

A SLASHER ROMANCE



MEET AT
MIDNIGHT

LUX OLEANDER

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Meet At Midnight is dedicated to those who say reading is their therapy. Be a good girl and flip the page, it's time to take your medicine.

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PREFACE

Two years ago I made her my final girl. *Perhaps I'm a little obsessed.* The shrine covering my bedroom wall would certainly agree. I've even played out a few scenarios that end with her taking my knife in *much* more creative ways than usual.

Today is the day I finally take her life.

I'm ramping up the carnage and tying up loose ends in bloody bows. There's another serial killer in Umbra Valley and the Massacre Maniac won't be outdone. However, our local femme fatale isn't waiting around for me to kill my obsession. Appears she hates me as much as I hate her.

"Meet at midnight", that's what the letter says. *Cute.*

Don't tango with the devil, sweetheart. You're about to learn that he doesn't play fair...

Author Notes: Each book in the Umbra Valley series will feature a new couple. This book can be read as a standalone.

This is a dark romance book with slasher themes and mature content. Meet At Midnight includes violence, gore, and sexual

content. The full list of content notes can be found either on the goodreads description or my website: luxoleander.com

1

ZOE

I RUN, MY FEET BEATING ON THE WATERLOGGED, particleboard floors, slipping through the little maze of mirrors. I don't realize David has kept up with me until the speaker on the wall blasts the sound of a demented clown laughing and he yells out.

I didn't think there was any electricity out here. The theme park has been closed for a decade. Clearly, I'm wrong because lights flicker on and music slowly starts. The funhouse has turned on; lights flash, cackling laughter bleats out from staticky speakers, and there's a spinning spiral twirling around hypnotically. The maze of mirrors warps our bodies as the air is punctuated with horror-fueled screams of death.

I'm not sure if I'm going in circles as I try to find the exit and escape whatever is causing the others to let out blood-curdling wails.

The stench of stale beer and mold competes with the ancient scent of buttered popcorn permanently soaked into the walls. I reach for a metal handrail and feel the hardened bumps of chewing gum.

The large shadow of a man steps in front of us. David practically falls into me before grabbing my arms. His fingers

dig in as he tries to pull me away and his shaggy, brown hair curtains his wide, terrified eyes.

The man in front of us lifts a large knife up, pinching an eyeball stuck to the blade, and gently pulls it off. He turns the eyeball in our direction as if he's making it look at us. My hand darts in my bag and I dig around for the secret gun I'd brought tonight—a fucked up surprise I'd intended for the others before this guy showed up.

The killer's face is all white and black, and shaped weirdly. It takes me a moment to realize he's wearing a skull mask. There's no way to tell if the blood that drips from the eyes and mouth is decorative paint or from killing the others. He raises a hand and gives a little wave, then a feminine scream rips close by. He flicks the eyeball to the floor in front of us before stomping in the sound's direction.

I run forward at the same time I finally get the gun in my grip and pull it out. My mind barely has time to wander, focusing on escaping an obvious threat. We break into a circular hallway and as soon as my feet hit the floor the tube starts to spin. Behind us, the sounds of panic and chaos keep up. I get to the center of the tube and stay put, thinking this might be a good place to hide and catch my breath. David crawls closer as I slowly inch my body backwards to keep up with the spinning.

“No, no, no,” a guy whines in the funhouse before he gives a low-pitched groan that sends a shiver across my skin. It sounds unnatural, pulled up from his body forcefully. My mind flashes with images of a knife pushing into his soft gut, the large man's powerful arm pumping. My eyes slide to David, seeing if he notices the flush on my face. It would be more

than a little awkward if he saw my reaction to the noises of brutality nearby.

“What the fuck do you have?” David snaps, lunging for the gun. He rips it from my hand.

“Give that back,” I grind out between my teeth. He shakes his head. There’s a suspicious look on his face that he fails to hide. David doesn’t trust me with the gun and he’s probably wondering why I brought it to the party.

Something crashes in another part of the funhouse and then one of the girls is screaming that it’s him: *It’s him, It’s him. Oh my fucking god. It’s HIM.*

Gooseflesh breaks out over my skin. *It’s him.* I know who she means. My brain shakes and out falls the answer of who would cause this terror. The Massacre Maniac.

It’s all happening so fast. The chaos, the death. She screams wordlessly until I hear three loud, dull thuds. Then there’s no more screaming. I side eye my gun in David’s hand but he notices.

“You’re not getting the fucking gun,” he hisses, anger swirling in his eyes. I consider fighting him for it but a moment later someone is at the end of the twisting tube. I shoot up and frantically try to make my way across. I can feel the Maniac’s presence in the silence behind us; it’s a chill rolling up my legs until it feels like an ice-cold hand is gripping the nape of my neck.

We tumble out the other side and I see a door flush with the wall. It’s painted all black, hidden away. It has to be a storage room or something. I can hear the pounding steps of the Maniac in the tube, coming for us now that he got rid of the others. I dart to the door, twisting it open. David pushes me

in as he barrels into the space as well. I shove him out of the way and grab the door, closing it and twisting the tiny lock.

Then, we wait. Nothing happens. My heart is throbbing in my ears, our heavy panting way too loud. The far-off cackle of the clown over the distant speaker is still playing. I shift slightly, my shoe scrapping dully over layers of dust and grime.

I want to ask David why he didn't shoot but I can't break the protective silence that engulfs us. David tries to pull us behind a small stack of molded, slouching cardboard boxes like it could save us. I feel on edge, the sounds of death like a lit match to my emotions. A minute drags on and I press my ear to the door.

Boards creak slightly under the slow steady footsteps moving on the other side.

They stop. I want to push David off me, to hiss at him to stop trying to tug me behind the fucking boxes, and tell him to shoot the fucking gun but I can't move or *he'll* hear me. We're stuck here with bated breath, waiting to see if we're going to be murdered along with the others.

Knock. Knock. Knock. The closet door shakes a little in its frame as the Maniac raps it with his knuckles. The tips of my fingers and toes seem to go numb. David presses his hand to his mouth and I hear him gag behind his fingers.

"I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll blow your door in," a man's voice growls in delight through the flimsy door with its shitty little lock. It's not going to hold, not against *him*.

David must think the same thing because he lunges forward to grab the knob but the door is ripped open before he can, the lock giving way like it never existed in the first place.

Finally, he lifts the gun up. I see an arm flash inside the closet, a knife gripped in the hand. It's fast and violent, striking inside the little room and sinking into David with wet pulpy noises.

A loud bang and flash goes off, and the Maniac grunts as a bullet hits home. Then his fist comes in, wrapping around David's shirt and dragging him out kicking and screaming. I hear his body smack the other wall, my gun going with him. He just threw a six-foot, two-hundred pound man through the air like he was half that size.

And then *he's* there, looming in the door frame, a dark silhouette of a giant. His presence feels cold, dark, and sick and my heart is pounding in my chest.

I'm going to die... and I've never felt this alive. This is better than whatever flimsy bullshit I was going to do tonight with my hidden gun. This is rattling me to my core, catapulting me to a new height of living.

I've never been this in the moment. I wonder if the Maniac feels that way too. He must feel a lot of things. I'm jealous of him. Of his freedom. Of his power. Of being himself even if it's extreme and fucked up.

My will to live kicks in after the momentary shock and awe. I feel a little faint as I realize there's no getting out of this closet. In no way does my body want to move towards him where he blocks the only exit.

The Maniac ducks down to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe and crowds inside my space. A rubbery, plastic skull mask covers his head and neck, and he's wearing a black hoodie that matches the rest of his outfit. I'm frozen in terror, my hands numb, and my body fails to move as he reaches for

me. I'm locked up in horror, realizing there's no stopping whatever he wants to do to me.

His large hand wraps around my throat and squeezes. My body presses into the wall and slides up as he lifts me higher and higher, my mouth gaping open to try to breathe... or scream. One of my shoes slips off my foot and hits the floor as I choke, all the blood and air cut off from my head.

The skin-to-skin connection gives me hope and I come to life, clawing and scratching at the brutal hand at my neck. The closet is so dark I can't tell if I'm losing my vision. White spots sparkle in my periphery. My feet kick his body over and over until he finally drops me.

As I fall back to my feet, I'm briefly overwhelmed by a rush of endorphins and adrenaline. All the blood and air come in one big gush up to my head, making me feel dizzy and high for a moment. The Maniac steps into me, taking up every inch I have left.

He's larger than life, his body hard under the loose black cotton. A hand grabs my jaw and I thrash. My body rubs against his as I fight. The snake tattoos that wrap around my arms writhe and dance right along with me.

At this very moment, I learn something about myself. Even when fighting for my life tooth and nail, I can still delight in the fucking thrill. I laugh, enjoying myself. The Maniac presses against me and I can feel his erection, hear his hot breath behind the mask. A wet knife comes up and settles on my cheek, making me freeze.

I'm not particularly vain, but I can appreciate how much my life would change if he decided to gore my face up. My looks are the only thing I have going for me. Makes people forget there's a bad apple in the barrel. A shiny McIntosh skin

masking the pungent, turned core. Take a fucking bite motherfuckers, and see what you get.

I won't have that ability to hide if he starts slicing. Part of me wants him to do it, free me of the act. Maybe then I'll be just like him, a maniac living their best life.

His eyes move behind the holes in the mask, staring right at me. They're so dark and deep, endless pools of twisted, inky thoughts. It feels like he sees what I am—different, a freak, *wrong*. For once that might make me similar to someone instead of a pariah.

His knife moves away from my face and my hands launch towards the eye holes as soon as I get the opening. I'll gauge his fucking eyes out. I'll fucking kill him first. I'll end this motherfucker and become him—a murderer. I suck in a breath as the idea fills me up. I imagine taking down a serial killer and smile as I try to shove my fingers into his mask to end him.

A laugh rolls out of him, amused at my attempt to fight him, and then his massive hand grabs my arm and twists me, shoving the front of my body against the wall so I can't fight. He maneuvers me like I weigh nothing. Considering how easily he threw David, I probably don't weigh anything to him. How is he so strong?

Something sharp presses against my black leggings and breaks the surface, his knife slowly inches into my buttcheek. I'm in disbelief for a moment, my face gaping at the wall in front of me before a scream of pain finally rips from me. His groan rumbles across my body like an earthquake and I feel his hips push forward with the knife as if it's his cock.

His groan in response to my pain does something terrible to me. Something I already knew about myself but only in

fantasy. Now, it's here. It's here in this closet with a serial killer. My scream turns into a gasp, my fingers scratching at the wall. I'm lightheaded and my mouth waters.

Through the loud throb of my heartbeat, I hear sirens and they're close. The cops are almost here, about to bust down the door.

Somehow it makes the moment even more intimate because I realize how alone we are. Just him and me here. The others are gone in some way or another. I'm hyper-aware of him, every little move and breath he takes. The way his boot is pressed up next to my bare foot.

His knife sinks in a little more, the sharp pain lighting my body up like I'm just one big nerve ending, my lungs inflating as I suck in all the air I can.

My mind is pulling in every minute detail. The way he's bent over so that his masked head is closer to mine. How his calloused fingers subtly inch closer to the pulse in my throat. The scent of him—metallic blood, bitter coffee, and the faint smell of gasoline.

My body is tense, from pain and masochistic desire, as he presses me against the wall and takes his sharp pleasure with subdued, languid force.

"I've been waiting all day to put this in you." His words drip with twisted lust behind the mask. It makes me ache. He killed the others so fast... like there was a timer running out. But now it's just us in this small room and he's not aware of any clock for this moment between us. He's *cherishing* me.

I was born for *this*, to experience this extreme and feel alive.

All the details are crystal clear in my head, all the acute feelings flashing like carnival lights inside my body. The fear, the pain. The monster picking me out of the pack, knowing I'm different, and indulging himself with me.

I don't know if that's really true, but in this moment I allow it to be my truth. That he knew I was fucked up. That he knew some part of me would like the abuse he's giving me, and so he's giving us what we both want—pain that brings us both shocking gratification.

The knife is ripped out of me suddenly and I tense, thinking it's coming back in to do the job in the same chaotic stabs David got. Fuck, I'm going to die. But then he drops to his knees behind me and pulls the mask up over his mouth.

He's frantic now, racing against the ticking timer as the police are getting closer. I turn and see a square jaw, the flash of lips and teeth. His fingers dig into my pants and tugs them down roughly, then he's licking the wound he gave my ass, collecting the blood on his tongue with a wild growl.

His tongue is so hot it feels like it's scalding me. The wound stings as he presses his mouth to it.

"Every killer needs a final girl, doesn't he, baby?" My breath quickens. His calloused fingers collect a thick section of my flesh and he pinches the knife wound. I hiss and buck, making him laugh before he gets to his feet and runs.

I feel it all slipping away, a sudden sense of immense loss as I stand alone in the room. The emotions are turning to sand in my hands and falling to the ground. *No*, I think, half panicked.

Right now I feel like I could do anything. Like I'm weightless, floating above normal, mundane people up in a

special realm where the Maniac and I exist alone. I don't want this feeling to go away.

I run out of the closet. The pain in my body feels far away. I see his back darting around the corner and realize he's getting away.

My foot kicks a clunky metal object and I bend over, picking up my lost gun. I've never been this keyed up in my life and I never want it to end. I'm *desperate* for it not to end. I want to chase it endlessly, run after the masked murderer shooting blinding until he turns around and—

Fuck, I don't know. Something amazing and terrible all at once. I need to run after that; it's calling me, promising more than the mundane excuse of life I have.

"Help me," a raspy croak comes from beside me, close to the floor. Some of the lights in the funhouse flash through the twisting tunnel, affording a slow strobe of yellow lighting up David. He's on the ground, bunched hands pressing into his stomach. There's a puddle of blood framing the floor around him. He can't even keep his eyelids open except for brief moments when he tries to make sure I'm still here.

"Zoe, help me. Please," he insists with a whisper. For a moment I lean towards the tunnel and listen. The rest of the funhouse is devoid of life, just the old mechanical sounds of the place. No moans or groans or shifting. Even the mechanical clown laughter has gone silent.

They're all dead. There's no doubt in my mind. I wouldn't call them my friends. They never were. That's not what I care about right now though. What I care about is witnesses.

"You want me to help you?" I ask. Something builds inside me, something big. Pins and needles race over my body. I start

to breathe harder. He tries to nod.

“Sure,” I say, lifting the gun and shooting him in the forehead.

2

JACK - TWO YEARS LATER

I'M NOT PAID TO KILL.

Stab.

I'm not a vigilante.

Stab.

There is no gray area in this. I'm one fucked up individual.

Stab.

I do this because I like it. I do it because it makes me feel alive and buzzing.

I do it because it gets me hard.

I give another downward jab with both hands and finally get the machete through both people on the bed. The couple who was previously fucking lay in a less than lively heap. It was a lot of work but it was worth it.

“Double penetration,” I say with a smile. The musky scent of sex mixes with the metallic bite of blood. I abandon the larger weapon and pull my butcher knife from a sheath on the right side of my belt as I move back into the house's hallway.

Sometimes I'm not sure it's really as simple as I think—the reasons why I kill. There's a niggling feeling that there's a greater power at play here. A mystical being who silently

encourages destruction at my hands. That I'm a tool for a larger purpose. A necessary blight on this town. Those ideas aren't good for my sanity though, so I try to ignore them.

Tonight, I'm killing for more than just a thrill and a good orgasm.

I'm killing because I'm pissed off. A guy darts into the hallway and I'm on him in an instant, grabbing him by the throat and lifting him up the wall as I redecorate his abdomen with a few memorable holes.

This past summer we all realized there are two serial killers in Umbra Valley. As the brutal August sun bleached neighborhoods, the resident serial killers repainted the stark landscape in thick gouts of crimson. Me being one of them, of course. Rocket pops, community pools overflowing, and carnage every morning and evening on the news. It was as reliable as the heat and drought in an Umbra Valley summer.

The seasons are changing, but the killing is here to stay. The media likes to discuss the murders like it's a team effort. I guess that makes it a good year for us murderers. We should do a group high-five for gutting motherfuckers.

Too bad I don't like sharing the attention.

The thought of the other killer makes me growl and put more force into my knife, pushing it so deep into my third victim of the night that it sinks through skin and organs until it comes out the other side and sticks in the wall.

The guy squirms and wails, stuck against the wall like a new painting. The other stabs had been practically cosmetic. I mean, who needs whatever organ is there on the left? No one ever dies right away when I stab them there so likely not anything all *that* important.

When he opens his mouth to yell, I give him a quick punch to the throat before gripping the butcher knife's handle.

It doesn't come out.

"Fuck me," I hiss behind the mask. I can already hear his girlfriend moving around the bedroom behind me. I wrench and tug the knife, but it's all slick with blood and pointless. My hand slides off and the handle wobbles. The guy is still alive and, believe it or not, he doesn't much like the knife wiggling. His legs kick and I stare at the good six inches he's hanging off the wall.

How about that? I step back and he stays suspended. His lips turn blue and his eyes turn red.

My eyes slide back to the knife in his gut and I take a deep, shuddering breath. There's no greater delight than seeing my knife inside someone.

They say I have piquerism. That I get off putting a knife into people, a sharp object replacing my fat cock. They're right. I love the shit out of it and I'm throbbing and hard underneath all this black clothing.

A phone starts to ring.

Screaming erupts behind me—the girlfriend. I turn and run at her. She panics, practically swallowing her tongue before running off the second-floor balcony. The wooden rail holds but her body flips ass-over-head. She crashes to the first floor with an alarming shatter. I peer over the edge and see she landed on a table made of glass and metal. Her body is a broken, bloody mess, and she didn't even give me the pleasure of doing it.

With a sigh, I stomp down the stairs and lean over her. She wheezes as she sees me, eyes widening, but still doesn't move

an inch. I crouch down and push curly red hair from her face. So far, only one girl has ever made me hesitate and this isn't her. Also, she's a goner whether I kill her or not, so I move my fingers away from gently playing with her hair to wrap my hand around her neck and squeeze. I don't have time to play poke the girlfriend with my sharp replacement cock until I leave an embarrassing stain on my pants. The fucking phone is still ringing and someone has to pick it up.

"Hurry and die," I hoarsely encourage, feeling the pulse in her throat weaken against my fingers. Her eyes slide shut. "What a good fucking girl."

No one here had *any* fight. Which isn't helping my shit mood about the new serial killer in my town. Fucking femme fatales. I swear I have to keep getting more brutal and killing more people just to get as many adjectives on national news as she did. Serial killing is tough work but someone has to do it. I mean, not really, but imagining I'm doing this for some greater cause—balancing the universe or some shit—really helps keep me motivated when I very rarely question if I should keep going.

The phone keeps ringing so I shove my hand in the girl's pockets until I pull out a cell phone. The blood on my fingers is making it hard to click the answer button. I grunt in annoyance and keep pressing until I finally manage to pick up the call.

"Hannah, are you coming to the party tonight?" A girl slurs the question through the phone, sounding drunk. My eyes slide to Hannah. Well, she isn't getting up and ready for a party anytime soon. "There's going to be so many people there. Ugh, I need help finding a hook-up."

I hang up and shoot the phone number a quick text saying I need the address and time. She calls me a ditz before giving me the details. There are four more hours until the party. I begin picking my way back outside the house.

I'm still keyed up despite the four bodies I'm leaving behind. I still need something, anything, everything. *Fuck*. This femme fatale really irritates me. She's sucking the joy right out of my kills. There's a certain level of detachment when I start stabbing now—where I'm standing outside myself asking: “*Would the eight o'clock news find this to be a new level of disturbing?*” or “*Is eighteen stab wounds really enough or should I just keep going until I hit triple digits?*”

Triple digits! You aren't even stabbing a body at that as much as tenderizing an organ filled meat log.

It's infuriating to overthink something as simple as stabbing people.

After a convoluted walk through the area, I find my van where I left it under a fat palm tree. It's a black panel van without any windows in the rear apart from those on the back doors. On the side is the stenciled logo of a local flower shop. The back bumper has a “how am I driving” sticker. I added both to look less suspicious.

It squeals to life as I twist the key around. The breaks wheeze and screech as I back up. Then I'm on an open road, following the lonely freeway as I rip the mask off and make my way home.

A half-built neighborhood sits neglected on the city limit line. I pass rows of houses that are waiting for the day the team comes back and finishes them—exposed wooden framework and electric wires threaded through the skeleton. Amongst the dead houses are the few they managed to

complete. They are cheap, decent houses for anyone willing to be a social pariah in the abandoned subdivision.

After faking a few car accident injuries, it was easy enough to afford one for myself. It's a lovely little one-story with a basement and no one around to disturb me. I pull into the driveway and am greeted by a brown, balding yard. I poisoned the whole thing so I wouldn't have to deal with it.

Inside is dark, the shades and curtains all in full use. I close the door and flip the switch to see home sweet home. Not that I feel much for it. It's a place to hunker down and waste time. The walls are blank, the couch is used, and the TV is the only point of interest in an otherwise neglected space. Just like my childhood—I suppose that's a disturbing comfort.

I slip into the bedroom I use. This room does have a few embellishments. On one wall a hundred large brown eyes stare out at me. The one I let get away.

She taunts me by being out there, alive and uncaught. I can't move on from the funhouse massacre two years ago because of her. Everywhere I go, I look for her large brown eyes and the apathetic look she wears for every news article and interview.

I long for the day I see her again. I need to end her. She's just too fucking perfect. I saw that the instant I started stalking her group that night. She's the only one who has ever stuck out. Perfect Zoe—sexy as hell little goth girl. Perfect Zoe, whose breath caught in her throat when I sank inside her. Perfect Zoe, who will make the perfect kill.

It'll be such a satisfying murder but I also know that I can only do it once. Which is why I'm avoiding finding her. I give myself excuses—it's too hard, she'll be well hidden. The truth is that when it's over I'll mourn that I can't do it again. That

she'll no longer be alive for me to obsess about and kill, again and again.

With I sigh, I draw my attention away from my obsession and to the other person who haunts me.

On the nightstand next to my unmade bed is a thick manilla folder, bursting with well-worn papers. It's filled with everything I can find about the femme fatale who they call the Lovers Murderer. I study it every night before bed, trying to find something that will lead me to my rival.

I knew as much as anyone about her. Which wasn't as much as I needed to know. If I could find her, I could show her who the real psychopath was in Umbra Valley. I could imagine the news when they found out I took out their precious femme fatale. The fear I'd strike in their hearts.

Yes, citizens, no one is safe from the Massacre Maniac.

Killing is a sensual event that gives me pleasure. The femme fatale will be different. It will be fueled by hatred. Alright, well it's not like I'm *not* going to get hard while stabbing her. I have very little preference for the body around my knife. A hole is a hole after all.

With that revelation, I wash the blood off my body while practically abusing my cock in the shower. Each pump of my fist brings back the visceral memory of my knife sinking into hot, wet flesh until my entire body throbs with satisfaction.

Afterwards, I check the time and slip onto the sofa with a sandwich.

The evening news is starting. Our town's star anchorman, Micah, is sitting behind the massive desk. He looks like a mannequin, everything about him plastic and fake. He prattles

on about anything and everything, and I listen to every word until I accidentally fall asleep.

3

JACK

“JACK.” I SHIFT, ROLLING TO MY OTHER SIDE ON THE WORN-out leather couch. “Jack!” I shoot up and look at the TV. Micah smiles at me, all his perfect square teeth flashing maniacally. Then his gaze darts away as he finishes up the news.

I scrub my eyes and check the time before peeling myself off the couch and heading to the bathroom.

Sometimes it takes forever to shake sleep from my head. Right now it feels like thick wool has been stuffed inside my skull. A phone chirps in my pocket and I pull it out. I look at the black brick in my hand trying to remember where it’s from. It definitely isn’t my phone. My fingernail picks at the dried blood around the edges of the screen.

Reaching up, I trace the scar on my scalp, hidden beneath my hair. Back and forth, I rub the ragged raised line until finally it starts to come back to me. Today’s murders, the party I was invited to. Well, Hannah was invited to, but she can’t make it so I’m going for her.

Her friend sent a picture of herself at the party. A witch costume fills the screen, showing off the crowd behind her. Apparently, her ex is there and she wants me to see him.

I tell her he's a jerk and to forget that asshole.

Well, if it's a Halloween party then I'll dress up. I pull out the black and white costume makeup and get to work painting myself up to look similar to my skull mask. My fingers swipe the grease makeup across my cheeks with practiced movements. This year's summer was so unbearably hot that I'd had to hang up the mask for a while. Staying conscious while murdering was fairly important. That's when the skeleton painted on my face came out to play.

I prefer the mask; it's easier and recognizable by everyone—going off the fear that flashes in their eyes when they first see me. My gaze slides to my dark eyes as I lose focus on the teeth. I watch the pupils expand as I stare into them. I'm not sure how long I stand there before I shake my head and finish up.

In the living room, Micah is still on the TV—paused. Did I pause it? He's smiling widely at me and it's spread a little too wide. It reminds me of the theme park mascot, Frankie. The signs for the park still decorate the town. A rat-like coyote hovers above the words "Where everyone is always smiling" with a manic smile. I turn off the TV and leave.

Fifteen minutes later I'm walking into the house party, a brief snapshot of a blonde witch on the phone burning a hole in my pocket. I'm still turned on from today's killings and simultaneously frustrated about the sixty-minute special the night before last about the town with two serial killers that ended up mostly being about the femme fatale.

Those motherfuckers. I was here first. I have better numbers. It's like they *want* me to kill more. They were encouraging it by brushing me aside. At one point, the news anchor looked directly into the camera and said "Jack, you're

going to have to kill a whole hell of a lot more people if you want to compete against this bitch.”

Whether that actually happened is a bit vague in my head, but I heard the message loud and clear.

“You left the door open!” A guy complains after I hover inside for a minute. “What kind of psychopath leaves the door open?” I laugh and slap him on the back. What kind indeed.

The place smells like cheap beer and apple spice room spray. Shitty EDM music pumps from the speakers with chaotic screams punctuating the beats. I don’t mind. I like a lot of untidy noise.

My eyes scan the bobbing heads for the blonde witch. I quickly lose focus. I’m a predator looking at a dense crowd of prey, inebriated and packed in so tight one swipe of a blade could easily take out two or three. The urge to lay waste to everyone here mutes the loud music until all I hear is the thumping bass keeping beat with my heart.

I love parties. The mayhem is thrilling, everyone running and screaming; friends unsure whether to help or hide. Drunk and drugged faces trying so hard to sober up as they look at me coming for them. And I love a crowd, even a small one. Once I finish one, I’m right on to the next, and this party would be a gory gorge fest.

People are spilling into the yard and onto the balcony. Bodies press tightly against the walls.

It’s a feast waiting for me to sink my teeth into. What would the news have to say about that? Surely the femme fatale won’t be worth talking about if I manage to kill every last person here.

A shudder rolls over me as I reach for the knife in my pants. I'd come to let off pent-up sexual energy, but I'm a beast of habit and never forget I'm a killer above all else.

I do another scan of the crowd, looking for her big brown eyes and long dark hair. My attention ends up on a girl in the kitchen. People shift around her with enough space they don't touch. As if she has some disease they might catch.

The long, dark hair makes me stop and stare. It's just like Zoe's. Suddenly, the crowd doesn't seem all that interesting compared to her. I want it to be her so damn bad my body feels like it's vibrating. The girl is wearing a mask, so I can't see her face. I try to tell myself it's her but deep down I know she'd never go to another party for the rest of her life after what happened.

But the hair makes me want to pretend and I find my hand forgetting my knife as I slink towards the wall and ease ever so much closer. If she keeps the mask on, who's to say it isn't her? A shudder rolls over me, an adrenaline rush building in my gut.

Shit, I think my MO is about to change. I should have seen this coming. I'm obsessed with Zoe so much that I'm mesmerized by this vague resemblance of her.

My mind is white noise, but my body instinctively knows what to do, my boots carrying me towards the kitchen as I let the delusion take hold of me.

Two years ago she possessed me, and has lived inside my head ever since. I was alarmed by my actions that night. Had no idea why, when the massacre was almost done and I found her trapped in a closet, I suddenly felt like taking my time. Like killing her quickly wouldn't be enough. That what she

deserved was something longer, more intimate, more terrorizing, and far more fulfilling.

Something inside me urged me to reach for something greater, even at the cost of leaving her alive when the sirens came. I'm never one to linger but that night I did. Almost until I could see the flashing red and blue filtering through the holes in the funhouse, but I wanted my mouth on her. I wanted my hands on her. I wanted *more*.

And so my final girl was born. My sole survivor. I've never acted like that before or since. What is it about her?

I slink closer to this fake Zoe, blending into the edges of the room as I watch her. She's wearing a plastic black cat mask on her face. It's an oddly vintage design with wide, yellow cartoon eyes and a big smile. The rest of her costume is simple, a tight black leotard clinging to her breasts, a black tutu spiking out from her waist, long bare legs, and a jacket covering her arms. There's a tiny backpack hanging on her back.

Does the real Zoe think of me every day like I do her? Does she know that I can't move on? That she bothers me? That every time I walk into a party I hesitate, wondering if by some chance she might be there—worrying her bottom lip between her teeth with large lifeless eyes blooming into terror when she sees me?

The unlucky cat mask turns towards me, then hesitates as if she's looking at me. For a moment, I stop moving just outside the kitchen she's standing in, waiting for her to react. When nothing happens, my feet carry me forward, and the people move out of my way as I crowd into the kitchen. She stands still and tips her head up to look at me.

There's an orange solo cup with a straw in her hand, filled with light pink liquid that smells like sugar and hard liquor. Her long, dark hair is parted down the middle, hanging across her shoulders and arms. I can see her thin neck. Both remind me of my final girl.

"Hey," she says, voice distorted behind the plastic. She lifts her drink up and slips the straw under her mask. Her throat rolls as she swallows.

I've been waiting two years to kill Zoe and I feel electricity under my skin, mania curling under my rib cage.

"Hey," I say back. I want her alone, just the two of us. Her eyes scan me head to toe and there's something molten and needy under my skin. Her hand reaches out, the tip of one finger touching the makeup on my jaw.

A shudder rolls over me when we touch.

"I like your makeup," she says. Men are looking at her, their glances darting at her as if they don't want to look but can't help themselves. She stands alone, though—no friends, no one daring to come talk to her. My mouth spreads in a wide smile.

You're mine.

Never before have I singled a person out with the intention of taking them somewhere else, but right now it's all I can think about. However, I've been smiling down at her for too long. I'm not sure what to do to get from point A to point B. Playing social games is incredibly tedious.

"Let's get you a drink." She sighs, seemingly annoyed by my lack of conversation. Christ, can't I just fucking beam my thoughts into her head? You, me, back bedroom, now. Now, now now. I can't stand this waiting.

She shoves a plastic cup in my hand and I tip it back, gulping down the entire watery beer before I crowd her against the counter. She shuffles backward, her back bending to account for the counter's tile overhang. Orange and purple lights flicker in our periphery.

I put the cup down and thread my fingers through her hair while I let the lie consume me. That this is Zoe, my final girl. She sucks in a breath behind her mask, her soft chest rising. Despite invading her space, despite my size and menace, she isn't acting scared. She's waiting patiently for what I'll do next.

My fingers slide around the back of her neck and I grip her nape, testing her. And still no scream, no fear. Instead, her hips press forward against mine.

"I think you're just my type," she whispers, a secret for me alone. I can barely hear the party anymore. An immense need burns inside me.

"I think you're mine, too," I say. I can't keep this fucking act up. I grab her wrist and pull her towards the back. If she puts up a fight, so fucking be it. She doesn't, though. She follows me. Maybe I *can* kill Zoe over and over, one mockery after the next.

I pull her into the room and slam the door shut before locking it. It's dark, quiet, and intimate. She stands in the middle, waiting for me as I prowl closer. I don't want to pull off the mask, but I have to. What's the joy of killing someone when you can't watch their face crack in rapture before the light leaves their eyes?

Slowly my hand moves up to her mask. Once I pull it off the fantasy might dissipate and I won't get the satisfaction of

pretending it's her anymore. With a thick swallow, I grip the flimsy plastic edge. She waits silently for me to take it off.

Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I don't need to see her face. Maybe there's more satisfaction in pretending. My hand comes off and she tilts her head to the side, the black cat grinning at me just like Micah the anchorman did earlier.

"You like the mask?" she asks.

"No." She responds to my brunt answer with a light laugh and reaches up to do what I couldn't.

She pulls it off, shaking her hair out, and drops the mask on a small desk. Big brown eyes stare up at me. My heart stops and the room spins. *It can't be.* I reach out and touch her cheek. I'm not seeing things. Soft skin is beneath my fingers... She's real.

Everything stops—time, my thoughts, my ability to breathe ripped right out of my lungs.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

Zoe, my final girl, smiles at me with a wicked stretch of lips as I fail to answer. She never smiles. Not for photos, not for the TV. I've never seen it until this very moment.

I know why she never smiles. I know everything I can about her history, having managed to get my hands on her school records. She grew up in a home full of emotional constipation and parental neglect. It leaves certain tells. I would know. The flat affect she wears is a clear sign.

But for me, she's smiling. Does she know I'm her boogeyman? Did she want me to find her?

"I know what you need," I tell her and she lets out a breathy sigh of relief as if she's been waiting for me to come

to her, to tell her that. My final girl in my hands. My final girl with her mouth slightly ajar and her hand wrapping delicately around my wrist.

She needs me. I feel fully possessed again, at a loss for what I want until my actions show me. My eyes descend to her mouth.

“I know exactly what you need,” I murmur, leaning down to touch my lips to hers, my tongue pressing into her mouth. She’s mine. I shudder. It’s perverse to want this from her too. To plunge into the mouth that’s said my moniker so many times on the TV.

Maniac, Maniac, Maniac. Like she’s calling for me, asking me to find her. Begging for my knife to satisfy her once again.

“I’m here, baby,” I tell her before I latch my mouth to hers again, trying to taste my name in her mouth. What the fuck am I doing? I don’t know, but I like it. Her death is going to be *so... fucking... good.* My teeth sink into her lip and she groans. My hand slides to her neck and tightens. Her body shudders, pressing closer to mine.

My fucking Zoe. How is she even better than the last time? Does she have any idea what I’m about to do to her? I rip my mouth from hers and bend down to wrap my arms around her hips. Frenzy is taking over, mania for the Maniac. I pick her up, launching her onto the bed. She gasps, bouncing up once before I climb on top of her.

She smells like cigarettes and caramel. Her long, naked legs are soft and tan. I can just barely see the press of her nipples through her clothes. I’m enamored, losing my mind to have her beneath me. Her thighs rub together and her lips are slick where our mouths have met. White makeup has transferred from my face to hers, showing off where I’ve put

my lips. Her arms reach out, her hands pressing to my chest and dragging her nails down my stomach like a cat. I feel like I'm losing all control of my mind.

I crawl down her body, fingers roughly spreading her open. As I sink lower, I trail my eyes over all the places I'd love to press my sharp blade inside her. My hand brushes her belly, rubbing on places that would look exquisite taking a knife. Then I'm between her legs, holding my breath as I stare at the best place of all. She squirms as the pads of my fingers rub her pussy through the cloth.

It's a bad repeating fantasy. I'd have never pressed a knife into someone here, but with her the naughty thought keeps creeping in. I can't count the number of times I stared at her picture on the wall, thrusting into my fist, and spilling all over the floor as I played it out in my head. I'd praise and compliment her as she did what no other person has done for me—open her legs and take the blade right in her delicious, wet cunt.

I want to see what her pussy looks like, if it's as wet as I always imagine, slicking up my blade with her arousal. She's looking down at me between her legs, squirming as I rub my fingers roughly on her clit. There's a confused look on her face, her eyes squinting as she stares at my face. There's a flash of recognition that causes a shudder to roll over her. But then it's gone. She shakes her head, dispelling the thought. Do you know it's me, Zoe?

I peel the leotard to the side. She's just as wet as I always imagine, her lower lips glistening and plump. So very slowly, I sink a finger inside her, watching as I disappear between her legs. She's soft and warm and lets out an airy sigh as I plunge, testing out how deep she goes. When I'm knuckle deep, I look

up at her and curl my fingers, rubbing her insides in hopes of seeing her squirm.

My final girl doesn't disappoint. Her hips buck and she practically purrs beneath me. Is this how she'd look taking my knife? Writhing and purring as I slowly sink it inside her, each hard inch an inch too much.

Fuck, I want that. I want it now. My teeth grind together and I thrust my fingers in hard. She gasps and my heart rate goes up. A new fantasy comes to mind. One where she's not just rewarded with words for taking what I have to give, but with pleasure as well. My mouth can do more things than talk.

My tongue swipes across my lips as I watch her writhe on my fingers. In my mind, I replace my fingers with a knife and find myself incensed by the fantasy. I can't control how aroused it makes me.

"Fuck, baby," I rasp. "Look at you take it." Her face flushes and her throat bobs. My mouth descends to her pussy and I lick. Then I thrust my fingers in roughly again, making her gasp and buck.

"Good girl," I purr. "You're going to let me fill you up, aren't you?" I don't wait for a response, I latch my mouth to her clit and suck. Zoe's moans are almost musical, keeping pace with my frantically beating heart. My fingers thrust in and out slowly, making my cock throb as I imagine it's my knife—in and out, in and out. Slow and steady, her slick insides leaving their residue on the blade. I'd fuck her with it, just like my fingers are doing now, as my mouth praises her with focused flicks.

Zoe sighs and squirms. My fingers are drenched as she tightens on them, whining as I tease her closer and closer with my mouth. God, she's going to come like this. With my knife

slowly fucking her—at least that’s what my mind is showing me. I’ll take my fingers for now. Remarkably, I like that I can really feel it. Her soft pussy is quivering and gripping me. It leaves nothing to the imagination like a knife might.

Which is a peculiar thought for me. I push that concerning thought aside. I’ll worry about what it all means later. I’m almost getting off more because it’s my fingers deep in her cunt, her wetness soaking into my body. I hope the scent of her never leaves me.

I groan and her fingers grab my shoulders, twisting the fabric of my shirt. She tenses. I’ll do it just like this when it’s time. It’s so perfect. I’ll eat her sexy pussy while I stab her.

“Good girl. Just like that,” I rasp as she cries out. She’s even more exquisite with my black and white makeup smeared on her thighs and mouth. My cock is so hard it aches. This is the perfect foreplay for the main event. I made my final girl come. The thought makes me wild with pride. It’s so fucked up.

I wonder what others would say if they found out Zoe let the Massacre Maniac get her off. If they could have seen how she greedily pushed her cunt against my face as I licked her a moment ago. Would they forgive her or did I just taint her for life? She’s not just a sole survivor now, she’s a sole survivor that the murderer got off afterwards. I want to taint her again and again while smearing my painted face over all her most telling places.

Before she’s even finished coming, I flip her onto her belly, fighting the tutu’s scratchy material out of the way as I grab the bottom of her leotard and peel it over her ass. All my thoughts scatter as I see the straight line of red, the scar I left when I pushed my knife into her tender body. It’s really her.

“Zoe,” I breathe out, sagging on top of her. She tenses beneath me, going silent. My mouth finds the wound. “My final girl.” My tongue presses to her skin and I groan. “My sole survivor.” I bite down and she bucks, sucking in a sharp inhale.

“You finally found me,” she whispers. I’m so hard it’s pulsating to my racing heart beat. I climb back up her body, feeling her writhe beneath me as she twists around to face me.

Her pupils look blown as adrenaline floods her system. Her skin is flushed, her eyelids heavy.

“You have no idea how badly I want to kill you,” I whisper tenderly. Her eyes widen and I’m hypnotized by them. Which is why I don’t notice her punching my face until it happens. The taste of pennies fills my mouth. She still has fight in her.

I smile down at her and blood falls from my mouth. The red liquid drips down, staining her plump lips. She spits at me, my own blood mixed with her saliva.

“Fuck you!” she hisses. I wipe off my face then push my fingers in her mouth, feeling all the wet, warm parts inside. She squirms beneath me, rubbing her body against mine. My fingers run across her gums and press down on her tongue, making her take back what she spat at me.

“Suck it clean,” I rasp with humor.

Suddenly, I feel the hard, metallic kiss of a gun barrel pressed against the side of my head and she’s flipped the script. Shit, of course she has a fucking gun. She learned her lesson the first time. I taught her to be prepared, didn’t I? Although, now that I think of it, there was a gun the first time too. Although it wasn’t in her hands. I roll off her and to the ground.

She shoots at me. The bullet pops off and the party outside goes wild with screams. I can see light through the hole she made in the wall. She shot towards them and it's created chaos.

Zoe darts out the door the second that I'm distracted. Seeing her getting away makes me rage. I rip myself from the ground and go after her, darting into the chaos of the overpacked house party. I try to rip people out of my way and when that doesn't work well enough I reach for my knife and start stabbing.

It rips into a throat and a fountain of blood geysers out as I pull my knife out and push them out of my way. I've never been in such a perfect scene of chaos and potential death, and I can't even enjoy it because Zoe is at the door. She hesitates, her fingers on the frame, and looks back at me. Her eyes hold mine, confusion swirling in them. Then she turns and leaves.

"Fuck!" I yell and start stabbing, pushing, and kicking. It's turning into a fucking bloodbath and I don't even find pleasure in it. I just need *her*. People wail my name, they know who I am.

The Massacre Maniac! Shrill cries of terror fueling mass hysteria. Well, shouldn't of fucking invited me. If you don't fucking want a massacre, then don't invite a blood thirsty maniac. Common fucking sense.

Finally, I make it out of the party and run past the cars and people on the lawn, stomping into the street. The crisp autumn air hits my lungs while I rub blood from my eyes.

Two round lights flash on and then a car bumper hits my shins. My legs give out and I roll over the top before crashing onto the asphalt. The car stops and the door flings open. Everything aches, but that won't stop the dark need inside me.

I'll kill whoever this is and take their car. Feet run up to me. I expect them to ask if I'm okay, instead they kick my shoulder with enough power that I roll onto my back.

Zoe is above me, looking down at my face with a cold, blank stare. I lunge towards her. Her eyes widen and she takes off, leaping into her car and getting away from me again.

“No!” I growl out. Police sirens are getting closer. I'm not doing this again. I'm not letting her go. Fuck being obsessed from afar. I'm never denying myself Zoe ever again. She's more perfect than memory allowed me to know.

I practically crawl from the street then get up and run. I will not be fucking caught. Even if it means letting her go for now. My shins burn like they might splinter and break with each stride. I promise myself I'll find her this time.

MY BODY MOVES WITHOUT ANY GRACE AS I SLIDE INTO MY house. The door slams shut and I stare at the lock, breathing heavily instead of twisting it in place. My heart throbs in my chest, pulsating chaotically.

What if he's right behind me? It sure felt like that as I sped all the way home from the party. Like a monster was sprinting after me for miles. The same sensation you have as a kid when running up the stairs at night. Ridiculous, I know, but he's ridiculous. He's larger than life. He's the fucking Massacre Maniac and I clearly haven't moved on from that night. Everything changed for me two years ago. The taste of death breathed new life into me.

"Hello," my gray parrot calls out behind me.

"Hello," I comment back, gnawing on a loose piece of skin around my fingernail as I stare at the lock. My talking pet insists on telling everyone hello whether they live in the house or just come to the door. He also gets angry if the people don't say hello back. He's got a lot of quirks and can be a real fucking asshole. He came with the house and surprisingly, I like taking care of him. What can I say? I guess assholes are sort of my type.

If the Maniac finds me, what would happen? Is it really so bad if we were in the same room? What am I thinking? We were just in the same room and that went straight to shit. Did it have to though?

I leave the door unlocked and move to the large front-facing window in the living room, leaning over the dated sectional to finger the blinds apart and peer out onto the dark street. A single light on a wooden pole casts a yellow glare on a dead street. Beyond that are stretches of darkness enshrouding empty fields of long grass I can't make out in the night.

My entire body feels like it's pulsating, one large heartbeat throbbing throughout every part of my being. All the way from my head to my pussy, one big *throb*. I saw a chaotic, unhinged sparkle in the Maniac's eyes that's left me unsure of what to expect tonight.

He's so strong. I thought I remembered how strong he was, but I was wrong. His calloused fingers dug into my thighs as he lifted me off the ground and threw me onto the bed.

His victims never stand a chance, not against that power. I remember when he came for me that night in the funhouse. He was a killing machine hovering a foot above me and as strong as Thor, a knife gripped in his fist. I remember the wet sloppy noises of death, the way I tried to shove my arousal back down in its box, but there was no going back after that.

For a moment, I imagine him bursting through my door and sinking his knife in deep, over and over, wet and sensual as I gasp, gripping his wrist with no hope of stopping him as he thrusts it inside me.

"Stop it," I hiss to myself. This is verging on pathetic.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” Parrot wheezes back while laughing. I shoot his cage a sharp look, seeing his beady eyes fixate on me as he dances and laughs on his perch. With a sigh, I abandon my post at the window and sink into the couch, its cushions more than happy to swallow me up.

I can't think clearly about tonight. About what just happened. We practically fucked for Christ's sake. I nearly fucked the Massacre Maniac, the Butcher of Umbra Valley. With a deep exhale, I reach for the remote and flick on the TV. I feel too keyed up, like I'm about to explode. The house around me feels like it's vibrating on its concrete slab, an earthquake about to rumble. It's all in my head. I need to calm the fuck down before I do something stupid.

Mashing the buttons, I maneuver through my selection of downloaded movies. Why are there so many serial killer slashers? Ugh.

“Have I really been this obvious the whole time?” I ask Parrot.

“What ya mean?” he croaks, head bobbing up and down. The room is dark other than the TV screen. It gives the parrot a long shadow on the wall behind it.

Yes, I have been so fucking obvious. And now I'm looking at it from the Maniac's perspective. It would be embarrassing if he knew how obsessed I was with what happened... with him.

I choose a movie about a serial killer stabbing his way through his town and slowly sink down further until I'm horizontal. I'm shaking, I realize.

I'm being ridiculous. I pop up and wheel the bird's cage into the kitchen before filling a glass from the sink. When I

press the cup to my mouth I don't stop drinking until it's empty, taking thick swallows of tepid water as I try to quench my thirst.

Then I'm back in the living room, eyeing the killer on the screen chasing a girl down.

My eyes dart to the unlocked door and I imagine it opening. Imagine the Maniac stalking silently inside with that skeleton makeup—standing at the foot of the couch. My thighs press together tightly.

After I took off the mask there was a moment of shock, recognition painted on his face as thick as the black and white skull. He knew exactly who I was.

Once he got over his shock, everything had changed, from casual movements to direct bursts of strength to take me over, to control the situation and to get what he wanted. I groan thinking about how he held me down on the bed, whispered my name, and pressed his mouth to the scar. It was that moment I realized who I was in the room with—not the look-alike I thought, but the real fucking thing. The cold hand of death with teeth digging into my skin like he was starving.

“Zoe,” he said. “My final girl.”

“My Zoe. My sole survivor.”

“You don't know how badly I want to kill you,” he said, a smile stretching across his skeleton face.

I've been holding my breath, waiting for the day we saw each other again. I'm lodged in that moment two years ago when he crowded into the closet and then vanished.

What the hell happened tonight?

Eventually, I crawl into bed and find myself dreaming of the funhouse yet again—the screams, the chaos, the way David’s body sagged as I killed him. The silence that came after killing him felt louder than any moment before. Then there was the horniness I had to ignore as I ran around in a frenzy stashing the gun before the cops got there.

I *always* dream of that night. Sometimes I wake up gasping in fear. Sometimes I wake up sweating and thrashing, the scar the Maniac left me burning as if it’s fresh. Every single time I wake up wet and with a groan trapped in my throat begging to push its way past the screams.

Tonight, I dream of the closet—of its damp musky scent, of the sound my fingers made furiously scratching at the dusty drywall. Then it morphs into something new.

I’m running down my street and I see the wooden pole with its ancient yellow light at the end. My house is just a black blob in the distance. I feel him behind me. I hear his feet crunch into gravel as he chases.

I run—frantic and heart pumping. I can feel violent intent pressing forcefully at my back. I’m barefoot, but nothing hurts me as I run through the streets. I run so hard, trying desperately to get to my house but the yellow light never gets closer. The only thing getting closer is him. My legs are heavy. I open my mouth to scream but can’t force anything out. I struggle to pump my arms as my feet barely lift off the ground.

He’s almost to me. I need to run harder than ever. I need to scream. But there’s no one else on this dead-end street. I’m in a country house, the same one I grew up in. I moved back in after my parents passed and now no one can help me. It’s a dated white brick bungalow with no neighbors. Even if I could scream, there’s no one to hear me.

Just him. I can hear him breathing over my shoulder now. Can almost feel it.

I'm terrified.

Suddenly I'm under the yellow light, the brittle grass prickling my feet. I see my door, an ugly burgundy thing. I'm almost home.

The Maniac launches himself at me and we tumble to the ground, his body blanketing mine and his hips digging into me. His massive hands shackle my wrists as he grinds his hard cock against my throbbing knife wound.

"I know exactly what you need," he growls in my ear. I relax underneath him, feeling hot and wet. My eyelids are heavy and my body is needy. He pants against my neck as he thrusts against my ass.

"I need you to take it, baby," he rasps. There's a knife in his hands now, dragging down my cheek and neck. I can't move at all. The knife moves lower until it's an inch below my belly button.

"I want to put it so deep inside you. You can do it, baby." The knife sinks in and I scream, waking up in bed, fighting sheets and conflicting feelings.

I WORK in a beige gas station at the edge of town, the last stop before the dead theme park that used to make this place worth visiting. Hardly anyone comes here but the ones who do I really wish wouldn't.

Especially today. My irritation levels are at the max after a week of nothing happening. The Massacre Maniac never

showed up at my house to fuck me with a knife, but I sat around in anticipation like he would. A good little puppy waiting at the door in a cold sweat.

Right now, I'm watching a regular customer eat stolen cheese danishes from the racks as he uses our internet.

I'd rather be meeting up with the man who reached out to me online. He saw my ad and wants to get together soon. I've long since lost my surprise at how many men are looking to be murdered. But this new guy needed time to get his affairs in order so we couldn't meet today.

Which means I'm here, riding the clock so I can still afford to fill my pantry at home. Ever since I moved back into my childhood house, the urge to amass food has been a mild obsession. It's so bad I steal bags of chips and cans of beans from work after every shift, despite having more than enough at home.

Childhood trauma much? Gross. I wish I could just move the fuck on from all those hungry nights. Be all blasé about it. Instead, I get a panic attack the moment one shelf begins to look a little sparse. Which isn't very badass bitch of me.

While I stand behind the counter, regurgitating my mental damage, a man is opening the pack of cigarettes before he's even pushed the money across the counter. I eye the crumpled bills as he shoves a Marlboro in his mouth. Only after he's fetched a lighter from the display beside the register and takes one never-ending drag does he sag towards the money, shoving it at me.

"I need another dollar. The lighter costs money too, believe it or not." I eye him. The truth is he's exactly my type—very tall, corded muscle obvious on his forearms, and a personality that suggests he might be mean. Ever since David, I've had

very specific tastes. My eye twitches at my bullshit. *Ever since David*— Jesus, I'm pathetic. David didn't have much to do with liking men as tall as a tree with arms built to jackhammer a weapon into someone.

I'd say it's bad for my health to like assholes but actually, it's bad for theirs. A smile spreads over my face. Coming across the Maniac again has left me paranoid. I've become a gold member of the window shades club—fingering apart the blind's blades to eye the street every ten minutes. What if this is him? He's tall enough.

"You aren't supposed to smoke inside." My words drip with flirtation. *Stop*, I tell myself.

"Whoops," he chuckles, leaning forward on the counter to eye my mouth. "You look sort of familiar."

Hazel eyes—it's not him. Reaching out, I flick the change cup towards him in irritation.

"For the lighter." My words are apathetic at best now.

"Isn't this for sick kids?" He picks up the little blue bowl and reads the sign attached to it.

"Is that what it says?" I ask, actually curious. We use it to balance the cash register at night.

"Whatever," he comments, fishing out as much as he can and pocketing it.

"The lighter?" I ask, watching the money disappear. He slips the blue lighter back into the designated spot in the plastic display he took it from.

"Don't need it anymore," he comments, walking towards the glass doors. He leaves with a sleazy wink. The door closes and I'm alone again. Well, not really.

The regular customer, Anthony, comes moseying up from the aisles, having finished off the entire stock of cheese danishes. He's the oddest person I know, and that's counting the fucking Massacre Maniac. At least I can make sense of the Maniac, even if his inner thoughts remain a mystery I'm desperate to figure out.

"Hey, Zoe," he says, giving a little salute. He frowns at the gun in my hand like he's noticed a small spill on the floor. When did I pull a gun out? Jesus, what's wrong with me? I'm losing it. I was the same way after the first run-in with the Massacre Maniac—weeks of anticipation and paranoia.

"Uh... Hi, Anthony," I say, shoving the gun back into my vest pocket. Anthony pushes open the door and starts to whistle a song. It sounds like *Entry of the Gladiators*, as if he's a clown come to the carnival. He leans back in for a moment and plucks a newspaper up before sliding it under his arm.

"There's supposed to be a great article about the Lovers Murderer in this one. Put it on my tab," he yells before leaving again. We used to keep a notebook of all the things he took but he took that too. I watch him get swallowed up by the evening sunset.

I check the clock. There are still three hours left of my shift—ugh.

No one cares about Frankie's Fuel. It's a wonder it's still open, but there is an odd sort of crowd that wanders in. Like Anthony who just walked off in the direction of the closed theme park despite nothing being over there. A lot of the people who come in here walk back in that direction. It'd be curious except it's none of my business.

I walk outside to waste time. The skeleton of Frankie's Fun World emerges in the murky distance, the dying light of the

day making the tallest roller coaster a black looming arch in the distance. Anthony is long gone, taking his odd behavior and secrets with him.

Umbra Valley was on the map once upon a time. It was the home of one of America's greatest theme parks. For a moment, this place was thriving. Practically the whole town was employed there, paid well, living large, and had bright smiles. I vaguely remember it from my childhood.

But something was off about Frankie's Fun World from the start. Everything was just slightly uncanny, including the rate of death for employees. Still, it clung to life until at last, there was the tragedy with the animatronics. The place shut down after several lawsuits and investigations. Everyone slowly trickled away from our town, leaving a rotting, bloated corpse behind. The boom had bloated the place and now we were chock full of empty storefronts and half-built neighborhoods—Frankie's always looming in the distance.

The signs for it are all around town, a smiling coyote named Frankie welcoming everyone with his cute little rainbow tie and arms spread wide. Their token slogan "Where everyone is always smiling" has been defaced on most signs. There's a collection of spray-painted words over the *smiling*. "*Where everyone is always farting!*" "*Where everyone is always sucking!*" One even said "*Where everyone is always fucking!*" for a while, but it enraged a lot of folks and they fixed that one. The rest retain their graffiti.

I fiddle with the gun in my vest pocket, tracing the lines until I pull it out. I look at our own Frankie sign by the road. I realize someone recently spray painted over "smiling". It was one of the last ones that hadn't been touched.

Under the gray anthropomorphic coyote, with a smile stretched far too wide, it reads: “*Where everyone is always dying!*” The red paint drips down like blood. Is it still wet? I swear I see it drip from the sign to the ground beneath it. They left a red handprint too.

The sensation of someone nearby presses against my skin. Spit collects in my mouth and I swallow it down.

I lift the gun and take aim at the sign. It fires off loudly, sending the hair on my arms up, rocketing a gentle release of adrenaline into my system that makes me forget the constant pressure under my skin for a moment.

There’s a hole right through Frankie’s right eye. I look around, expecting the person who was just painting the sign to come out.

Come on Maniac, come and fucking get me. I can’t take this tension of thinking he’ll come, but each day he doesn’t. I can’t keep waiting for him to find me. He’s not. He never did the first time, why would he now?

The gun goes back into my pocket and I go back into the gas station, getting back to dreams of meeting the man who answered my ad. I’ve got something special planned, something new.

5

JACK

FOUR DAYS. HOW PATHETIC. TWO YEARS OF OBSESSING AND she's not only still in town, but fairly easy to find for someone looking hard enough. Her place of work is how I find her—Frankie's Fuel. I didn't even realize the place was still open. I thought it closed with the park and the people who hung around here were just loiterers. The place has had zero upkeep and only half the neon lights flicker to life as the sun turns red near the horizon.

I've spent the entire day watching her. This is all wrong. I'm not a stalker. I don't pick victims. I don't need a certain type. Zoe throws my normal rulebook out the window.

How can someone look so hot in a gas station vest? I don't know. She manages it, though. With thick black eyeliner and ball-crushing boots, she looks at customers with equal parts apathy and judgment that seems to leave most of them oddly attracted. Perhaps I'm imagining that, seeing leers and looks that don't exist. Whether it's real or not, I don't like it.

She's talking to a man blowing smoke in her face and I cannot stand the way I see a smirk appear on her face. Her limited smiles are mine alone. He blows a thick cloud in her face, her skin turns green and he just laughs, pretending to fan

the smoke away. I'm about to step into the store until finally he retreats, sliding out the door and into my domain.

"Psst," I call out to him. His head twitches and he cranes his neck, looking over at the corner of the building.

"Hello?"

"Come here," I say, making my voice a little higher, swallowing back the hate that wishes to growl out between my teeth. He seems about to turn and leave, so I give him one more chance.

"It's about her. The girl inside," I say with a lecherous voice. He seals his fate by looking both ways, then marching around the building to where I am. I've crouched down between the two big green metal trash bins. I'm not sure how often the city clears them out but it's not weekly, that's for sure.

"Hey," he calls out, twisting around to find me. I don't usually assign any type of worth to my victims. I don't figure out who may or may not deserve the death I have for them. None of these things matter to me, nor do I think I'm the one who should figure out a morality system. It's not about justice and there is no need for me to make rules for guilt that doesn't exist.

This man, though, needs to be killed. He needs to die for disrespecting my final girl. He just waltzed around after checking for witnesses when I mentioned her. I'm an unknown man hiding in the shadows. He knew nothing good was going to be discussed and he practically ran to me.

It's none of my business what others are up to, except when it comes to Zoe. She's mine.

I stand up and walk out from my hiding spot. His head whips around, his eyes widening the second he sees my size unfolding from the small space. I'm not even wearing a mask. No makeup either. Just me, a smile cut into my face that seems to upset him. Although, maybe it's the combat knife in my hand combined with the smile that's really got him looking alarmed.

Without my normal mask or makeup, this feels different. It *is* different. It's not a thrill kill, and it's only exciting in the sense that I despise this man and am happy to end him. If serial killing is my work, then this is personal.

Don't touch my final girl.

Don't talk to her.

Don't look at her.

Don't ever fucking come back here again.

I'm hissing this all aloud, punctuating each statement by poking holes in him until it's not just blood coming out. Something pink and fleshy worms through. It looks like another knuckle at first, as he clutches his stomach. As I stare at it longer, I realize it's too soft for that. It's his insides, and they make that known in the next second as he pops like a can of snakes and flops to the ground like a fish.

I'm an energetic cat who unspooled a ball of human yarn.

My newfound friend starts moaning softly and murmuring "sorry" as he contemplates the pile of steaming intestines on the ground in front of him.

"Well, I'm glad we could have this little chat," I say.

Guess it's pointless to tell him never to come back. He's not getting up again, let alone driving his car around and

stopping at gas stations. Not unless people learn to do that with intestines unraveling on the hot concrete by the pungent, neglected garbage cans. The trash smells like it's spoiled in the sun all summer.

Shit, he's a fucking mess. Like those cans of spray foam for kids. You click the trigger and it shoots out in thick, pink squiggles all over the fucking place. I just stare at it a moment, sort of lost on how he acted like a shaken soda before I kick it off my shoe.

A heavy sigh comes out of me. I don't do body clean-up. I don't do fucking any of this. Zoe is fucking with my head. I wander in a circle around the gas station. Some other guy saunters out and at first I think I might kill him too. Might as well keep it up once I start. Why ruin a good thing?

There's something about him that makes me not want to keep my distance. Maybe it's the way he notices the blood dripping from my hands and how his stomach growls like it makes him hungry—his eyes glistening with humor. It looks like he *wants* me to attack.

Yeah, fuck that. He can live. He's leaving anyway. I make sure of that, marching at a distance behind him.

He chuckles and strolls leisurely down the road towards the theme park.

I think about how Zoe will be back in my hands soon and bite back the enormous smile threatening to break out on my face. Everything is lining up and she's not getting away again. It'll drive me mad if she does.

I slip around the back of the gas station and pass the time by cleaning up the mess I've made. Hacking and sawing through limbs isn't my forte, but it passes the time until I

realize there's a fucking shovel out here with the garbage and I just pointlessly ripped a corpse to shreds for no reason.

It was mildly disgusting too. I don't stab and hack at corpses unless purely by accident. I like living things and the process of making them *unliving*. A corpse can't smile, or beg, or scream. Utterly boring.

The next couple hours involve digging a hole behind the building and burying the multiple pieces of the man. It almost makes me miss Zoe leaving. I hear her car starting and fling the shovel towards the vacant stretch of desert behind the gas station before taking off.

My van is parked behind the closed-down ice cream shop next door. I bound over, fling myself in the vehicle, and bring it to life before I gun it. She's pretty far ahead, but there's not a lot of traffic so I maintain a healthy distance to avoid raising any suspicions. After about fifteen minutes, I see her pull into a tidy little brick house well past the outskirts of town. Out here, the houses are occasional and the land turns into a patchwork of forest and scrub pasture.

"Oh, Zoe." My hand covers a smile and I allow myself to laugh at her bad fortune. You're my final girl and live somewhere remote like this? Then again, I'd already determined at the party that people seem to avoid her—when I still thought it was just an imposter and not really her. Even if she was surrounded by people, they might not help her.

Do they avoid you because of me? Maybe everyone already knows you're mine. That you're a dead girl just waiting for my knife. I feel my cock becoming engorged at the thought. I watch her house until the lights have been out for hours, taking my own nap as I wait. Well, I try, but it's hard to get sleep when I'm so excited.

With my mask on, I prowl closer. I've made my way into plenty of houses I wasn't welcome in but never like this. Never with her. My throat bobs as I swallow thickly. Her door isn't even locked and I stand there a while at the entrance to her home thinking about that. The yellow street light behind me casts my shadow into her house.

She must already know, just like everyone else does, that she's mine. That I was coming. Didn't she?

"Hello," croaks the sound of a perky old woman coming from the kitchen. I run in there, ready to help her to Heaven, but see a bird in a cage.

"Hello," it says again, head twisting to the side so it can see me better. "Say hello!" it insists with venom. I walk closer while keeping my ears open to hear if Zoe will rustle.

"Hello," the bird says again, sounding angry. Its gray wings flash out and it squawks at me.

"Hello," I say back and its wings tuck into its body and it twists around, giving me its back as it goes silent. I peer around the edge and see its eyes are closed—it's going to sleep. Guess all it wanted was for me to say hello back.

I linger in the kitchen for a moment, deciding to waste a little time just to make sure Zoe's really asleep. I open the pantry and it's bursting with all types of foods. I stare at the shelves. Someone might think she's a prepper waiting for Doomsday, but I can see the real story it's telling.

My Zoe didn't have a nice childhood. I understand that about her. Her emotional blunting, her need to collect food. I know not only because I found old files from her middle school therapist that said as much, but because I can read the subtle signs.

And with that thread of similarity between us humming under my skin, I can no longer be distracted. I feel like I'm under a spell as I march deep into her house and twist the one closed bedroom door open. Slowly, I push it open just a crack and then peek inside.

She's there, lying on the bed. I open the door wide enough to slip into the room and quietly pad to the side of her bed. I spend a moment looking at her face in the moonlight before gently pulling the quilt from her sleeping form. I can see the outline of her breasts straining against the thin fabric of her t-shirt and then the small, silky shorts clinging to her hips.

I'm not really the planning type but there's been vague ideas in my head of taking her. As I see her soft body defenseless in the bed, an actual plan starts to form. I'm kidnapping someone. I'm keeping them.

No, not someone. My sole survivor.

Why does she always make me act so strange? *Plans?* Not just plans, but ones that involve delayed gratification. My hand slides into my pocket and fists the Ka-Bar's handle. I pull it out and look at the impressive blade—long and thick—then look at her.

Delayed gratification my ass. As I crawl on top of her in bed, I think of the Halloween party. I hadn't gone to that party to kill anyone. I went to fuck and I'm not even entirely sure what my plans with the masked girl were when I pulled her into the dark bedroom.

It hits me that I know why *she* was back there though, letting me grip her tightly and press my tongue in her mouth... letting me fuck her with my fingers as I ate her out.

She had wanted to fuck me.

A shudder rolls over me. My fingers dance down her body until I'm pressing two against her shorts, languidly rubbing back and forth as I watch her face. Her lips separate and a small noise comes out. Pleasure.

I pull my hand away and stare at her. This is the answer I've been looking for—it's simple attraction that has me acting so strangely. I'm used to killing people that I don't give a second glance to, but then I finally came across someone I actually like during one of my sprees. Someone my body craves. Someone I actually want to fuck with the cock in my pants and not just the blade in my hand. At the moment, it's throbbing and pressing hard against my pants. I want to grind against her. I sit up on my knees and spread her legs, watching her breath quicken for a minute before slowly thinning out into long, deep breaths again.

I've never fucked someone I killed. It's a bad idea. Everything works for me because it's simple. I've never consciously made concrete rules but this would be one of them if I did.

Don't fuck who you kill.

Don't fuck your final girl.

I press the tip of the knife to her tummy and the idea of going further flashes in my head. The knife sinking in with wet sounds. Her waking up with screams that my mind warps into pleasure.

"Baby," I'd groan, thrusting again and again. God, she'd be so wet.

I've never wanted to be inside of someone as badly as I want to be inside Zoe right this instant, the tip of my knife dimpling her soft gut.

I grind my teeth and slip the knife back into my pocket, leaving her body unmarked from what almost happened.

I lean over her and pull out my cock, thrusting roughly into my fist as images flash in my head—ones that involve my *cock* buried deep between her legs. The bed creaks and she rolls onto her other side with a dreamy murmur. I go stone still, strangling my cock to keep it from exploding as I look down at her with wide eyes. I reluctantly admit to myself that if I take her now, she won't even last the night. I want more time than that. I want *more*.

Not only because of my own desires, but because of the femme fatale. I've had enough of playing second fiddle, of being pushed to the side as old news. Zoe is going to help change that for me. She's going to be something new. Something to cause people to stop ignoring me.

I always knew Zoe was special and now I know why. She's helping me to evolve and she's helping me show that I'm the real threat.

I push my cock into my fist a few more times, until my balls are tightening and my body is begging to come on Zoe's soft thighs. I can't. I can't. I can't. She'll wake up; she'll know. I'll have to end things far too fast.

"Shit," I hiss, putting my cock back into my pants in angry frustration. I silently creep back out of the room, closing the door behind me. I'll be back tomorrow night.

6

ZOE

WHILE I'M SITTING ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, I NOTICE THE man who steps out of the truck looks nothing like the photo he sent me. The real disturbing part? He pretended to be someone half his size with a mousy, innocuous face.

This man wants to kill me.

Well, this should make for an interesting night. I pop up, toss my backpack over one shoulder, and get into his passenger side. He quickly climbs back in, eyeing me from my black gloves to my mask. He looks like he works outdoors for long hours—tan, strong, rough. He has on faded dad jeans, a clean t-shirt, and a well-worn ball cap sitting atop his mop of blonde hair.

I get the feeling this is the start of what will be a glorious fuck-up of a night. The whole day has been off already. I woke up feeling as if someone was in my house. I spent thirty minutes in a paranoid craze, searching the place and finding nothing.

“Drive,” I say. The man says nothing, just backs up and gets on the road. The next stop is where I would have preferred to meet up. That’s another strike against him. He pleaded to meet up at a different location first. I allowed it because this is such a peculiar and highly illegal thing that a

little compromise made the difference between meeting up and another night alone.

Now I realize he was trying to take control of what *I'm* supposed to be in charge of. With an irritated sigh, I pull my backpack around. My hand finds its way into my bag, petting the gun like a cat, brushing my fingers over the safety switch.

“Sorry,” he finally says. “I was curious about you.”

“It’s fine,” I say lifelessly behind my kitty mask. It’s not fine but he’ll find that out quickly enough, no need to spoil the surprise. He’ll be dead soon. I stare out the mesh-covered eye holes at Noah Rathe, or at least that’s what he claims his name is. Most of them lie about it. I usually find out when the news comes out and I see the real name.

I’m half tempted to bury a bullet in his temple while he’s driving. He’s what I call a bad seed. They’re the ones who don’t follow instructions. The ones who lie about what they want from me.

I fetch the script from my bag. It’s a trifold, bone-white pamphlet that I slide into his lap.

“What the fuck is this?” he asks, eyes darting off the road as he picks it up. The only other sounds in the truck are the deep hum of the engine and wheels racing across the asphalt to someone’s final destination.

“Just the basics. I know sometimes, in the heat of the moment, it can be hard to remember—”

“You made a fucking script for killing me?” He sounds outraged. These guys always get so fucking emotional. But what can you expect? It’s not like emotionally stable guys are asking to get killed online.

It's not a single thing that leads them to me. For some, they just want to die and would rather have someone else do it, someone they think might be gentle and might offer their cunt up as a farewell to living.

Others are victims of a desire to be dominated so thoroughly that they want to be murdered. A real life snuff film with them in the starring role. Some ask me to eat them. What on earth do they expect me to do? Carry a body twice my size over to a meat hook for dressing? I tell them yes, of course—it's not like they'll be around to make sure—but my cannibal cherry has yet to be popped.

“Look, I take this seriously. I don't want some messy panic and you don't either, right?” I lean towards him and he eyes the vintage black cat mask, his gaze focusing on the toothy grin. I do want messy panic, I really do. So why the script? I don't know, I'm obsessed. I like a plan in place even as I hope it all goes to shit. I sit around daydreaming about this all day, so it's trivial to put down a few details to keep things on track.

Plus, I'm trying out a little roleplay this time and I make that clear in the pamphlet.

“This is just fucking weird.” He peels the pamphlet open with one hand, the other still on the steering wheel taking us to our planned destination. The skin around his nails is dry and torn, and his eyes bug when he takes in something on the page.

“There's a fucking timetable of events,” he barks.

“No messy panic,” I repeat with a smile. To be honest, I added half the shit in there just to fuck with him. Seems to be going swimmingly.

I squirm a little in my seat, getting excited as we get close.

Noah is the start of something new in my killings, something I hope will be even more satisfying. I'm always chasing the high of that night two years ago and nothing ever hits as hard. It's frustrating.

Noah pulls into the shut down hotel. Thank you so much, Umbra Valley, for being a has-been town. Left plenty of locations just begging for depravity to happen inside. If buildings have emotions, I'd like to think they're delighted to have something exciting going on after being ignored for so long.

This place is expansive, a twenty-story hotel with a pool and sauna. It's not the best hotel they built for the guests of the park, but it's a nice mid-range one that's close to the gas station. It's been empty for far too long. It looks depressed, apathetic, and begging for a murder to liven things up inside. *Request acknowledged and mission accepted.*

I hop out of the vehicle, swallowing an elated whoop that wants to break out of my mouth, then stroll around the front of the truck. Noah's door creaks open as he shoves his keys deep into the back pocket of his jeans and grips the pamphlet in the other hand. When he shuts his door and comes closer, I head towards the hotel steps.

"Do you need more time to read the details?" I ask over my shoulder as I practically bounce to the entrance in excitement.

I imagine this is what Christmas feels like for kids who had parents who actually bought them gifts. At least now I can get myself presents. Like Noah. Noah is perfect. It's not hard finding men who claim they want to die, but it is hard getting them to actually meet up. The promise of sex goes a long way

though, and once they agree to that snack, I gorge on the whole buffet.

My boots leave track marks in the dirt that I ignore.

Should I care about leaving clues? Yes, I should definitely care about leaving clues, and at first I did. I fucking hate that time in my killing past, it was hard to enjoy anything when anally keeping track of every piece of evidence I might be leaving behind. So I got lax and then I finally just stopped caring at all.

I've been killing for two years now, ever since the funhouse, and they haven't found me yet. One day they might get me, but until that day comes I'm going to enjoy myself in full. Worrying about that future is a waste of time.

I stop at the entrance, fingers resting on the door, and see Noah shuffling his feet. His eyes are on me, looking alert and focused. I run my tongue over my teeth. He most definitely wants to kill me. Naughty Noah, that isn't our deal.

You'd think the tables turning would be my worst case scenario, but to be honest, it's my fucking favorite. Bad seeds like Noah never plan to be killed. It's a little clever if I was going to afford them a compliment, pretending to want to die as a pretext to get close to their own victim. It's a shame these fuckers were dealing with a cold-blooded expert, or maybe their simple little plans could work. I'd killed—Well, over twenty men at this point. Some virgin murderer looking to pull a fast one on me...

“What's so funny?” Noah asks.

“Nothing,” I say, swallowing the laugh back down as I brush the dry dirt from my leggings.

Admittedly, the first bad seed had been a close call. Surprise is really all it comes down to, and he'd surprised me instead of the other way around. I'd ended up with broken ribs, two dotted eyes, and a concussion I'm not sure I ever fully recovered from—but who cares about a little brain damage? Not me. At least it was a valuable lesson learned nonetheless.

We push into the hotel, being swallowed up by echoing silence. It's supposed to be fall but the weather can't make up its mind yet. Today the heat is oppressive in Umbra Valley. Even though the sun is gone, it's still swampy inside the Ferris Wheel Lodge. The air is so dense there's a solid layer of sweat enveloping my body.

When I walk in and look up, the lobby stretches all the way to the roof. It's a cylinder circled by nineteen stories. Each floor has a balcony that guests would have peered over to see how busy the main floor was. My eyes play tricks on me, seeing bobbing dark shapes lean over the ledge and then pull back quickly—shadowy ghosts of the past. My ears strain to determine if what I saw was the truth. Was that the sound of movement? I don't know. Probably rodents if I heard anything at all.

I walk through the lobby to the bay of windows along the back wall. They are supposed to show off the park in the distance but there's hardly anything to see, not with the park blanketed in darkness.

“Want some music?” I ask, pulling a speaker from my bag and setting it on a dusty table. Next comes an electric camping lantern that I click on. The harsh white light makes the shadows around us darker. My eyes dart up to the balconies again but I don't see any more moving shadows.

Noah suddenly invades my space, wrapping his arms around my waist and smearing his excessive sweat on my tattoos as we stand by the camping lantern and Bluetooth speaker belching the year's summer hits. The upbeat pop music slithers out into the empty hotel and comes back in a faint delayed echo.

The gun makes my backpack heavier than normal. I would leave if I knew what was good for me but, I haven't bothered to care about what's good for me in a very long time.

Maybe this is it, the murder that finally gets me caught. I'm not sure why I need this when most people are perfectly fine with more mundane forms of entertainment. There's a desperate, gnawing monster inside me that begs to be fed and I want the relief of feeling full. Is that so much to ask?

Maybe it's this town. Maybe I was just born this way. I don't have an issue with it like others do. Yeah, I'm fucked up. Deal with it.

For a moment I wrap my arms around Noah too, my hands playing with the edge of his jeans while I make sure he's not hiding a gun. Oddly, no one has ever brought a gun before. Perhaps men just naturally underestimate me. I suppose it's hard to take a young woman they meet online seriously.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I push Noah off me and back up. I know he wants to kill me instead of the other way around, but I still hope he goes along with the script a bit before we get to the life or death fighting.

"Let's play Seven Minutes In Hell," I say, my words muffled slightly behind the mask. I pull two beer bottles from my bag. Noah's mouth goes flat. He doesn't like the roleplaying but I want it so bad. This is how the party started at the dead theme park two years ago. It's a version of Seven

Minutes In Heaven, but instead of a pleasant coat closet, we go into the decrepit funhouse.

The bottle caps fall to the ground with little metallic clinks. Noah sighs and reaches out, taking one of the beers I opened. We both touch our lips with the glass and tip them back, chugging. I shoot Noah a wide smile, a reward for being a good boy and following the script so far. Not that he can see it behind the mask. Oh well, it's the thought that counts.

He'll start feeling the effects of the LSD in about twenty minutes. Not that he knows that part. People think a capped beer bottle means no tampering but it's easy enough to recap a bottle. Just need to get a fresh cap and a bottle capper and then voila, a virgin beer. Now I just need to kill a little time until the acid kicks in.

I waste time flirting and trying to talk about the recent rumor the park is being bought by someone. I want to wait until the drugs start to hit before we do more. I want to see his pupils expand like David's did that night. Big black pools that gobbled up his irises. Tonight is all about recreating that *first* night as best as I can.

"Time for Seven Minutes In Hell," Noah demands, tired of me wasting time. He drags me down to the cracked tile in the lobby.

"Okay, okay," I relent, putting my empty bottle on the floor in front of us. Noah starts fingering the decorative holes that run the length of my black leggings and I close my eyes and imagine crushing his dick with my shoes. Which isn't typical. Usually, I like the sleazy intimacy—the threat of violence looming in the future while the promise of sex distracts the present.

The brown bottle spins and I see remnants of yellow beer drip from its tip like a spent cock after pissing. Noah lets out a groan, warm and soggy, right in my ear when it stops spinning. He attempts to sink his hand between my legs and I slap it away.

“What the fuck is this?” he growls in anger. Shit, I don’t know.

“We’re supposed to go in the funhouse first,” I say as an excuse, brushing off his anger. Noah rolls his eyes and motions for me to show him what to do.

Normally, I fuck my victims. That’s part of the deal and I enjoy it as much as they do. They are very thankful as I take them inside me, much more thankful than when I take their life.

“This is fucking stupid,” Noah grumbles loud enough for me to hear. Fuck me, when does the acid kick in? Noah follows me behind the lobby counter while I pretend I’m walking into the funhouse two years ago. I try to visualize it, but this isn’t working. Maybe I should have taken the acid too.

“Can you take the mask off?” he asks. I ignore him. I already told him before we met that it doesn’t come off.

Noah presses close and finally goes back to the script, saying the things David did that night before the Massacre Maniac showed up. I don’t think I care anymore, though. He was right, this is fucking stupid.

“I think you’re so hot,” he whispers, coming closer. I turn my head as his body presses against mine. He’s supposed to say, “*Come on don’t be like that,*” but it never comes. Noah giggles in my ear and I try to push him away. His pupils have expansively engulfed his iris and appear to be jet-black dimes.

Even in the shadowy corpse of the abandoned hotel, they're far too big to be normal.

The giggling stops and he grips me roughly.

“What the fuck did you drug me with, bitch?” He catches me off guard, grabbing me and throwing me on the ground. Shit, it's this stupid fucking roleplay idea and my sudden distaste for fucking that has made this go south. What the fuck is wrong with me? What's changed?

Come on Zoe, get with the fucking picture. First you fuck 'em and then you kill 'em. It's a nice little combo, like pizza and beer! I can do this.

But when I hear Noah's zipper, it angers me for no reason. I delight in a rough fuck but right now I don't want him anywhere near me.

It's not him.

Oh shut the fuck up, I tell myself. Am I actually pining after the Massacre Maniac? This is dumb. Of course I am, but this is a whole new level of fucked up if I can't even bring myself to have sex with other people.

I claw at Noah's face to get the point across that sex is no longer on the table. My nails slice down his cheeks, leaving deep lines of red. He jerks back, hands flying to the damage.

I kick his stomach. He rears up and punches me in the head, disorienting me as he grabs me by the throat. I shouldn't have tried out the roleplay. I realize that now. Maybe next time I'll bring a skull mask.

Surprise is really the only thing that matters when I kill. Being quick and having a gun makes the difference every single time.

When I'm the one surprised, it can go south fast. I'm at a disadvantage with size. Right now, I'm struggling on the ground with Noah's hands wrapped around my throat. He pushes the mask off my face as I thrash beneath him, equal parts terrified and ecstatic. It reminds me of that night in the closet when the Maniac first stepped in and choked me.

I'm getting wet as Noah bares his teeth in manic delight above me. If I close my eyes, I can almost imagine it's who I really want here. That it's that night—the cackle of a distant clown, the press of a mask against the crown of my head.

I hear the screams of the others as they run around the funhouse. It sends a delightful chill up my back. Fuck. I feel the urge to kill building inside me, snowballing up towards the point of no return.

The truth is that I went to that party two years ago intending to hurt people. I had a gun in my bag and something insidious humming under my skin. I've always been defective and the people there with me that night hated me. David might not have hated me. It's hard to tell. But he was pushy, and I realized I'd rather see his brains than his cock.

Then the Massacre Maniac showed up before I had the chance to do anything.

My hands shake in excitement as I grip Noah's wrists. The smell is all wrong. No ancient buttered popcorn, smoke, or blood. Instead, it's stagnant dust.

It's never as good as the first time. I grind my teeth together in dismay before I push that thought off and try to live in the moment.

“You stupid fucking bitch,” Noah hisses, ruining the fantasy. What an asshole. I can't even romanticize my trauma

while getting strangled. My eyes pop open and for the briefest moment I almost see the others from that night standing around us, but it's just the old luggage carts—their brass poles dull with neglect in the lobby.

My vision dims around the edges as I futilely try to inflate my lungs with a compressed windpipe. I'm about to pull out the gun I'm hiding until Noah shifts his grip for a moment, letting me suck in just enough air to stay conscious. Blood rushes to my head and the room spins like a carnival ride.

A laugh rasps out of me. When he doesn't pull out a knife and instead just begins strangling me again, I grow bored. Still, I close my eyes and try to get what I need so badly.

I'm back to that night two years ago. It's the Maniac's hands against me. It's dark in the closet, intimate. A moan breaks from my mouth and now he knows just how fucked up I am and plans to show me just how fucked up he is. He plans to make me feel like I never have before.

I think about last week's party, too. How the Maniac looked into my eyes with his endless dark pits, a smile stretching across his skull face.

Could he tell I was just like him? An alarming idea comes to me. Maybe that's why he finally found me... because he figured out I'm the other serial killer in town. Maybe I ran too fast. Maybe I was too rash. Maybe he'd found me so we could team up.

Shit, maybe he gets me and I get him and he wasn't going to kill me despite voicing his desire to do exactly that.

My gun comes out and I shove it under Noah's chin. I like Noah. He's cute and absolutely perfect at this moment—scared eyes with oversized pupils and hands shaking as he holds them

up. His head tries to dart away from my gun, but he's not fast enough.

When I was a kid, I tried to make a boiled egg in the microwave. It seemed a lot easier and faster than the stovetop. I thought I was really clever as I sat the egg in the middle of the glass plate and pressed start. It went round and round, the yellow light showing me the white oval shell making its doomed journey.

My face pressed to the plastic window as the shell began to sweat. Then it exploded. A loud bang went off, just like a gun. Wet, half-cooked strings blasted out.

Noah's head is sweating like the egg's did right before it exploded.

There's a flash of pure fear in his eyes before the back of his head does a rendition of the egg in a microwave. Stringy, wet brain splatters the hotel counter wall and he slumps beside me on the ground as I press the hot barrel of the gun between my legs and rub. God, this is better than any sex I've had.

My eyes settle on Noah's vacant ones and a moan drifts from my mouth. Frantically, I pull my pants down and my panties aside. I maneuver the gun inside me, too hyped up on manic power and horniness to turn on the safety. Fuck if I care if I shoot myself. I care about nothing but riding out the deluge of excitement that flooded my mind as the gun went off. It was so loud and the fear of getting caught is making me shake as I pump the barrel of the gun inside myself whimpering and moaning, entwining my fingers with Noah's limp hand.

When I killed David all those years ago his head snapped back and the life left his body in one monstrous instant. *Help me, Zoe.* Well... I helped alright. Put him right out of his misery.

“Shit” I whimper, my fingers slowly moving to the head wound. Noah is silent and still, his corpse showing no protest as I slowly press my fingers against something wet and spongy. A shudder of alarm and disgust rolls over me mixing with the rising ecstasy as I clench around the gun with one final furious thrust and come. My moans dance up the dark floors of the hotel for ghosts and rodents to hear.

A second later, it all comes crashing down. The excitement and pleasure rush out of me, leaving me irritated. There’s always a sudden drop off at the end and this time is no different. The moment the orgasm leaves, I’m cursing myself and shooting a few more bullets into Noah. A sad attempt to get a little more thrill but nothing is like that single mortal shot.

A pearly white piece of enamel catches my eye on the ground and I pluck it up. It’s big with smooth bumps, practically perfect. My fingers brush over it a moment while I think about the exact moment I took Noah’s life.

I slip the tooth in the front pocket of my backpack, then quickly toss the rest of my stuff back in. There’s always a sensation of panic right after the come down, one moment where all my doubts creep in. Was anybody close enough to hear? Was someone in the hotel? Am I totally fucked?

I run out of the building and down the empty street, my heart pumping and my body sore. As my legs pump and my lungs burn, the anxiety fades and exhilaration takes charge. I laugh while panting.

My phone dings and I come to a screeching halt to read the text.

“DoorDash has arrived.”

I didn't order a food delivery, obviously. I hadn't planned to be home for several more hours, anticipating things would go more to plan than they had. Someone must have accidentally used my number. I shove the phone in my pocket and ignore the next two texts. I'm sort of busy running from a murder scene.

I run all the way to the bus stop and barrel into the bathrooms they have there. A leftover luxury from better times. I change my clothes with the extras in my backpack and slip on the city bus when it rolls up. I ride for a while until I see my house in the distance. Outside the windows the town is aging without grace. The sidewalks are cracked, the streets forever pot-holed, and the houses are slowly settling into a state of vintage charm that will never be updated.

There's a weak collection of fog in the air, peculiar for nighttime. I have to walk a few miles home from the stop where I got off. I like every part of a murder night, even the long trudge back home. On these nights, I'm living entirely in the moment. The murder weapon is heavy in my bag and my body aches from the fight. The clawing need that lives with me everyday is vacant for one beautiful night.

A skull-painted face flashes in my mind. My eyes shift around the road as if the Massacre Maniac will burst forth from the ground and run at me just like in my dream. There's a shuffling of the trees as a gust of wind blows by. I walk faster, eyeing the darkness around me, and waiting to see the eyes of a murderer lurking in wait. No doubt there would be a smile stretching over his painted face as he clicks his tongue, telling me I'd made a mistake.

Isn't that what I want, though? I don't know. He's terrifying. It's hard to want him nearby when it's dark like this.

He's like a boogeyman I can't help being scared of in the dark of the night.

But he knows that I'm just like him, right? That's what I thought I'd figured out earlier—that he found me because I'm the Lovers Murderer, not because I'm his final girl. That he wants to kill together. That he thinks we're the same.

The details of a new fantasy start forming in my head. Where the Massacre Maniac finds me, pulls me close, and whispers in my ear that he knows who I really am and he *loves* it. That he's been looking so long for someone like him. That the news of a new serial killer gave him hope he wouldn't be alone anymore.

It feels too good to be true and that makes me nervous.

I look at the black sky and touch my lips before sucking them into my mouth, wanting to see if I can taste Noah's blood on them. When I close my eyes, though, I see the Maniac shoving his fingers roughly in my mouth.

"Suck it clean," he growled after I spit at him, his excitement hard against my leg.

As I walk up to my house, I remember the DoorDash thing. I pull my phone out and open the door. Did I forget to lock it when I left?

"Hello," Parrot says.

"Hello," I respond on autopilot.

There's a picture from the door dasher in my messages. An overstuffed McDonald's bag is soaked in a dark red color and sitting in the middle of a bed. I recognize the blanket. Other details of the room are startlingly similar. My eyes burn into the picture, my heart rate picking up.

It's my bedroom.

"Hello," Parrot repeats to someone else. My head shoots up, the phone dropping from my hands. The Massacre Maniac is already coming for me, looming tall and eyes reflecting the single street lamp outside as a grin stretches across his skull-painted face.

"Hello," his deep voice says in delight to my bird before he's suddenly on top of me. A rag quickly covers my face, smelling of paint thinner. Before I can peel it off, his hand is there, holding it over my eyes, nose, and mouth. His body overpowers mine easily, wrapping an arm around me and holding me against him as I thrash briefly in a wide-eyed panic before everything mercifully fades to black.

I wake up groggy and pissed in the back of a vehicle. Something like a pillowcase is over my head and my hands are bound.

MY FINGERS TAP THE STEERING WHEEL AS I DRIVE TO MY place. My lips move as I sing along to a song on the radio. Two blocks away, Zoe begins to stir. She sounds like a cat in a bag, hissing and scratching and banging around in rage spurred by fear. I chuckle to myself as I ruminate on my victory.

In the crooked rearview mirror, I see her in the back of the van. There are no seats besides the driver and front passenger, so she's got plenty of room to thrash around amongst the accumulated collection of junk back there.

My fingers flick the volume up and I begin yelling along to the song, enjoying the scream of anger coming from the back that bleeds between the lyrics.

I start to get into it, drumming the wheel, thrashing my head around, and singing loudly. Just because I have to cover up her noises doesn't mean I can't enjoy it.

The song finally ends and I sit back with a satisfied smile. Then my smile drops. Why isn't there any screaming and banging? I jerk around and see her lunge from the back, the bag that had been over her head abandoned in a lump on the ground.

Her duct-taped hands turn into claws as she launches at me. The van swerves wildly as she twists into my lap, wailing like a banshee. I try to grab her with one hand and reach around to the wheel with the other.

“Fuck,” I hiss, pushing her into the door so I can at least see the street. We’re almost there. I can see the orange, dead grass coming up fast. Also, I can see the tree. I grab for the wheel again, but it’s already too late. We slam head-on into the mesquite outside my home. My body lurches forward. I don’t wear seat belts. Why the fuck would I?

My head hits the windshield and it shatters as I go arcing through, flying like superman. This is fun. I’m flung past the tree and onto the lawn. As the pain of landing travels across my body, I black out for a second. I come back to and get to my knees, pausing as I try to make the world stop spinning. My house definitely shouldn’t be upside down like that.

Zoe opens the door and falls into the grass, rolling from her back to her belly and using her forearms to push herself up before breaking into a run.

I finally drag myself to my feet and go after her, my long, determined strides slowly devouring the distance between us. She takes off like a bat out of hell.

Luckily, there’s no one else that lives on this block. As far as I know, there’s only one other person in the whole neighborhood and he’s in the completed model home near the entrance.

Zoe runs as far as the house next door and I tackle her on the front lawn. A scream rips out of her throat and I feel electricity under my skin at the wonderful sound of her voice. God, I love it. I slam my hand to her mouth, muffling her. Not that anyone would hear out here, but she doesn’t know that.

Let her think a house full of people is right in front of us. If she gets out of my grip, or the house, she'll waste precious time running from one empty house to the next, only to find a full vacancy and me looming behind her.

She bites my hand and I laugh as I pull it away from her face.

“Fuck you!” she screams. I flip her over and cover her mouth again.

“We're going to have so much fun, Zoe. You're special, you know that? You're going to help me teach that fucking femme fatale she's *nothing*,” I spit with venom. Zoe stills beneath me, her eyes going wide.

“I like you, Zoe. Unfortunately, I think that's going to make things worse.” She screams behind my hand. “Shh. Be thankful you're not the Lovers Murderer. She'll get ten times what I'm giving you. I despise that bitch.” That doesn't calm Zoe down at all. Guess I don't understand how to pacify people—surprise, surprise.

I pick her up off the ground and throw her over my shoulder. I have to kick my door open because she's writhing like a dying eel and I need both hands to keep her from falling. She does *not* want to be in the house. Too bad for her.

The door smacks the wall, the knob making a hole in the drywall.

“Help!” she screams until her throat goes raw and her words end in a cough.

“Come on, now. You can scream louder than that, can't you?” I ask with a laugh.

“Go fuck yourself,” she hisses. “I'll fucking kill you.” I laugh loudly and she writhes some more, nearly flailing off my

shoulder.

I stomp into the house and pull open the basement door. When my boots smack the descending wooden staircase, she really loses it. It's quite fun having her squirm on my shoulder, my hand between her legs to keep her steady. I should kidnap people more often.

Zoe thrashes again, her taped hands slamming my back. She jerks and humps my body, trying to throw herself off. All the while she's screaming but instead of calling for help she's tossing the most colorful threats that I've ever heard my way. Really, I should write some of these down. I could terrify someone who gave a shit. As it is, I find it absolutely adorable as she details exactly how she intends to shoot a gaping hole in my head, then finger fuck the wound before she collects the molars that'll spew from my mouth.

Do normal people always talk like this? Maybe I'm not as fucked up as I thought... comparatively. I've certainly never even thought about finger fucking someone's open skull wound. That's a bit nauseating, actually.

"Alright, Zoe," I tell her patronizingly, giving her ass a little pat. "Can't wait." She sucks a breath between her teeth, enraged by my reaction to her gory threats. She moves erratically as I bend down for the leather straps I installed yesterday. She gives a violent jerk and her body falls from my shoulder and onto the concrete floor. She instantly squirms away, crawling towards the stairs.

A shot of adrenaline floods my system as I see her path to escape and I leap at her retreating body. She reaches the stairs and begins to lift herself up to her feet. I launch at her, my body blanketing hers and pressing her into the stairs.

She's warm and smells like blood and something sweet, a perfume soaked into her skin from before I caught her. I don't know anything about scents to describe them, but this one is nice and welcoming. Clean and soft when it drifts into my nostrils as she squirms for freedom beneath me.

Her fingers scratch at the wooden steps and one of her nails gets stuck and tears. She whines slightly beneath me.

"Careful," I comment, grabbing her connected wrists and pulling her hands to my mouth. The bleeding finger goes between my lips and I suck the blood up with a moan. She's gone still beneath me, a shudder rolling through her body as my teeth sink into her finger just enough to keep her in place as I suck.

"Come on, now," I rasp, getting up and grabbing her by the back of her shirt. I drag her across the concrete in a sharp tug before releasing her. She slides across the floor into the other wall and I'm on her in an instant, making sure she doesn't move again.

"This is really fun," I mumble, our faces close as I slide the leather straps around her ankles and tighten them in place. As the second lock snaps close, she spits in my face with a look of pure rage contorting her features into a demonic mask.

Hmm, didn't we do this before? I wipe the warm spit from my cheek and then shove my fingers in her mouth, forcing her to take it back. She bites down hard and my teeth snap together as I smile at her. There's something different about her, something I like.

While my fingers are trapped in her mouth, I grab her hair and tug. She cries out and I get my fingers back. I keep gripping her hair as my eyes linger on her lips.

“What a dirty mouth,” I say before dipping my face closer. She gasps, her eyes going wide, her body going still as she watches my mouth descend to hers. My teeth sink into her bottom lip. It’s nice and plump and tastes a little of my blood. I bite down until I can taste hers too. She swallows thickly, breathing heavily. I pull back, licking my lips as I eye her now swollen one. She’s flush, no longer thrashing or fighting.

“You like being punished, don’t you?” I ask. We both know the answer to that. I get up before she can deny it and start moving back up the stairs.

“If you’re going to kill me, why go through all this trouble? We both know this isn’t what you do.” Her voice drifts up from the back corner of the basement. I crack the door but linger near the top of the stairs for a moment.

“You’re special,” I say again.

“How?” she asks. It’s almost like she wants me to say something specific. What on earth could she want to hear from a serial killer? I don’t know. She’ll get the truth, though.

“It’s time we both move on. We’ve waited too long. And you’re going to be my promise to the other serial killer in town. I despise her existence, Zoe, and you’re special enough to play this role for me. She’ll know what I’ve done to you and realize I’m coming for her.”

With that said, I close and lock the door behind me as I head to the couch. I drop onto it before laying down and pulling a pillow over my face to block out the sound of her racket downstairs.

I could have worded that better. Girls hate when you make it about other women. Plus, it seems I’ve only freaked her out more, going off the noise she’s making. Judging by all the

racket coming from the basement, she doesn't seem real happy with our arrangement.

I could have just killed her when she got home. She lives alone, so I could have drawn it out to whatever lengths I wanted there. But there was a subconscious desire to bring her to my home. Zoe feels like she's mine. It felt right to take her, to keep her.

I'm concerned. Her reactions to me have woken a whirlwind of thoughts now spinning wildly in my head. Both two years ago, and the party last week. A few things are obvious to me.

Zoe likes rough men.

I think of downstairs just a few minutes ago when I bit into her lip roughly, punishing her for spitting at me again. She'd flushed and went lax in my arms, her eyes half-lidded.

Zoe likes to be forced. Likes to be submissive.

Part of me wonders if I'm responsible. Perhaps our first run-in had impacted her, leaving her with a twisted need to seek that thrill out again. Two years ago, there was something that blossomed because of me. *For me.*

She didn't respond how I expected. I expected fear and terror after locking her up. I expected begging and pleading. Not someone promising to finger fuck my skull while spitting in my face.

I can't keep thinking about this. My cock is hard and starting to ache slightly, pressing against my pants aggressively and giving me wild ideas. The intention is to end this obsessive interest and finally kill her. It's already complicated enough and twisting the situation up more won't help.

However, the needy recesses of my mind inform me that I have a human pet chained in my basement. I'm suddenly curious if I could keep her from biting my cock off if I shoved it down her throat.

I rip the pillow from my head and shoot up, reaching for the remote desperately and flicking it on. News will distract me, and this wave of attraction will pass and I'll funnel all this pent-up energy into killing her like I should have all those years ago. I'll put an end to my final girl parading around alive for the media to talk about.

The news anchor, Micah, is talking about our local femme fatale and my attention constricts to a pinprick.

"The Lovers Murderer struck against last night—" Last fucking night? Fuck her. They don't even give me a passing mention while talking about her today. I'm losing their attention, losing their fear and interest.

That's why I have to kill Zoe and stop whatever murder pining I've been allowing myself. It's going to be big news when they find out she was kidnapped—that I'd taken her, kept her, *destroyed* her.

I should set the stage with a little creative scenery. Put the body in a gift-wrapped box with the note "*from The Santa Claus Killer. Ho! Ho! Ho!*". Yeah, the media loves a good show. Or maybe I'll just offer her head made up to look like a clown. "*What's in the box,*" they'll whine. Nothing much, just a present from the *Ringmaster*.

Yeah, plenty of time to work out the details.

Miss Femme Fatale will be the one swept under the rug. I'll be the one they invite experts on the news for again. *Is he evolving? My god, we don't know what to expect anymore. Will*

he stalk our women and chain them up? Will he barge into our parties and massacre them all?

I'm sure I'll get a new name.

“Fuck the femme fatale.” I chuckle at the TV. The anchorman's smile grows larger as I say it, his eyes sparkling with humor as he talks about the scene she left in her wake.

Final girl dies soon. It's time to finish this and set things right.

IT FEELS UNREAL TO BE IN THE MASSACRE MANIAC'S basement but I'm really here, my ass growing sore from the concrete floor as I pick at the skin around my nails and catalog the room.

There's a stash of drinks and food beside me. An alarming amount. Seems he intends to keep me here for a long time. Why else would he leave me with this much food and water? There's a disturbing amount of items that I buy regularly. Jesus, even tampons and lube. Who the fuck is this guy?

My stomach drops and I swallow the hyperventilation that wants to start.

He's been in my house before today. He peeked into my pantry and saw the food in there. He was in my fucking house. Oh god, was I there? Was I asleep while the fucking *Massacre Maniac* moved through the rooms of my house like some knife-wielding wraith? He could have *killed* me.

I keep eyeing all the potential weapons out of my reach in the room and wondering how I could get close to them. Even if I did get one, I'd likely spear his calf with the screwdriver on the counter twenty feet away and he'd just keep walking like nothing happened. Maybe that's an insane thought, but he's been hit by a car and flown through a windshield with

hardly a scratch. Other than slowing down a little, he seemed perfectly fine.

Apparently, big boy drank all the fucking milk as a kid.

My options are slim. Playing dead introduces the risk of him desecrating my corpse that isn't really a corpse. Which leaves me with the one bad idea I have left—seduction. Clearly, there's an attraction here. My lip still burns from where his teeth sank in to mark me.

The Massacre Maniac finds me attractive. Plus, I'm special to him. I'm his final girl. I'm not just some random nobody—he stalked me and broke into my house. Then he didn't kill me, but instead kidnapped me, brought me here, and chained me up.

The Maniac has no idea I'm the other serial killer. The single person he despises, apparently. Realistic anxiety about him discovering I'm the other serial killer keeps my stomach squirming. I'd just come from a murder when he snatched me. Did he look in my bag? I think I saw it in the back of the van. Fuck me.

I purposely ripped a nail out on the stairs so he wouldn't wonder about any blood on my hands. This is what I get for touching brains. I don't know why I do that. It's gross. Maybe I do it because it's gross. I like feeling things and touching a little brain meat usually startles some emotions to life.

Right now, I'm feeling a lot and for the first time in a long time, I wish I was feeling nothing at all. This is *painful*. The Maniac not only doesn't know me like I thought he mystically might, he hates me, deep down. Even if we're the same. Hell, being similar makes it worse.

He hates me.

It should hurt a hell of a lot less when it's the default. People hate me, they don't get me, and they think I'm a freak. And they're right, I am a freak—I'm defective. But here is someone who's the same as me, who says I'm special, who treats me better than everyone else... and he still hates me. Hates the Lovers Murderer and is obsessed with his final girl for shallow as fuck reasons. I've been reduced to a prop for some kind of bullshit message to his rival. Waves of frustration mix with longing.

Ever since the funhouse, I've tried to keep logical, to not get carried away in fantasies, but the way my chest aches lets me know I'd been shit at it. I really believed he left me alive that night because he looked into my eyes and saw someone who was the same as him, saw someone he wanted to keep alive for once in his fucking life.

But he doesn't want me alive. He wants me dead like the rest. His dead final girl he has a hard-on for. And his dead rival serial killer. I guess that's what we are, rivals. I never saw it that way. I saw it as the thing that brought us together. Some part of me was doing it so he'd know I was out there, sending him a message that he's not alone, that we could fucking be together or some bullshit. I don't fucking know!

I'm so fucking stupid. I don't like this feeling—this sense of loss and self-loathing. My teeth grind together as I come to the desolate realization that once again I'm alone in this world. Always have been and always will be. Fuck the Massacre Maniac for making me ever think differently. For making me dream of something before ripping it away. I fucking hate him.

But he can't know that. Not until I get out of this fucking basement and make him pay for this pain.

Right now I need to make him believe I want him—push his attraction. I press my thighs together and swallow thickly, trying to push off the memory of his mouth on mine. Of the way my body caves to the way he treats me. How everything inside me warms up when his fingers thread through my hair and tug.

What a dirty mouth, he rasped, eyes diving into my mouth as he held me firmly in place. A shudder rolls through me. It's not going to be hard to pretend.

Did he bring me here for that? Maybe he kidnapped me and chained me up down here so he can fuck me as many times as he wants, whenever he wants. My face flushes and I feel warmth rising between my legs as I contemplate that.

Shit, this shouldn't be turning me on. Okay, stay focused. Am I leaning into seduction simply because I want to fuck the Maniac?

Maybe, possibly. I groan. My mind is a mess.

I push off self-reflection for the time being and concentrate on whether this is a viable plan. I don't know, but it's my only plan so I'm going all in. I'm going to seduce a serial killer and he's going to fuck me. I bite my lip.

Oh and then I'm going to escape... Somehow.

I slide to my side and lay my head on a pile of Flamin' Hot Cheetos. I'm so tired. Clearly whatever rest I got while drugged didn't actually benefit me. I'm exhausted from the murder and from my pathetic attempts to escape while the Maniac had me in his bare hands.

I need to stay awake but I can't. My body is giving out after the intense adrenaline rushes it's experienced. It's demanding that I rest. I count the wooden steps up to the

basement door, trying to keep my mind active. Next, I visualize killing him with the screwdriver on the table too far away. Then I remember his body invading my space over and over, hands touching me, bending me to his will.

I don't realize I've fallen asleep until I start waking back up. Someone is with me.

He's here. He's touching me.

The Maniac has me in his lap, his arms wrapped around me, and his lips pressing to mine. It's tender and quiet.

"I'll miss you when you're gone," he whispers. I don't think this is something he'd like me to hear. His mouth briefly presses to mine again before he pulls back, brushing my hair from my face. For a moment, I wonder about the food again. He got me the things I like and set it all up beforehand. Is there some way he knows that's an anxiety of mine? But why worry about that for someone you plan to kill?

"You're so warm and soft, Zoe." His arms tighten around me and I realize he's hugging me. His face burrows in my neck as he breathes me in. I can't take this anymore, not when I feel his breath tickle my neck.

I pretend I'm only starting to wake up. I make a small noise and he stills suddenly.

"Are you awake?" His voice lacks all the warmth it had before. Fuck. I say nothing and keep still. His mouth moves to my ear.

"Zoe," he purrs into it. "You need to tell me if you're awake." His voice is deep and low as his arms grip me tighter. Then his mouth moves back to mine, his hand wrapping around my jaw to keep me in place as he invades with his tongue and teeth.

A whimper comes from me and I squirm. I don't know if it's a good idea but I can't help myself. He growls against my mouth and shifts me in his lap. I can feel his massive hard-on pressing against my ass.

“Better tell me if you're awake, baby.” Like fucking hell I will. I keep my eyes closed but he seems determined to wake me up now. A large hand pushes between my legs and knuckles grind against me. I bury my face into his body, trying to pretend I'm just moving in my sleep.

“Wake up, Zoe,” he rasps. “I'll stop as soon as you wake up. I'm not supposed to do this.”

Well, now I have two reasons not to wake up. He grabs my face and peels it away from his chest as he keeps grinding between my legs with his knuckles.

“Your face is flushed. Look at you,” he comments thickly, sounding awed. His heavy breathing fans my hair as he tentatively creeps his fingers inside my clothes. It's nearly impossible not to react when he dips his fingers into my pussy. He slickens them with my arousal before giving slow, measured swipes to my clit.

“Should I put my mouth on you?” he whispers against my cheek. “Should I stick my cock in you?” he rasps even softer. My lips purse as I swallow whimpers. My thighs are shaking. This is so fucked up. I'm his captive and can feel the leather straps snugly in place around my ankles. I'm in his basement, balled up in his lap as he plays with me while thinking I'm asleep. I want to open my mouth and say “yes,” because I'm just as fucked up as this situation.

His fingers swipe faster, his hand more determined. His breathing picks up.

“I want to get you off again,” he admits breathily. My lips peel apart, I can’t stop them. Small gasps and sighs escape me. I’m trying so hard to pretend I’m asleep. He’s so warm and large, and the pleasure is pooling in my gut and dipping lower. My fingers twitch, wanting to grab hold of him, but I can’t. He’ll stop if he knows I’m awake.

The Massacre Maniac growls in my ear and I feel his hard cock swollen against my ass.

“Come on, baby. Come on,” he rasps right in my ear, encouraging me to find my pleasure. He won’t even have to put his mouth on me, I’m already coming. A series of straggled whimpers escape my mouth. He keeps teasing my clit with his thumb but moves a finger down to shove deep inside me.

He groans as my body accepts him, practically sucking him in so I have something to tighten around.

Oh, fuck. This was a bad idea for my sanity. However... it’s a good sign for my plan. My body pools in his lap as I relax, coming down from my high.

The Massacre Maniac curses under his breath and starts to unlock the straps with swift, jerky movements.

“Stay asleep, stay asleep, stay asleep,” he whispers in a soft sing-song lullaby as if he’s casting a spell. His strong arms slide under my knees and back, cradling me up in his arms. I make a small noise and slowly open my eyes. He stills and looks down at me in his arms. The Maniac’s expression goes from mild surprise to completely blank in an instant, everything living vacating his eyes. A shudder rolls over me.

“Did you feel what I was doing to you?” he asks. It’s a trap. It has to be. Even though he can act normal sometimes

and say normal things, I know he's not. I know that saying the wrong thing could set him off because part of his logic is fucked.

"What were you doing?" I ask, making my voice heavy as if I'm just waking up. I blink slowly up at him. He's not wearing any paint or his mask. It's startling. Tan skin and dark eyes with black hair that falls into them.

"I've been thinking about something," he says, looking away from me, and I realize I was just staring at him. I try to pull my eyes away but I can't. I'm seeing the face of the Massacre Maniac. A sharp jaw, endless eyes, and a strong nose that has been broken at least once. My brain and body don't know what to do with this. Where's his mask? Where's his makeup? He's too human, too real. His arms and chest are warm against me.

"I've been thinking about the Halloween party last week," he says. I blink, caught off guard by the surprising direction the conversation just took. He's just standing in the middle of his basement with me in his arms, unlocked from the straps. This is a good time to try and escape, but I can't just leap from his arms and flail my way to freedom.

"Why were you there?" he asks, dark eyes falling back on me. They are inkwells that wish to stain me.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"You told me I was your type. You followed me into the bedroom." I don't know where he's going with this. Does he hate sexually active women or something? Oh, Jesus. He drops me to my feet, wrapping one arm around me so tight my ribs protest. His other hand snatches my jaw, forcing me to face him. I can feel the imprint of his hard cock against my stomach.

“Did you want to fuck me?” he asks, and my eyes go wide. This doesn’t feel like a safe topic. I try to jerk my face from his grip, but it’s impossible. He flashes me a toothy smile with eyes still dark as shadows.

“Be a good girl and tell me the truth.”

“Why?” I blurt out, shooting him an exasperated look. My face heats from his choice of words.

“Hmm. How about I tell you something, too. An equal exchange.” His gaze dips down to my mouth as he talks. “But you need to be honest. Then you get one question.” I scoff. What he wants is the answer he wants to hear. There’s no way he could tell if I’m lying unless he has a lie detector shoved up his ass.

“Of course, I wanted to fuck you. I think I made that very clear.” His breath hitches and he goes startingly still. It’s as if he’s forcing himself to be catatonic so he doesn’t do something he thinks is a bad idea.

“What’s your name?” My question surprises him. He blinks, shaking off whatever just happened, and looks at me quizzically.

“Jack.” He gives a little laugh. “Now we’re even. A truth for a truth.” He leans over me, his face coming closer to mine. I decide to go for it. It might be now or never. Every moment I stay in this basement is another moment closer to death.

“I said you were my type at that party. You know why?” I ask. His eyes slide up from my mouth and settle on mine. Something is chilling about them, almost inhuman.

“Why?” he whispers.

“I thought you looked like the Massacre Maniac,” I admit. His teeth grind together, his jaw flexing.

“You’re kind of fucked up, aren’t you?” he asks, his face splitting into a wide smile. His teeth are perfect—white and uniform. He’s had work done on them. Who knows why. Maybe he got them all knocked out while killing people. Maybe his parents never took him to the dentist and he had to fix their neglect later on. But of course, I jump to that possibility because it’s what I did with my own neglected teeth.

“Yeah, I kind of am,” I say. His tongue darts out, playing with the sharp tip of his canine as he looks at me and thinks. I take another risk.

“Why did you unhook me?” I ask.

“Oh, that,” he says, looking at the empty leather straps on the floor. “I was thinking of fucking you.” My eyebrows fly up.

“Do you still want to fuck me?” I wheeze, shocked at his admission. Those alarmingly dark eyes flick back to mine.

“Yeah,” he says easily. My breathing picks up, my heart pounding in my chest. Nothing is happening, but it feels like it could. The tension of the moment is alarming. The problem is that so many different things could happen when it comes to the Maniac, to *Jack*. I need the *right* thing to happen.

“You were touching me while I was asleep,” I say, trying to keep the shakiness from my voice. My hand moves between our bodies, my palm settling on the hard length in his pants. “Like this,” I say, dragging my hand up and down his pants. Jack doesn’t do anything. Fuck, he’s just standing there looking at me.

My tongue darts across my lips and his gaze shoots to the action. Okay, nothing is better than something bad. I press my

hand flat against his lower belly before I slowly push into the fabric of his loose sweatpants until I feel his cock. My hand wraps around his firmness and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows thickly. Jack doesn't say anything, doesn't do anything. The moment feels so frail. One tiny misstep could cause it all to collapse.

As my hand gently glides to the base, the moment feels surreal. I tighten my hold at the bottom and drag my hand back up. He sucks in a deep breath, his eyes flashing wide as he leans in closer to me. The hairs on my arms raise as a disturbing smile slowly spreads across his face—wide and manic.

“I know your secret, Zoe.” I'm a deer caught in the headlights and a car is coming at me fast. *I'm fucking dead.* He knows I'm the Lovers Murderer; he saw the guns in my bag—the fucking tooth, the mask, the bloody clothes. It's going to be brutal carnage. The fear is on my face, I can tell. He can tell, too, going off the pleasant chuckle he gives.

I try to pull my hand from his pants and he snatches my wrist.

“Again,” he growls and I nod while wrapping my fist around him. God, he knows and I don't stand a chance. There's no getting out. He knows I'm who he despises. He said the Lovers Murderer had terrible things coming for her.

This fucking basement is going to be my tomb. I panic, pulling my hand away, and drop to my knees.

“Please,” I beg. Fuck, I'm pathetic but this is all I have. I need to make him remember I'm not just who he despises, but I'm also his final girl. That I'm special.

That he wants to fuck me.

My knees hurt from the concrete floor. His hooded eyes watch as I pull his pants down, exposing his hard cock. As he collects my hair in a ponytail to grip tightly in his fist, my hand wraps around warm, tight skin.

He's as big here as he is everywhere else. The tip is dusky and thick veins run up prominently from the base. I can almost feel him throb in my hands. The media thinks Jack might be impotent. They say a lot of men with piquerism are. If they tried to say that to my face, I'd burst out laughing. He's virile and thick. Christ, he might be doing some people a favor by offering the knife instead of his cock.

His hand tightens on my hair impatiently and I waste no time. It all feels so frantic, like everything could fail if I allow him a moment to think. My lips open and wrap around the head of his cock. Jack looks at me with eyes half-lidded and a hazy daze of lust.

I swirl my tongue around the tip and suck. His eyes flare and he finally decides he's done being an observer. With one hand still fisting my hair at the back of my skull, he reaches his other hand up to grip my jaw tightly. That's when I realize I have the hands of a murderer clutching my skull. Big, calloused fingers that exude power hold my head in his hands. He could snap my neck and rip off my head if he wanted to. Or suffocate me if he jammed his cock down the back of my throat for long enough.

"Relax," he whispers softly. My hands grip his thighs, my nails digging into the skin as he thrusts, cock pressing into the back of my mouth. He bursts through the tight muscles into my throat. My head automatically tries to jerk back but he holds me with those powerful, mean hands that have taken so much life and doesn't let me go.

I gag and he groans. I feel my throat tightening around every inch of him and he shudders and melts above me.

He's not going to show mercy. That knowledge does terrible things to me. My face flushes, my eyelids feel heavy, and my body feels lax as he pulls his cock back out, sliding the weight across my tongue until I can suck in air.

Not a moment later, he grips my head harder and pushes all the way back in.

"Take it for me," he groans, pulling my head tight against his body. He buries my nose against him, trying to get in even deeper. I gag and he relaxes, like that was what he was waiting for. I moan around him.

"Oh God, Zoe," he rasps, his words thick with desire. Slowly he pulls back out, hands still holding my head hostage. "Big breath," he warns as the tip of his cock lays right on the tip of my tongue. My eyes widen and I quickly follow his command. I gulp in as much air as my lungs can hold. His eyes flash with feral need as I readily obey and then he plunges back in, pressing the fat head of his cock down the length of my tongue until he finds my throat.

He doesn't stop, diving into the tight muscles and pushing past them. This is what he does, isn't it? Jack loves to put phallic things in deeper than someone might want. I *do* want it though. I want him to abuse my throat with his throbbing cock until he's growling out his release. I want him to make me take it, even if there's resistance.

He does just that, diving in his cock so deep I can't breathe. I gag but he holds me tightly to his body. My lungs scream. My nails scratch his thighs.

“Just like that, baby. Hold on,” he groans, seemingly turned on more as my body fights. I feel his cock jerk in my throat as my body attempts to inhale around him. “A little longer. You can do it.” He’s making deep sounds of pleasure as my body struggles against the invasion. Finally, he pulls out.

“One more time,” he says as I suck in breath, feeding my lungs. I make an exasperated noise but open my mouth wide.

“You’re so good. My perfect, Zoe,” he cuts off with a satisfied sigh as he finds his way down my throat again. “So good,” he repeats. The fingers in my hair pet me gently for a moment before my body begins to fight him again. I gag and suck, my body begging for a break. I want to whine and whimper but nothing can come out around the fat cock in my throat.

He’s groaning, trying to thrust even deeper.

“Fuck, baby,” he spits out, his thighs starting to shake. I’m not sure he’s going to pull out in time. I feel lightheaded, and he’s holding my head in place, not letting me escape. “Almost there, you’re doing it,” he tells me and I try to relax, feeling an inappropriate amount of trust in his words.

He lets out a primal growl and starts to fuck my mouth, his hips thrusting quickly as his cock throbs. Salty, warm liquid begins to slide across my tongue as he keeps going. I breathe around him, catching my breath slowly.

The knowledge he’s coming makes me whine. I can’t help it. With sharp, shallow breaths, he looks down at me making noises. More cum fills my mouth and his cock jerks rhythmically as it unloads. Once I’ve caught enough breath, my lips wrap around the shaft and I suck. My tongue slides across his girth as I swallow and groan.

“Fuck,” he hisses, suddenly pulling out. He stumbles backwards, shaking his head as he looks at me on my knees with a flushed face and swollen lips. His spent cock is wet with my saliva.

Before I can do anything or figure out what’s going on, his eyes laser focus on me and he shoves his cock back in his pants.

This isn’t good. This is very bad.

“No!” I yell, trying to fling myself away from him, but he’s on me in an instant, body falling on top of mine, hands dancing with my limbs as he gets control of me. He drags me across the room kicking and screaming to a table wrapped in blue packing blankets that are held down by cloth straps. Jesus fucking Christ, it looks like the set up of a snuff film.

He looks so fucking keyed up he might burst in his fucking pants.

“Your secret, Zoe, is you like being forced. Like it rough,” he growls. I stop fighting.

He doesn't know I'm the Lovers Murderer.

He lifts me up and presses me onto the table. Jack’s eyes are soft and his mouth is open as he takes heavy breaths while staring into my eyes. It seems like he’s about to fuck me and I shudder beneath him, gripping his wide shoulders.

A smile spreads across his face like he knows all my secrets. He might have figured out a few things, but he missed the one that matters most.

I hear the scrape of metal and something sharp settles against my stomach. My eyes widen and my body startles with every emotion I know how to feel. It’s thrilling and terrifying.

“It’s okay,” he rasps gently into my ear, soft and warm. His fingers brush the hair from my face. “I’m sorry it’s so big, but I know you’ll take it so fucking well,” he murmurs with his knife poised at my middle before he presses down, sinking it inside me. His groan is impossible to hear over my scream, but I can feel it like thunder rolling across a mountain. It’s just as poignant as the knife, just as demanding of my attention.

My scream breaks off and I groan in pain. His breath hitches and his hand moves away from the knife jutting from my body, sliding to my hip to grip me tightly as if this is sex. As if he just buried his cock inside me, but it’s not inside me. I know because it’s pressed against my leg, a steel rod in his pants.

“Baby,” he rasps in pleasure as if I’m gripping his cock inside me and not a knife in my gut. Even I get confused for a moment because his acting is so complete—his pleasure so real. A shudder of pleasure rolls through his body as a strained whimper breaks past my lips.

“God, you fucking love it,” he says in disbelief, fingers digging sharply into my hips. He’s fucking insane. Truly fucked up. He’s delusional to think that anyone could actually enjoy this... But I fucking do in the most depraved corner of my mind—the sharp slice of his knife, the way he keeps trying to comfort me as he fucking murders me, his shudder with every breath I take.

I imagine opening my mouth and asking him to kill me.

Please kill me, Jack. You’re just so hot I want the fucking privilege.

What the fuck?

The thought scares the fucking life out of me. Which is a terrible turn of phrase right now.

This is my delusion, the one where he makes me feel special and I believe it's real. But I'm not special. I'm just the girl he's failed to kill a couple times and I'm the serial killer he hates even if he doesn't know it.

I bet he whispers in everyone's ear. Tells them how good they take his knife. Calls them baby. Groans when they feed him little whimpers of pain.

I will not be another one of his victims. Another pricked pig in the pile of dead names at his feet.

I know how to change this. I know how to show this motherfucker I'm someone important.

I reach up, grip the knife handle, and yank it out. As I feel a gush of thick, warm liquid soak my shirt, I aim the knife at him.

9

JACK

ZOE WRITHES IN PLEASURE BENEATH ME. I KNOW IT HURTS HER, it's just so big and powerful, but I'm committed to forcing this deep satisfaction on her. She needs it, wants it so much.

The devil on my shoulder says I should fuck her. The angel says I should kill her. A vague voice from somewhere else asks *por que no los dos?*

I like that voice the best. Maybe I'll kill her while she comes. Maybe I'll kill her as I come. Either way, I want my cock buried deep inside her when it happens. I bet she'll squirm on me, tighten, and gush... blood.

Something sharp pokes through my clothes.

Shit.

I grind my teeth and growl as she pushes the knife into me. I breathe through the pain, tugging her hair hard in my fist.

"I never said I was into role reversal," I spit out.

There's satisfaction on her face, pleasure even. She's fucked me with my own knife and honestly, I'm not sure whether I'm turned on or furious. When the knife comes back out, she replaces it with two fingers.

Are we performing fucked up foreplay or is she trying to kill me? It's murky to me. Zoe briefly finger fucks my brand new hole and blood gushes out. Even if this is foreplay, I need to duct tape this and probably lay down for a moment. I'm feeling a little woozy.

I lurch to the ground, trying to find the tape I dropped somewhere down here. Her heel connects with my jaw. If I was a smaller man, she'd have kicked me to the floor. Instead, my head just jerks to the side and I groan, holding the knife wound as blood squeezes out between my fingers. I feel movement and jerk back, a knife slashing where my face just was.

I resume scrambling for the tape when I hear her with it. She's beat me to the punch and is doing exactly what I intended, giving the knife wound a big, ugly, silver band-aid. She waves the tape at me then tosses it into the junk corner where it slips between all the random odds and ends like it's a frightened rodent that never wants to be found again.

Now I'm angry, but still bleeding badly, so instead of running after her and teaching her a lesson, I go after the tape. She scrambles towards the door as I peel my shirt off and cover the pretty knife wound she's given me. I can catch her, I tell myself. Even though my impressive strides seem to be zigzagging.

The guttural belch and high-pitched squeal of my van make my eyes bug. She's stealing my fucking van. I stumble up the stairs and outside just as she's backing off the lawn where the van is still sitting against the tree. She leans out the window and flips me off with both hands before stomping on the gas.

"Fuck me," I growl, leaning against my doorframe.

As she races away, I see that someone spray-painted “huff paint, lick taint” on the back doors, which does nothing to brighten my mood. That’s pretty conspicuous and I kidnapped someone in that. At least now I can report it stolen. That’s a funny thought.

However, the bigger issue here is that she knows where I live. She practically knows *who* I am. I have to abandon the house, my name... How the fuck do I keep messing this up so tragically? Does she have a lucky rabbit’s foot squirreled up her pussy? I’ll make sure to do a thorough check next time.

At this point, I’m not even sure who’s getting closer to killing the other. She ran over me, sent me through the windshield of my van, and stabbed me.

I poke at the metallic tape and hiss. First things first, decide on cauterization or stitches. The smell of burning flesh is always an odd delight, so I decide on that as I shuffle into the house.

I turn on an electric burner on the stove and eye my options, settling on a metal spoon over a butter knife. I place the utensil on the red rings and grab a kitchen towel to wrap around the handle when it’s time. For a few moments, I stare blankly at the heating spoon before looking at the knife wound. I groan and pick at the edge of the tape.

This is going to fucking hurt. I pinch the corner and tear. A hiss escapes through my teeth and blood begins to slide out. There’s no time to waste. I throw the towel over the spoon’s handle and grab it. It’s so hot I can feel it burning through the towel and threatening to melt my fingertips.

The spoon slips a little as I settle it to my skin, the blood slickening my body. I groan and force it back on the opening fully, flinging myself on a kitchen chair and dropping my head

back as I slump. The pain aches as the smell of burnt flesh teases my nostrils. I breathe it in and out as blood drips to the tile floor.

The adrenaline wears off and the spoon slips from my hand as my energy ebbs and drops to zero. My head lolls to the side as my eyes close. I can't afford to pass out. I pop my eyes back open and look down at the wound. It's closed at least. Now I have to drag my ragged ass around collecting everything important.

I remember she took my van and curse. Zoe is coming very close to getting on my nerves, something I didn't think her capable of.

Okay, so stash my most sensitive stuff in the crawl space of an empty house a block away and travel with what I can carry in a small pack. Luckily, this town is a playground of empty subdivisions, closed hotels, and boarded-up stores. Briefly, I entertain the idea of going to the homeless shelter. They'd have a hot meal and a bed at least. Too bad my face is about to be plastered on every TV across the nation.

"Fuck!" I yell, pulling at my hair. I'm about to be embarrassed on national news for my inability to kill Zoe. God damn it. The femme fatale is going to think I'm a joke.

A manic laugh comes from my mouth that I can't stop for a while. Fuck me. I'm going bonkers just like I said I would if Zoe got away again.

JACK

NORMALLY, WHEN SOMEONE ESCAPES A SERIAL KILLER'S basement, it tends to get a little airtime. So why in the fuck haven't I heard anything about Zoe escaping the evil clutches of the big, bad Massacre Maniac for a second time?

Something isn't adding up and I can't figure out what. There's been zero action at my house. I know because I'm still in the neighborhood keeping an eye from a suitable, safe distance.

Nothing, fucking nada. I don't like this. It's making me nervous. I chuckle aloud like an insane person as I bite my nails. I've been stuck in this house without electricity for days, doom scrolling my phone for any news about Zoe and me. There's been some chatter about the Lovers Murderer since her last kill apparently left new evidence.

If she gets herself caught before I can murder her, I'm going to be angry.

My phone is set up on the window's ledge and I have the streamed broadcast of our local news paused on the screen with the host, Micah, looking directly at me. My anxiety has me barking out questions to him.

“Why the fuck aren’t you talking about Zoe?” I growl at him. His eyes move as he slowly comes to life.

“Maybe she died before she could get help,” Micah says with a big smile. “That was a nasty wound,” he hisses the words in entertainment just to mock me.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Fuck it, I’m going for a walk. I pull my hood up and leave. Today has been one long stretch of gray—a dark overcast day that finally breaks into rain as I step out of the house I’m squatting in.

I walk to my house half-expecting a team of SWAT agents to peel around the corner and start beating me senseless. Instead, I’m just standing on an empty street, looking at my empty house where I could have been living comfortably. I’ve been sleeping on an unfinished concrete floor, using an old paint drop blanket as a musty pillow. No big TV, no flushing toilet, no refrigerator. I’ve had to ride the bus to town to charge my phone every day.

With a growl, I stomp up my yard, deciding I’m going in. Before I get very far, there’s a beeping noise that has my heart seizing in my chest. Fuck, they’ve got the place bugged. I never decided if I would rather go to jail for life or die during the attempt to arrest me. Suicide by cop is a tempting option but if I do that my story is over before I even get a chance to write the best part. If I go to jail, at least I can be interviewed and have a circus of a trial to look forward to.

Nothing is happening. I twist around in the yard, my hands up in a shrug as I try to spot the police. There was definitely a beep. It sounded like an alert of some kind that went off around the time I stepped on the dead grass. Where would it

come from, though? I scan the tree then slide my eyes to the mailbox. *There.*

My eyes dart around the empty street as I prowl closer. I rip the front down and peer inside. There's a light brown package in there. When I reach in and pull it out, it's a lightweight, bubble wrap mailer with my address and name. The "a" in Jack has been replaced by a simple skull. My fingers brush over the handwriting. It looks like a woman's.

My eyes dart around the street one last time before I rush up the lawn and go into my house. I set the package on the living room coffee table and search the rooms for any sign people have been here. Nothing is out of place which is relieving, but doesn't answer any of my nagging questions.

I plop on the couch and stare at the package for a few minutes while still waiting for someone to pop out and arrest me. When nothing happens, I jerk forward and rip open the package. At the bottom is an archaic, cheap phone.

"What the fuck," I whisper slowly as I reach in and pull it out. This is getting stranger and stranger. My final girl escapes from captivity and there's no news. My house is silent despite her knowing where I live. There should be a manhunt, but there's nothing.

Maybe Micah the news guy is right. Maybe she died somewhere between here and help and she's decaying in my van on the side of the road. My fingers tingle and my arms feel numb. I don't want that to be what happened. I've waited so long to kill her and never once considered the possibility that she might die without me there with her.

No. I refuse to accept that as a possibility. She can't die without me there. I've decided that. I will be there when she

takes her last breath. It's mine. I'll swallow her last exhale and keep that part of her inside me forever.

Why did I let her get away? How could I let that happen? I feel sick thinking about her corpse slumped in the driver's seat of my van, days past its expiration date with milky eyes and her clean, sweet scent missing as the smell of decomp rises around her.

"Fuck," I hiss, my gut twisting in dread. Finally, I punch a button on the phone and the screen lights up saying I have several messages. My eyebrows pinch together as I click to open them.

The phone drops from my hands when I see what's on it. My body feels cold, the room spinning around me. I quickly scoop the phone back up and pull it close to my face, making sure I'm not being tricked.

It's a picture of Zoe.

Someone has my Zoe.

And she's not with them willingly.

Someone stole my fucking final girl. If they taint her death with their hands I'll make them beg for their own end, which I won't fucking deliver. I'll make them keep suffering for as long as their pathetic body can withstand it. Then I'll bring them back to life to make them suffer until even their mind is just a smoking husk.

I hate these feelings. Zoe has created anxiety and dread inside me. It's insufferable to care about someone.

There's a picture of her tied to a chair, her eyes glaring at the person taking the picture.

She's still wearing the clothes she had on when I grabbed her. There's a slice in her shirt, blood staining it from where I'd sunk my knife in. My hand goes to my matching wound, pressing two fingers in to feel the ache.

Finally, I drag my attention away from her to look at the other messages.

Look what I found. Should I kill her for you?

You can't seem to be able to do it, lol. -Lovers
Murderer

I stand up, hurling the phone hard enough that it breaks through the drywall. My heart beats fast and loud in my ears as my fingers twitch. With gritted teeth, I slam my boot down on the coffee table. It cracks down the middle, breaking in half. Next is the sofa, my fingers gripping the armrest and pulling with such a vicious desire for vengeance that the entire thing rips up from the ground as I twist it over.

I stomp over to the new hole in the wall and punch it bigger. My fingers grip the drywall and break it apart, powdery pieces of it covering my hands until there's enough space for me to stick my arm in and reach the phone.

Thank fuck it's some ancient, indestructible Nokia brick. My eyes have tunnel vision as I scan the words again. I thought I hated this bitch before, but I didn't even know what hate was. Rage consumes me in a way I've never once felt in my entire life.

My teeth grind together and I press my head to the wall, breathing in and out to try and calm down. Losing control would be bad. My fingers shake as I fight myself. This level of emotion isn't logical. It'll have me racing into town on foot yelling for Zoe as I kill everyone I see.

That's not going to fix the situation, but what fucking can?

Find her. I pull the phone up and peer down at the picture. I can see details of the space. I close my eyes and breath. Now that I know there's a plan I can start to calm down. I punch the wall again, putting another hole in it. Then I peel myself away from it and flop on the busted couch, covering my face with my arm as I laugh at the ridiculousness of this situation.

Zoe escapes my basement just to be caught by the Lovers Murderer? How the fuck does this happen? I don't know but the picture is staring me right in the face and the fact this phone was sent *here* with my name and address leads me to believe that the femme fatale got that information from the one person who was recently given it.

This explains why Zoe hasn't been in the news and my house is still safe. Well, not really safe. Safe enough at the moment to take a hot shower, eat a warm meal, and decide on a long list of heinous atrocities I'm going to commit during the delightfully delicious desecration of femme fatale's body.

What do you want?

I send in a text back. She takes a while to respond. Enough time for me to do everything I want in my house and then leave. Even if it's comfortable, it's too big a risk. Being in the squatter house a few streets over is still a risk if someone is paying attention. Someone might be, but I have to hope that keeping a captive has that person's hands tied. Especially a captive that is a complete pain in the ass. I hope Zoe is ten times as difficult for her.

I'll tell you where she is...

Why would you do that?

Instead of answering, she sends an address. She has me by the fucking balls. It's a trap, but one I have to walk into.

Show me her again.

A picture comes through almost immediately, a close-up of Zoe's face, her emotionless eyes staring into the camera that's too close to her face.

Shit. I need time to plan. I pick up my actual phone and search the address. It's a warehouse close to the amusement park, tucked away in the forest that surrounds the place. It was probably storage for the park when the place was still open. I wasn't even aware of the building, but I'm not surprised by her knowledge of it. The Lovers Murderer takes her victims to different locations each time, picking out abandoned buildings that litter Umbra Valley.

Come in one hour or I kill her for you. :)

My eyes bug. One fucking hour doesn't leave a lot of time to plan. Which she obviously knows.

Fuck it. The two people I want to kill the most in the world are currently together, asking me to come to them. I'm sure this will work out fucking great.

That's not enough time

Not my problem.

Bitch

Asshole

Three hours.

One.

Two

Forty-five minutes.

“Fuck,” I snap, running around the house to collect as many knives as I can hide on my person. I have to take the city bus to the stop outside the theme park, then trudge to this building where undoubtedly I’m walking into some type of trap.

After jogging to the front of the neighborhood and waiting at the stop, I pull the phone back out.

I’m on the way.

Good.

Why are you doing this?

I want to meet

Why?

The bus comes and I stomp on.

“Hey, motherfucker. Bus pass or two dollars,” the driver harasses me when I try to walk past him. I shoot him the meanest look I can muster up, but he just points at the payment reader. I pull out a five and shove it in the little box before moving inside to sit. Quickly, I pull out the phone to read her response.

Why not?

Maybe because I’ll fucking kill you?

I abuse the buttons as I type it out. It’s annoyingly slow since each number represents three letters, meaning I have to

mash them several times just to get a single letter.

That's not very nice

Then there's radio silence. As the bus makes its stops, I grow grumpier and more irritated. People refuse to sit near me, cramming themselves at the furthest end of the bus away from me. My stop is last on the line, my house being on the opposite side of town—a pleasant distance from the park.

I stare at the phone, wanting to spew a hundred insults and threats but now's not the time. I type them up and manage to delete them before I make a dumb mistake. I've never shown this type of restraint before. It's maddening. The Lovers Murderer is the one in control and we both know it.

JACK

IT'S ALREADY BEEN FORTY-FIVE MINUTES BY THE TIME I GET off the bus and start trudging up the back entrance to the park. It's a dirt road and the soggy day is making for an early night and muddy walk.

I decide not to alert the femme fatale about my progress. It's a risk I'll take because I'm not a complete dumbass. I'm running close to her deadlines, but she's either already killed Zoe or she's going to wait until I get there. Me running late won't change that.

The building is tucked right at the edge of dense woods that croak and wheeze with wildlife flourishing in the fall's cooler weather. The woods choke out the light and give me a sense of unease. There are too many places people could hide.

I pull my mask on and slip into the trees, going around the entire perimeter of the building under the cover of the forest. My boots snap fallen twigs and crush dead leaves. The only noises out here are me and the soft patter of rain. The bugs and animals remain silent as I stalk around, radiating bloodlust.

There's not a car or person in sight. Even though my time is up, the burner phone has been silent ever since her last message on the bus. I don't know what to make of that.

This is a bad choice on my end. I should never have come here but I'm not logical about Zoe. I need to see this through even though each new step forward only heightens my concerns.

Finally, I can't wait any longer and dart towards a side entrance. The red metal door is flush with the building and decorated with brown, rusted spots. I grab the handle and am a bit surprised to find it unlocked. But then, I am an invited guest. I quickly open the door and dart inside, closing it behind me. My eyes aren't adjusted to the dark and I can't see my own hand in front of my face. I slowly move around, shuffling my feet.

My movements echo around whatever large room I'm standing in. I have a bad feeling.

Reaching into my pocket, I retrieve the burner phone and hit the call button. No ringing comes from the building. *Shit*. I pull out my own phone and flip on the flashlight, illuminating the large room.

Demanding, oversized eyes are right in my face. They're wide, manic, and alarming. I hiss, jerking forward, and sinking my knife into the person. But the instant I lunge forward, I already realize this isn't something alive. It's an eight-foot animatronic dog. Its furry, anthropomorphic face is half peeled away from a metal skeleton that reflects the light from my phone.

Two rows of blunt metal teeth grimace at me. When my body connects with the creature, its eyes move. Two gray globes sink down, seeming to look directly at me as I pull myself away. Even as I move around it, the gaze has an unsettling way of following me.

I strain to listen for any noise and can almost hear whispers coming from the machine in front of me. I shake my head and keep going. The building is sparse other than this single animatronic. It's sat here alone for ten years, slowly decaying in silence as it stares endlessly at the exit.

It doesn't take me long to spot the chair in the middle of the room. There's a human-sized lump on the ground beside it.

I don't think; I run towards her, dropping to the floor and twisting her around. A masculine face gapes at me, his body stiff with rigor mortis and cold to the touch. I push it off me in disgust and jerk my head around before my eyes resettle on the corpse.

His body has been decorated with knife wounds and sitting beside him is an impressive Ka-Bar with blood on it. This isn't how the Lovers Murderer kills. It's how I kill.

"Fuck me," I hiss. This is a set up, but not the way I anticipated. I need to get out of here—now. I rip my phone from my pants as I run to the exit I came in from. Blue and red lights flash in from grimy windows, lighting the place up in strobing anxiety. The cops are already here.

I've been waiting for this moment for days, but it still surprised me. I'm ready to fight my way out though. They've only just arrived, meaning there are holes I can poke through.

I throw myself against the side door and listen. The burner phone goes off and I look down at the message.

Sorry, Jack. Guess I changed my mind about meeting. Give my regards to the pigs!

I grit my teeth and burst through the door, coming face to face with a pair of police officers. I slam my knife into the ear of one and leave it jammed in there. I grab the second by his

collar and rip him from the ground before slamming him back down on it. My boot snaps down on his nose with an impressive crunch before I take off into the woods.

The racket behind me is immense—dogs baying, sirens screeching, and even a goddamn helicopter. My lungs are burning as I stumble across a gaping, round sewer entrance. Finally, a bit of luck. I descend the shaft into the large sanitation pipe. My boots hit the water and I take off through the underground tunnels, twisting myself around and around before hiding in a dark turn-off. The sound of walkie-talkies, dogs, and splashing steps alert me that they're still hot on my trail.

One cop stops right beside my hiding spot. He shudders and chills sprout on the back of his neck as if he senses something terrible nearby. He does, it's me. I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows and slowly turns in my direction. I lunge from my hiding place. His gun goes off as I smack his arm away. Then I grab his wrist, bringing it down on my knee with the snap of breaking bones. The gun clatters to the ground and the cop cries out in the sudden extreme pain.

My hand covers his mouth, muffling his wail of pain from the compound fracture. Then I slam him into the other side of the sewer, his head smacking the wet stone. His legs immediately buckle and he falls on his back into the shallow water. I step over him and he holds his hands up to shield himself from the sight of me.

“No! No!” he wails; a full-grown man stricken with terror as I loom above him with a skull mask. I flip him over and push his head into the water. He thrashes, unable to breathe. It's taking too long, so I grab the back of his head and slam it into the shallow water until his body goes still.

The shadows swallow me again as I quickly proceed deeper down the dark, wet tunnel, gradually leaving the radio squawks and barking dogs in the distance. Eventually, I manage to reach another ladder leading to a manhole that I can only hope is in a suitably isolated area. I cross my fingers for luck as I push up on the heavy iron manhole cover and peek out. There's a few buildings and a couple old cars, but it looks like I'm safe. I slide the cover aside and climb out while glancing around to ensure I'm unobserved. I spend the rest of the night dragging my cold ass to the squatter house, exhausted and feeling confused.

What the hell just happened? The entire thing feels off— illogical in a way I can't pinpoint.

“What am I missing?” I find the news on my phone to see the damage. The manhunt is live, but then Zoe's face flashes on the screen startling me. Nothing about her looks like she's been held captive the past few days. Her clothes are fresh and her hair is smooth.

She flashes the camera a huge smile. She's never smiled for cameras before. It's contagious; my mouth twitches into my own small smile before it drops and my eyebrows press together.

Then Zoe opens her mouth and lies spill out while her eyes glisten in victory and her smile curves connivingly. She says I've been sending her messages. My eyes drift to the burner phone and reality slowly begins to unearth itself, showing me the answers to my unease.

She says I'm obsessed with her while blinking demurely through her lashes. This is quite the show.

Zoe says I admitted I was impotent and I'd begged her to come here tonight so I could show her how much I loved her.

What. The. Fuck.

The interview goes on with me gaping at the screen in confusion. I stay in a state of shock until the man asks a question that changes everything.

“Why do you think he used a gun at the funhouse two years ago when he never has before or since?”

“I’m sorry?” she asks, honey-brown eyes darting away. A gun? How did I miss this? It was because after the funhouse I was hyper focused on the survivor, not the dead.

“David Sabato died from a gunshot wound to the head. Some people suggest it wasn’t the Massacre Maniac, who seems entirely opposed to the use of guns. There’s a theory that someone else killed him.”

“I didn’t see anyone else,” she says quietly, looking as if she’s tired when a moment ago she was practically bouncing up and down in front of the camera.

“Some people are saying it’s disturbingly similar to the Lovers Murderer,” the interviewer says, pushing the microphone close to Zoe’s devious lips. How about that? My hand reaches for the burner phone. I scoop it up and send a message.

Impotent, really?

On the live feed, a phone chirps.

“Sorry,” Zoe says, pulling the same style phone out that she gave me. She looks at the screen and bites back a secretive smile before sliding it back into her pants. I turn the screen off and lie down, setting the burner phone in the middle of my chest.

My final girl isn’t perfect like I thought.

She's not weak. She doesn't cry and beg when captured, she promises to finger fuck my brain while spitting in my face. She doesn't writhe beneath me screaming in a pool of blood when I stab her. She rips the knife out and gives me a matching scar before fingering the wound with a smirk dancing across her lips. She gets turned on when I attack her because she's as fucked up as they come. Because she likes life or death, she likes blood and pain, and she likes putting bullets into the heads of men.

My final girl is the Lovers Murderer.

And she absolutely loathes me. She could have just told them my name and address and sent them to my house, but that wasn't enough for her. She wanted me caught red-handed so that any trial would end in seconds.

And right now on live television, she's trying to rewrite my history to make me seem weak, submissive, and stupid.

She wants to ruin my life and ruin my name.

My heart beats fast behind the warm phone on my chest. There's an electric current under my skin making me feel like I'm floating. I'm breathless and my mouth is dry.

There has never been a time in my life when I felt capable of love, but for *her* the rules of the universe itself have shifted to make it happen.

I adore her. My twisted, fucked up final girl. The memory of the basement flashes in my mind.

"You're kind of fucked up, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I kind of am," she said back.

My hands shake as I lift them to my face, rubbing my tired eyes as I laugh.

I love a woman who I drove to despise me. But I don't care if she hates me. I don't care if she runs from me or escapes my greedy demands again. I don't care if she shoves a knife in me a few more times or tries to ventilate my head with a bullet.

I always knew she was mine, but never appreciated how I'm hers as well. We're two twisted souls who can never be untangled again.

A WEEK LATER, THEY STILL HAVEN'T CAUGHT THE MASSACRE Maniac. Which leaves me feeling like I took a big risk I shouldn't have. Especially because my story has brought the cops sniffing around the old funhouse crimes as they ask questions about Jack. The way they keep circling back to the funhouse makes me itch.

“Run over that night again,” Detective Harmon says, sounding exhausted. This is the tenth fucking time he's asked. He claims that if I kept reliving it, I might remember something new.

We're sitting in my living room and Parrot keeps flying at the Detective's head, making him yelp.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” Parrot coos with its almost human voice, lying to the man. Detective Harmon shivers in displeasure and tries to ignore my pet who wants to bite him. It's hard to keep acting like this isn't fucking irritating. It's also nerve-wracking. I can't tell if I'm paranoid or if they're focusing on me and that gun two years ago a little too much.

“David had a gun. I don't know why. He shot the Maniac. The Maniac pulled him from the room to finish him off. I didn't see what happened out there, *maybe David killed*

himself,” I huff under my breath. The detective’s eyes settle on me, thoughts whirling in his head.

Why did I say that? Because I’m fucking frustrated and terrified that they know something about me and my murders. I’m playing a cat and mouse game with the police, trying to ride this out to the other side. If they really have some suspicion about me, then running won’t help. Neither will killing this fucker but I keep imagining it anyway.

I recross my legs and wrap my arms around myself.

“Walk me through Wednesday night, two weeks ago,” he finally says after his long, poignant pause. My body tries to react but I hold it in, trying not to be too still as I lock up the panic roiling up inside me. That was the night I killed Noah Rathe. It was also the night Jack kidnapped me. I didn’t tell the police about that. It would have made the lies more complicated and simple is best when weaving a web of deceit.

But now I realize how they must have cataloged every single thing in Jack’s house. My blood was on those blankets, mingled with his. Was he dumb enough to keep them? The heavy look on the detective’s face makes me think that they know I’m lying. Fuck. But how bad is it? I shouldn’t assume anything.

My lip starts to tremble as I begin working myself up into an act. I’ll tell them I was ashamed of getting kidnapped, not ready to talk about it. That he did things to me I didn’t want others to know about.

A phone chirps. Both me and the detective pull our phones out but there’s nothing. It goes off again and my eyes bug.

It’s the burner. The one Jack’s connected to.

“Excuse me,” I whisper, leaping up from the couch and darting into my room. I pull out the second phone and see he’s sent messages. A line of goosebumps raises on my arm. There’s something about Jack that bleeds a sense of evil.

The phone starts ringing.

“Shit,” I hiss, looking over my shoulder at the empty doorway. He just had to do this when the detective was here. If he’s reaching out after a week of silence, I need to know what he has to say. It’s been miserable staying in the very house he kidnapped me from, but the police have me on 24-hour surveillance. Lately, I’ve been wondering if it’s me they’re watching suspiciously, instead of keeping an eye out for Jack.

“Zoe,” Jack sings into my ear as I press it to my face. I feel cold all of a sudden. I swallow thickly and reach for a sweater in my dresser. I remain silent as I pull it on and peer out my door down the hall. The police didn’t know about this phone, obviously. I hear Parrot talking to the detective and slip back into my room, leaving the door open so I can listen out.

“Watch my video,” Jack demands like a demon whispering in my ear. Anything normal about Jack is a facade, a lie of sanity. Right now those lies are stripped bare like flesh from the bone, the Massacre Maniac is on the other side of this call in all his twisted glory. The way he talks, the way he feels... even through a phone line. There’s something wrong with Jack.

The problem is that I like it. He feels dangerous in a way that is larger than reality dictates. He’s just a man, but sometimes he feels like more. Like he’s surpassed humanity through his depravity. Jack frightens me. He’s a force unmatched. He can hunt me down and end me easily if I allow him any opportunity.

The risk, the fear... it's exhilarating. But that's all we have. I deluded myself into more before and I wasn't going to let it happen again. I had to hate Jack because he was a warped lie—a dream that couldn't make its way to reality. He says and does things that make me think he's offering me companionship, but Jack lacks the humanity for that.

He wants to kill me. He made that very clear. He might want to kill me more than he's ever wanted to kill anyone else, but that was the only special thing about me. I can't imagine what he thinks after I attempted to get him caught standing over a body.

My tongue darts over my lips as I stay on the line silently. Jack waits patiently for a full minute.

"I can hear you breathing," he whispers. "You sound scared." He hangs up. Shit. I open the messages and see he's sent a link. It must be the video he demanded I watch. I slip the phone back into my top drawer and go out to the detective, trying to get rid of him as fast as possible. It takes another hour, and it's not good that I answer his questions while distracted by the video I've yet to watch.

"Two weeks ago? Wednesday?" he reminds me. I don't even entertain the idea of the act I planned before. I wouldn't be able to pull it off now. Instead, I say I was home, quickly shooting answers out at him.

I want to see what Jack has to show me. I think it's going to be very, very bad. I need to see the depravity that the Massacre Maniac can provide me with. When the detective finally leaves, my hands are shaking. I run to get the burner phone and my cheap laptop before typing in the link.

His mask fills the screen. The same one from that first night—a pale, plastic skeleton swimming in shadows. Dark

eyes stare at me through the holes and there is the barest flash of skin beneath the mask at his neck. It makes chills race up my spine and I pause the video a moment just to reassure myself that this isn't live.

I press play again and the camera spins around, showing he's inside a house. He steps over a body and reaches out to a closet.

For a moment, I feel like I'm watching the night he found me in a closet. He rips open the door and there's movement, coats twisting on their hangers as a person yells. Jack moves closer, aiming down to show his knife before he thrusts it forward blindly into the coats. The sounds of pain almost sounded like groans of pleasure. Jack's breath hitches behind the camera as the person is pulled from the back of the closet and into the hallway.

Jack twists them around and shoves his knife in the same spot he stabbed me. He's showing me just how vividly he remembers.

"Zoe," he moans before he starts thrusting the knife in again and again, rapid, angry stabbing. The screen goes black and I stare at my own reflection for a few moments. So it's going to be like this, is it? I twist in the kitchen chair and look out the window. A police car sits outside and the driver's eyes are burning into me.

Something is going to give—the police, Jack, me. I can feel the storm approaching.

The video suddenly starts again and I realize it never ended, it was just a black screen until something new came on.

Jack walks to a chair in the middle of the frame and falls into it with wide-spread legs. There's a body behind him,

soaking the cream carpet in burgundy blood. A knife is still gripped in his hand. The blood dripping off it lets me know he only just stopped killing.

His hands are exposed, teasing the man beneath the mask. His calloused fingers give a brief tug to the fabric at his thighs, trying to straighten the tight fabric, but it still bunches at the top of his legs, hugging the massive bulge that he immediately grabs onto and adjusts.

“Are you watching?” he asks—voice a rough, husky thing like gravel and smoke. He unzips his pants.

“You have no idea what I’m going to do to you,” he comments, peeling the band of his briefs down to reveal a long, hard cock, almost pale against the black fabric on his body. He pulls the knife up, wiping it off on his hand. With blood-coated fingers, he grips his erection, sliding his fist down with a sharp tug. A groan rolls from behind the mask. My heart is sprinting in my chest and my thoughts are all blanking.

My eyes track the way his knuckles move up and down. He’s already panting, spreading his thighs wide as he slips further down in his chair. One hand is casually holding a bloody knife while the other works himself over. The mask stares directly at me as he jerks off faster. It’s left unsaid what he’s thinking about, but he alluded well enough. He’s thinking of me and the things he plans to do to me.

I know I shouldn’t take his words to mean anything other than his desire to murder me. I know I shouldn’t...

The Massacre Maniac keeps panting behind the mask—no words, just eyes burning into me through the holes, and his fist sliding up and down. His cock is drenched in red.

My thighs press tight together as I watch him jerk off, grunting and moaning behind an expressionless skull mask. I hate myself for how turned on I am. How greedily I watch him increase his speed. His breath hitches and he growls as cum begins to bleed from the tip.

I turn it off and close the laptop.

“I fucking hate him so much,” I hiss, slipping my fingers into my pants for some much needed relief.

JACK

“YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT LOVE IS, JACK.” MY EYES OPEN AND I look at my phone. The anchorman is giving me another pretentious smirk.

“I don’t need to,” I respond with a smile. He raises an eyebrow and then turns to his co-host, talking about me more. I used to live on these words, but now I can’t concentrate on them. A week ago, I’d have been thrilled to be on national news daily. Now it’s unimportant.

Did Zoe like the video I sent? Hard to tell when she’s refusing to take my calls. That isn’t a good sign. How does one court a serial killer? I really thought the murder video was a slam dunk. Show her I care by imagining her as one of my victims.

Then again, maybe it was the masturbation that was a miss. Google did inform me that sending shots of your dick was often ill-received, but it felt *really* important to show her my hard cock to prove that my feelings are sincere.

Oh well, it doesn’t really matter. I’ll find her eventually and keep her tied up until she comes around. I played a hand in making her the killer she is today and now I want my creation by my side. I want to know how deeply she feels my

impact. Maybe I'll find out, cut down to the bone, and see if my name is carved into her cartilage.

My attention comes back to my phone when I receive an alert. When I see what it is, my heart beats hard in my chest.

Zoe sent me an email. I wonder how she managed to find the address. Maybe she doesn't hate me as much as she wants to. This would have taken a little sleuthing.

My eyes soak in the words quickly. A smile stretches over my face. We have been cosmic bodies circling each other for years, but the gravitational pull is finally going to crash us together.

"JACK,

Let's finish this, find out who's the better killer. Unless you're too scared I'll win? Let's go to the mall tomorrow night. Meet at midnight. -Zoe, the Lovers Murderer"

"OH, SWEETHEART." I chuckle. The better killer? That's cute. It appears she still hates me. I can live with that, especially if it means getting to see her again. She's making this far too easy for me.

If she thinks I'm going to play fair, she's charmingly ignorant. Fair play isn't really a part of my pleasure calculus. No, I play to win.

THERE ISN'T a lot of time to prep before the meetup but I do the best I can, arriving far before midnight the next day to set

everything up. The mall was once the third largest in the state but, like most large businesses in Umbra Valley, it's long since closed down. It's an interesting location for her to pick. I'm curious if there are bodies in here she's left behind. It's only logical that a large percentage of her kills are still decaying silently, hidden until some poor soul comes across their gaping skulls.

My flashlight does a lousy job of lighting up such big spaces. The mall is expansive and it's hard to determine where to set up traps and leave weapons. I stick to the lobbies, rarely darting into the stores. Most have locked metal grates still intact from the last time these stores closed. There's a dated appeal to the place. It shows off its eighties roots with long stretches of neon signs that will never light up again. Most of the places don't catch my attention, but there's one that draws me in.

Frankie's Funhouse. My eyes sink from the sign to the gaping, shadowy entrance. There's no metal grate to keep people out. Despite that, it appears no one has looted the place or even dared to walk inside. My flashlight darts over dust-coated arcade and carnival games.

This is where it all started for Umbra Valley and the Frankie franchise. It was a pizza arcade in the early eighties that featured a dying animatronic television star, Frankie the Coyote, an anthropomorphic robot that sang songs to children. His popularity re-bloomed in Umbra Valley—the TV show started back up and the franchise took off better than it ever had before. That's when the theme park was created and the town rather quickly evolved into a bustling tourist city.

Whispers seem to bleed out from the back of the pizza arcade. My flashlight fails to show the full depths of the

restaurant. Some say the franchise was cursed, that the animatronics were alive. Some say Umbra Valley still houses that evil spirit.

A TV flicks on deep inside Frankie's Funhouse. Even from the mall's hallway, I can see the static screen hissing. My eyes latch on to it and my feet feel restless. I take a step closer, breaching the entrance for a moment.

"*Jack,*" warbles out behind the loud, unstable interference. I'm seeing and hearing things. The electricity has been cut off from the mall for years. I back away and leave, checking my phone. It's nearly midnight so I take off in a sprint, finding my way back out of the mall to meet her. I've wasted no time because she's already outside... pulling up in my own fucking van. Must be nice having a big panel van to drive around.

Any irritation involving that dries up along with my mouth when she steps out. I'm seeing her for the first time since finding out she's my femme fatale. My legs are suddenly weak, threatening to collapse underneath me. My eyes grow dry as I fail to blink.

I can fully appreciate her now. She's not just pretty, she's absolutely jaw-dropping. I called her perfect in the past, but she isn't at all. Zoe is remarkably flawed like the most precious piece of art.

My fingers curl into fists to control their shaking. I want to grab her so horribly that I'm unsure I can refrain myself. She's wearing that tight as fuck leotard from the Halloween party. It molds to her breasts like a second skin, wrapping around her waist like it's painted on. She's got on black-and-white striped leggings over top that elongate her legs. I take a moment to wonder if she's foregone underwear because of the leotard.

Her arms are bare, showing off the snakes that wrap around both of them. They dance as she moves, almost jerking and hissing at me as her arms sway back and forth.

She's wearing the vintage cat mask from the Halloween party and there's a gun strapped to each thigh. Something small, sleek, and black is in one of her hands but if it's a weapon, it's a pathetic one.

"Zoe," I practically purr.

"Jack," she says back. That name from her mouth hits me low in my gut, forming a distracting tension. She leans against the van, her hands never far from the handle just in case I lunge for her and she wants a quick getaway. I realize I've been slinking forward closer and closer, slowly consuming the space between us without even noticing.

It takes a lot of effort to take two steps back, but it's worth it when her body relaxes and she points at the mall.

"You go first," she says.

"How about I give you the head start. You probably want to find a place to hide," I suggest with a smile. She gives an irritated click of her tongue behind the mask. I try to imagine her expression, plump lips twisting in frustration.

"I want you to go in first," she insists.

"Oh, but I must insist. Ladies first," I say in response. A long sigh comes out of her and she lifts the thing she was holding in her hand. Her thumb presses down on a button and explosions rip behind me. My eyes widen as I feel the blazing inferno on my back, heating me from my heels to my head. I turn around and see the mall up in flames. My mouth drops open.

“What’s wrong, Jack?” Zoe says beside me. I swallow thickly and look at her standing far too close. Only a thin thread of restraint keeps me from moving.

“You look a little lost under that skull makeup. You didn’t have traps set up in there, did you?” she chides me before laughing. “I hope you at least kept some weapons on you. If not, you better hurry back in before the entire place burns down.” I have exactly one knife on me out of the thirty-two I brought. One.

But honestly, that’s one more than I need.

I SHIFT FROM FOOT TO FOOT, ANXIOUS YET EXCITED TO BE SO close to him. Jack has once again donned a painted skeleton face instead of his mask or bare skin. I take great joy in the way his mouth is still popped open in shock from the mall explosion.

I try to not squirm under his gaze. There's a sort of power that rolls off him—dangerous and cold—just like the first night we met. Just like every time we've met. I doubt it's something he can turn off.

“You continue to surprise me, lil' killer,” he says. His deep voice is like a caress against my neck. I glare at him from behind my mask as he watches me back, his eyes never wavering from me.

This is bad. I want Jack. He's dangerous and thrilling. He's madness and chaos.

The Massacre Maniac is the answer to my problem. The gaping maw inside me is a needy, cloying irritant under my skin. It slowly destroys me each day until I can't take it anymore. The murders are my attempts to find relief, but they only offer a fraction of the sweet, destructive rapture Jack gives me each time we meet.

The reflection of the fire's flames whips around in his eyes like cobras and I feel weak. If he lunges for me right this minute, I'll give in. Let his rough hands pull me close and twist in my hair. Thank him when I feel the cold press of steel against my gut.

He stands his ground and I stand mine. Then I take a deep breath and let it out, shaking off the weakness and taking a step back. Jack can't offer me anything other than one fleeting moment of freedom before death. His dick isn't worth dying for... probably.

"Shit," I hiss quietly.

"What was that?"

"I said where do you want to go? To end this."

"That didn't sound like what you said," he comments, eyes drinking me in.

I toss the detonator on the ground and stomp on it. Then I turn and head towards the van. Jack is suddenly beside me, moving like a wraith. I startle, pulling in a sharp breath. My mind goes blank as his hand brushes mine with a delicate, soft touch. Then his fingers invade, pressing into my palm and snatching the keys.

"I'm driving," he comments. "It is my van, after all." He flashes me a smile, a line of teeth on display as he watches me.

I stomp around the other side of the van and crawl in the passenger side as he gets the vehicle started. Being in a closed space with him feels like holding a live wire. The tension is so heavy I can barely breathe. I eye him as he grips the steering wheel tighter.

"We could end it here," he whispers. We slowly turn to each other. His eyes dig into my flesh. Out of nowhere, I

remember how his weight feels on top of me, trapping me beneath him.

“No,” I say quickly, my fingers shaking a little. He smiles and lunges for me suddenly. My hand darts for my gun as his fingers wrap around my throat. His knee digs into my seat as he presses me against the passenger door.

“I understand why you wouldn’t want that,” he whispers, his fingers tightening around my neck. My tongue darts over my lips as I grip my gun but don’t pull it up yet. His eyes sink to the weapon and he smirks.

Jack leans in closer, dragging his nose up my neck to inhale me. Goosebumps break out over my skin. When he tightens his grip on my neck to the point I can’t breathe... I melt. I feel dazed; my eyelids are heavy, and my body wants to bleed all the tension out. It’s a relief his dominating grip keeps a moan from breaking loose.

“You aren’t as good at close quarters as I am,” he rasps into my ear. He pulls away, fingers brushing down my neck as he goes. I sag in my seat, taking this moment to heart. He’s right. I can’t let him get close again. Thankfully, he seems committed to leaving right now, pressing hard on the gas. Probably because any minute the police and fire department will be here.

“The ice cream store,” I say apathetically, staring out the window. I wrap my hand where his had just been, trying to choke the memory of his touch out of me.

“No. The river.”

“No,” I respond. We pass a Frankie’s Fun World sign.

“The theme park,” we both say, then sink into silence as he takes a right turn onto a dark road. As the silence stretches on,

the memory of his video creeps into my mind like a dirty secret that wants to be found out. Visuals flash of his blood-coated cock throbbing in his hand and moans drifting from behind the expressionless mask.

This night needs to end quickly.

Jack takes a left on Frankie Drive. The street lights that are still working flicker anxiously. The rest are dark poles with jagged, broken glass at the top. This road isn't city property, it's the theme park's, and there's no one here to care about upkeep. The wheels of the van dip into a pothole as we ride closer to the gates.

The looming skeleton of Frankie's Fun World creates ominous shadows in the night sky. It feels bleak and empty from a distance. Empty, but alive in some way—a primordial monster staring with blank eyes from shadowed woods. The gate comes into view. Frankie's eyes are aimed down at the road to perceive us venturing into his world of fun.

The adorable quality of the cartoon coyote feels off. As if it were a mask to hide something sinister beneath. Perhaps the entire town is infected by that spirit.

Under the sign and through the parking lot we continue. One of us isn't coming out. Abandoned cars litter the cracked asphalt slab that used to be packed by the eight o'clock opening of the park gates. As our lights travel across one of the cars, I see movement inside. As we pass it, I peer in, observing only dark lumps that could be anything.

The trams that used to shuttle people between the parking lot and the gates are on their sides and are decorated in spray paint. As the van creeps closer to the entrance, I feel like holding my breath. I never thought things would turn out like this. The brakes squeal as we come to a stop.

This is it. Now or never. Even if Jack wants more from me, we will never work. Our natures ruin any chance of something long-term. Ending things now, once and for all, saves us both from a lot of pain and trouble.

I look over at Jack staring at me with deep, inky eyes. They're enigmatically both ice-cold and white-hot at the core. He's everything I could want, and the only man that can possibly accept me.

Something has changed for him since the last time we were together. He's hesitant, waiting for me to make my move, and watching me with such intense attention I can barely breathe without feeling self-conscious.

Maybe he gets it now. That we're the same. Maybe he finally understands what I used to believe—that we could be something.

Maybe not, but even so... it's too late. I understand there's no future where he doesn't kill me. Maybe not today or tomorrow or even next week, but Jack is a killer above all else and his desire for me is sharp steel enveloped by broken flesh.

I have to kill him, *especially* if he's changed his mind about me. It makes him even more dangerous. I get out of the van and walk closer to the sagging ticket booths. Jack follows me a moment later, stopping twenty feet away.

"Right then," he says. The skull teeth on his face move as he talks. He lifts his hand to brush his hair from his face. "Should we make any rules or..." He waves his hand around.

I pull out a gun, take aim, and fire. Surprise is always what makes the difference.

For a moment, he stands there with mouth gaping in an O even more perfect than the one I just shot through his palm.

Try masturbating on camera now, Jack.

“Missed,” I comment with a smile, staring down the gun as I shift my aim. With a curse, he dives into the theme park, twisting his body behind the destroyed ticket booth and taking off deep into the silent recesses of Frankie’s Fun World.

JACK

THE FACT THAT ZOE IS MY FINAL GIRL IS MY FAVORITE THING about her, but far from a complete description. For my own safety at this moment, it's best to think of her, first and foremost, as the Lovers Murderer. That's who's with me tonight, the serial killer who has exploded the heads of who knows how many men and got off while doing it.

I realize I've never encountered this side of her before, and I'm not sure what that means. Thinking back, never once before tonight did she seem interested in killing me. At the Halloween party, she pressed a gun to my head but didn't shoot. It was only a threat, "*don't fuck with me*".

Which means before now, Zoe never truly wanted me dead. Why not? Was I not good enough for it? The urge to dig up her victims and kill them all over again in a fit of jealous rage pulses in my veins.

Though... maybe she didn't want to kill me because I'm more special than her victims. She knew we were kindred spirits from the moment we met and I made her my sole survivor. Somewhere in my subconscious, I knew it too. Zoe has never acted normal and it's caused me to react abnormally to her—to leave her alive, to stalk her, to obsess over her. Unfortunately, my failure to consciously realize what we were

to each other has led to her learning she has to kill me for her own safety. Well, ain't that just fucking peachy?

My back is pressed into a cotton candy booth that somehow manages to still cough up the scent of lung-clogging sugar from the moldy pink and blue boxes shoved on the storage shelves. My teeth rip into the bottom of my tee shirt, sacrificing a long strip of cloth to use as a bandage.

Thankfully, she seems to have missed everything vital. A cute little bullet from a cute little girl has left me with a sticky, half-cauterized hole in the middle of the palm, but not much else.

I roll up two small balls of cloth and press them onto the entrance and exit wounds and then wrap a long, black strip of cotton tight around the hand to provide compression. I flex my hand and the bandage holds, the bleeding stanching for now.

Zoe is prowling like a fucking panther in the theme park. Like the king of the fucking woods with zero predators, only prey. Her boots stomp into oily puddles as she holds her head high. A shudder rolls over me and I delight in the sensation. I've never been prey before. It excites me. My tongue darts over my lips as I press my fingers to the abdomen wound she left with my knife. If I finger it hard enough the pain flares to life, making my cock hard as I remember the details.

She's a danger I've never encountered and she's coming closer. It's thrilling. I'm lying in wait, watching her from the shadows. The Lovers Murderer isn't stalking meek prey though, and soon she's going to get far too close to the predator she's after.

My eyes snag on one of the old carnival games still standing. It's a strength test; the splintered, waterlogged wood has flaking yellow and red paint. At the top of the long

wooden pole sits Frankie, the coyote mascot's face smiling down with big cartoon eyes. The coyote still looks good, a mish-mash of bright colors and gleaming teeth.

Leaned up against the booth, where the attendant used to stand and heckle, is the hammer. It looks almost four feet long and with an oversized red rubber head. It is in good condition having been sitting here in the booth, warm and dry, since the park shut down.

Frankie's Fun World was never normal. I know the head of that hammer is deceptively benign. That the red rubber outside is just the sheath to a solid metal center. Most hi-strikers use a full plastic head, but not here. Here they wanted to play with fire. Here they wanted to promise you things other California theme parks *wouldn't*.

The decrepit strength machine in front of me was infamous when the park was open. It was a god-tier game in the world of strongmen who traveled across the country to see if they could be the one to hit the top. With a solid metal hammer weighing seventy-five pounds, even lifting it was a feat of strength for some. And that is just a piece of the game. The towering pole and weighted puck you needed to get to the top are impressive feats all their own.

I peer around the cotton candy cart and see the Lovers Murderer in all her glory. She's got a gun in hand as she silently pads around the decaying carnival-themed park. Her kitty mask grins mischievously as her fingers play with the safety, flicking it on and off.

I slink over to the hi-striker's hammer and wrap my fingers around the long handle. I grip it in both hands, pulling the weighty beast as I step up to the strength test pole. No one ever got the puck to the top while Frankie's was still open.

I eye Frankie at the top, wondering how the coyote's paint job managed to stay so pristine compared to the rest of the device. His black pupils are aimed down at me, his smile far too wide.

I hear Zoe shifting closer. I want her to understand that if she gets too close to me, there is nothing that can save her but my own will and mercy.

My body comes alive, my muscles tightening as I rip the hammer from the ground and twist my body, bringing the weapon in a sweeping loop from the ground. It goes over my shoulder and swings over my head. My fingers grip the wooden handle and splinters dig into my bare hands.

The weight of the hammer threatens to take control. It's seventy-five pounds of steel slamming towards the machine but I stay in front of it, my body forcing it even faster and harder. I slam it into the bar, the hammer smacking the end in an alarming thwack that booms across the silent park, bouncing off broken booths and ancient games to create a resounding echo.

The puck leaps, chasing its way up and up, and *DING!* A dinner bell for the silent park. A wake-up call for the ghosts—or whatever else might be slinking around here. Winner, winner, chicken dinner.

I'm not a normal man. It's unfortunate for everyone else that I chose to use this body for carnage.

Quickly, I pull the hammer with me back to the cotton candy stall. I hear Zoe's boots splashing in puddles, quickly closing the distance now that she has located her prey. She's ready to end me because I'm too dangerous to let live. But if she's a panther, I'm a tiger. She's sleek and vicious, but I'm bigger and meaner. Even so, I'm going to have to play a little

dirty if I want to walk away at the end of the night. I'll make sure to lick her wounds, though.

I lift the hammer over my shoulder, my tongue swiping over my teeth as I wait. She comes around the corner, gun first. I don't hesitate and swing. A big, red, rubber hammer head the size of her skull is hard to miss. She does what I expect, flinging herself backwards, but I manage to make contact with her shoulder, ripping an angry scream from her as she falls to the ground. Her gun falls from her grip. I walk fully into view, kicking her gun away before I straddle her body.

I reach down and pull off her mask. Zoe's eyes concentrate on the hammer and white-hot panic flashes across her face like a lightning strike. The beauty of us is that I know the exact thing running through her head. She's thinking about me lifting this hammer like an angry Norse god and breaking her face apart, making her skull shatter like a broken porcelain bowl. Or maybe a splattered watermelon is a better descriptor.

It's an option. A smart one probably, if my goal is to kill her before she kills me. But everything has changed now—absolutely fucking everything. Down to the core of my identity. She's turned me inside out and twisted me into something new.

She's brought us here thinking one of us is going to die. Poor thing wouldn't stand a chance if this was a real one-on-one brawl to the death. She might be the Lovers Murderer, but I'm the motherfucking Massacre Maniac. Luckily, I'm not done with Zoe. Not yet.

“Fucking do it, coward,” she spits, her eyes darting to the gun on the ground—just out of reach.

“Want to blow my brains out, baby?” I ask her with a smirk. She bares her teeth at me and twists around, trying to get to the gun fast. I click my tongue and pick her up, pressing her against my body. She feels divine. Her soft curves molding to me make my body tighten.

“Won’t you at least fuck me first? Give me the full Lovers Murderer treatment,” I rasp. Her eyes widen and she turns her face away as a flush creeps up her neck. I take the opening, dropping my mouth to her exposed skin and kissing her rapid pulse. Is she embarrassed of what she does to her kills or is that flush all for me?

“Stop it,” she whispers between her teeth. Her hands wrap around my wrists tightly.

“Okay,” I agree easily. Zoe isn’t ready for fucking, she’s still all for fighting. I can appease her wants. I’m nice like that.

I fling her over my shoulder and carry her to a carnival game booth. Dehydrated leathery strips of balloons are pinned to the backboard with darts nestled deep into the plywood beside them. People used to throw darts to pop the paint-filled balloons for prizes.

She’s hissing and writhing on my shoulder. My hand spasms and I drop the hammer. The hole in my palm is tired of the way I’ve been ignoring it. I don’t need the hammer anyway. I fling her on the counter.

“First things first,” I comment, grabbing a dart from behind me. Zoe is trying to get away so I pull her back down, stepping between her legs and laying on top of her. I grab her wrist and press her hand into the counter, dragging the blunt tip of the dart across her palm to make an x. X marks the spot.

“Fair’s fair, baby,” I tell her, watching her eyes widen and her body writhe as I settle the tip of the dart into her palm and then pull it back. I slam it back down. The dull needle goes through her hand entirely, sticking into the wooden booth beneath her. She screams in rage as blood blooms up in her palm.

“Well, would you look at that, a bullseye.” I laugh. Her hand’s imprisoned on the counter and she tries to reach over to pull it out. I grab the free hand and slam it back to the counter, pressing on top of her. She’s writhing beneath me as I smile down at her, watching the anger flashing in her eyes.

“You asshole,” she hisses. My smile widens.

“I believe in an equal relationship.” I lift my bullet hole hand and wiggle my fingers at her. She gives a hissing sound of disapproval, rolling her eyes.

“Let’s try this again,” I say, and she goes still beneath me. “I got you under me way too fast and I think the Lovers Murderer can do a little better than that, can’t she?” I nip at her nose and she jerks away. My hand slides into her hair and I tug, pulling her face to mine. Without planning, my lips sink to hers, my tongue pressing into her mouth. She moans beneath me, her tongue delicately sliding against mine. There’s something here neither of us can fight against but she wants to so badly that I’m going to let her.

My hand slides into my pocket and I tease the bag open, pulling out the drenched cloth inside. She’s unaware of all that though, she’s too concerned about my body weighing hers down and my teeth sinking into her lips in a playful bite.

“Stop,” she whispers with a breathy voice.

“Whatever you want, baby,” I say, pulling my mouth from hers. “Night, night,” I rasp, pressing the rag to her face. Her eyes widen and she screams beneath it. Panic flashes in her eyes. Oh, she’s very worried about what I might do while she’s passed out. I cackle loudly as her eyes roll back in her head and she goes limp.

I WAKE UP WITH THE WORLD SLIGHTLY SPINNING AROUND ME. Grogginess keeps me confused as my eyes dart around to figure out where I am. It's not the balloon dart booth and Jack isn't here. After a short minute of pounding behind my eyeballs, everything starts to clear up. That son of a bitch.

The dark sky is all around me and I'm sitting in a metal car. Other than the lingering headache, I feel about the same as before. Better actually. My shoulder has been popped back into place and my mouth is wet with the faint taste of something bitter in the back of my throat. It's as if he fed me water and medicine. Which is alarming. If I was unconscious, did he have to mouth to mouth feed me the medicated water?

My fingers press to my lips and I try to shove down the positive feelings I'm having related to the Massacre Maniac. I eye the palm he poked a hole in. We match now. I can see he's neatly wrapped a piece of black cloth around my hand the same as his. Well, that and mine is from a 1mm dart and his from a 9mm hollow point. I'm pretty sure I got the better end of that bargain, but it's the thought that counts.

"Fuck me," I hiss, looking up at the stars in the sky. The cool air is making the tips of my ears ache slightly. He's left me in a roller coaster car. I guess this is what he meant by

“trying again”. Unfortunately, I seem to have misplaced my firearms. Now, surely that wasn’t intentional, right Jack? I’m not an idiot, that puts me at a massive disadvantage. If it comes down to hand-to-hand combat, Jack will plant me six feet under any day of the week. Though I’m sure *he* still has a few select sharp and pointy things with which to play.

“Asshole,” I sigh.

The rolling, mechanical noise of the roller coaster starts. The car begins to move, making me tense in the metal seat. I peer over the edge and see I’ve already slowly moved past the platform. The drop to the ground is way too high for me to make a jump for it.

Guess I’ll just ride it. Clearly, Jack is having fun while I’m fighting for my life. Hopefully, his treating this like a game will be his downfall. I reach out for the safety bar to lock it in place. It clicks shut a little loose as my boots press against the front of the car and watch the track in front of me.

“Not sure that was a good idea,” Jack says behind me. I twist around and see him three cars back, waving hello with a rather big fucking knife held rather casually in one oversized hand. Then he leaps up with a smile, crawling into the car in front of him.

“Fuck! How is this fair?” I spit out as I hear the cars creak as he crawls closer. The loud clicking beneath the cars alerts us of our long ascent to the top of the drop. How old is this thing? It’s had zero upkeep for way too long. I can see cigarette butts crumbled in the bottom of my car and half the paint is chipped off to reveal bare, rusted metal.

“Fair?” Jack barks out with a laugh. The man is a giant slab of muscle and sadism crawling across the moving cars of

a rickety roller coaster. My only hope is to keep my distance for the entirety of this ride.

It's extremely awkward trying to maneuver out of my safety bar restraint. Trying to pull myself upwards quickly proves to be useless so I start sliding down into the bottom of the car. My chest presses into the bar, making it hard to breathe for a quick moment before I manage to wiggle myself completely free. I pop up triumphantly only to come face to face with Jack's hands gripping the edge of my car and pulling himself into it.

I look at the car in front of me. There's open track separating them. At Jack's size, that empty stretch between the cars probably looks minimal. To me, it looks like the Grand fucking Canyon.

"Better hurry," Jack says in dark amusement right behind me. "When I catch you this time, I promise I won't keep my hands to myself." In a desperate play, I stand up on the seat with one foot on the edge of the car. I make a wild leap to the lip of the next car where I teeter for a brief moment, looking down at what must be a couple hundred feet to the ground. Shit. I quickly hurl myself to the floor of the car. Jack's already coming in after me. I can see his fingers gripping the edge as I look up from the floor. Next, his head peeks out, knife held between his teeth in a smile.

I consider punching him in the mouth so all his perfect white teeth fall the fuck out.

The rollercoaster keeps clicking, going higher and higher. I take a deep breath as I shoot up, scrambling for the next car as fast as possible. If I can get ahead of him before the drop he'll be stuck behind me until we finish the ride.

But I'm too late. Jack's hands twist my clothes as I attempt to free myself and leap to the next car frantically. I thrash as he pulls me in tight. His warmth engulfs me, heating my nearly numb arms. He pulls me in close, forcing me to sit right in the middle of his lap before he grabs the safety bar and pulls it down, locking us together for the rest of the ride.

"Better hold on, the first drop is when the fun starts," he whispers into my ear. He presses the bar down a little more, making it give a fresh click. My ass is digging into his lap as much as it can without us fusing together into one.

The entire park is below us at the top of the rollercoaster. I can even see the funhouse from here, the place where it all started.

"This isn't the one missing some of the track is it?" I ask.

"Missing some track?"

"Fuck!" I bark, ignoring the serial killer's erection digging between the cheeks of my ass to focus on strangling the safety bar. The car tips over the edge and we start to barrel towards the earth. My stomach crawls up to my throat as my gasp is lost in the wind.

The thrill of it hits me in such a pleasant way. I'm desperate to keep the smile off my face. I can't enjoy this as much as I want *because* of how badly I want to. Jack chuckles in my ear as I imagine us flying off a broken track. It would be exhilarating. This entire night has already been exhilarating—mall explosions, hot and heavy close calls with the infamous Massacre Maniac, shooting a bullet through his hand, slinking around the creepy ass park trying to find him.

It's difficult to decide my favorite part so far. This ride or when his mouth fell to mine in the game booth, his teeth

sinking into my lip. My body was vibrating with the danger he presented and the pleasure he supplied. He had complete control over the moment and over me. He'd shown no hesitation or difficulty overpowering me. That did something to me.

Unfortunately, this is neither the time nor the place and I can't get distracted by being attracted lest I end up being dismembered. The purpose of tonight's meetup is crystal clear. Find out who's the better *killer*, not the better fucker. He is here to kill me.

As we finish the first drop, Jack makes good on his promise; he isn't keeping his hands to himself this time. Did he even the first time, though? I very clearly remember our bodies touching. He shifts beneath me and I feel the hard press of his cock in the crease of my ass. He stops moving and lays his head on my shoulder, groaning against my neck. One of his hands dives between my legs, fingers rubbing roughly over the thin fabric of my pants.

"Goddamnit, Jack," I gasp as he demands pleasure through several layers of thin nylon. "Where's your knife?" I hiss out, my legs stretching wide open in a betrayal of my will to live.

"Ooo baby, you already want me to stick it in you?" he asks with dark humor, mouth pressing to my ear in a growl. It'd be funny, except I can feel the way his cock throbs when he asks.

Suddenly, he pulls the knife out and begins tapping it against my inner thigh as the cars jerk right and left, twisting around to head up a series of smaller drops. We go up and down several times on the ride, my stomach lifts to my chest and Jack's rough fingers keep rubbing purposefully between my legs.

“Stop that,” I demand, my voice breathy, my legs widening.

“Alright,” he says, his hand pulling away. I whine. It’s pathetic. I meant for him to stop tapping me with his knife, not to stop the rubbing, but I can’t say that. Voicing my eager desire for foreplay will only encourage him, which will bring me pleasure for about two minutes before the painful punchline.

On cue with my thoughts, he pulls his knife towards my gut. It’s dark, no lights reflecting off the matte black of the blade as he pulls it close to my soft belly. His hand spreads out across my fluttering stomach, his fingers brushing beneath the leggings. Then his knife follows, slipping beneath the pant line and moving lower. I writhe, trying to press myself tighter against his lap.

“Better not squirm unless you want me to accidentally take off more than just clothes,” he says apathetically. It makes him sound like he could care less about what his knife happens to take off my body.

“This is not the time to forget to inflect your words,” I hiss. He barks out a laugh.

“Whoops. But you’re one to talk. We got to work on your expressions. You haven’t smiled once during this ride even though I know you want to. Let me help you. Smile and I’ll be really careful down here.” He begins sawing into my pants, his sharp knife gliding effortlessly to split the fabric apart. I can feel the hard kiss of cold steel sliding across my cunt as he works his way down.

“Smile,” he growls mischievously in my ear and I do. I fucking smile. “Good girl. I love your smiles, Zoe.”

Jack's knife presses on the fabric until my leggings fully give, popping open for him to rip roughly from my body. Shit. Now I'm just in my leotard, his cock that much closer to me. He flings the black and white fabric behind us and it sails away as the coaster races forward, wind whipping our hair around.

Expertly, he flips the knife around and grinds the hilt between my legs.

"Is that better?" he rasps into my ear. I'm practically crawling up his lap, my boots pressing into our seat as my hips start to move back and forth. Which means my ass is grinding against him. His other hand grips my waist, his fingers pressing into my skin.

"Fuck," he groans long and low before flipping his knife back around to the blade side.

This is why we can't have nice things. This motherfucker has piquerism, and the moment things start getting good, his knife comes into the picture. Abruptly, I go still as he lays the blade flat between my legs and begins patting my cunt like it's a mini paddle.

My entire body jerks each time, an automatic reaction to a knife snapping and tapping my delicate parts. Jack likes the way my body jerks with each soft tap of his knife. He bites into the side of my neck, growling as he does it again. *Tap, tap, tap*—my body jerks each time, even when I try so hard not to.

The end of the ride is coming up. We make the final turn and I start to visualize leaping up and dashing away.

The knife leaves and is replaced by his hand. Fingers slide right into the leotard, playing with my wet entrance before

they push inside. A shocked whimper breaks from my lips as I feel thick fingers slowly sink into me again and again. Then he presses one in deep, hooking it inside me.

“You really think you’re going anywhere?” he murmurs against my ear as he slowly rubs inside me. The backside of his thumb starts grinding my clit in tandem. I make an undignified noise, my body melting as I try to keep my wits. *He’s the Massacre Maniac, Zoe. He wants to kill you. You know that. You’ve got the scars to prove it.*

Then again, I do like fucking before a little murder. They go together like peanut butter and chocolate. Two great tastes that go great together.

“Jack,” I whimper. A shudder rolls over him.

“Zoe,” he growls back. The cars pull back into the station and the moment the bar goes up, I try to bolt. I need to get away, find a weapon, and sneak up on him. Even if the deep fluid movements of his hand feel mind-numbing, I can’t afford to be mind-numbed. This is foreplay and it’ll lead to more. I’m well aware Jack’s version of penetration results in my guts spread out across the theme park in a fucked-up human garland.

I kick the bar at the same time they pop free and bend forward, grabbing the front of the car and trying to rip myself off of Jack. He jabs his fingers deeper into my pussy and hooks them once again. His other hand slips around my neck and he pulls me back down to his lap—cunt in one hand, throat in the other.

“Come on, baby, don’t kiss and run.”

“Kiss?” I snarl.

“Yeah,” he says on an exhale, gripping my jaw and twisting me around. He stares at my mouth before a vicious smile cuts across his face. “Play nice and I’ll let you go again.” I stop fighting and eye him suspiciously.

“What do you want?” I ask as he keeps playing between my legs, rubbing and grinding in ways that make my body tight and hot.

“Open your mouth and stick out your tongue,” he demands, the painted teeth on his face moving as he smiles. I swallow thickly and open my mouth, stretching my tongue out. He’s treating this night as a game and I need to play by his rules. This next time he lets me go I won’t sit around masticating, I’ll jump and run.

“Good girl,” he growls before spitting into my mouth. Before I can do anything other than be shocked his tongue darts across mine, licking up his own spit before pressing greedily into my mouth. Then his hand starts moving faster, his thumb grinding up and down, his hooked fingers rubbing inside me as his mouth devours mine.

“You got to earn the next round,” he rasps. His hand creates building tension deep in my center. His movements are determined. “I want to see what our town’s femme fatale looks like when she comes...” he trails off and I feel it building. He’s roughly pulling it from the depths of me, my eyes rolling in the back of my head. I twist his jacket in my fists as my muscles tighten. Oh god, no. He’s going to make me come and I can’t afford to want him more, but it’s happening. It’s coming fast, my thighs are shaking and I’m burying my face against his chest as I make pathetic little noises of increasing pleasure.

“Not yet, baby,” he whispers and I feel something hard replace his fingers and press in. “Come on my knife, Zoe,” he rasps. “Then I’ll let you go again.” My body jerks in shock. Is that the fucking blade? I can’t tell if there’s pain. He probably keeps his knives so perfectly sharpened that a hairline cut would be hard to feel at first.

“Don’t move so much,” he hisses, holding me down. My eyes bug. He *has* put the blade in me.

“Fuck you,” I whine, but his fingers pick up speed rubbing my clit and I can’t hold back anymore, even more so now that danger and potential pain have come into play. To be honest, the moment is perfect. It’s every bit of the fucked up mess I crave. Jack inches his knife into my cunt like it’s his cock. His breath hitches as his eyes soak in my gasping mouth. I twist his clothes in my fists as I come on his lap, his knife inside me.

“Baby,” he groans, low and deep in his throat as I shudder against him. His thumb languidly rolls between my legs, dragging out my pleasure.

Then a rag goes over my face and he presses it down. It never happens as fast as the TV likes to portray. I hold my breath as long as I can. I want to thrash, but his knife is inside me while he smugly smiles. I’m trapped in his lap while he licks his lips.

How many times has this man drugged me now? I’m concerned about where I’ll wake up next and what might happen while I’m asleep. Although, the last time it seems the only thing he did was take care of me. It’s fucking with my head. He better do some awful shit when I’m knocked out this time, that way I can learn how to hate him instead of love—

Fuck me, I am not going there.

My fingers dig into his scalp. I can't tell if I'm fighting him or just touching him. The tips of my fingers brush into his hair and I feel a long raised line of flesh hiding. It's a thick scar on his head, and it feels both serious and old. He smiles down at me wickedly.

“You did a good job earning the next round, but this is your last chance, murderer. Get the upper hand or face the consequences.” Jack reveals his knife. It's in a sheath that's wet with my arousal. He didn't put the naked blade into me.

My lungs are screaming and I fill them up with a huge heaving gulp of heavily chloroformed air. I'm hit with an instant wave of disorientation. His tongue flicks out and licks up the side of the leather, tasting me on it. I absentmindedly count to myself—*ten, nine, eight*—before my eyes roll back in my head and I drift off to la la land.

JACK

WE'RE NEAR THE ENTRANCE OF THE PARK, A STRETCH OF carnival buildings sagging in the humidity—their paint is chipped in matching fashion to Zoe's nail polish.

The entrance to the funhouse is through the mouth of the wide eyed and grinning mascot's face. His eyes are leering above the gaping maw, the mildew and flaking paint making the friendly cartoon character look manic—eyes bleeding and bloodshot with a mottled patchwork of black and yellow mold—as he watches me inch closer, the Lovers Murderer flung over my shoulder.

Broken lightbulbs line the entrance and Frankie's gloved hand points down to the stretched mouth of darkness so he can swallow us into his world—a place where reality warps.

Everyone knows the stories of the funhouse from when this place was still open. No one knows how it started, but it became commonplace for workers and patrons alike to hide behind corners, jumping out to frighten people walking through it. They got high off the screams and kids began to cry when their parents tried to drag them into Frankie's gaping mouth-hole for a benign stroll through the rooms of carnival mirrors.

I can feel the compelling taunt to cause fear pouring out from the shadowy insides. I've always loved the funhouse but I'm not here because of that. I'm here because this is where it all started for Zoe and me.

Two years ago, I followed a group of young adults as they snuck into the closed theme park. Parties have always been my favorite. The group showed up and parked themselves right where I'm standing now. They danced around, spraying insecticide in a pungent chemical circle that was meant to keep the bugs from feasting on them as they got fucked up drinking cheap beer.

Zoe's presence unsettled them. Minus the guy hanging off her—something her constant sneer told me she hated. I'd always thought the sense of doom in the air surrounding the party was me, hiding in the shadows with a hard-on for murderous knife play.

It wasn't that at all, though. It was her and those smoldering honey-brown eyes glittering with mischievous violence. If I hadn't shown up that night, I think people would have died regardless.

I sink into the gaping cartoon mouth and slink deep into the dark funhouse.

Life crafted us separately, but the mimicry of our similarities is almost too perfect to be happenstance. I look at Zoe and I can almost read her mind. I can see her past, her fears, her wants.

And now we're back where it all began—the funhouse. The rollercoaster was fun, but this place has history I'd like to revisit. The birth of my final girl. The birth of the Lovers Murderer. It was the threads of fate tightening in a noose to finally bring us together.

The boards creak as I walk through the maze of mirrors, retracing the steps I took that night. It's impossible for me to remember every murder but that night sticks out because of her. The pack of young adults scrambled, a mess of screams and panic, shooting into the funhouse to escape me.

She took me so well, her screams breaking off into whimpers, her fingers clawing at the wall like she couldn't take how good it felt, how big it was, how invasive and powerful and overwhelming.

I stop walking through the circular tunnel to experience a full-body shudder of desire.

I find the closet. There's still caution tape from two years ago torn and hanging limply on the floor. My eyes slide to the spot where I threw the guy and a smirk cuts into my face. The Lovers Murderer was here with me that night and shared my kills. It feels right.

I open the closet door wider and set her on the floor inside, leaning against the wall. I've probably only got a few more minutes before she starts to come to. One of her guns is heavy in my pants pocket. Give her the gun or don't give her the gun? My tongue swipes over my lips and I taste waxy makeup.

I want to give her the gun, but not for something as asinine as fairness. I want her to have the chance to kill me and not take it. That's the first good step in any relationship—not murdering each other. However, considering how long it took me to stop trying to kill her, it's probably safer that I keep the gun for now. We'll get there eventually... maybe.

I don't go far as I wait for her to wake up. I want to hear her when she realizes where she is. I want to do a little reenactment. My hand slips into my pants and grips my knife.

A moment later my desire comes to life. Zoe wakes up gasping. I hear her scrambling on the floor to stand up and don't wait another moment. I step up to the entrance, blocking her escape. She presses against the back wall, her eyes wide in shock and confusion. Her hand reaches out and she touches the moldy stack of boxes beside her.

"I'm not dreaming?" she asks, and a wide smile blossoms on my face. I don't dream, but now I wish I did. I'll have to live off the satisfaction that when Zoe sleeps, she dreams of me.

"Not tonight," I say, ducking to not hit my head on the doorframe as I step into the closet. She sucks in a breath and just stands there looking at me. It's just like that night, but so much better because I see her now. I know what she is to me. I know who she is.

And I know exactly what I want.

I pull out my knife and step up to her, crushing my body against hers, and trapping her against the wall. She stretches her neck, her eyes hazy with lust. I didn't plan on choking her, but she's hoping for it. I chuckle, reaching out and fitting my hand to her neck.

She lets out a sigh of relief, her eyes closing as she gives a little smile. I tighten my hold and her mouth pops open at the same time as her eyes. She looks at me as she tries to breathe, not fighting me at all.

"This round isn't looking very good for you either," I whisper before removing my hand. She sucks in a big breath before letting out a soft moan.

"I'll fight back," she says, looking up at me through her lashes, "in a minute." Her voice is a throaty rasp. Her body

pressed against mine is maddening. My hand wraps around her neck softly and I bend down, tasting her mouth again.

She moans against me, her body writhing against mine. My breathing picks up. There's a dark desire inside me, rearing up to be seen. *I shouldn't. I shouldn't*, I tell myself over and over in my head as my attention keeps being dragged back to the knife lying idle in my hand.

There's always been something wrong with my fucking head—or maybe not until I got the scar. Denying my impulsive desires is a near-impossible task for me. I've been so good today but right this minute I want to bury my blade to the hilt and watch her squirm. God, I want to fucking stab her.

The want is too much for me to ignore.

I growl and thrust. She gasps as it buries in the wall beside her. With large eyes, she looks at me and I see something shifting in her mind. I press my mouth to hers though, greedily tasting her mouth.

“Jack,” she mumbles between my kisses. I rip the knife from the wall.

Don't, I tell myself, but I want to so fucking bad.

“I'm sorry, baby,” I tell her. She thrashes as I twist her around. “Just the tip,” I whisper in her ear. I pull the leotard over her ass cheek and line the knife up to the thin line of red left by the compression of her clothes.

Her fingers are scratching at the walls, her breath heavy and fast.

“Jack,” she whines, fear in her voice. My body blankets hers. My fingers drag up her perfect legs. My mouth nips at her neck.

“It’s okay,” I whisper.

“Killing me isn’t fucking okay,” she spits over her shoulder. My hand shakes but the blade stays nestled against her ass cheek. I’m so fucking hard and the overwhelming demand inside me requires I sink inside her. I don’t have the strength not to. With that, I press my hips closer and dig the knife in.

She screams as I enter her, sending chills up my neck.

“Fuck, Zoe,” I rasp. I pull it out and sink it inside her again with a groan. I’m going to come like this. There’s no doubt in my mind.

Her head slams backwards, her skull crushing my nose. She twists around and her hand dives in my pants, wrapping around her gun and whipping it out while I’m still trying to recover from momentary blindness and the sharp pain of my nose cracking.

She starts to pull the gun up and I grab her wrist, a shot going off and burying in the floor. *Ah shit*, she really wants to kill me now. I’d apologize for stabbing her, but that might imply it isn’t happening again.

Her boot comes up and jackhammers into my balls, sending me to my knees on the floor with a groan full of pain instead of pleasure. She darts over me, running to the door. I flip around and grab her ankles.

Zoe drops to the ground and I crawl over her quickly. I grab the wrist of her gun hand and slam it above her head so she can’t shoot me. Her mouth is begging to be kissed and I’m remarkably keyed up. I brought her here for *this*.

My mouth goes to her in a frantic demand of teeth and tongue. My hand dives between her legs in a feverish back-

and-forth grinding that insists she feels pleasure. She moans, her legs spreading to make room for me.

“Just like that, baby,” I rasp, reaching for my knife, but it’s gone. Shit, I dropped it in the closet. Suddenly I have too much pent-up energy and no quick outlet to expel it. A growl rips from my mouth as I bite her lips. She gasps, her chest pressing against me. My fingers are frenzied, but it’s not happening fast enough.

“Don’t kill me for a second,” I hiss, dropping her gun-wielding hand to slide down her body. With my face between her legs, I peel her leotard to the side and take one long lick up her bare cunt. One of her hands flies into my hair, gripping it too hard as her hips thrust against my face. I can feel her shaking against my mouth as I flick my tongue.

My hands are begging for a knife I don’t have, so I grip her ass and tug her against my mouth. I feast like a ravenous wolf, licking and lapping in rapturous abandon. Her moans, loud and long, fill the empty funhouse with a blissful symphony of desperate need. I compel the orgasm from her with rapid licks and intolerable sucking. Her back bows and her breath hitches. Her soft thighs press against my ears as a thin whine escapes her mouth.

My fingers dig into her ass hard, jerking her closer. Almost there, almost there.

“Jack,” she sobs before a wordless cry releases from her. My fingers sink into her wet cunt, feeling her clench greedily as she orgasms on my face. Before she has a chance to come down, I grab her hips and pull, bringing her directly beneath me again.

“Fuck me,” I insist, kissing her. When I pull back, her eyes are dazed and her own wetness has transferred to her mouth. I

push my pants down and settle between her legs, dragging myself up and down her entrance, coating the head of my cock with saliva and her arousal. My hands twitch for a knife but it's not here. Just her warm, wet cunt and my hard cock begging to be buried inside her.

“I thought you wanted to kill me,” she gasps as I settle my head against her entrance. I drape myself across her, burying my face in her hair. Then slowly, I press in. Our groans twist together as one while her cunt relents to me. My entire body is tense and shuddering, pleasure rolling down my spine as I feel how warm she is. She's wrapped around me like a vise as I penetrate her with my hard cock.

“Fuck,” I gasp. Sex has never been this good. It's even better than putting my knife in her. She squirms beneath me, delicate noises and sharp nails letting me know how much she feels me. I'm not thinking of my knife at all right now. I'm only thinking about how deep I can bury my cock inside her.

“Jack,” she whispers as I drive all the way home, feeling sweet cervical tension against my glans like the kiss of a heavenly angel. I shudder as pleasure takes over my body. She has all of me inside her. “Do you still want to kill me?” I pull out slowly and she shivers beneath me, her nails digging into my skin as she tightens on my cock.

“Yes,” I growl out. “I'd love to fucking kill you.” I press back in, my eyes nearly rolling into the back of my head. “That doesn't mean I will.”

“That doesn't mean you won't,” she says through gritted teeth. My cock rubs inside her over and over, and I watch the anger bleed out of her eyes.

“Well, it's not like you don't want to kill me,” I rasp with a throaty chuckle, thrusting into her again. Who knew fucking

her was an even greater pleasure than sinking my knife in? I feel incensed by her body moving against mine, her hips rocking to meet my thrusts, her legs wrapped around tightly, and her hands in my hair.

My eyes dart to the side, seeing the gun lying beside her. She doesn't respond to my statement about killing me, but we both know she wants to. And god, I'd love to kill her, but I'm not done with her yet. Not yet, I think rubbing my cock inside her. *Not... yet....* I groan.

"I'm fucked," she whines beneath me.

"That's the idea," I huff, pressing my hand between us and dutifully demanding more of her pleasure. When I start to swipe her clit, she tightens around me and I nearly come. My balls draw up tightly and I pant in disbelief. How does she feel this fucking good?

"That's not what I mean," she rasps against me. She grabs the collar of my shirt and stretches it down. Her mouth traces the bullet wound on my chest. It's the exact wound from the funhouse two years ago and I like knowing now that it was her gun, her bullet. Maybe not in her hands, but I'm willing to forgive that small detail.

My fingers play with her until she's squirming pleasantly beneath me. I can't get enough of her pussy. It's slick and messy, accepting my fat cock as I relentlessly thrust in and out, prolonging whatever pleasure I can squeeze out of this moment.

I'm not sure this opportunity will come again. Zoe and I are for forever, but sometimes forever ends far too soon. I've never thought much about the afterlife or what comes next, but at this moment I have to believe it. Death will not stop me from having this ecstasy again. I'll find her—whether in Hell

or the next life. There's no reality where I wouldn't recognize her. It's the look in her eyes, the one she's giving me right now as she moans beneath me, her cunt sucking in my cock and squeezing as she comes. I'll always know that look and I'll always find her.

Hot pleasure crawls up the base of my spine and weighs heavily in my gut. My balls draw up and tighten. I'm going to come inside Zoe and I didn't even need a knife. I'm in disbelief as my cock throbs deep inside my final girl, her own body still twisted with orgasm. Hot rushes of cum soak her pussy as I bury myself deeper than I managed before. She whimpers as I sink in, flinching from pain, but tightening her legs in encouragement.

I'm a goner. Unrestrained groans of pleasure roll up from my throat as I witness the painful bliss her face offers me.

I love Zoe. Adore her.

But she knows something that threatens to ruin us. She knows that I'm no good for her.

I'M SHAKING AND THERE'S NO HIDING IT. MY HANDS PRESS TO my face and I groan in frustration. Tonight has only made things so much more complicated. Jack's massive cock is still deep inside me and I'm beginning to think he's not taking it out.

It's a wet mess between my legs, Jack's cum bleeding out around his shaft to coat our bodies and make a puddle beneath my ass on the floor. My butt intermittently sparks with sharp pain from the latest wound he's carved into me. I'm thankful he gave me it. Not only because it was really hot seeing him lose control from overwhelming desire, but also because it's a sharp reminder he wants to kill me.

Causing me pain is one thing—one I'm not opposed to. But I have to stand my ground on murder. Maybe I'm picky, but I prefer being alive. My bad.

There's always the come down after the high and fucking the Massacre Maniac is the same high as killing other men. Which means my emotions take a nosedive.

"Get out of me," I insist as he hums, pressing kisses to the crown of my head. "Stop that."

“All I’ve done is what you want tonight. Let me do what I want,” he sighs.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I ask. His hips shift and I realize he’s growing hard again. Lord, he’s an absolute animal. My body feels heavy and lax as he slowly begins fucking me, right through my drop and into the next dangerous high. Shit, this is too good.

“I came just as requested. Ready to play your game of who’s the better killer,” he comments, hips snapping forward to stab his cock into me. It’s such a powerful thrust I lose my breath for a moment, my insides tightening.

“Jack,” I rasp, trying to get my words out. His groans always do terrible things to me. I can barely remember what was so alarming a moment ago as I feel his cock flex and his powerful body surging in and out of me.

“You’re so pretty when you can’t talk,” he whispers. My entire body shifts beneath him, thrown forward by the brutal strength of his thrusts. Moving shadows catch my attention through the tunnel hall behind my head. Which forces a sudden urgent clarity back to the front of my mind.

“Jack, I didn’t—” He pulls out, gripping the top of my leotard and tugging it down. I groan when his mouth latches to my breast and sucks, tongue flicking the nipple as he roughly grips my chest. He growls and I feel the sharp kiss of teeth graze the sensitive nub.

“Jack, you sent the message,” I gasp, trying to squirm free from beneath him. He seems possessed, or in any case indifferent to my attempts to talk instead of just fuck. My eyes flick down between our bodies and I see his wet, long cock as he tightens his hold on my breast and bites.

“Ung!” I throw my head back, my body coming alive with sensation caused by the acute pain of his teeth. I think I hear a snicker in the funhouse and shake my head. Frankie’s Fun World has always been this way—making you see and hear what isn’t there. When I was walking around early, trying to find Jack, darting, shadowy shapes moved around the park. Sometimes I even heard the sound of feet on the earth running closer. Ghosts, that’s all. They weren’t really there.

“Jack,” I snarl, ripping him from my breast and grabbing my gun. That gets his attention. His eyes flare and he lunges for my arm, slamming it on the ground.

“Play nice, baby. I want to feel your cunt again.” He flashes a wide smile, all teeth.

“*You sent me the invite. This entire night was your fucked up threat. Meet at midnight or else I’ll find you while you’ll sleep. You even detailed how you’d get to me.*” He looks down at me like I’m speaking Latin.

“Aren’t you under twenty-four surveillance?”

“You detailed the loopholes. Knew the tradeoff times for watches. You listed the exact schedules and even mentioned a few of the cops by name. You said to meet at the mall for a fair fight and if I didn’t come you’d gut me while I slept.”

“That doesn’t sound like me,” is all he has to say.

“Well, actually, it sort of does.”

“Babe, I’m a binge killer. I’ll admit you were worth stalking, but running a week-long surveillance of your extensive security detail? Knowing the names of cops while I’m the most hunted man in the nation? No. Thanks, but it sounds boring as hell.” His words thread together a growing

unease. What he's saying makes a hell of a lot more sense, but if he didn't send it...

"You sent me an email asking to see who was the better killer," he says slowly, confused eyes darting around my face. Goosebumps rise over my arms. A prickling sensation wraps around my neck. It feels like the blood is draining from my head.

"Zoe," Jack says in concern. He gently cradles my face in his hands as my heart races. "What's wrong?"

"They—" I try to calm my breathing, but it's fast and shallow. "They know I'm her. That I'm—" I'm losing it.

Then I hear it. The sounds of boots crunching on broken glass outside the funhouse, stomping in a quiet pack all around us. Those aren't ghosts.

As realization dawns, I watch the emotion fade from Jack's face like a mirage, leaving behind the blank expression of a cold-blooded psychopath. His face slowly turns to the side as he hears what I hear. Dark, inky eyes crawl back up to mine and I know death is coming. Lots of death.

I wonder for a moment if he'll kill me first. He always wants the time to take it slow, but maybe he'll cut his losses now. Stick me quick in the heart by way of goodbye before he relentlessly carves a path through the authorities collecting outside. The detonation of the mall where we first arranged to meet must have screwed up their plan to capture the both of us, but now they've finally managed to catch up.

Jack's deep eyes dip to my mouth and I realize I'm hyperventilating. I'm having a panic attack. There's too much stuff at once and I'm spiraling, my heart crawling up my throat. Jack drops his body on mine, slowly weighing me

down inch by inch until his entire weight is pressing me into the floor.

“Shh,” he whispers into my ear. “It’s going to be okay, Zoe.” It’s not. I almost panic even more at his words because usually he whispers so tenderly right before he thrusts in his knife. I whimper and try to move under him but I can’t. I thrash for a moment while he keeps whispering in my ear, gently hushing me, telling me everything is fine. He’ll make it fine for me.

After a moment of useless struggle, the tension begins to leak out and the panic crawls back down in my stomach.

“Good girl, that’s it,” he whispers. “They know you’re her, don’t they?”

“I think they must,” I murmur. I’d felt them closing in on the truth all week. I’d been too sloppy and they’d kept me locked up tight while they connected all the dots before laying this beautiful trap. They were here, having concocted this wonderful ploy to get a two-for-one, knock out both Umbra Valley serial killers in one night.

Jack reaches for my hand, pulling it above my head and rubbing his fingers across my wrist.

“Okay,” is all he says before I hear a metallic snap and click. The press of metal digs into my wrist and I realize he’s handcuffed me to a bar on the side of the spinning tunnel. My eyes bug but then his mouth is on mine, his kiss deep and slow. He’s savoring me, cherishing the kiss with every second we have left.

Then he gets up, pulls his pants over his cock, grabs my gun, and looms above me in the dark. My eyes fall to the gun in his hand. Does he even know how to shoot? He’s never

once used one in his kills. The one time they thought he did was actually me and a lot of people chose to ignore that single outlier in the sprawling history of his massacres.

“What are you doing?” I whisper. He holds my gun like someone who has held a lot of guns—with confidence and familiarity. The clip falls out and he takes a quick inventory of the remaining bullets before slamming it back in. His thumb expertly flicks the safety off.

“I fucking hate guns,” he spits out. There’s some history there, I can read it between the lines. The disgust on his face as he stares at the gun in his hand goes beyond preference and into trauma.

“Jack, do not fucking leave me handcuffed in here,” I hiss. A dark smile blooms across his face. Half the makeup is smeared away to reveal the tan skin underneath.

“Sorry, Zoe, but you’re staying here. Hope you don’t mind me borrowing this.” He waves the gun. My eyes bug as it sinks in. He’s leaving me, taking my gun, and shooting his way through to escape.

“You fucking bastard!” I yell.

“Well, I won’t argue with that.” He winks and snaps a jaunty salute before turning and walking out into the darkness. I look at the handcuff and contemplate breaking my thumb to get out. I reach up and sucker punch my hand but all that results in is me rolling around the ground, hissing in pain with my thumb still perfectly intact.

Okay, that was fucking dumb.

I’m still debating a course of action when I hear the first loud bang from my gun. It reminds me of horse races, when

there's an anticipatory silence before the action starts. Everyone is holding their breath and then *BAM!* Chaos.

Jack has started chaos with a single bullet.

"Agent down!" someone yells. There is racket, shifting, and whispers growing into yells. Someone finally takes charge.

"FBI! We have the place surrounded! Come out wi—" A shot from my gun cuts him off. The way his words end in a gurgle lets me know he received the bullet. Two for two—Jack's certainly no novice. Not at all. They clearly can't see him, but he's popping up and smacking them like whack-a-moles back into their hole.

More chaos erupts. Them losing organization. More bullets pop off. More "agents down" barked out over the growing cacophony of mortal panic.

"It's the Lovers Murderer, she's shooting!"

"Guess again," I hear Jack bark out with a laugh. Everyone goes silent. My own breathing feels too loud.

"Drop the gun," someone demands. He's run out of bullets and I'm not sure what he's going to do now.

"Come down here slowly with your hands up." I hear Jack's impressive weight on the flimsy wooden steps. He's giving himself up? That doesn't seem like something he'd do. I need to get out of the handcuffs.

My eyes dart around and I see Jack's left me a shiny little key on the ground that I missed before. I strain for it, my fingers brushing the floor just out of reach. I curse under my breath.

I stretch and the handcuffs dig into my wrist, but I brush the key, managing to pull it just close enough to snatch it up. Quickly, I slam it in the cuff and release myself. I crawl quietly on the floor to the door and peer cautiously through the crack.

There's a small army in front of Jack. He's standing there, but no one is coming close.

"Go cuff him," someone demands. An agent shuffles forward with trepidation, terrified to get close to the Massacre Maniac.

"Better hurry," Jack jokes. "I might change my mind." That inspires a couple more agents to come join in on the subduing. One grabs his arms, pulling them behind him. Another takes it upon themselves to strap a muzzle to his face.

Clearly, they consider every part of him a weapon. They snap the cuffs on and pull him into the wall of black uniforms.

"Did you kill the Lovers Murderer?" someone asks him. Jack acts like he hasn't heard the question.

"Zoe, come out with your hands up!" My eyes haven't left Jack. Why did he give up? Something doesn't feel right about this.

His dark eyes are aimed directly at where I'm crouched down in the shadows. A lazy smile spreads beneath the metal muzzle and he winks. Then his expression shifts to anger and strain—his arms bunch, the muscles bulging. The veins in his neck pulsate and in the next moment the handcuffs snap and his arms are free.

It becomes absolute chaos like I've never witnessed. A muzzled Massacre Maniac with broken cuffs on his wrists earns his name ten times over. He grabs an assault rifle and

tugs it backwards, right into the owner's face. It caves in, exploding in blood and bone. Jack whips the gun around before the man has even dropped to the ground, lighting up as many as he can in a single sweep.

Screams, shooting, wails, barked orders. I don't lose sight as he moves through the chaos, swiftly eliminating one person after the next with overwhelming strength and the keen ability to decipher each person's quickest death, however brutal it may be. Jack doesn't have any limits.

One of the agents drops his gun with a clatter, turns, and hauls ass as fast as he can.

There is a loud bang and an enormous flash of white like staring at a hundred suns. For a moment, everything is pitch black and my ears are ringing. When I regain my senses, I see Jack dancing—it's the only way to describe it. He's a dervish of death, soundlessly twirling about amongst the unseeing cops who have been blinded by the flash-bang grenade he somehow managed to get his hands on. He also has a knife in each hand that he must have found as well.

Jack is sinuously moving from one man to another, quickly and efficiently executing them one by one. He's a brilliant, if controversial, artist deftly painting a masterpiece in broad brush strokes of bright crimson. One gets seven inches of steel inserted to the hilt in his skull at the temple, another a blade to the heart, another a spinal strike at the back of the neck. Instant lethal strikes for all of them. They're dead before their bodies hit the ground.

Every half minute another flash-bang goes off and the cops are blinded, groping around furiously, listening to screams and thuds of bodies hitting pavement.

With each flash of light, there are fewer cops standing upright as the body count grows.

By the second bang, their numbers have dwindled to fifteen. By the third, ten.

The scene lights up in the eerie glow of a highway flare. It illuminates the scene in a sickly red hue that makes the blood and bodies look black. Jack stands in the middle of his field of corpses, drenched in blood as he reaches down for a man who's pawing at his eyes and fumbling for his gun. Jack rips him around and sinks in his knife, ripping from groin to neck in one powerful eruption of blood and gore.

He drops the body as a bullet rips into him. Then a second, and a third. Jack staggers a moment and looks back to where I sit in the funhouse. He swallows, grinds his teeth, and keeps going. He snatches another gun after losing the first, bashing brains in and shooting precise holes into the hearts and eyes of anyone who has the misfortune of coming close to his scope.

It's a bloodbath and he's nearly inhuman. But he's tired and shot up. I can see the disappointment in his eyes as he has to make the choice to run. He comes sprinting for me. His fingers disappear behind his head to unlatch the muzzle. It drops to the ground as he jumps up the steps.

"C'mon lil' killer, time to scoot." He pulls me beside him, making a quick detour to the closet to grab his personal knife. I'm looking at him with awe and confusion as we come out the other end of the funhouse and take off into the park.

JACK

THERE ARE SEVERAL BLOOMING WET SPOTS ON MY CLOTHES that the dark fabric is hiding well. It's obviously not the first time I've taken a bullet. I popped that cherry a very long time ago—way before Zoe's gun was used at the funhouse.

Frankly, I'd have preferred capture or death over picking up a gun again. It isn't about me though, it's about Zoe. The bullet in my leg is making it difficult to run, so we make do with a lumbering trot. Every step is a painful reminder to try and dodge a little better next time. My hand is wrapped around Zoe's wrist, a shackle that isn't unlocking.

Right now we need to find a place to hunker down for a while. I expelled a lot of energy back there and would also like a moment to make sure I don't have any bullets still lingering inside. A quick lick of my wounds for lady luck and to make sure I still taste ok—a compress to stanch the bleeding followed by a hasty bandaging and we should be good to go.

We're both on the run now—me and my femme fatale. I like the idea of us riding through the long stretches of highways across the country. I wonder where Zoe would like to go. I'll take her there. Anything for my baby. Guns, glory, and dibs at picking where's next on the map. She can have it all.

She's been quiet as we move. It's understandable... given the radio squawks and what sounds like a lot more sirens approaching from the distance. However, her silence makes me uneasy. There's a troubling energy surrounding her. Not just the silence, but also the way she keeps looking at me.

"We got to hide," I say. Zoe lifts her arm and points up at the Ferris wheel in the distance. It's a towering circle currently framing an approaching dawn. The black sky is beginning to fade to a deep blue as I pull Zoe beside me to the ride.

We approach a cart and I waste no time opening the metal door and getting Zoe inside. I move over to the controls, my fingers hovering over the buttons. It's a pale metal box decorated with brown rust spots. Contrary to public assumption, there is still power to the park.

I bend down and feel around underneath the metal box. In a pocket on the bottom is a handheld controller that I rip off before joining Zoe in the cart. It's connected to the box by a chord that I pluck off. Pretty sure ten years is long enough to get a good charge.

It's an open-air cart that no modern Ferris wheel would dare to tempt fate with. These days they all have metal cages on the top to stop idiots from jumping or falling out. Of course, Frankie's Fun World favored delivering the richest experience even at the expense of the industry standard safety precautions.

"Is there power?" Zoe asks as I sit in front of her, caging her legs with mine.

"Yes," I comment, clicking the button that slowly begins to twist the ride. In the dark, with all the lights off, they are unlikely to see the steady movement of the round beast. Metal whines loudly, putting me on edge.

I set the remote down as we go up then reach for Zoe, pulling her into my lap. I'm supposed to be checking body damage, but she's the only thing I want to concentrate on right now. Her legs spread as she sinks into my lap, straddling me on the bench. Her hands settle on my shoulders as she looks down at me with her haunting eyes.

"Why did you do that?" she asks.

"Hmm?" I question, my hands smoothing over her hips and traveling higher. I palm one of her breasts and lean forward, pressing my face into them. She smells like a cool autumn night.

"Get yourself shot? Use my gun? Handcuff me in the funhouse? You're bleeding all over the bench, Jack." She sighs. "Why?" I pull my head away from her body and cradle her face in my hands.

"Because I'll never let them take you from me. I'll massacre this entire crumbling city one person at a time if I have to. You're mine, Zoe. Only mine. I won't have anyone else ripping you from my hands. I won't have anyone else stealing your last breath from me." She watches me while I talk, concentrating on my words with a look of pain.

"I'm yours?" she asks.

"Until the last star burns out. I'll never let you go." I lean over and click the Ferris wheel off. We're at the top now. It's the perfect spot to rest. We can see the agents from here. They aren't coming anytime soon, still recuperating from the carnage and too shell-shocked to come asking for more.

Zoe peels herself off my lap and moves to the edge of the cart, looking out at the movement near the funhouse. Flashlights dart around chaotically in the distance.

“I’ve always wanted this,” Zoe says, turning to look at me over her shoulder. I shift down the bench seat, wrapping my arms around her.

“What did you want?” I whisper in her ear, pressing my mouth to her neck. I’m so tired but I’m clinging on to get this moment with her. Then I’ll take care of myself. Then we can leave. But first, this. Her skin feels like ice. A cold front came in tonight that’s left her shivering in meager clothes that offer scant protection against the temperature.

Grinding my teeth in pain, I slowly peel my bloody jacket off and wrap it around her shoulders. I insist she put her arms in the holes before my bloody fingers reach around her and zip it all the way up. My hand slowly pulls the hood above her head, giving her a little pat before I sag in exhaustion.

“I wanted you. Us. Ever since the funhouse. I tried to pretend I didn’t but it was there, inside me. A wish.” She tips her head up and looks at the stars above us. They glitter in the dark sky, twinkling like magic.

“Zoe,” I whisper, drooping on the bench as I tangle my fingers in her hair and pull her head to mine. She resists, turning her head away. My eyes dip closed and I have to force them back open.

“You’re my wish, but Jack, you’re a death wish,” she says. Suddenly, she lunges towards me with her shoulder. Her shoulder connects with mine, right where one of the bullets hit me. My body jerks backwards from the pain automatically. She keeps pressing and my eyes bug as I tip over the edge of the cart.

My hands fumble, frantically scrambling for the edge of the cart. My heart is rapidly pounding in my chest. I’m

suddenly awake, my eyes wide open, and adrenaline coursing through me as fast as it can for survival.

My fingers catch and my shoulder wound screams in agony as I hold on to the edge of the cart. It swings wildly and Zoe sways, nearly tumbling out of it too. I reach out and grab her, pulling her closer.

“Saving yourself from me, final girl?” I ask with a mean smile.

“Let me go,” she hisses between her teeth as tears bloom from her eyes. “Goddamnit, Jack.”

“I’ll never let you go,” I tell her, making sure she sees it in my eyes.

“You want to kill me,” she insists. As I pull on her clothes, she’s forced half over the edge of the cart, her face drawing closer to mine. Her eyes flash to the ground.

“That doesn’t mean I will,” I whisper. Her mouth finally touches mine but we don’t kiss.

“You won’t even deny it,” she says, lips moving against mine as she talks. My hand is getting sweaty as it holds on to the edge of the cart. My heart throbs in my chest.

“No, I won’t deny it,” I say, kissing her mouth. “Don’t leave me, Zoe. Anything but that.”

“I’m killing you, Jack, not leaving you.” She gives a gasp as I tug her another few inches over the cart. Her hands are desperately gripping the edge to keep from tumbling out of the cart with me. My mouth presses to her ear intimately.

“If you can’t live with me, die with me,” I tell her. One of her hands leaves the cart and settles against my neck delicately.

“Do you love me?” she asks. “Are you even capable?”

“For you, I’m capable of anything. I undoubtedly love you.” I kiss her gently, against the heartbeat in her neck. “Death itself won’t stop me from having you.”

“I love you too, Jack,” she whispers in my ear. My breath catches in my throat. If someone had told me when I was younger that one day someone would love me...perhaps it would have changed how I turned out. The hope alone could have altered me. That there was one person in the world who could care for me might have made all the difference.

Zoe’s hand brushes down my chest.

“But let’s see about death not stopping you.” Her hand wraps around the knife tucked in my belt and she rips it out. It sinks into my gut in one brutal stab. Pain lights up my body and my arm shakes as I hold on. A sob chokes out from her throat as tears spill from her eyes.

Zoe looks tragic while killing me. She doesn’t want to kill me, does she? Never wanted to. Not even tonight. It’s startling to realize that. For the first time, I comprehend that I don’t want to kill her anymore. The pain from her absence would forever taint any high resulting from her death. A world without Zoe is a world in which I no longer have any interest.

She rips the knife out and stabs me again. A groan of pain rolls out of me and my hand starts to slip on the cart. I let go of Zoe’s jacket, freeing her, then brush her tears away.

“You’re no good for me, Jack,” she chokes out.

“I know.”

“Goodbye, Jack,” she whispers. My hand slides from the edge and I fall. My stomach crawls up my throat and the wind

whips around me. She watches me go, her eyes wide in panic, and my blood-drenched knife in her hand.

I watch her shrink in the distance and then close my eyes, relieved that I can finally relax and sleep.

ONCE JACK'S BODY HITS THE GROUND IT DOESN'T MOVE again. I thought I experienced pain in his basement—when I realized I was worse than nothing to him. I was both a passing curiosity to be explored and something loathsome that must be killed within his mixed up psyche. That wasn't pain. That was juvenile.

This is pain. My mind reels, the shock sending pinpricks over my skull.

“Move,” I insist, willing him to get back up like he always fucking does. I shove backwards and grab the remote control, slamming the button to go forward at its fastest speed. I've suddenly developed vertigo, it seems. The world is swaying like a body of water and I'm feeling confused. Is this real life? Maybe it's just a terrible dream.

What did I do? Oh god, it hurts.

I *had* to, though. I had no fucking choice.

Blood leaks from the body on the ground. I want to erase the horrible thing I just did. Scrub it clean from reality.

Jack's gone. He's dead. I killed him. I *loved* him.

My chest aches and my stomach is squeezing itself so tightly it takes colossal effort to not throw up. I hit the bottom

of the Ferris wheel, open the gate, and stand on the platform. My eyes dig into the body of the Massacre Maniac on the ground. He suffered bullet wounds, stab wounds, a broken nose, and was thrown off a Ferris wheel.

“Jack,” I choke out, begging him to get up. Then I hear the FBI coming—boots stomping and radios beeping. I give Jack one last look as I wipe my eyes. Then I turn and run. My body meets the forest that surrounds Frankie’s and I’m off, darting through the trees and brush like a panicked deer.

I’ve never been this tired in my life and I doubt any amount of sleep will shake it. For the rest of my life, I’ll be exhausted from what I had to do—kill the man I love to save myself. Kill the only person in the world who accepted me. Who truly wanted me, all my fucked up parts. I’m alone now once again, truly, utterly alone.

But I’m alive.

It takes a long while to make my way to an abandoned place to crawl into and hide. There’s no going back home. I imagine the detective adopting Parrot and getting teased by the bird for the rest of his life. Which should bring a smile to my face, but I can’t make the expression.

I’m in the closest hotel to the park, the one meant for the best experience and the richest clientele. I don’t move past the lobby, too tired to climb stairs. Instead, I grip the plastic covering the couch and rip it off. It’s pristine beneath, a soft, clean couch that welcomes my body as I drop onto it.

I don’t even realize I’ve kept Jack’s knife gripped in my hand until it falls to the floor with a clatter. The imprint of the handle is indented into my palm. I had it in a death grip.

The burning need to sob feels like hammers behind my eyes and a fist in my throat. Eventually, it comes out and I can't stop it. Before tonight, I haven't cried since I was a child and now it's letting itself all out. There's a deluge of emotions rearing up to tell me "*Yes, you're alive, you fucking bitch*".

Finally, I tire myself out and the broken sobs settle down. Then I fall asleep.

I startle awake, scrambling to sit up on the couch and twisting my head around. I'm not sure what's woken me up or caused me to be on edge. Maybe it was nothing but dreams, or enough exhaustion wearing off to remind me I needed to keep moving. It's night outside again. I slept through the whole day. My mouth is dry and my body aches.

I need to leave. I think through all the abandoned places I'm familiar with in Umbra Valley. There are so many it's nearly endless. I've stuck to places of business when I killed, but never even touched more than the tip of the iceberg there. And that's just one type of empty building. There are homes, apartments, and public buildings, all offering an endless stream of sanctuary. I don't have to leave Umbra Valley at all. I can hide here forever if I want.

Except Umbra Valley reeks of the Massacre Maniac. I can't stay here, not when he still feels so close. His presence will always be alive here and I can't take that.

The front door shatters and crashing glass startles me. Has the FBI already found me? *How?* Someone slams it open and stomps in. My throat closes up and my eyes bug as a massive man with blood dripping from his broken nose aims inky eyes on me.

"No, it's impossible," I say. A chilling smile crawls up Jack's face before he lunges forward, suddenly running at me

full speed. I twist on the couch so I can crawl over the top. Large hands grab hold of my legs and jerk me down. His body blankets mine across the back of the couch, fingers settling on either side of me.

“No,” I gasp.

“Oh yes, baby.”

“How?” I choke out and he presses into me harder, squeezing me between him and the couch. I can’t tell how mad he is. My heart feels light for the first time since I killed him, but terror makes my limbs shake. Relief and fear twist inside me

“I told you death wouldn’t stop me. There’s no getting rid of me,” he growls. His fingers leave the couch and I feel them grip the leotard’s fabric between my legs. He grabs his knife from the floor and saws into my clothes. They break at the crotch, snapping open.

“It was a very bad thing, trying to kill me, baby.” He goes to his knees on the floor, grabbing my ass roughly and sinking his mouth to the knife wounds he left. His tongue and lips press and stroke the place tenderly.

“I’m sorry!” I gasp. Fuck, I’m a mess. He changes all the rules for me though. The rules that say feelings come hard and that I can’t make an honest expression to save my life. I’ve sobbed for him, felt for him, hurt for him.

“You will be sorry,” he says with a laugh. Teeth press into my ass, biting hard. He wraps his arms around my hips and twists us around, laying me in his lap ass up. All his strength is back or maybe I have none left. He pushes my legs between his own and squeezes to keep me from bucking. Then he

presses his forearm against my shoulders, weighing me down and trapping me.

Next, Jack does what Jack does best. He uses his knife on me. Except this time it's delicate slices that burn so good the lines of pleasure and pain blur. Warmth radiates from my body as the sharp edge of his knife slides across the soft skin.

He hums in pleasure as he slowly works, carving something into my skin deep enough that I'll never forget it. My pussy throbs when he groans while making another slash. The sound spreads over my body like a syrup, burying into my flesh. I'm so wet I can't take it. It's not just the delicious pain, but the way he's forcing it on me. His body controls mine entirely, I'm nothing in his massive, calloused hands, and the Massacre Maniac has no problem making me aware of that fact. Struggle is futile, I'm his captured prey. His body is steel and mine is the soft flesh he splits open.

I writhe on his knee as he makes me take my punishment. When he's done slicing, Jack throws his knife in a sharp jerk. It flies through the lobby and plants into the wall with a soft wobble.

"Done," he says, and I twist around trying to see what he's done. "It says Jack's," he tells me. He bends down and gently kisses it, making me hiss from a sting on the tender wound. He twists us around until I'm draped over the back of the couch again, bare ass up for him. The sound of him spitting in his palm sends a shudder down my spine. His hand presses warm between my legs and rubs his spit where he needs it.

He leans over me as his fingers find their way inside, massaging into my body slowly but surely.

"Beg to be mine," he rasps. I suck in a breath and imagine being his—allowing myself that wish as a reality. There are so

many things that make this wrong. Perhaps we don't deserve love and that's the real rub of it.

Then I think of the shootout, Jack picking up my gun and inflicting carnage and wrath behind a steel barrel. He hated it—he risked his health, his freedom, and his sanity—and he did it for me. He likely saved me from capture or death with no guarantee he'd receive the same reward.

Then I think of the overwhelming relief I felt when I saw him walk into here. I recall the devastation I felt from his death. I remember the desolate, hollow place in my chest when I thought he could never care for me. I think of how, even when he was eagerly trying to kill me, he went out of his way to do little things... like make sure I had enough food not to panic in his basement.

I imagine being his—the sinister strength he's capable of and how he'd wield it for us. I think about sharing the most heinous parts with him and us just laughing in joy. I think about how every single second with Jack subdues the gnawing blankness inside me.

“Can I be yours Jack?” I whisper quietly. I can feel the heat on my cheeks crawling around my neck and up to my ears. I bury my face in my arms. How am I so embarrassed about this? I've killed men and yet asking Jack if I can be his makes my throat burn. I feel so small right now, so open to attack.

“Yes, Zoe. You can be mine,” he says, running his hands up my back. I swallow the lump in my throat.

“How did you find me?” I ask, rocking back on his hand. He taps a finger against my hand, the one wrapped with his dark cloth.

“You really think I was ever letting you get away again?” he rasps into my ear with a dark chuckle. I feel his cock slide between my thighs and press at my entrance. At first, my mind tells me he found me because of magic, that Jack really is more than a man. Then a more pedestrian explanation hits. He’s used the dart wound as an excuse to implant me with a tracking device.

“You didn’t,” I rasp.

“I did,” he growls, finally sinking inside me. My back bows, my ass pressing against him. A moan drifts from my mouth as he fills me. I gave my best fucking shot at avoiding this. One attempt is good enough. Never again.

“I love you, Zoe,” he groans in my ear. He’s everywhere around me—body draped over mine, name burning on my ass, breath in my hair, and cock pressing deep into my body.

“I love you too, Jack,” I whisper back. His hand twists with mine, our matching cloth bandages kissing. I can’t fight this anymore. I never want to again.

“Try not to kill me.” I gasp as he gives a rough thrust into me. My body is brought to life with pleasure, blooming between my legs as he spreads me wide on his thick cock.

“Only if you promise to do the same. Fair is fair, baby.” He sinks all the way in and stops moving as a shudder rolls through his body. His large, calloused hands roam, sliding under the broken leotard and the bloody jacket of his that I’m still wearing to grab a thick handful of my breast and squeeze.

I clench down on him and he groans, teeth sinking into my shoulder as he fucks me.

“Fair is fair,” I say before a soft cry breaks from my lips. His movements are deep and smooth, a steady languid pace

that is driving me insane. Despite my writhing and pleading, he never speeds up, he's fully committed to a long, drawn-out climb to the highest peak.

His fingers press between my legs as he fucks me from behind. It doesn't take much, but he tries to draw it out with soft, reliable sweeps. My body tenses on him, winding tighter and tighter.

"You feel better than I ever could have dreamed," he groans. His hips flick in a way that makes him grind all the best places. I come, my body tensing as pleasure roars up from my center, overtaking me.

"Fuck," he rasps, his large hand spreading over my belly as he digs as deep as he can. There's a pinch of pain that makes my insides flare. I relax entirely, a puddle of orgasmic bliss as he presses in and groans. His fat cock throbs inside me, giving subtle jerks as he makes me take his cum as deep as I can.

I'm warm and relaxed. Everything is right, even while completely and utterly wrong. All I needed was this.

"Everything will be okay," he tells me, pulling me into his lap. "You've got the Massacre Maniac on your side now." I hear the vicious humor in his words as I press my face to his chest and curl up.

"What do we do next?" I ask.

"Let's take a trip. I think other places deserve a little attention. Umbra Valley's been greedy."

"A road trip killing spree?" I ask with a lilting laugh. He startles, looking down at me with shock. "What?" I ask.

"I've never heard you laugh," he says.

“I’m pretty sure I laughed one of the times you were failing to kill me.”

“Yeah, like you’d lost your mind. This was different,” he says, observing me. I roll my eyes and press my hand into his hair, pushing it from his face.

“We need rules,” I say. His eyes drift away from my mouth.

“Sounds annoying.”

“No stabbing me,” I say, and Jack makes a choking sound of despair.

“Okay,” he wheezes.

“You can still stab others plenty.” My fingers twist a lock of his dark hair.

“No fucking your victims,” he growls. I bite back a smile. He doesn’t know I couldn’t fuck them anymore anyway. Not with him back in my life.

“But I usually promise them. It’s part of the deal,” I pout, teasing him. His face twists in confusion.

“Your murders sound so weird. They can watch me fuck you if I’m feeling generous.”

“How magnanimous of you, Jack.”

“Indeed,” he growls, grabbing my face and dipping his lips to mine. He dominates my mouth until I’m breathless. “Let’s find our new MOs together,” he says softly. I trace his lips with my fingertips and nod.

“I’d love to kill with you,” I tell him. He shudders, his eyes dilating in excitement before he kisses me deeply once again.

EPILOGUE

ANTHONY

AT A GAS STATION NEAR THE ABANDONED THEME PARK, I snack on a stolen box of stale crackers as I watch the recording of two serial killers. The killers in question are Jack and Zoe, or the Massacre Maniac and Lovers Murderer. They found the video at an abandoned sandwich shop in the dead hands of Umbra Valley's leading anchorman. He'd been brutally murdered before the pair of serial killers stole his convertible to ride off into the sunset. Apparently, the ex-gas station attendant had fallen in love. Good for her.

The video starts with the news anchor, Micah, on the screen. He's been taped to a chair and has blood and bruises over his sweaty face. His brown hair is plastered to his forehead and his eyes are rimmed in red. It's a far cry from the rendition we normally get of him.

"You're my friend," the Massacre Maniac tells Micah. He thrashes in the chair, screaming through the cloth in his mouth. "Whoops, sorry about that," Jack laughs, tugging the gag down. Micah leans over and spits a tooth on the floor. It lands in a small pool of blood that Jack zooms in on for a moment.

"Ah shit, those perfect teeth!" he exclaims with a laugh.

"Let me go," Micah demands. Jack sighs then twists the camera to Zoe. She shoots a look at the camera that promises

violence. Jack darts the camera away with a chuckle.

“She’s mad I lost her mask,” he says to Micah. “She’s promised to give me a second asshole to shit out of if I don’t get her a replacement soon.” By the tone of his voice, you can tell he finds that charming. I shove another dry cracker in my mouth and brush the crumbs from my shirt.

“I like you, Micah,” Jack says. “That’s why I wanted to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” The camera view tumbles and then goes dark. There’s a muffled conversation that is subtitled on the screen. Jack asks him to record their farewell to Umbra Valley.

“I record and then you let me go?” Micah asks. Zoe’s laugh is in the background. The camera is picked up and aimed at Zoe and Jack, who is wearing a skull mask.

“Yeah, then we let you go,” she says with a deadly smile curling up her face. I’d be lying if I said I was surprised by this turn of events. Zoe used to walk around with the murder weapon in her work uniform. I’d have been more shocked if she hadn’t turned out to be the Lovers Murderer.

“Why don’t you ask us some questions, Micah. An impromptu interview,” Jack says as he walks up to Zoe. He fists her hair and pulls up his mask before attacking her mouth with a brutal, dominating kiss. My eyes stray to the chocolate milk behind the glass door. I lean forward and fetch it out.

“Are you for fucking real?” Micah spits behind the camera, sounding angry. “You grabbed me to record a porn and interview? How about we start with ‘How old are you?’ Oh, eighteen? Hold up your driver’s license, baby. Show everyone that you’re legal today.” I’ll give it to Micah, he was a ballsy guy.

“Micah, are you into that barely legal shit?” Jack asks with a note of disgust, pulling the mask back down over his mouth.

“You fuck people with a knife,” Micah counters with exasperation.

“Is that the first question? Yes, I do,” Jack says chipperly. “We all have our kinks.”

“Is that true? Does the Lovers Murderer also have a kink?” Micah asks.

“Murder,” she purrs, rubbing against Jack’s pants.

“How did you two meet?” Micah asks quickly. Maybe to distract them from sex, maybe because he thought doing the interview would save him... no one can be sure but him. Not that he could talk if he was alive. They cut off his tongue. Guess they didn’t like the news.

“The funhouse murders,” Zoe responds to his question, looking at Jack with a smile. “He stuck a knife in my ass and I knew we were meant for each other.”

“Right,” Micah deadpans. “That’s lovely. Was it love at first stabbing for you as well, Jack?”

“Uh...well,” Jack stumbles over a response. I chug the drink before setting the empty bottle on the shelf. It helps the next salty cracker feel less dry in my mouth.

“Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise already?” Micah asks smarmily.

“It was obsession at first sight,” Jack finally responds. Zoe looks up at him with stars in her eyes.

“Was it really?” she asks.

“Yes, baby,” he whispers. They really are a cute couple, actually. Minus all the murder, if that sort of thing bothers you.

“You escaped capture at the theme park a week ago. Where have you been?” Micah interjects, entirely unimpressed by their romance.

“Around,” Zoe says. “Jack slept the entire time. I had to kiss his boo-boos clean,” she jokes.

“Want to kiss something else clean?” he asks her. She flashes him a wicked smile.

“You said you were leaving?” Micah asks with a sigh.

“We’re going to travel,” Jack says chipperly.

“Oh? A little honeymoon for the newlyweds?”

“That’s right! Taking the show on the road. I know Umbra Valley will miss us, but that’s showbiz, baby.”

The camera suddenly twists to the side, where you can see a body deeper in the store.

“What the fuck is that?” Micah asks. Jack goes to look.

“Babe?” he calls out. “I thought we agreed on no solo kills.”

“It was an accident!” she replies sheepishly.

“How do you accidentally disembowel someone?” Jack asks, coming back to her. He throws a three-foot stretch of intestines at her feet. Micah begins gagging right near the camera’s microphone.

“I was practicing,” she admits softly. “I’ve never used a knife and you’re so good with them and—” Jack cuts her off.

“You were practicing for me?” he asks, choked up. The video doesn’t last long after that. The couple seem to grow

more interested in fucking than doing an interview. Large portions of the screen get blurred out but the wet sucking noises are a clear indication of what's going on. Plus, Micah keeps sighing and complaining in detail.

A couple minutes of that and then the screen crisply shows the Massacre Maniac's skull mask lunging at the camera. Micah's screams are chilling. Then the entire screen is blurred out. Wails of pain, gurgles, a gunshot, and then the sounds of sex. The news closed captioned the scene as "wet sex noises" for those hard of hearing.

They keep playing this on the national news, but it's the first time I've seen the full clip.

I turn away from the TV and walk to the front of the gas station, giving a salute to the new employee. He's a tired looking guy with dark circles under his eyes. He never talks, but his eyes follow me as I leave.

"You aren't fucking the Massacre Maniac too, are you? He made a mess outside when he was stalking the last attendant." I don't wait for a response.

I follow the path to Frankie's Fun World. The sun sinks down on the horizon as the day starts to slowly cool. I make my way to the big tent past the carnival-themed booths. Ten years ago I was a Harlequin Acrobat, a talented gymnast with clown makeup, performing for the park.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see others slinking around, watching me return.

You see, when the park closed... the employees never left. Instead, they sunk into the depths of the abandoned theme park, creating a strange society free from the normal laws and rules of man.

It's not empty at all. It's filled with the degenerates of the world, and I happen to be one of them.

AFTERWORD



Thank you so much for reading Meet At Midnight! I hope that you enjoyed it!

ALSO BY LUX OLEANDER

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The second book in the Umbra Valley series. It will follow a new couple. Coming 2024.

If you like paranormal erotic thrillers then you might enjoy books from my other pen name, particularly...

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Love and sex in a paranormal asylum for the criminally insane. MMFM, why choose featuring a full cast of unhinged psychos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lux Oleander survives in the heat-drenched state of Texas, attempting to drink the humidity for sustenance. When she isn't writing in her metal storage container turned office she's watching horror, playing video games, or staring at her collection of possessed furbies.

Lux writes high action and high heat that's low on morals. Serial killers, stalkers, and stabby fun with a serving of dark humor are a few of her favorite things. Her books feature villain leads with charm and wit and main characters with just as much bite as their love interests.

If you like paranormal and monstrous stories then check out her other known alias: Beatrix Hollow.

<https://www.luxoleander.com/>

