

K.L. TAYLOR-LANE

# HAUNT

RAVEN RIDGE HALLOW BOOK ONE

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✿ Created with Vellum

He is the second son of the first father of The Obsidian.

She is an orphan playing pretend inside an Italian convent.

Separated as children, he promised to go back for her, she promised to wait for him. Twelve years have passed, and he is finally tasked with finding his pair.

But is it too late?

After all, Billy Blackwell and Penelope Hart are both such beautiful liars.

# Playlist

911 – ELLISE

SWEET DREAM – BOHNES

SANCTUM ETERNAL – ESSENGER

DIRT – DREAM DROP

NIGHTMARES – ELLISE

MINE – SLEEP TOKEN

VICIOUS – BOHNES

RAPTURE – UNDEROATH

HALLELUJAH – UNDEROATH

RAGING ON A SUNDAY – BOHNES

BAD DECISIONS – BAD OMENS

MAD HATTER – MELANIE MARTINEZ

THE LOVE YOU WANT – SLEEP TOKEN

LIFELINE (DROWNING) – UNDEROATH

PUSH ME AWAY – OMENXIII

GLASS HOUSES – BAD OMENS

THE HIGH – BRYCE SAVAGE

ALL THE GOOD GIRLS GO TO HELL – HALOCENE

MISS YOU! – CORPSE

GIVE – SLEEP TOKEN

DEMONS (PHILOSOPHICAL SESSIONS) – JACOB LEE

CONTROL – HALSEY

UNSAINTED - SLIPKNOT



*Raeleen,  
for always believing in me.*

# NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Please be aware this book contains **many** dark themes and subjects that may be uncomfortable/unsuitable for some readers. This book contains **very** heavy themes throughout so please heed the warning and go into this with your eyes wide open.

For more detailed information, please see list in back of book.

The characters in this story all deal with trauma and problems differently, the resolutions and methods they use are not always traditional and therefore may not be for everyone.

This book can be read as a standalone, however there will be further books featuring this couple.

This book is written in British English. Therefore, some spellings, words, grammar and punctuation may be used differently than what you are used to. If you find anything you think is a genuine error, please do not report, instead, please contact the author or one of her team to correct it. Thank you!

This book and its contents are entirely a work of fiction. Any resemblance or similarities to names, characters, organisations, places, events, incidents, or real people is entirely coincidental or used fictitiously.

\*Haunt is a dark gothic horror-gore cult MF romance. Please read with caution, the characters in this book do not and will not conform to society's standards or normalities. This book does have a *happy for now*.\*

See full content listing in the back of this book.

## PROLOGUE

# Billy

**S**he never once spoke a word to anyone that did not stand to unsettle them.

But it's her big brown eyes that I remember most. The strikingly dark brown colour, outer ring black, against her sickly pale skin, is vivid inside my mind. Large orbs set deep in her face, doll-like in the way her cheekbones were so sharp. There were always blue rings beneath them, tiredness carving into her face. Hollowing out her expression. That is a truth. Her face. The stories it told with not much more than a look. A stare. Cold and calculating. Unusual. It is what drew me in like a compulsion.

Still, to this day, it makes me wonder if my father already knew who I would find when he sent me there to recruit.

Goosebumps strike up residence on my dark skin. Although I am naturally a warm brown, very much the opposite to her icy flesh, I am likely now as drained of colour as she. She was never tanned. No kiss from the sun. And since I laid eyes on her last, I have only continued to stalk through umbra. Traipse aimlessly through gloom. Darkness and shadows, a cloak of cold comfort in a world full of loud, bright chaos. It is the deepest onyx that I am forever drawn into.

The weird and the wonderful.

The strange and macabre.

I, the white goat. She, the black lamb. Wrong in all senses of the word. The odd ones out. Different to our peers. Neither one of us belongs out in the fields, frolicking in daylight and sunshine, fresh green grass and bright white daisies. Instead, we should shelter inside the barn, in the damp, in the cold, in the darkest, creepiest corner. I would bathe her in my blood, drown her in our sin, and it would fill the empty cavity beneath my sternum with something more than wicked, lustful fantasy.

An opportunity is all I needed.

Something, it seems, that is finally presenting itself to me.

In a home for the defiled and strange.

A convent in the heart of Italy. An orphanage, one not too dissimilar to that which we shared as children. A place I have travelled to, in search of her, seeking her out, finding her in an unlikely, but also, not so unlikely, place.

She is a liar.

A very, very good one.

Manipulative.

She looks young, innocent, fragile.

But, like a shapeshifter, she can morph into anyone and anything she needs to be in order to fit her current circumstances. Whatever they may be.

She was never like that with me.

I had to leave her before.

I have waited for what feels like an eternity to get back to her.

But, finally, it is time.

To collect my precious Little Lamb for slaughter.

## CHAPTER I

# Penelope

It is not often I feel unnerved.

Yet, today, I find myself creeping along the halls, palms flush to the cool white concrete. Peeking around corners, fingertips blanching as they curl into the wall. Sticking to the shadows, blinking harder to see better.

It is exciting.

This rush of feeling.

I am a twenty-two year old woman, posing as a fourteen year old girl in a foreign children's home. It is unusual, but the rooms are large, the food is free and there are no responsibilities for me here. It is convenient. Nice. To exist beyond the predators of the outside world. The police. Here, they see me as an innocent little girl. I am protected.

A smile curls my lips as I skip down the stone floored hallway, my long dark brown hair slapping against my spine. Dancing through the high ceilinged archways, painted a bright white, fresh and clean against the old stone.

The Italian summer sun beams through the glassless arched window frames, heating my skin as I drift between cool shadows and warm light. My black shawl slips down my biceps, exposing my pale shoulders, and blood smears my arm as I wrench the fabric back up with aching fingers. Bringing my fist to my mouth, nails biting into my palm as I curl my fingers into my hand. I lick over my red stained knuckles, the

metallic tang assaulting my tastebuds, but I frown at the lack of sting. I stop, peer down at my hand, and lap at the crimson a second time, cleaning my skin off further when I realise that it's not split.

The blood is not my own.

Humming happily, I scrub at the red with a tasselled corner of the thick black fabric over my arms, and then haul the shawl back up and over my shoulders. My bright yellow sundress dances around my calves as I continue on my way, the thin cotton fabric tickling my skin. I skid around the corner, the soles of my little black ballet flats worn thin, and make my way into the large dining hall.

Stained glass windows reflect colour across the otherwise white painted and dark wood interior. Four long mahogany benches lining the hall. I step through the wide double doors, releasing my grip on the black, gothic-style iron handles, I let the doors bang shut behind me. The slam echoes around the space, all eyes snapping to my late entrance. I bow my head in silent apology, my dark hair falling around my face, curtaining my smirk from the room. When the burn of eyes feels like it averts, I lift my head just enough to watch my shuffling feet take me to my usual seat at the far table.

I step over the low bench. Tuck the skirt of my dress beneath my thighs and sit slowly. Clasp my hands together, letting my eyes slip closed, I sit through the rest of the prayer I interrupted. Not that I'm religious, well, perhaps I am, but I certainly do not worship the same God as the rest of this room.

*My* God, he had warm, creamy brown skin, light blue eyes, tight, brunette afro curls that stood straight up on his head. He would bring me daisies, brush my hair, whisper into my ear whilst he held me at night, kept me safe like a big brother. We were only together in the same children's home for a year. And then he was gone, and I were alone again.

The orphan nobody wanted.

Well, nobody *good* wanted.

I wonder sometimes, having only ever been together under the cover of night, when he would sneak into my room. His heart beating solidly beneath my cheek as he cradled me to his chest. Protected me. If he was ever really there at all.

Perhaps he was a phantom, a haunting figment of my imagination.

Another lie.

This one being something I told myself.

Started to believe.

Even still, my elbows resting on the solid surface of the table, echoes of '*Amens*' filling the huge hall, I pray.

To him.

For him.

For *us*.

Head turning, as if of its own accord, my eyes blink open, and that's when I see it. Breath burns my lungs as it catches in my throat and my tongue sticks to the roof of my suddenly dry mouth.

Billy Blackwell.

I could not erase those pale eyes from my memory if I scraped out the inside of my skull with a blunt hatchet. My mind conjures him, always. Obsessively so. But, when it does, he is always the teenager I fell in love with. The one I pined for. He was older than I. Tall, so, so tall, and skinny, as though his bones grew with the rest of him always trying to catch up. Serious eyes that felt too seeing, and a sly smirk that he only ever softened for me. Hands that drew blood and ears that kept secrets. Lips that never dared brush my own.

He is not... *this*.

Broad and wide and muscular, a dipped chin with a sinister glare.

I blink at him down the table, merely ten feet away on the opposite side of the wood and he is gone. Evaporating into thin air as though he never were. With nothing more than a



flutter of my lashes, I have banished him from this holy place like I just performed a silent exorcism.

Frantically, heart hammering in my chest, I twist my head on my shoulders, press up, lean forward onto the palms of my hands, clammy and slick against the tabletop. The ends of my hair graze the plate of food set before me, but I do not care, I cannot shake this feeling that it is not just inside my head. Or perhaps it is, and I have finally gone mad.

I feel unwell.

It feels like a fresh loss.

Why am I thinking of the boy who left me?

Who promised his return.

*He was supposed to save me from them.*

But I am ruined.

Tainted.

By holy hands and unholier vows.

My fingers instantly cover my belly. Sickness and shame swirling and twirling through my gut as if I'm on the spinning teacup ride at the funfair. I cannot be here. In this hall. In this place. Filled with innocent children with thoughts of heaven and shiny dreams. I am not made for these white shimmery threads of hope.

I throw myself back over the bench, my feet hurrying me back through the huge doors. I hear the nuns at my back call out, but I know they will not follow me.

Not to the hidden place I have found.

It feels like I am chewing on broken glass, shredding my cheeks, piercing my tongue, blunt pieces wedging in my teeth. Bile thick in the back of my throat, I race down the hall, shadowed from the sun now dipping behind fluffy, white summer clouds.

Clumsily, I rush up the stone steps, my skin crawling with the thought of phantom eyes on my back, hands on my flesh. I shiver, tripping over myself, my knees crash into the harsh

edge of stone. Palms cracking as they splay out before me. Breath rushes through my nostrils in a low whistle. Chest heaving, I squeeze my eyes shut, attempt to catch my breath.

I'm being ridiculous.

I just need to calm myself.

Nothing is haunting me.

Nobody is here.

Everything is exactly as it was this morning when I was in complete control.

The air is warm, the gentle breeze blowing strands of hair across my face, the tassels of my shawl tickling my arms. I twist my hips, flip myself around, drop heavily onto my backside. Let my head hang forward, between my knees, my fingers scrub at my face, nails clawing down my skin. Pain flits through me, a breath huffs through my teeth, and I shove my hair back roughly, straightening myself up.

I look up towards the ceiling, the scent of incense heady above me as I flare my nostrils. I hate and love it. The smell. It is as familiar as it is painful, and I wish I could disassociate myself from my memories.

Nothing bad has happened here.

*Well*, not to me...

Just to the reason I came here.

This is to be my last day here.

Now that it is done.

I think of the body.

Stare at the dried fleck of blood I've missed on the back of my pale hand. I wish I didn't see it. I wish I couldn't see it. Groaning, I close my eyes again. Thoughts of clawing them out, stomping on them until they're smushed beneath my feet. Hollow holes in my face where they used to be, run rampant inside my head and it brings a soft smile to my face.

Lifting a hand from my lap, I trace the tip of my index finger over the ridge in the bodice of my dress. The razor blade safely wedged in the boning of my bra. Instantly, I breathe easier. As I lift myself to my feet, I think about what I'm going back upstairs to.

The mess.

The dark.

That's what I find comfort in. I shall cocoon myself away until early tomorrow. No one will raise the alarm that he is missing until then. Not since morning prayers today have already ended, and those, he attended. Whilst I read and rest and decide where I want to play next. Perhaps I shall head back to London. Seek out the boy I am so disgustingly lovesick for.

Perhaps I will carve his heart from his chest, lock it in a box, chain it in silver, wear the antique key around my throat. Replace the small, gold, heart-shaped locket currently snug between my breasts. The long chain he gave me. Gifted from his throat to mine.

A promise.

The only thing some days that keeps me sane. Keeps me holding on. Keeps me from losing my mind.

Such a fractured, tortured thing, the pulsing goo of organ residing miserably inside my cranium. It is a wonder how I ever would have ever made it to twenty-two without thoughts of him woven inside of it.

There is a tangled web of love and hate inside my aching heart. To wrestle with it would be suicide. So I leave it there. Let it sit. Festering away, eroding and corroding the rest of my insides. Acid drips slowly penetrating my soul. Not fast enough, but I can be patient.

I push myself up from the steps, take my time in righting myself, and calmly make my way back to my hidden room in the tower.

## CHAPTER II

# Billy

Her room is in a tower. The door only accessible via a crumbling staircase, partially hidden behind a stone statue of a weeping angel. Steps narrowing the higher I climb, it is a tight squeeze, my shoulders too wide, forcing me to finish the ascent sideways.

When I reach it, the room itself is small. There is one entry, one exit. Vast ceilings. Late morning light streams through a single gothic arched window set high in the wall. Cobwebs decorate wooden beams, an abandoned bird's nest decaying high in the rafters. A single cot dressed in white sheets, small wooden table beside it, an old brass candleholder upon it, the white candle half burnt.

I can see why she chose it, this space. It is probable that most do not even know of its existence. The perfect space for an ambush.

*By her.*

Penelope Hart.

Her scent fills my nostrils as I inhale, the deep breath inflating my chest. It is exactly how I remember it. Soft roses and damp earth. Intoxicating. She smells like sweet death, specifically mine, but beneath it, here, in this room, there is a putrid odour infecting it. Overwhelming it with an acrid perfume.

*Actual death.*

My memory of her is pure, possibly the only thing in my life which is, but this room is not. And with the closed door at my back, nothing more than the perfectly made cot, table beside it, filling the space, I easily locate the source of the stench.

Bending forward, fingers curling over the hem of white sheets trailing the stone floor, I flip them up, bend my knees and peer beneath the rickety metal frame.

Lifeless grey eyes stare back at me as I blink into the dark space. Mouth slack, skin sallow, definitely dead. Nevertheless, he is fresh, perhaps a kill from just this morning, not more than a few hours old. Without disturbing him to look for more, all I can see is a single wound. An inch long, in the side of his neck. It is neat. Surgical almost, in its precision. There is not much blood. There is no mess. It is packed, the small wound bulging just a little, a peek of red-stained substance exposed just enough to see that something isn't quite right there.

*Clever.*

Dropping the sheet, I push to my feet, allowing the corpse to be hidden once more. I wonder how she will dispose of him now. How she plans to get him out, if she does at all, of this space with the tight, winding staircase, the eyes of orphans, nuns, bishops and priests all likely on her.

She does not fit here. As much as she does. She has always managed to adapt to any place she lands. But I have been here little more than three hours and have already witnessed the way in which eyeballs, that should not stare at children, roll in their sockets, follow and track her every movement. She likely knows it too. With the extra sway in her narrow hips, innocent bats of her eyelashes over those big brown eyes. The way she skips, carefree and *absolutely* aware of everything and everyone around her. She is a fancy, colourful lure in stagnant water. A sunflower bloom in the depths of a cave. The first ray of sunshine in a place deprived of it all winter.

*She is mine.*

I am here to collect.

It is written.

We are to be.

The scriptures say that it is my time. My older brother Gore is impatient for this to go ahead, and so I shall do as my brother wishes. I am the second son of the first father, birthed by the second mother and it is deemed the time of *Twos*.

I itch with the desire to see her again. Having first watched her from a darkened alcove as she unknowingly hurried her way past me to the mouth of the stairs. Appearing before her at breakfast, if only to make her question her sanity when I disappeared just as quickly.

I am sure she is on her way back to this very room, but I left the hall first, have longer legs with larger strides.

It took everything in me not to just grab her, but I want her to see me first.

*Feel me.*

It is a compulsion in my blood, the need to be close.

We are tethered in ways even I do not fully understand. And I have been starved of her for the last twelve years.

I am ravenous.

Because it was written.

*I am Two.*

We were too young when I first found her. The year I was given for finding my pair and consecrating them into our family did not lend us enough time. We were nothing more to each other than innocent children acting as comfort blankets in the night. Together for a year and then pulled apart by my departure. Beckoned back to the unholy circle as a failure. It was not a failure; I just did not want her exposed to so much cruelty at such a young age. Like I was. So I lied. Said I did not think her worthy.

But they know everything. And I do not lie as well as she. Therefore, in order to save her, I inadvertently condemned her. A punishment bestowed upon me, forcing me to wait longer to

find her again. A punishment, for her, from everyone I wasn't able to protect her from.

*Better the evil you know.*

Two years turned into twelve, and only now, by my brother's hand, do I find myself here. After the things that she went through, I am not of the belief she will be very compliant.

But as it stands.

It doesn't really matter what she thinks.

She belongs with me.

*To me.*

As day turns into night, I watch her from the rafters of her room. Feet crossed at my ankles, back to the wall, I sit along the wide wooden beam, wait for her to crawl into bed. She does not look up. She does not peek at the body hidden beneath her bed. I think of her comfort, how she is not fazed by the dead man sharing her space, and I wonder if anything *I* do to her tonight will unsettle her at all.

Something unfamiliar, at the thought, threatens to pull at my lips, morph my face into something unrecognisable.

Something I couldn't ever stop myself from forming when I were with her.

A smile.

It is sinister in its intent, the way I watch her move around her space. Finally peeling away her clothes, pull on a yellow nightdress, with nothing more than the flicker of a single candle casting her shadow across the wall. I cannot see all of her creamy pale skin, but I imagine I can as I watch her silhouette creep across the room.

And it is perfect.

She is perfect.

I watch her patiently, *agonisingly* patiently, for her to fully settle. Then, I monitor the time, waiting for the large hand on my watch to hit twelve, the little hand to find it too. It is

difficult to see it in the blackness of night, her candlelight not stretching anywhere near this high. Only a small circle of glow around where she lies, but with my eyes having adjusted slowly as the blanket of onyx befell us, I find it considerably easy to watch it strike twelve.

Slowly, swinging my legs down, I let them dangle over the old wooden structure, nothing but an almost silent creak as I curl my hands over its edge and begin to lower myself down. Rafter after rafter I climb my way closer. Heart thudding dangerously loud in my ears. My feet find the floor much faster than they left it in my desperation to get closer. I keep my breath held. Try to temper my excitement. Adrenaline like a lightning bolt zapping through my veins.

I feel alive.

For the first time in over a decade.

Emerging from a state of hibernation, everything inside of me kicks into gear in the pursuit of my sunlight.

I am as silent as death, creeping across her space. She does not spot me, even as her candle projects my large shadow against the wall. She reads, enraptured, head in her book. Completely zoned out, and I can't help but recognise how dangerous this is.

For someone like her.

I am still out of sight, watching her delicate fingers trace old pages in her book. I cannot see her face, hidden beneath shadows and curtains of dark hair.

I want to watch her forever. Keep my eyes on her until death. But just for a moment, I must keep her in the dark. So I blow out the candle and plunge us entirely into black.



## CHAPTER III

# Penelope

**I**t is precisely midnight when it happens.

I am lying on my cot, curled fist propped beneath my cheek, holding up my head. Elbow digging into the thin mattress, a white cotton sheet covering it. My other hand curled over top of the open pages in the book I am reading. Room in darkness, shadows flickering across the white wall opposite, dancing in the light of the tall cream candle beside my bed. A singular cross hung upon it; a bloodied Jesus nailed to the wooden symbol.

My eyes scan across the yellowing pages of text, a book in French I have carried with me for as long as I can remember. Poetry. Assaulted and abused with strokes of many pens and pencils, coloured notes and scribbles and doodles all added by my hand, except...

*La folie et l'horreur, froides et taciturnes.*

*Madness and horror, cold and taciturn.*

The scrawled words beneath that line of text. The only ones *not* by my hand.



*The Obsidian.*

His handwriting is beautiful. It is almost an archaic scrawl, calligraphy, something slanted and delicate and important. I do not know what it means. Silver circles the phrase, the page dented from years of lead pencil.

A single tear slides down the side of my nose and I let it fall from the tip, splashing onto the black inked phrase. That's when I hear a sudden rush of breath and the candle beside me goes out.

Smoke scents the room, my skin prickles with cold, goosebumps barb across my flesh, but I do not move.

I think of the corpse beneath my bed. The wound to his neck. Imagine his fat greying fingers clawing at the edge of my sheets.

My breath sails in and out of me, my chest heaving. I am paralysed. I am so still, bar the rapid flexing of my rib bones, the solid, rampant thudding of my heart. Something I desperately want to stop as I strain my ears, try to listen for breaths from the dead body beneath my cot. But there is a buzzing inside my skull, a descendant of flies readying to feast. I bite my tongue, swallow the urge to cry, crinkle the pages in the tightening of my fist.

Rigor mortis sets in, despite my death feeling far from here, I do not move, whimper, breathe. I strain my other senses, rapidly bat my eyelashes but nothing becomes any clearer past the scent of dying smoke in the air, the pounding in my chest. It is becoming louder, or, perhaps, I am becoming fainter. I wonder if I am going to pass out or throw up. Maybe it shall be both, but my stomach isn't churning, and my head is

suddenly no longer spinning, and I find my lungs slowing despite the dose of fear thrumming through my veins.

Turning my head slowly, I blink hard into the dark corners of the room. Staring hard through the humming inside my skull. I think I hear a whisper. My mind is playing tricks, but the softest brush of lips over the curve of cartilage in the top of my ear has me launching myself out of my sheets. My bare feet slap against the cold floor. The high ceilinged, concrete and stone rooms helping keep the space cool during the high heat of summer.

Back flush against the wall, palms splaying over the smooth surface beside the door. The door I have locked from the inside. The iron key to it on the table beside my cot. The one with the chamber stick holding the extinguished candle. One of my hands comes up, palming my throat before my fingers slip their way down my cool clammy skin, finding the tiny gold pendant between my breasts.

Fear lights through me like I have never felt before, nails biting into my palm as I curl my hand into a fist, squeezing the locket inside my caged hand. My sunshine-coloured nightdress blows gently around my knees, loose and light and eerie.

I do not feel alone in this room.

And I do not think the corpse I have kept hidden here is the reason for the heat lashing up my spine.

*“Nellie,”* it is hushed, too silent, too close, but my eyes widen, orbs large and pupils surely blown in the never-ending darkness.

I am still once more, but my body trembles with the unknown. The scent of smoke dwindling, something new taking its place. Earthy musk, sharp grapefruit. It is as familiar as it is foreign and I find myself squeezing my thighs tightly together, the urge to release my bladder overwhelms everything else inside of me as a slow creeping warmth begins crawling over my skin.

*This isn't real.*

Nothing is happening here in the dark.

It is all inside my head.

My imagination running riot as it sometimes does.

It is why I am such a good liar.

I can make up a believable story about anything. Anywhere. Time and place. It is for survival, but sometimes I use it for pleasure too. Slowly, I release the tension in my thighs, sweat beading along my brow, but I am cold now, the heat I felt tiptoeing across my skin is all but absent. A distant memory I cannot even begin to claw at. I let my eyes roll open, drop my hands to my sides. Take in a shuddery breath that is all but redundant because it catches immediately in my throat.

A shadow, something darker than the rest of the room, the umbra of the space seeming to warp around it, the tall, wide figure perching on the end of my bed. I blink faster, my eyes stinging as they strain harder, but it is real. It is here. It is not the corpse reanimated from beneath my bed. He did not sit on it in this same way when he came into this room just this morning.

Lured by the innocent.

The forbidden.

Something divine and pure.

But I am really none of those things.

Which is why his stiffening corpse is now hidden beneath my bed.

I am silent. Unmoving. My insides vibrate with nerves. Excitement, I realise, washes over me as I let my spine curve back into the wall. The cold seeping through my thin, yellow, cotton nightdress, forcing its way deeper into the outer layers of my skin. It cools the sweat across my brow, the back of my neck beneath my thick waves of brown hair.

I try to breathe in again, catch the scent I forgot I knew. So similar to my own. We are somewhat connected by a higher power.

“You’ve been a bad girl, Nellie,” a man’s hard, deep voice punctures the stagnant air like a bullet does a head.

Heart kicking against my sternum, I lick my dry lips, try to calm my breathing once again. I am arid in my throat, tongue floppy and uncoordinated with the rest of my body when I try to produce words. My mind is a frantic mess, jumbled with fear and excitement. One far outweighing the other.

“*What?*” it is a whisper, a cracked, slow, drawn out word that feels as though it did not come from me, even though it did.

There is the softest, almost inaudible, huff of laughter, it is barely more than a puffed exhale, but I catch it like my own breath in my throat. It strangles me, the sound, something digging itself up in the very back of my skull. Claws and talons bursting up through consecrated ground. A steel coffin filled with rot and dread.

I am fearful as much as I am nervous. I want to be happy, but I am scared. I want to call his name. Whisper it into the dark, but I cannot find a thread of strength in my now trembling body to summon him.

I have been brave.

Forever.

*Without him.*

I have erected walls. Solidified my foundations. Dressed myself with impenetrable armour and armed myself with deadly weaponry. But I fear that will all fall apart the very second I know if this is real or not.

*I am lovesick.*

It hurts and it burns, and I am unable to temper it, control it. It consumes me, thoughts of him. It is as though something infected my brain, back when we first met. He left a scar on my heart that is threatening to burst open, blood flooding into places it should not be.

The back of my skull collides with the wall, and I squeeze my eyes closed once more. My chest trembles, heart

threatening to crack, because I *know* I cannot do this if it is all just inside my mind.

So I do it.

I am going mad.

Nobody is *really* calling my name. And yet...

I am brave.

Steeling my spine, and taking a strong, solid step forward, I call out for my God in the dark.

## CHAPTER IV

# Billy

“B illy?”

Eyes instantly closing, I drop my head back, a real smile curls the corners of my lips, heavy breath of relief slowly draining out of me.

*She knows.*

*Remembers.*

She is it for me.

I can see okay in the darkness, practised eyes adjusting quickly to the blackness. I turn my head in her direction, a dark figure splayed against the wall. I want to pin her there, smash my much larger body into hers, bite and suck and fuck. It is an incessant need to stake claim. Not that anyone, even her, can, *will* ever question it.

It is written.

“It’s me,” I finally respond, nostrils flaring with the compulsion to sniff her out.

“You came for me,” she speaks softly, breathy and unsure, a whispering need for reassurance.

“I promised you I would.”

I lick my lips, keep my hands clasped together in my lap. I stare at them in the dark, think of how beautiful they will look locked around her neck.

“That was a long time ago, Billy,” she swallows loudly, a desperate, dry gulping. “I thought you forgot about me.”

I hear it then, the tremble of emotion in her voice. The uncertainty. Something like pain is sharp in my chest and I am suddenly on my feet, but I keep them planted as though they are cemented in the floor. Keep myself away from her. I fear if I am too close too soon I will not be able to control myself.

There are ways we are supposed to do things. I do not want her to be punished for my foolishness. My impatience. But I have been patient for twelve long years and even in my youth, something which is not lived the same as others, *normal* children, of that age, I longed to have her by my side.

“How did you find me?”

She means here.

In Italy.

A remote orphanage.

Somewhere very far from home.

“You have my heart,” I confess simply, my words are as brutal as my fists, the way passion slices through the rawness of my truth.

Something that the other Blackwells, the ones we do not align ourselves with, their morals as pure as any Blackwell’s in their line of work could be, they see truth as their God.

And it is oh so very different to ours.

I think of Milus. His cold eyes. Too reminiscent of my own. And I shut it down just as quickly. Thinking of what is to come, the things he will do, the things *I* will have to do, is only going to serve to ruin this moment. And I have waited so very long to be deserving of it.

“You ripped mine out,” she spits, it is a hiss from a viper in the dark, striking poison into my chest.

I am quiet, her breathing is rough, too fast, my mind conjures the image of her pulse fluttering in the dark. I want to sink my teeth into it. Too much too fast.



“I am here to put it back,” my words are twisted on a whisper, a silencing hush that has her holding her breath.

Finally, I allow myself to twist fully in her direction, stare at her flattened form against the wall. A darker silhouette in the pitch-black room.

“You knew I would return,” I hush, chin dipped, eyes flicked up. “You have prayed to me every night, Little Lamb. On your knees, your hands clasped, fingers laced.” She does not protest. “I have heard your calls. Your pleas. I have felt your tears wet my cheeks as if they were my own. But you,” I pause, inhaling a slow, deep breath. “You *knew* I would come to collect. You have *begged*,” I smile, exhaling slowly, all of her attention so very perfectly on me. “And now you shall worship. It is the way. You wear the locket that a piece of me is inside of. A piece of *us*.”

Bloodied fingerprints pressed into the gold.

I step closer now, my body vibrating with the urge to possess her.

Consume her.

“You thought my words scrawled inside the pages of your book meant nothing.”

One of my hands comes to the wall above her head, fingers splaying. Tips curling into the cold stone in an attempt to stop them from clawing at her skin. Ripping the flesh from her bones, snapping pieces of her skeleton in my desire to climb inside of her. Love her, fill her, own her.

“They are *everything*.”

I dip down, our breath shared, her neck craning back, crown of her skull flush with the wall, face angled up towards mine. And I can see her, finally. Better.

“You will learn,” the words are whispered into her mouth, along with the next. “You are worthy, Penelope.”

She gasps softly, air expelled from my lungs sucked into her own. Satisfaction rolls through me, a desperate need to be inside of her. Slowly, one of her hands comes up in the slim

space between us. I can see the dark movement of her hand but not the detail of it as her fingertips glide up and across my cheek. Teasingly gentle, I want to take her hand in mine, slam it into my face, have her fingerprints etched into my flesh.

But I don't.

I refrain from moving, from breathing, as her fingers sweep across my skin. Curling over my temple across my forehead, down the length of my nose, ghosting over my eyelids. My lashes fluttering under her exploration.

When her fingers leave my skin, a heavy thud of her arm as she drops it by her side, it is too much like the absence I have felt for the last twelve years.

Letting my parted lips graze down the side of her face as I curl into her. Her breath hitches, this tiny, low whimper rushing out of her. The sound of it tunnels directly into my ear, tumbling straight down my spine into my rapidly hardening cock. Heat swells in my lower belly, a twitch in my balls so sharp it hurts. And it's just too much to try and keep my hands off of her.

I let my body crush into hers then. My pelvic bone flush with her stomach, her chest heaving against my abs. I curl myself over her, our height difference something ridiculous, but it makes me feel as though I could keep her safer.

Closer.

Smother her inside of me.

I would snap my heart free of its rib bone prison just to bury her inside of it.

Dropping my forearm to the wall, I bend lower, spine curved. Her neck still arched, face angled up towards mine. Finally, I bring my free hand closer, drag the back of my knuckles up the wall beside her. I feel her tremble, nightdress fluttering around her bare legs, her feet bare between mine, and a predatory grin splits my face.

"Did you miss me, Nellie?" the words flutter over her, the back of my hand finally connecting with her outer bicep.

I watch my shadowed hand draw its way up to her shoulder, my fingers curling over the bone, thin cotton between us. I can feel the prickle of her goosebumps through the fabric beneath my hand, the heat of my palm warming her rippled skin.

“I missed you,” I tell her, directing my eyes back to her face.

Stroking my fingers up the side of her neck, my thumb grazing the column of her throat, dipping into the hollow at its base.

“Would you like to go on an adventure?” I smile against her temple, before dragging my lips back down her cheek.

Of all the questions she must have, the confusion she must feel. All of the things I’m not saying. She doesn’t speak any of it.

“Will we stay together, Billy?” is all she asks.

My lips really curl then, transforming themselves into something truly monstrous.

“From now on,” I whisper over her mouth, our noses touching, my eyes on hers, despite the blackness cloaking her, I know she is looking at me, “Even in death.”

“It’s really you,” she murmurs breathlessly, it is not a question, but there is disbelief in her tone. And then a nervous, quiet, “Billy?”

“Yes?” I groan the response, a pull deep in my gut at hearing my name on her tongue.

“There is a man beneath my bed,” she confesses, voice small.

I huff a laugh, her breathing picks up and I am compelled closer, not stopping until the tip of my nose rests along the length of hers. Inhaling her. Her scent the only thing I can focus on, earth and roses.

“Mmhm,” I hum against the apple of her cheek, the vibration thrumming through the bone. “It’s not the first time. Is it, Nellie?”

She sways a little, my body still pinning her to the wall, holding her in place. I slide my hand to the front of her neck. Feel her swallow beneath my palm, my thumb on her pulse, fingers collaring her throat.

“It’s okay,” I hush against her lips, her breaths fast and sharp against my mouth. “I will take care of you now.” It is only half a lie. “We can sort this. Make him disappear.” She swallows again, throat rolling beneath my hand. “You going to help me, Little Lamb?” her throat bobs, neck straining with her attempt at a nod.

“Yes, Billy.”

“Good girl.”

## CHAPTER V

# Penelope

**M**y head spins as Billy slips back inside my room.

He has been gone no longer than ten minutes and I have not moved a toe out of place since he did. I am unsure if my mind even circled through questions on what is happening. If it did, I am none the wiser in any conclusions it possibly came to.

A black duffle bag in one hand, the other splayed over the wood of the door, Billy lets it close softly at his back. There are so many stairs to get up here, but he does not seem out of breath, as though he never used them at all. Perhaps he didn't, perhaps he unfurled godlike wings and travelled up and down them that way. Nothing would surprise me tonight.

His dark brown hair sticks straight up all over his head, the long length of afro curls pointing in a million different directions, making him appear even taller than his –what must be- six and a half feet.

Beneath the swaying glow of orange candlelight, the wick of which he re-lit before he disappeared to *'get something'*. His warm skin appears sallow. The shadowed hollows of his cheeks carve his face like a skeleton. His lips plump, dark, the top a little larger than the bottom gifting him an unusual pout. Light eyes, more grey than blue, watch me where I stand. Hands clasped before me, fingers squeezing tight, laced and hooked together. I lock my elbows, putting a strain on my shoulders and watch as he stalks towards me.

Those unnervingly pale eyes stay locked on mine. I feel cold. Hot. Scared. Excited. Nervous and happy and confused. Everything and nothing. My stomach feels as heavy as it does hollow, my head light but full. I wish I knew where he has been. Why he did not come back for me. Why he has now.

However, I fear I am too afraid of the answers to even contemplate wanting to hear them.

He could lie.

In the same way as I.

But I also worry he would tell me a truth I do not wish to learn.

And so I stay silent.

Wanting only to exist in this space, *with him*.

Watching as he places the bag down on the end of my cot, its contents clinking like metal on metal as he does. A crease forms between my brows, my gaze finally shifts, lowering from Billy's to the bag. My heart races in my chest, a rapid pulse of excitement.

"What's that?" I ask quietly, everything in my body on high alert.

Danger receptors running wild. I feel like my heart could explode out of my chest cavity at any second. I am unsure, fully, if this is even really happening.

*Is anything real?*

Billy cocks his head slightly, eyes rolling down my baggy nightdress, stopping at my bare feet. A small smile tugs his lips, I see the half-shadowed movement just before he smothers it, lifting his eyes back to mine.

"Tools."

It's loud in the small space of the room, despite the ceiling being so high, it feels cramped. And with this large man inside of it now. It is suffocating.

I swallow, glance at the bag, the sheets covering what's hiding beneath the bed. And then him. Vision dragged back

like my eyeballs are on strings and Billy is the puppet master. I stare at him.

Waiting.

For instruction.

I am submissive.

As though my insides know this is their God.

I feel dizzy as he steps back into me, his eyes on mine, so light, almost hollow, his skeleton shadowed face, all of it frightening and uncomfortable. It all makes me feel safe.

It is a vile deception.

He has to crane down, spine curving, knees bending, head canting, to become level with me. His face before mine, his breath on my lips. He reaches up, looping a thick tendril of hair behind my ear, the pad of his finger catching on the gold post of my earring. He drags his nail down the length of my neck behind my lobe, snagging my flesh just a little with the pressure.

Breath hitching, my lips part, chest rapidly rising and falling, I cannot blink. I don't think I have since he appeared before me this morning...

"You were there," I swallow. "In the hall." His long curl of lashes bats slowly, just once, dusting his high cheekbones. "That was real?"

It's a question as much as a statement. One that doesn't really require an answer, because if this is all inside my head, that surely would have been too.

"If you are asking me if this is real or not, then the answer I would give you could be one of your own making, could it not? So it isn't really worth anything," he says it all a little too quickly for my brain to finally realise he is teasing me, trying to noose the fragile threads of insanity tighter around my neck.

But then he frowns, a deep crevice cleaving between his thick dark brows.

“I am real. This is real.” It feels like truth, but he was always such a very pretty liar. “I have been haunting you. Watching you tonight, from the rafters.”

He lifts a hand, index finger pointed up towards the ceiling, but I do not follow it, and neither does he, our eyes still locked together.

“Desperate to get this close to you,” the words are hushed over my mouth, and I suck them in with my sharp intake of breath. “And now you question it?” he swallows, I see his Adam’s apple bob, but I don’t drop my gaze to his throat. “*Me?*” he whispers that last part sweetly, it is a lie, the sweetness, Billy Blackwell is as rotten as I, and my heart batters the inside of my chest.

Instantly, I shake my head, knowing how this game, once upon a time, used to end. My tongue flicks over my cupid’s bow, I shake my head once more, gaze still tethered to his. Even as children, I followed his lead, his instruction.

Billy’s word was law.

“No,” it is whispered too, this quiet tension we have built up between us feels like it’s tightening to snap. “No, Billy.”

He smiles then, index finger curling down the drop of my jawbone, knuckle hooking beneath my chin, he arches my neck, slowly, slowly, until my throat is stretched so taut it feels hard to breathe. He is towering over me, his face hovering above mine. He brushes his lips delectably across the bone of my brow, my eyes fluttering closed. I exhale deeply, refill my lungs with his scent. Warming my insides with the familiarity of him. Something past now present.

“I missed you,” I profess, differently to the way he spoke the same words, I did not respond to, just a short while ago. “I hated you.” The confession is heavy in my heart, light on my tongue. “You promised to come for me.” I don’t open my eyes now, I fear I cannot. “You devastated me.”

The way his grip tightens on the length of my jaw at that has me wanting to wince, but I keep my expression relaxed. A short huff of breath escapes my nostrils as he pinches my chin,



*hard*, a tear squeezing from the corner of my eye. This is how he has always been, brutal, demanding, ruthless, consuming, and yet, I am gone for him regardless.

His nose glides up the length of my own, inhaling deeply, he runs it across my forehead, down my temple. His breath is a warm tickle. Goosebumps raze across my flesh, a tremor grating its way slowly down my spine. My knees feel weak, my head spinning. His mouth is aligned with mine again, his lips moving with unspoken words. I am glad he does not say them, whatever they are, something meant to cut.

Another tear squeezes free, and I am trembling in his hold now, my eyes still squeezed shut. His breath is hot against my skin and then the flat of his tongue is lapping upwards of my cheek, my tears on his tongue, the tip of it catching on my lashes. He groans as he pulls back, no more than an inch of space between us, and I know his lips are over mine once again. His breath on my mouth. Fear is like a knife in my gut, but there is a sickening devotion in my heart. And I know it will destroy me.

It is a foreboding, this omen that could possibly be our love.

His hands clamp over my shoulders. Suddenly. Sharply. Catching me by surprise, my eyes snap open like a bullet went off, immediately re-finding his. My hands flying up to close over his muscular forearms. The weight of his fists, their size, smothering the entire space between my neck and shoulder. He drags his thumbs along my collarbones. It is rough and hard, the pressure making my knees want to buckle, the way he is so heavy handed. It has something inside of me desperately thrumming to life.

“Take this off,” he demands, voice loud and throaty.

My body snaps to attention, fingers moving of their own accord, I am ensnared in his gaze, his compulsion. My hands drop from his arms, his hands falling from my shoulders. A bruising pain is present in my collarbones, the tendons in my throat, from straining against the pressure. He steps back, just

enough for my elbows to bend as I lift my nightdress over my head, let it drop to the floor at my feet.

I shiver at the cool temperature, the summer heat having been so hot all day, when night falls, it is a welcome reprieve. But it is cold and my skin smatters with goosebumps as his gaze holds mine. My breasts are exposed, gold pendant hanging between them, small cotton knickers the only thing covering me, my hair brushing my lower spine. I do not cover myself from him, even as everything in my brain demands it.

Billy steps back from me, further, never looking at anything below my chin. As though he knows it doesn't matter because he can demand to look at what he owns anytime he wants. He turns from me, bending over the bag, black shirt tight across the expanse of his broad back. The zipper opening is loud in the room, the prospect of what could be inside causing my blood to pump faster. Anticipation is lustful as it floods through my veins.

When he turns back to me, a short handled axe in his left hand, bone saw in his right. I eye the instruments, both things I have used before, but neither one of them particularly my favourite.

He watches me. My slow approach. Bare feet, naked body. I am pulled towards him by something that lives deeper inside of my skeleton than marrow, an infection burrowed beneath my skin that I do not want to cure.

It is a swirling vat of toxins, a poison. The living, breathing thing stitched beneath my skin, a cloak of darkness merged with my soul.

My neck arches back, gaze never straying from his, he grins at me, eyes glinting, wicked and cruel. My toes brush the tip of his boots, suede soft against my skin as I stop before him. I reach up, fingers tracing down the length of the bone saw where it hangs between his loose fingers. The metal glints beneath the glow of candlelight as I drop my gaze to focus on it.

It feels like he is giving me a gift as, without a word, he lifts it towards my hand, offering it to me as if it cements

something between us.

A binding of sadistic, soul-deep sorts.

Slowly, heart pounding, my fingers curl around the smooth handle extended to me, eyes lifting back to his, my lips begin to mirror his own, twisting into something truly horrifying.

And it is the first time in twelve years, I feel something other than cold.

## CHAPTER VI

# Billy

**I**t's the feral glint in her big eyes, the brown as black as her blown pupils. The way she blows a stray wet hair from sticking across her face, hooking it from the corner of her mouth with her little finger, that has me pausing. My chest heaves where I am bent over the chopped torso I'm butchering. Drenched skin, my upper body bare, my face dripping, hair heavy with the life fluid of someone she killed so neatly.

I wonder if she prefers it that way.

Clean.

Testing her with the tools I revealed, seeing how she reacted. There are others in the bag, she didn't ask to see them. She did not hesitate to pluck up a weapon and begin.

It is one of the reasons she is deemed worthy.

As I watch her saw her way through the back of a knee, tendon and bone squeaking and crunching. Her small frame seated cross-legged on the floor, small grunts of exertion punching from her chest. I am enthralled by her, and I worry, not for the first time, how I am going to hide this level of utter devotion from Milus.

Our God.

Leader.

*Father.*

He does so like to ruin us by destroying our possessions.

I think of Gore, how father destroyed what he had.

I shake my head, clearing my thoughts of dread.

This is okay. It is by Gore's order that I am here, after all. Finally. And my oldest brother very rarely would offer up something like this. Knowing I would be gone more than a day. There are many things coming up that I am to be present for. My instructions on obtaining my pair were strict, sharp, no fucking around. It's why I have everything so meticulously planned.

I am standing over her, and I blink, wondering when I took the seven steps across the room to reach her. The axe is heavy in my hand, but I cannot seem to detach it from my fingers. Naked body, white cotton underwear on her lower half, all of her covered in blood. She shifts to her knees, a leg in her hands, looks up at me, fingers of one hand curled over the ankle, the other palming just above the sawn knee. It is not yet severed, the leg, not all the way through. And I watch her small hands, with her eyes on me, as she rests it over her thigh, bending it backwards as she attempts to snap through the final pieces of joint.

It crunches, the knee, something I have broken on many men twice her size before, the sound not unfamiliar. It is hard work. Tearing and snapping through sinew and bone, but the smile on her face, the strain in her biceps, forearms, the slight heave of her chest as she puts all of her strength into severing the limb in two, has my mouth salivating for a taste of her.

She grunts, a huge exhale of breath immediately following, and as I lift my eyes to hers, she drops her own to the leg. Tossing the two separate pieces just past where I stand to join the pile of meat behind me.

The bit of my axe finds the hollow underside of her chin and I use the sharp edge to drag her face up to mine. She peers up at me, the flicker of the chamberstick candle on her bedside table the only thing lighting her up. She is a vision, and my cock weeps at the sight of her slathered in blood.

Applying more pressure with the sharp curve of the axe, she starts to rise with the motion, never once straying from looking at me as she climbs to her feet. I let my gaze wander then, down the exposed length of her neck, curved where she is forced to arch it back. Red pools in the hollow of her throat, having collected there, but now it is steadily dripping rivulets down the valley of her small breasts. I graze the butt of the axe over the hard point of her nipple, drawing it into an even sharper pucker with every gentle grate over it. Her chest trembles, body shaking, but she does not object as the weapon lowers further. The cheek of the blade following the curve of her waist, stopping at the outer jut of her hip. I glance up, grin at her, enjoy the attempted hidden tightness of fear in her face.

“You haven’t bled for me in so long, I can hardly remember what you taste like,” I murmur it lowly, dragging the axe across her lower belly, just above the band of her underwear. “Will you?” I whisper, already knowing the answer but *needing* to hear her say it. “Bleed for me, Little Lamb?”

Her exhale is shaky, but without hesitation, she is resolute in her answer, “Always, Billy.”

It is a chant inside my head, I repeat her words over and over, let them bounce around the inside of my skull.

I always had her devotion as children. I feared I would not have it so easily this time, twelve years later. And yet, as I set the butt of the axe blade against the crease of her cotton covered cunt, apply just the slightest amount of pressure, a keen, high-pitched and whiney, claws its way up her throat like a demon.

Followed by a quick breathy, “*Please, Billy,*” her body instantly trying to grind down on the iron and steel instrument.

My free hand flies up, and she stills beneath my fingers clasping tightly over her shoulder, thumb sliding across her collarbone. I tilt the bloody axe head between her legs. Blunt side pressing harder against her pussy. The sharp edge directed towards the flesh of her inner thigh, all whilst keeping my eyes on hers, I don’t cut her.

“This cannot happen yet,” I hush, my chin dipped, eyes flicked up beneath my dark lashes. “We have to leave here first.”

I think of what is to come.

What is going to happen.

To her.

Us.

Tonight.

Something I feel strangely about without my three brothers being present, bolstering my confidence. Still in England, at our home in Raven Ridge Hallow. I also know it is going to be intense, this rushed union. The Obsidian cannot wait. My punishment for shielding my Little Lamb all those years ago only now lifting.

Because of Gore.

And I am running on very limited time.

After they tried to pair me off with others. Suitable candidates of *their* choosing for my pairing, despite that being fucking sacrilege because I had already found her. I killed all five of them, the potentials for my pair. I am lucky this has even been sanctioned. I thought they would make me die without her. Or watch as I continued to tear apart everyone they *offered* me until it was *me* they made a mess of in the Abbatia.

*I only want her.*

She stares up at me, willing, waiting. I don't want to frighten her too much. Not yet. I need her to trust me inexplicably for what is to come.

Her breath is warm over the back of my hand, and it grounds me for a moment, brings me back to her.

Always her.

Tethered and twisted through one another's insides.

I lift my free hand closer to her face, the other still perfectly steady on the wooden handle of the axe pressed between her thighs. My thumb plucks at her thick bottom lip, dragging it down, away from her teeth. I stare into her eyes, blown black in the low light, imagine what they'd look like between my fingers if I were to pluck them free, place them between my teeth. And then her tongue finds the tip of my thumb, licking over the bloody skin, the underside of it laving over my thumbnail. Her mouth is hot and wet when I press my thumb against her tongue, her lips closing over the digit without instruction.

Humming, she sucks it deeper, the pressure I'm applying to her tongue making her jaw click. She doesn't try to spit me out, get me to release her, as my index finger hooks beneath her chin. Ensnaring her lower jaw hard from the inside and the outside of her mouth. Saliva streams from the corners of her lips, her mouth still closed, I press harder, watching the clear fluid flow down her chin, cleaning its way through the blood splatter. I can almost feel my finger on my thumb, still pressing down on her tongue, side of my finger driving up harder into the hollow of her chin. As though the digits are trying to connect, her jaw, skin and tongue between them.

The muscle in my forearm tenses, ridges of veins popping up through my brown skin at the intense pressure I apply to her jaw. And, just like that, the spell is broken, her teeth bite straight through my skin and it feels as though she is going to strip my flesh clean from the bone with the savagery of it.

I stare at her mouth as she bites harder, swallowing, her throat working a mixture of her saliva and my blood down her throat. It hurts, feels so fucking good. If there was not a ritual hanging over our necks like a guillotine then I'd be so fucking deep inside of her right now, we wouldn't know where she begins and I end.

"Release," I snarl, my cock twitching in time with my hammering pulse as she does exactly as ordered.

Her teeth almost suction as she widens her jaw, my finger from her chin having fallen away. Her lips pop open, disconnecting us.



“Suck,” I instruct, lower, gravelly, “Clean up your mess.”

Her eyes flicker between my own, and then her lips once again close around my thumb, still on her tongue, and she sucks gently, *erotically*. I grit my teeth, her eyes on mine as she sucks on my thumb, swirls her tongue around it. I tug it free slowly, because my self-control is fucking slipping, and this is my final chance. If I fuck this up, we may as well both be dead now.

“We need to clean up a little, there’s somewhere I need to take you,” I breathe the words lowly, licking my lips as she lifts the back of her hand to her mouth and swipes it across her chin. “We can drop this off on the way,” I tell her, thinking of the late hour, but the place we are going, on this hallowed day of the year, is not closed for us.

Her naked body is radiating heat and just for a moment, axe still angled toward her thigh, I lose a little of that carefully crafted control, and *cut*. She gasps, body trembling as I drag the blade out, shallowly slicing her more as I do. I lift it to my mouth, frowning at the mess, because it’s not only her blood on there. I suppose in the same way it was not only my blood on the thumb she expertly pulled into the back of her throat, considering my hands had been ripping apart a dead man. So I lift it towards my mouth, locking gazes with hers once again, back of her hand still against her chin, lips parted, eyes wide. I open my mouth, intending to lick up the blade when I have a better idea.

*Purer.*

I drop the axe. Her gasp of surprise as loud as the thud of the axe as it hits the floor, echoing around the high-ceilinged room. My knees crash into the floor and my mouth comes to the crease of her upper thigh. Nose burrowing between her legs, I angle my face, keeping my cheekbone pressed into her cunt, mouth slanting over the wound, I suck, *hard*. Her hands fly to my head, fingers weaving into my curls. Her spine arches back, grip tightening on the top of my head as I bury my face further between her thighs.

Inhaling her deep, smelling her arousal, earthy and sweet, I can't resist.

And shoving my tongue in her cunt is definitely not my cock.

It only counts if it's my dick.

*When you can't break the rules, you manipulate them.*

I smile against her, my hands coming to the backs of her thighs, fingertips gouging her flesh. I drag her into me, my tongue lashing over the slice in her thigh, my head rocking back and forth as I do, ensuring I graze my face over her pussy. She lifts onto her tiptoes, head dropped back as I look up at her, watch her face, shadowed in the darkness, tighten with need.

My hands slide up the backs of her thighs, sliding beneath the cotton of her underwear. I flip my hands, the rough backs of them against her soft skin, my fingers curling over the waistband of her underwear, from the inside out, and I move my mouth just enough to tear them down her legs. She wobbles on her feet as they fall to her ankles, my hands immediately back on her, groping her cheeks as my mouth covers her cunt.

She groans, bowing back, pushing her pussy even closer as I yank her into me. I bite her folds, my tongue slipping between them, spearing straight into her tight cunt as I work my fingers between her cheeks, gripping punishingly and pulling her apart for more access. I groan as she whimpers, her wetness drowning me as I bury my face in her. She pulls on handfuls of my hair like they're reins, trying to direct me where she wants me, nails clawing the skin from my scalp.

*But I don't fuck like that.*

I pull back from her, staring at her exposed clit where my fingers from behind hold her open. All pink and glistening, her pulse practically jumping in her clit. I stare up at her, her chest heaving, those big brown eyes staring down at me. Without looking, I spit on her cunt, feeling my saliva as it runs towards my fingers, her entire body flinching as I do. She blinks, once,

a slow hard clearing of her vision and then she sucks in a sharp breath.

“Stop moving,” I order, a growling bite to my words, my breath ghosting over her cunt, spread open and twitching, *waiting*.

She stares down at me, chest heaving, eyes wide, she licks her lips, swaying slightly in my hold, thigh muscles jumping beneath my over-tight hold on her. But she’s not squirming with pain. She is fucking intoxicated with it, *with me*.

“And let me fucking *eat*.”

Then my mouth is back on her, messy and wet and she is fucking dripping. Her sweet-earthy arousal dribbling down her inner thighs, mixing with the blood from her wound. My mouth follows the trails of it, tongue flat and harsh as I lap it up, turning my head from one leg to the other ensuring I don’t miss any. Then my nose is nudging her clit, and I’m impaling her on my tongue, one of my fingers circling the tight ring of muscle at her other hole. She yanks at my hair as I apply more pressure with my tongue, my nose on her clit. I can’t breathe and I don’t think I ever want to come up for fucking air, if it means I get to die with her sitting on my face like it’s a throne.

Her legs are trembling and as I drag my mouth up the length of her. Finger driving deep into her arse, a thumb replacing my tongue in her pussy as my teeth latch around her clit and I suck, instantly making her shatter. She comes so hard, entire body trembling, that she half collapses over me. I don’t change my pace until she’s completely bowing over me, her fingers slicing through my hair and down the back of my skull, my nape. I keep suckling at her until her belly is resting on the top of my head, body draping over me, arms loose over my shoulders, fingers hanging limp near the centre of my spine.

I draw in a deep breath, my finger and thumb gently sliding out of her, hands smoothing over the backs of her now bruised thighs, just holding her against me. My cock kicks hard in my jeans, but I ignore it. There are some sacred rituals I absolutely cannot fuck up. So as much as I’d like to sink

deep inside her tight little body, I refrain. Trying to soften myself to her instead.

She shivers, her cold skin slick with a fine sheen of sweat and we both breathe hard, her body weight fully relaxing over the top of me. She trembles, I smooth a hand up her back, hear her teeth rattling and pull her limp body into my lap, cradling her to my chest. She tucks her hands up beneath her chin, shivers wracking through her, I drop my chin to the top of her head, breathe her in.

“Think you can get dressed up real pretty for me, Little Lamb?” I whisper against the crown of her head, wisps of long dark hair tickling my face with my breath.

She nods, burying her face against my bare chest, flaking with dried blood. Her breath is cool against my nipple, hardening it and I can hardly concentrate as she laves her tongue over it, shifting in my lap so that she’s fully over the undeniable hardness of my cock.

One hand clutching her upper back, holding her to me, I slap at her outer thigh with the other.

“Up,” I rumble, a yelp as she jolts.

She grumbles against my goosebump smattered skin, pushing against my chest to stand. She stumbles to her feet, shaky legs finally steadying like a newborn lamb. She looks fully destroyed and a sly smile plays on the corner of my lips as I stare up at her. Blood and saliva, her arousal, smearing her inner thighs. I feel a little smug as she peers down at me, bottom lip tucked between her teeth, a monstrous glint in her eye.

“Use towels,” I tell her, my voice rough. “We don’t have time for showers.”

She stares back at me as I rise to my feet, tracking my every movement, like if she doesn’t, I might disappear as though I were never here at all.

I feel the need to reassure her, tell her I’m not going anywhere, but that’s not true.

In reality, it is her who won’t be.

Freedom, hers, mine, ours, belongs to The Obsidian.

And after tonight, once I've had my way with her, *paired* with her, she won't be going anywhere without me ever a-fuckin-gain.

## CHAPTER VII

# Penelope

**B**illy carries the bleeding bag of body parts, the duffle slung casually over his shoulder. His other hand, his left, encases my right, our fingers laced together, but realistically, my hand being so small, I am swamped by him, the tips of my fingers only just peeking out between the webbing of his.

There is a full moon, high in the pitch sky, clear and cool, no wispy clouds of white or grey, just the large white orb, rings of blurred glow around it. The cobbles beneath our feet are slick with the residue of water used to drench the dry soil in the flower boxes lining the streets. Hanging baskets of amaryllis and chrysanthemums, all of them bright and blooming, even this late in the year, strung up high on the black, lantern-style lampposts.

I drop my gaze down my dress. Thick straps over my shoulders, a bright yellow pinafore-style top, square neck like a slash across the top of my breasts, tight until my waist where it flares out, length stopping at my knees. Matching yellow ribbon tied in a bow in the front of my hair, the thick brown strands of it loose down my back. I have a black Victorian-ruffle neck shirt on beneath it. The neck is high, the sleeves are long, elasticated at the wrists, a flare of frilly lace cuffs that cover the backs of my hands to the knuckles. My gold locket tucked beneath it all, black combat boots on my feet.

I wonder, looking at myself, glancing to my right at the God that walks beside me, gaze focused on the dark path ahead, what he really sees when he looks at me. In his outfit of all black, tight jeans, long sleeved dress-shirt, combat boots, laces looped once, all the way around his ankles before being tied in a tiny bow at the front. He is simply beautiful in a dark, vicious, God-like way, and it should be terrifying. But it, *he*, isn't.

I keep pace with his large strides, the cut high up on my inner thigh rubbing and itching with every step, two of mine for every one of his. Destination something unknown. Billy winds us through the snaking lanes, buildings and houses towering high on either side of us. As the path opens up, widening like the gaping jaws of a beast, blackness all that is beyond, I can see nothing, and I want to.

I hesitate, my eyes flicking up once more to Billy. Studying him, the underside of his jaw, prominent and angular at the base of his ear, his chin wide, squarer than the rest of his face. I watch his lips kick up, he doesn't dip down to look at me, but his eyes roll in their sockets, the light blue focusing on me from the corner of his eye as he keeps up his pace. Almost dragging me along with him by his hold on my hand, but it's like he doesn't notice. Or, perhaps, he knows exactly what he's doing but doesn't let it deter him.

There is a gradual incline beneath my feet, and my eyes slowly traverse from his. The space opens up further, a small footbridge, the faintest sound of water, a steady flowing body of liquid beneath it, larger than a stream, smaller than a river. I half skip to the top of the bridge as he pulls me towards it. Releasing my hand, he drops the duffle bag down his arm, he rolls his wrist and then watches me as he heaves it over the black curling railing, holding the heavy weight of it above the water.

"After this," his voice a deep thrumming as it washes over me. "No more without me," he dips his chin, looks up at me from beneath dark curling lashes. "Okay?"

My heart hammers in my chest, drumming violently against my sternum. Eyes flying from his to the bag, his

fingers, one by one, slipping free from the woven handles of it. I swallow, sweat pricking along the back of my neck. There is silence around us, other than the water, my heavy breaths, but it feels loud. Those words. The impact. I'm not sure how I feel about it. I think he wants to keep me safe. Maybe he just wants to help. Perhaps it's something else entirely.

*'You thought my words scrawled inside the pages of your book meant nothing.'*

The Obsidian.

There are so many things that mean something and nothing. I am not even sure what I am doing here. So far away from home. Well, not really home, I haven't had one of those since he left me. It is a swell of confusion inside my brain. Why I have ended up here, where I would have escaped to tonight.

Alone.

*Without him.*

"I am not always sure of what I am doing."

I'm not sure why I say it. I'm not sure what it even means. I have a pain in my heart echoing in my lungs, breath sort of whistles its way around my insides, a mass of confusion. A frown appears in the form of a crease between my brows.

I have never really felt like anything without him.

It's not that I can't get by on my own.

It's that I don't want to.

I have never wanted to.

He was all I ever saw whenever I thought of my future.

He and I together.

A big house full of dark rooms and low lights, just Billy and I.

Lovesick little demons creeping in the dark.

"How do you feel about me, Nellie?" is his response, fingers, one by one, retightening around the bag straps.



My heart kicks up a bit faster then, wondering why he wouldn't let go, drop that into the dark water below, when I was so sure he was about to. What it is I have said to make him halt that. Perhaps I am wrong and he wasn't going to drop it at all.

I am so con-

"You are so confused, Little Lamb," he coos gently, echoing my thoughts, his bottom lip pouting just enough to match the natural pucker of his larger top one. "Come to me," he whispers, and it's only now that I realise, I have taken a few short steps away from him, separating us. "Penelope," he says a little louder, "come here."

He extends his arm, offering me the hand I clung onto the entire way here, to this bridge. Maybe this is our destination, perhaps it is only one of however many stops we may make tonight.

*'Would you like to go on an adventure?'*

I step forward, eyeing his open palm like his fingers might suddenly grow snake heads and lunge for my own. They don't and I willingly curl my hand into his. He snatches it up immediately, yanking me into his tall, hard body, my chin smacking into his sternum as I fall into him. My teeth ache, jaw crunching, I shake my head, and he is banding his arm around my back, the one with the bag in his fist. I feel a dribble of something cool splash onto my calf, but I cannot look at it, drag my eyes from his.

"Are you scared with me, Nellie?" he whispers over my mouth, "*of me?*" my chin trembling, chest shaking.

Because I wasn't scared. But now I am not so sure.

Billy would never hurt me. Even as I think it, the cut in my thigh burning, I know it to be true.

I shake my head, a strand of hair sticking itself across my lips. He brings his hand up, the one laced with mine, he releases my fingers, my hand curling into his chest. His, cupping my jaw in the junction of his finger and thumb. My other arm is by my side, crushed in his hold, my head tilted

back, he smooths his index finger up and down my cheek, thumb digging into my jawbone as my own gouges into his chest.

“Are you sure?” he breathes, the words siphoning their way from his tongue to mine.

“Yes, Billy,” I whisper back, feeling lightheaded with the way his light eyes study me, I swallow and he smiles, dropping his palm lower to feel the roll of my throat.

“I need you to always trust me,” he cants his head, lips brushing the corner of my mouth when it occurs to me, we have not kissed.

Not on the mouth.

Not tonight.

Since his reappearance into my life.

*Is any of this real?*

It feels like a fever dream, something I don't want to wake from, let the sickness kill me if it means I get to stay like this.

The thoughts make me flush, thinking of less than an hour ago when his mouth was all over me in a different way. Perhaps something I have only conjured inside my brain, and I am sure, under the cover of darkness, redness is eerily visible in my pale skin. Different things tumble through my head, too many to really cling onto for more than a fleeting second. And I think I want to. Kiss him. But I am not someone who initiates. I'm not sure I would even know how to. I am unsure I have ever been kissed in the way I think I would like to kiss him.

I lick my parted lips, strands of hair latching themselves onto my tongue. His finger curls, the hand still in mine, hooking them free of my mouth, smoothing them back from my face.

“Even when you think I don't care,” I frown instantly, confused by what that could mean, “I do. *You* are all I have ever and *will* ever care about, and soon, you will see how much.” His light eyes flicker between my dark ones. “It won't

be easy being with me,” he whispers over my mouth, almost like a promise, dragging the tip of his nose over mine. “But I cannot live without you any longer,” a chill bumps over the discs of my spine, a chill that is strangely warming. “And I am not so sure that *you* can,” he hushes into my cheek, my eyes wide open, staring up at the dark sky, full moon in the clear expanse but there are no stars. “Can you, my pretty Little Lamb?” I exhale hard, like something punches into my gut and I am automatically shaking my head.

I have known this since we were mere babes.

I am lovesick.

Infected with him.

Always have been.

Always will be.

He draws back enough to drop his forehead to mine, our breaths shared between parted lips, our joined hands between us, resting beneath my chin. I squeeze my eyes closed for just a second, thinking of my next words.

I don’t know what they mean. Even as I speak them. What I do know is that the extent of their truth is all I feel right down in my marrow.

“The only thing I will allow to part us again,” I whisper between us, his arm around my back crushing my ribs, “is death.”

And even then, I would not allow him to live without me. I would take him too. With me. The pair of us falling into the afterlife together or not at all.

His smile is slow to form, as though he heard my unspoken thoughts, a short huff of laughter expels through his nostrils. I feel it against my face, my neck. It is like a drug, being in his presence, I feel as though I have been waiting an eternity to be right here.

“Never let me go, Billy,” I say vulnerably.

It is a declaration. Ominous. Pleading in its way. I do not know *this* Billy. This grown man, a few years older than I. My

soul begs to differ. My heart is but a broken, decaying thing since he left. He has returned no more than a few hours and it feels like the organ is already stitching itself back together.

I have an obsessive need to carve my way back inside of this man, plant myself inside of his bones. And if I need to do it literally, *I will*.

His smile transforms into a grin, wicked and devilish. Spinning us around, my spine crashing into the metal railing of the bridge. A loud splash sounds at my back, the bag, plunging into the water. Both of his hands find my face, his hips pinning me in place, the thick bulge of his cock pressing into my belly. He holds my head, angling it back so I have to look up at him. He is towering over me, his breaths harder than they were only seconds ago.

Excitement pulses between us like a shared heartbeat, my nerves at my previous words evaporating. The way he looks at me like I am his entire world puts me in a head spin.

In this moment, it feels as though we have never been separated at all.

Even though there are twelve cold years to say otherwise.

Right here, now, him and I, it feels like everything.

I do not know why he is here. Why he chose now to come for me. But it feels like the beginning of something *more*.

“Death, Little Lamb, is only just the beginning,” he whispers between us like we are mere spirits walking another plane. “For people like us.” I breathe hard, his hands on my face brutal, he could crush my skull and I would love him anyway. “You and I, we are something else. Higher,” his lips brush mine with every overly pronounced word, “*more*, Penelope. *Everything*.”

His hands loosen as the pressure in my temples threatens to explode brain matter across the cobbles of this footbridge. Decorate the quiet, quaint street in red and black, blood and bone.

“Tell me now, Nellie. This is your only chance to tell me no, because after tonight, you won’t get an opportunity like

this again.” It feels as though it takes something monumentally soul destroying to speak those words, like he really would let me go if I wanted it. “Do you want this?” he licks his lips, the tip of his tongue wetting the Cupid’s bow of my own. “*Me?*”

It feels like an offering. Sacrificial in the way he speaks his last word. As though, if I were to say no, it would kill him dead where we stand.

But Billy Blackwell is not a man of sacrifice.

He knows I could never say no.

*To him.*

And I am sure he would never *actually* let me go.

And it makes me love him all the more.

Perhaps his intentions are pure, perhaps, he truly believes he could do it. Walk away from me again, a second time, but this time because I so wish it. I know him differently. Understand the darkness of his possessiveness towards me because I have the same in me for him.

He smiles wider, manically, as though he really can read my mind. His lips still not fully on mine, he makes no move to close the distance between us and I almost whine for his kiss. He draws back further as if he knows, and I squirm in his hold, my hands on his chest, but he is waiting for his answer.

*I am drunk on you, Billy Blackwell.*

*Intoxicated.*

*Plagued.*

*Lovesick.*

*Broken and desecrated and utterly obsessed with you.*

It’s a confession that needn’t be spoken, he knows this, but I confirm it anyway.

“My heart has always been for you,” the words are barely audible, and he cants his head once more, dipping in further towards me, tip of his nose against my own. “*I have always*

been for you.” My eyes flicker over his face, vision blurry at his closeness. “Keep me, Billy. And never let me go.”

## CHAPTER VIII

# Billy

**O**range and green and purple. That's all I can see as we reach the first cobbled street decorated for Halloween.

The rest of the journey to *Casa Nera*, all of the winding streets, houses and lampposts between, will be lit up as I ordered. There's no funfair here like there was when we were young. I probably could have demanded one, The Obsidian's reach is global, creeping ghostlike fingers delving into brains, planting seeds. I didn't organise a funfair, but I think she'll enjoy this all the same.

It is officially October thirty-first. Early morning on All Hallows Eve. The day before the first of The Obsidian's new year.

The first of November is our equivalent to what New Year's Day means for the rest of the world. The first day of our calendar so to speak. Something, I would quite like us to be home in time for.

We like it, the celebrations, *Halloween*, but we do not usually get to indulge in parties and drinking or treats of any kind. It is all rituals and sacrifice and signifying the year's end. However, this year, this day is mine, and *hers*. Not something I would usually spend with anyone but my brothers, Gore, Bram, Tolly. But I remember it so well, how much she so does enjoy this holiday.

I watch her deep brown eyes light up as she sees the first hint of decorations. A huge, towering arch in illuminous

orange and yellow skeleton lights, round, grinning pumpkins with triangular eyes framing it.

It does not excite me, the thought of celebrating, something we would do slightly different at home in England, usually a funfair, something I know she used to love.

I snuck her out of the children's home we shared, fourteen bedrooms, twelve to a room, but it always felt like it was just us two when we crawled into her bed together. Hidden beneath the thin cotton sheets as I watched her sleep until the sun came up.

There was zero nefarious intent back then.

I never looked at her with anything other than an innocent kind of love. I felt like a protective older brother. In an obsessive sort of way, I suppose.

But I knew she was *it* for me. *My pair*. The moment she plucked the legs off of a spider. We had watched it crawl over the metal slats above our heads, holding the mattress of the sleeping child's bunk above. I watched her, take it apart, piece by piece, gifting me its writhing torso into the palm of my hand, giggling at the messy conflict of love and horror on my face.

I had wanted nothing more than to keep her safe.

It's why I lied to The Obsidian.

I thought they were the worst thing she would ever have to face in this world.

But telling them she wasn't worthy was the biggest fucking mistake of my life.

On the only Halloween we spent together, we ran, hand in hand, to the funfair. There were rides and snacks and prizes. Too many things to look at and take in, but the only thing I wanted to watch was her. Even then, at that young age, ten to my nearly sixteen, she had a lightness about her. Carefree. That was why I enjoyed her so much. But really, it was like trapping one of those oil-slick coloured beetles in a jar. Shoving a stick and a leaf inside with a tablespoon of dirt and



watching it make the best of a shitty situation. I always forgot to put air holes in the top.

It got worse for her after I left. The people who used her. I know all of them by name.

I will gift her every finger that ever touched her. Every cock that should never have been inside of her. Every tongue, every tooth and bone.

I shall jar it all, put the pieces into different coloured liquids, seal the lids and display them on a shelf for her viewing.

So she will always know just how far I will go for her. And if she ever forgets, she can look at the macabre display and feel it.

My love for her.

It is vengeance.

Not something cults are particularly known for. The one I am a part of certainly is not.

But I don't give a fuck when it comes to my girl and her safety.

All of the things I couldn't protect her from.

Save her from.

*I won't let it happen again, Little Lamb.*

As I stare down at her, lifted cheekbones, bright smile, my heart pangs in my chest. Knowing what is to come. More things that will hurt her. All things she must do so that we can be together. It is selfish. Really. It's the whole *if you love her, let her go* thing, but I am not that kind of man. My world is so very different to this one. I will snare her in a bear trap, even if it ends up severing her foot. Because I must keep her, I *need* her.

It is a sickness.

My love for her.

It has festered like a slow simmering poison.

I am lovesick for her.

And I couldn't let her go now even if she begged for it.

When I offered her an escape, an out, on the bridge only minutes ago, I know I did not mean it. I would have slit both of our throats and thrown us into the river below if she had told me she didn't want to go with me.

She can never escape me now.

We walk through the towers of brightly lit pumpkins, everything luminous in the dark. There are few people wandering about, but everything has remained open. As I requested. There are games and stalls, gift vendors and street food. Sweet and salty scents fill my nostrils, and I can't decipher any of them for what they are, everything melding together on the back of my tongue.

Eerie music plays, sinister and cold, high-pitched laughter of clowns cutting through it all. Straw is scattered along the shiny cobbles, it *whooshes* as we walk, both of us in matching boots. A pathway full of spooky decor leading to the field behind *Casa Nera*, our final horror destination for tonight.

I let her lead. Her fingers squeezing between mine, excitement on her face, plastered in a grin, happiness alive in her eyes. Her smile is infectious, my own lips curling somewhat upward. She takes me straight to a toffee-apple stall, so many different kinds, chocolate, caramel, dyed greens and reds and pinks, flavours I cannot determine through their bright coloured icing.

A man in a black mask and blood-splattered apron stands behind the glass display, peering down at her unseeing. *Good*, if he looked at her, her delicate features, wide eyes, too hard, I might have to pop his own from his head. But as she points to a dark green covered apple that looks like toxic forest slime covered in shiny chips of blood red, he does nothing more than lift it towards her. Offering up the white stick pinched between his thick, leather gloved fingers. Their hands brush as she takes it from him, and I think about snapping the bones in his knuckles. Severing his fingers, shoving them down his throat. But his shadowed eyes come to mine, a slight nod to his head

and he steps away into the shaded area at his back, eyes immediately averting.

*One of ours.*

Nellie stares up at me, top-heavy, speared apple in her hand, her lips popped open.

“Don’t we have to pay him?” she asks quietly, body turned to face me, her dark gaze flicking to the vendor, back to me.

I bend forward, bringing my face towards hers, the sickly-sweet apple smothering her scent as I try to breathe her in, “Not tonight,” I whisper over her mouth. “Everything is already arranged,” I smile at the wonder in her gaze, dark brown eyes, the bitter chocolate colour circled in a ring of oozing, coal black. “Go wild, Little Lamb, all of this is for you.”

My lips brush hers, very much *not* a kiss. Something I am desperate for but cannot bear to give into yet. If I do, it is possible she will destroy me with it. I find myself unable to know how far is too far when it comes to this perfect girl. And I don’t like to hold myself back. I want to devour her all the way down to her skeleton, take every organ between my teeth and leave a scar of me in each.

She drops her gaze almost nervously, which is ridiculous, this woman is not shy. She is wicked and vile and ruthless. Deadly. *Just like me.* Nevertheless, I find her shyness intriguing all the same. Captivating. I am enthralled.

“Come, Nellie,” I say, glancing over her head at everything ahead of us, she leans in, caught in my web, and a smirk kicks up my lips. “Don’t you want to play some games?” I tease, lapping the flat of my tongue up the rounded side of her apple. *“Play with me, Little Lamb.”*

I feel her turn, her hand tightening around mine, then she pulls me with her. Light giggle leaving her lips before her pout is suctioning to the candied fruit held in her other hand. She skips down the streets, in awe of the lights, the stalls, and it is *exactly* like the last time. Childlike wonder, happiness, joy, I am amazed by how everything is so incredible to her. It is as

though she hasn't lived. Even now, at twenty-two, it feels like she hasn't seen anything. Done anything. Everything taken away from her.

And I'm about to snatch any and all of her remaining opportunities away, too. Plunge her into a life of living inside an elaborately designed prison. Trapped inside a gothic manor with my brothers.

With me.

I should feel something.

Some sort of guilt.

But I don't.

After a while, we stop at a booth, a woman in a witch costume behind the counter smiles when we approach. I stare at her staring at my girl, and I wonder what the fuck she's looking at. When I drop my gaze, Penelope's green-stained lips are popped open, her eyes wide. I follow her gaze, a frown line forming between my dark brows. There are hanging ropes of toys, all colours, all kinds, unicorns, ponies, cats, cute and fluffy and kind of gross. I feel my top lip pull up a little as I stare at them, trying to understand why anyone would want one, when she tugs on my hand, yanking at my arm in its socket.

"Billy," she breathes, my eyes on her, she slowly drags her gaze to mine, neck arched, throat exposed, I want to sink my teeth into it. "I want that one," she says quietly, a small smile on her dark green lips, her white teeth stained from the apple she devoured, too.

I look up, follow the direction of her pointed finger, and... "I have no idea what it is you're showing me, Penelope."

She laughs loudly, a quick bark of laughter as I shake my head. An explosive giggle peels out of her, her free hand curls around my forearm, our other hands already interlaced, she pulls herself into my side. Her warm body feels too fucking perfect wrapped around me like this, no force.

I'm going to miss it.

*She's going to hate me.*

She stares back at the stall. Colourful balloons stuck to the back wall, darts in baskets.

“I want the goat,” she whispers, glancing up at me from beneath that thick fan of dark lashes.

I look back, twist my head, cocking it to the side. I finally see it. This ugly, fluffy, black thing with something that *could* represent horns.

“Are you sure that’s a goat?” I ask her seriously, she laughs even louder, and it is fucking delicious.

Twisting her lips to the side, attempting to shield her full smile, she nods, just once and I’m plucking my arm free from her, taking three darts and popping the same number of balloons, red, blue, yellow. She claps her hands as the vendor retrieves the prize, handing it to me. Penelope looks up at me, eyes shining like the moon, and I wish I could hold onto this exact moment, feeling, forever. The fullness in my chest, lightness in my heart. The way she looks at me when I hand over the hairy fluffball like I am gifting her the entire world, when, in actuality, I am taking it all away.

She looks down at it, small thing, in her even smaller hands, and then she beams up at me and I am breathless and falling. And I don’t know why the fuck I didn’t kill my entire family years ago just to fucking claw my way to her.

To save her before condemnation.

“Thank you, Billy,” she smiles up at me, it’s soft and sweet and real.

It feels like I’m inhaling razorblades.

Lifting my thumb to the corner of her mouth, I cradle her jaw, keep her looking up at me.

“Lick my thumb,” I whisper, the Halloween music loud around us, the lights beacons for ghouls in the dark, but her sole focus is on me.

Her tongue pokes out slowly, the tip of it rolling over the pad of my thumb, wetting my skin. And as her tongue retracts,

disappearing back inside her mouth, I swipe over her pout. Rubbing away the green tingeing her naturally red lips. She lets me clean her mouth, all I really want to do is lick the stain away, but, despite what we've already done tonight, *that* isn't something I can do right now.

Instead, thoughts of her decadent, wet cunt on my mind, I lace my fingers back through hers, continue walking through the streets. A little faster than before, my heart pumping hard in my chest. I can feel her pulse, too, through her fingertips where they press firmly to the back of my hand, over my knuckles, it's fast, erratic.

A cool breeze blows, making her shiver beside me, and I catch her scent, can smell her, for the first time since we arrived, roses and earth, it cuts through the sickly scent of sweets. My nostrils flare, teeth gritting, my fingers squeeze harder. And it's like she feels it too.

Urgency.

I'm not sure how it happens, my eyes scanning the transformed residential streets, searching for the darkened house I know sits at the very back of it all. Hidden by a dense cloak of black.

Our final destination.

For tonight.

I didn't want to rush, now that's all I want to do. I am desperate. Craving her. It is as though she can sense my need, perhaps her own. Because with every increased stride, she skips along to keep pace. Her eyes keep flicking up to me, I don't look but I can feel them like lasers heating the side of my face. I find it then, the slip of a disguised walkway through overgrown grass.

I drag her around the side of the last house at the end of the street, squeeze us into the tight space between the back wall of the building, the tall, black, wrought iron fencing that surrounds the grounds of *Casa Nera* at my back. I press her back into the building, a vibration from the impact running

through her bones, through my fingers curling around her biceps.

I dip my head into her, breathe her in deep until she is all I feel inside of my lungs. My eyes are closed, and I can hear how my heart hammers between us, harsh in my ears like a death knell. It feels like none of this is real. Like it isn't really happening. As though I'm not really here, *with her*, about to commit fucking sacrilege.

My fingertips grip her tighter and I know she wants to shift, I'm pinching her skin, through her long sleeves, but I cannot loosen my hold on her. It is as though I am possessed. Something else beneath my flesh, clawing its way out to her. But really, it's just me, and my total fucking lack of self-control.

I weigh it all up in my head.

The shit that we're about to walk into.

Her, blindly.

I can't hold back any longer.

My eyes snap open, her dark ones like swirling black vortexes. She stares up at me like I am all she can see. Lips parted, chest heaving where I have her pinned to the old stone wall.

I lick my lips, my tongue catching her Cupid's bow, so close we share breath. My chest is heaving with restraint, my hands circled around her upper arms, her hands by her sides, but her eyes are wholly focused on mine.

*I am all she sees.*

"*Billy,*" she breathes into my mouth, it is a summoning. She calls me forth like the demon I am with the unholy chant she sings, "*Billy, Billy, Billy.*"

And I am lost.

Falling, dying, soaring.

My lips collide with hers. Teeth and tongue, and instantly, I bite into her lip so hard I taste blood, feel skin tear away

between my front teeth. I have no control when it comes to her.

We are inevitable.

I need her to *know*.

I lick into her mouth, her lips parted for me on a surprised gasp. My tongue traces the inside of her teeth, over the roof of her mouth, our lips smashing together as I fight for dominance.

But I don't need to fight.

She's not kissing me back.

And she might not want to kiss me ever again after tonight. So I indulge. I give the fuck into something *I* want for a change.

I draw back, just enough to get a good look at her, blood smear on her chin, lips swollen, the bottom one split.

I am so obsessed with her; I can hardly think straight.

My eyes flicker between hers, and I panic, for a split second, that I've done this all wrong. I have pushed too far, too soon, we were children the last time we were together, twelve years has passed. There is an internal tremor rattling around my nervous system and I lick my lips as I stare into her eyes. Pleading with her silently.

*Please, let us have this, Little Lamb.*

*Don't make me take this from you.*



## CHAPTER IX

# Penelope

Words breathy and soft, demanding, Billy says, “Kiss me back, Nellie.”

My lip is bleeding, stinging, pounding with my pulse where he tore into it like an animal. I feel it trickle down my chin. I am stunned. And I don’t really know why as I stare into his light eyes, grey more than blue in the shadows we find ourselves cloaked in. Because he is a brutal, savage boy, I have known this for so long, more than half of my life, nothing about this first kiss should have surprised me.

And yet...

I lick my lips. Copper thick on my tongue. I swallow hard, staring up at him. His hands sweeping up and down my arms, an attempt at soothing. Bruises beneath his palms, from where he held me to him so tightly. I swallow again, my mouth feeling as though it is on fire with the burst pressure in my lip. I keep staring up at him, something like panic dancing across his face, even beneath his pinched features, it feels like genuine concern. Perhaps it is more so for his benefit than mine. But even still, I feel something like guilt clog my throat.

“Please,” he whispers the words, dropping his forehead to mine, closing his eyes softly.

I don’t close mine, staring at his face, a faux peacefulness in his features.

I see the tightening at the outer corners of his eyes just before he says, "*Nellie.*"

My name cracks like a whip against my spine, I breathe hard against his lips, slanted over mine, his hands leaving my arms, splaying over the wall at my back, either side of my head. His body comes closer, elbows bending, lowering himself to me. Caging me in, hips pinning me down, his weight too much and not enough as he presses me in further against the cold stone.

I think I have romanticised this kiss, *our first*, in my head for so, so long that no matter how it happened, *if*, it was never going to be like I imagined. Something soft and gentle and warm.

None of those things represent us.

I don't know why I would even want that.

Knowing the brutal things, he, and I, alike, can do.

We are not soft.

All hard, jagged edges, white noise, split skin and deep puncturing wounds. I feel him in my bones, in my soul, an imprint of him in every organ. I would cut myself open just to offer him my parts, rip my insides to my outsides, decorate him in my pieces, but I expected this to be different.

Something *else*.

*Something not like them.*

Vicious and cutting and violent.

I swallow hard, breathing harder and white spots dance across my vision. My legs feel weak, and my head is spinning, the ground feels like it's about to fall away from my feet when his hands fly up from the wall, grabbing my cheeks, his nose on mine.

"Breathe, baby, *breathe,*" Billy's voice drums through my head, but my eyes squeeze shut, my lungs shrivel, and my blood feels like it's on fire.

*No one has ever been gentle with me.*

“Penelope.”

I blink. Breath punching out of my lungs, my hands come up, clinging to his sides, his thin shirt balled in my fists. I stare at him, wide eyed, my vision blurred where he is too close. But then his lips come to my cheek, the arch of my cheekbone, messy and sloppy, he drags his lips down the side of my face. Kissing, I realise, along my jawbone, the tip of my chin, stopping a hair’s breadth from my mouth.

“I am not like them,” he breathes into my mouth, the words settling on my tongue taste like truth.

I know they are, in my heart.

But Billy and I, we are both such beautiful liars.

My skin crawls, prickling like insects running over my flesh. I feel dirty and ashamed, and I want to hide my face. But I learned a long time ago, there is no hiding from Billy Blackwell.

My eyes drift low then, his barking command pulling me back, “Look at me.” His eyes flicker over mine, and I am captive in his gaze. “I’m always going to hurt you, Little Lamb,” another thing he needn’t confess, but it feels strangely good to hear it all the same. “I am going to devour every inch of you, Nellie.” His forehead lifting away just enough that I can see him clearly. “I will have to do things to you,” he swallows hard, but he doesn’t look away, it feels worse that way, like there isn’t really regret there. “Horrible things,” he whispers, goosebumps razing across my skin like wildfire. “Maybe like the things *they* did to you,” I squeeze my eyes shut then, tight, so tight, the backs of them burning. “You are going to hate me, even when you want to love me.” It is cold, the way he says it. “But, Penelope,” he whispers lower, deep voice soothing me like a gentle lullaby.

He is a predator.

“You are mine, Little Lamb, my whole heart. And I will die before I let anyone *else* ever touch you again.”

It feels like there is so much more to unpack with that sentence. The things he’s going to do to me are going to be

truly horrific. He's not trying to lie about it, and yet, *anyone else*, feels like he means more than just him. *Else* doesn't really make me feel very reassured.

"Do you understand me?"

I do.

I don't.

There is so much more to him than I know. It didn't occur to me to try and find out anything before now.

I feel ridiculous and stupid. Pathetic.

*Desperate.*

He has alluded to so many different things since I have known him. There are cryptic words scrawled in my book, the one currently tucked safely in his back pocket. A chain around my neck that suddenly feels like it weighs one hundred pounds and a glint in his eye, sinister and ominous. Because *he* knows all of the unspoken things between us. It feels like tonight is really, only, just the very, very beginning.

Despite it all. Everything unknown. I nod, sealing my fate, because, regardless of how *absolutely* stupid it makes me, I don't want to be separated from him ever again.

*I am lovesick.*

"Yes, Billy," I swallow, whispering between us, "I understand."

And then his lips are crushing into mine. A collision strong enough to kill. My teeth do more than my lips as his tongue dips into my mouth, licking into me like he could consume me just like this. My hands fly up, fingers curling over his shoulders, and then his hands are gripping the backs of my thighs, lifting me up with ease. My legs curl around his waist, the cut in my thigh burning. His tongue fucking so hard into my mouth, it feels as though he's going to tear out my tonsils.

And I love it.

Every depraved second.

It's filthy and raw. I grind my core down his laddering abs, too much fabric between us. His black shirt, my yellow dress. Day and night, but neither one of us really belongs in either.

Monsters that flourish somewhere in the in-between.

Something I was always frightened of, until I fell in love with one.

And now I am one myself.

Two monsters thriving in the decay.

My pussy grinds into him, my core on fire, his fingers bruising where he grips the backs of my thighs, my knees pressing sharply into his ribs. I lift up, knot my arms around the back of his neck, hands locking over my elbows. I bite into his bottom lip in the same way he attacked mine. The brush of his tongue over my clamped teeth has me unlocking my jaw, immediately snapping back down. He groans against me as I suck on his tongue, his fingers digging even deeper into the flesh of my bruised thighs and then my head is slamming into the wall at my back making me see stars.

Copper is thick in my mouth, slick in my throat. My lips wet, chin dripping. He stares at me where he has me pinned to the wall. His mouth no longer on me, my skull having ricocheted off of it as he knocked me into the house. I can feel it then, captured between my teeth.

The little piece of his tongue.

He stares at me, bloody faced, and he looks... *uncertain*.

It takes me a second to clear my vision, the back of my skull pulsing where I rest it against the cold stone wall of the home at my back. The wall he must have shoved me back into it. I don't even remember how it happened... I stare into his light eyes, roll the miniscule piece of his flesh around on my tongue. His eyes are fixated on my jaw, my mouth, and then they lift.

I grin at him, and I don't feel nervous, a piece of his tongue locked behind my bloody teeth. He swipes his face against his shoulder, smearing a mixture of his blood and mine

onto the black fabric of his shirt. It smears across the lower half of his face, across his cheek, chin, side of his jaw.

He swallows, and my mouth starts to water, wanting to mimic the action, but I don't, not yet. Instead, our eyes locked, an unreadable type of hesitation in his, I open my mouth. Slowly stick out my tongue, showing him the little piece of his.

As his eyes lower to it, I think of the rough, bloodied blade of his axe. The way it dragged dangerously over my peaked nipple, how he was enraptured by the caress of it across my body. That's what I focus on, how *he* worshipped *me*.

Billy turns his head, spitting blood on the floor at his feet. Saliva drips from the corners of my mouth, the overwhelming urge to swallow. I pull my tongue back into my mouth, a little piece of him with it, it feels like power. I still don't swallow.

Billy's light blue-grey gaze roves over the mess on my face before bringing those dangerous eyes back to mine.

"You gunna swallow that down, Little Lamb?" he asks me, deep and rough, it sends a tremor down my spine. "*Me?*" the way he says it, with something like reverence.

I nod slowly, dropping my attention from his eyes to his mouth, back up again, "Spit it in my mouth, Billy."

I extend my tongue at the same time he groans, rocking his hips into mine, slamming me back harder into the stone wall. He eyes the little piece of his tongue I tore from him, atop mine, and then, holding my gaze, he spits in my mouth.

Lifting a hand from my thigh, he palms my throat, feeling me swallow him down and the strangled noise that falls from his own sounds nothing short of tortured.

He grinds himself into my core, squeezing the sides of my throat, he suctions his lips back to mine. Copper and salt floods my mouth, infects my nose, filling my lungs. I breathe him in, earth and grapefruit, sharp and sweet. Let him really kiss me. His tongue tastes my mouth, long, luscious licks over my own. Slower, explorative.

I grind myself against him, firm ripples of muscle rolling beneath me as I drag the heat of my cunt over his defined torso, down to his throbbing cock. I moan into his mouth, arms hooked over his shoulders, my hands clawing at his back, trying to drag him closer and closer.

*I want him inside of me.*

And then he tears his lips from mine, leaving me gasping, he pants over my mouth, a strange tension in his face.

“Billy?”

“We have to go,” his breath against my mouth, vibrations from the ghost train mechanics running down my spine. “You’re going to have to trust me,” he whispers, and my blood suddenly runs cold. I shift in his hold, “Nellie.” His fingers only tightening until the pressure makes me wince, I still. “Even when you think you can’t, even when it seems impossible,” he swallows hard, and we are tethered. I cannot look away even though I think I want to when he says, “Even when you hate me.”

Not if. *When.*

I want to protest it. Tell him that I could never hate him. Even though I told him exactly that only hours ago. I didn’t mean it. I *couldn’t*. He knows this too.

*I am lovesick.*

“Don’t say anything back,” he says, his voice deep. “Just, please,” I am silent, “trust me.”

My eyes flicker between his, one of his hands sweeping up my spine, cradling the back of my skull, fingers beneath my hair. His light eyes gleam with darkness, something unspoken that I think, perhaps, might be hurting.

“I trust you,” I say because I think he needs to hear it. “And, Billy,” his eyes wide on mine, I bring my hands to his face, cupping both sides of his jaw. “I will love you enough for both of us,” I whisper the words, my heart squeezing in my chest.

Bringing his lips to mine once more, all he manages to say is, "Thank you, Little Lamb."

And it feels like I'm falling into an abyss.



## CHAPTER X

# Billy

Silence.

It is deafening in the dark.

There are insects chirping and buzzing, crickets and grass beetles, the collection of them like a sinister symphony, but I don't really hear any of it at all. Fingers interlinked; we walk hand in hand across the dry field. In the black of night, my other senses heightened, I am alert. Overtly.

*To her.*

Shivers rip through her, making her teeth chatter. It is not cold, the air is warm, the breeze cool, and she has two layers on with her long-sleeved shirt, dress over top.

Yet, it's as though my soul is rattling around inside of me, a warning, perhaps, preparation. For what I know is coming. She hasn't asked any questions. I am not sure she would like the answers. I am not sure I would even give her any.

She is submissive, *to me*. Even when she shouldn't be. It's as though she catches sight of me, my scent, and she is trained, somewhere deep in her soul, to follow me, my lead. Submit. And I *want* her to. I want her to do everything I ask of her.

She is lovesick.

So am I.

And I am not upset about it.

The thought of having her attention, undying, unwavering, for the rest of our lives fills me something indescribable. I have waited, starved of her, for far too long.

Palms clammy, sweat slick on my nape, I swallow, iron ominous on the back of my tongue. I am ready. Even if she is not. And as I think it, she tucks herself closer, our arms brushing. I look down at her, but she doesn't look up. I watch her take in our surroundings, piece by piece, her eyes wide like saucers. I cannot distinguish the bitter chocolate brown of her irises from the black of her blown pupils. I watch her see the huge, shadowed building come into better focus. The one we are heading towards.

It has spires. Two of them. Sharp arrowing points like Devil fingers reaching for the blackened sky. It's the first thing she sees, angling her head back to take them in. I stare at her as our boots thump quietly through the tall, dry grass, the earth hard and compact from months without rain. The grass swishes across her bare legs, poking at the backs of her knees. I want to reach down, scoop her up, keep her cradled to my chest, protect her from getting scratched up, *marked*.

Only *I* get to do that.

The noise from the street is long gone, a distant memory that feels, if it were not for the fluffy toy goat clutched in her free hand, like it might not have been real at all. I have waited far too long for a night just like this.

*With her.*

I study her as she glances left, chin still raised, trying to smother her fear. Darkness, shadows and trees, tall grass for as far as the eye can see. There is nothing else around, just this place of horror.

I have been here before, only once, when we had problems with a mafia Don, a few members of the Bianchi family.

*Fuckers.*

I have not been back since.

We begin weaving our way through headstones, I do not speak, even when I hear her breath catch. She is half hiding

behind me as I lead us through the mass graves. I don't know how she didn't notice them on our approach. The tops of the weathered grey stones are bright, even in the dark, beneath the moonlight.

A concrete ocean of death laid out before us.

"No questions, Nellie," my deep voice cuts through the quiet, her attention snapping to me, neck cracking as she cranes it back to look up at me. "*Please.*"

*I don't want to have to lie to you, even though we are both so dangerously good at it.*

It is eerily more silent as we clear the graves, more so than before. We do not stop walking as we approach the house. The insects have quietened, the air is still, and the house before us, a living, breathing vessel for something *more* stands in silent darkness.

We are near the building, half-illuminated by the moon. Dark brick, empty windows. Her head craning back, neck arching, I lead her forward. There are too many windows to count, four floors high, but it's what lies in the belly beneath that we are here for tonight.

The seventh circle of hell roars with fire beneath our feet.

I wonder if she feels it yet.

Tugging her sharply left, she half skips to catch up with my rapid change of direction. I lead us further along the back of the house, and the ground opens up, a deep black pit of nothing. I stop over it, looking down, but Penelope's still a couple paces back, our arms extended, hands joined between. I stare down into the hole, her arm trembling, I don't want her to try and pull free, I don't want her to run. I want us to stay together...

*I will catch you if you try.*

"Billy," she whisper-hisses, my skin prickling at the sound, it is vicious, much like I shall be soon.

Slowly, I turn my head over my shoulder to look at her.

Her tiny frame, petite features, faux innocence.

*Fuck, I can't wait to devour you.*

“Yes, Little Lamb?” I ask, a chill racing down my spine, even to my own ears it sounds cold and unfeeling.

“Billy, I’m scared,” it is breathless, her confession, and I can practically hear her heart thudding in her chest.

I breathe in deep, letting my eyelids flutter, and then I’m turning back towards her, yanking her forward, her shoulder joint cracking. She thwacks face first into my chest, my other arm binding across the back of her shoulder blades. I release her hand, grab her chin, squeezing her cheeks hard. She stares up at me, her split lip weeping, pale blue rings beneath her eyes. Her heart pounds so heavily in her chest it feels like it’s going to explode.

“They feed off of fear,” I breathe over her mouth, head dipping down, my nose touching hers. “You have to be brave, Nellie. I’ve got you,” it’s a rough sound, the promise aggressive, because I know what I’m about to demand of her is going to be the hardest thing she’s ever experienced.

All eyes will be on us, *her*, it makes my teeth grit.

“Who, Billy, who’s they?” her words are low, quiet, lips brushing against mine with every word.

I think of our kiss, my tongue, her teeth, our blood. It feels heavy in my heart now.

All of this just feels wrong even though it is the only way.

You don’t get to just *leave* a cult.

I think about what happened to Gore.

She would never be safe and she’s not even *in* yet.

“You aren’t going to let anything happen to me,” she trembles, heart racing faster, my arm like an iron bar across her back.

“I’m going to do what is necessary to keep you,” I tell her quietly, calmer, my own heart beating strong and steady where her chest is flush with mine. “I know you’re scared,” I say then, and it is real, my understanding, she is blindly trusting

me, and I don't take that lightly. "But I'm scared too, Nellie," I confess, hearing chains rattle in the pit at my back. "I'm scared because if we don't do this, I won't get to keep you, you will be taken from me, because you'll have seen too much. You've already seen too much and we haven't even made it down there yet."

*I know everything is cryptic, but trust me to keep you safe.*

"You have to follow through now," I glance away, finding her sad eyes too much to look at.

But this is the way for us to be together.

For me to be able to keep her safe.

The only way.

I drag my gaze back, finding my resolve, clinging onto the love I have for her even though I find myself unable to voice it.

I am lovesick.

"We're in this together, you can't turn back." I stare into her eyes, a million silent words shielded behind them.

*Please do as I ask.*

*I wouldn't do this if there was another way.*

*We don't get to be like others.*

*This dark world is different.*

*You're my pair.*

*My whole entire world.*

*Please don't let them take you away from me.*

"Don't make me have to force you, Little Lamb."

I watch the words take hold, a tremor tearing its way through her limbs. I know she has been forced before. But this... It isn't a threat, it's just a fact, a warning.

*I will do anything to keep you, even if it means I have to hurt you.*

She doesn't pull away, sucking in a sharp breath, the inhale inflating her lungs. I will do it. No matter what. This ritual is for survival. Hers. Ours. And she doesn't even know it.

There are not enough hours left in the year for her to contemplate how this all works.

The Obsidian.

It is something so much bigger than any of us.

Especially we two.

*I am Two.*

She swallows, closing her eyes. I listen to her breaths, feeling them, too fast, on my skin. My grip on her jaw loosens, finger and thumb caressing the reddened skin.

She doesn't speak and neither do I, but I hear the sound of chains again, wishing they would shut the fuck up, and her eyes fly open, panicked.

"*Shhh,*" I hush, drawing her in closer to my chest, her arms pinned at her sides by my crushing lock around the back of her shoulder blades.

She stares up at me, waiting for something, *everything*. I give her nothing.

"Come with me," I whisper, "I've got you."

## CHAPTER XI

# Penelope

I t's an omen.

An old water well transformed into a macabre entrance to Hell.

Narrow stairs curl around the inside of it, down and down and down, further and further into the black abyss below. Billy holds my hand at his back as we descend, him first, me behind. My tiny feet struggle with the small stepping-stone type stairs that are no more than bricks poking out from the walls. He descends into the black like he has done so one hundred times before, despite telling me as we began heading down that he has only ever been here once in his life. And he did not use this particular entrance when he did.

I swallow hard again as my foot slips, losing my balance, causing me to stumble into his back, I gasp sharply, my lungs burning with the cold air, but Billy doesn't wobble. He is the epitome of stability, catching me against his back, his fingers tightening through mine.

I'm sure that doesn't help. Having to navigate the pitch with a hand pulled behind your back, but he doesn't complain, doesn't try to make me let go. If anything, it feels as though he holds me tighter.

*Never let me go, Billy.*

I squeeze my fingers around his, using my free hand, palm splaying over the top of his spine, I push myself to straighten,

brush the clammy skin down the front of my dress.

“Okay?” he whispers, voice echoing around the narrow, tunnelling shaft.

“I’m okay, Billy,” I whisper back, my voice rolling around the damp brick walls.

That’s all I can smell, wet, musty iron. The warm air down here is humid but cool. Something putrid smelling sticks in the hair of my nostrils, the back of my throat. I try to swallow it away, my mouth too dry, making me want to gag. It creeps colder as we inch our way down. The hair on my arms raising, goosebumps prickling along the nape of my neck, when I hear it again.

Chains.

Rattling, clinking, it’s unmistakable now, I flinch, but I do not stop walking. Billy does nothing to react, and I try to keep my gaze on the back of his head. Focus more on the words he whispered to me before, *‘I’ve got you’*, than what is below our descending feet.

I feel like we’ve travelled to another dimension entirely as Billy’s boots finally make contact with the bottom of the well. The moon above us not penetrating the pure blackness of the space at all. He turns to look at me, just two steps up, my feet having stopped moving. I dart my eyes around, nothing but glistening black brick in the dark, the smell stronger this far down, it makes my stomach roll, but nothing comes of it.

“I’ve got you,” he says lowly, my gaze snapping back to his.

His shining blue eyes remind me of a demon’s in the dark. And this far down, closer to the core of the earth, where hellfire houses The Devil, it’s believable.

“Billy,” I whisper again, unmoving, my breath held, he shakes his head, just once, and reluctantly, I take the last steps down to meet him.

I lick my lips, dry and stinging, stare up into his light eyes. Silently, he takes my hand, and turns away from me, walking forward into the darkness, but I don’t move. Body trembling,



feet cemented to the floor. He looks back over his shoulder, eyes narrowing just slightly.

“Come, Little Lamb,” he summons, and my feet move before my brain can register.

Always submissive, always following.

*Lovesick.*

A tunnel appears through the cloak of darkness, swallowing us as he leads us down it. Boots heavy, their collective echo ricocheting down the length of the walkway. We walk side by side, hand in hand, as we weave around a curve in the bricked passageway, a glow of light illuminating the path ahead. A sconce, high up on the wall, orange flickering candlelight spilling out from the top of it. The further we walk, following the snakelike pathway, the more light, sconces closer together, more candles clustered in each one.

And then the passageway is widening, opening up like the gaping maws of a hell beast. It is light beyond. Moisture seems to drip from the ceiling, I can hear it, like leaky pipes, the sound of it ominous. It makes me think of blood, slicking off of my outstretched fingers, dripping to the floor. All of the times it was my own, crimson running from me, my body, my injuries.

My sacrifice.

I squeeze Billy’s fingers, shoving it all down. Nails clawing into his palm, I pick at his skin, my eyes taking in the cavernous space.

We stop just inside the empty room. High ceilings, painted murals, I can’t make out, decorating them, alcoves and wooden beams carving across it all. Stained glass windows that can’t have ever seen the light of day, nothing but dirt on the other side of them. It’s as though we’re inside a cathedral that has sunken deep into the earth. Dragged down by Lucifer’s own fingers.

A round pool is the focal point, sitting deep in the centre. Pyres of black candles surround it. It is warm, the room, from

their heat, their flames dancing shadows across the panelled walls. Incense is strong, but the scent of fresh roses is stronger. They're everywhere. Occupying every flat surface, curling up all of the pillars and posts, free-standing candelabras.

"You like it?" Billy asks in a low voice, my eyes dragging themselves back to him.

I look up, his chin to his chest, our hands still linked, his eyes down on mine.

"What is this place?" I whisper, eyes unable to stop from continuing to glide across the vast room.

"The Baptistry."

I blink at that, unsure of how to respond. I don't know what this means.

"Why are we here?" I whisper, feeling like if I speak too loudly, someone may shush me.

A slow smirk pulls across his lips, his eyes dropping to his feet, chin still tucked into his chest, he licks his lips, drags his gaze back up to mine.

"For the sacrifice, of course," he whispers sinisterly, I feel my mouth pop open, a crease forming quickly between my brows.

There are so many questions, I don't know which to start with. I shake my head as though to clear my thoughts, perhaps my ears. I can't have heard that right.

"Billy, I-"

"Shhhh, trust me, I'll make it good for you, Little Lamb," he draws our joined hands up towards his chest, pounds them over his heart, drops his voice to such a low whisper, I can hardly hear him. "It only beats for you, remember that. It is yours. *I am yours, Nellie.*"

A grin stretches across his face, his lips curling up high at the corners. It carves his face like a skeleton in the shadows, cheeks dimpled, hollowed. I swallow dryly, my heart hammering against my sternum. Everything inside of me rebelling against whatever it is I have just stepped into.

“Billy,” I say again, nervously, my body trembling, “I’m frightened.”

“Ohhh, *shhh*, beautiful girl,” he smiles, stepping into me, his thumb brushing a lock of dark hair behind my ear. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

And then I’m grabbed from behind. A hand clamping over my nose and mouth, an arm banding across my heaving chest. My feet are lifted from the floor as I’m dragged backwards against a firm chest. My nails claw over the back of Billy’s hand, tearing the skin from his knuckles as he tries to get me to release him. I want to sob, but, instead, panic flaring through me like an explosive, I kick my flailing legs. Try to rock my head back, arms pinned by my sides like I’m wearing a human straitjacket. Billy doesn’t move. Small smile still present on his lips, he glances down, bringing his clawed hand up, surveying the damage before casually sliding both hands into his pockets.

His light eyes watch me as I’m torn backwards, away from him. My eyes wide, nostrils flaring, lack of oxygen beneath the cold hand of my captor making my eyes stream.

That’s when I hear it again.

The chains.

Coils of heavy metal sliding along one another fills my ears like snakes slithering over one another. A sob rips its way from my chest up my throat, but nothing comes out other than a muffled moan. I stop kicking, stop struggling, watching the boy I love let me be manhandled by a stranger. I still completely, going lax, muscles burning as I loosen the tension in them. I watch him, a tear tracking down my face, onto my captor’s hand as they tear me away from him. He frowns then, blinking hard, nostrils flaring, like he’s seeing something he doesn’t like. It makes me want to laugh.

I don’t know how I ended up here.

*Billy Blackwell is a beautiful liar.*

My heart is heavy, thudding slowly now, defeat thick in my blood. It’s like suddenly realising my soul has been

carrying around a corpse all this time. The other half of me doesn't exist anymore. Perhaps he hasn't existed for the last twelve years.

Billy Blackwell is dead and in his corpse a demon resides.

Possessed by something else.

Animated by evil.

And yet, there is still a tiny piece of me hoping I'm wrong.

I close my eyes, unable to look at him any longer. It is a lie. His pretty face, light eyes, dimpled smile. It's all wrong, warped and twisted now, tarnished.

"Penelope."

I squeeze my eyes closed tighter, pressure across the bridge of my nose from the side of my captor's hand. I hope he breaks it. My breaths come short and sharp in the sweaty cupping of his cold hand. Moisture from my panicked breaths slicking his skin, when it is suddenly torn from my face, my body yanked into a familiar one.

My hands claw at his shirt, the stretch of tight fabric knotting between my fingers as I fist it. Sobbing into his chest, his arms band around me, one hand cradling my skull, the other low on my spine.

"*Shhhh*, I've got you," Billy coos and my brain melts.

I don't know up from down. My head spins, thoughts tumbling around my skull. This is all wrong, yet, I cling to him anyway. The only thing even a little bit familiar to me in this strange place. My cries are almost silent where I can't catch my breath. Chest heaving, eyes streaming, the taste of salt running down the back of my throat.

"I've got you, Nellie. Come now, calm down," he whispers across the top of my head, hair tousling with his breath, cheek resting on top of my skull, hand cradling the crown of it. "I've got you. Be brave for me, my pretty Little Lamb."

We stand that way until my legs go numb. My hands curled in his shirt, balled beneath my chin, face buried into his chest. His arms banding tightly around me, he smooths his

fingers through my hair, shushing me lowly. My eyes are closed, my heart rate slowing, my breathing calming. He keeps swaying us, almost like a slow dance, but we don't turn, and I fear everything, *everyone*, I can't see at my back. And despite what just happened, I don't think Billy would let them hurt me.

Slowly, Billy pulls back, holding onto my biceps, he cranes his head back to look down into my eyes. His frown is etched deep into his features, warm brown skin sallow and grey looking beneath the flickering candlelight. He cups my neck, palms warm on either side of my throat, his thumbs smoothing their way up my jaw, trailing through my tears, swiping beneath my stinging eyes.

"We still have to get through this, Little Lamb," he whispers, softer than before, my head shaking instantly, automatically. He purses his lips, looking down at me with serious eyes, "Yes, beautiful, we must."

"No," I hiccup, the word wailing its way free of my lips, "I don't want them to touch me," I whisper brokenly, my eyes pleading with him.

His eyes seem to flash, widening suddenly.

"No one else will touch you," he says then, holding my cheeks in his big hands. "No one but me, okay?"

Someone makes a sound of protest at my back, it shoots a shiver of fear up my spine, even though I can tell they're far enough away not to be able to touch me right now. But Billy's head snaps up, gaze over the top of my head, shooting whoever it is a look that says he means what he says.

Then he brings his eyes back to mine.

"I can make it easier," he says quietly. "But you really have to trust me," I draw in a shuddery breath, unsure what to even do now.

So I do what I seem to do best when it comes to Billy Blackwell.

I submit.

“Okay,” I whisper, lashes fluttering over my dropped gaze.  
I lift my eyes back unto his, “Okay.”

## CHAPTER XII

# Billy

The small square of paper-like substance sits on the tip of my tongue, white with a black ram's head printed on it. *Obscurity*. A manmade, non-organic, chemical substance that really, just makes you more willing, happier, less questioning.

And that's all I fucking need right now.

I don't have much pull here, being unpaired, unrisen, and already known for being a notorious troublemaker as it is. My brothers absent, Gore, The First, also not here. I'm nervous. I really need her to do this, right now.

*Come on, Little Lamb, I would never let anything happen to you.*

I almost scoff at myself. I already did. Letting that fuck touch her. That's one strike now from both The Obsidian and my Little Lamb.

*God, I'm fucking up.*

It's okay. I'll rip his arms from his sockets once she's baptised. It can be my initiation gift to her.

Penelope stares up at me, eyes flicking to the rapidly dissolving paper on my wounded tongue, back up to my eyes, her own, dark and glistening with tears. I want to lap them up where they shimmer on her cheeks, but I can't do anything

unless she takes the drug from my fucking tongue and it'll dissolve before she even gets near it at this rate.

She stares at me and it's as though she senses all of my unspoken pleading, because quickly, before she can really think it through, she presses up onto her tiptoes and sucks my tongue into her mouth. One of my hands palms the front of her throat, feeling her swallow, the drug making her mouth dry, the aftertaste something metallic that sticks in the back of your throat.

I kiss her, my tongue gliding over hers, deep into the back of her mouth, I taste it too, the chemical, the almost bleachy taste. I pluck at her lips, my teeth nipping the bottom, and then I drag my mouth across her. Up the hollow of her cheek, my tongue sliding over her salty skin, beneath her eyes, lips sucking the tears from her perfect porcelain flesh.

I drop my hands to her shoulders, lips back to hers, and thread my fingers beneath the straps of her sunflower yellow dress. This time, only a couple of minutes after taking the Obscurity, she doesn't try to fight me. I can't help the small smile of triumph in our kiss as I feel her relax into me, allowing me to push the straps of her dress off of her shoulders, the fabric dropping to the floor, pooling at her feet.

Her fingers start plucking at my shirt, my hands reaching down, I pop the buttons free, our lips severing the connection as I pull away to shove it off. She whimpers a protest, mouth instantly re-finding mine, teeth pulling at my top lip, and I breathe a little easier.

Her hands glide down my abs, finger and thumb flicking my jean's button free, but before she can get them off of me, I'm gripping either side of her black shirt, ripping it in two. The buttons scatter across the brick floor as they tear free. She groans into my mouth, teeth nipping and pulling on my lips. I shove the shirt down her arms, skate my hands up her bare back, flicking the hooks of her bra free.

She shivers as my calloused hands slide around her ribs, thumbs gliding up her sternum, palms cupping her small breasts in my hands, her bra falling down her arms. I squeeze



gently, forefingers and thumbs tugging her nipples. I graze my teeth down her chin, the front of her throat, her hands looping around the back of my neck. She arches her spine, pushing herself into me, my mouth finding the dark, pointed peaks of her chest. She gasps, chest heaving against my mouth, my teeth grating over her goosebump covered flesh.

Hands skating down her sides, I suck her nipple into my mouth, bite down on the hardened point, feel the vibration of her deep moan in my own throat. Thumbs hooking into the sides of her underwear, fingers splaying over the roundness of her backside as I suck at her chest, I push the cotton down over her hips.

Fingers curling into my hair, tightening in the coiled roots at the nape of my neck, she gasps, "*Billy.*"

It's the most decedent sound I think I've ever heard.

Bliss, pain, need.

I want to hear it again.

Her nails rake over my scalp, my lips sucking bruises across her chest, collarbones, biting my mark into the hollow of her throat. I walk her backwards. Towards the men, she goes willingly, moving with me without conscious thought. I'm expecting a flinch when she hears the chains, but she doesn't, nothing comes from her as I scoop my hands up her sides, fingers running over every rib bone, the sides of her breasts.

Hooking her arms in my hands, I drag her arms up above her head, encircling her wrists as I drag my teeth along her jaw. I pass both hands into one of mine, peck at her parted lips, slip my tongue over her bottom one, swollen and plump, before fucking it into her mouth. She is loose and light and as the cold chains touch the back of my hand, dragging across her fingers, she shivers, but she doesn't stop kissing me.

I bind her hands with the heavy chain, coiling it around her wrists. Then the chain is pulled, the sound of it passing over the steel hook, *clink, clink, clink*, is loud in the quiet room.

“Close your fingers around the hook, Little Lamb,” I whisper over her mouth, glance up, watching as she does just that, curling her thumbs over the metal. “Good girl,” I hush, pressing the words into her teeth, tongue licking over her top lip.

Only when she is dragged too far from me, do I release her mouth.

Our kiss broken.

Her toes brush the floor as I drag off her frilly socks and boots. Small, perfect feet stretching like a ballet dancer’s as if to try and plant them down on the floor.

I take a step back, watching her be pulled higher, the grind of the cogs crunching as they come to a stop. She hangs there, swinging lightly.

Exposed.

Ripe.

Fucking beautiful.

I try not to think about everyone else seeing her, like this.

Neck arched back, my gaze on her, she stares down at me, throat exposed, gold locket between her breasts, sickly white skin glowing warmly under the orange flickering candlelight. Her chest heaves. Tits shadowing her abdomen with every quick inhale-exhale. I bite into my bottom lip, tongue swiping over it where it snags between my teeth.

I picture her insides, beating heart, heaving lungs, slippery organs, coiling intestines, thick red blood.

How it would feel in my hands.

Bones snapping, skin tearing, tissues and fat and sinew, stringy and tough.

Veins, blood and organs.

Every single piece of her.

I’m going to infect it all, seep my way like black tar through her veins, drips of poison beneath her tongue. Kiss her

and fuck her and mark her.

Make sure she knows exactly what she is.

*Mine.*

*I'm going to eat you alive, Little Lamb.*

I step further back, more cloaked men enter the room, flooding in like a plague from all around. Hidden archways funnelling them inside. Heads bowed, chins dipped, black hoods pulled low. They circle the baptismal pool, the one my Little Lamb hangs above.

Her wide dark eyes peer down, scanning over the room. I watch her take in the men, study them as they all slowly come to a stop. Surround her, me, us. I don't take my eyes off of her, a wingless angel in the dark. Even as a naked, blindfolded woman enters the circle.

The woman's heat hits my spine as she closes the distance between us, circling around my broad frame, stopping before me, un-touching, she can sense me. But I don't even glance at her, never looking away from my love. Keeping her as my whole focus.

She has been the entirety of my life, consuming my thoughts, my heart, my blood, ever since she were ten years old.

Penelope tracks the woman, her chest stilling. I know she's holding her breath. Waiting to see what is happening, what I'll do.

*I would never betray you.*

I am lovesick.

*Only for you.*

*I will hurt you, but not like that.*

*Never like that.*

The woman's hands come up in the space between us, fingers finding my naked torso, she plants her palms over my chest. Her breathing is shallow, her heart racing, not from fear, but drugs, and I wish I didn't have to look at her at all. But I

drag my gaze from Penelope, the chains clinking as I do, but she doesn't speak.

My voice low, words deep but quiet, I ask, "Do you come here tonight of your own free will?"

"I do," the woman speaks, soft, lyrical, it is a hum that infects my veins, my skin pebbling, heart hammering.

*Begin.*

I lick my lips. Lift my gaze to the man stepping forward on my left, silent on his feet. Extending his hands, palms face up, open in offering, head bowed. A silver dagger rests upon black cloth, gleaming in the candlelight, The Obsidian symbol in its hilt.

Fingers curling around the blade, the cold metal slicing into my palm, the backs of my fingers. I tighten my fist, feel the sting as it sinks into my skin and then I unsheathe it from the inside of my left hand in one quick pull. It burns as I drag it out, but I don't have time to think about it, before plunging it into the woman's chest. Her gasp of air hits me in the face at the same time a splay of blood splatters across my bare chest. My ears buzz with the deep chorus of chanting, the slow, heavy stomps of feet.

*"CRUOR ET OSSUM."*

*"CRUOR ET OSSUM."*

*"CRUOR ET OSSUM."*

*-Blood and bone-*

I drive the dagger down the valley of her breasts, the blade slicing through without too much effort. I cut her down to her navel before she falls back, her body slamming into the stone floor with a thud. I follow her down, knees either side of her hips. Her head turned to one side, chest still moving with the last of her breaths. I stare at her staring at me, dark eyes flicked down, blindfold having slipped up. The brown bleeding away as black takes over, my fingers inside her chest now.

I think of who is above, staring down, watching me butcher this sacrifice like a monster. But this is all for *her*.

My Little Lamb.

Penelope.

*I don't ever want this to be you.*

That's what keeps my focus.

My hands push further inside the hot cavern of her torso, blood sluicing down the sides of her open chest as I flex her ribcage, my fingers curled in its underside. Sweat beads across my brow and I pull my hands free. Placing them, one atop the other, over the right side of her ribcage. I bear down, the bones bending as I rock my body weight on my knees, hovering over her chest, before I hear them finally start snapping beneath my weight.

I reach inside, using the backs of my hands to force the cracked bone and cartilage out of the way. My fingers find her heart, wrists and lower forearms disappearing inside her chest as I cup it between my palms. Pulling hard, I feel it slowly start to tug free, but I want to get this done so I can get my girl down.

Finally, struggling, I manage to rip it free. The organ much heavier than I expected in the palms of my large hands. A velvet-lined, wooden box sits open at my side, ready to accept my offering. I place it inside, hot blood running down my forearms, pooling in the ditches of my elbows. I glance up. Staring at her, wide eyes glistening, lips parted, arms trembling, she licks her lips as I wipe my face over my shoulder. Trying to clear some of the blood splatter, smearing it across my cheek.

The chants continue, *cruor et ossum, cruor et ossum*, but I barely even hear them anymore, over the drumming of my own heart.

*Finally.*

*Finally, finally, finally.*

*She's going to be mine.*

But there's one last thing to find.

The hyoid bone.

*For fertility.*

The priest of this cradle –*holy house*- steps forward, his face in shadow, hands me a tiny vial of crimson, a cork stopper in its top.

“Sangue del padre,” –*father's blood*- he speaks lowly, voice vibrating as the sea of followers begin to speak it too.

I snag the stopper with my canine, popping it free and spitting it onto the floor. The clotted blood inside the glass, enough to roll my stomach, but it's just another thing I have to do to get my girl.

And I will do *anything*.

The priest touches my head. Speaking words just for me.

“Dai vita, Numero Due.”

–*Give life, Number Two*–

Closing my eyes, I swallow the vial down. The thickness of it sticking on the very back of my tongue, but I work it down, rolling my throat over and over as I swallow again and again. Sweat is slick across my skin, jeans open at the waist, and boots laced, both items still on.

I swallow again, opening my eyes as the priest backs away. My gaze lifting onto her, she blinks down at me, and I expect to see fear, instead, there is nothing. I can't get a read on her, but I know I have to keep going.

I wonder what she thinks.

How she feels.

Watching this.

*Me.*

Our future.

What it holds.

Blood and bone and love.

*Fuck.*

I dip down, re-taking the dagger in hand, my palm and fingers pulsing with the cuts as they re-curl around the silver hilt. With my right hand, I arch the woman's neck, pushing her head back, lifeless eyes staring away from me now. I slice below her chin, in the top of her throat, cutting as deep as I can until I hit bone.

*This is what I want.*

I twist the dagger, making the entrance wound as wide as I can, and then I drop the blade shoving my fingers inside the open throat. Scissoring my index and middle finger until I locate the piece I need.

Fisting my hand in her light hair, I hold her head back, dip my face to the underside of her chin, and use my teeth to pick my way inside. I have to bite and tear, my jaw crunching with the effort of procuring the hyoid. And when my front teeth finally bang into it, my breath held, my stomach fucking rolling, I huff a sigh of relief and bite my teeth around the curve of it.

I tear my head back, ripping it free with every ounce of strength I have. Pain explodes in the sides of my face, blooming through my temples like quick bursts of fire, but I keep the small bone between my teeth. Stringy shit I don't want to think about still attached to it, dangling down my chin.

*It's for her.*

*Everything is for you, Little Lamb.*

*Even if you think I'm a monster now.*

*I'll be yours.*

*Your monster, yours to trample, yours to command.*

"Sii benedetto," *-be blessed-* rings around the room in a boom resembling a clap of thunder.

The body is dragged out from under me, my own, exhausted, dropping forward onto my palms. I spit out the bone, hear it skitter across the stone floor, my chest heaving, eyes pinched as I try to catch my breath.

There is a momentary silence, respect, then the sound of fabric on skin is echoing through my head, the men in the room pushing their hoods back from their faces.

The cranking of the cogs starts next, the chains clinking as they begin to loosen, lowering my Little Lamb into the baptism pool below her. I lift to my haunches, push to my feet, watch her pale, still body be lowered into the water.

Incense fills my nostrils, trying to overpower the metallic scented air. But the taste of it on my tongue, in my nose, in my teeth, is too strong to ignore. Yet, despite the struggle, I manage to keep it from showing on my face.

I am a beautiful liar.

And I will always do everything I have to, to protect my girl.



## CHAPTER XIII

# Penelope

Slowly, I am lowered down, toes dipping into the lukewarm water first, the clear liquid slowly edging up my thighs, reaching my navel, my sternum. My feet touch down and my body sways, sagging a little into the water, my arms still pulled high above my head. Shoulders burning, muscles aching, my joints feel stretched to their limit, and my wrists burn from the cold metal coiling around them.

A man approaches from my right, his cold hands coming to my own makes me flinch, but I can't look at him as he releases my wrists. My arms flopping heavily down by my sides. Cut in my inner thigh burning. Small square mosaic tiles smooth beneath my toes, I float in the pool, letting the water cradle my weight. I can't lift my eyes from Billy's.

He stares back at me, blood drenched face, only fifteen or so feet away, but it feels like miles, he's too far. Whatever the fuck is happening here, I don't care, I don't care about any of it. I just want him. There is an itch beneath my skin, a clawing in my gut, a lightness to my head that I know is from the drug I sucked from his tongue.

But despite knowing nothing, a million things I think I'm too frightened to even question in the safety of my own cranium, I still want him.

This.

Whatever it means.

I want him more than breath for my lungs, blood for my heart.

Two fraying pieces of the same soul.

And I would tear it all out for him.

Heart, lungs, insides to my outsides, just for him.

I want Billy Blackwell more than I have ever wanted anything.

Especially here, now, after everything I have witnessed, I just want him near. His blood slicked hands on me, red smeared face in the crook of my neck. The bruises throb along my throat the longer I stare at him. My chest heaves uncontrollably, heart thundering a storm inside my chest.

It is a need.

My achy arms reach for him, I couldn't stop myself if I tried, and with zero hesitation, his light eyes never having left mine, he starts towards me. More chanting, feet stomping. And I know what's about to happen here as he kicks off his boots, shoves his boxers and jeans down. His long, thick cock bobbing free as his remaining clothes drop down his thick thighs, muscular calves.

He doesn't look at anyone else as he makes his way to me, his warm brown skin glowing in the flickering orange candlelight, shadows falling across him. I drag my gaze over him as he approaches. Shoulders wide, arm muscles thick. Tattoos in dark ink and shading trail their way down, wrapping around his left side, swirling all the way down the top of his thigh. His abs roll with each breath he takes, the thick lines of his Adonis belt carving their way between his hips.

Billy takes the steps down into the circular pool. The water lapping over him as he steps deeper and deeper. The water stops at the middle of his belly, his arms coming up to curl around my biceps. His grey-blue eyes bore into mine, his bloody face dipping to meet my own, his lips ghost across the top of my cheekbone.

I release a shaky exhale. Suck a trembling breath in.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers into my skin, low enough that no one else can hear. “Trust me.”

I gift him a subtle nod, my hair falling around my bare shoulders, covering my breasts. I feel the eyes of the hundred or so men in the room boring into me, but hidden once again beneath their dark hoods, I can pretend they aren’t looking, can’t see.

Pretend it’s just Billy and I.

My hands glide through the water, bumping against his pelvis. Head tipped back, I stroke my fingers across the firm planes of muscle in his lower belly, feel them rippling beneath the skin. And then the tip of my middle finger finds his hard length, tracing teasingly along the underside of his cock. My other hand smoothing over his thigh, nails clawing gently down his skin. He shivers, rippling the water, his hands massaging my shoulders, his eyes intense. His cock bobs, my finger sliding up and over his slit, wet with precum, even beneath the water, I can feel it.

“Penelope,” he whispers desperately, and I know this isn’t the time for exploration.

I swallow, bringing my hands away from him, submerged beneath the water, I stare up at him, wait for instruction.

*Submissive.*

*I wonder if you’ll ever let me touch you in the ways I want to, beautiful boy.*

“Do you come to me tonight of your own free will, Penelope Hart?” he asks me, voice deep, gravelly with the words.

“I do,” I say quietly, unsure what else to do, but he guides me, silently, with his eyes.

I feel safe.

“Do you willingly give The Obsidian your blood, your body, your womb?” I blink, my eyes widening, panic swirls in my gut, *womb*, but I answer in the way I know I need to.

*Survival.*

To be together.

*I am lovesick.*

“I do,” I almost whisper, voice cracking, but I keep my burning eyes on his.

So familiar, so not at all.

Billy drops his gaze, chin dipping, he looks up at me from beneath his thick curl of black lashes, mouthing the words *good girl* and it implodes my brain. Singes my skin. Lightning zips down my spine, and my breaths rush in and out of me.

The silver dagger he used earlier is passed back to him, the one he cut his hand with, the one he used to kill. It's no longer stained, clean and polished.

“Do you mix your blood with mine willingly?” he asks me then, his voice dropping an octave. “Take me into you as I shall take you?”

He closes the same hand around the dagger once more, fingers curling into a tight fist.

“I do.”

He pulls the blade free, dripping red, he gestures to my left hand, and without thought, I lift it, offering it to him. The warmth of the wet blade touches the palm of my hand, my arm trembling, from muscle ache, nerves. Billy closes my fingers gently over it, securing it softly inside my palm.

“*Ligare,*” -to bind- he whispers seductively. “Say it, Nellie,” his hand over mine, the dagger in my fist.

“*Ligare,*” I echo, and then the blade is slicing through my flesh, too quickly for me to feel the lick of pain until it is completely pulled free.

I hiss, my hand still curled, Billy pries my fingers open, clasping his own bleeding hand with mine, our blood mixing. I feel him descend into me like a darkness, an infection, toxin creeping its way beneath my skin, seeping its poison into my veins like a drip feed.

This was the omen.

“Ligare,” he says loudly, his voice sharp, the word echoing back to him in the form of a chant by the other men, their feet stomping onto the stone.

I flash my gaze around the room for the briefest second, eyes snapping back to his, and then the dagger is clattering on stone as it’s tossed to the edge of the pool, and Billy is flipping me around. Back to his chest, his heart claps against my spine, his arms curling around my front, big hands cupping my breasts. His lips come to the shell of my ear, his breath ghosting down the side of my neck. My skin prickles, hands curling over his strong forearms.

“You did so good, Nellie,” he praises, and I feel my eyelids flutter, his words, the drug, the adrenaline, fear, all of it mixing into a deadly cocktail of lust. “Now we need to consummate,” he hushes, tickling the tendrils of my hair over my shoulder, it makes me want to laugh, a giggle bubbling in my chest. “To *breed*,” he whispers, and I melt back into him. “I don’t want any of these old fucks looking at you any longer than is absolutely fucking necessary. So this is gunna have to be quick, Little Lamb, or it’ll be their blood instead of this pool that we fuck in.”

A shiver tears its way down my body, legs trembling, his filthy words spitting through gritted teeth has the hair raising on the back of my neck, my pussy is dripping, pulsing. One of his hands slides over the front of my throat, up the side of my face, collecting my long, thick hair into his hand, he drags his grip to the very ends, and then begins coiling it around his fist. His knuckles grazing over my scalp as he exposes my neck.

His teeth sink into the side of my throat, and I groan loudly, arching back into him. A display, a show, for the audience I choose to block out by closing my eyes.

“Bend over, beautiful,” his voice ricochets down my spine, teeth sinking into my nape. “This is going to be quick,” he whispers, nuzzling his nose across the width of my shoulders. “I’m going to fill you with my cum, Little Lamb, but I want yours too.”

And then his free hand is snapping me forward, fingers splaying over my upper back, my forearms smash into the stone floor, knees crashing onto the slippery steps beneath the water. Billy crowds my back, cloaking me from view with his big body. His bleeding hand slides down my spine, over my cheek, pulling it hard, releasing it with a quick slap that has me shunting forward, my arse burning just above the lapping water. Massaging the stinging flesh, he chuckles lowly, dark and decadent, delicious.

Still holding onto my rope of hair. He brings his free hand into the water, I feel his knuckles graze against the back of my thigh, his knees planting on the step on either side of mine. He leans over me, the weeping tip of his cock brushing my inner thigh, smearing me with precum. I shiver, his lips sucking at the back of my neck and then he's thrusting hilt-deep inside me.

A gasp escapes my lips, eyes squeezing tight before flying wide open. He pulls out, the drag of his cock against my inner walls making my head spin. And then he's pushing back inside me with a hard smack of his hips. I groan, sinking my teeth into my forearm, the sting of the stretch almost too much for me to bear. A tear squeezes free, gliding down the side of my nose, dripping onto my lip as he pounds into me.

My walls squeeze around him, his impressive length knocking into the entrance of my cervix, and I can't stop the desperate gasping sounds that fall from my throat. Billy tears my head back, my teeth ripping free from my arm with his grip in my hair. Blood on my tongue, lips parted, his sinks his own inside. Thrusting into me hard and fast, sharp claps of his hips against my backside. The water sloshing violently up the sides of the baptism pool, flooding over the edge into the display of red roses.

Billy's teeth sink into my bottom lip, his free hand splaying over my lower belly, his middle finger finding my clit. I jerk forward, jolting in his hold, but he keeps his grip firm, holding me back into him, his muscles rippling and rolling beneath his tight, dark skin. He kisses me like he's

trying to eat his way inside of me, long, luscious licks of his tongue over mine, his lips suckling at my jaw, my cheek, neck.

A second finger joins the first, his hand dropping lower, thumb replacing his finger on my clit, his fingers slide lower. I can feel my orgasm building, a pressure in my temples, eyes squeezed tight, I can't even kiss Billy back. My entire body locking up tight in preparation to come. He rubs the rough pad of his thumb over my swollen clit in one hard flick, one of his fingers pushing inside of me alongside his cock, stretching me too much, too fast, and I'm coming.

Stars explode behind my eyelids, the crown of my head colliding with the centre of his chest as I throw it back. A suppressed groan ripping through my barred teeth, his own sinking into my neck. A violent growl tears its way up his throat like he's releasing a demon, his cock throbbing inside of my slick heat, filling me with his cum. My chest heaves as he flexes his hips slowly. Short, sharp, little nudges into me as his cock finishes filling me.

I keep my eyes closed, my head against his chest. And then he's unravelling my rope of hair from his fist, letting it fall down, around my shoulders. His arm barring across my bare chest, he holds me close, his breath on the top of my head, blowing loose hairs around my face. I don't move, ears buzzing, unhearing of anyone around us now.

"Open your mouth, Little Lamb," he hushes against the abused skin of my throat, his tongue lapping over the pain he inflicted. "Take this in and swallow it down. Don't chew."

Immediately, my eyes fly open, his arm tightening, hand over my cunt flattening me further into him, his cock still twitching inside of me. A hooded man is crouched before me, towering over us and I shrink back into Billy, but he is immovable, a solid statue at my spine. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, when he kisses behind my ear.

"Last part, Nellie," he breathes, "I'm doing it too. Close your eyes."

And I do.

My eyes close, my lips part, tongue out, my head rests back against the boy I have always loved. And a small metallic chunk is placed upon my tongue, a knuckle tapping, just once, beneath my chin. I close my mouth, immediately wanting to heave, my entire body flinches with the force of it. The gag caught in the back of my throat, Billy's hand closes over my mouth, thumb and finger pinching my nose.

*"Swallow,"* he growls, gulping as he speaks, ordering me.

My entire body convulses, my lungs burning without air, his pinch on my nose painful. He only holds me tighter, harder, his arm barring my chest is crushing now, my body thrashing as much as it can in his firm hold.

And then I swallow.

*A piece of the sacrifice.*

His hand dropping from my face, palming my throat, fingers stroking.

*"Such a good girl,"* he whispers viciously, triumphantly.

Everything inside of me wanting to rebel against his words, but I can't.

*Submissive.*

I am lovesick.

He swallows hard, his lips against the shell of my ear.

*"We can go home now, Little Lamb."*



# AFTERWORD

Hello you,

I hope you enjoyed Haunt!

Billy and Nellie were going to be a short, gory novella and that was it, but as usual, it developed into something more. I can't wait to bring you the next instalment of Raven Ridge Hallow. And I'm so excited for you to meet even more of our *other* Blackwells.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mark, for everything, for your hours and hours of TikTok promos, your dedication, not only, to me, but to my brand, my work, and most importantly, my characters. Thank you for treating them all like part of our family. For letting me inject so many parts of you into every male lead I write. Oh, and for putting up with all of my wives, even though they torment you daily, one more than the rest (looking at you, Keeks). Beautiful boy, I love you endlessly.

Kendal, for always being the big sister even though you're the little. I love you more than you'll ever know.

Addie, because where would I be without my best friend? You know you have my heart.

Els, thank you for all of your wonderfully detailed cult knowledge. Our endless hours of discussion on the strangest subjects. I'm so happy we met. I will never tire of our talks. I have so much love for you, beautiful lady.

Keeks, Lady Gayle, for your friendship, for the laughter and the tears of hysteria. Thank you for cheering me on even when I'm overstimulated and can't find a way to function. You bring me laughter and light. Also, chants and feet stomping. Thank you for terrorising and traumatising my croc-creating husband, I love you all the more for it.

Inga, for everything, always. There are no more words. We said it all on smushy Sunday. I love you.

Raeleen, for organising my entire life, and most importantly letting me send your son horrifying spider videos. That's true friendship right there. I love you.

Hannah, for this beautiful cover! Thank you for loving my work, for wanting to work with me on this cover (series...) and for your endless support. You are incredible and I wish you all the luck in the world with your art.

Kim, yes, you, Kimkybooks! You didn't know you'd be here, did you? But you made me smile on a day I wasn't sure I could. You gave me hope. You are wonderful, and I am so grateful to have you and your support. Keep being incredible, the world needs more people like you to give them sunshine on a rainy day.

And to you, the reader, thank you for being here. I appreciate you more than you could ever know.

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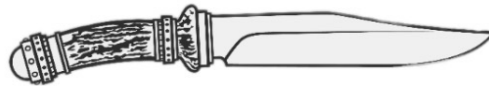
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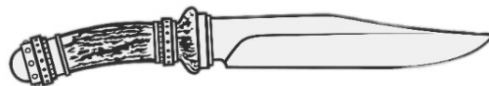
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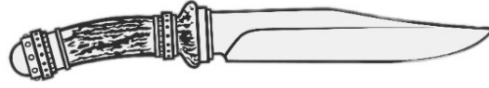


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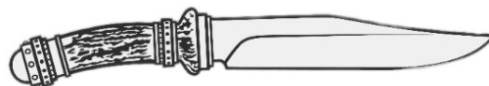
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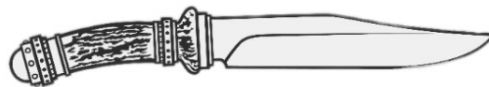
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