When I find the contents of his basement, I understand what the money was paying for.

Computer monitors line the wall, a surveillance system to rival Margot's taking up the entire one-room basement. It explains the usage and exactly how he knew we were here last night. One monitor is blinking, and some sort of coded message appears on the screen in red text.

“The wind is blowing and that vicious shark is hungry,” I read to Margot on the phone. “Know what the fuck that means?” The rest of the monitors show camera footage of the surrounding woods, and there’s even one of the main road. He knew we were coming for a while if he was paying attention.

“Sounds like a failsafe. He probably has to type in a code or something or it will all lock down. Don’t fuck with it. I’ll get out there as soon as I’m able.” The television is quiet in the background, and I hear the sound of her blankets ruffling. I’m still sore as hell, but Margot is much worse off than me. It took far longer for our friend Nico to pull out the silver pellets embedded in her skin, and her healing time as a made vampire is longer than mine, anyway.

“It’s like he barely even lived here. Everything is dusty as hell.”

“You find anything at all?”

I trudge upstairs, satisfied I can leave the basement in Margot’s capable hands. “Nope. Not in the house, anyway. I found the keys to his old Chevy, though, so I’m going to check that out. Anything on that translation?”

Not bothering to lock the door behind me, I let it slam shut as I go out to the truck parked behind the cabin.

“I have a couple people working on it, but they seem to think it’s going to take them months to decode it.”

I swear, shoving the key into the driver’s side door. I’d given Margot a copy of the coded letter and told her I’d consider Gwyn’s offer if the woman had something for me by the time I got back. Her cooperation is the only thing she has to barter with, so I don’t blame her for trying, but I almost certainly can’t agree to it. I don’t think my father will allow her to live that long. I’d have to convince him of her death, put someone else’s heart in a box, and douse it in her blood. Then I’d have to hide her. This plan assumes he won’t order me to do it with words I can’t circumvent.

The fact I dislike the idea of killing her after everything her family has done to mine should be enough to make me

keep my distance from her. But I need her to help me figure this shit out so I can—what? Put Remy to rest? Not without a fucking body. And even then, what good will it do? It won't bring my brother back.

Gwyn's kind words started something in me I don't want to think about. She can tell it's guilt eating me alive, and I'm still surprised at how much I want to believe her. How much I want to think it wasn't my fault. Part of me wants so badly for Remy's death to be unavoidable because it means I didn't fail my family.

"Anything else, Roman?" Margot clears her throat in a way which tells me it's not the first time she's asked the question.

"Damn, his truck is fucking pristine." Dismissing everything else, I'm surprised to find a recently detailed vehicle. It's not new, the leather showing wear in the driver's seat, but it's far better kept than his house. It's not empty either, a hunting cap sitting on the passenger seat, spare change in the cupholder, and a Glock in the glove compartment. But that's it. And it's clean. "It sort of smells like bleach."

"Do you smell blood, though?"

"No. The bleach is pretty faint too. But it's been almost two months now, since—"

I clear my throat, not bothering to finish the sentence. Checking the center console, I'm fucking thrilled my search has paid off. Pocketing the receipts I find first, I power on the cell phone.

"Found a burner," I say.

"Hell yeah. Alright, bring it back, and I'll get out there tomorrow or the day after."

She hangs up, and I'm left to go through his flip phone. It's not password protected, and the man has nothing on it but three phone numbers. Debating the intelligence of my decision, my finger hovers over the call button.

Though Charlie said he didn't kill Remy, the way he laughed made it clear he knew more. I'm on the right track, but I don't know where it's headed. Charlie was human, and as far as I know, Gwyn is the last hunter. Unless there are sorcerers or demons involved, I don't know how Charlie could have pulled it off. With no wards on his cabin, the process of elimination points to demons.

I don't know if that's something I want to fuck with. But for Remy's sake, I have to.

Pressing the button, I call the first number on the list and pace on the driveway. I can still scent our blood here, and I'm grateful Margot and I won't show up in any sort of database. When the automated message of a doctor's office plays, I almost hang up. I don't give a shit about the old man's doctor's appointments.

But when I look at the number again, I recognize the area code this time—Virginia. I let the automated message play again, listening for the doctor's name, and I'm relatively certain it's the same name printed on Gwyn's bottles of anxiety medication. The second number is the same area code, and I'm shocked when someone actually answers it.

"You found her?" I don't answer, and it makes her sigh. "I told you never to call me while I'm at the office. If you've lost her, and she doesn't show up for her appointment, I don't know how you can expect the AMH results."

The woman hangs up. When I call back, she sends it straight to voicemail, so I call Margot as I head back into the house and explain what I found.

"Did Gwyn have any appointments set up for next month?"

"She had an appointment scheduled with her hair stylist and her yearly gyno checkup." Margot's reply is instantaneous because she's that damn good.

"Send me her records."

"I did that ages ago. They're on the tablet, but I assume you want them to your phone?" She's annoyed with me, and I

can't help my grin when I'm able to prove her wrong.

"I brought the tablet, smartass."

"Shut up, you did not!" Pride is evident in her squealing voice, and I hang up before it goes too far.

A few minutes later, I'm sitting in Charlie's basement as I go through the electronic records. When my phone vibrates, I realize Margot must be looking on her end. She sends me a clip of a video from Gwyn's doctor, talking about some new technique to treat cervical cancer, and I recognize the voice from the phone.

Something beeps, and I check all the monitors to make sure no motion is detected outside. Determined to figure out what the fuck kind of tests Charlie could be interested in from Gwyn's fucking gynecologist, I tell Margot to look up what AMH stands for.

My gut churns when I read the notes from her last appointment. Among bullet-points for irregular menstruation, an STI screening thanks to Josh's infidelity, and a follow-up for IUD insertion, the doctor scrawled something that takes a moment to process.

Despite absence of birth control, the patient reports no pregnancies. Patient currently declines any further testing.

I hadn't looked to see when Gwyn got her IUD, and I certainly hadn't considered she could have been attempting to reproduce with that bottom-feeder. My chest constricts when I think about it. I recall the recording from the day I found out Remy was dead, and I scroll through my phone to find it and press play.

"*She's pregnant. Look.*" Gwyn sounds matter-of-fact, but I've listened enough, paid enough attention to her voice to hear the slight pause between words. The stiffness tells me now what I couldn't hear then. I'd thought it had been heartbreak because the man she loved, who had so deeply wronged her, had moved on completely. While that must have been part of it, I wonder how much—if any of it—was sorrow

over a baby that had never come to her. And potentially never would.

“Fuck.” I toss my phone on the desk and lean back, cupping the back of my head with my hands. Margot is researching what I asked of her, so I try not to get too ahead of myself. Something beeps again, and I frown before getting up to pace around the room. When Margot texts me to confirm that an AMH screening has something to do with fertility, I scrub my hands over my face. Grabbing the back of the computer chair, I’m tempted to pick it up and throw it.

Gwyn is the last hunter, and Charlie wants her to carry on her line. It’s the only thing that makes any sense. I shiver when I think about him trying to use her as some sort of hunter incubator. He deserved a harsher death, and I’m feeling conflicted over the entire thing. Gwyn had asked me not to kill him, and I had been actively fucking disappointed when I’d failed to honor her request. I’d hesitated like some kind of amateur when his gun was in my side. And for what? This man deserved his death. I shove my hands in my pocket, reaching for my keys so I can head back to the compound and question her about it all, and am confused when I pull out the receipts I forgot I’d taken from Charlie’s truck.

Unfolding them, I realize they’re all from the same place. Three different receipts from a tobacco shop, each payment over five hundred dollars.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, grabbing my phone from the desk as the computers beep again. The cabin and Charlie’s truck don’t smell of tobacco. I haven’t spotted even a single cigarette, nor did I smell it on the man the night before. It’s hard to miss with my sense of smell, so it doesn’t make any sense. Texting Margot, I explain that I think it’s a front for something since Charlie didn’t smoke, and I’m certain there are more people involved than the old crackpot.

I’m startled by a high-pitched ringing sound like last night, only it’s far louder since I’m inside. It’s almost debilitating, vampire hearing more sensitive than human, and I cover my ears. It doesn’t help the noise rattling my fucking bones, and I

stumble back. The monitor with the message on it has changed, the background red with black words.

The shark returns.

That's when it hits me, and my eyes widen. It's more than a failsafe. It's an auto-destruct, and I probably only have seconds to get out alive. Sprinting up the stairs, I'm on the porch when the entire cabin explodes.

Tossed into the air, I roar in pain as tiny pieces of silver embed into my skin. I slam into a tree across the driveway, and the last thing I see is the encroaching dusk through the leaves above me.

“IT’S BEEN THREE DAMN DAYS!” I SHOUT, AND THE VAMPIRE beside my door doesn’t move, doesn’t react at all. “Where is he?”

Nico doesn’t reply, but he points a steel-toed boot to the granola bar, banana, and bottled water sitting on the ground beside my bed. I flip him off, but I lean over and grab the banana and the water, anyway. I’m feeling woozy, and the blood loss is finally getting to me. Light-headedness is what I blame for my concern about Roman’s whereabouts.

“I know he’s okay, because he wouldn’t trust all these people to drink from me without swearing to him first.”

Nico doesn’t say anything, his silence deafening. His dark jeans and grey henley match his boring personality. He rolls his sleeves up, displaying golden forearms lean with muscle, and he smirks at me beneath an errant strand falling free of his slicked-back hair. He kind of looks like a hotter 1970s John Travolta and it’s clear he knows he’s pretty. I know I should be afraid of him, afraid of all the vampires, but short of being rude, he’s done nothing wrong.

Except refuse to answer a single question I’ve asked.

“If I’m still alive, that means he is, too.”

Not sure if I imagined the minuscule tilt of Nico’s head, I shout, “Aha!” but he doesn’t react. I try not to think about it as I toss back half of the water in just a few gulps. I need Roman to be alright—for my own safety. That’s all it is. It has nothing to do with the way my stomach dropped the last time I saw

him, the wounds on his stomach in dire need of attention. It has nothing to do with the pity I feel for him and his search for answers about his brother. And it certainly has nothing to do with my absolutely unhinged desire to let him ravish me. How could I think of that when he was my captor, a vampire, and his people had been the reason for so much suffering? I need him not to stay away, because how can I burrow into his conscience if he keeps his distance? How can I make him desire me enough to keep me alive if he won't even see me? Margot has been noticeably absent as well, and it's making me desperate. Shaking—from fear or blood loss, I do not know—I peel the banana and take a bite.

Nico had turned around when I drank my water, and I wonder if it's because my throat being on display so boldly was too much for him to bear. I could use that to my advantage.

“You know, I don't think Roman would mind you drinking my blood since you're already sworn to him.” Nico grunts, stretching his neck, but he keeps his back to me. “I've let Margot do it. You've let, what, half the coven drink my blood the last few days.” I'm exaggerating, but barely. Based on overheard conversations, I estimate the number to be a little under a third of the vampires in the coven, but I can tell most are old and important. Their vows will mean something. I hold out my arm. Even though his back is to me, I know his preternatural hearing will let him know exactly what I'm doing. “Go on.”

Though most of the vampires who drank from me the past few days were older, holdouts who had yet to declare for Emile or Roman, there were a few younger vampires who Nico had to pull off me. He'd healed me before I knew what he was doing—a swipe of his tongue on my wrist—and he'd shivered and called it quits because of it.

“What does it taste like to you?” I whisper.

That gets his attention, and he turns halfway to face me. “How do you know—”

“Margot. She won’t tell me what I taste like to Roman, but she says I taste like a rocket pop to her.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“How old are you?” I ask, genuinely curious. Letting my eyes peruse him, I try to place him in another time period. It isn’t the first time I’ve done it since he’s been babysitting me, and I truly have no idea. I know he’s older than Margot, but that’s the only thing I’m certain of about him.

“Old.”

“It’s a flavored ice pop. Kids get it from the ice cream truck. Do you know what that is?” Nico stares at me as if I’m some sort of idiot. “Shit, I don’t know, man!” Frustrated, I pick at a hangnail, and when the faintest hint of blood swells up by my nail, Nico starts tapping his foot. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s breathing through his mouth.

“Go put on a bandage.”

“Ah, yes, I’ll just go find the first aid kit that Roman has magnanimously left for me,” I say, knowing full well there is exactly that in the bathroom. It’s one of the first things I found when I tossed the room, searching for anything of use. When Nico’s phone buzzes, I slip off the bed and pad over to him.

He’s definitely not breathing.

“There’s a first aid kit beneath the sink,” Nico deadpans.

“Is that Roman? Give me the phone,” I say, darting my hand out to grab it, but he pulls the phone back with that supernatural swiftness. It’s been days since I’ve seen my captor, and I’ve lost my patience.

Stomping to the corner where I know one of two cameras is placed, I jut my chin up as I stare into the blinking red light.

“Roman Sauveterre, if that’s even your fucking name, you need to tell me right now if you accept my deal! I’ve been good, haven’t I, Nico?” When I glance at Nico, he raises his brow and smirks. No text lights up his phone, no response from Roman comes through. “I swear to God, Roman!”

When nothing happens, I put my thumb in my mouth and chew on the spot that was already bleeding. It hurts, and I swear as I pull my thumb out of my mouth. Nico stiffens, and I throw my hands wide, wafting the scent of my blood in his direction. “Tell me you agree, or I’m going to keep tormenting your little henchman!”

Nico snorts, and his phone buzzes. Within a second of reading a text, the vampire is on me, digging his teeth into my hand. He bites my thumb and the meaty flesh of my palm, drinking my blood and moaning as he does it. I stumble back a step, gasping in surprise before I collect myself.

“Oh, fuck you!” I shout at the camera. “Fine. You wanna be a dickhead? Me too,” I mutter. Using my free hand, I rip my shirt off, letting it hang from the arm being held in Nico’s painful grasp. “You’ll let people feed from me, but you draw the line at naked and touching myself. Isn’t that right?”

I’m shoving my free hand down my pants when Nico’s phone rings. He grunts with the effort of detaching his fangs from my skin, and he answers the phone without a word.

I don’t need vampire senses to hear Roman shouting down the line.

“Give her the phone and get the fuck out!”

Nico shoves it into my hand, staggering away as most of the vampires have done once they’ve tasted my blood. The door shuts behind him, locking, and I let my shirt fall from my arm. Holding the phone up to my ear, I can hear Roman’s panting breaths as I stare at the camera. He says nothing for a minute, clearly fighting something mentally. I don’t know if he’s trying to stay calm or waging some war against himself.

“I accept. I will keep you alive to the best of my abilities until my father Slumbers, and I will free you after.” My lip twitches, and I try not to smile at the camera. I’m sure he can hear my sigh of relief, but I don’t care. It was the one thing I needed. “Gwyn?”

“Yeah?”

“If you do anything like that ever again, I will set him on fire and make you watch.”



THE NEXT DAY, Nico came back, refused to speak to me or make eye contact, and it seems like today is going to be the same. Roman still hasn't come down, and the only reason I'm not nervous about it is because of my victory on the phone. He's alive and able to make promises, and that's all that matters.

When Nico leaves me with dinner, I'm exhausted. Though the number of vampires who have come to taste my blood has dwindled, my body is drained. The best part of the meal was the mashed potatoes, but I devour everything before collapsing back against the headboard. My eyes flicker shut before I can even slide down to get comfortable. I didn't even bother to turn off the light.

I don't know how long I slept for when I'm awoken by a key in the door.

“Roman?” I ask, and the hope in my voice isn't as feigned as I would like it to be. His absence has been strange the past week, and it had been almost therapeutic going through my dad's things. I don't bother doing it without him, since I'm sure he'll just make me do it a second time.

I'm fooling myself if I think that's all it is. My wires have gotten crossed in all of this. In trying to make him feel something for me, I have grown to know him and understand him better. Everything he does is out of grief and guilt for Remy. Every now and then, I wonder if it's to honor his brother or to rid himself of that gnawing feeling inside his chest.

I'm familiar with it.

I bet Roman wonders if he hadn't gotten frustrated with Remy and caused him to be exiled from the coven, would his

brother still be here? If I hadn't insisted on my favorite restaurant for dinner that night, would my parents? If I hadn't reached for the radio that night, would I have seen the truck that slammed into the passenger side?

Grief is a series of what-ifs, and with time, all you can hope for is that you wonder less. The imaginary scenarios from a brain in mourning about a future that will never come to pass are a special torture I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Even Roman.

"No, sorry. A friend of his," a soft voice answers, and I narrow my eyes as the door creaks open. A woman with dark auburn hair stands just on the other side of the threshold with a tentative smile on her face. "May I come in?"

She wears a long-sleeved t-shirt, comfortable leggings, and fucking slippers. Her bright green eyes stand out, reminding me of a cat. And just like her feline counterpart, I don't trust her.

"You will, anyway," I say.

She dips her head before padding into the room. She's a bit shorter than I am with an average build, and a thick gold engagement ring on her finger looks far too chunky on her slender hand.

"Victoria," she says, holding out a hand as if she wants me to kiss it rather than shake it. "I haven't had a chance to get a proper look at you, but I decided I couldn't wait any longer." I don't move from where I sit on the bed. It's grown colder in the month since I've been here, and I shove my hands into the pocket of the purple hoodie Margot sent down last week. Victoria's lips tilt up at the edges as she settles into the folding chair Roman has left in my room. "I'm not here to cause any trouble," she says, holding up her hands in submission.

I say nothing, staring at her. I don't trust the woman, just as I don't trust any vampire here, but I have expected every person who has been in my cell before now. I didn't expect her, and it unsettles me.

"You look just like I remember her," she says.

“So I’ve been told,” I reply, frowning at her. I don’t care to talk about my birth mother with a stranger.

“Not Cynthia. I mean, obviously there’s a resemblance, but you look like your great-grandmother. Jane.” She leans forward, squeezing her hands between her thighs as if she doesn’t know what to do with them.

“I know nothing about that side, so whatever you’re trying to say, get on with it,” I bite out. Debating telling her to just bite me and get it over with, I pick at my nails inside my sweatshirt. She would be here with Nico if she did it the proper way, so I don’t want to tempt her.

“I knew her during peace. When your kind only hunted those who didn’t know how to clean up after themselves.”

Victoria stands, glances at the door, and moves toward me faster than I can blink.

“I was there when it all started. When the first hunter avenged the death of a loved one by slaughtering an entire coven.” She reaches out and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, smiling at me. The woman has an adorable gap between her two front teeth, but her eyes are dark as they dart all over my face.

“Do you know how we work, darling? The thirst?” I nod, leaning back as much as I can without being too noticeable. “So you know it’s blood we crave, we thirst for? Regardless of who or what it belongs to?” I don’t bother nodding this time, but I don’t take my eyes off her.

“Do you, are you thirsty? Is that why—” I barely breathe as her hand reaches out and covers my mouth.

“This is important to the story. Don’t interrupt.” When Victoria deems me properly silenced, she draws her hand away and takes a step back. She wraps her arms around herself and looks at the camera in the room’s corner.

I wonder what time it is, because I already know someone checks the security system at least once an hour. Based on the interaction with Roman the other day, I suspect it’s more often. But there’s no way he’s watching now, or he’d already be here.

Unless he sent her.

“I was a fledgeling then. In my coven, we did the same thing with our new vampires as we do now. Isolate, ingratiate, initiate. I was being isolated when your great-grandmother slaughtered everyone.” She waves her hand, dismissing whatever she thinks I might say. “A few of my friends died, the ones who convinced me to turn. I didn’t know what I was, what I was doing, how to *be*. And your ancestor found me in the holding cell, saw my teeth when they snapped out upon smelling her blood, and do you know what she did?”

I swallow, knowing whatever it is my kin did in the past isn’t benefiting me at this moment. “No,” I whisper as she waits for my reply with a raised brow.

“She laughed. And then she left.”

I sigh slowly, not sure if she wants me to reply. Searching her eyes, I wonder if she expects an apology.

“So, I did what I do best. I survived. It took me days to break through a wall, and by then I was so gripped by the thirst, I fell upon my ruined friends like a beast starved.” She grabs my chin, forcing me to meet her eyes. “I licked their blood off the ground, drank from their severed necks, swore blood oaths to those who could never claim my loyalty. Alone with my new body, my only company were those who turned me and were left like carrion. Because of Jane.”

Victoria is breathing hard, her fingertips holding my face tight, and her teeth are sharpened points, turning this woman wearing goddamn slippers into the thing that will take me out.

I’m almost too relieved to fight my way out of it.

Slowing herself, she takes one giant deep breath and steps backward three measured paces. Smoothing her hair down with one hand, her eyes are locked onto my pulse point, and I try to slouch down farther into my hoodie.

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“Why not?” I ask, my heart racing. “I—I understand the feeling. You didn’t deserve that—”

“I’ll give you the same courtesy she gave me.” When she eyes the hinges on the door of my cell, I hold my breath. “She didn’t kill me, but she sure as hell didn’t show me mercy.” She launches herself forward, breaking the door right off the hinges.

She’s gone, and I’m off the bed, running into the bathroom as fast as I can and slamming it shut. It won’t be long until they come.

ROMAN

EARLIER

I'M WATCHING GWYN EAT HER DINNER ON THE MONITORS WHEN I get the notification that Margot has pulled into the parking garage. It's rare that I've had a moment alone the past week to watch her without someone—Margot—having some dumb shit to say. So I've been taking advantage of it, and as long as I don't think about why, it's been...nice.

I've noticed Gwyn doesn't like her food to touch, and she eats things in counterclockwise order. It fascinates me. She's on the mashed potatoes now, after finishing the green beans, and she always leaves the meat for last—if she eats it at all.

Two days ago, she told Nico that the chicken tasted “too chickeny.” Whatever the fuck that means.

She tucks a strand of loose hair behind her ear and stifles a yawn. I can tell it's exhausting, but she's done everything as agreed upon when I made that goddamn stupid fucking deal. Hasn't put up a fuss, has been willing to let my blood sworns drink from her, and she's even been kind to some of them. I can tell it takes Nico by surprise.

Though she hasn't been perfect. She told Emile to eat glass when he popped his head in one night. I'm lucky I didn't have to intervene because I was laughing my ass off after the shock passed.

When Margot's key turns in the door, I stand, peeling my eyes from the monitors as I carefully put weight on my bad leg. It's not as bad as I'd expected. The silver was in my skin

for so long before Margot came to retrieve me, it's impeded my healing. I'm lucky the firefighters didn't find me in the trees while I was knocked out. Nico is convinced I'll be back to normal by the end of the night, and judging by the improvement in the last few hours, he might be right. When Margot walks inside, she leans back against her door and closes her eyes. She looks haggard as fuck, and it's not like her, so I give her a minute to relax.

Without ever having step foot in the tobacco shop, my assistant has determined exactly who owns it, and, in the process, has uncovered a hidden faction dedicated to ridding the world of my kind. Humans, sorcerers, a few demons, and even a soothsayer have been meeting weekly in private for years, creating protective amulets, attempting to undermine my father's business deals, and stockpiling silver. Creating silver buckshot and bombs is quite lucrative, but not enough to grow their numbers or their weapons.

Each of them has a reason to hate us, and that's why I let Margot scope it out first before deciding to bother with them. They are barely a threat, their numbers and abilities too weak to do much without proper organization. Now that we know of their existence, they'd be easy to monitor. We've killed their friends and loved ones in this endless war for dominance, and I don't know if it will ever end.

Will I be the one to finish it or will there always be someone from one side seeking retribution? If there is ever to be peace, we have already bought it with flesh and blood. If we continue until no slights or vengeance is left, we will be eradicated. It's not worth it.

I startle, rubbing my hand over my face when I realize where my mind has wandered. Never has inaction against those who would do us harm been an option I would consider. Though I seek to live peacefully and quietly with more freedoms after my father Slumbers, not once would I consider allowing our enemies to live.

Until now.

Fighting the urge to peek at the monitors again, I walk into the kitchen. But like a weed drawn to the sun, I can't help but look at her. Ignoring a tightness in my chest, I only look away once she's fallen asleep. I have not given two fucks about anyone save for Remy since my mom died. I have killed anyone who stood in my way, have had no desire to be more or do better. Not until her.

Not until Gwyneth fucking Parsons.

It's goddamn infuriating.

She so earnestly thinks I'm not at fault for my brother, clearly believes in my ability to save her from death. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I breathe deep, dismissing the thoughts. Gwyn is just saying all the shit she thinks I need to hear. She's trying to force me into being a better person by creating this illusion that I could be.

"Sit down," Margot says, and I raise a brow. She's nervous as fuck. Chewing on the inside of her cheek and averting her eyes, she asks, "Where's Nico?"

"He'll be here any minute." I nod toward the monitors. "Why?"

"I'll wait until he's back," she says, immediately turning around to leave. Her hand is shaking as she tucks her thumb under her bag. Her normally sluggish heart rate has picked up.

"*Stop,*" I command. "*Tell me.*"

"I—" She fights it, and I growl at her. Margot is a bombshell—the woman could stop traffic—and she knows it. Never has my confident, borderline-egotistical friend cowered before me, but if she had a tail, it would be between her legs right now. "I saw his car," she whispers.

"Who's car?" I ask, but I already know.

"Remy's."



NICO IS DRIVING NORTH while Margot sits in the backseat, trying to hack into the security cameras belonging to the tobacco store and the tire shop next door to it. They're owned by the same people, and Margot suspects this group meets in the basement below the strip mall. In a stroke of luck, it's a Friday night. Just in time for their weekly meeting.

I can kill a lot of birds with one stone. Seventeen birds, to be exact.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Nico asks as he merges lanes.

I don't answer, watching the SUV to our right almost rear-end the car in front of it. Closing my eyes, I think of Remy, imagine my brother and his crooked smile. The chipped tooth he got before he Ascended. I think of him tossing back a shot and telling me he planned to marry Rose. Remember holding him in my arms after she died. Everything I've done and everything I do tonight will be for him, and maybe his soul will rest easy knowing I did my best.

All of that floods my mind, and yet the image that pushes forefront is Gwyn.

I picture her horrified face as I gut the people who killed my brother to protect her, to protect a *bloodline*. Do they give a flying fuck about her? Know her favorite color is teal? Do they know how long she can talk about her hatred of Hemingway without needing to take a single goddamn breath? Do they know how many ridiculous fucking hobbies she's picked up in the last few years without finishing a single project? Or is she just a broodmare to them? They clearly don't view her as a weapon or they would have trained her. Even if Bill had been against it, the old man has been dead for over a year now.

They only want her for what they could grow in her fucking womb.

Part of me wanted to bring her. To see if she would condemn them for what they've done to Remy. Or what they might have done to her if given the chance.

I'm nearly sick to my stomach when I realize I want to protect her from that knowledge.

"Because he doesn't want to get her hopes up," Margot quips from the backseat. "Ya know, in case he breaks the deal he made with her."

"Jesus, Margot, not right now." I stretch my leg, massaging my thigh where the worst of the damage was. The breakthrough pain is gone, but it's still sore to the touch.

"That's what thinking with your dick gets you," Nico says, not taking his eyes off the road. These two jackoffs have gotten way too goddamn comfortable with me.

"*No more talking,*" I command. The traffic is abominable, but I have to end this tonight. I crave more answers, and I don't know if I'll get them. All I know is the auto shop has Remy's car, and what can be more damning evidence than that? It's his dead fiancée's car, and he would never have parted with it willingly. The sooner I deal with this, the sooner I can move Gwyn far the fuck away from me, fake her death, and patiently wait for my father to Slumber.

"Margot, when this is done, I want you to make arrangements for you and Gwyn somewhere else. Preferably outside the United States." My friend kicks my seat when my compulsion won't let her talk. I sigh. "You may speak."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're going to help me fake her death, and then you're going to take her as far away from the coven as you can. You may return once my father Slumbers or Gwyn dies of old age. Whichever comes first." I prop my elbow up on the center console, resting my chin on my hand as I stare at the sea of brake lights before me.

"You want me to play house with her?" she asks, and I can't help it when I look in the rearview mirror because of her misty tone. As if this is a dream come true.

“No,” I snap. Closing my eyes, it’s an assault when I picture Gwyn plating up dinner for Margot, leaning over her at a kitchen table and pressing a kiss to my friend’s forehead. “I want you to set up a place for you both to live. Separately,” I add, ignoring the smirk on Nico’s lips. “You are to monitor her, but I don’t want you to interfere in whatever life she builds.”

“You, uh,” she starts, then clears her throat. “You don’t need me here?”

She’s looking down at her laptop when I glance up at the mirror. Her golden hair is up in a tidy bun, and the only thing out of place about her is her tone. I’ve hurt her feelings.

“Margot, I expect you to work for me remotely. I’ll pay for everything the two of you need either way, but if you decide you don’t want to work for me anymore, I understand.”

She nods, swallowing, and I don’t think I’ve undone the damage. Margot is important to me, but I don’t know what she wants me to say. Nico just glares at me from the driver’s seat, and it’s not like we are moving on the highway at all, so I get no reprieve.

I’m about to word vomit an apology when she inhales quickly. “Look,” she says, spinning her computer in her lap. It’s standstill traffic, so Nico turns with me and nearly slams his head into mine.

If it weren’t for the image on the screen, I would have bitched at him.

But I can’t quite tell what I’m seeing. There’s an open door, and I see a glimpse of what looks like an examination room beyond it.

“What are we looking at, Margot?”

“It’s in their basement. They only have two cameras, and one of them points here. Look at the examination table,” she directs, reaching over the top of the screen and pointing down.

The angle doesn’t allow me to see much, but when I realize what she’s drawing my attention to, my blood boils. There are handcuffs attached to the stirrups.

“Were they planning to—to inseminate her or something?” Margot squeaks.

I say nothing, turning forward and drumming my fingertips on the center console. Unwilling to examine it, I make a decision. Even if I find no more evidence tying this group of people to Remy’s murder, they’ll bleed out slowly.

Every last one of them.



AFTER SITTING in silence for another hour, the traffic hardly moving out of the city, I pull out my phone to scroll when I notice a shit ton of notifications for the camera in Gwyn’s room.

“What the hell is she up to?” I murmur as I load the app. Asking for Margot’s hot spot Wi-Fi password, I key in the letters and numbers.

“You haven’t been watching her this entire time?” Margot muses, and I don’t catch myself before I rise to her bait.

“She was sleeping when we left. I figured she’d—”

“That hasn’t stopped you before!” Margot shouts, and Nico laughs. “Are you going to make me install cameras in our place in New Zealand or wherever?”

I’m about to remind her that Gwyn is to have her own place when the app finally loads. The most recent notification is from the bathroom camera, so I click on it, angling the screen away in case she’s showering. Gwyn is wearing one of Margot’s old college sweatshirts, her hair a ruffled mess like she just woke up, and she’s digging through the cabinet beneath the sink. She’s concentrating, tossing shit out of her way when she doesn’t find what she wants. I don’t know what she hopes to find, and I decide I haven’t heard her voice enough over the past week. Instead of shoving that feeling aside, I embrace it and click on the microphone icon.

“What’re you looking for, sweetheart?”

Her head snaps up, eyes wide and frantic as she looks at the camera, and she puts her finger to her lips to shush me. The fuck? When she points at the shut door, I don’t understand.

But when she mouths the word help, I can’t miss it. I try to switch over to the main room camera. I don’t know what the fuck is going on, and I feel like my heart is going to burst out of my chest.

“What’s going on?” Nico asks.

“I don’t know. She—she just said help and pointed at the door. The other camera won’t load.”

“Give it here,” Margot says, taking my phone before I can respond.

I don’t know what to do with the pit of dread forming in my stomach. It’s violent and nauseating. Why didn’t I leave Nico to protect her? How long were there notifications on my phone while it was in my pocket? How long has she needed me?

“Jesus Christ,” Margot breathes. I spin in my seat to take my phone from her, but she’s already shoving it into my hand. The image is grainy, but I can tell exactly what made her react that way.

“Turn the fucking car around.” When Nico doesn’t move from the center lane fast enough, I start shouting. “Get over and turn the fuck around. NOW!”

With this kind of traffic, it’ll be easier to find an emergency vehicle turnaround rather than get off and back onto the highway, and Nico merges accordingly.

I’m staring at the screen again, mouth agape as I take in the open door of her cell.

“Who the fuck did this?” My mouth is dry, and I’m struggling to breathe. My thumb twitches over the footage, and I almost drop the phone when I realize I’m shaking.

“I’d put my money on Emile or Victoria,” Nico says.

I switch back to the bathroom camera and see Gwyn holding the tiny fucking first aid scissors in her fist as she backs away from the door. She looks determined, her cheeks a violent red.

“Hide in the cabinet, baby,” I say over the speaker as quietly as I can. “I’m on my way.”

GWYN

HE'S NOT HERE.

Roman isn't at the fucking compound.

If he were just upstairs, he'd be down here by now. Between the tremor I heard in his voice and the time it has taken since he last spoke, I know he's not here. There is no reason he would take his sweet time in a situation like this. Unless his desire is to make me sweat, but I could hear from the tone of his voice when he told me to hide.

He's scared.

That doesn't bode well for me. At all.

And telling me to hide in the fucking cabinet? He's clearly not thinking straight. There are pipes under the sink. What contortionist shit does he think I'm capable of? Certainly not fitting under a goddamn bathroom sink.

Instead, I go behind the stone half-wall that separates the shower from the rest of the bathroom. I'd locked the door when I came in and found the only weapon I could think of. The tiny little bandage scissors won't do shit against a vampire, but maybe I can take things into my own hands if I need to.

I'm getting sweaty in this fucking hoodie, and I do my best to take slow, deep breaths. A racing heart won't do me any favors. I consider taking my sweatshirt off and doing some yoga and trying to meditate, but I know the vampires are

sensitive to scent. Between my blood and panicked sweat, I'm surprised no one has come yet.

I can't imagine Victoria wouldn't ring the dinner bell.

I hear a sound in my bedroom, a whisper and a footstep.

"Get the fuck out of there or I will rip your heads from your shoulders," Roman's voice crackles over the speaker, and the footsteps fade away.

My breath hitches, and I don't know how much longer his threats will work.

I pop my head up, waving my hand to trigger the camera's motion sensor.

"They're gone. You're okay," his voice says, and it soothes me even when it shouldn't.

"How long?" I whisper. There's no point in being silent, not with his voice on the intercom.

"Fifteen minutes. Try to stay calm," he says.

I slide down the wall.

A lot of things can happen in fifteen minutes.

When I tilt my head back, the cool tile helps. I close my eyes, piling my hair on top of my head. Casting my memory back to the darkest point of my life, I remember the guided meditation videos my therapist suggested I use to overcome my inability to sleep. There's a cool stream running through a twilight forest. The sound of toads croaking and bugs chirping helped lull me into sleep nightly for months. Josh had hated it, so if he ever slept over, I'd had to choose. The comfort of a warm body next to mine or the soothing sounds of nature carrying on whether I could or not.

My frogs and crickets always won. I couldn't handle the silence.

When it was quiet, I blamed myself.

When it was quiet, I couldn't breathe.

When it was quiet, I wanted to die.

It's silent now, but I can imagine the sounds that saved my life back then.

Clenching my fist, I hope they can do it again.

ROMAN

“FIFTEEN MINUTES? ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY?” NICO IS shouting as he flies down the shoulder, going southbound on the expressway. I’m sure he’s doing his best, but I’m so fucking angry, I want to kill him. I’m splitting my attention between the screen in my hands and the road in front of us. The sun has long since set, but it’s a Friday night and it’s busy as hell. I fucking hate this city. We’re finally making some progress, but as the Edens merges into the Dan Ryan, Nico can’t get past the lanes of traffic between us and the shoulder. “It’s impossible.”

“Keep them out the best you can,” I say to Margot as I open my door. I’m across the lanes of traffic, jumping over the barricade and climbing the chain link within a breath. The train tracks run adjacent to the highway, and they’re my best shot. It’s dark enough now, and I don’t give a fuck if anyone sees me, anyway.

I should have done this sooner.

The cool night air is the only thing keeping me sane as I sprint toward the compound. The crimson light of braking cars sears into my vision, matching the fiery rage I’m feeling. Someone defied me and put her in danger. Someone cost me vengeance tonight because they hate her and don’t respect me. Someone will pay with their life for inconveniencing me.

I swear when I realize I’m full of shit. Saving Gwyn is a demand. An instinct. An inevitability I cannot fight. Certainly that counts as more than an inconvenience.

I'm barely paying attention to my surroundings, imagining Gwyn curled up in the fucking bathroom. She's probably goddamn terrified, and her racing heart will give her away. I'm lucky as hell the fledglings are sworn to me, and I'm relieved I was able to get them out of her cell; I'd loaded my voice with my influence, but it's not something I've ever practiced. My father is adept, but I've never needed to compel anyone over the phone or non-verbally like him.

It was a risk to put Margot in charge of keeping thirsty fucks out of there, but getting to Gwyn as fast as I can is my priority.

Somehow, I've deemed it more important than revenge.

I found the ones who killed Remy; I should be killing them right fucking now. I don't need her anymore.

What the fuck am I doing?

The tip of my boot hits a stray piece of gravel, and I'm off-kilter, barely able to catch myself before hitting the third rail. It probably wouldn't kill me, but it'd sure as fuck slow me down. This is what my life has been with her in it. I should let her die just to be rid of her. Gwyn is a beautiful means to an end, that's all. She has done nothing but distract and make me question my entire existence. She's too dangerous to keep around.

And yet here I am, running with my goddamn heart in my throat, feeling foolish when I toss up pleas to some greater force I don't believe in.

Not wanting to deal with going underground into the city and doubling back, I scan the area for the Metra line I know is nearby, and I'm elated when I see the overpass ahead. I jump onto the barrier and clamber up the concrete before making my way up the steel platform.

When I spot the train heading southeast, I let go, running as fast as I can. I've had little need to do this in so long, if I wasn't terrified, I'd feel elated.

Catching up to it, I grab onto the last train car, flinging myself onto the roof. Sprinting and leaping each gap, I easily

make it to the front. For a moment, I think about what it would be like to sit up here, laying back and staring at the sky, but when I imagine Gwyn beside me—like a fucking crazy person—it puts me back on the warpath. The brief hesitation draws my attention to my injured leg. It throbs, but there’s nothing I can do about it, not with the urgency of this situation. Nico might not have been able to get there in fifteen minutes, but using my abilities, I’m probably going to arrive even sooner. When I leap down, no horns sound out from the train, so it’s clear they don’t see me as I dart ahead.

I forbid myself from thinking about anything but my task at hand. I get off the tracks before I reach the transportation center, running down the sidewalks in a blur. Someone screams as I run past, but I don’t give a fuck. I’m only a couple of blocks away when I’m knocked on my ass at an intersection.

“Watch it, fucker!” a man yells out the window of his luxury sedan. There’s a rideshare sticker on his windshield, and logically I know he’s just trying to work, but I want to tear him apart. He drives past me, laying on his horn, and I take off again. The pull toward her is something greater than me as I put one foot in front of the other.

My phone’s ringing, and I answer it as I run the final block to my father’s building.

“Are you close?” Margot’s barely concealed panic doesn’t improve when I tell her where I am. “Hurry, Roman,” she whispers. “It might be too late.”



No, no, no, *no, no, no*.

Standing in the doorway, I can’t bring myself to move as I confirm Margot was right.

It’s too late.

When Margot had uttered those words, I'd known.

When I heard Victoria's laugh as I'd entered the mezzanine, I'd known.

When I smelled her blood from the stairwell, I'd known.

But I can't stand seeing her like this.

They've dragged her out from the bathroom, four vampires still feeding from her. They've torn her hoodie off, her half-naked body laying still beneath them. She's so goddamn pale. Her dark hair is a puddle on the ground beneath her and her mouth is slack. The worst part is her eyes. Unseeing, she's staring at the door.

She'd been waiting for me. Watching for me.

Counting on me.

I can't move, can't breathe, can't think.

I can only break.

When one of them drops her wrist, Gwyn's hand opens and the tiny bathroom scissors fall to the floor. Her attempts at protecting herself had been futile, and all I can think of is her expression in the camera. She'd been scared but determined, and I wonder how much of her had trusted I'd be there to intervene in time. Whatever good she'd seen in me has gone with her, and there is no hope for those who have taken her from me. Launching forward, the sound which comes up my throat is that of a wounded animal.

Is that not exactly what I am?

When one of my father's most steadfast men faces me as I grip him by the throat, he's so drunk, I doubt he even knows his own name. Anders is no match for me as a born vampire, even if he has a few centuries on me. He doesn't cry out when I break his neck, still staring at me as I rip his heart from his chest to ensure he can't come back.

The others don't move, continuing to drain every drop from her. She is covered in the marks of their thirst, covered in evidence of betrayal, of hate, of desire. They hate her, and yet her blood tastes like their sweetest dreams.

They won't live long enough to have nightmares about what I do to them.

I pluck the slight woman off her, grimly realizing it's the same fledging who attacked her in the stairwell weeks ago. The new vampire who barely has any fucking control.

I don't care.

She thrashes in my arms, pupils dilated so thoroughly I can barely see the blue ring around them. The girl screams, clawing at me, doing what she can to get back to Gwyn.

I break her over my knee like a twig, and she stops moving.

For whatever reason, it gets the other's attention, and both men attack at the same time. They're both Emile's blood sworns, Giovanni and Peter if I remember right, and I wonder again if my uncle was responsible. I'd assumed Victoria had been behind it, but I suppose they could've worked together. The scent of Gwyn's blood is overwhelming as they tussle with me—covered with it. The sound I make is one of horror and longing. I want to taste it, taste her, drink from her neck. But I can't.

I will crave her for the rest of my life.

In more ways than I ever wanted to think about.

Giovanni's hands are around my throat while Peter tries to knock my legs out from beneath me.

"Did you think I wouldn't care?" I roar at them, but I am so much closer to sobbing than I realized. When did she become so important to me?

Everyone you swear to protect ends up dead though, don't they?

Indulging myself, I'd chosen to protect her. She'd relied on me. This is what happens to the people I choose. This is what happens when I soften and dare to dream of something different.

I get them killed.

Flipping Giovanni to the ground, I knee Peter in the jaw. Gio is looking up at me from below, blood covering his face and clothes, and he chokes on a laugh.

“You mad we stole your blood bag?”

He coughs up a bit of her blood when my hand punches through his chest. His eyes widen in shock, brain not quite caught up, as I wrap my hand around his heart. I’m moving in slow motion, feeling his slow, not-quite-dead beat.

And then I squeeze.

When I rip it free from his chest, Peter is already on me, tackling me to the ground. I don’t know if he’s just high on her blood, but surely he knows running to Emile would be the safer option. Throwing him off me with ease, I’m shoving the heart in my hand down his throat when I see something out of the corner of my eye.

All I can do is stare, hoping and praying that what I saw was real.

That the twitch in her leg meant she isn’t fully gone. Straining, I try to listen for her heartbeat over mine and Peter’s. He’s gagging loudly, fighting against Gio’s heart.

Tuning him out, I hold the feral vampire at bay as time slows down. As I take in her lush lips and soft skin, willing her to move again.

I swear I see her hand twitch, and I jump to my feet, pushing him off me. When Peter rushes me again, I throw him to the ground. Kneeling on his chest, I put my hands on either side of his stupid fucking face and pull. There is no satisfaction when I sever his head and throw it away from me. There is no triumph—only disgust and fear.

“Gwyn?” I scramble over to her just as I hear pounding feet behind me. If she’s alive, if there is even the tiniest hope of saving her, I need to get to her now. “*Stop,*” I yell, commanding whoever has come down to feed from her next, hoping it’s someone I can compel. Shaking, I try to find her pulse, but everything is slick and covered in so much blood. I can’t catch my breath, let alone hear her heartbeat.

“It’s me,” Nico shouts from the hallway, and I sag in relief as I pull Gwyn into my lap.

“Keep them out,” I bark, and cup her cheek. I don’t know what the fuck to do. She’s lost so much blood.

“Gwyn, wake up, please.” I pull her wrist to my mouth, gently swiping my tongue over a bite. She has dozens all over her body, but I let out a shaky exhale as the wound closes. Unsure of what has overcome me, I let out a small laugh and gather her closer.

I cannot heal the dead. As a child, I’d learned that the hard way. But the mark on Gwyn’s wrist is gone, and that means she isn’t.

Tracing my thumb over her lip, her eyes seem to regain focus for a moment as I gaze down at her. “*Wake up, sweetheart,*” I command.

Her eyes dart over to mine before she closes them, unable to obey my influence. But it’s enough. She’s alive. I can’t let her down again. Her weight in my arms is nothing compared to what’s been lifted from my soul.

But there’s only one thing I can think of to save her. Finally calmer, I hear her heart’s feeble beat, and I know I don’t have time to get her to a doctor. This might not even work because of what she is. And she’ll surely hate me if I’m successful.

“Come here, Nico.”

He obeys, and I direct him to bring me various body parts of the vampires I’ve just killed. He’s confused but does what he’s told, dragging them over.

“Roman,” he says, as I drip blood from a severed arm into her mouth. Some of it dribbles on her chin, but she’s already covered in her own blood. What’s a few more drops? I ignore Nico, grunting in frustration as I toss the arm out of the way. It didn’t bleed nearly as much as I expected.

“Give me a heart, something else,” I demand, holding out my hand.

“Roman.” His voice softens, and I don’t look at him. “Roman, this isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?” I snap even as he places a heart into my palm. When I squeeze it over her open mouth, she coughs. “That’s it, baby. *Drink*,” I command. We’re not supposed to use our influence in the process of an Ascension.

I don’t give a fuck.

“She’s a hunter,” he says. “Has anyone ever turned a hunter?”

“Don’t know,” I grunt, but I smile as I watch her swallow the blood pooling on her tongue. Her eyes open again, but I don’t know if she really sees me. “That’s so good, Gwyn. Keep drinking.”

“Your father—”

“I don’t give a *fuck!*” Her body startles as I shout at Nico, and I soothe her, tracing my hand down her cheek. When Nico wordlessly hands me another heart, I squeeze it into her mouth. I exhale hard when she grabs my wrist. She leaves a bloody handprint as she adjusts, her sweet mark remaining on me.

It’s not the only one she’s left, and I hate her for it.

“You’re going to have to use yours,” Nico says before standing and uselessly wiping off the knees of his jeans. “This shit isn’t enough.”

“I can’t.”

“And why the fuck can’t you?” He scrutinizes me, and it’s already gone too far as it is, so I don’t want to elaborate.

“Give her yours.”

“No.” He scoffs, holding his hands up and backing toward the door. “Margot will be here soon with the car. Maybe she can help you figure out this clusterfuck. I’ll be the muscle, but I’m not turning her.”

Glancing around me, I realize he’s right, and I’m fucked. She’s already started the Ascension. I don’t know if she can

complete it as a hunter, but if she stops drinking, she certainly won't be able to.

But I don't want her beholden to me.

She'll think I've done it on purpose, and for some godforsaken reason, what she thinks of me has become...an issue. My own Ascension was with someone I'd loved and trusted at the time—planned for—and it had still been traumatic. I can't have her thinking I turned her just to bring her through it. That I'd wanted to take advantage of the desperate thirst and craving of the transition. The mindless state of *need* that will drive her to beg for everything I can give her.

Not that I don't want to give it to her, because Jesus Christ, now it's entered my mind, I have to fight to shut it out.

When I run out of blood from what Nico has brought me, she whimpers and opens her eyes. This time they focus with more clarity. Her lip quivers, and a tear beads at her lash line. It's like her hand reaches into my chest and squeezes, bleeding me and breaking me. I never wanted this. I never wanted to feel fucking anything for her, and I certainly never wanted to see her like this.

“Roman?” her voice rasps, and I can tell she's confused.

“Shh, I've got you.” I tug her closer. Her skin is so pale it looks like porcelain. She doesn't even look real. Her lips are crimson from the blood, silky black hair plastering to her skin, sticky and tangled. The tear breaks loose, sliding down the side of her face to land on my arm where I'm holding her.

“I'm so thirsty,” she says, and I take a deep breath. I don't want to tell her, but I have to.

“Yeah, that's..that's normal.”

Her eyes narrow the slightest bit, a muted version of the many glares she's given me before. As if suddenly aware of her partial nudity, she tries to cover her chest, but her hand slides down weakly after only a moment. I consider grabbing the blanket from her bed or some sort of clothing to make her feel better, but I don't want to move. She's not okay yet.

Might never be okay again.

Carefully adjusting her, I lift my wrist to my mouth and bite. She blinks a few times, staring at me. I tear the skin, remembering how Victoria had done for me. The wound has to be big enough for the blood to flow.

“No,” she whispers, reaching for my arm.

“Yes, baby. You have to.” When she hesitates, I continue. “You’ll die if you don’t, Gwyn.” I hold my wrist over her mouth, and she snaps it shut. I use my other hand to cup her face, trying to be gentle with her. “You might not survive it either way, but you have to try, alright?” Her eyes flutter closed, and I’m not sure if it’s weakness or willpower. Her refusal hadn’t been something I’d considered. The small amount of blood I’d given her has brought her back from the brink, just enough so she could tell me no. My breaths come faster, and my chest hurts.

She can’t refuse. I simply won’t allow it.

“You can’t leave me too,” I whisper, letting her feel the truth. She opens her eyes wide, and her lips part. “Please.” She flinches as if I’ve slapped her, but I’m not budging. I’ve lost the two people I care about most in this world, and whatever the fuck Gwyn has become to me? I’m not losing her too.

“Roman.” Her voice cracks, and her head lolls to the side as she shivers. She’s grown weaker in the few moments since she last drank. Adjusting, I pull her farther into my lap, nestling her head against my shoulder as she softly moans.

I can’t risk waiting any longer. I lift my wrist, taking a pull of my own blood into my mouth.

And then I tilt her head.

Honey-brown eyes meet mine as I press my lips to hers.

GWYN

I'M SO COLD, AND MY MOUTH HURTS.

It feels like I'm floating, and it's hard for me to form words. It's almost like coming out of sedation. When I was little, I used to get terrible headaches, and the doctors decided to do a CT scan. Because I was always fidgeting and couldn't lay still, they'd knocked me out. The test was pointless since they found nothing, and when I woke up, I remember being frightened. Nothing was quite right; the air was thicker, the lights were brighter, and it wasn't my dad holding my hand but the nurse. Her calming voice hadn't been enough, and I'd kicked and screamed until my dad was allowed in.

But Roman is here now. He's so warm and gentle, and I want to melt into him. I am content in his arms, his voice soothing, and part of me wonders if it's actually a stranger. Perhaps this *version* of Roman is a stranger.

Or is he?

Maybe I've been meeting small parts of this Roman all along. Has he always had this potential for softness and never allowed me to see it?

Is he doing this kindness only because I'm dying?

Do I deserve it?

I'm a kid again, falling asleep in the car and waking up in my room hours later, warm blankets tucked over me in my bed. Just like then, I don't know how I got here. But Roman

has me. His strong arms pull me closer, and I turn my face into him and inhale. Safe.

I regret so much.

I need to let him turn me, but I can't.

I can't, I can't, I can't.

Is it my imagination when I feel my heart stop? It's so quiet.

Roman is cupping my face and bringing his mouth to mine.

I never thought it would happen like this.

His lips are so soft, and I relax, closing my eyes. I'm so thirsty, and when he passes blood into my mouth, I groan. It's hot and earthy, and I can't swallow it down fast enough. Roman's mouth leaves mine, but he stays close; all I can see is him and his frown. All I can taste is him. All I can feel is him.

Roman is all there is.

And if I drink from him, Roman is all there will ever be. If I turn, I am sworn to him forever. Sworn to the man who looked at me with his earnest furrowed brow and wet eyes and begged me not to leave him.

"I can't."

"*Drink,*" he commands, taking away so many things and giving me even more with a single word. I'm too weak to fight it. And once I get another taste, once I'm licking my lips clean of his blood, I don't know why I fought it in the first place. I can suddenly hear my own heartbeat drumming loudly in my chest—not fast enough but strong. Roman holds me like a lover, caressing me with gentle hands, and I wish I didn't crave more of it. The relieved exhale of his breath on my ear is damning evidence. It is a storm I cannot afford. It will tear me to pieces, and I can't take any more pain.

My teeth are on his wrist, and my thirst is burning, an unquenchable desire to breathe his life into me. I clutch his arm, and his hand ghosts down my side as he wraps me within his protective embrace. My mouth aches, but I can't stop. The

taste of him is a rich, heady wine with a static electricity tingle to it. I'm panting, struggling to both drink and breathe, and I cough.

"*Alright, breathe,*" Roman orders, and he controls my lungs like he will control everything else. He slips into my willpower as he has slipped into my heart. How did it come to this? His thumb caresses my cheek while I catch my breath, and I blink up at him. Everything is clearer, brighter, more focused, and he's all the more beautiful for it. One corner of his mouth raises into a smile, but the wrinkles between his brows don't smooth. He's flushed, his dark hair hanging loose, wavy and perfectly tousled. "There you are," he says.

He's gentle, movements carefully measured. His thumb drags over my bottom lip before he angles my mouth to his. He kisses me again, dragging it out as he pulls on my lip. There is no reason for it this time. No ulterior motive like at the photoshoot, no blood to force down my throat. Roman kisses me just to kiss me, and I hate that I never want him to stop. I hate that I've missed his minty breath, and I hate when my hand lifts to cup his face. I hate how I deepen the kiss, running my tongue against his, while my fingertips slide up to clutch his dark strands. I hate that when he pulls away, I wish he didn't.

He chuckles. "A little more, sweetheart. You're almost there. Is your mouth hurting?" I nod, unable to speak after his kiss. I hate that I want him to do it again. He slides a finger beneath my lip, inspecting my teeth. He doesn't even touch them, but I hiss in pain. "When you can bite me with your fangs, that's when you're done. Not a second sooner. *Drink.*"

I reposition, sitting up in his lap and grabbing his arm, before drawing deep. Closing my eyes, I slip a leg over him, the wet friction of the blood between us causing my skin to stick, and I'm unable to stop, to breathe, to think. I crave it so badly it hurts, my entire body vibrating with need. I feel almost like a hummingbird, like I'm moving too fast for the camera to catch me, but I've gone nowhere at all. The electric activity in my veins sets me aglow, and there is nothing to stop me from taking, taking, taking.

I cry out as my teeth lengthen. It hurts, almost like getting one pulled. But I know that's not what has happened. Slipping my tongue over, I gasp when I feel just how sharp my incisors have become. When they finally stop hurting, Roman is waiting, watching me. And I suddenly feel his influence leave me.

But the need does not.

I straddle him, and he runs his hands down my waist and hips before caressing my thighs. His touch is firm but almost hesitant. We're face to face, and he clears his throat before he speaks. "You can bite—"

I'm already moving, my hands curling on his shoulders as I dip my mouth to his neck. A surprised sound leaves me when my fangs pierce his skin with ease. The blood tastes different, the salt of his skin stronger here than his wrist. I can sense his pulse, heart beating as fast as mine. Or is it slow? I can't tell. I moan, unable to hold it back. The taste is inherently him; I couldn't explain it if someone asked me, but I'd recognize it anywhere. Roman's hand trails up my back, a whisper of a touch which makes my skin tingle. My senses are alight. I can hear someone breathing in the hallway. I can smell the leather of Roman's discarded jacket and the pungent iron of blood. I can count every freckle in his irises. I'm Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* when everything goes Technicolor. Everything is new and bright and vibrant—almost overwhelming—but it all fades away. All I want is him. His taste, his touch, his attention, his protection, his desire. I want all of it.

I take a breath, leaning back to look at the breathtaking man holding me. His blood still wets his lips, and I need to smooth the furrow between his brows. I want to say so many things to him, but I bite my tongue. His cheeks are flushed, and I wonder if I would have noticed it with my regular vision. That beautiful soft mouth is open slightly as he pants. It seems to genuinely surprise him when I'm the one who closes the distance. When I'm the one who presses my lips to his. When I put my hands in his hair and tug. I'm covered in blood, feel it dripping down my chin, but I don't care. As I suck on his lower lip, he makes a rumbling sound. He rubs my thighs, digs

his fingertips into my ass, and his dick twitches against me. I sigh, eager to feel him, but his hands suddenly move to my waist. He squeezes, steadying me.

Frowning, I sit back and stare. He's breathing hard, composure broken. "Touch me," I whisper, licking my lips. Leaning forward, I chase the drop of blood rolling down his chest with my tongue. I tug on his shirt, wanting his skin on mine, when he squeezes me once more. "Roman, please, I need it."

"Fuck, I know you do, sweetheart, but you can Ascend without it," he says, sighing. He lifts a hand and rubs it over his face. "It'll be painful, but I can help you." He repositions me so I can't feel his hardened cock.

"Haven't you hurt me enough?" I bite out, desperate for him to relieve the swiftly building ache. After what he said while I laid dying in his lap, I almost regret it. The words don't seem to bother him though, as he merely shakes his head.

"Gwyn, you don't want this. The transition just rides you, makes you feel like you'll die if you don't. It's fucked up, I know."

"You think I didn't want this before now? You think I didn't want *you*?" I wonder if inhibitions are lessened during the change. Or perhaps our natural traits are more apparent. Either way, it's making me say things I wish were lies.

"Gwyn," he says on a breath, eyes wide, as if I've given him a gift. Some realization that whatever the fuck is going on in his head isn't one-sided. It almost feels more cruel than letting him think otherwise.

I look away, his gaze too intense for me to handle. It's then that I notice the rest of the room. "You did this?" I whisper. There's blood everywhere, bodies scattered around us. I realize it's not just my blood Roman is covered in.

I sense him move, taking in the surrounding gore. "Nico, come handle this," he says. Quieter, his lips move against my temple as he speaks for only me. "I thought you were dead. You were—if I hadn't, you would have—"

Turning quickly, I grip his chin in my hand, overcome with some emotion I refuse to categorize. I bring my mouth to his and kiss him again. And again and again. It doesn't matter that Nico is carrying bodies into the bathroom. When I rip Roman's shirt from his shoulders and my nails drag down his back, I roll my body against him. Roman lets out of a soft tortured sound as he brings his hands to my hips, guiding my movements. The sound of Nico tossing severed limbs onto tile does nothing as I reach between us, fumbling with Roman's pants. He kisses me hard, gentle movements gone as he brings one hand up, fisting my hair in his grasp. He controls my motions as his tongue slides into my mouth. When he breaks away, he tilts my head back, giving him access to my throat. He kisses my pounding pulse, licks where my blood has dried on my collarbone, drags a lazy fingertip down my chest. His calloused hands on my body are a sandpaper touch I welcome, wanting to rub raw the parts of me which crave him.

When I raise up on my knees and tug on my sleep shorts, Roman tears them free with a growl. He's shifting, pulling his jeans down, freeing his cock. It's heavy and thick as it rests against my inner thigh.

I need it.

We're both naked, his skin hot against mine. He dips his head, curling his wicked tongue around my nipple. I gasp when he lets his sharpened fangs move dangerously over me, and I arch backwards. One of his hands supports my lower back while the other reaches up to cup my breast as he sucks me into his mouth. He bites gently, expertly, avoiding nicking me with those keen-edged teeth.

"How does your blood still smell so tempting?" he asks, smooth lips whispering against my pebbled flesh. He kisses me there, pressing his lush mouth to the purpled veins spider-webbed over my skin.

"Ansi's tears," Nico mutters, dropping the last body on his way out the door. I barely notice his words as Roman reaches between us, grabbing himself and slapping his cock against my pussy.

When he parts my skin, sliding a finger from clit to entrance, I'm almost embarrassed by how drenched I am for him. Our thighs are slick because of it, but the sound he makes is broken and raw, as if any lingering resolve has just been obliterated.

"If you want it, sweetheart, you have to take it," he says. When he looks down, eyeing where his hard cock rests against me, those long thick lashes brush over his cheeks; I wish I were the one caressing him so gently. Raising up on my knees, I kiss him again while I fist him in my hand, notching him exactly where I need him.

I circle my hips, rubbing the head of his cock at my entrance, and I revel in the sharp intake of his breath and the dark look in his eyes. Pulling back, I watch him as I sink down. Barely breathing as I move, I watch the minuscule relaxation of his face, the dropped jaw, the 'oh' which forms on his lips, as I ease down the thick length of him, taking and taking and taking. A high-pitched whimper escapes me, and he steals it with another kiss. I can feel him twitch inside me as he stretches me. It feels so good, I don't know if I can continue. But I do, squeezing him tightly as I take him completely. I can't move, can't breathe, only able to pant as I adjust to him inside me.

He feels so good, and it's so tight, and I feel so full. He closes his eyes, tilting his head back as one of his hands moves to the middle of my back. When I angle my hips the slightest bit, he curses. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Don't move yet." His other hand grips my thigh painfully, and I can't help but smile.

"Is it too good?" I ask, and when I squeeze my muscles around him, he groans. I'm slowly rocking on him when he leans forward, biting my breast hard enough to hurt but not enough to break the skin. I yelp, and he sucks the ache away, pulling my nipple into his mouth as his hands reach around and cup my ass. He drags me toward him, helping guide me in his lap.

"It's agony. This is the worst idea I've ever had."

But his fingers dig into me, making me grind on his length, as he presses his mouth to my chest. I can't control my noises when his teeth close around my nipple, holding it gently but firmly. Tilting my head, I arch backward, using my hands on his knees to support me. My blood still covers my skin, and he licks it as if he'll never taste it again.

And that's when I realize he won't.

The blood spilled on my body belongs to someone else, someone different. Someone who is no longer *me*. There are bigger consequences to drinking my blood now.

But Roman noses my neck, and he makes a low sound in the back of his throat. I feel the sharp tip of his fangs as he licks me. I'm trying to writhe on him, but he holds my ass, forcing me to move slowly. But all I want is to take. I need to push him backward and ride him hard. I want it to hurt.

Roman grabs my thighs, helping me to reposition and wrap my legs around him. He thrusts up into me, and it's too gentle. When he looks at me with a softened brow, the deep lines between them nearly gone, I almost regret wanting to rid him of them. The vulnerability in his eyes makes me feel things I know I shouldn't.

I am here because of him. I am a vampire because of him.

I almost died. I *did* die.

When he reaches up to brush my hair out of my face, I grab his wrist. I can feel his pulse, hear the pounding of his heart, and my fangs snap out painfully. The satisfied sound he makes when I bite him, the way he uses his other hand on my hip to make me move, causes me to see red, and I don't know why. I'm drinking from his wrist, staring at him, my anger growing more potent with every slide of his body inside mine.

He has no right to feel this good after what's happened. He has no right to be the one I need right now, the one I crave, the one I simply cannot live without. If it had been anyone else, it would've been so much easier. I wouldn't be so angry. I wouldn't have the same regrets.

When a sob heaves up my throat, I drop his wrist and smack him as hard as I can. Lines of red appear on his cheek the moment my hand leaves his flesh. His eyes only widen as he stares up at me. My blood has mixed with his, staining his lips a brutal crimson. He doesn't speak, but a slow smirk forms on his perfect mouth as he waits for me to speak.

"Why?" I ask. "Why didn't you let me die?"

"Couldn't," he says simply, as if that's all it is. As if he hadn't been on the verge of killing me for weeks. Roman licks his lips, and I track the motion. His hands haven't moved from my ass, and he thrusts upward, drawing a moan from me. "You've needed this," he says, and when I assume he means his dick, I'm about to smack him again. He chuckles as he thrusts, using his fingertips digging into my flesh to pull me down harder. "Anger. You've needed this anger. It's easier to be angry than it is to be anything else."

"You don't know shit about my anger," I retort.

His arm wraps around me, and he holds me tight against him. Stomach to stomach, chest to chest, he gets in my face. I'm struck with the urge to bite him as hard as I can. I feel wild and untamed in a way I can't begin to comprehend.

"I know everything about you, Gwyn." Then his arms are hooking under my knees, and when he stands, I'm at his mercy. I've never been picked up like this before. The shift of gravity forces me to take him deeper than I thought possible. I gasp, wrapping my legs around his back, and he's using those big hands on my waist to bounce me on his dick. He's so thick, and he's spreading me, stretching me; the angle is so good, it's hard to speak.

"Holy fuck," I gasp. I can't help it as I cry out, nearly screaming as he slams me down on his cock over and over again. He's so strong, my arms doing little as they wrap around his neck, and he steals another kiss. It's full of teeth, brutal and unyielding, his rough stubble hurting my skin.

"There's nothing holy here, sweetheart." Roman's eyes dart to mine, a stuttering breath escaping him as he stills my body on his. "And yet you've brought me to my knees," he

whispers against my mouth. He kisses me hard, and I wonder if he thinks it hid his uncertainty, the slight shock which accompanied words he never meant to say.

His fingertips are bruising as he pistons into me. He's so deep, it hurts. But the ache is welcome, each pound against me, each jolt something I crave. I'd wanted the pain, and he's giving me what I need. Hanging on the best I can, he lays waste to my body. His kisses are as punishing as his thrusts, nipping and pressing, as if letting me speak will put a voice to words he's having trouble accepting. I will ask what he meant, demand he tell me how far it's gone for him. I will hope he's worse off in this ruthless game between us but will be fearful of the knowledge.

So I kiss him back with equal vigor. When I draw blood from his lip, moaning as I drink him down, it's a growl which tears up his throat as he moves me even faster. He's close, and finally, he breaks the kiss. He doesn't let go of me, and he shakes his head as he looks into my eyes. It's too much for him. It's disbelief creeping over as his brows gather while quiet grunts and sighs tumble out of his mouth as his movements grow erratic. Finally, with a long groan, he comes. The emotions which warred on his face only moments ago have shocked me into silence, into some state of denial and desire. Roman holds me still atop him, the warmth of his release filling me. He doesn't put me down as he staggers to my bed, and he buries his face in my neck.

I wonder if it's self-preservation.

Sitting on the edge of my mattress, arms wrapped around my waist, his lips move gently on my neck. He's holding me tightly, like he can't let me get away. My knees rest on either side of him, and I squash the urge to rest my head on his shoulder. I don't know what to say, or if I should say anything at all.

Roman holds me like this just long enough that my body begins aching for more, my hips trying to roll against him. Nothing else matters, when every thought of mine revolves around getting off, and I wonder if he went over that edge

without me as punishment. But then he's nipping my ear, his warm breath a tickle on my neck.

"You don't think I'm done with you, do you? Let me see it," he says. And then he's lifting me off his lap and throwing me onto the bed. I prop myself up on my elbows, and I feel like I should say something. I should have some sort of remark to minimize what we've done. He shoves my legs apart, staring down at me, and I've never felt more bare. But then he praises me, and I wish it didn't affect me the way it does. "You're so fucking pretty like that. My beautiful little mess."

And then his big hands are on my thighs, pushing my legs farther apart. Roman kisses the inside of my knee. Higher. The juncture of my thigh. Higher. He licks around my belly button, and I shiver. When he looks up at me, I'm taken aback by how beautiful he is. Dark, thick lashes ring his bright eyes, and they're filled with a fiery lust which feels like something *more*. When his fingertips slip through the mess we've made and his tongue traces that sensitive, swollen spot, my hips buck uncontrollably. He chuckles against me and slides his fingers inside me.

Roman sucks on my clit as his fingers curl, slippery with his release. I've never had a man do this before, and it's made me lose focus on my pleasure. He's surprised me enough to distract that throbbing need. The sounds he makes bring me back though. He lets out little noises and rumbles of approval, like this is just as much for him as it is for me.

Men from my past wouldn't even kiss me after a blowjob, but here Roman is letting his tongue trace a path all over me before I've cleaned up. His clever fingers rub me with enough pressure, my legs start twitching. This feels more intimate than it should, and I wonder if it's because I've expected so much less in the past.

Or because Roman is so much more in so many ways.

"Out of your head, Gwyn," he says before nipping my clit. "Thinking is for when you're boneless. For when it's quiet." He pulls my clit into his mouth hard as his fingers flutter

inside me. I gasp when he releases me. “And you’re not going to be quiet for me, are you, sweetheart?”

I let my elbows slip out from beneath me and collapse into the mattress. Not wanting to analyze any of this, I close my eyes and heed his words, allowing myself to sink into the sensation. And when I just let myself exist, let myself soak in the feeling, I don’t stay quiet. I moan, pressing my head back into the mattress hard. His chuckle is smug satisfaction against my skin. When Roman rubs his fangs over me, I suck in a breath. I don’t know if it’s meant to be a threat, but something about it pushes me closer. This sharp-edged predator is using that lazy tongue alongside his fearful teeth to bring me pleasure, and it turns me on all the more.

I’ve chased risks all my life, and I wonder if I’ve been running after Roman all along.

He sucks and kisses and licks, all while deft fingertips rub that spot inside me with consistent pressure. I can feel my muscles flexing against him, as if it’s too much and they want him out, but he presses past it. I’m writhing beneath his touch, and he puts a hand on my stomach to keep me from moving away.

“Don’t stop,” I murmur, and my body tightens. My shoulders tense, and I feel like I’m about to explode into a thousand tiny pieces. I can’t help it as I reach for the hand he’s using to hold me down. And instead of swatting me away, he interlaces his fingers with mine. Roman anchors me to his touch, and when I finally hit that peak, gasping his name and squeezing his hand, I realize I don’t want to stop doing this.

Ever.

ROMAN

How I managed to come in the midst of a goddamn crisis of identity is a testament to how ruined I truly am. I'd had no intention of fucking her, hoping my own willpower would counteract the need the change would force upon her.

Turns out, I'm a stupid motherfucker.

My only hope now is to make Gwyn forget her own name, so she doesn't remember what the fuck I said, the hand I'd shown her. The line I'd not only crossed but invariably pissed on.

Holding her goddamn hand isn't helping. Gwyn's eyes are closed, brows lifted, and her other hand lays across her chest as she breathes deeply. I'm already hard again, the way she'd writhed and reached for me while I brought her to orgasm more than enough to do it. I don't know how much longer we have before people start asking questions, but I need to get her out of here. Taking her to the greystone before anyone can figure out what I've done to her is of the utmost importance. She can't cling to me on the way out, her fangs and desire uncontrollable; someone will see it, and we'll be caught.

I quite literally need to fuck the need out of her.

"Come here," I say, pulling her up by the hand I still haven't let go of. Sitting on the edge of her bed, I settle her between my legs. Her ass rubs against my dick, and I reach around to cup her breast.

"How do I already want you inside me again?" she asks, relaxing against me. "It's not as bad as before, but fuck."

“It’s going to be like this for a few days,” I tell her. “Each time will take a little edge off. It took me about three days to get a handle on it.”

She stiffens in my arms, and I pinch her nipple. Wishing I hadn’t said that, I rub my hand down her spine. Territorial is a modest way to describe vampires during an Ascension. It goes both ways, but at least with me, I know how to control my shit. She doesn’t. Not yet anyway.

“When were you changed? I thought you were born a vampire.” Her hands rest on my thighs, one fingertip tracing the ink curling over my knee. It’s on my left, the side I’ve dedicated to nature, so the curve of the long vine is easy for her to follow. Brushing her hair out of the way, I press a kiss to her neck. The urge to bite her hasn’t subsided in the slightest, and it’s mind-boggling. If anything, she smells better. Apple pie has shifted into some sort of rich cider, and it’s all the more tempting. I don’t know how the fuck I’m supposed to handle it. But caution has apparently left me with my common sense, and I drag my teeth over her carotid. Her pulse has slowed, but not as much as Margot and the others. Perhaps it’s because of her hunter’s blood. I drag my hand down her side, the sticky blood from where one of them had bitten her impeding the motion.

“I was born a vampire, but the choice to Ascend remained. I still had many of my abilities, like strength and speed, but they were harder to control. Erratic, unpredictable. To be fair, it never really felt like much of a choice. My coven had been swearing blood oaths to me my entire life, just waiting to become sworn to me the moment I Ascended. But I still had to choose to drink to obtain immortality.” Her heart begins to race, and I realize my mistake immediately. “Try not to think about that, not yet.” I lick her neck, the sweet tart of her blood fading as it dries on her milky skin. It had taken everything in me to not bite that plump spot between her thighs. Honestly, when I was sucking on her sweet little clit, if I’d have gotten a taste of her blood, I would’ve come right then. A tremendously reckless part of me almost said ‘fuck it’ and did it anyway. But then I thought about how she would stop needing me once her body completed the change, and then

she'd hate me for what I've done. And if I drank from her, it would limit me beyond comfort. Blood sworn to Gwyn, I'd have a hell of a time acting against her, and I can't have that.

Gwyn adjusts, rubbing her sweet round ass against me, and I groan into her neck. My teeth drag along her skin, and she reaches one arm up, digging her fingertips into my scalp.

"You still want to bite me, don't you?" she sighs, and her other hand squeezes my thigh, digging her nails into my flesh.

"Desperately," I admit. There's no point in lying.

"You can if you want," she says, letting her head loll against my chest.

"I know I can. I can do anything with you I want, sweetheart," I retort, sliding my hand down to cup her pussy. She's a sloppy mess, and I rub my fingertips through it. The sound I make is involuntary. I don't think I've wanted anyone this badly since my own Ascension. Frankly, it's worse because I have the choice now to stop. And I really don't fucking want to.

"But you won't," she says. I don't know if she refers to me biting her or the thinly veiled threat of using her as I see fit. Either way, she's correct.

"A burden far easier to bear if I'm buried inside you." I lift her, squeezing that fat round ass in my hands as I stand and turn her around. I almost mourn that I'll never get the chance to bite it. Grabbing her thigh, I put one of her knees on the bed. Eagerly, she angles that sweet cunt toward me, and I tease her, holding my cock with one hand and spreading her with the other. Rubbing myself along her slit, once I'm lined up perfectly, I grip her waist and pull her back.

She's dripping wet, and it feels so good, I can't help it when I groan. Gwyn's moan is deep, reverberating, as she throws her head back. Encircling her body, I grab her breast with one hand and her stomach with the other, hauling her against me. She arches her back, putting her weight on her knee. I drag my tongue over her shoulder and up her neck, gently pulling her ear into my mouth.

I want to be so fucking far from gentle with her, but I can't risk it.

"Roman," she pants as her fingertips flutter over my knuckles. I grab her wrist, gently guiding her hand down her stomach, bringing her fingers to where I rest inside her.

"Feel it, sweetheart. Feel how perfect." She slides her fingers on either side of my cock, and I feel her muscles tighten around me. Gwyn straightens, gliding her fingers over my length. She spreads the wetness on me and her clit before she rubs firm circles on that sensitive spot. Insatiable, the Ascension is riding her hard. "Nuh uh," I say, grabbing her wrist. "That's mine now. *If my cock is inside you, ask permission first.*"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she says, and it's the first glimpse of her normal self after giving her my blood. The laugh which escapes me is more relief than anything, and I clear my throat. She can't see that weakness. "I'm not asking you—oh!" She clenches around me, her body unable to hide how much she liked me slapping her pussy. Instinctively, I'd done it to cover up my overwhelming relief. I rub my middle finger over her clit, and one of her hands grabs my wrist. "Roman," she moans as she writhes beneath my touch. The warm hug of her cunt is almost too much, but I thrust into her. Using my other hand to grab her throat, I turn it so I have access to her pretty neck.

Dragging my teeth over her pulse, I breathe her in. She is the sweetest temptation, and I want her more than anything. I want her blood on my tongue as I come inside her. I want that sweet taste in my mouth as she squeezes my cock and cries out. I'm furious I didn't fuck her before it came to this.

Fleetingly, I almost convince myself it wouldn't be that big of a deal. I graze the sharp tip of a fang along the column of her neck. Her high-pitched noises make it worse, make me want to validate the fear and arousal. She tilts her hips toward my hand, wanting more pressure on her clit, and I push harder, giving what she needs.

Gwyn is panting as I slam into her, as her hand rests atop mine where it rubs her clit, as her legs shake and her cries grow louder. When I hear Nico clear his throat in the hallway, I become single-minded. The Ascension is harder on those turning, but I'm not unaffected by it either. She's mine, she belongs to me, and I will annihilate anyone who threatens her.

"Fuck off, Nico," I grumble, and Gwyn snorts.

"Strange choice of dirty talk," she says, and I flick her clit before circling it with more pressure. Sucking on her neck hard, I immediately pull away when I realize what I've done. I don't taste her blood, thank fuck, but I can smell it. I've nicked her skin, and I loosen my grip on her throat to wipe my mouth and teeth. When my hand comes back clean, I'm relieved. The smell is driving me mad though, just as much as it always has. I watch as a bead of blood wells up on her skin, and I wipe it up with my fingertip. I put it in her mouth, and she sucks the taste away, removing the temptation.

"Was that my blood?" she asks. "Did you bite me?"

"Just a scratch," I respond, but it was too fucking close. Rubbing her clit harder, I angle my hips to fuck her deeply, grateful she can't see me. There's too much I'm feeling, too much I'm holding back, everything is too fucking much. I can't risk her reading it on my face. I don't even know what any of this means—how much of it is the Ascension and how much is just her? Her light, her kindness, her trust, her beauty.

If Gwyn has somehow managed to become my everything, then what I've done for my family is worth nothing. I don't know if I can live with that.

"Roman, I—I'm," she stutters, and her pussy is squeezing me so tight, I know what she's trying to say.

"I know, sweetheart. You need to come, don't you?"

"Yes," she cries out, hand grabbing at mine as I rub circles on that sensitive spot. "Please, I need to."

"Then do it. *Come on my cock*," I command, and she does, her whole body shaking as she tries to collapse forward onto the bed. But I don't let her, gripping her hips tightly as I thrust

into her. Her sounds are so goddamn sexy, the whimpers climbing up her throat as her hand claws into mine. She's squeezing my dick like a vise, and she's so slick and beautiful and mine—I tip over the edge with her. I'm soaring on a high from the blood I've licked from her body, everything slightly blurry and bright. When I can barely stand, she falls forward onto the bed, and I move with her, bending over her and kissing her spine before collapsing beside her.

Gwyn is laying on her stomach, facing away from me as I roll over onto my back. Staring at the ceiling, I know I have to move, have to get her to safety, but I wish I had a few more minutes to deconstruct my emotions. But she turns her head, grabbing my hand in hers and pulling it close.

She's flushed, skin dewy and eyes wet. Her lip trembles, and a tear slides down her face onto the bed. Rolling toward her, she's all I can see.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and I say nothing. How could I possibly respond to that? By choosing to care for her, to protect her, almost getting her killed was inevitable. I frown, shaking my head when she continues. “You were never my damnation, Roman. You're my absolution.”

Frozen, all I can do is stare at her. Long dark lashes, wet with emotion. Honey eyes which are only brighter now that she's changed. Smooth, unblemished skin and pink cheeks. That plump mouth and the soft curve of her jaw. She's breathtaking. When she smiles at me, I kiss her, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to stop.

“Holy shit,” Gwyn breathes as I shut the front door behind us. It's quiet, and I can hear the faint murmur of Margot's voice as she problem solves on her phone outside. I run my hand through my hair, walking past Gwyn to the back of the house where the kitchen is located, flicking lights on as I go. I haven't been to the greystone since Margot had the place renovated. The marble counters and white cabinets with gold brushed handles are ostentatious, but I have to admit it looks

nice. I know Gwyn will be impressed by the small closet with glass doors and a stock of wine more expensive than the home itself. She lingers in the foyer, but I don't bother calling her into the kitchen. She won't stay away from me for long. Much to Margot's chagrin, I'd sat in the backseat with her on the way over, knowing Gwyn wouldn't make it to the house without needing my touch once more. We're lucky she was too busy riding my fingers to worry about biting Margot's fucking head off. Gwyn's change might have caused her to want to kill Margot, but I had found her to be barely tolerable as well. It had been a considerable effort to not remove her from Gwyn's presence, and I'd left Nico at the compound for the same reason.

"I thought this was your place," Gwyn says, voice moving closer to the kitchen where I pour a finger of scotch. Before she comes around the corner, I toss the extra glass back up in the cabinet. I'm not the fucking host to her houseguest, goddammit. When she sees the marble island with the low-hanging lights over it, her brows raise, but she says nothing.

Without holding something, Gwyn doesn't know what to do with her hands. She doesn't even have clothes after I'd thrown a severed head on top of her things and she'd subsequently puked on top of them. She wears my leather jacket, zipped to her chin, and it swims on her. Even though she wears pajama shorts I'd fished out of the mess for her, it looks like she's only wearing my jacket. I swallow when I realize that fucking does something to me. Fucking hell. Her long dark hair is tangled, and she stinks of blood and vomit. I swear trauma has a smell, that hint of fear in her sweat and the salt in her tears, and I fight the urge to take her straight to the bathtub.

"It is." I toss back my drink.

"Doesn't look like it," she remarks but doesn't comment further. Her hands are clasped in front of her as she approaches the window facing the back garden. It's small, with barely enough room for the built-in brick stove and the patio set Margot insisted on. I'm about to tell her she won't be able to

see anything outside without the porch light, but realize she can see perfectly fine in the dark now.

It pains me, surprisingly.

“I haven’t really lived here.”

“Ah yes, you were traveling for work,” she says. In the window’s reflection, I see a slight smile grace her perfect lips. She’s far more calm than she ought to be amid this life-changing transformation. She plants her ass on the windowsill, hands curled around the ledge. Unsettlingly docile, she waits. When I pour another glass, she eyes it like she wants one herself, but she doesn’t ask.

And I don’t offer.

I don’t know what the fuck to do with her now. Margot is simultaneously horrified and pleased, while Nico is confused and probably disgusted. I’m a little bit of all those things. What I do know is I’ve created a fucking predicament without solving my previous one. If my father finds out what I’ve done...Fuck.

“We found them,” I blurt, swirling my glass on the table. The scotch on top of the white marble is the exact hue of her fucking eyes, and I can’t goddamn escape her.

“Who?”

The front door opens, and I’m relieved to hear Margot finishing her phone call. I haven’t moved by the time she gets into the kitchen, and she freezes in the doorway. Eyeing Gwyn, she plants herself firmly out of our radius. Margot has changed clothing, and she sports cat-eye reading glasses she doesn’t need. Her slicked back ponytail is crisp, and she fits my house better than I do. Gwyn and I look like shit, and we reek of sex and blood. Maybe I should have sent her to bathe.

“Alright then, fuckers. Go bang it out,” my assistant says, pointing to the ceiling.

“Jesus, Margot,” I say, rubbing my hand over my face. When I sneak a glance at Gwyn, she’s blushing as she focuses very hard on the grout lines between tiles.

“What? There’s no way it’s eased up that soon, has it?” She doesn’t direct her question at anyone in particular, and neither of us jumps to answer it. “You know, it took over a week before I was back to normal. And it took you a few days. Since you’re a hunter, maybe it will go faster.” She frowns at Gwyn, clearly pitying her.

“Who did the—who made you?” Gwyn asks, soft. “If you don’t mind me asking, I mean, I just—”

“No worries. A vampire named Mateo turned me against my will. His blood was in my system when he murdered me.”

“And you had to Ascend, you—you had to *have sex* with him?” Gwyn hisses, looking at me in horror as if I had something to do with it.

“No. He brought me to the compound when Roman had just Ascended, and Roman killed him. A few other vampires let me, uh, work things out.”

“Oh, well, good call, Ro—”

Margot doesn’t let me have an ounce of glory, and that’s fine because I didn’t earn it. “No, no, he didn’t do it to give me justice. Mateo looked at Kathleen wrong, and Roman ripped him apart.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense.” She swallows hard, staring at my empty glass. “Wait. Kathleen? She turned you? She’s your ex?” When I nod, all she does is laugh. Head thrown back, pretty neck exposed, she cackles like it’s the funniest thing in the world. “That slipped bitch,” she murmurs, and I don’t know what the fuck she’s talking about.

“You look confused, bud. Kathleen is the one who instigated shit,” Margot explains. I’m out of the kitchen, halfway to the front door, when Margot stops me with a hand on my wrist. “She hopped on a plane with Bjorn while you were, uh, occupied. Don’t waste your time.”

“Oh, thank fuck.” I’d forgotten all about their little romantic trip to Iceland they had planned. “How long?” Gwyn peeks her head out of the kitchen, and I can see her pupils dilate and fangs lengthen. Moving quickly, I swap positions

with Margot just as Gwyn collides into me, the woman not used to her abilities yet. Her nails claw at my neck, and she doesn't realize it's me and not her target until I have her arms crossed over her chest and her body locked to mine. "Easy, sweetheart."

She growls, lunging at Margot like she stands a chance of escaping me. I chuckle when I think about just how impossible it will be for her to get rid of me now.

"They planned on staying for three weeks, but I don't know who knew about Kathleen's plan. And I bet Emile will wonder where Peter and Giovanni went at the very least." Margot backs toward the door, slinging her purse over her shoulder. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's back in a week, especially if he finds out Gwyn is gone. You might want to come up with a reason to take her out of the compound. Something he'll believe."

Gwyn is squirming in my hold, trying to go after Margot, and I toss her over my shoulder. She screams, thrashing, and I swat her ass just like I did all those weeks ago. When she moans, Margot snorts. The reprieve is brief as Gwyn starts yelling at me almost immediately. Margot speaks over her as if it's nothing new.

"I need to go deal with the surveillance. Freddie will review it in a few hours, and I need to fix it before he does. Nico handled the mess, and I think he's found a door..."

I walk Margot to the foyer as she rambles on about all the ways she's going to earn the raise I already planned on giving her. We both tune out the feral creature on my shoulder. Only when I round the stairs and Margot closes the door behind her does Gwyn stop shouting, but she squirms in my grasp, dying to get free.

"Put me down. Where are we going?"

I do no such thing. "Well, sweetheart, I have three things planned. Number one, get us into the shower. We stink."

"Speak for yourself," she says.

“You have the nose of a bloodhound now, baby. You can’t lie and tell me—”

“Whatever. What’s number two?”

My smile at her sass fades quickly. “We found the people responsible for Remy’s death—and they would’ve been responsible for hurting you too if they had a chance.” She goes limp, and I let her slide down to the ground once I reach the top of the stairs. “I think I ought to fill you in.”

“Why does everyone want to hurt me?” Gwyn presses her palms to my chest, resting her forehead against me. She breathes deep as if she’s trying to keep herself from crying. “And third?”

“Well, number three involves banging it out.”

She balls up one of her hands into a fist, slamming it against me, but there’s laughter in those haunting, tear-wet eyes as she looks up at me. “Pig.”

I scoop her up into my arms, making a beeline to the master bathroom, and I do my best to ignore the uneasy feeling creeping over me. At least we’ve got a few days to plan. I’m going to need every minute to figure out how the fuck I’m going to handle this mess.

“DID YOU ALWAYS STRUGGLE TO SLEEP? BEFORE THE accident?” Roman asks, and I’m surprised he’s still awake. Though I can’t tell because of dark curtains, I know it’s approaching dawn. There are too many things on my mind, and I can’t shut it off. Between the transition, the need which comes with it, and all the things Roman has explained since, the last few days have been earth-shattering. The screenshot Margot took of the surveillance footage, the grainy image of an examination table clear, has haunted me. Because of that and the demands of my body, I don’t know up from down anymore. I need to shower again, and the fact I’m not sore is confusing. I should ache, but I don’t. A perk of a vampire body, I suppose, but it feels like a violation.

It’s the first discomfort I’ve missed, but I’m sure it won’t be the last.

The thirst isn’t what I expected either. Roman truly meant *constant* when he said it. There is no relief. Even drinking from him only soothes the edges of it, sanding it down to bearable. Roman hasn’t allowed me to go long enough between drinking to feel the worst of it. But I’m sure he will one day, just to make certain I can handle it. I dread that day.

I don’t answer his question. “Do I even need to sleep anymore, or is it just habit?”

He doesn’t touch me, but I notice the infinitesimal shift in the air, the slight shudder to the bed I’m sharing with him. His hand moved as if he wanted to touch me, but then he thought

better of it. I don't know if it's a good thing or not. "We still need to sleep. Maybe not as long, but we still need it."

I sigh, rolling onto my back and staring at the ceiling fan as it spins above us. "I've always struggled to sleep, but it got worse when they died."

He's quiet for a long time, and just when I think he's fallen asleep, he speaks. His voice is a low rumble in the dark. "Remy was a light sleeper when we were growing up, got worse after Mom died, but he barely slept at all while he was, uh, getting into trouble."

I know from reading the journal what he speaks of. The details are a little fuzzy about why his brother's addiction started, but I know Roman's part in it. I recognize the worry and fear he must have felt when he didn't know where or what Remy was doing. The duty Roman must have felt once he finally found him is clear in Remy's written disdain. I know the rage which flooded through Roman's veins when he found the vial of demon blood Remy had smuggled into the compound. I can understand the helplessness which caused him to bring it to Bjorn, hoping to help his brother. And I felt the betrayal when Remy wrote about what happened next.

"What's so special about demon blood?" I ask.

"Tastes like shit, makes you high," he grunts out.

"Didn't my blood make you high?"

"Not like demon blood, no. Demon blood makes you stronger, makes you feel invincible, makes vampires dangerous. Remy hallucinated shit after Rose—" Roman stops himself, rolling onto his side to look at me. Though it's dark in the room, with my improved vision, I can see the snake curling up over his arm and the raven on his chest. I'm reminded of not too many hours ago when I'd traced the path of the serpent with my tongue as I'd moved on top of him. I lick my lips when I think about how I'd bitten that soft skin over his ribs and drank his blood. His eyes flash; I'm not sure if it's something I can only notice now because of my better sight, or if they've always glowed. Like a predator in the dark, it's not as unsettling as it ought to be. Perhaps I've grown used to him.

Perhaps it's his blood which slakes this god-awful thirst that has made me comfortable in his presence. "I haven't read through the journal yet," Roman says, sounding exhausted, "but did he talk about what happened with Rose?"

"Not really." All Remy had written about her was how much he'd missed the woman. I'd known there was more to it, but I'd found few answers in the journal.

"Rose and Remy were absolutely fucking horrid for each other. She was the one who turned him onto demon blood. They were fools." Roman swallows as he flops onto his back. I've never seen him restless before; every action I've held witness to has been carefully calculated. But his guard has come down around me in the days since he's turned me. His hands rest on his belly, and I am so tempted to provide comfort with my touch. I dismiss the impulsive thought. "Before she was turned, Rose had a daughter—Kayla was her name. Rose didn't have custody of her for a while, but Kayla's dad got a temporary contract overseas—about six years ago now? He decided leaving her in the United States was better for her." Roman smiles, closing his eyes as he exhales a laugh. "The minute Remy met her, at all of ten years old, Kayla had my brother wrapped around her little finger. He immediately stopped using, and he got Rose clean too. He started working for me, doing some filing with all the projects I was working on, and my dad hired Rose as a maid at the compound." Roman grunts, flipping onto his side to face me. His tone turns pleading. "They were good for a while, Gwyn. *Really* good for about a year." Earnest, Roman needs me to see his brother tried. That Remy did the work and made a life for himself. I'd seen hints of it in the words I'd read, but that life was a ghost by the time he wrote it all out.

"But she died, didn't she? Rose?"

"Overdosed on demon blood. Didn't even know you could do that. They always warn you about acting stupid, doing things that will get you hurt beyond our healing abilities. Fuck, maybe the shit she got was bad and had silver in it for all I know. But Remy came home one night from working with me and found her." His voice has softened, gentle in the early

morning quiet. Tenderness on Roman is foreign, and I stop breathing when I think about how he's shown me so much of it the last few days.

Roman is like this with those he loves. I close my eyes, thinking about the words he'd said before he turned me. I obsess over the indecision I'd had when I didn't want to drink from him. He hasn't said anything definitive; he probably doesn't even realize how he's treated me. I'd wanted this. I'd done what I could to manipulate him into caring. And now I've succeeded. Now he treats me differently. Hearing him speak of his brother in the same hushed tones he's used to comfort me lights a small kernel of hope in my chest.

I should extinguish it now before it's too late.

"Margot beat me there, and she took Kayla to her grandparent's house before the girl even knew what happened. Her dad flew in a day or so later, and Remy never saw Kayla again. To lose them both was too much on his relatively new sobriety, and, well, his journal probably details the rest of it pretty well, I'd guess." Roman swallows, putting an arm under his pillow as he watches me.

"He was pretty angry with you when you first found him," I admit.

"I wasn't gonna let my little brother die like Rose." And he didn't. It might have taken him a few months to track him down, but the moment he did, Roman took Remy straight to the compound. He'd tossed him in the same room they had held me in and forced him to get sober. But he didn't abandon him there either. He'd gotten him a counselor—coercion forced, but still—and he'd been there for his brother. But I don't think he realizes how close he was to not finding him in the first place. Roman didn't just work against the addiction, but also Remy's overwhelming desire to stop living. I don't think he knows the extent of it. For a moment, I resist the urge to explain, but the insane part of me which has come to care deeply for the man beside me wins.

"You should read the journal, Roman."

"I plan to. I just don't know if—"

“I know you already have a lot of guilt over it. And telling you this might not help. Or fuck, maybe it will, I don’t know. But I don’t think he ever planned to use that vial you found on him. Not like you think, anyway.”

He stiffens before sitting up and leaning against the headboard. I’m sure I’ve struck a nerve. This is the source of Roman’s guilt. He found that vial, and he caused Remy’s banishment.

“Gwyn, an addict with a secret stash? What the hell do you mean he wasn’t going to use it?”

“Well, that was a long time ago now, wasn’t it? Four or five years? And Margot says you think he’s been clean ever since, right? After your father exiled him?”

He nods. “We met up over the years, and he always seemed to be sober. I kept trying to get him to just move into my place, but he was trying to make his own way. Until he disappeared hunting you, he’d been doing good on his own.”

I sit up. Despite myself, I take his hands in mine. “When you *rightfully* freaked out on him, and you found that vial of demon blood, I think you took his, uh...Hm, I don’t know what to call it.” I tilt my head, stuck on how to explain something which is so obvious to me but so clearly an inconceivable concept to him. “If Remy never used again after you got him clean, even after you caused his exile, that vial wasn’t what you thought it was.”

“Then what was it, Gwyn?” I can’t tell if he’s annoyed with me, but he slides one hand up my arm, cupping my neck and drawing me closer. He rests his forehead against mine and waits for me to speak. Affection rises in my stomach against my will. Roman has stolen my hatred for him and drawn a line in the sand. It’s not that I’ve crossed it, but the tides of his fierce protectiveness and loyalty have smoothed it away.

“He never outright said it in the journal, but my guess is it was tainted. He viewed it as an escape, but I don’t think he meant a temporary one. By the way he wrote about it, it would’ve killed him if he drank it.” Roman is quiet, and I find it desperately important for him to understand exactly what I

mean. And yet, I dance around it like I have my whole life. When someone suffers from depression, suicidal ideation is the line people draw. It's impossible to speak of past thoughts without people worrying about the present, so I prefer not to mention it at all. "Many depressed people have a...a plan on standby. A-an exit plan. In taking it from him, you might have saved his life." His thumb brushes over my neck, and his breath stutters.

"Fuck." The whisper is so soft, the exhalation of breath so faint, that it breaks my heart. Roman knew his brother's afflictions, that much is clear. Like Hale with me, Roman forced his brother to bathe and take care of himself. And while Roman might know the existential sorrow of a heart steeped in guilt and regret, I doubt he understands the burrowing urge to do something about it, no matter the impact. What Roman thought was a token of his brother's addiction was more likely a hallmark of depression—the insidious yearning for everything to stop. To find out his brother probably had a real, tangible plan to end his life? I'm certain it hurts.

I breathe deep, searching for words to soothe and heal, to ease the ache. But I can't say the one thing which would help. I can't tell Roman that Remy is alive, thriving because of his interference. I can't tell Roman that in the end, everything is okay, and that's all that matters. This is a heartbreak I cannot fix. And yet the desire to do so is extreme.

"Roman, your brother—"

"Did you? *Do* you?" Furious, it's an accusation. "Do *you* have a plan, Gwyn?" I can feel his anger, but somehow I know it's not directed at me. It's a futile hatred of that intrusive self-loathing which has plagued me for as long as I can remember. His hand on my neck grips me firmly, holding me still. I'm stunned into silence by the shift of his thoughts. Moving from realizations about his brother to questions about me is a dizzying jump. That he would ask me something so personal and so sensitive without any restraint shouldn't surprise me, but it does. Direct, Roman asks me what I've told no one, not even a therapist.

“Sorta,” I answer, the candor feeling foreign on my tongue. His other hand slides up and cups my jaw. He cradles my head in his hands, another tender act. No one has ever reacted like this to my mental illness. Being handled with such care almost makes me think I deserve this kind of softness.

Even before my parents died, I had slipped into seasons of sadness with ease. They dealt with it for most of my life, part of why I stayed in their guest house for as long as I did, and they never understood it. Even Sasha never truly grasped it. Finding the professional help I needed, providing me with a safety net when I failed classes—that was the extent of their support. And even that came at a cost. It took far too long for everyone to realize it was my mental health and not laziness or lack of drive which kept me from the success they’d expected of me. And I’d plummeted farther into the abyss of self-hatred and despair when I had thought they were right. When I’d been convinced if I just tried a little harder, things would be better.

Later, once they figured it out, they’d done enough. But no one ever shoved past the discomfort of asking the hard questions, to truly push me into talking about my depression instead of shutting everyone out. Part of me still thinks they believed it was a choice. They never offered more than what I asked them for. Roman so bluntly giving more, *demanding* more, when he’s only just understood one of the more horrifying parts of this goddamn disorder, knocks me on ass. He feels no discomfort as he pushes past the invisible boundaries my depression has created around me.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did.” I only realize I’m crying when his thumbs slip beneath my eyes and brush the tears away. “I—I haven’t thought about it in a while, but...Lake Osman...the swamp.” And then I’m talking and words are falling out of my mouth in a rush, and I can’t stop, and I don’t stop until I tell him exactly how and exactly why. The words pour out of me—I tell him more than I ever intended to. I tell him how sometimes I can barely keep those dark thoughts away. Describing the feeling in my gut when I know it’s coming is so much easier when Roman’s touch soothes me. I’m sobbing, and he’s pulling me into his lap, holding me tight. In just a few

words, brutal tone cloaking his concern, someone I'd sworn to hate, who has hurt me, who is the face of so much pain, makes me feel seen in ways I've never experienced. When his silence isn't accompanied by horror and repulsion but is instead paired with soothing circles rubbed down my back and soft brushes of his lips to my temple, I am unraveled.

I know, in that moment, the need I feel for him has shifted, has transformed into something bigger than the changes my body has undergone. That when I kiss him, it is not because my body tells me to, not because I only think I want to. When I pull his big body over mine, and my tears don't stop, I let him think it's because of the truths I've admitted. I don't tell him I hate him for this and that I'll never forgive him for making me care for him.

A WEEK AFTER BECOMING A VAMPIRE, my body doesn't look much different. The most remarkable change is that, even though I've been through hell the last few days, my skin looks fucking amazing. I don't look or feel sleep deprived. I don't need a gallon of coffee to wake up, and concealer doesn't even cross my mind. It's a good thing. The trauma I've been through would be significantly less bearable if I physically felt its effects or could see them in a mirror.

I know Margot is downstairs, the faint scent of her coconut lotion drifting up to Roman's walk-in closet. The urge to attack her has eased, but knowing she's near him makes me feel something I don't like. The only things keeping me from going down there are the locked door Roman put between us and his command that I stay upstairs. With my vampire strength, I'm sure I could bust the doors down if I wanted, but that wouldn't matter if I can't go downstairs.

I'm trapped, biding my time. For what, I don't know anymore.

I want to call Sasha, but he won't allow me that.

Returning to my self-assessment in the mirror, I sigh in relief. My pearly stretch marks remain; my soft curved belly and dimpled thighs are unchanged. I've done the work to love my body, and I would've eventually figured out how to keep loving it through a massive change, but I'm relieved it is still mine when so much else doesn't feel that way. My hair is shinier, and it looks like I've gotten a fresh cut. I'm surprisingly hung up on this, and someone needs to explain it to me. How do vampire split-ends work? Hair is dead and vampires are undead, so will it continue to grow? Roman has mentioned his abilities, thirst, and immortality are the only things which have changed since he Ascended. My stomach rumbles, reinforcing my need for food. It's confusing, honestly.

I need someone to answer my very specific questions, and I'm eager to be around Margot again when I don't want to rip her limbs from her body. Roman would probably try to answer, but something tells me he doesn't give a shit about split-ends. And besides, do I want to talk about such mundane things with him? Do I want to let these feelings for him grow? But some of these questions are important. We've already been supremely irresponsible by not using protection when we don't know if my IUD will work. But between my own fertility "concerns" and the fact his mother is the only vampire to have fallen pregnant in the past fifty years, he seems unbothered. Considering Josh's impending fatherhood, it all but confirmed what I'd known for a while. But how does Roman know this new body hasn't healed those parts of me?

I sure as fuck hope not. I've never wanted kids, and I've already worked through the trauma of society making me feel broken, as if the only acceptable role of a woman is to bear a child. If I was entirely certain they wouldn't grow back, I'd cut those parts out of me and weather the pain.

I should ask him to buy condoms.

But then I'd have to talk to Roman about something so obscenely normal, and it gives me anxiety. I would think about him adding a box to his grocery order, carrying plastic bags full of our favorite things, insisting he can carry it all in one

load. I'd imagine putting things away in his beautiful kitchen. Or daydream about him putting me on the counter, spreading my legs and ripping one of those foil packets open with his teeth, kissing me as he rolls it on.

No, I can't ask Roman anything that will make me yearn for the ordinary with him.

I'm about to grab one of his t-shirts when my fingertips trail over a silky powder blue button down hanging on the rack. I can't imagine him shopping for the clothes in his closet, and I'm irritated by the idea that Margot supplied this wardrobe. Or fuck, possibly even Kathleen. But before I can destroy it, ripping the thought to shreds along with the fabric, I imagine it peeking open at the collar, a hint of his chest hair and ink visible beneath it. I think about that first morning Roman came into my room at the compound with his shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal strong, thick forearms. I remove the shirt from the hanger and wrap it around me. When I button it up, the hem of it barely covering my ass, I catch myself in the full-length mirror.

I look good in him. It makes me frown.

Roman is all there is, just as I'd foreseen. But where it should be cold and overwhelming and horrifying, it is warm and light. When I smell him on me, something loosens within my chest. When I feel his touch, it unfurls, invading the space between my lungs. And when his words tickle the spot beneath my ear, whispers of praise and understanding pebbling my skin, it blooms.

My heart has never had such dissonance with my mind. When everything I know tells me to run, to destroy him and never look back, I fight. Whichever half of me wins, the other won't survive it.

I need to kill the feeling before it kills me.

I'm still lost in thought, moving on to study the different shades of brown in my irises, when I hear Roman open the bedroom door. I don't bother taking his shirt off as he unlocks the closet door. In the mirror's reflection, he takes up the entire space. I don't miss the slow drag of his eyes down my body,

the way he lingers on my ass and my thighs, and the smirk which raises his lips as his gaze meets mine. He holds a few black Eloquii bags in his hands, and I struggle to hide my excited inhalation. I didn't realize the brand had a brick-and-mortar location in Chicago, and even though I didn't get to go myself, I know I will be pleased by whatever is in those bags.

“Margot?”

He nods. “Get dressed, sweetheart. We have some hunting to do.”

ROMAN

I'M RELATIVELY CERTAIN MARGOT WAS TRYING TO FUCKING kill me when she picked out the little black dress Gwyn is now wearing. Ruched, it's tight over every fucking curve, and I can't help it when my eyes are drawn to the seam going from the center of her back down her ass. She wears her hair down, the black tresses the same shade as the dress, and when an errant strand rubs over one of her bare shoulders, shiny silk even at night, I lick my lips. I wonder if my friend did it on purpose. We're taking Gwyn to teach her how to feed from humans, and yet, I'm the one barely able to control my thirst. She's a vampire and shouldn't be as tantalizing anymore, and yet all I want to do is sink my teeth into her. The scent of her blood still beckons me, and I'm growing more and more tempted with each passing day.

If they knew of my infatuation with her, with a hunter, the coven would disown me. There are too many who count on me, though, who want to live more normal lives, and risking my station for her is thoughtless. And yet, guilt about that is only a small flicker in the back of my mind. More pressing than the coven's reaction is my need to handle what I started last week before I had to rush back to her. Even though I'm doing this for Remy, I decide I want Gwyn there when we confront the ones who hurt him; they'd planned to hurt her too. But that's why this task is so important. We can't have her losing control before getting answers.

She whispers to Margot as they walk arm and arm down the sidewalk, just quiet enough I can't hear her. Lips stained

scarlet are dangerously close to Margot's ear, and I'm about to find a reason to intervene when Nico chuckles beside me.

"Her Ascension riding you that hard?" he asks, and I glare over at him. He lifts his hands in surrender. "Hey, man, I'm just asking. She seems mostly past it, so I thought you would be too."

"I'm fine," I bite out.

"Okay," he says, dragging out the word. "Unclench your fist, then." I'm grinding my teeth and flexing the hand in question when he softens his voice. "She's the first one you've turned, isn't she? First one is the hardest." I nod, shoving my hands in my pockets. I have no intention of turning anyone else ever again, especially if this is what it entails. Sure, the sex is goddamn life-altering, but keeping myself in check when I so desperately want to mold myself into her very being is not remotely what I'd had in mind. "And fuck if she doesn't still smell delectable," Nico continues.

It takes everything in me not to punch him in the fucking face.

We turn the corner, making our way toward our red brick destination. I'd had my driver drop us off about a block away, making sure Gwyn had time to acclimate to the scent of human blood. No one has drawn her attention, and I find myself impressed with her once more; her control is better than I'd expected. Margot laughs at something Gwyn says, and I pick up my pace as we near the door. Nestled between a clothing shop and a store selling sports gear, Last Drop looks like any other long-standing bar in Wicker Park. But the exclusive second-level boasts one of two specialty bars in all of Chicago. It's the perfect place to teach Gwyn everything she needs to learn.

Margot knows the owner, so we skip the line, and while she's stuck chatting with the bouncer, I lead Gwyn to the bar with my hand on the small of her back. She jumps, but doesn't lose her balance in her heels. I smile when I think of her trying them on in my closet. Still naked, she had strutted around in nothing but the black pumps, thrilled by her improved balance.

If Margot and Nico hadn't been waiting for us downstairs, I'd have made her ride my face right then.

"You nervous, sweetheart?" I ask, bending down to speak against the soft, warm curve of her neck. Her heart is thumping fast.

"Yeah," she says. "Everyone smells so *good*." I inhale deeply, avoiding the dangling earrings she wears as I trace my nose up her neck. Human blood is more pungent than hers, but it's not enough to distract me from that rich, spicy scent wafting from her veins. I press my lips to where her neck meets her shoulder, and I suck. Pulling her blood to the surface, a bruise is the closest I can get to tasting her. Violet blooms on her flesh, and it would be so easy to pierce her skin and bring her blood into my mouth. She lets out a soft groan, her hand sliding up to grasp my neck. "What if I can't stop?" she whispers.

"You'll be alright. I promise."

"What can I get ya?" the bartender asks, and Gwyn steps up between two barstools to order. There's a drink menu written in chalk behind the bar, and she picks something I know will be far too sweet with blue curaçao and grenadine mixed in. I order my favorite top-shelf whisky they carry and put both our drinks on my tab. When the man scrolls through the digital kiosk to add my name, his eyes widen a fraction when he realizes who I am.

"Thank you, Mr. Sauveterre," he says before turning around to make our drinks.

"Roman Sauveterre," Gwyn says, drawing out the 'oh,' sound at the beginning of each word. "I can't believe that's your real name. I had to look it up, you know, before the photoshoot; I didn't know how to pronounce it."

"It's French," I say, dumbly, as if she didn't know that by now. This woman is doing my head in. She laughs, and I wish she was facing me so I could see it. When she turns, I wonder if I didn't somehow silently command it. Seeing smiles on her face after so long, when I'd caused their departure, makes me

feel guilty. They're a gift and a punishment in one. I pull her closer, both hands cradling her lower back.

"I gathered that," she says. "Your mother's last name?" When I nod, she asks me why.

I shrug. "Because I can." There's more than that, and it's a lot to explain. I'm surprised I want to tell her more about my life. I dislike it.

"Wait. How—how has no one found me yet? You use your real name."

"I don't exist, baby. Not legally, anyway."

When our drinks come, hers a bright purple color with sugar on the rim, I pick them both up in one hand. "Come on," I say, leading her to the back of the bar. Bypassing the restrooms, I lead her to the exclusive access staircase, appreciating the round curve of her ass as I usher her in front of me. At the top of the stairs, the bouncer, a younger vampire tasked with keeping unwitting humans away, nods at me and lets us both through.

"Back corner," I tell her, pointing over her shoulder to the unmarked door at the far end of the room. I watch as her head whips around, taking in the moody ambiance and writhing bodies. The place looks exactly as you'd expect an illicit vampire bar to look. Dark red and black couches are low to the ground, littered with pillows and willing humans. Not a single one of them has been coerced to be here. In varying states of undress, they luxuriate in the attention of vampires willing to trade money and attention for a little blood. I watch the way Gwyn's body goes taut as we walk past a particularly bloody scene. A human couple rubs their blood over each other's bodies as a vampire I don't recognize sits back and watches. His pants are tented, and I look at my watch. It's not late enough for those kinds of activities but it's only a matter of time.

Gwyn stops in her tracks to watch the human couple. They're both in only their underwear, and she flinches as the man slices a cut down his palm and rubs it across the woman's chest. Considering how much blood covers them both, I

suspect she's done the same to him. The vampire watching them must be doing some sort of delayed gratification thing, because all he does is lick his lips. When Gwyn takes a few staggering steps toward them, nostrils flaring, I wrap my arm around her waist and tug her close. "It's rude to interrupt, baby."

She snarls at me, her fangs lengthened as she tries to pull out of my grip. "*Calm*," I command, and she goes slack in my arms. "Come on." I nudge her along to the back room, typing in the code at the door. The private room is reserved for those willing to pay an exorbitant fee, and Margot reserved it the minute Gwyn's Ascension began.

There's a large sectional with deep cushions wrapping around three of the walls, black, and the dark wood paneling behind it gleams against the golden sconces lighting the space. Gwyn walks to a corner of the sectional and sits down, pulling a crimson pillow into her lap.

"That was..." she trails off, shaking her head. "*Fuck*." When I hand her the ridiculous purple drink I carry, I set mine down on the dark coffee table in the center of the room before taking my jacket off. She stares at me, her little pink tongue visible as it rests on her lip. I haven't even sat down, and she's across the room, shoving me to sit and climbing into my lap. She rips my shirt open, the top button flying off, before she pulls the fabric away from my neck. My chuckle turns into a groan as her fangs pierce my skin. Her satisfied grunt is my favorite sound as she pulls my blood into that perfect little mouth. I cup her ass beneath her dress, her thong giving me plenty of access to her smooth skin.

Whenever anyone has sworn their vow to me, I've made them drink from my wrist. Gwyn is the only one who has ever drunk from my neck, and it's far more intimate than I would have imagined. Every single time I hold her in my lap and she drinks from me this way, I allow my eyes to drift shut while I imagine a world in which this could continue. I measure the exact weight of her body on mine, the precise heat she radiates against me, the specific scent of her shampoo and the taste of her skin as I press my mouth to her shoulder. I squeeze her ass,

and she sits up, flipping her hair out of her face. She's glowing, cheeks pink and eyes bright. My blood blends in with her red lips, and she licks away whatever is left. When Gwyn smiles down at me, it stops my fucking heart.

I've seen vampires changed before, and most of us grow more cold—stoic, even. But Gwyn shines. She is full of life, breathless and almost joyful. I try not to wonder if it's because she's been craving her death, and I finally succeeded in giving it to her in a way. The tiniest part of me is worried that's the case. But so what if it is? What if she finds freedom in it? As long as she's actually here, smiling and laughing, does it matter why?

Yes, I decide. It matters.

It matters because the fear of losing her has not left me. That same urgency with which I turned her lives in my chest. It had been assuaged when she began her Ascension, but it never fully left. When she'd fought against me, fought against her despair, I had thought she'd fought the dark beast of depression off too. But it turns out that monster resides in her, and I worry it will overpower her. Knowing how long she's carried a plan in her heart, one hand holding the grenade lever while the other plays with the pin, makes me feel ill. She is fragile, and I hate myself for my weakness. I should never have taken ownership of her melancholy by begging her to stay.

But I have, and I can't regret it.

“What?” she asks, laughing playfully. “I was thirsty.”

When I say nothing, she leans down to kiss me. It relieves a bit of the ache beginning in my chest. I shouldn't let her kiss me, should make it clear this is only to help her through her Ascension. But I squeeze her ass instead, sliding my thumbs over the silky skin of her hips. When I hear someone keying in a code, I tug her dress down, making sure she's covered. My friends have seen enough of what doesn't belong to them.

Although does she really belong to me either?

When Margot enters the room, I hear her swear and tell us to get a room. But I can't take my eyes off Gwyn in my lap. She's laughing at Margot, head tilted back and eyes closed. Her smile is perfection. Seeing her with fangs makes her even more attractive to me. When she touches the tip of her tongue to one, I feel my dick harden, and I'm disappointed when she clambers off me. She doesn't go far though, sitting beside me with her hands in her lap. I adjust my pants, too tight in the crotch now thanks to her, and put one arm over the back of the couch.

"Do you have a preference for who she feeds from, Roman? The usuals are here," Margot says.

"Hey, why does he get to decide?"

"Because he's more likely to hurt someone than you are," Nico answers, and Gwyn only squints at him in confusion. I should kill him.

I decide to ignore Nico instead and give Gwyn a choice. "Do you have a preference? Some vampires don't want to drink from men because of the height difference—"

"Or other reasons," Margot adds. "But don't worry, the humans here don't get handsy."

"I was getting there," I say, scowling at the two vampires hovering in the doorway. "It's up to you, Gwyn. Whatever makes you most comfortable." I don't know if Gwyn does it on purpose, but she sidles closer to me. She's nervous. "It's not that bad," I tell her, tilting her chin toward me. Those big brown eyes dart all over my face, and her pouty mouth begs to be kissed as she wears the slightest frown. I don't let myself. "You just do what you've done with me, only more gently. And they won't heal after, so you'll need to lick the wounds you make."

"Unless they don't want you to heal them," Nico says, reminding me once again of his presence. I regret bringing them both.

"What's your one friend's name, Margot? Petra? Bring her and whoever else you two want."

Margot leaves, and Nico settles down on the couch across the room from us before he pulls out his phone. When the screen lights up, I can't help but snort over a centuries old vampire playing Sudoku.

"Is Petra your favorite?" Gwyn asks.

"You jealous?"

"I never said that."

"I don't have a favorite."

"Then why did you pick Petra?" She is definitely jealous, but is it her or the Ascension?

"She'll be good for you."

A moment later, Margot is ushering a few humans into the room, and Petra makes a beeline toward me and Gwyn. She's small and fit, her dancer legs thick with corded muscle.

"Roman! It's good to see you." The human turns toward Gwyn, sticking her hand out in offering. "I'm Petra, and you must be Gwyn?" My girl sits up, eyeing the human in her fishnets and tight lime-green dress. When Gwyn doesn't move, Petra pulls back with grace, running her hand through her short dark hair instead. She turns, grabbing the coffee table with our drinks, and drags it across the floor. She's a bundle of energy, this one, but I think she'll help Gwyn feel at ease.

"How are your savings?" I ask.

"Almost there!" She beams before turning to Gwyn to explain. "I'm saving up to move to L.A., and I'm a few grand short of my goal." She leans forward, giving both of us an ample view of her tits. "I think another month or so here oughta do it. Then I am going, going, gone!" Her voice swaps octaves and takes on a sing-song quality.

"Help her figure this shit out, and I'll make up what you need," I say. Petra's eyes go round as saucers.

"I couldn't accept—"

"It's no big deal." I shush her. "You know the risks of a first-timer, and this one is especially feral," I explain. Gwyn

elbows me hard.

“I’m sorry I didn’t shake your hand. I was afraid I was going to bite it,” Gwyn explains, sounding embarrassed.

“That’s what I’m here for, right?” Petra grins at her. She’s a sweet girl, kind and bubbly. Exactly what Gwyn needs to guide her through this, but also as a reminder of her humanity. It’s easy to get swept up into the thirst early on, but getting to know someone helps. “Where do you want to start?”

“Do you agree to let her compel you?” I ask. “She won’t do anything which doesn’t align with your Last Drop contract.” I know how strict the rules are, and I won’t be letting her break them. “I just want to see if she can make you sit down, stand up, shit like that.”

Petra hops up. “Sure! Make me sit down.”

“Sit down,” Gwyn says, completely uselessly. Petra doesn’t laugh though, and I appreciate that.

“No, you have to want her to sit down. The more you want it, the more she’ll want it.”

“*Sit down,*” Gwyn repeats, leaning forward. Petra immediately obeys, a surprised smile on her face.

“Okay, now release it. Sometimes it helps to say it out loud when you’re first learning.”

But Gwyn is stubborn, brows furrowed as she stares at Petra, non-verbally urging her compulsion to give up. A few seconds of perseverance works in her favor though, and Petra jumps up.

“That was good!” she chirps. “Okay, now bite me.”

When she plops down on my lap, legs across Gwyn’s, Gwyn lets out a surprised laugh. When her eyes find mine, wanting to share the reaction to the girl on our lap, I swallow down the affection. This is getting ridiculous.

“Go ahead,” Petra encourages, shoving her wrist into Gwyn’s face.

A new vampire shouldn't be able to resist this, to stop herself from biting a human when it's this easy. But Gwyn almost has more control than I did when I Ascended.

“Roman?” Gwyn's tentative voice shakes, beautiful brown eyes full of trepidation. Biting me has been nothing to fear—she can't do me any harm. But this is different. I understand it, and I don't know what to do. “You go first?” she asks, suggesting exactly how to help her.

“Oh! Good idea!” Petra says, lifting her arm over her shoulder without even turning to face me. I laugh, bringing her wrist to my mouth and biting gently. I am far more careful with her than usual, barely pulling any of her blood into my mouth, wanting to save most of it for Gwyn. Seeing her pupils dilate and her cheeks go pink is a delicious addition to the taste of fresh human. I've barely pulled my lips away when Gwyn snatches Petra's wrist and presses her mouth to where mine had just been. She watches me, not blinking, as she drinks deep. Petra lets out a gasp, adjusting her body as Gwyn pulls her closer. I have to move the human off my lap because watching Gwyn is getting me hard again. She gulps down the blood, and I don't know what the fuck is happening. Gwyn shouldn't give a shit about me at this moment. She shouldn't be caring about my reaction. But when she pulls away, gasping for breath and licking her lips with the bloody wrist in front of her, she does it in such a way I know she means to taunt me.

It works.

“THANK YOU,” I SAY TO PETRA, LICKING HER BLOOD OFF MY lip. It’s still a little crazy to me that there are people who do this, but I suppose it’s no different from people who donate plasma for cash. If someone will buy it, humans will capitalize on it. And for so many, their bodies are the only currency they can part with. I should be thankful for places like this that seem to have rules. Roman’s eyes are dark as he stares at me over the girl’s shoulder.

“I’m glad to help you learn. Seriously. Some vampires don’t care,” Petra says. There’s a spot of blood I missed, and I swear it sparkles as it dries on her neck. I lurch forward without meaning to. My tongue tingles as I lick the errant drop, and my fangs prick her skin just as Roman reaches around Petra and grabs my nape.

“You weren’t offered a second bite,” Roman says, low and commanding.

“Oh, it’s alright! She’s learning—”

“Yes, she is. And an important part of learning is correction.” He tilts my head back, and I’m simultaneously irritated with him and turned on. I needed to be stopped, and I’m glad he was here to do it, but I feel patronized. But then his thumb rubs the side of my neck with firm pressure, and my body relaxes. “May I, Petra?” Roman asks, and when she nods, he dips forward, biting the spot I’d wanted. He doesn’t let go of my hair, and all I can do is watch.

I don't realize the hiss and subsequent growl I hear is coming from me until Petra takes my hand in hers. "It's okay. Your turn is next. You're doing fantastic."

Roman is staring at me while he drinks, and I struggle to bring myself back from that aggressive brink. I close my mouth, pressing my tongue against the sharp points of my teeth, letting the small pain guide me back. Roman doesn't let me pull away, and all I can do is watch as his lips move against her neck. I don't know what part makes me more angry: that it's *her* neck he's touching or that it's *my* blood he's drinking. I clear my head, blinking quickly, when I realize how possessive my thoughts have turned. Petra doesn't belong to me, no matter what this thirst says. And Roman? How could I look at him, after everything, and still want him? Even worse, how can I even dream of him being mine?

I wish I could go back, wish I could remember a time before I knew the warmth of his skin, the caress of his fingertips, the push of his body inside mine. The tenderness and praise which shouldn't belong to me. In the end, he will be the one to ruin me, and I will deserve it.

You are wretched. You are nothing. He should have let you die.

Vicious and shocking, these thoughts used to come unexpectedly. Like a thief in the night, breaking and taking anything I held dear. By now, we are old friends. By now, there is nothing of value left to take.

I am no good.

Roman closes his eyes, dark lashes sweeping low, and I want to count every single one, but then he's looking at me, pupils blown wide. When he pulls his teeth free, blood drips out of his mouth, but he doesn't swallow. He moves, standing over me. Petra shifts and lowers herself onto the coffee table. And then it's just me and Roman. His hand grips my jaw, and his thumb pulls at my lower lip.

Heat travels low, and I grow slick between my thighs when I realize exactly what he wants. Opening my mouth wide, I close my eyes as he spits Petra's warm blood into it. Groaning,

my eyes roll back as I swallow. I can taste a hint of his whisky, and I'm on my feet in a heartbeat. I don't know if I want to fight him or kiss him, but that seems to just be the way of it with Roman. He makes me lightheaded.

"You were so patient, sweetheart. I didn't want to make you wait any longer." When he puts his hands on my hips, I grab his wrists, but all I can do is stare up at him. There's no way he knows how sexy he is, because he wouldn't act like this in public if he did. If he knew people would fucking melt with even a fond look from him, let alone praise? His smirk is infuriating as he licks the blood from his lips. My hand drifts up like it has a mind of its own, tracing his jaw, pushing past the rough scruff he sports, until it's firmly tangled in his wavy hair. "Petra, go get some water and a snack," he says, but his eyes don't leave mine.

I faintly hear Margot say my name behind me, and I can see Nico drinking from someone out of the corner of my eye, but I can't focus on anything except for the man in front of me. My vision goes fuzzy on the edges, and he is all there is. He has cut me down and formed me into something new, and he has no idea how it's affected me.

He can't hold me responsible for what he's done.

Roman's eyes narrow as he brings his hand to his mouth. He smacks his lips, running his tongue over his teeth. When his eyes widen and he mouths the word 'fuck,' I frown. The light behind him flickers, and I tilt my head in confusion.

"We still have the room for, like, five more hours. You two can't fuck in here yet." Margot's voice buzzes beside me, and when I look down, her arms wrap around my waist, but I barely even feel her.

"Petra is possessed," Roman says, crowding me. His hands grab my upper arms, and he leads me backward. I don't understand what he's saying.

"What do you mean? She was really sweet," I say, but I don't think he understands me considering the frown he still wears.

“She’s a demon?” Nico asks. I can’t see the man, only focusing on the line where Roman’s lip meets his skin. I want to suck on it. “You feeling it?”

“A little. Gwyn had more, though.” Roman’s eyes move way too fast as he looks at me. His hands cup my face, and I reach for him as I fall. The couch is cloud-like beneath me, the velvet soft under my fingers. I tilt my head, tipping backward as a blur of yellow moves between me and Roman.

“Petra?” Margot’s voice is shrill, and it makes me laugh. “Let me go find her,” she says, and then she’s gone.

“Nico, *help*.” Roman commands, and then there’s a girl in my lap I don’t recognize.

“Drink up, buttercup.” Nico sounds amused, but that can’t be right. He doesn’t believe in fun.

“Hello,” I purr. The woman is really fucking pretty. Her hair is a bright blue, and she has big green eyes. Her lips are plump, and she looks at me like she wants to eat me. Which is confusing. I’m the one with the fangs. She turns and straddles me, unbuttoning her shirt a little. I search for Roman, but I don’t see him anywhere. I wonder where he’s gone.

“Drink, beautiful.” When the woman points at her boob, I smile. She is really quite pretty, and she has *really* nice boobs. But would Roman want me to bite her there? I hesitate because I really don’t think he would. Not that it matters, not that any of this matters.

“What’s her problem?” she asks, sounding irritated.

“I’m sorry, they’re really nice, I just—” I try to explain because I don’t want to hurt her feelings.

“Just give her your wrist.” The harsh sound of Roman’s gravelly voice travels up my spine and makes me shiver. I whip my head around, but it only makes me dizzy.

“Fine by me,” Blue Hair says, and when her arm is presented to me, my fangs snap out when I’m not expecting it. I bite her, and this blood is different from Petra’s. It’s richer, thicker, and the metallic tang is less severe.

I groan, drinking as much as I can. It's more than I've drunk since we've been here, and I barely feel thirsty anymore. Roman is talking to Nico about chemistry. Their voices echo to an overstimulating degree, so I close my eyes. I'm drinking from the pretty girl, trying to not think about science, when it hits me. Petra is possessed. By a demon. Demon blood.

I snort, dropping the pretty arm. I cough out some of her blood, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. This is why Roman is very serious right now as he talks about diluting blood. He's so handsome though, arms crossed over his chest. The blue shirt I'd had on earlier looks good on him. Open at the top, I can see the edges of his tattoos. I want to lick that triangle of skin. "Roman? I'm fine. It's fine." I stand, using my vampire speed and strength to dart over and pull him close, and we tumble backward onto the couch. "I just feel a bit tipsy, that's all."

"Fuck, Gwyn," he grunts. "You need to drink more. You didn't get too much in you, but—"

"*You* need to drink more," I retort.

He sits back, and I realize he's on his knees on the ground. Between my legs. I grab his shirt and sit up, hauling him closer, and I press my mouth to his. He doesn't kiss me back, and when I nip him and draw blood, he lets out a soft grunt. Sucking on his lip, I drink from his wound. It's more subtle than human blood, but it tastes of him, and I find more comfort than I ought to in that. I pull away, pouting, and he's frowning at me. The high hasn't gone away, but it's not getting any worse, so I don't know why he's so worried. When he pulls his lip into his mouth, staring at me with the most serious expression I've ever seen him wear, it clicks into place.

I'm like his brother in a lot of ways.

I should have figured it out sooner, but obviously I'm not thinking straight. It feels like something thaws inside of me, melts down my limbs and coats my veins. My face softens, and I wish I had my expressions under control. I'm reminding him of a painful time in his life, one which so many decisions

and actions have hinged on. Fixing what I can is my top priority.

Throwing my arms around his neck, I lean in close. His aftershave has a hint of cedar and cinnamon, and I breathe him in deeply. It only takes him a moment to wrap his arms around me, and I don't know if he means to nuzzle me back. How many of his actions are ones he's failed to hold back? I wonder if each moment, each sweetness, is something he fights against.

God, I hope he does.

"Hey," I whisper. "I'll be alright. A-and this won't happen again. I didn't know, I'm sorry."

"I know, Gwyn. I know."

He sounds so fucking sad. I need to reassure him. "I—I know I might seem like a borderline alcoholic, but I didn't even like it, and—"

"You prefer gummies to smoking weed because the smoke hurts your chest, and it has to be the exact right strain or you get paranoid. I've only seen you pop one after a long day. You do drink too much, but you rarely do it to the point of losing control. Any substance you abuse isn't because of enjoyment." He hesitates, pulling away from me. He doesn't meet my eyes when he says, "I'm not worried about you doing it for recreation."

"Oh." It comes out as a sigh. "*Oh*," I repeat when I realize what he means. To numb my mind or to poison myself, it doesn't matter; the outcome he worries about is the same. His jaw is tight, and the bob of his throat is more evidence of the crime I have committed.

I have damned us both.

"You can't do that, sweetheart. Alright?" He cups my cheeks in his hands, thumbs smoothing over my heated skin. "This doesn't become a backup plan."

"I wouldn't do that to you," I whisper, looking into his eyes as I lie directly to his face. For most of my life, this lie has been easy, and I've found a sick comfort in it. Not this

time. Of all the lies I've told him, this one is the most egregious. If I could make promises like that, I don't think I'd be here now. If I could make promises like that, he wouldn't feel the need to bring it up. Even so, there is a drop of oily truth coating the false promise, helping the words find their way out. I want them to be true, and I have to let that count for something.

"I meant what I said. You can't leave me too." Roman lets the words hang there, and this time it isn't a plea. It's a harbinger. It's a warning I should heed.

I nod, unable to speak. When his lips press to mine, tender, I kiss him back. He wastes no time, his movements growing harsher. Ravenous. Returning the pressure, the urgency, I lick into his mouth. He grips my hair in his hands, tilting my head back, and then traces his tongue up my throat. "Fuck, I need this," he says before dragging his fangs along my skin.

His hands grip my waist and he lifts, pushing me backward into the sectional. Nestled in the corner, he presses a knee between my legs and hovers over me. Roman only hesitates a moment, and it's obvious he makes a decision in that time. His chest expands as he inhales deeply, and his jaw tightens. There is no relief in it, the pain of this choice etched on his timelessly handsome face. But then his grim expression softens infinitesimally as he leans forward. My heart nearly beats out of my chest when he kisses me again. I should stop him, knowing his pain, but I can't. Or I don't. Is it a decision if it would kill me to make it? Is it a decision if I'd rather die than let him stop?

One of his hands caresses my body, sliding from my neck down my shoulder, the side of my breast, my waist, my hip, my leg. His lips are so soft, but his kiss is rough, his beard grating against my chin. I raise my hands, rubbing his chest and shoulders, squeezing his biceps. Roman grabs beneath my knee, opening my legs so he can slide between them. He rolls his hips, and I feel his cock straining at his zipper. Pulling my lower lip into his mouth, he sucks before pressing his tongue farther. Gentle, he slides it along mine, and then brings it up to the tip of my sharp fang.

I whimper when he touches it, my new teeth still sensitive, and then moan when he scrapes his tongue along it. Sharp, it draws blood immediately, and as the hot droplets land on my tongue, I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him closer. One of my hands threads into his hair while the other rests on his chest, and my hips lift against him. I swallow the taste of him as he nibbles on my lip, and I need more.

“Petra’s gone,” Margot says as she barges back into the room. “Fucking hell,” she mutters, and the door slams behind her. When I glance past Roman, I see the room stands empty. Should it surprise me I didn’t notice anyone leave? I am drunk more on Roman’s attention than anything else. I can already tell the blood I drank from the pretty blue-haired woman has diluted whatever I took from Petra.

He sits up on his knees, staring down at me. His hair frames his shadowed face, the glow of the lights behind him creating his powerful silhouette. Roman is beautiful, like a vengeful god. His chest rises and falls fast, and I swear I notice a tremor in his hand as he plucks at the buttons on his cuff. “Take your dress off,” Roman says, quiet. “I don’t want to rip it.”

“I can just pull it up.”

“I need to see you.” All desperation, his words come out harsh as he starts on the buttons down the center of his chest. “All of you, Gwyn.”

I don’t meet his eyes, staring at his fingers. He means more than what he says, and I can’t look at him for a moment. I sit up straighter, tracing my hand down his exposed chest, fingertips lingering over the bloom of a flower on his rib. I’m pretty certain it’s an iris, and I wonder if it has any significance. His shirt falls from his shoulders, and my gaze trails down to what bulges beneath his belt buckle. “Help me with the zipper, then?” I whisper.

Roman slides my hair from my shoulder, bending down to press a kiss to my collarbone as his hand reaches around me and grabs for my zipper. His lips move over my exposed skin as my dress falls to my waist. Ink-covered hands contrast

against my bare skin as he pushes me back into the corner of the sectional once more. “Lift your ass, sweetheart,” he says, and then he’s pulling my dress over my hips, snagging my thong as he strips my clothes off. He rubs a hand up my leg as he lifts it, his rough touch running down to my feet as he removes my shoes.

Roman stares at me as his hands move to his waist, and I hear the clink of his belt. Feeling them harden under his gaze, I let my hands drift to my peaked nipples. He stands, tugging his pants down, and if he told me I was drooling over him, I wouldn’t question it. Beneath his boxer briefs, one of those thick, dangerous thighs is covered in vines and leaves, a continuation of the plants swirling over that side of his body. The other thigh features a grim reaper figure, a closeup of the skeleton beneath its cloak. Its bony hand is outstretched, and I’m not sure if it’s reaching for something or if Roman just hasn’t finished the tattoo.

He spreads my legs wide to accommodate him as he climbs back over me, bracketing one arm on the sofa behind me while the other hand grips my chin.

“What have you done to me?” he says, and then his lips are on mine once more. He doesn’t linger, kissing my jaw, moving down my throat, and when his fangs press against the crook of my neck, I shiver. Roman chuckles against my skin, drawing his tongue over that spot. His hips punch forward, and he grinds his length against me. When I slide my hands up and down his sides as he sucks on my neck, a sigh slips out of him. It’s almost sweet, and it makes me smile.

“Same question,” I whisper. It is Roman who has broken down walls I once thought insurmountable. I had little to do with it. It is Roman who makes me feel understood more than anyone else ever has. It is Roman who has turned me into a fool. He curses, lips whispering some sort of confession against my flesh. And then I feel the sharp press of his fangs. What I don’t expect is for him to break the skin.

“Roman!” I gasp, shocked by his decision as he pulls my blood into his mouth. He has sworn himself to me with this one action. “What are you doing?”

“You think I know, Gwyn?” He speaks against my skin, his lips pressed to the wound he’s made. “I need all of you.” He groans as he drinks from me, and he slides an arm around my back, pulling me close.

“You—you shouldn’t have done that,” I stutter out, arching beneath him as his free hand slides between us, rolling my nipple in his fingertips as he drinks from me.

“I know,” he agrees. “*Fuck*, do I know, baby.”

When he kisses me again, it’s desperate. It’s consuming. It tastes of my blood and his defeat. His acquiescence to what he can’t control. But if he is defeated, then what am I?

Destroyed.

I am shattered as he adjusts us, moving me beneath him. It is ruination when he slides down my body, when his fangs prick the sensitive skin of my breast, when he pulls my blood into his mouth. He swirls his tongue over me, soothing the ache as his lips caress my tender flesh, and I grab a fistful of his hair. He disintegrates my hesitance as his lips move down my stomach. When he licks a path lower, pressing a kiss to the soft skin between my legs, I am dismantled.

“Show me where you want me. Tell me what you need,” Roman demands as he drags my hand down, down, down. He spreads me open, gliding his fingertip from that sensitive spot downward over impossibly wet skin. My breath hitches as I move my hand down and stroke my clit.

“Here,” I breathe. “Need your tongue here.”

“Mmm. And how do you need it, Gwyn? Soft and sweet? Firm and fast?”

“Surprise me,” I say. “Just stop talking and start doing.” I squirm beneath him. Feeling his breath on me is torturous, and I can’t help it when a whine escapes me.

Roman laughs but doesn’t make me wait for long, swirling his tongue over that sensitive spot. His fingertips rim my entrance as he takes my clit into his mouth. Starting soft and sweet, Roman moves idly, as if he’s savoring me. When he sucks me into his mouth and gently nibbles, I start panting,

raising my hips to meet his movements. I can feel my fangs grow, sharpened tips lengthening. When he finally settles on firm and slow, exactly how I need it, my breathing grows faster. Roman makes a low sound in his throat. Satisfaction.

“I need to bite you, sweetheart. Let me taste you like you’re mine.” His sharp fangs glide over my skin, and I don’t know what possesses me when I thrust against them. He pulls my clit into his mouth, but then opens wide, letting those dangerous points pierce the plump triangle of flesh above. I shriek, pushing my head back, but then the pain has passed, and Roman is sucking and teasing and licking and laving. Everywhere and anywhere he can touch me. When he sinks his fingers into me, I’m already close to the edge.

“Need you inside me,” I say. “Finish with me.” With him drinking my blood, *choosing* to swear himself to me, I know everything has changed. And before I let myself think about it, I need these few moments of bliss. I want to share this with him before there is only devastation left.

His defeat is my annihilation.

After a moment, I push his head away, and he stands. The faintest curve of his lips softens the glare he shoots at me as he shimmy out of his boxer briefs. I grab his waist before he can climb back over me. “Let me get it ready. Come here,” I say. Propping myself up on an elbow, I look up at him where he stands. His expression has shifted to both adoration and hunger, and when I grab him and pull him to my lips, his low growl makes me clench around nothing. Sticking my tongue out, I slap his hard dick on it, tasting a drop of pre-cum as it drips into my mouth.

My satisfied moan is all too real.

When I take the tip of his cock between my lips, he groans, tossing his head back. His hand slides into my hair and he pushes into my mouth hard, control lost. Swallowing him as deeply as I can, I work him up and down. Firm. When one of my fangs presses into his fragile skin, I pull away, not wanting to hurt him.

“Do it,” he grits out, thrusting into my mouth harder. It takes me by surprise, but I do what I’m told, letting my fangs graze along his shaft. I don’t press down, but it still scrapes against delicate skin, and he jerks forward, shoving his cock to the back of my throat. Warm and rich, his blood goes down easily, and I groan around him. “*Fuck, Gwyn,*” he mumbles, eyes closed. I swirl my tongue over him, lapping up every drop from his already healed skin, watching how he reacts to each long trace of my tongue. He doesn’t let me continue for too long, gently stepping back as he inhales deeply. An open-mouthed smile creeps over his face, and I’m thankful he’s never gifted it to me before. It’s too much.

The smile softens, but he doesn’t let it revert to its usual smirk when he climbs over me, on his knees between my thighs. When he reaches between us, I cup his face with my hand. I can’t stop myself when it comes to him. “Look at me. I want to see you,” I say. Roman’s brows lift as he nudges my entrance with his cock. When he brackets his arms on either side of me and tilts his hips the tiniest bit, I revel in his relaxed expression. He is always so angry, so intense, so determined. To have earned this vulnerability, this unburdened version of him, gives me hope.

Slowly, he sinks into me, exhaling on my lips. He grinds on top of me, barely pulling out as he shifts his hips, rubbing exactly where I need it. Methodical, careful, he brings me to the brink in only a few rocks of his body against mine. I am close, edging into those moments when the heart stops between panting breaths, and it fills me with want for so much more.

“Roman, I—”

He circles his hips, and I’m grateful when my moan breaks off my words. I can’t say what I want, can’t breathe to life what flits around on broken wings deep in my mind. It’s too delicate, too early. A thought half-formed and a wish ill-gained. Roman drags a kiss from my lips as he moves slowly. I swallow hard as I gaze up at him. This is the first time we’ve been face to face during sex since the night he changed me. I think we’ve both avoided it for a few reasons, but I cannot

avoid this truth any longer. As every sense grows white hot and I tip over the edge, the truth is just as searing. When he kisses me, when he caresses me, when he whispers my name, it proves what I already know.

Roman Sauveterre has broken me.

ROMAN

“YOU’LL BE THE ONE TO PUT HER DOWN IF HE FINDS OUT.”

Margot’s words still ring in my mind during our drive to Wisconsin. Pulling me aside, she’d given me a piece of her mind on the way back from the bar last night. Though my friend didn’t see what I did, didn’t watch me lose my mind and swear an oath to Gwyn, she knows I’m in too fucking deep.

I resent her for being able to read me.

The clock is ticking down, and I’m running out of time. Even though Bjorn thinks I’m protecting my assets while I finish up my investigation, he has already told me my time is up the moment he returns. He has planned a ceremony in which he will eat Gwyn’s roasted heart in front of the coven. It’s an unnecessarily gory display, referring back to his ancestors, our ancestors, and their acts of revenge served gruesomely.

I haven’t quite figured out how to fool him.

Gwyn sits silently beside me, looking out the window, while Margot and Nico chatter in the backseat. They’re talking about some reality television competition, arguing about who they think should win, as if we aren’t on the way to put an end to one of the most gut-wrenching chapters of my life. As if Margot didn’t so nonchalantly mention the impending death sentence which hangs over Gwyn’s head, and in turn, mine.

I won’t let her die, no matter the cost. Be it the possessiveness of the Ascension or the loyalty I feel after swearing to her, I can’t let anything bad happen to her. The

only reason I haven't sent her away with Margot already is because of the lingering effects of her Ascension. At least that's what I tell myself. I'm relatively certain she'd be alright if I separated us now, but since Margot has eyes on my father in Iceland, I prolong the inevitable for as long as I can. I try to convince myself that it's because of the mind-blowing sex, but I know there's more to it than that.

I *loathe* that there's more to it than that.

When I think about how I almost let things slip out last night, nearly told her what she makes me feel, my stomach twists into knots. Even worse, what we did at Last Drop feels like a lot more than sex. The fact I wonder if she views it the same as I do is fucking worrisome at best. What am I goddamn thinking? She might not have been the one to kill my brother, but she's certainly why he was in Virginia. She's the reason Charlie and the others went after him.

What would Remy think of me?

"Can you guys please be quiet?" Gwyn asks, quiet enough Margot and Nico don't hear her.

"Hey, idiots, *shut up.*"

Gwyn's tight-lipped smile over my command shows how nervous she is. One of her legs rests on the other, burgundy pants stretched over her thigh, and her foot taps a rhythm on the floor. Arms graced by thin black lace cross over her chest, and she chews on a fingernail. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was headed to the first day of a new job, the way her hair is slicked into a high ponytail. She's that special kind of put-together I've only witnessed when she's hungover, doing her best to fake it through the day.

Perhaps she *is* hungover. I have a bit of a headache thanks to the demon blood, but I thought she drank enough untainted blood to make up for it.

Margot kicks my seat, and I ignore it. Silence feels more fitting. After this, there will be no reason for Gwyn's presence, no need to hold her hostage. I will have done untold damage to her, and the thought of abandoning her makes me feel ill. The

thought of sending her off with Margot to protect her makes me hate that I ever involved her. But it's not as if I can keep her.

It was far easier when I planned to kill her at the end. Hell, it was even easier when I planned to hide her until she was an old lady and release her when my father Slumbered. Now that she's Ascended and after what I did last night, there's no denying things have shifted. Part of me wishes I never knew she existed. If I hadn't been selfish, desperate for closure, desperate for justice, I wouldn't be in this predicament. If I had kept my distance, I wouldn't be fighting my instincts. There would be no qualms about doing what my father has asked. There would be no fantasies of a future with her. There would be no almost-admissions to a woman who can never be anything to me.

Her heart is better off in a box than in my hands.

Gwyn has been quiet today, and I wonder if she's realizing the gravity of this. Of what I've done to her. I knew she would hate me for this. Knew that, though she has changed me so fucking thoroughly, there will never be room for us in each other's lives. And that's for the best. That's what I want—what I need—to respect my brother, to make my mother proud, and to protect my coven's future.

There's no room for a hunter, even if she is now so much more.

Sending her away saves her. The coven can't know about her. They can't know she has so much more control than a fledgeling ought to, rivaling that of mine and Remy's own experience. They can't know what I've done. And the thought of another coven finding out? Ketill's coven out west is well-known for its ferocity.

“Margot, when we get back, I want you to show Gwyn those places you've picked out. And then we'll need to draw some blood. All we can hope is Bjorn won't think too much of the shifted scent.”

My friend nods in the rearview, but it's Gwyn's eyes burning a hole into the side of my head.

“Places? What do you mean?” She shifts in her seat, turning to face me.

“Margot is taking you out of the country until Bjorn Slumbers.”

“When?” She’s snappy, and I regret bringing this up in the car. I should’ve waited until we lined everything up, and not told her shit until I put her on a flight.

“I’ll get you on a plane as soon as the property purchase goes through. Sooner. I’m paying cash, so we can buy plane —”

“And my family? Sasha? Hale?”

“They can’t know you’re alive. Bjorn knows who they are, so it puts them at risk.”

“And you’re just shipping me off with Margot? Into *hiding*?”

“Yes.” She’s quiet, and out of the corner of my eye, I see her pushing her tongue against her cheek.

“I’m not going anywhere. My family thinks I’m dead and if you send me off into hiding, I might as well be. I’m not doing it; I refuse.”

“Sweetheart—”

“Am I still your prisoner?” The question knocks me the fuck back, and I’m stunned into silence. I’ve brought her over the threshold of vampirism with my guidance and my body, and I know I’ve crossed so many lines with her. What we’ve done, how I feel? It frightens me. And yet she thinks she might still be my prisoner? “Is that—Is that all this is?”

I don’t answer, dismissing the warm feeling her words give me. There’s no sense in it. Instead, I focus on what I need to happen. Perhaps there is some salvaging of the original arrangement that can be done. Perhaps I can force her to do my bidding without letting her know just how fucked I am when it comes to her. Just because I can’t compel her anymore doesn’t mean she isn’t my captive. There’s no sense in her finding out how little I want to send her away, how much I’ve

come to count on her humanity, how her faith in me has made me consider things I once thought impossible.

“You’re still my prisoner, Gwyn. For eternity now.” All I see is her ponytail swishing as she looks out the window once more. She doesn’t argue with me, tapping her foot on the floor instead. But when her hand reaches up, I realize she’s wiping her nose. She isn’t breathing, probably trying to hide a sniffle. And it destroys me. I don’t care that Margot and Nico are in the backseat when I scramble to fix it. “Listen, I—”

She doesn’t look at me. “Don’t. I needed clarity, and you gave it. You can’t apologize for the truth.”

No one speaks for the rest of the drive, and every time I think of telling her the real truth, the knowledge which is tearing me apart, I spare her from it. Because no matter what, I’m getting her out of here, far away from the coven. Adding feelings which change nothing will do little more than hurt her. And after all my time with her, Gwyn has convinced me I am capable of compassion and kindness. I am capable of goodness for the sake of it, and I’ll use one of my first acts of it on her. I’ll protect her from Bjorn, and I’ll protect her from me.

MARGOT HAS BEEN PLANNING this operation since the minute she knew Gwyn was going to be alright. Relatively. It’s been a week now since our last attempt to take them out, and I know it’s only given her more time to prepare. She’s had time to search satellite images and see Remy’s car show up around the last time I heard from him. It’s allowed her to research some of the tire shop’s inventory purchases to see the exact white buckets they used to hold his blood. With each new discovery, my rage has only grown.

“Their shit is way more lax than Charlie’s, but I can see some recent changes,” Margot says. We’re in the parking lot of a closed-up diner down the street from the tire shop where

she's hacking into their system. "Looks like when you blew up the fucking cabin, they tightened it up."

"When you did *what?*" Gwyn's eyes bulge. "You seemed to have left out some shit."

"Technically speaking, I didn't do that," I argue. "It was a self-destruct situation."

"A 'self-destruct situation'? What in the fuck?" Gwyn's voice pitches upward alarmingly. Margot chortles to herself as she types a shit ton of nonsense on a black screen.

"Charlie hid all electronic traces of his little group—"

"The Dragonflies!" Margot shouts.

"The Dragonflies?" Nico asks. He hasn't spoken since we arrived, which is actually completely like him, but he's been fucking with his hair a lot. He's nervous.

"Yeah. They eat mosquitos," Margot explains, rolling her eyes.

Gwyn huffs in something I can't quite describe as amusement. "Very clever."

"Anyway," I say, interrupting. "Charlie tried to cover his tracks but left receipts in his truck. No way he bought \$500 worth of cigarette cartons."

"You conveniently left out the explosion part of this story before." Gwyn picks at her shirt, and she's pouting a bit. Is she concerned?

"It was no big deal, sweetheart. I'm fine."

"Good for you," she says. Crossing her arms, she looks out the window again. Clearly she's angry with me. This isn't the first time and it certainly won't be the last, but I have to admit there's a sting to it now.

"Alright, lovebirds. The basement only has two access points. There's a door leading straight into it from outside. This is their primary entrance for these meetings, but when I watched last week, the camera showed they bar it. So, that's

where Nico and I will wait while Roman goes in through the tire shop,” Margot instructs.

“But isn’t the entrance to the basement through the tobacco place?” I question.

“What about me?” Gwyn asks at the same time.

“Yes, and you’re going to have to kick down an access door. I think you can handle that.” Margot’s annoyed I interrupted. “And Gwyn, you stay here until you get a thumbs up from me on this camera,” Margot says, passing the laptop to Gwyn from the backseat.

“I don’t want to wait. I—I want to be part of this. They were going to...Ugh, I don’t want to even think about it.” She shudders, and I resist reaching out to comfort her.

“You will be, just not until the end. There’s no reason to subject you to all that,” I explain.

“Fuck you,” Gwyn snaps. “Don’t treat me like glass.”

“I’m not—”

“Either way, you can’t be there at the beginning. You might get hurt, and you’ll certainly get in the way. You don’t know what you’re doing yet.” I don’t know if Nico says it to stop me from shoving my foot in my mouth even farther, or to stop me from apologizing.

“Fine.”

“Alright, now that that’s settled with less drama than I expected, everything is disarmed. I set the security cameras to business hours, so there won’t be any kind of alert when we pull in. All I have to do is turn on the cell phone jammer, but I figure we should wait until we get there for that. The doctor is in charge, so I think she’s our best bet.”

Putting Margot’s car in drive, I pull out of the parking lot. I’m turning left, so I have to look past Gwyn to check for traffic. She evades me, and I want to set shit straight with her. If I tell her how much I care for her, maybe she’ll understand why I’m keeping her out of harm’s way now, and why sending

her off with Margot is the best choice. I'm just about to open my mouth when the shame hits me.

I'm finally about to avenge my brother's death, maybe get some answers about where his body is. And yet, all I can think about is her?

What the fuck, Roman?

I'm still stewing when we pull into the parking lot. Stopping just outside the property, Margot hands Gwyn a knife, and instructs her through breaking the enchantment. Though Margot was worried, the moment Gwyn's blood hits the earth, I feel the change of pressure in the air. The magic still recognizes what Gwyn is at her core. Hunters will always find a hearth with these fuckers. It will take a few moments for their ward to come down, but we'll be in place by then. Gwyn's hand is already healed when she brings it back into the car, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to lick the blood from it. I'm reminded of a far fucking simpler time when she was passed out in the front seat, and I hadn't felt anything for her at all.

Goddammit.

Making haste, I pull into the parking lot, avoiding a pothole, and park around the side of the building. Rage builds fresh in my blood when I see Remy's car on the other side of the chain-link fence. His beat-up Trans Am is sitting on four flat tires, and I can't breathe. All I can do is stare.

This has all been for my brother, and I need to keep that in perspective.

Finally, after several long moments, I get my shit together. When the three of us quietly exit the car, I don't speak to Gwyn. What is there to say?

Nico and Margot start toward the back of the building before the former turns around and nods to the car. "Forgetting something?" Gwyn looks between us, just as confused as I am. I'm sure she can hear him. "You going to command her to stay put?"

My stomach drops. “Ah, yeah, go ahead.” When I duck my head back into the car, she’s already smirking.

“You didn’t tell them?”

“No. But I don’t have to, do I? You’re going to stay put so you can see this through, right?”

She rolls her eyes. “Do I have a choice? I’m still your prisoner, aren’t I? You still know where my family lives, do you not? You have made it clear you will hunt me to the ends of the earth if I run, and who knows what you’ll do to the people I care about.” I swallow past the lump in my throat, and all I can do is nod. “Go on, Roman. I won’t risk them.”

She waves me away, focusing on the computer in her lap. I should be satisfied, content with her answer. It should make me feel better, and yet a few minutes later when I’m breaking through the access door into the tobacco shop, I can only picture her frown and hear her disdain.

When I rip off the necklace of the sorceress at the top of the basement stairs, throwing her protections off with little more than a chemical burn on my hand, I think about letting Gwyn call Sasha. If Gwyn would agree to some bullshit story to keep her safe, we could send her sister some sort of compulsion resistant necklace. I dismiss the idea when I peel the links of the witch necklace from my burning skin. It would stop another younger vampire like Margot, but these physical deterrents do very little to the stronger ones.

Running down the steps, I’m a blur as I decapitate a human running to investigate the noises. That’s when the screaming starts. There’s a loud blast, and unnatural purple smoke plumes from the end of the hall. I worry for a moment about the others, but I hear Margot laugh right before the burbling sound of someone coughing up blood.

“I’ll make you a bargain,” someone shouts before they round the corner to the hallway I’m in.

“I bargain with my teeth, demon. Are you sure?”

The demon is a lanky man with long grey hair, and his skin has a yellowish tinge to it. He smells of sick, that very specific

hospital scent when someone is on the verge of death. I wonder what kind of bargain the man made. Did he get a few more good years out of it before the demon took over? He lifts his hands, and when I look past him, I see furniture being thrown and hear Nico shout in victory. I should be done with this and help.

“The doctor got to the panic room. I’ll give you the code if you let me go.”

“No deal.” I’m on him in a heartbeat, my hands wrapped around his throat when his words make sense.

“Satellite.” Cough. “Phone.”

“Margot, satellite phone?” I shout, and the demon’s eyes bulge.

“Covered. Knew they had one,” she replies, dragging a woman by a very dislocated arm. “*Stop screaming,*” she commands, and her target goes silent. I snap the demon’s neck, hoping the human buried deep inside is already long gone.

I let the others continue what they’re doing in the main meeting space while I check a storage room and a bathroom, finding them empty. There’s a loud bang from above me though, and I turn toward the stairs. I only see a blur of black and dark red as Gwyn whips past me, and her rich apple cider scent drags me along behind her.

I DART PAST MARGOT AND EVADE NICO AS HE REACHES OUT for me. I'd seen exactly where she went, the grey door swinging shut behind her as I'd watched from the car.

Even though I'd told Roman I would stay put, I couldn't help myself when I saw that fucking face.

The door is made of pure silver, and it's rough to the touch, covered in sharp points made to deter vampires. I wince as I pull away from it, and it's enough hesitation that Roman catches up to me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demands, his minty breath washing over my face. He lifts his arm, pointing a gun past me, and the sound ricochets through my fucking head when he fires it. I almost blink in surprise because vampires from the movies never use real weapons. They always attack with sharp teeth and lengthened claws and their super strength. They never use something as simple as a gun. And yet the body hitting the ground is still dead.

Ignoring Roman, I run my fingertips over the rubber buttons on the door. It looks like a four-digit code, and I breathe deep before keying in my first guess.

One. Nine. Nine. Three.

There's a quiet whirring of the door unlocking, and when I grab the handle, Roman puts his hand over mine. Tight and painful, he has no intentions of letting me go in there without an explanation.

“How?” he demands.

“Trust me,” I say.

I push the handle down, my hand burning once more thanks to the roughened metal. Roman either doesn't notice or doesn't care. When the door swings open, the heavy thud of it slams against the interior wall, and she screams. She looks different from the last time I saw her, the blunt edges of her dirty blonde hair forming a shortened bob.

“Susan?” She whimpers when she hears my voice, but turns around to face me. Tears are running down her face, black trails of mascara marking her sun-aged skin. “How could you?” I trail off when I see the blood oozing from her stomach. Her hands do little to staunch the wound, and Roman can't stop me as I launch forward. Slamming into her, I hear a sickening crack as her head slams into the wall behind her. My strength is unsettling as I lift her high enough to drink the blood dribbling down her stomach from a protruding wooden table leg. I can't help it, gulping the hot liquid down as fast as I can. It should taste sour, should reek of betrayal and hatred. I should want to spit it out, but instead I drink, swallowing down that which has come from her poisonous heart.

Roman must have hesitated, because he takes too long to get to me. He wrenches me away from her, and she slides down the wall. Her eyes are glazed over a bit, that blue-grey which I know so fucking well, and I think perhaps I've killed her.

“Oh my god,” I gasp. “Is she dead?”

“She's not dead yet. What the fuck is going on?” he demands. His hand squeezes my shoulder. “Gwyn?”

Closing my eyes, I wipe my mouth and count to ten. I'm fucking furious, and this woman is still bleeding in the same room as me. I don't know how long I can handle it. Susan has known me since I was a child. She held me at my parent's graveside as their caskets were lowered into the ground. This woman came to graduations and birthday parties. She was a job reference and friend. She even recommended an old

classmate as my goddamn gynecologist. To know what she has done, to know what she has planned for me, makes me sick.

I will never experience a greater betrayal.

She tilts her head back, but she doesn't look at me. Her skin has gone impossibly pale, and eyes belonging to my best friend stare past me.

"Leave Hale out of this. He's just a human." Her eyes flick to me briefly, brows tight, before she looks at Roman once more. "He didn't know. Please," she begs him. Hale's grin forces its way to the forefront of my mind, but I push it away. Susan's arms hang limp at her sides, and she blinks slowly enough I realize I probably gave her a concussion. The steady flow of blood trickles from her wound, and my fangs are painful in my mouth. I groan, unable to stop it, and my lip curls. "Oh my god," she whispers, mouth open in shock as she finally understands what I've become.

A monster. But it takes one to know one, I suppose.

"You're—you're Hale's mom?" Roman stutters. "How the fuck did Margot miss that?"

"Gwyn, honey, I'm sorry. Hale doesn't know about any of this. He calls me every night crying, worried about you," she pleads. "This is all me. He was only doing what I asked."

There have been few times in my life where my anger has felt impregnable. Deep and consuming and red hot, I've wondered if I'd ever come out of it. The deaths of people I love and my father hiding the truth make up some of those moments. But being betrayed by someone I call family is different. It's depthless grief and anger. But there is no hopelessness, no inability to do something. There is only an abundance of willingness to wring her fucking neck.

Is that the vampire or the hunter in me?

Or is it the human?

"Bullshit," Roman spits. "What do you mean he was doing what you asked him? *What did you ask him to do, sorceress?*"

She grimaces, ignoring Roman's command. I hadn't realized she was clutching a satellite phone until it falls out of her hand. "Please don't hurt him," she whispers.

I can't help it when a hollow laugh falls from my lips. "You think he'll be alright when he finds out what you've done? Did you plan to use him to impregnate me? Does he know you're a murderer?"

Roman's hand hasn't left my shoulder, and this time when he squeezes, it isn't hard. It's reassurance. It's comfort. "Where's my brother's body, Susan?" She frowns as if she's confused, but when he continues, her face relaxes in comprehension. "My brother, Remy. Is his body still in Virginia? Tell me, and I'll leave your kid for Gwyn to deal with."

Her breathing has become labored, and I don't feel any regret as I do nothing to help her. I briefly wonder if my humanity has left me already, days after becoming a vampire. Maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing. "There was..." she starts, and I don't think Roman means to squeeze me again, but he does when she finishes speaking. "...nothing left...of him."

Roman swears under his breath. My heart sinks, knowing what kind of blow this is to him. But as Susan's eyes flutter open, she searches for me once more. "Forgive him." Her lungs are full of liquid; I can hear it rattling in her chest. "Hale."

"He didn't think it was weird or-or wrong to spy on me? Did he sign up for the same classes as me just to, just to— What the fuck, Susan?" I flex my hands to ease the ache from balling them into tight fists, ignoring the urge to wrap them around her throat. I take a step toward her, the alluring scent of her blood about to overpower me once more. She doesn't answer, merely closing her eyes. "I saw the chair and the stirrups. I know, Susan. I know about everything you've done," I whisper, and I feel a tear roll down my face. Susan heaves what might have been a sob if she wasn't struggling to breathe so much. When I hear her sluggish heartbeat, I notice everything has gone quiet. Margot and Nico must be done.

Roman abruptly lets go of my shoulder, and I whip around to face him. His jaw is tight, and he won't look at me. When I put my hand on his arm, he shrugs it off. I don't know if he's angry with me or not, but I don't have time to ask him. Susan coughs, and when her blood flies out of her mouth, I stagger toward her. Roman doesn't move a muscle. I don't know if he's given up or if he doesn't care, but when I land on my knees in front of her and use my hands on either side of her head to snap her neck, neither my conscience nor Roman stop me. As I cup her blood in my hands before bringing it to my mouth, I'm only slightly horrified.

And not by the gore, not by her death. But by my impassivity.

IT'S complete bullshit that vampires still have to eat. We've stopped at a late-night pizza by the slice place in the city so Nico will shut the fuck up. Since I don't have an appetite, Roman circles the block while we wait for the others to get their food. He doesn't seem to be hungry. He doesn't seem very talkative either. I'm staring at a red light and picking at my nails when I break the silence once more.

"Can I call him?" I ask for the thousandth time. I've gone back and forth between staying quiet and begging, and Roman is certainly sick of it. Smoothing my baby-blue dress down over my thighs, I can't stop staring at my hands. There's blood beneath my fingernails still, the only evidence of what I'd done. My saturated pants have already been disposed of. Margot thought ahead and packed a change of clothes, and though we are returning from a slaughter, I look better prepared for a date. I adjust the elastic of the sheer sleeves, designed to cinch around my elbow and allow the fabric to flow and poof accordingly. I almost wish I was still wearing my blood-stained pants. Perhaps then I could feel something—even if it's just the sticky coldness of Susan's dried blood.

Roman ignores me again, reading a text on his phone. When he tells me it was Margot, letting him know they're currently paying, I lose my patience. It's been hours, and he won't fucking communicate with me. I slam my hands on the dashboard. "Roman! She said he didn't know! Let me call Hale. Please," I add.

"No." When he goes straight through the light and flips on his turn signal for the next intersection, I'm tempted to yank the steering wheel from his hands.

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

"I'm not some petulant fucking child. I need to...need to —"

"You need to what? Tell your best friend you killed his mother, and you're just checking to make sure he didn't betray you as badly as he could have?" Roman snaps.

My inhale of breath is sharp. "Sh-she deserved it. She was going to do awful things to me. She—" I clear my throat. "She is responsible for your brother. I—I don't feel bad for killing her." If I hadn't Ascended, would I have felt guilt? Would I have let her live? He doesn't spare me a glance. "Her neck snapped really, really easy though. That was...unsettling," I whisper. "But...I don't have to tell Hale any of that. Don't want to tell him, honestly. I just want to see if—if he knew more."

Roman parallel parks beside the pizza place before clearing his throat. The streetlight outlines his profile in gold, and I can't take my eyes off him. He has his hair pulled back from his face, but a few strands hang loose. I fight the urge to reach out and tuck it behind his ear, to trace that smooth skin down to his rough beard. The leaves from his tattoo pop up over the collar of his suit. There's no denying how stunning Roman is. He's a heartbreak personified as he props his elbow up on the door panel. When he sighs and rubs his chin with his hand in that exasperated way he does, I don't know how to interpret it.

“I’m trying to make sense of things here, sweetheart. Why didn’t you have wards at your townhouse?”

“Why would I, Roman?” Something close to hatred flickers in his gaze as it sears over me.

“You lived with a sorcerer, at the very least a witch untrained, and his mother had a vested interest in keeping you safe. Where. Were. The. Wards?” When I shake my head, his hand shoots out and grabs my hair in his fist, pulling me close.

“You heard her just as good as I did, asshole.” I hit his arm as hard as I can. “Hale is a human. How could he put up a ward?”

The back door opens as I’m flailing, trying to upright myself. “Whoa, what the fuck?” Margot asks, and the scent of marinara hits me hard enough I want to puke. Roman’s grip doesn’t lessen.

“And I’m just supposed to believe her?” His heaving chest barely contains his rage. His heart is racing, and I wouldn’t be surprised if I could see it knocking against his ribs, wanting to beat out of his chest. “It doesn’t fucking matter. If Hale is really human, Susan would have done it. WHERE WERE THE WARDS?” Roman roars.

“I don’t know! Fuck!” When he finally releases me, my scalp is aching. He floors it, and Nico falls into the car as the door slams shut. Roman is flying down the street, weaving in and out of traffic. Grabbing the handle near the ceiling to steady myself, I close my eyes and count to ten.

“Jesus Christ, Roman!” Margot is screaming, and after an entirely too long trip hurtling through the city, Roman finally pulls over.

“Get out of the car, now.” Deadly calm, Roman points to my door. I’m shaking when I grab the handle, but I push the door open and step out. There’s a giant stone gate with three arches, the center wide enough for a car to drive through, and I take a moment to recognize the tombstones beyond it. It’s the entrance to a cemetery. It looks old, perhaps one of the first in

the city. A short iron gate blocks the entrance, and Margot's car blocks my access to the street. I wonder if it's strategic.

The other three get out of the car, and Roman starts pacing.

"I don't know what you want from me, Roman," I say.

"Roman," Margot starts, gentle. "Just ask her." Closing my eyes, I inhale, preparing for the storm her words might cause. Admitting he bit me will certainly be a jolt to his pride.

"I can't," Roman grits out.

"What?" Pure shock is nothing worse than I expected.

"I can't compel her anymore." Nico's harsh curse makes it clear what he thinks of that. But Roman stops pacing, lifting his hands to cup the back of his head. The moonlight shines down, warring with the street lamp, as they both paint soft strokes of midnight across his face. "But one of *you* can."

"No," I whisper. "I don't want..." I freeze when he drops his arms. He stares at me like he used to, like he hates me, like he's considering ripping my heart out once more. Roman has flipped on a dime, and it's terrifying. "Fine." I swallow. "Whatever you need from me."

Roman's nostrils flair, but he gives no other reaction. "Nico, let her drink from you."

"Why Nico?" Margot asks, arms crossed.

"Because Nico will do as I say without complaint."

Nico proves his point, rolling up the sleeve of his sweater as he saunters over to me. My heart is racing, but there's nothing I can do to get myself out of this. I have to prove myself to Roman. When Nico gives me his arm, I stare into Roman's eyes as I drink. Nico tastes like I'd expect. There's almost an astringent undertone to it—clean. When I pull back and lick the blood from my lips, Roman looks away, throat bobbing. Good.

"Ask her why Susan didn't put wards on her townhouse." Roman turns away, clasping his hands behind his back. His shoulders are tense as Nico repeats the question, filling his tone with command.

“I. Don’t. Know.” I say. Clear and calm, I stare a hole through the back of Roman’s head. “She lives in fucking Wisconsin. We moved into the townhouse at the start of summer. She’s only visited once.”

Roman rolls his neck, and I don’t know if he’s satisfied or not. Margot watches her friend, and she’s chewing on her lip. It’s one of her nervous tics, and it scares me. She knows him better than I do, and if she’s nervous, I ought to be too. “When she—when Susan visited, we were in our original unit. Maybe she—maybe she did it to that one,” I stutter.

“The unit you were only in for a week?” Margot asks, and I sigh in relief. Of course, she knows what I’m talking about.

“Yes. Before the plumbing disaster.”

“Oh my God, Roman. Remember? When they talked about their old place flooding, I couldn’t find the unit when I looked for it. We thought it was some sort of paperwork error, remember? But it didn’t matter because we knew where she was.”

“You couldn’t find it because it was warded.” Quiet, Roman faces the cemetery. I hear water, the sound of waves hitting rocks. It’s faint, and I realize the cemetery butts up to Lake Michigan. “Take her back to the greystone. It’s done now, so Margot, book the rental we discussed and the flights. Tomorrow preferably.”

“What?” It’s more an exhalation than anything. A sudden burst of wind from the lake nearly knocks me back a step. My mouth goes dry, and I tuck my arms around my body, seeking some sort of physical comfort. He was upset, I understand that, but for him to deflate like that? For his anger to immediately recede is strange, and now he’s back to making me leave. I’d stupidly thought he might have changed his mind.

Taller than average, Roman steps over the low gate with relative ease, and he walks into the dark cemetery, leaving me behind. He doesn’t look back. The world narrows down to the ache in my gut and the expanse of his back. As he walks farther, disappearing into the night, I feel as if I’m fading into nothing. He’s sending me away. He’s sending me across the

world to hide—away from the people I love, and away from him.

Just enough or far too much, that's all I ever am.

Roman cares just enough about me to send me away, to spare me from whatever demise waits for me. But that's it. That's all it is. I should have been prepared for this. It had been what I wanted anyway, right? I'd never intended this. I'd never intended to truly care for him. But here I am, a wilted flower chasing after the sun.

Panic overtakes me, pure consuming fear. He can't send me away. "Roman!" I shout, darting toward the gate.

"*Stop,*" Nico commands, and I spin. My hair whips into my face, and my dress blows in the wind. My hands ball into fists, and something between a scream and a growl rips up my throat.

"Nico," Margot says. A car drives by, and their headlights make her look like one of those golden-haired angels you might find on top of a Christmas tree. She gives me a half-smile before dropping her gaze from mine. "Let her talk to him. He's being..." She gestures her arm toward the cemetery, but Nico seems to understand what she means.

"Five minutes," he says, and there are no thoughts in my mind as I put one hand on the gate and launch myself over it. I never would have been able to do that gracefully without my immortal coordination.

I get a few paces in and start listening for Roman. The old cemetery is unsettling in the dark. I know it's silly, but I can't help it. I am the thing that goes bump in the night. Haunted by so many other things, I don't think any ghosts would be interested in me. There's little life in me to feed from, little damage left to do.

I can't hear or see Roman, but there's a tiny red glow in the distance, and I'm grateful for my exceptional new vision. When I start running, the cold lake breeze slams into me, throwing my hair behind me. It should feel awful, but I am not

so sensitive anymore. When I finally see him, I realize what I'd been smelling all along.

Near the other end of the cemetery, close to an entrance, Roman leans against a tree with a cigarette in his hand. Slowing myself, I approach him carefully. I don't know what to say. I don't know where his head is at. Truly, I don't know where mine is either. He's undone another button of his undershirt, and it's clear he's been tugging at it. His hair is disheveled, loose now, as if he's been pulling on it too. With the natural wave of it, I wonder how often it gets tangly. The intimate picture my mind paints is unkind. He's damp, fresh out of a shower with only a towel on, and he's holding out a hairbrush to me. I've always thought tending someone else's hair was a love language, and I blink the image away.

I clear my throat as if he didn't hear me running toward him, as if he doesn't see me standing right here. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't," he says on a sigh. "Swiped these off Nico." And yet when he inhales, holds it, then releases, it's clearly not his first time.

"The mints?" He nods. "When did you quit?"

"Gave it up when I was trying to rehab Remy." He tilts his head back, closing his eyes. "Figured we could be miserable together. Mints are just habit now."

More silence. I don't rush to fill it though, letting him set the pace. I feel foolish running to find him and having nothing to say, but I can't bring myself to tell him the truth. Not yet.

I think of Roman's face only a few moments ago: the hatred creasing his forehead, the distrust screwing up beautiful lips better suited to more pleasing endeavors, the frustration which made him grow flush with fury. It makes me shiver. It's what makes me draw my arms across my chest and stare at the ground. The cherry on Roman's cigarette glows, and when he finishes it, he tucks the butt into his pocket.

My eco-conscious captor.

Mine.

“I don’t want to go,” I whisper.

“I can’t keep you, baby.” I don’t move, don’t breathe. He runs his hands through his hair before shoving them into his pockets. “You don’t belong here. You have to go.”

Swallowing, I take a step closer. “I...I want to belong.”

He grits his teeth, crossing his arms and avoiding looking at me. When he finally speaks, each word holds more anger than the last. “I didn’t feel shit when we ended them, Gwyn. And I still don’t have the closure I was searching for.” He throws his hands up, then walks over to the fence bordering the cemetery. Hands fisting the metal, he looks toward the lake. “When you were changing, me and Margot looked around. One room smelled like him.” I step forward, gently placing my hand atop his. “It’s been months now since they sent us his blood. For it to still smell so strong? Fuck, Gwyn. They tortured him. There was all sorts of shit in there. Silver scalpels, acid to pour in his wounds. There’s...there’s a video file with his name on it. I-I can’t watch it.”

“I don’t think you—”

“But I have to watch it, Gwyn. If he had to suffer like that, I should suffer with him. Someone who loves him should hear his last words.”

My nose stings, and I force my lip not to quiver. Seeing him hurt like this hurts me now. I wish it didn’t. “They deserved their deaths. Would’ve deserved worse.”

He shrugs, pulling his hand out from beneath mine. The moon lines his tension-filled face. “That’s not the issue, sweetheart.” The bite is back in that single word, and my chest feels tight.

“Then what is?”

“You. When you confronted that bitch. I could feel your pain, and it took everything in me to not rip her to shreds. I wanted to tear her limb from limb, wanted to watch you do it. Wanted to fuck you on her goddamn corpse. But that rage, that anger, that *fire* wasn’t meant for you. It was supposed to be for my goddamn little brother. Do you realize how much of a

piece of shit that makes me?” I reach for him, unable to say anything, but I think better of it. He jerks away from my extended hand just as I lower it. “You took my fucking anger and displaced it. I’m never going to forgive you for it.”

“Roman, I—” He holds up a hand, cutting me off.

“This is done, Gwyn. You got a good goddamn deal out of it, didn’t you?” His laugh is cruel. “I knew your plan all along. I just didn’t think you’d succeed. You made me care enough about you to let you live, but that’s it. You’ll get no more from me.”

“It might have been my plan, but—”

“For fuck’s sake.” His grip is rough on my bicep, and he turns me around. “You need to go before I change my mind and take you to the compound.” His voice cracks, and the emotion in it creates a fissure in my heart. I imagine it moving in slow motion, spreading uncontested. In the days since I Ascended—before that if I’m honest—Roman has curated a level of security I knew I could never rely on. Yet losing it is tectonic. I can barely stand my ground. It takes all my strength to turn and face him. He towers over me, and I’ve never seen him more somber. No hint of mischief I’ve grown to expect. No understanding in his warm eyes.

I can’t stand it.

“Roman, tell me the truth.” I feel an anxiety attack burgeoning. My breaths are coming too fast, too shallow, and my entire body feels too tight, the veins beneath my skin being pulled taut. I’ve never asked a more important question in my life, and his answer could change everything. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want this. That you don’t want *me*.” His hand hasn’t let go of my arm. “Be sure of your answer, Roman. Because after this moment, you’ll never get another chance.”

A heartbeat. Two. Three moments pass. His expression doesn’t move even a fraction.

“How could I, sweetheart?” Everything stops. If he were to press his ear to my chest in this moment, he would hear the

echoes of my shattering heart. His jaw juts out, and I watch his tongue run over one of his fangs. “No matter how beautiful the fractured parts might be, I’m not about to risk everything for someone so broken.”

ROMAN

I'VE NEVER HAD SUCH A VISCERAL REACTION TO REGRET. WITH Remy, I've wished things went differently. I've agonized over every decision I ever made. I've lost my appetite, been unable to sleep, but it doesn't compare to how I feel now.

My body revolts, rejecting the horrifying things I just said to her. Goosebumps prickle my skin, my stomach roils, and everything aches. Physically, my body reacts to my words like an infection. If only it could burn my guilt away with a fever. Sweat out everything I've ever felt for her, so watching her reaction doesn't hurt so fucking bad.

Gwyn's mouth falls open, and her porcelain jaw trembles. Those warm eyes go dim, and I want to take it back. But I can't. It wouldn't matter anyway. The cruelest words I could think of have already crossed the threshold of my lips. It's a chemical reaction when their evil meets with oxygen and what we could have had decomposes within a few syllables.

No matter if I meant them or not, they'll leave a stain on her heart. Even if I could keep her, even if I changed my mind, she won't have me. Not anymore. I'm just another asshole on her long list of people who haven't cared enough to see her for more than her mental illness. Who haven't loved her enough to stick around and see it through.

I hate that just as much as I hate why I had to make her believe it. Everything I've done for the last seven months was to find Remy—at first to bring him home, and then to avenge him. And when I finally had the chance to do it, every fear I

held about myself regarding my brother was proven to be true. Acting recklessly, I killed everyone who might have hurt him, who might have been able to tell me about his last moments because she had distracted me. My disloyal thoughts had turned to the woman who stands crestfallen in front of me now. My traitorous heart had only wanted to avenge her, and thoughts of my brother had fallen away.

She might have seen my capacity for goodness, but it doesn't count if it's at my brother's expense. It doesn't count if I hate her for it. And it certainly doesn't count if I spew a bunch of bullshit at her to make her get as far the fuck away from me as possible. Just because I might've believed Gwyn for a time, it doesn't make it the truth.

I'm not capable.

I will never be the kind of good that the people I care for deserve. So it's better to deal with it now, safer to deal with it now, before she thinks she can count on me. Before she meets the same end as my brother. Before my hands grow weak and drop the broken parts of her I desperately want to carry. It takes every ounce of my willpower not to pull her close and say anything to fix what I've done. Instead, I drop my grip on her arm, and start toward the entrance where Margot and Nico wait.

"Fuck you," she whispers from behind me.

Might as well twist the knife.

I turn to face her as I continue walking backward to the car. "Timing doesn't seem right, does it? Although that *was* the best part."

I hope to whatever higher power there is that ghosts aren't real. That my mother doesn't see me desecrating her final resting place with the words of someone I don't recognize anymore. Someone Gwyn almost convinced me I wasn't. I pray my mother's ashes got caught on the wind and took her far away from this tree where I pay my respects. I have ruined the place I go to speak to her—one more casualty I can add to my list. With blackened hands and bitter heart, there is nothing I touch which doesn't end up destroyed.

But Gwyn is the ghost in this graveyard, her hair an inky black stain on the wind. Her pretty little dress is muted in the dark, and when the breeze grabs it and pulls it up, I can see pale, plump thighs I'd much rather be nestled between. Her arms clasp the other, pulled close against her body.

“Coward,” she says, jaw clenched.

At least she sees me now for what I am.

Within a breath, she's in front of me, teeth bared, with two hands firmly planted on my chest. Then she shoves with all her strength. When I stumble back a step, she advances. Her eyes are alight, molten rage boiling the tears on her lash line. It's better than the cold lifelessness I just saw. At least her hate will keep her warm. “These broken parts have sharp fucking edges, Roman.”

Grabbing her wrists before she can push me again, I tug them down to her sides. “You're done Ascending, sweetheart. You've got your wires crossed if you thought this was anything more.”

Perfect lips curve up into a disbelieving smile as Gwyn huffs out a laugh. She seems as if she's about to speak, but then shakes her head as she looks away from me. “No. What I *thought* was—”

“Stop talking,” I say when I hear a strange sound. Surprisingly, she listens. I loosen my grip but squeeze her wrists as I turn my ear to the cemetery entrance. Unable to see past the trees and the stone gate, I'm not sure what I heard. It's possible I overreacted, and the sound had just been Nico and Margot getting into the car.

“What is it?” Gwyn whispers, but she's promptly drowned out by a scream.

Margot.

Nico is shouting, and I'm running. Gwyn is right on my heels, keeping up despite the shoes she wears. But the familiar laugh I hear from ahead sends a chill down my fucking spine. I skid to a halt, stopping Gwyn with an outstretched arm.

“Go. Back to the lake, head south on the road. Run,” I direct her.

“What? No.” She makes to push past me, but I grab both her arms and spin her toward where we came from.

“It’s Emile. *Go.*” I give her a shove for good measure, and she stumbles a step before spinning around. Her eyes are wide, and I can hear her heart speed up. It’s fast, like it was before she turned, and I know she’s frightened. “He’ll fucking kill you, Gwyn. He must have found out about you. Now, go.”

“Where? The greystone? I don’t know how to—”

“I don’t give a *fuck*, Gwyn. Go!” Keeping my voice down, I do my best to stress what needs to happen. It doesn’t matter where the hell she goes, as long as it’s not here. I’m about to pick her up and take her out of the cemetery when she finally takes a step in the right direction.

If I had to make that choice, living with it would have killed me. I can’t let Margot and Nico suffer the consequences of my decisions. I can’t let Gwyn get hurt either. No matter what bullshit I just spewed, I can’t let anything happen to her.

“Don’t go home, alright? They know.” When she hesitates, when she looks over her shoulder with those sad brown eyes and gathered brows, I allow myself a moment to just take her in. It’s possible she leaves, escapes, runs far away from this. Now she knows of witches and sorcerers, she could find someone to help her hide once more. Sending for Sasha, Gwyn knows enough now to escape and hide and thrive. Hidden from me forever.

This could be the last time I ever see her.

“I’ll find you,” I say when I decide that won’t work for me. “I promise. Now, go.”

Her eyes are still wet from when I’d been the world’s biggest asshole, and so it shouldn’t surprise me when a tear rolls down her cheek. It shouldn’t fucking devastate me. My lungs tighten, and I mouth at her once more to go. She doesn’t look back again as she runs away from me. Her hair whips out

behind her, and the wind blows her scent to me. I breathe it in deep, wishing I could keep it with me forever.

When I hear Nico cry out in pain, it draws me out of my trance, and I don't let myself linger any longer. Weaving between trees and headstones, I run as I strain to hear the voices outside the gate. There's Emile, his lover, and at least two others. Slowing to a walk before I reach the gate, I take a moment to catch my breath and straighten my appearance. Hair has fallen loose from where I've pulled it back, so I take the elastic out completely and comb through the loosened strands with my fingers.

Finally, with a practiced nonchalance, I step over the gate. Nico is scuffling on the ground with one of Emile's muscle. On her knees, Margot has a very sharp silver knife pressed against her throat. Emile's paramour, Zada, has a firm grasp on my friend's hair, keeping her neck exposed. My uncle's black Escalade has blocked Margot's sedan, and two of his more muscled bloodsworns flank either side of him. My uncle is of average build, and yet these two make him look small. I've known Ivar my entire life, the hulking blond Viking on his right who has never cared to learn any English, but the man on his left is new. Neither of them are people I want to deal with if I can help it. Emile's hands are in the pockets of his black peacoat as he leans against his SUV. His grey hair is perfectly styled and the light blue scarf around his neck matches Gwyn's dress.

"Tonton, que se passe-t-il ici?" I ask as I put my hands into my own pockets. I don't trust myself not to clench my fists.

"À vous de me le dire, Roman." Icy cold, he attempts to make me feel like a child again with his stare. In his long life, that's what I must seem to him. But, though child I may be, Emile is now my equal. His intimidation doesn't work. Leaning against the stone gate, one leg crossed in front of the other, I watch Nico get overpowered as he's pinned face down on the ground with his arm twisted behind him at a painful angle. Sucking on my teeth, I sneer at Emile.

"Ah bah oui, Emile. It looks like you have assaulted my friends, and I'm at a loss as to why."

“Where is she?”

“The hunter? She’s locked away at the greystone, I suppose.”

“*Putain, Roman! Sale gosse.* Do not speak to me as if—” He inhales deeply, tight-lipped. Emile walks toward me, picking his way carefully between Margot and Nico’s outstretched feet. Margot is sobbing loudly, and he glares over at her. He’s brought his hands out of his pockets, and he doesn’t bother hiding his fists like I have. “Did you not think you would be *seen*? Did you not think you’d be *noticed*? Last Drop is not some secret little lair, you fool.”

“You told me to fuck her and get it out of my system, did you not? Why does it matter if I did it in the company of friends over drinks?” Margot had assured me it was safe. She made sure money exchanged the right hands, so I don’t know what the fuck happened.

He runs a hand through his hair, sighing. “I’m trying to handle this before your father returns. Do you not understand? If this were about the coven, I would rejoice. You’ve effectively handed it over to me.” He puts his hand on my shoulder, looking into my eyes with unquestionable sincerity. “Roman, I care about you as my own. You are my blood. Bjorn is already on a flight back. *When he finds out what you’ve done, he will end you.*”

Margot whimpers behind him, and I’m surprised when he whips around, the tail of his peacoat hitting me as he moves toward her. “Why do you fight and scream so, *petit Talleyrand*?” He tilts his head, bending over to look her in the eyes. “Does that make me Alexander?”

I sigh in annoyance. “What are you talking about?”

“If she is Talleyrand, and I am Alexander, who does that make you, Roman?” I stare at him blankly, at a loss for words. “*Think!* I am the tsar. Who. Are. You?”

“Talleyrand, Alexander...” I can barely make sense of the words, and I feel sweat form on my brow when I rifle through the memories of French history lessons with him. The burning

headache I'd get from standing out in the sun while he made me recite the history he'd lived. "Are you...Are you saying I'm Napoleon?"

"*Oui, mon grand.*" His lips curl downward into a pout. "Which makes your friend a traitor, unfortunately. For the greater good, but still. No one remembers a traitor fondly, do they?"

My fists unclench, and I'm numb with disbelief as I look past him at Margot.

"He's lying, Roman!" She calls out before Zada presses the knife closer to her throat. A drop of blood rolls down her neck, and my thirst rides my senses for only a moment before I'm focused on my uncle's words once more.

"What did she tell you?" A black pit opens up in my stomach.

"She shared her location from her phone about thirty minutes ago. There was a picture attached."

Margot had been in the pizza place with Nico, had even sent me a text. If he can prove it came from her phone, can she refute it? I'd thought she was more than an assistant. A friend, even. And I'd thought she'd felt the same about our relationship. But perhaps she figured Emile could give her more pull within the coven. Or perhaps he offered her a place outside of the compound. Margot is pulling against Zara, about to slit her own throat, eyes wide. I refuse to look at her. "Please, Roman," she sobs.

When Emile hands me his phone, I don't bother looking at the number; I don't have Margot's memorized, and I'd have to pull out my phone to compare. I don't even read the text message she sent, eyes skipping straight to the photo. All I see is *her*. Laughing in my lap, Gwyn's beautiful smile takes up her entire face. The picture had clearly been taken at Last Drop, and it tells me Margot has indeed betrayed me. But I can't find it in me to care when I look at this image. When I see the two of us, it stops me in my fucking tracks and flips my world on its head. She's wearing that tiny black dress, and it's ridden up around her thighs. There's a trail of blood on my

neck, a single red drop on the collar of my shirt. With her fangs clearly visible, the image is damning, but it feels the opposite.

It feels divine.

My tender eyes and soft smile are reverence. Holding her in my lap is worship. Her blood is my communion, and her voice calls me to prayer. Her curves are a holy place to which I'd build an altar. As I look at this picture, her name repeats in my head, a sacred mantra growing faster as it matches the beat of my heart. My body holds no tension, my face holds no fear, and I hadn't yet realized the cost of confession. When I'd admitted in my quietest of moments, within the deepest parts of my mind, that I needed her, that I couldn't bear to lose her, I hadn't known the price.

To have her, I will have nothing else.

“We can fix this, *mon grand*. Tell me where she is.”

No home, no family, no friendships, no coven. To have her is to forsake the rest.

“No,” I say. When my uncle pulls the phone away, I see his mask slip. The ugly horror which pulls his mouth into a grimace takes over, and his rage runs red as it tints his pale face. I take a step away from him as his eyes bulge. I'm expecting him to hit me, brace myself for the blow, when he surprises me, punching a number into his phone instead. Putting it up to his ear, someone answers before the first ring.

“Kill her when you find her. Bring the heart back.”

No.

My chest tightens when I hear it on the other end of the line. It's quiet, but I would recognize her voice in the deepest of dreams. “*Non, Tonton, je te supplie.*” I drop to my knees, grasping his hand in mine. I don't know what else to do. Gwyn's faint gasping sobs crackle through the speaker and reverberate through my entire being. I don't know how far she got, and I don't know how many people he sent to find her, but it doesn't matter anymore. All I can do is barter for a few more moments. “Let me swear to you. Whatever you want.”

“*Attendez!*” he snaps before ending the call. His lip curls as he looks down at me, my desperate hands wrapped tightly around his wrists. “*Pitoyable. Mon Dieu, tu l’aimes?*”

I say nothing, pulling his wrist to my lips. “Let me drink. Please. Just...throw me in the cells with her until Bjorn returns. That’s all I want.” When he doesn’t move, merely blinking at me, I lose my patience. “I have asked very fucking little of you my entire life. Give me this one thing. Give me a chance to say goodbye before he kills her.”

There’s a hitch in his breath, and I know I struck the nerve I intended to. Though he didn’t tell me more about her, I doubted Emile had a chance to say goodbye to the woman he loved before my father took her from him. All I have to do is get him to agree. And then I’ll figure it out from there. I have to. I have no choice.

“Fine,” he says, lifting his arm. When I bite down, I close my eyes. One more person who can hold me under their thumb for the rest of my life. But, at least by doing this, I might be able to free Gwyn. It’s my only hope.

GWYN

A SPIDER OR SOME OTHER BUG CRAWLS OVER MY ANKLE, AND I brush it away before pulling my legs up and crossing them.

It's pitch black, and even my improved vision isn't able to penetrate the overwhelming darkness. It stinks of mildew and dust. I doubt anyone has been down here for a very long time. The blackness is suffocating, pressing close, making me feel claustrophobic. The cell is small as it is, more like a small closet than anything. I don't think I could stretch out if I tried. The bone-deep chill I feel seems heavier, and I suspect it has something to do with what lays beneath me. The air is dense with what I can only describe as dread.

I am walking on a beach. The sand is hot beneath my feet and hard to walk through. I think of burning calves, the rough sand slipping between my feet and sandals. Imagining dropping my bags full of towels and sunscreen, I remember that feeling of wet packed sand beneath my feet. Digging my toes in it. Walking to the water and standing still as I let the incoming waves wash the ground out beneath my feet, making me sink lower and lower. Cool, frothy water comes up higher and higher on my ankle the longer I stand there. When the smell of blood interrupts the ocean breeze in my mind, I open my eyes. There's a faint beam of light coming from the direction of the stairwell, but it's not enough for me to see anything; it's still too far away.

The blood I smell isn't just any blood either. It belongs to Roman. I know it better than is fair.

I slam my head back against the wall behind me. It hurts, and I relish in the ache. I don't want him here. I don't want to see Roman while I await Bjorn's return from Iceland. I don't want to speak to him, don't want to be near him. And the fact I smell his blood makes my stomach twist.

He's hurt. Though probably healed by now, I imagine Emile punished him. I wish I didn't care about that.

As the light gets brighter, illuminating the bottom step enough for me to see, I watch a rat skitter away. Bile rises in my throat alongside my thirst. I can only imagine how tempted I'd be to drink from a rodent if he kept me down here for an extended period. As it is, I am keenly aware of the creature's heartbeat, and I hear a few others in close vicinity. I'm repulsed when I lick my lips. I can only hope Bjorn is not so sadistic. Swallowing, I turn away from the stairs. Two sets of footsteps keep time with my pounding head. Leaning against the wall, I pull my knees up and wrap my arms around them. I try not to let my thoughts spiral, try not to entertain anything having to do with Roman or what he said to me or what I wish he'd said instead. As the light gets brighter, I watch the shadow the bars cast onto the floor. In the shadow, it's impossible to see the detail; the points carved like thorns into the bars aren't visible in their silhouette. Tiny and sharp, it makes it impossible to grab the bars without pain.

When the light is bright enough to show me my own hunched silhouette spreading long and horizontal on the wall, keys jingle as the cell beside mine is opened. I should've known Emile would punish Roman. Even so, it surprises me. Though he's one of just a few people stronger than him, Roman's blood sworns would have defended him, right? And now he's here, so many hours later? What has he been doing this whole time?

It doesn't matter. Silver bars will keep me stuck, but they'll also keep me safe. They'll keep me distant. They'll keep me from getting any wild ideas. There's no point in interacting with him. Not after what he said to me.

There is no fight, no scuffle, no attempt to overpower whoever escorted him down here. No words are exchanged as

footsteps move into the cell beside me. I suspect he's limping, and the scent of his blood has only grown. The silence is broken by the clang of bars swinging shut and the notching of a key in a lock. Neither of us speaks as one set of footsteps leaves, and I am ushered once more into unending night.

It's a lot harder to meditate when Roman's breaths and beating heart resound in my ears. When I begin to hear his words on repeat, all hope of peace is gone.

How could I, sweetheart?

I'd been so profoundly foolish to think he could truly care for me, to think *anyone* could want me. Fuck, I don't even like myself most of the time, and yet my wretched heart thought someone else might? Not just someone, but Roman Sauveterre. The man who kidnapped me, who stands for everything I should be against. Who has shown little remorse for what he's done and how he's treated me thus far.

"Gwyn?" he whispers, his voice scratchy. I ignore him. There is no room for softness from him anymore. There can't be. "You alright?"

"Just peachy," I reply, kicking myself for bothering to answer him. I bite down on my lip to punish myself for it. I can't let Roman back in. Not now. I won't allow myself to think about how he held me when I'd cried in his arms. I can't think about how he'd pulled me from death's grip with his mouth full of blood as his lips pressed to mine. I refuse to entertain the indignation and sorrow beneath his harsh exterior when he'd learned of my own suicidal thoughts. And yet, fighting away the thoughts has allowed me to come to a painful realization.

It's not that he didn't care. He did. Roman is capable of good; that much I know is true. But he's not capable of caring *enough*, and that's not his fault. The problem lies in me. The problem *is* me. I am no fucking good, and he's far more astute than I ever gave him credit for if he knew it all along.

"I didn't mean it."

I say nothing. Of course he meant it. Everyone always has. I don't blame them. Why would someone want to deal with my issues when it is so much simpler not to? It would be so much easier if I didn't deal with them either. The urge is sometimes overwhelming. I'd been fighting the thoughts away, pushing myself after each new distraction, but beneath it all, it waits. The desire to not feel a thing looms far below, like a leviathan—hungry and vicious. If I venture too deep, I won't make it back to shore.

“Gwyn.” There's a sound like a snake slithering over dry leaves as he slides closer to the bars. “I was angry and confused, so I said that shit to hurt you. To push you away. I never fucking meant it.”

I sigh, leaning my head against the wall. “It's not like it matters now. Why are you here? If you're looking to atone, find forgiveness elsewhere.” I'm the last person he should seek that from.

“Come here. Let me...let me touch you.”

I can't do this. I can't do any of this. If I listen to him, he'll just break my heart all over again. “Roman, please just leave me alone. I-I would like some quiet before my death.”

“You're not dying,” he snaps. “I'm not going to let that happen.”

Try as I might, in the pitch black I struggle to imagine his fierce expression. The downward tilt of his soft mouth. Narrowed eyes and crossed arms and a heart bigger than he thinks he has. Just not quite big enough. I won't see this Roman ever again, and it's the first thing that's made me want to cry. I don't, though, turning again so my back is to the wall. Breathing deeply, I can scent him far too well. I don't smell mint on him, and I wonder if there's a trace of it on his tongue. Though his woody deodorant is doing the best it can, sweat and blood are overwhelming. The blood on his body is not too old, from what I can tell, but the thought of tasting him one more time makes me consider going over to him.

“What's your plan then, Roman? You seem just as trapped as I do.”

“I’ll pretend I’m talking sense into whoever comes down for you, get the keys, and give them to you. You let yourself out, then you either let me out to help you get away, or you leave me here. It’s up to you. If you let me out, I will do whatever needs to be done to get you free of this place.”

“I’m not even going to touch on your plan to just ‘get the keys,’ and instead ask why wouldn’t you just let yourself out first?”

“Well, it’s all I could think of to get around the command. And honestly, that’s pushing it. I might not even be able to hand them to you.”

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest. “The command? What command? Is your father already here?”

“No, but he’s landing soon.” The way Roman’s voice drops when he continues makes me think he’s ashamed. “The command isn’t from him.”

“Who, Roman? Who commanded you?” I demand. I wish I could see him. The cold stone feels awful on my knees as I adjust closer. “Roman?”

“Emile.”

Moving as close to the bars as I can without touching them, I look toward where I think his face is. I’m tempted to reach through and cup his chin in my hand. Instead, I whisper, “What did you do?”

“I did what I had to do, sweetheart. He had the upper hand. Margot...”

“What about Margot?”

“The bitch betrayed us. She fucked us over, and I’m sorry.”

“She did?” My stomach twists in a knot, picturing the blonde I’d one day consider a friend if things had gone how Roman planned. I feel his hand move closer to my thigh, feel the heat of his body beside mine. I know how disappointed he is, how hurt, how horrified he must feel. He’s probably second guessing every decision, every interaction, and my mouth goes dry at the thought. The air in my lungs feels thick as I push it

out. “I thought she liked me.” I force a laugh, but he doesn’t react.

“I swore myself to Emile so I could see you again.” He swallows, and I hear his body shift. “To say goodbye.”

My throat closes up, and I fight angry tears. “Why would you do that, Roman? Why would you swear to him?”

“What the fuck was I supposed to do? Nothing? Not an option. I’m going—”

“Sure seemed like an option a few hours ago. This is just guilt.” I hate the things I’m saying to him. I hate that every fiber of my being believes them to be true. There is no shred of doubt, no tiny glimmer to hang my ill-advised hopes from. No matter what he’s told me, he didn’t mean what he said.

We can regret the things we say and still mean them.

I’ve seen Roman in all stages of his guilt and grief when it comes to his brother. The only reason he is here now is because of it. He doesn’t care for me enough to want the broken fuckup that I am; he made that clear. The worst part is that I’d ever hoped he could. There should be a word for simultaneous embarrassment and heartbreak. I’m a fool, simple as that. After seeing the shattered parts of me, to hope he might not think I was too much is delusional. That my grief wasn’t too big, that my failings and coping mechanisms weren’t too hard to deal with. I’d hoped so desperately that my broken heart held together by moonlit wishes and crossed fingers might be enough for him. “I can’t handle carrying your regrets on top of everything else, so just leave me alone,” I snap.

“I don’t regret what I said at the cemetery.” When Roman’s words register, I laugh, high-pitched and surprised. I’m about to crawl away from him when he continues. “I should’ve said it sooner. I should’ve told you I can’t stand the sight of you, that you are nothing to me.” He reaches out and grabs my hand, pulling it through the bars to stop me from moving away. “I should’ve said I never think about you.” His lips graze my knuckles, and my breath catches. “That I could never want you.” He kisses the inside of my wrist, and my

pulse races. “That your heart wouldn’t fit perfectly in my hands.” My eyes water when he presses his mouth to the center of my palm. “I would be the world’s most accomplished liar, sweetheart, if it meant you were safe.”

Swallowing a sob, I pull my hand back. I’m surprised he lets me. “Roman, it’s too late. Please. P-please, don’t.”

It’s too late. *It’s too late, it’s too late.* This is guilt and nothing more. *Do not let him in.*

I hear him run his hands through his hair and then swipe one over his rough beard. Little sounds I’ve grown far too accustomed to. I’d told myself from the very beginning that Roman would be the one to ruin me, and he’s done it so thoroughly in such a short time. Everything I’ve ever known has been upended, and I should want nothing to do with him. I should have never gotten close to him, grown fond of him, fallen for him. The way I currently feel is all my fault.

If only Bjorn would return faster, this feeling would go away sooner. His return will take away all my suffering, and I will finally know peace. I will stop craving the impossible, I will stop grieving, stop struggling through existence. I will finally be free from everything which has ever caused me pain. When I cup my head in my hands, warm tears splash into my palms, and I’m sure Roman smells the salt of them.

“Gwyn...” Soft, he soothes me against my will. “I’ll protect you.”

“Forgive me if your protection means very little from behind these bars.” Though I meant for it to come out cold, Roman’s deep voice has rolled through me and taken out the bite.

“I’ll convince Emile to come to my side. My father will consider his opinion now that the coven will belong to him. What I did...it...I guess it cost me the coven, but I don’t want it. Frankly, I don’t know if I ever did. I care about them, my people, sure. I’ve known them my whole life, grown up with them, fought with them, but I don’t *need* them.”

I'm shaking as I exhale. "You want things to be different. You want to be the leader they deserve," I argue, even if it hurts.

"But I don't need it. Not like I need—"

There's a loud bang from above, and I'm almost worried the building is collapsing. It makes me giggle to myself. Dying in a cell because of a building collapse is peak hilarity to me in my tired, anxious state. And once I start, I can't stop. I'm wiping tears and snot from my face when I hear shouting from above.

"Fuck," Roman says, clambering to his feet. "He's here." He grunts as if he's in pain. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. I didn't think he'd come down here himself." He paces as we hear thunderous footsteps going down the stairs. Far too fast, Bjorn's using his vampire speed to get down here. The man is furious.

"*Roman, against the wall, hands on your head. You move, and I kill her in front of you. I'll leave her rotting corpse for you to gorge yourself on until I decide what to do with you, you fucking disgrace.*" Bjorn's voice is thick with his accent, echoing down the stairwell as he gets nearer. Roman fights the compulsion, but it doesn't last long before he stumbles backward and slams into the wall.

"Father!" Roman shouts. "It's not—"

"*SILENCE*," Bjorn roars, and even though he can't compel me, my throat closes up as if I'm susceptible to his words. Within a breath, Bjorn is standing at the bottom of the stairs. He has a flashlight, and he shines it over Roman first, staring such animosity at his son, it makes me sick. Roman is still in the same clothes he'd been wearing before, but his jacket is missing. His shirt is ripped and covered in a red spray. But he's still the same Roman who broke my heart hours ago. Still tall and sturdy and larger than life. I worry about what Bjorn might do to him. There's a slick of blood on his cheek, as if there was a wound beneath it that has since healed. I don't know what he was doing before this, and part of me doesn't

want to know. Did he endure torture for a chance to speak to me?

“*You,*” Bjorn snarls, pointing his flashlight toward me. I can barely make him out over the bright beam, but I can see his vicious teeth bared at me. “Abomination. I should give my son a thousand deaths for what he has created. Did you use a spell? Did a backwoods witch or some sorcerer give you something to lead him astray?” Bjorn crosses from the steps to the bars of my cell in two quick strides. I don’t move, a shiver creeping up my back. I can feel Roman’s eyes on me from where I sit.

“Perhaps,” I retort. “It couldn’t possibly have been anything else, could it? It’s not as if he learned compassion from you.” Bjorn surges forward, grabbing the sharpened silver bars with his bare hands and bending them apart. I can tell it takes quite a bit of strength as he fights against the reinforced silver. I don’t flinch, don’t even move. The smell of burnt skin floods my nostrils, and all I can do is watch. In the dropped flashlight’s beam, he is a sharp-angled shadow. Even though I’m still sitting, my dress pulled over my knees, I feel a strange surge of certainty. Though I’m in a position of weakness here, there is strength behind my words. What I said—or perhaps my unwillingness to cower before him—has struck a nerve. But Bjorn will not shake me.

I have confidence earned through trauma, honed by my darker moments, and purified by my survival. Since I’ve spent so much of my life yearning for death, I won’t face it with fear. An old friend who has walked beside me for countless long nights waits for me in Bjorn’s promised violence. I will not cower before him.

Roman is thrashing against the wall, fighting to move, and there’s a low whine coming from him as he struggles against his father’s command for silence. Bjorn steps closer, leaning between the bars, and I can finally make out his blond hair as he bends over me. “Perhaps it was unwise to question my compassion when you are at my mercy, little bitch.”

His hand shoots into my hair, grasping it at the crown as he pulls me up. His flashlight gets kicked, and it spins,

illuminating the room almost like a strobe light. It's dizzying. I struggle to keep my feet beneath me as he pulls me between the bars. My thighs scrape against the roughened silver and I can't help but cry out in pain. I'm fighting against Bjorn with as much strength as I have, but he overpowers me as he pulls me toward the stairs. He gets an arm across my chest and drags me backward, and all I can see is Roman. He's fighting against Bjorn's physical command, staggering forward before stumbling back. His teeth are bared, angry fangs glinting as the flashlight finally settles on him. His hair is in disarray, long tendrils wet with sweat and blood brushing over his face. It takes me a moment to realize he's yelling because no sound comes out. I'm holding my hair where Bjorn has it wrapped around his fist, my feet kicking out as I try to get my balance while he drags me.

It's my name that Roman is yelling. Over and over.

A tear runs down his face as his body gives up against Bjorn's compulsion. My heart breaks when I realize this is his worst nightmare coming true once more. Watching helplessly while someone he cares about is taken from him. This is all Roman has ever hoped to avoid, and it's a horrifying thing that just keeps happening to him. I want to tell him it will be alright, that everything will be just fine, and not to worry.

But I can't. I know it's not true.

"Someone will be down to deal with you shortly, son," Bjorn barks out. I get just a moment to plant myself and pull against him, and he stumbles back a step. Roman capitalizes on Bjorn's split attention as he rushes toward the bars. But he doesn't have the strength his father has, so he hisses in pain when he tries to pry his cell open. Bjorn rights himself, and starts dragging me once more, and Roman roars in anguish.

"Roman," I gasp, when I realize he broke the silence. "It'll be alright, okay?" I'm crying when I say the words. They feel venomous for so many reasons. Because it's not quite a lie, but it's not the truth either.

One more I've told him I can add to the list.

“Gwyn,” he yells, throat ragged. His mouth drops open and his eyebrows tip up in the center. He is in the middle of a storm, watching it take and rip and destroy. And he won’t know its calm. “I love you,” he says, holding onto the bars and ignoring the burning of his skin. It’s close to a whisper, but it feels like a scream when it penetrates me. His words burrow, spreading through my veins like a virus, and I stop fighting his father. I stop breathing. Everything stops.

Bjorn is dragging me up the stairs as I watch Roman in slow motion. Tears cloud my vision as he repeats himself over and over. Every time he says it, my soul is damned further. The sound which rips out of my lungs is one of mourning, and words fail me as Bjorn drags me up the steps. My eyes have blurred Roman beyond recognition as Bjorn pulls me out of sight. Eventually, he puts one arm around my shoulders and grips my bicep with his other. Somehow, I put one foot in front of the other.

Blood stops pounding in my head long enough I hear an even worse sound. Roman’s sorrow makes its way out in heaving gasps from floors below, and it renews my own tears.

“Why didn’t you say it back?” Bjorn asks, and it’s with such hatred, I know he thinks I used Roman. That I could not possibly love him, and was manipulating him all for my gain. And while it might have started as that, while I might still benefit from it, it’s become so much more. Though I don’t give it to Bjorn, the answer is simple, and it hurts far more than I could have ever expected.

After Roman finds out what I’ve done, he will question everything I’ve ever said to him, and I don’t want my only truth to be mixed in amongst the lies.

ROMAN

I LOSE TRACK OF TIME IN THE DARK.

I struggle to hold on to the anger and not slip into grief. Overpowering my father's command for silence was only possible because of the sheer need I felt to get the words out. The heat of my fury was the fuel I needed to fight past it. But now, with her gone, with my father taking her upstairs to perform some masturbatory proclamation of his strength, all I feel is despair. On the ground with my back to the wall, I can barely move. I'd fought against his hold, and for what? I'd been able to tell her I loved her, but at what cost? It hadn't given her peace.

Did I think it would make me feel better? That telling Gwyn I loved her right before her death would keep my guilt and sorrow away in the years to come? But I couldn't let her think the horrendous words I'd said to her had any merit. If she would have walked to her death believing herself too unlovable, too *broken*, it would have devastated me. Flawed logic, perhaps. Losing her will destroy me. Loving her is cataclysmic. Loving her will kill me. And my words hadn't even consoled her; that much was clear by the tears and look of horror she gave me. It's hard to believe it will be my last vision of her. Unless I get my fucking shit together and find a way to evade Emile and Bjorn's commands.

My father hadn't bothered ordering for my silence again, but my body still wants to hug the wall, and I know Emile's command is still there. How can I help her if I'm stuck? How can I kill them all if I can't escape? I sense the flicker of anger

once more, but the hopelessness I feel is overpowering. I wonder if it's worse, considering the proximity to Agnarr's tomb. It's always caused discomfort for me, a sickly feeling in my bones, and I think it might be hindering me further.

I'll leave her rotting corpse for you to gorge yourself on.

Bjorn's words replay in my mind and they give that tiny flicker kindling to feast upon. If he kills her, he better plan on killing me too. The moment I'm out, I will do everything in my power to stop him. Emile too. If my uncle were truly concerned about me, he would have covered for me. He would have let me have a goddamn conversation with him. No, they'll both die for what they've done. I'm already thinking about all the equipment left behind by Susan and Charlie's operation, plotting exactly what it will take to kill them. The more I think about it, the more calculations I make, the farther I can pull myself from the wall. The rage is fuel on my fire, and I try very hard to channel it.

But for what? Will it matter? Will it be fast enough to save her? And now she's all I can see. The way she'd looked at me at Last Drop, when I'd crossed into ruination with her, is all I can think about. I wonder if she knew then how this was likely to end. When I'd told her I wanted all of her, she knew what I meant. When she came around my cock and gifted me a small smile, even though she looked close to tears, I'd wondered. She'd looked devastated. At the moment, I'd thought it was just Gwyn; perhaps her melancholy heart wouldn't allow her to consider joy. But now I wonder if she'd been far more intuitive. Only one of us had been a fool, and it hadn't been her.

I punch the ground, furious. This is all my fucking fault. I'd been careless in all fucking aspects. I never should have brought her here. Punch. I never should have turned her. Punch. I never should have fallen in love with her.

Dust moves on the ground after my last strike, and I trail my fingers through it. The discarded flashlight gives me enough light to see by when I lean over and notice a hairline crack in the limestone. Experimentally, I draw my arm back and hit once more, using all the strength I have. I'm not sure if

it's my eyes playing tricks on me or not, but I'm fairly certain the crack grows.

Inhaling, I hold my breath while I let the events play out in my mind's eye. The steps stopped here, so I know this is the lowest level. Beneath us, there is only a hollowed out limestone tomb, holding nothing worth thinking about. If I manage to dig my way down, falling onto Agnarr's Slumbering body is something akin to suicide. Even being in his tomb, utterly silent, would be dangerous. The only way in and out is through the private elevator shaft, which leads to my father's suite, and he never gave me the code. This idea is a death wish.

But that's what makes it feasible. With the odds stacked so highly against me, I couldn't possibly hope for escape. It's a fool's plan, and that's the only kind of plan which will allow me to skirt Emile's command. If the floor falls out beneath me, I won't be compelled to stay flat against the wall. All I have to do is pick my way through the tomb of a few millennia old vampire, who has not quenched his thirst in centuries, and make sure not to wake him. I huff a laugh when I suddenly realize I don't care if that's what happens. Without Gwyn, I may as well throw myself on the mercy of one of the first ones.

Ideally, he'll stay asleep. There is an enchantment placed on him, one that allows him to rest despite his monumental thirst, but I don't know the limits. Maybe the sleep is deep enough for what I need to do. If I can manage not to wake him, I'll have to guess the code for my father's fucking elevator, ride it up a couple dozen stories, and then somehow overpower everyone and save Gwyn.

Yeah, I'm a stupid fucker with a stupid fucking plan, but I have no choice. With a deep breath, I adjust and start pummeling the ground.

IT DOESN'T TAKE AS LONG as I would've thought.

Strategically, I had found the most unlevel surface of the ground below me, and was able to break off a sharpened piece of rock and use it as a chisel going forward. The positioning of the cells is lucky. Built on top of a limestone deposit, my father's skyscraper is a front for the hollowed out tomb which lies beneath it. But the hollow section is not as large as the building on top of it, so when I could tell, based on sound that the ground was hollow beneath me, I nearly wept with relief. Using the sharpened rock as a chisel, I use my speed and strength to power through, tossing chunks of rock aside as I break them from the ground.

I'm hammering away when I realize what's about to happen, and I'm not quick enough to stop it. A large chunk of rock falls out beneath me, and I hold my breath as it lands. The gap isn't enough for me to slip through, but it's close. I wait, leaning over the hole to listen. I can't see—it's too dark—but after a moment of silence, I decide it's safe to continue. It sounded like the rock hit something and bounced off, so I'm not sure what's beneath me. Maybe something has finally gone right for me for once, and Agnarr Slumbers in a different chamber.

I make quick work of what's left—just enough for me to wiggle through—and I listen intently as the rock falls. It has to be at least twenty feet. Not difficult for me at all when I can fucking see, but I'm going in with no idea what I'll be falling on or facing after. I inhale, standing up and brushing all the dust off my clothes. While I'd been digging, my father's command had finally left me, and just in time. I need that fucking flashlight for what I'm about to do.

I need to hurry in case he released me for a reason. Maybe someone is making their way down to me. Maybe it's all done.

Maybe she's dead, and I'm too fucking late.

I simply won't allow myself to entertain that possibility, instead counting on my father's insufferable need for fanfare to draw things out. Reaching through the bars, I grab the

flashlight, wincing when a silver point catches on my shirt and pokes through my skin. I lick my fingertip and rub away the blood, not wanting to tempt the monster below me any further. Shaking off any sort of fear, I point the flashlight down into the hole, and am shocked to see gold.

Treasure. A wooden chest has fallen apart, and the floor beneath me is covered in silver coins. A golden arm band lies on top of it. I wonder if part of this is Ansi's cursed treasure. It's not very much, but it looks old. I wonder how much it would be worth now, and why he'd bother keeping it in this form. Even a few centuries ago, when he'd chosen to Slumber and all he'd had was this hollowed-out stone and a promise of protection from my father, had he prioritized resting with it? Or had my father kept it elsewhere until his obelisk was finished?

It doesn't matter.

I lower myself to the ground and stick my head through the hole. When my flashlight illuminates nothing more than treasure and impenetrable darkness, I take a deep breath and adjust before lowering myself into it. The flashlight is shoved safely into my pants as I dangle from the dungeon floor. Emile's command pushes at the edges of my senses for only a moment, but then I let my mind wander to the likelihood of Agnarr waking and pouncing on me. With a swiftness I find almost comical, the command loosens. Self-actualizing my escape by believing so much in my likely failure is an interesting experiment in the limit of our abilities.

I drop, careful to make as little noise as possible when I land on the spilled coins. Pulling out my flashlight once more, I look around. This is a small chamber full of treasure, and there's a long hall—if you could call it anything other than a tunnel—attached to it. Listening as intently as I can, I hear nothing as I creep toward it. Maybe I'll get lucky and the elevator will be at the end of this long, dark tunnel, and Agnarr will be asleep in another chamber.

No such luck.

I drop my flashlight to my side when I see a glow past the tunnel's edge. And then I hear a strange sound. Repetitive, it almost sounds like a hiss before it stops. When it repeats, I briefly wonder if what I hear is a snore. It's such a ridiculous idea, I nearly laugh. But then there's a pause in the noises, and I distinctly hear the smack of someone's lips. Gently, I bend, putting the flashlight on the ground and snuffing the light; I don't dare switch it off. When the sounds begin again, I put one foot in front of the other and step around the corner. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but my stomach drops out at what I see.

Across the giant chamber, there's a blinding white rectangle of light. It takes a moment to place it as my father's elevator, held open by something on the ground. It illuminates the room despite its size, and there, in the center of the chamber, is the largest bed I've ever seen.

Its occupant is neither asleep nor alone.

Draining the blood of a woman I recognize, Agnarr is certainly awake. Sitting up, his ice blond hair is tangled, and I can't see where it ends. I don't know what she's doing down here, and it's only one more reason to hate her. She's woken Agnarr, and even if it cost Kathleen her life, it's just one more fucking way she's betrayed me. Him being awake has fucked me. She doesn't fight him as he drinks, and I wonder if she's already dead.

If that's the case, I might be fucked. Once he's through with her, he'll certainly scent me and kill me, too. I've only got one shot, and if the elevator requires a passcode to make it rise, I'm dead.

My eyes leave the elevator as she stirs in his arms and he caresses her long auburn hair. And then Kathleen's body starts to seize. Rooted to the spot, I watch a woman I once loved die. But it's not Kathleen's soft sighs and quiet laughter I hear in my mind. It's not green eyes I see, but honey—warm and inviting. And it's not her smile I imagine dimming, but Gwyn's. All sense of self-preservation leaves me, and I sprint into the elevator, moving as fast as I can. Kicking over the heavy vase holding the door, I slam into the back wall. Just as

the elevator closes, there's a loud slamming, and I watch in horror as the metal dents inward. I leap to the panel with the buttons, and I don't have time to be relieved it doesn't require a code. I press the only one which will take me away from the monster beating against the other side of the door.

When it finally moves, I allow myself to breathe. The banging stops, and I sag against the wall.

It's only then I notice the faint, bloody footprints on the ground, tracked in by Kathleen.

The blood smells of my father.

GWYN

I CAN'T STOP SHAKING AS I LOOK DOWN AT THE HOT BLOOD ON my hands, thick and crimson. Vile, relief and repulsion rip through my system. I'm in shock I went through with it. I'd nearly considered forgetting everything. I really thought I could have done things differently. When I'd waited for Roman's response in the cemetery, I'd been hopeful I could trust him. I'd wanted to tell him everything, let him help me find a different way to do this. Fuck all the planning, all the scheming, all the enchantments, all the lies.

All the sacrifices.

I'd thought perhaps he would be *with* me, and I'd been so relieved to have someone to rely on who wouldn't be bound to it. Not Sasha or Hale, but someone who would have chosen me. Who could have loved me despite what I needed to do. Someone who loves me, even now, while he's unaware his father's blood grows sticky on my hands.

He will know no greater betrayal than this.

What I've done is brutal. Monstrous. But I cannot be blamed for what they've made me into. Can I?

Each moment which pushed me toward this has been fraught with indecision and fear. When Bjorn had thrown me into his office while he prepared for his little ceremony, I'd heard Roman's words over and over again. He loved me, he loved me, *he loved me*. It's not enough. They'd all loved me too, hadn't they? I'd paced the room, not bothering to look for a way to get me out of this. All I could imagine was Roman's

tortured expression as he'd screamed for me in the dark. Rationalizing it, I'd decided I had no choice anymore.

Either I die and nothing happens, or I do what I came here to do in the first place. Dead to Roman doesn't feel much better, but it's too late. He'd been too late.

By the time Bjorn came to fetch me, my tears had dried, and I'd held my head high as we'd made our way into the ballroom. He'd dragged me down an aisle between tables set for a feast. I think he was disappointed I didn't fight it. I hadn't forced him to pull me by the hair or yank me by the arm. Despite my fear, I'd walked calmly beside him, chin up, while his fingertips created indents in my bicep. When my eyes eventually found Margot's, I had been met with a tilt of the head and a frown. My heart had raced, and I'd finally considered what might happen if I failed.

I can't regret what I've done. I clench my fists, watching the blood squish out between my fingers.

I can't regret commanding Bjorn to let go of me, using the blood vow he'd sworn when he drank from me that very first day. He'd been stunned. Eyes wide, he had stumbled away from me. He hadn't been able to speak as every person in the ballroom stood frozen. I wonder if it was the same look my babysitter had given before she died. I'm sure she was equally surprised when one of Bjorn's henchmen snapped her neck while she waited for my father to come home from a shift. I had always hoped she didn't see it coming. Perhaps it was my father who wore that expression when he came home too late to save her, but soon enough to blast the vampire's stomach out with a silver loaded shotgun. I'm sure *he* was shocked when my father cut off his head.

I couldn't regret commanding all those sworn to me, as gasps and harsh whispers echoed throughout the room. Every person whose tongue has tasted my blood before I Ascended is still held in my thrall. And when those who hadn't drunk from me raced forward, my blood sworns intercepting every attempt on my person just as I'd demanded, I could feel no remorse. But I'd had to hurry; there were over a hundred vampires missing from this celebration. My sworns had held Emile at

bay easily when enough vampires piled onto him. Though some of them were sworn to him too, his commands could not override mine. I'm sure he still doesn't understand why.

"He will kill you for this," Bjorn had whispered when I made him sink to his knees. I hadn't answered before forcing him to reach into his chest and pull out his own heart. There is no more room in my heart for regret, especially not for those who have hurt people I care about. I can't stop shaking as I stare at the ground where the organ rests at my feet. Slick with gore, I'd dropped it. Blood blooms from Bjorn's body, face down on the ground. I watch it spread slowly, a dark red stain on the crisp white marble.

He's right. Roman will end me, but I doubt it will be because I killed his father. It won't even be because of what I do to his coven. It will be because I earned his trust, his care, his love, and I'd spit on it. It will be because he thinks it's all false, and that I'd planned to do this all along. I don't know when it shifted, when I started considering alternatives, but he'll never believe me. Once he knows the depth of the lies and manipulating I've done, the information I've withheld, he will hate me more than he ever thought possible. A sob heaves up my throat just as a woman slams me to the ground. Kathleen's hands are on my throat, squeezing, and I'm barely able to pull her hands off me, but she overpowers me for a moment and punches me in the face. I gasp as my head whips to the side, and she repositions. Straddling me, she holds my wrists down to the ground above my head.

"How?" she demands, but I thrust my hips up and she falls forward, letting go of my arms to gain her balance. Grabbing her around the middle with one arm, I elbow hers with the other and roll. Slamming her down to the ground, I'm the one with the advantage now as she throws her head back on the marble. The sickening crack vibrates through me. Kathleen turns her head, looking at Bjorn's body beside us. I realize I'm covered in his blood, and exhale a quick breath. I think of the brief terror she'd caused me before it shifted into the opportunistic glee her hatred offered.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “When you ripped my door off, it made me stop chickening out.” Holding her wrists down with my knee in her stomach, I lean forward, nearly pressing my lips to her cheek. She’s crying as she looks at Bjorn, dead beside her. “I cut my hand so Roman would have to turn me,” I say. She closes her eyes and begins to cry, and she doesn’t move as I sit up.

“I’m pregnant,” she says, and I let go of her hands. Her dark auburn hair spills out on the surrounding floor, growing darker as it soaks in the growing circle of Bjorn’s blood. I should kill her. I shouldn’t hesitate. The child in her belly would one day seek to destroy me if they had the opportunity. I wish I could be as callous as I’d been in the days after my parent’s death. Revenge fueled and teetering on the edge of that intrusive darkness, I’d been reckless and angry. I’d have killed every single vampire if I’d had the chance that day.

But Roman has shown me more. Margot has shown me more. Even Nico has convinced me of their humanity.

“Go,” I say. “Don’t come back.” It’s not a command since she never drank from me, but as I stand up, she scrambles to her feet. Then she runs. Tracking Bjorn’s blood across the floor, I watch as she leaves the ballroom. I’ll probably regret that. A few follow her, and I’m tempted to send someone sworn to me after them, but there’s no point. I’ll deal with them later.

Plucking Bjorn’s heart from the ground, I turn away, wondering if what Sasha and Hale told me about vampire hearts is true. After what Bjorn had planned for mine, I suspect there is some truth to it, long overlooked as an ancient barbaric tradition. I might be finally reaping the vengeance I am so badly owed, but I am not so far gone as to have the stomach for that. But I’ll keep it close by, just in case. Leaving Bjorn’s body in the middle of the room, I walk to the dais and brace myself on the intricately carved table placed there. I drop the organ on a gilded plate. It could have been my heart sitting upon it, and the thought makes my mouth run dry. I swallow down bile.

“Round up anyone who has ever hurt a hunter, anyone who has harmed my family or chased us these last three decades,” I demand, not even looking at them as I wipe my shaking hands on my pretty blue dress. Dirt and blood have ruined it, but I wear the stains with something close to pride. I just need to stop shaking. Breathing deep, I can’t summon the sounds of nature, but I can imagine them. Closing my eyes, I imagine a bubbling spring, and I’m much calmer in a matter of minutes. I turn to face the mess I’ve made. Some of the vampires sworn to me, who have caused harm to my family, gather in the center of the room, marching toward their own death, while the others follow directions. As more vampires are added to the crowd in the middle of the ballroom, held bodily in place, they look terrified and angry. It’s a mirror of what I’ve faced my entire life. I recognize one of them, and it makes my chest constrict. The marble floors in this ballroom will run red by the time I am finished, and I won’t mourn the decision. This was only a matter of time.

Roman had been a distraction, a silly little fantasy, which had almost cost me everything. Swallowing hard, I push him from my mind as I watch Margot shove a small woman into the growing group. I wince when she swipes at Margot’s face, raking her nails over her flesh.

Guilt seeps into my gut, pushing the nerves away. She will understand now what happened. When I make her fetch Roman from the dungeons, Margot will tell him she didn’t betray him on purpose. That when I’d whispered commands to her on the sidewalk outside Last Drop and ordered her to forget them, she couldn’t have stopped me. What he won’t know is the picture she took was real. That any of the feelings I’d shown for him that night weren’t faked. He won’t know I changed my mind nearly a hundred times since then. Since the moment he broke me with his tenderness. Since I accepted what I felt for him, I have been in agony. He won’t know that when she’d sent the text, I’d thought I had more time. He won’t know I fucked up and cut myself short because of the way I’d worded things. I doubt it will make a difference either way.

I search the room for Nico and find him sitting in a chair at one of the lavishly decorated tables. He's smoking a cigarette and watching me, a single dark eyebrow arching high. He doesn't try to stop me. Now that I've drunk his blood, both our commands are useless against one another. It was just one more thing I did to prove a lie to Roman. But because Nico doesn't move against me, it gives me hope perhaps he is nonplussed by this turn of events. Perhaps Roman...

I inhale deeply. Roman doesn't matter.

"*Now kill them,*" I command, gaze stuck on Nico. "*Line their heads up against the far wall so they can be burnt.*" I'm not taking any chances. Roman's friend doesn't move, doesn't even appear surprised. As the screams start and the metallic tinge of blood permeates the air, I close my eyes. The bloodcurdling scream wrenches through the air, bringing me back to childhood.

I imagine Nonna standing in the kitchen doorway, about to wipe her flour-dusted hands on her apron. I can hear the scream she'd unleashed when she came to investigate the front door opening and found PapPap bleeding out on the ground. I remember backing into a corner, brandishing my fork from lunch. The screams in the ballroom grow louder. They go on as long as Nonna's did, each one an echo of my past as they cut off abruptly. Like hers did. Collapsing from a heart attack was probably a better death than what the vampire would have done to her, but it wasn't fair. I never forgave my father for not warding their house, too. There are a lot of things I won't forgive him for.

At seven years old, I had been more prepared than the last time. When the vampire took a few steps toward me, ready to grab and hold me until my father came to fetch me, I had remembered what he taught me. I'd pulled the necklace from my throat and opened the locket. With the room pitch dark from the enchantment I'd unleashed, I'd moved on two little legs and blew the contents of my locket into what I thought was her face. The ground-up silver had slowed the vampire down and bought me just enough time for my father to step out of a portal and lop her head off with an axe. Spattered in

the vampire's blood, I remember screaming as Angela had rinsed my eyes of the silver dust. Sparkled vermillion had pooled at my feet before going down the drain.

These are just more screams to go along with the nightmares which have always plagued me.

When the sounds finally stop, I turn around. A few dozen bodies are piled in the center of the room, and more red stains the marble. I watch it ooze, dark and slow. I think of Brianna, the girl who stood between me and Sasha in our dance class, and how she'd died on the sidewalk in front of the studio. Red had stained the concrete, and we never went back because of it. Death has followed me my entire life, and my father had always been there to handle the fallout. It was then, at fourteen, that I decided I was done. Chasing after the mess the vampires left behind was no way to live. That was the first time I thought death would be easier, but it certainly wasn't the last.

I'm not worth so many lives.

Any time Angela intercepted them, she'd been soft and enchanted their memories away. Any time my father found them, they'd ended up dead. Either way, they still kept coming. I lost count of how many times we moved, trying to stay one step ahead.

Emile and another older vampire break free from the few holding them back just as the doors at the back of the ballroom open, and a throng of vampires dart into the room. I nearly freeze as I see Emile emerge, his entire hand no longer attached to his body. He shakes his head, roaring in pain, but I'm aware the odds have shifted. "*Keep everyone away from me,*" I command, feeling dozens upon dozens of cobweb thin tethers as they hear my demand. Only a few from this new group listen, and I realize I haven't estimated properly.

Bjorn's heart is in my hand within a second, the knowledge of what I need to do weighing heavily.

But Emile tackles me to the ground. I grimace as I tighten my grip around the slick, bloody organ and pull it toward my

mouth. Emile's scrambling, trying to use his remaining hand to dig into my chest, but I'm able to knock him off balance.

"*Pute!*" Emile shouts, and his foot kicks into my hip as he topples off me. His eyes widen when he sees what I hold in my hands.

Sasha and Hale were right about our hearts.

Taking a deep breath, I bite into it and swallow as fast I can. Emile struggles to get up, his missing hand making it difficult. And then he runs. Tearing through the ballroom, he is a blur before he disappears through the same doors Kathleen used. He is the only one who will be immune to my commands, having never been forced to swear to Bjorn. I don't chew, sitting on the ground shoving the bloody heart into my mouth and swallowing. Rip and tear, I swallow bite after bite. It's disgusting, thick, and nearly impossible to eat.

"*Stay quiet, and don't come near me,*" I command, sputtering with a mouthful of blood, starting to feel more and more of those featherweight tethers as I assume Bjorn's bloodsworns. "*Don't leave this room either,*" I add, as a few vampires dart to the doors. Doing my best to keep it down, I continue eating. When I look down at the heart in my hand, I see I'm barely even halfway done, and it makes me choke. Everyone in the ballroom has stopped moving, stopped fighting, and they all just stare at me. Margot stumbles forward, blood covering her already healed face. Tears run clean tracks down her cheeks as she stares at me.

I sit down on the steps of the dais, nibbling on the disgusting flesh in my hands after commanding the burning of the bodies. And I wait. I don't know what to do. Roman had never played into this plan when I'd mapped it out with my sister. I'd never thought of sparing him from my manipulations and violence. I was supposed to lure the coven with my blood, that poison they didn't expect, and then find a way to be turned. I hadn't expected to fall for the person who I ingratiated myself with. I never expected him to see the worst parts of me and not shy away.

Until he did, I remind myself. He knew it was too much, and he'd made a choice. He'd made *my* choice. It doesn't make it any easier, though.

Slipping the last bite in my mouth, mind made up, I stand. "*Margot, bring me your phone,*" I demand. She does as she's told and the phone is ringing when a gasp ripples through the room. Every set of eyes stares past me, and the room is deathly silent. When Margot's composure breaks and her chin wobbles, I know exactly who she is looking at behind me, and I prepare for the worst. My decisions won't matter if he kills me now.

I close my eyes, seeing the streetlight's glow of my worst memory, the down feather stuffing of my father's coat drifting to the ground like freshly fallen snow.

"Gwyn?" he asks, impossibly soft. The caress of his concern rips through my heart, and I bleed out.

ROMAN

I'D FOLLOWED THE FOOTPRINTS LIKE A BLOODHOUND TO THE ballroom. Fearing the worst, that Gwyn had somehow managed to hurt Bjorn, and he was only moments away from ripping out her heart, I had veered to the entrance near the dais. The scent of blood was growing stronger, and my shock and concern only worsened. How had she done it? Best case scenario, he'd torture her for injuring him. Worst case? He'd kill her on the spot. I can't let that happen.

And with Agnarr awake, I'm only more worried. I have to get her out of here.

Quietly, I pull the door open, prepared to see her desiccated body on the ground. Her lifeless eyes stare at me in my mind, the memory of her almost dying. Of almost losing her before I knew what I stood to lose. Gwyn is standing on the dais, Margot a step below her, and my heart stops. She's covered in blood, blue dress turning red, but she's in one piece. She's standing. She's *alive*.

"Gwyn?" I take a step toward her, confused why my coven is standing stock-still. Had my father ordered this? Gwyn doesn't turn to face me, and I glance at Margot in confusion. Despite her betrayal, I once trusted her; I can't help looking to her for answers. Tears are streaming down her face, and she flicks her head to the left. "What the fuck is going on? We have to get out of—"

All sense of urgency leaves me. My father is lying facedown in the center of the ballroom, blood spreading in a

large circle around him. Swallowing, I scan the crowd for Emile. Nico is sitting by himself, smoking a cigarette and shaking his head. The fuck?

“Gwyn!” I don’t mean to shout, but I need someone to explain. She’s okay, and that’s all that matters, but I don’t understand what the hell happened. When she finally turns, she’s white as a ghost. But she thrusts her chin upward, mouth a straight line. There is no relief to see me, no affection. Her hands are stained red, though one holds a phone, and I shake my head. It doesn’t make any sense. She killed Bjorn? “No. You didn’t...How? I don’t understand.”

There are no words. I only stare at her, mouth gaping open. She doesn’t look hurt; the blood covering her body doesn’t belong to her, but to my father.

“They’ll stop you if you try to hurt me,” she says, gesturing behind her toward the vampires who stand eerily still. My breath catches in my throat when I glance past, seeing a pile of bodies. Dozens. I only look for a moment, but not a single one has a head. This isn’t fixable.

This can’t be happening. She’s done this. *Gwyn* did this. She killed Bjorn. Somehow gained control of the coven. She *planned* this.

It clicks like a lightning bolt to the chest, running hot through my veins. Crackling rage overtakes me. I’m on her before she has a chance to order anyone, hand clamped tightly over her mouth. She’ll have to work hard for a silent command, and I don’t intend to allow her that kind of focus. Sweeping her legs out from under her, she’s on the ground in a second. Her hands are tugging on my wrist. I’m still stronger than her, despite all the power she’s obtained in the last few moments. My coven doesn’t move, and if I wasn’t so enraged, I’d be relieved. She wasn’t specific enough in whatever command she gave them.

“You killed him, didn’t you?” I spit, watching those vicious eyes for a reaction. They’re not soft honey anymore, but hardened predator. Her eyes narrow on me like a hawk.

Her brow furrows, and she glares at me. “DID YOU KILL REMY?” I roar, screaming inches from her face.

She owns me. She owns my body, my fucking heart, and I would’ve done anything for her. Rip out my own damn soul and give it to her to keep her here. And now, I’m going to kill her.

But I have to hear her say it. Sliding back on her legs, I sit up. Pulling her up by her face, she huffs in pain. I don’t give a fuck. “I’ll rip your fucking head off before you say a single goddamn thing. Tell me the truth, tell me fucking everything, or you’re dead. Hale’s dead, Sasha’s dead, that little girl she fucking babysits is dead. Everyone you’ve ever fucking loved, fucking *talked* to, is dead.”

At this, she snorts. I feel her hot breath against my hand, and her head tilts back. Eyes closed, she won’t stop laughing. I growl, about to squeeze her face to make her stop when she catches me by surprise. Using both her hands, she pushes me as hard as she can. I’m still on top of her, but her face is free from my grasp.

“Why the fuck do you think I’m here, Roman? You think I did this for fun? You think I did this because I was in a silly little mood? They’re the only ones left! You’ve killed everyone else! Your coven has been killing people I love MY ENTIRE FUCKING LIFE!” she screams, and then she slides one leg out before kicking me as hard as she can right in the dick. I grunt in pain, but I recover before she can fully get up. Pulling her leg, her ass slams back down onto the ground, and I slide her across the floor to me. At this point, she could order them to intervene if she has control of them, but she doesn’t.

I’d be a fool to think it’s because she gives a fuck about me.

I can’t breathe. Margot steps toward us, and the sound which comes up my throat is inhuman. This is my goddamn fight. My stupidity, my fucking fault. My *mess*.

“Tell me it was you,” I say, and it comes out as a plea. “If any of it was real, you owe me the goddamn truth.” I didn’t

mean to say the last bit, but I can't stop myself. She's ripped my fucking heart out. "You knew everything, didn't you?"

"He killed my parents, Roman." Her lower lip trembles, but her eyes hold a fire of fury.

"Hit and run, they—your parents died in a hit and run." Even as I say it, I begin to doubt.

"They covered it up, made it look like that. Enchantments, cutting the video and splicing it. He rammed into us with a truck first, before they attacked, so it wasn't hard," she says, putting her other foot against my chest, trying to push off me with it, but I hold her ankle tight. "A car accident couldn't kill Bill Parsons. Are you fucking kidding me? They tore him apart in front of me!" she screams.

"They?" I latch onto the word.

"Susan," she grits out. "She sold us out, hired some people to kill them, then covered it all up. Tied up all the loose ends." She gives me a pointed look. I assume she means Remy.

"Why? Why would she do that?" I demand, pulling her leg. She's halfway in my lap, and the time that would have meant something feels like another life. Before Gwyn. But now I'm in the After, and she's lucky I want my goddamn answers, or she'd already be dead. She opens her mouth, and I think she's about to tell me, but then she shakes her head and looks away.

"I didn't know everything," she says, nearly silent. "My dad withheld some stuff. He didn't tell me—" She cuts herself off.

"What didn't you know?" Gwyn refuses to look at me. "Goddamn it, answer me!"

"*Get him off me,*" she commands, shouting at the crowd of vampires who will have to obey whether they want to or not.

I wouldn't blame them if they wanted to after what I brought into our home. She was never susceptible to my commands. She'd been a trained hunter all along, and I'd been an ignorant fool.

I'm the Trojan fucking horse.

I let go of her before anyone can get to me, and she scrambles away. She picks up the phone, holding it to her ear. I don't move. I've missed my chance to fucking end her, and it makes me want to tear this place apart. There's a loud metallic sound, and the floor above us shakes. My father's suite is directly above this room, and there's only one sound it could be. A shudder ripples through me.

"Gwyn? It sounded like you were being attacked. Are you okay? Did you do it? Are they dead?" I can hear her sister's voice on the phone, frantic. I pull my legs up, resting my elbows on my knees, and hang my head.

I'm in a state of shock. I'd watched them for months. Me and Margot had researched for *months*. They hadn't planned anything, had given no indication she knew what she was. I blink, wondering if Sasha is also a hunter. My mouth has gone dry, and I can feel my blood rushing through my veins.

Margot comes to sit at my side. I don't look at her. "Did you know what she was? Did you lie to me? Did you—did you know?" When she puts her hand on my shoulder, I shrug her off.

"Alright, call me back in a minute," Gwyn says before shouting some orders to the waiting vampires. She's making them burn the bodies, and I feel sick. Those were my people, and I'm the reason they're dead.

"No, Roman. I swear," my old friend says. "She's been giving me commands, I think. No idea how long."

Blowing out a breath, I shake my head. "We have to get out of here." There's a loud roar from above us, and Margot's eyes widen. I don't know if she understands, but I'm about to rise when Gwyn walks over.

"*Don't let him stand,*" she demands, and Margot only looks at me sadly before I sit back down. I won't make her hurt herself to hold me down. Gwyn stands above me, arms crossed over her chest. "Susan wanted to breed me by force. When my parents wouldn't let her, she took care of that obstacle with the

help of some demons and your brother. I was already trying to figure out a way to take down every last vampire when Hale figured it out.” She laughs, cold and hollow. “She’d been giving me time to mourn their death—*because it would be too hard on a fetus*. It was an easy shift in our plans.” She has the audacity to fucking shrug.

She *used* me to kill them. I shake my head. Remy wouldn’t work with someone like Susan, with someone like Charlie. Fuck, he wouldn’t work with demons either, not if he was sober like I thought. It doesn’t make any sense. I’m looking down at my hands when I realize there’s a hole in her story. “Remy called me six months after your parents died. You’re full of shit. He had nothing to do with it.”

At this, she grins. “And when did you last hear from him before that, *sweetheart*?” I don’t answer, knowing it was the day before her parents died. He’d sent texts here and there, but that was it. Margot never picked him up on any cameras after that night. It’s all lining up, and I’ve been a fucking idiot. “Who do you think made him call his big brother?” She laughs, wicked and low. “Still took you two months to find me with no protection. He thought you’d be faster. Thought you’d save him.”

“You fucking bitch.”

This time, her laugh is soundless, and her jaw clenches shut. She swallows before speaking. “Watch how the fuck you speak to me, Sauveterre. Even without an oath, you’re going to do every single thing I tell you to do, and you’re going to do it without hesitation. Do you understand me?”

The cell phone rings, and she answers it, not lifting it to her ear.

I snarl. “I’d rather kill every person in this room—”

“Ro?” The voice on the phone makes me freeze, and I feel my eyes widen as I stare at it. Lifting my gaze to hers, there’s the tiniest spark in them. A flicker of something which isn’t hatred. It’s gone by my next blink, and I’m just staring up at her, mouth hanging open.

“For you,” she says, handing the phone to me.

“Remy?” I breathe, almost dropping it as my hands shake.

“I-it’s me. I’m okay. Are you okay? I’m sorry. I’m so, so fucking sorry, Ro. I’m—”

“That’s enough,” Gwyn barks out. “Hang it up.”

“Where are you? Where do they have you? What—”

“Hang it up right now, or Sasha puts a silver bullet in his fucking skull. We have shit to do,” she says.

“She’s not lying, bro. I’m so sorry. I fucked up. I’m sorry,” Remy says before he cuts the call himself.

Gwyn clears her throat. “Now, get up. If you ever want to see your brother again, you’re going to help me kill my father.” I just stare at her, dumbfounded. She did all this to *avenge* her father. “Well, you woke him up, didn’t you? That’s him roaring and shit, isn’t it?”

Agnarr.

I close my eyes, a slow smile lifting my lips, even if the ‘how’ of it is unfathomable. “Clever, sweetheart,” I say, tilting my head back as a chuckle bubbles its way up my throat. Half-hunter, half-vampire, Gwyn only had to Ascend for every drop of blood taken from her to become a weapon. A poison within my coven.

You were never my damnation, Roman. You’re my absolution.

I gave her everything she needed to destroy us. To destroy *me*.

The moment I get my brother back, I’m going to rip out her goddamn heart.