

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a vast, golden-brown field of tall grasses or wheat. In the distance, there are rolling hills under a blue sky with soft, white clouds. The overall tone is warm and nostalgic.

the Wayward Sons

& THE WICHITA
WEREWOLF



A. WINCHESTER

The Wayward Sons & The Wichita Werewolf

A. Winchester

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To anyone who ever wanted a smutty Supernatural book, here you go. There's demon hunting & there's dick on the first page.

“Meeting you was like listening to a song for the first time and knowing it would be my favorite.”

-Unknown

*“You’re my favorite place to go when my mind searches for
peace.”*

-Unknown

A Note To The Reader

PLEASE READ this first, my dear reader. It'll help clear up a tiny little thing so you can thoroughly enjoy Ryder and Gray's smutty demon-hunting adventures. *The Wayward Sons* is a part of a bigger universe I created called the HunterVerse—inspired by *Supernatural* and *Arrow*.

You don't need to read the original series to understand Ryder and Gray, and the universe is pretty self-explanatory. However, here are the only two pieces you need:

1. There is no lore behind the demons. You will see familiar types of demons (werewolves, sirens, etc) but their origin will be different. All demons crawl their way out of hell.
2. Demon hunters have superpowers based on their archangel lineage. Some even have a superhero glow. They go as follows:
 - a. Descendants of Uriel—elemental control over any two of the following
 - i. Water—blue glowing eyes and hands
 - ii. Air—white glowing eyes and hands

- iii. Fire—red glowing eyes and hands
- iv. Earth—green glowing eyes and hands
- v. Energy—silver glowing eyes and hands
- b. Descendants of Selaphiel—telekinesis
 - i. Orange glowing eyes and hands
- c. Descendants of Gabriel—super strength
 - i. Gold glowing eyes and golden tracks over whole body
- d. Descendants of Raphael—physical durability
- e. Descendants of Michael—enhanced senses
- f. Descendants of Barachiel—emotional project/control
 - i. Black glowing eyes
- g. Descendants of Raguel—foresight
 - i. Copper glowing eyes during a premonition, uncontrollable timing

And that's all you need to know about the universe to enjoy these two hot idiots as they save people from demons... and usually fuck the people they save. Have fun!

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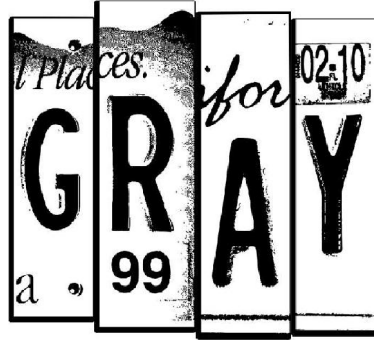
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Chapter One



WAY DOWN YONDER
CHASE RICE



“Fuck.” I let out a moan. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white, as I held on for dear life. “*Fuck*. Your mouth feels so goddamn good on my dick, baby.”

Windows down. Music up. A long stretch of road ahead of us. That hot mouth around my cock. There was nothing better than this. *I was in fucking heaven.*

Right up until some dickwad started laying on his horn like the asshat he was. I pumped the brakes to be an asshole— *because I was just that*. The dickwad in a fancy SUV flew out from behind me to speed around. He flicked me off with a look of disgust as he passed.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” I shouted out the window angrily and threw the finger right back at him. “You

ain't ever seen a guy get his dick sucked before?"

"Maybe it's because you're going thirty under the speed limit, honey," Ryder said as he pulled off me. He braced on the center console, settling that judgy stare on me. I glared right back at him. Talking wasn't what I wanted out of him.

"I ain't goin' that..." I glanced at the speedometer. *Oh, fuck. I was way under the speed limit.* My bad. I laid on the gas and brought the car back up to speed. For one not-so-short moment, I considered speeding to catch up with the douche canoe and cutting him off just to be a dick. But I also wanted my dick sucked, and Ryder would've stopped if I did something so petty. *Debates, debates.* I grumbled, "He still don't need to be a fuckin' asshole."

"Are you done throwing a temper tantrum?"

"That depends."

"On?" He cocked an eyebrow—a look that was downright sexy on him.

"Are you done suckin' my dick?" I gave him the most charming smile I possibly could. That sexy-as-sin grin he gave me back told me he wasn't. *Thank fuck, because my dick was throbbing.*

"Go the speed limit, you idiot," Ryder ordered.

"Yes, Sir," I attempted to say, but the words were lost in a deep groan as his warm mouth wrapped around me once more. I shifted in the seat slightly, making it easier for him. His hand gripped my hard length as he worked me with both. It was

sloppy, hot, and meant to be fast. Road head always was with me and him. But mostly that was because I was an easily distracted fucker. A mouth on my cock took precedence over the road. If he sucked me too long, I'd probably land us in a ditch somewhere. *Ryder said I wasn't good at figuring out my priorities, except I was pretty certain my priorities were real damn straight.*

I threaded my fingers through his soft hair and gave a small but affectionate tug before smoothing my hand between his shoulders. Ryder hated the rough stuff—hard hair pulling, choking, spanking, all of it. We dealt with enough hard shit while hunting demons. He didn't want our relationship to have the same tone. It was a simple request. *Whatever my man wanted, I gave it to him if I could.*

Besides, bar bunnies usually never had any problem with a hot guy and hand necklaces. Fuck, if I called them a good girl they went fucking wild. They were more than enough to satiate that desire for me.

But Ryder Collins? He was my everything and had been for years. He was my ride-or-die—pun applicable if there was one. There wasn't a damn thing I wouldn't do for the russet-haired man with the baby blue eyes sitting in the front seat of my car. Tall and muscular, the man came across as closed off and anti-social to anyone he met. *Reserved and observant.* That's what he really was. Ryder was a descendant of Barachiel. A true empath open to all the shitty feelings going on around him. I didn't envy it. I was a descendant of Uriel—a

wielder of elements. Most specifically I could control the air and the earth.

My power was easy breezy—pun intended. But Ryder's? His was complete shit. I didn't envy him and did whatever I could to protect him from the world. Life on the road away from people and hunting demons suited him. Existing in our space away from the rest of the bullshit and chaos made his power manageable.

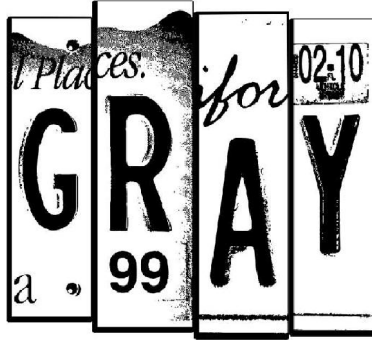
“Fuck, baby.” I inhaled sharply. The heat spiraling the base of my spine was electric, and my balls drew up tight with anticipation. I grasped his shirt and clung to the steering wheel for dear life. I was so goddamn close. “Fuck. I'm goin' to—*fuck me.*”

Whoops. So much for a warning. I came hard the minute he pulled me into the back of his throat. Ryder didn't miss a beat, swallowing every drop I had and sucking me dry while I panted hard and did my best not to drive off the fucking road.

“Jesus fuck,” I let out breathlessly. Ryder sat back in his seat and swiped a hand over that sexy mouth of his. I fumbled through getting my dick back in my pants and not driving us off the road. He bit his bottom lip, hiding a small smile as he shook his head and looked out the window. From the bulge pressing against his jeans, he was as turned on as I'd been. *That wouldn't do.* “Let's stop for somethin' to snack on and figure out where the hell we're goin', so we can stop for the night.”

Not that I had any intentions of sleeping. I planned to take care of him the way he took care of me and then some.

Chapter Two



COWBOY
ASHER CATALDO



“What’d I say about you eating that shit?” Ryder demanded as we wandered across the parking lot of the gas station to our car. He carried drinks, I carried snacks. *Okay, I was already eating the snacks but same difference.* I bit off half a Twizzler and handed off the rest to him. He could complain as much as he wanted, but I knew better. Considering the way he popped the whole damn thing into his mouth, he liked the candy too.

“Don’t start,” I retorted. “You love this shit as much as I do, baby.”

He did. He just wouldn’t buy it, which left me buying all the crappy snacks while he bought the shit that wouldn’t kill us. The way I saw it, we were hunters. We lived, breathed, and chased down dangerous shit because we could. We were headed straight for death anyway. We might as well enjoy the

ride with sugar, carbs, and dangerous road head. There were worse fucking ways to go.

“I’m taking your ass on a run when we get to the next motel,” he grumbled, and I scoffed. *Fat fucking chance he’d get my ass out on a run.* The only running I did was when demons were involved.

“How about I let you do other things to my ass and we call it even?” I flashed him a cocky grin. His serious expression didn’t budge. “That’s cardio, right?”

“I’m trying to keep you alive, Gray.”

“And I’m just enjoyin’ the life you give me.” I countered cheekily. As we stopped by the car, I hopped on the trunk and snacked on another Twizzler. Ryder was meticulous in how he packed away the food and drinks. “All right, hit me with our options. Where we off to next?”

“I’m thinking Wichita,” he said.

“Kansas?” I frowned. “What the fuck is in Kansas? Besides the band?”

“Wrong part of Kansas,” he replied. *What was the right part of Kansas?* Ryder slid onto the trunk with me as he took out his phone. I scooted closer, my shoulder bumping into his and our thighs brushing together. On instinct, his free hand came to rest behind me in a simple gesture of closeness. “I found a few accounts about werewolf sightings.”

“Say what now?” I stopped mid-Twizzler-bite to stare at him. We dealt with demons. All that myth and lore shit people

got excited about was just that: myth and lore. That shit wasn't real. Demons all came from the same place. They clawed their demonic asses out of Hell and fucked with humans on our plane. *It was complicated shit.* All that was to say, werewolves weren't fucking real. "That's horror movie shit, Ryder."

He shrugged, those baby blue eyes leveling on me as he waited my indignation out. *Well, he'd just have to wait a little bit longer because what the actual ever-loving fuck.*

"Horror movies ain't real, baby!" I exclaimed. "You keep tellin' me that. Where the fuck are you gettin' your information?"

"You done?"

"Maybe. Depends on what you're fixin' to say," I muttered. He kissed the tip of my nose, chuckling softly. That coupled with him offering me another Twizzler didn't bode well for what he knew.

"The initial accounts come from some local blogs. The usual stupid shit," Ryder told me. I sighed. *We hated the usual stupid shit.* Okay, mostly I hated the usual stupid shit. Ryder always seemed to find useful information when he decided to go wading among that shit. Me? No way in hell would I bother with all that shit. Humans mixing with demons never ended well. It also never ended accurately. "But I did cross-reference the information I found with information on the Demon Web. There's a kid out in Chicago who has a hell of a system for tracking demon information. I shot him over some of the shit I found to see what he could help me figure out."

“And?” I arched an eyebrow. There was no fucking way in Hell that werewolves were real. *Right?* The look on his handsome face made me second-guess my dead-set thoughts on the matter. “Werewolves ain’t real, Ryder, right?”

“I’m not sure I’d say werewolves are *real*,” he began carefully, “but there’s definitely a demon out there that doesn’t kill humans. It turns them into demons... that look like hairless werewolves.”

I gasped with delight. *This shit was straight out of a fucking horror movie.* He handed me his phone, so I could flip through the pictures. Sure enough, it was a fucking werewolf—or as close to a werewolf as we were ever going to fucking hunt. The pictures were gruesome and only piqued my interest more. The thing was massive and stood on two legs with powerful arms. Hairless skin was stretched tight over its muscled body while long claws extended from four paws. *But the fangs.* Shit. Those fucking fangs were meant for ripping things apart. The fact that it wasn’t killing people was impressive.

“Shit,” I muttered around a mouthful of Twizzlers. “That is one ugly motherfucker. And there ain’t no hunters out that way?”

“Nope.” Ryder shook his head. “At least not any that are showing up on the Demon Web.”

“Fuck it.” I jumped off the trunk. There was no way I could say no to this case. I’d be an idiot to pass it on up. “We have to be... what? Four hundred? Five hundred miles away?”

“About four-seventy-five.”

“We can get a good hundred miles out tonight,” I said. He grabbed the Twizzlers, I took out the keys, and we got in. In no time, I had the car started and ready to go. “We’ll find a bar and motel in about an hour or two and call it a night. Hit the road early tomorrow mornin’ to give us plenty of time to get there.”

“Do you need to piss before we go?” Ryder asked with a small grin when I started driving toward the exit. The car jerked as I stomped on the brake and threw it in park. *Fuck him.* My bladder echoed its agreement. *Why was it that every time he asked that goddamn question, it made me have to go?*

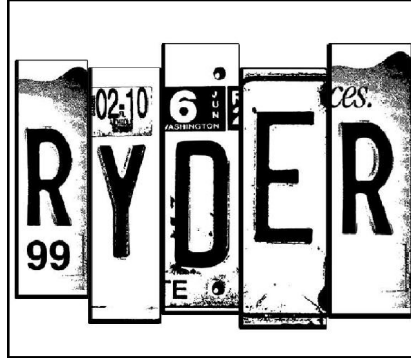
“I didn’t,” I mumbled under my breath. Getting out of the car, I snapped, “Fuck you, Ryder.”

I slammed the door for good measure—mad at my bladder’s betrayal rather than actually mad at him.

“Love you,” he called out, his laughter following me as I waddle-jogged back to the gas station with a pressing need to piss.

Fucking hell. This was hunter life.

Chapter Three



SHAKE IT OFF
TAYLOR SWIFT



Inhale.

Hold five seconds.

Exhale.

Find my calming place... find my calming place...

Inhale.

Hold five seconds.

Try not to murder the fucking douchebag laying on his goddamn horn...

I groaned and scrubbed a hand over my face. Fucking moron was stuck at a red light and acting like the people in front of him had a choice. People sucked. One little slip was all it'd take for me to drain every ounce of emotion out of the fucking

dick—leave him nothing more than an emotionless, damn near soulless void of a human being.

It'd be so fucking easy.

I squashed that thought instantly, a thread of fear weaving its way through my chest at how readily those thoughts could show up. Those kinds of thoughts had gotten me in a shit ton of trouble. I couldn't afford them, and I couldn't afford to let myself use my power. It was the whole reason I was a fugitive on the run.

Putting the chaos behind me, I wandered around the side of the motel until the street was out of sight. I needed to get my shit under control.

Inhale.

Hold five seconds.

Exhale.

Find my calming place... find my calming place...

Inhale.

Hold five seconds.

People sorely underestimated descendants of Barachiel. Granted, the power of emotions was greatly underestimated. The shit I could do with my power was more destructive than people thought. Empathy projection sounded ridiculous until you realized I could inflict so much pain and suffering on a person that they went crazy. Or I could take away every ounce of emotion they had until they were an empty shell.

And I didn't have to try all that hard to do either.

I fucking hated it.

I hated my power.

I hated how open it left me to feeling all the emotions of everyone around me.

I let myself into our motel room, pausing to smile at the Taylor Swift song blasting from the bathroom. *Shake It Off*. Gray loved that stupid song. I just loved him loving it.

Grayson Harper was the only good thing in this God-forsaken world. Where others saw me as off-putting, uptight, or a straight-up asshole, he just saw me. He was sunshine and a breath of fresh air in a world mucked by chaos and darkness. Even when shit got hard, he never gave in. He never gave up. *And he never gave up on me*. I hadn't known it was possible to love someone as much as I loved him.

Peeling off my shirt, I wandered to the bathroom and stood in the open doorway. I leaned against the wall while I took a moment to drink in the sight of Gray in the shower. Water ran in rivulets over his toned body, curving around taut muscles and tracing the contours of his tall frame. Dark hair fell in streams over the back of his neck while water clung to his long lashes. The corners of his honey-chocolate eyes crinkled as he belted out the lyrics. The man had three tattoos: one of my name scrawled over his heart, the word *fear* under a line across the inside of his left wrist, and one of a dandelion with the phrase *you're on your own kid* on his bicep. *Life goals: get*

my man to meet Taylor Swift. His body was rugged art, a mix of his ink and scars.

And all of that paled in comparison to the sight of him dancing around in the tiniest fucking shower I'd seen in a long time. The size of the space didn't deter him in the least. He sang at the top of his lungs and danced around while he soaped up head-to-toe. His hips shook, and his heart was in the music.

God, I loved him in all his wild and happy glory.

Just watching him let loose and be himself turned me on. My dick raged hard against the zipper of my jeans. He didn't need to do anything special or crazy to get me going. Just watching him be unapologetically himself was enough—including his all-out dance fests in the shower to Taylor fucking Swift.

For just a moment, I closed my eyes and opened myself up to his emotions. The flood of his comforting emotions washed away the chaos outside our door. *Joy. Relaxation.* I let his uplifting zen seep into my soul and bring peace to every part of me. The tension eased from my muscles, and my mind calmed.

Nothing ever got to Gray. For all the shit we dealt with, for all the shit he'd been through, he was still as happy-go-lucky as the day I met him. He was too busy finding ways to enjoy our simple life to let the crap get to him. I needed that. I clung to that. *I craved feeling like that.* His outlook on life was an addiction, one I used to filter out the shit-stain that the world left on me. I siphoned a bit of his positive energy and soaked it up. I also took only a tiny bit, never enough to make a real

difference to him. He knew about it and didn't care. He would've offered up every ounce of his energy and emotions on a golden platter if I asked him for it.

"You know," Gray's thickly accented voice cut through my thoughts, "I reckon it's way more fun doin' that shit in here. Get that sexy ass of yours here in the shower with me."

"Like there's room," I scoffed. Nonetheless, I undid my belt and let my pants drop to the floor. His dark gaze swept over my naked body with a look of hunger I was all too familiar with. The man was insatiable—*not that I minded*. Gray always looked ready to devour me. And it wasn't one-sided either. The way he looked at me made my dick ache something fierce. I stepped in the shower and promptly hopped right back out as the scalding water touched my skin. "Jesus fuck, Gray! It's a shower. Not a volcano."

"Sorry." He chuckled and turned down the temperature. The man took ungodly hot showers. No reasonable human showered in water hot enough to cook pasta. I waited a solid minute to let the crappy motel pipes catch up with the temperature change before slipping in behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist, kissing his shoulder. A content sigh passed through his lips and the feeling moved through me. I relaxed into him as he leaned back into me. "You good?"

I made a sound as I kissed my way along his collar and to his neck. My hands ran over his chest, down his ribcage, and over his hips, admiring the definition of his muscles under my

fingers. I used his hips to drag his ass snugly against my hard dick. His hand came around and fingers tangled in my hair while I kissed my way up the lean column of his neck and nipped at his ear the way he liked. He pushed back against me, and I thrust against him—the wet friction between our bodies spiking my arousal. My grip on him tightened, and his hand slammed to the wall to brace himself.

I grabbed the bottle of lube from that practically useless shelf they put in motel showers. *Motel rules: always put a bottle of lube in the shower.* We'd been in this exact situation without lube too many times in the past that it'd become a travel rule to put it in there along with our soaps and shampoo.

“In a mood?” Gray asked, his voice thick with need, as I coated my fingers. I kissed the curve of his shoulder as I repositioned myself behind him. The way he moved with me told me he was just as ready. *He could say whatever the hell he wanted, but he was just as needy as I was—just the way I liked him.*

“You can't shake this sexy ass around and expect me not to want to do something about it.” Proving my point, I pressed a single finger in and out of his ass slowly. *That fucking moan he let out.* It bled through me like liquid iron. He rocked back against me, and I slid in a second finger, stretching and prepping him. I threaded my fingers through his wet hair and tilted his head to the side, nipping his neck where I knew he liked. Gruffly, I ordered, “Stroke your cock, Gray.”

“Yes, Sir,” he replied breathlessly as he fisted his dick. I knew he meant the words playfully, but fuck if I didn’t like hearing him say it a little. Covering every inch I could in gentle kisses, I watched each long stroke as he ran his hand base to head over his gorgeous dick. Gray wasn’t the first man I’d been with, but he put all other men to shame.

“God, you’re perfect,” I whispered against his skin. My fingers laced through his as I braced against the wall. When his head turned toward me, I caught his mouth in a heated kiss and ate up every groan he let out. My tongue swept through his mouth, meeting his with a gentle caress.

Two fingers became three, and my pace quickened as I stroked over his prostate. His hand moved faster over his dick, matching the rhythm I set but just barely. From the way he moved and the sounds he made, the man was ready to fall apart for me.

“Quit teasin’ me, and just fuck me already, baby,” Gray gasped out. “I want you inside me when I come.”

“So demanding.” I chuckled as I nipped his ear. I liked him like this—teetering between wrecked and desperate for me. Still, my cock ached. Ever since I’d sucked him off hours ago, my dick had me on autopilot to this moment. I needed some kind of relief.

I needed him.

I coated my dick in lube, groaning at the sensations rolling down my spine. *Fuck this tiny ass shower.* Not our best idea.

Not when it came to this. Space was limited, making positioning a challenge as I lined up behind him.

“Faster, Ryder,” he said urgently. “I need you, baby.”

Whatever he needed.

In one slow thrust, I pushed the crown of my cock past that tight ring of muscles. His moan echoed mine. I slid into him little by little, easing him into it.

“More,” Gray whispered. “I need more of you.”

My head dropped to his shoulder as my power opened up to him. His pleasure became mine in a vibrant cascade of sensations. His amped-up, blistering need for me crashed into my own. The catastrophic collision threatened to decimate my control. I buried my dick in him until my hips were flush with his ass.

“Fuck, you feel so goddamn good,” I ground out. Reaching around, I knocked Gray’s hand away as I took over jerking him off. “Hands on the wall, honey. I’ll be the one to make you come.”

My hand glided over his dick in rhythm with my hips as I thrust into him slowly. I reveled in the tightness of his body around my cock, in the changes in his groans, and how his fingers clung to mine against the wall.

It took everything I had not to lose complete control and give in to the feral desire spiraling through me. Sensations shot like lightning down my spine and heat coiled unbearably hot inside

me. My breath fell out of me in quick pants as his pleasure compounded on my own. *This. I needed this.*

“Faster. Please, baby,” he begged. Gray’s fingers dug into my forearm as he urged me on. I was so goddamn close and that desperation in his voice for more crashed through what little self-control I had left. Giving in to his pleas, my hips rolled faster and harder as I chased my release.

Groaning and grunting.

Wet skin sliding and slipping against wet skin.

His nails in my forearm, my lips on any inch of him I could reach.

He consumed me. I was so fucking lost in everything about him, teetering on the edge of blissful release.

“Come on, Gray,” I bit out, my hand working his cock faster. He didn’t need the encouragement. I could tell from how his body tensed under mine and the way my name mixed with his moans. “Come for me, honey.”

One... two... three more rapid strokes. He came apart for me, coming hard in thick streams that washed away with the water. His hand flew up and tangled in my hair as I tumbled over the edge with him, curling into him as my dick jerked and filled him with every drop of cum I had. I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my face in his neck, panting with my heart pounding out of my chest. Wild desire faded into a satisfaction that weaved its way through me.

“Fuck, I need another shower,” Gray let out with a breathy laugh. His fingers tightened in my hair as he turned slightly to kiss my temple. He teased, “I knew you couldn’t resist Taylor Swift.”

He rotated in my arms and kissed me, his lips curving into a smile. I shook my head.

“Still don’t like her,” I told him between kisses. I pushed his back into the wall. His leg hooked around mine and drew me in closer. “Just like the way your ass shakes when you listen to her.”

“I’m countin’ it.” He laughed. *Fuck, I loved that sound so goddamn much.* “You know... I like this shower.”

“It’s too small!”

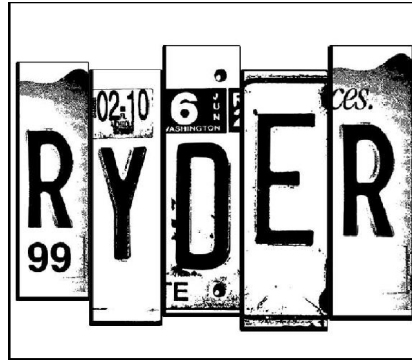
“Not *this* shower, but the idea of the shower,” he said as he gestured to the itty bitty space. “Make it bigger with one of those rain shower panels overhead. Nice tile and shit. Build in some shelves for shit. Oh! What about doublin’ up on the rain shower panels? One for you and one for me? No more volcano showers for my baby. And heated floorin’. Fuck, that’d be nice.”

“So, not this shower.” I nipped at his jaw and kissed down his neck. The scent of soap on his skin and the way his body slid against mine threatened to do me in. I could feel how my dick thickened at the thought of having him all over again. “You want a different shower.”

“A nicer shower,” he corrected. His hands ran lazy tracks up and down my back as he chatted comfortably. “I’m addin’ it to the list when we’re done in here.”

I smiled into his neck. Gray kept a list in his wallet—an old folded-up gas station receipt. On the back, he kept a list of all the things we’d put in our dream house. It’d never happen, but the dream was a nice thing to keep when shit got bad.

Chapter Four



The minute Gray walked into a bar, people noticed. The man turned heads wherever he went. It wasn't just how damn good he looked in his fitted t-shirt, jeans, and work boots or even the backwards hat and the Twizzler jammed between his teeth. Sure, he was fucking gorgeous— *I was biased*. But it wasn't that. Not really. No, the man was walking sunshine with a smile that drew people in naturally.

And me? I trailed behind to let him garner the attention he thrived on. I let him take the proverbial stage because I didn't want it. The frustrating downside to empathy was always knowing what people thought of you, even when they plastered a friendly smile on their faces. *Take the bar owner for example*. He may have been smiling, but that didn't stop the rolling disgust I felt from him as he watched Gray take my hand when we entered. *Fucking douchebag*.

Some people were more bigoted than they wanted to let on. Those were the people I hated most. Be honest to my face,

even if it meant you were an asshole, and I'd happily square off. What the hell was I supposed to do about the upfront nice guy who secretly hated us?

Nothing. Not a damn thing. Instead, I just shut down. It was easier to sit at a table and focus on our tablet instead of engaging in a room of emotionally inept people. Their feelings thrummed against the back of my skull, inciting a dull ache I was used to.

Gray, on the other hand, made himself busy with getting our usual drink order going and picking out burgers for us. He chatted up anyone who'd listen, his loud laughter carrying through the bar despite the constant music and conversation. *Or maybe I was just really in tune with my favorite sound.*

As soon as he sat down, his fingers wove through mine, and his thumb gently rubbed circles over my knuckle. His happy-go-lucky mood seeped into my skin and eased my nerves. Gray just made things easier by being there.

"Food should be up in fifteen he said," Gray told me with a grin. "They got this burger with fried onions and bacon and a secret barbecue sauce I thought we'd try. And extra fries because why the hell not, you know?"

I made a small sound, barely acknowledging him as I scrolled through the information the kid in Chicago had sent me. It was only half interesting, but it was better than dealing with the world.

"Owner was real fuckin' cool about shit," he continued. "I'm thinkin' we should try hittin' up breakfast here, give him the

business—”

“He’s a bigot,” I interrupted and glanced up at him. A deep frown settled on that handsome face as he waited for me to say more. “We’re in questionable territory during questionable times. It’s bound to happen. He can fake the smile, but he can’t hide his disgust.”

“Well, fuck him. We’re adorable,” Gray muttered. The conviction of his words moved through me. “I love your power sometimes, but that shit sucks.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. He could say it all he wanted, but he didn’t have to live with it. Gray took my hand in both of his and kissed each knuckle slowly as he inched closer.

“What’re you lookin’ at over there?”

“That kid in Chicago sent over a ton of information on the *you-know-what*,” I told him, my voice lowering with the second half of my sentence. *Didn’t need the waitress overhearing shit about demons and killing monsters.* That’d go over real fucking well.

“Easy hunt?”

“Complicated.”

“How so?”

“Well.” I blew out a breath of air as I debated the best way to approach Gray about the new information. I knew it’d change the playing field of the hunt. “He sent me several missing person reports around what he thinks is the original sighting —”

“Are we workin’ with this kid now?” Gray demanded. *Not surprising*. He wasn’t a fan of hunting with other hunters.

“No, he’s adamant about not wanting to work with us. He has his own team, and we’re not it. But he said we’d never be as good at this as he is.”

“Fuckin’ prick.”

“But the kid was able to pull a shit ton of information I probably wouldn’t have so there’s that,” I said. *Shit ton was an understatement*. The kid was fucking good, which was putting it mildly. It would’ve taken me forever to get the information he had. If sucking up and playing nice in emails got me access to this kind of intel, I’d fucking do it every time. “The biggest issue is the number of possible humans turned.”

“How many we lookin’ at?”

“Eight.”

“Eight?” he repeated with disbelief, his voice rising in volume. “That’s a whole fuckin’ pack of werewolves right there, Ryder!”

“Quieter.” I shushed him.

“Eight!” Gray whisper-shouted with that stupid sexy grin of his. “That’s a whole fuckin’ pack of werewolves right there, Ryder! *There*. That better?”

“Yes.” I shook my head, chuckling at his dumbass. *Fuck, I loved this man and all his dumb antics*. “If this kid’s information is right—and I believe it is—we’re looking at no less than nine total you-know-whats in Wichita.”

“Fuck me,” he muttered. Before he could say more, the waitress interjected herself into the conversation with our burgers balanced on her arm. Gray beamed like it was Christmas morning. “Look at that! Bacon on fried onions on a fuckin’ burger to drool over! Darlin’, you are magic.”

“Oh.” She blushed and pushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “I didn’t make them. Jay does that back in the kitchen. I just carry them out and deliver them to handsome customers like yourself.”

“You think I’m handsome?” he asked, and she damn near turned scarlet on the spot. Lust and curiosity swirled through her as she listened to him talk. Gray had that effect on a lot of people—women in particular. *Always sunshine. People loved sunshine.* “Ah, now, don’t go blushin’ on me, darlin’. I’m just teasin’ you.”

I held my tongue to keep from chuckling as she sputtered her way through saying something and leaving. Gray grinned, his gaze following her ass while she rushed across the room. I did the same. I couldn’t help it. *She had a nice ass.* Admittedly, she had a nice everything. Pretty whiskey eyes, curled blonde hair, ivory skin, wicked curves, and legs for days. I could see why he was interested in her. Hell, I would’ve been if the cloud of negative emotions from the bar owner and his little crowd by the bar wasn’t hanging over me.

Gray and I had a comfortably open relationship. Both of us were bisexual. My preference leaned toward men while Gray was a raging bisexual—*his words, not mine.* Either way, we

both enjoyed the company of women from time to time. Life was short. Our lives were often on the line, so there was no point in not indulging in whatever the fuck we enjoyed. Being on the road all the time made it easy to hook up. Sometimes we shared a woman, sometimes Gray went off and did his own thing with a bar bunny as he called them. I rarely did, but it wasn't off the table for me. My needs were just different than his, which never bothered me.

Open communication and boundaries made it work and had for eight years.

While Gray damn near had an orgasm over his burger, I nibbled mindlessly on fries. I wasn't hungry, but it was better than nothing. Instead, I focused on scrolling through the demon information again. *Eight victims*. And those were the ones we knew about. Fuck, the stakes were high with this hunt. Uncomfortably so. I wasn't sure what the hell to make of that.

"Hey." Gray's hand slipped through mine, and he tugged gently until I looked up at him. "Put that shit away, baby. There ain't no use in worryin' about that now. We still got a whole fuckin' day of drivin' tomorrow. We wouldn't get there tonight no matter how fuckin' fast we drive. We ain't magic."

"I know." I sighed but turned off the tablet nonetheless. "But you know me. I like to know what we're dealing with."

"I know, and I know you already know what we're dealin' with. You're just goin' to work yourself into a fit. It ain't good

for you to stress so much. We focus on what we can handle here and now, right?”

“Right.”

“And is stressin’ goin’ to do you any good tonight?” Those dark eyes watched me closely as he waited for an answer. Gray was real damn good at pulling me back to the here and now whenever my mind got ahead of me.

“No.” My lips pressed into a line as I shook my head. *He was right*. He was usually right when it came to this sort of shit. “You’re right.”

“I know. Now, I’m all sorts of riled up,” Gray said. “We’re in town one night. Let’s have a lil’ bit of fun. You, me—”

“The waitress,” I interjected as I tipped my chin in her direction. She stood by the bar, pining after Gray with that heated gaze of hers as she chewed her bottom lip. She practically vibrated with her attraction. “Put that poor girl out of her misery and call her over, will you? She’s been eyeing you and trying to figure out a reason to come over.”

“Us or me?” he asked with a chuckle. I said nothing as he flagged her down. No one in the bar had better service than us as she hurried over.

“How is everything?” She tucked her hair behind her ears and gave him a pretty smile. *Yeah, she was definitely hung up on him*.

“It’s fantastic. Just fantastic.”

“Oh, good!”

“Tell me somethin’, darlin’.” Gray took her hand and guided her into the seat between us. His fingers trailed a lazy track up and down her arm. Even in the dingy bar, the flush on her cheeks was readily visible. Her arousal spiked in response to his touch. I felt it in my core as she leaned closer to him. “What’s your favorite place for a man to treat your pretty little self to a mornin’ after breakfast?”

I snorted under my breath. *How fucking cheesy was that line?* Why the hell that question worked so well with most women was beyond me, but it did. Her breath hitched in her throat, and her eyes widened.

“Oh...” She nibbled on her lower lip as she thought about it. Her gaze slid down the length of Gray’s body and then over to me. I purposefully looked away. I was off the menu for the night. I didn’t have it in me, but I’d cross that bridge whenever he closed the deal with her. “There’s this cute little diner off the ramp. It has great waffles.”

“I do love a good stack of waffles,” he said. “How about Ryder and I take you there in the mornin’?”

“*Oh.*” Surprise and uncertainty flourished in my chest as she continued throwing her emotions around carelessly. “But I thought you two...”

“Let me ask you somethin’, darlin’. What’s your favorite wine?”

“Oh, I just drink whatever’s cheapest.”

“But you got to have one you like more,” he insisted.

“I like a nice sweet red,” the waitress whispered.

“Me too,” Gray replied. I snorted, shaking my head. The fucking chances she’d pick red. The man definitely glanced at my hair. I didn’t even need to look up to know that. We had eight years of comments about me being a redhead. “A good red is goin’ to age quite nice. So, let’s say you could indulge in a nice red for the rest of your life. Are you tellin’ me if a gorgeous lookin’ rosé walked into your life, you wouldn’t devour every delicious drop it had to offer?”

Yeah. *That was it.* That did her in. She was putty in his hands. It was such a stupid fucking thing to say, but Gray just had his way with people—women especially. Always had, always would.

“And are you goin’ to tell me you wouldn’t be sharin’ that delicious fuckin’ wine with someone you cared about if you could?” he asked quieter, forcing her to lean in closer. When she did, he kissed the back of her hand and let the gesture linger. “That sounds like a hell of a night, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” she replied. Her gaze was fully on his mouth as he spoke. The woman would’ve done whatever he asked. “I get off in a half hour.”

“Yes, you will.” The words were a promise that had nothing to do with the end of her shift. With one more kiss, he set her hand on the table and gently patted it. “We ain’t goin’ nowhere, darlin’. Just come on by when you’re done with everythin’ if you’re interested. If not—”

“I’m interested,” she interjected a little too quickly.

“Good girl,” Gray said in that sultry voice of his. Her cheeks flamed and a tiny giggle fell out of her as she slid off the chair. He watched her hurry away. “Oh, she’s goin’ to be so fuckin’ fun to corrupt.”

“You have fun with that,” I told him. I flipped the case closed on the tablet and got to my feet. “I’m ducking out this time around.”

“You sure?” he asked, and I nodded. His hand caught mine. “You doin’ okay? I’m more than happy to turn her away.”

“Enjoy your night,” I said softly. *I meant that.* Just because my mood was shit didn’t mean he couldn’t have the time of his life for the night.

“If it’s the bar owner,” Gray began, his voice turning low and deadly, “you know it ain’t an issue.”

“I know—”

“You know I ain’t got a problem with startin’ a fuckin’ fight,” he snapped. The fire that flashed through his eyes was one I was all too familiar with. For as sunshine and happy-go-lucky as he was, Gray was fiercely protective. *Of me.* Lord help the person who fucked with me. I wouldn’t start a fight, but I’d end it with efficiency. Gray wouldn’t wait for that shit to happen. He’d start a flat-out war on an inkling.

To ease his mind, I palmed his cheek and kissed him. The man grabbed the front of my shirt and dragged me closer, his tongue driving forcefully past my lips. I groaned, caught

somewhere between not wanting to cause a scene and wanting more of him.

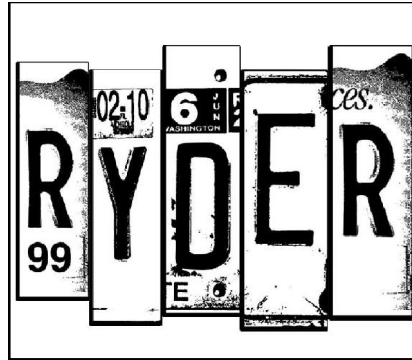
“Don’t need to put on a show, honey,” I whispered when he let me. “We don’t need to incite shit.”

“I’ll fuckin’ burn his bar to the ground if he says a damn thing,” he growled. *God that sound was sexy coming out of him.* I gave him one last chaste kiss before swiping the tablet off the table and standing taller.

“Be quiet when you come in,” I said.

“Text me you get back, okay?” Gray asked, and I nodded. I always did and always would.

Chapter Five



BREAK DOWN ON ME
BRANDON LAY



I groaned and pressed the pillow harder into my ears. It did nothing to stop the shouting and rage-filled emotions being thrown around two doors down. *Shit, these motel walls were thin as fuck.* I hated motels. I hated all the bullshit and chaos that accompanied them most of the time. A house was a stupid investment, but it sure as hell sounded nice with how things were going.

My stomach rolled nauseously, and my head pounded painfully. *How long had I been laying there listening to them?* An hour? Two? Three? It'd probably only been minutes if I was being honest. The fight had been sudden—an out-of-the-blue explosion between some guy and his wife? Girlfriend? Hooker? Who fucking knew what they were to each other? The onslaught of emotions had taken me out by the knees. That was the only damn thing I cared about.

The room door opened and clicked shut quietly. I froze as I listened to Gray move around in the dark. I didn't flinch or give away the fact that I was awake. If he thought I was asleep, maybe he'd go back out and enjoy the rest of his night like he wanted to. My stomach dropped as the bed dipped when he climbed in next to me.

"You're a shit liar, you know," Gray whispered. His arm slid around my waist, and he inched closer. Just the simplicity of his touch was enough to penetrate through the emotional ache. Not enough to make it go away but enough to begin breaking it down. "I know when your power is botherin' you."

"Doesn't mean I have to let it fuck up your night," I muttered.

"You ain't a burden, baby," he told me, saying the words he knew I needed to hear. Gray's power was simple. Easy. There was no ridiculous backlash or long history of chaos. I envied that something fierce. *Empathy fucking sucked*. He kissed my shoulder before tugging gently on my rib cage. "Come on. Roll over for me, baby."

"What happened to the waitress?" I asked. I shifted with him, letting him settle my head on his chest over his heart. His arms wrapped around me, warm and strong—the blanket I desperately needed to protect me. We'd done this dance a thousand times before. The steady thrumming in my ear drowned out the rest of the world with ease as it always did.

"Walked her to her car, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and left her disappointed," he replied as if it was nothing. His fingers

combed through my hair gently. I wanted to be frustrated that he'd come back, but the tingling up and down my spine at his touch was enough to squash that thought. "You and me, we're gettin' lost in my happy place tonight. Fuck the rest of the world."

I smiled against his skin. *His happy place*. That's what he called helping me. When the feelings of the world were too loud and too heavy, Gray dragged me to his happy place with him. His happiness was enough to chase away the chaos and dark clouds that weighed me down.

"And what are you thinking about tonight?" I shut my eyes and breathed him in deeply, nestling in closer as I curled up around him. My legs tangled with his, his hip pressed into my stomach, my arm draped around his ribs. *Warm woods and fresh air*. That scent was intoxicating.

He clicked his tongue as he thought about it. Heat and joy rolled through me, weaving their way through every little part of me. The anger and frustration washed away the longer he thought about it. Whatever it was, it felt wonderful.

"We should get a house on a beach." Gray sighed. "I reckon you'd look so goddamn good on a fuckin' beach... windblown and knee-deep in water... wearin' one of those sweater things... you know what I'm talkin' about, right?"

"Cardigan?" I chuckled.

"Yeah, those," he said. "All that open water and fresh air... yeah, I reckon that'd be real nice. For both of us, you know? It'd have one of those real nice patios lookin' out at the sea

and a fire pit with some chairs. Late nights with beer, just watchin' the waves roll in and out. No neighbors for fuckin' miles. That sounds nice, don't it?"

"Yeah," I let out softly.

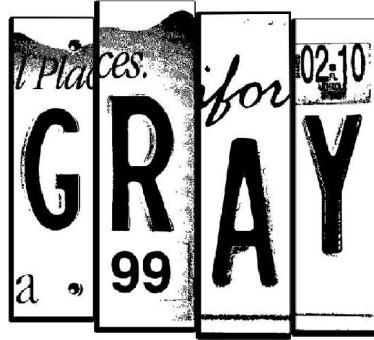
"Waves in... out... no stress... no worries..." His voice grew distant as my body grew heavier. A thick calm settled over me as I tumbled into his happy place with him. *A quiet house on the beach sounded nice.* "Just you and me, Ryder. No demons... no huntin'... no bullshit..."

I liked that thought.

"Just you and me, always. I love you, baby."

I love you.

Chapter Six



Polo shirts were fucking bullshit. Cardigans were cool. I could dig those comfy-ass things. But the polo shirts? Those things were uncomfortable as shit. Who the fuck thought these were a good idea? Pick a dress shirt and stick with it. Not this weird ass in the middle thing that was half a t-shirt and half a dress shirt. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

I tugged on the collar. It didn't sit right and rubbed weirdly against my neck.

“God, I look like a fuckin’ tool,” I grumbled.

“No, you look like a professional,” Ryder shot back. He wore a similar outfit but pulled it off fantastically. *Of course, he did.* The outfit was natural and handsome on him. That powder blue color did wonders against his tanned skin and baby blues.

“A professional tool,” I retorted.

“We’re supposed to be journalists, so play the part,” he whispered.

“What part of me screams educated journalist, baby?” I gestured to myself head to toe. I couldn’t pull off this outfit. I looked like a fucking tool in freshly pressed khakis, a white polo, and a dark gray cardigan. Even my shoes were clean, my hair was neatly combed, and I’d trimmed down my beard. *I didn’t like it.*

“No, I’m the educated journalist,” Ryder said. A small grin curled those sexy lips of his. “You’re the eye candy that tempts me the whole time I work after I’m stuck taking your intern ass with me.”

“Oh, sexy. So, we’re role-playin’ this whole thing. I can dig it.” I chuckled, liking that idea. *My dick liked that idea too from the way it twitched with excitement.* I planned to categorize that little thought for later on.

“Just let me do the talking, Gray,” he replied.

“Happily. I could listen to you talk all day, baby.” *Which I could.* That part wasn’t a lie. But also, I didn’t get why we were doing it this way. I was much better at the smashing and killing part. All this other bullshit just wasn’t my thing. “Why are we goin’ to her as fuckin’ journalists? Why not talk to her as cops or somethin’? Wouldn’t that be faster than this whole fuckin’ lie?”

“We don’t have the credentials to be cops.”

“We don’t have the credentials to be journalists!” I exclaimed. “Jesus fuck, Ryder.”

“Do you really think either of us could pull off being cops?” Ryder demanded. He stopped on the sidewalk, planting a hand on my chest to keep me from moving. I stared into those baby blues as I waited for him to say whatever the hell he was thinking. “The girl already talked to the cops and didn’t give them a whole lot. Small press goes further than people think. I just want to have her answer a few questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“There’s something... off about her statement to the police. The where her boyfriend disappeared is fucking vague. Outside of town somewhere. She couldn’t remember where he was going,” he said. “If I went missing, wouldn’t you remember where you last saw me?”

“If you went missin’, I’d tear the fuckin’ world apart until I found you,” I snapped with conviction. I didn’t even like thinking about that hypothetical question. We’d been through enough shit. “I ain’t relyin’ on no cops to find you. I’m doin’ that shit myself.”

“I love you, but that’s not helpful, honey.” He sighed. “My gut tells me she’s lying. She’s not the only one. There’s other stories that just don’t sit right. I want to know why. If I know where or even why, it might help us put a better fix on this demon’s location. Got it?”

“Be sexy journalists, got it.” Despite the joke, I nodded seriously. I trusted Ryder’s instincts more than anything else in

this fucking world. They'd never steer us wrong. "So, who we dealin' with?"

"Lena Caulfield. Her boyfriend Brett went missing three days ago. Her story is flimsy at best about where she last saw him."

"Is that the thing you're all hung up on?" I demanded. *What a weird thing to be stuck on.* People forgot things in times of stress. "There's got to be other ways to get that information, baby. It ain't worth all this shit."

"I think she's lying, and I want to know why," he repeated. That firm set in his mouth told me just how much the whole fucking thing bothered him. If it bothered him, then I'd let it bother me. We were a team. We just worked like that. "Once we know that, we'll have better luck pinpointing the demon's location. Wichita is too big to be playing a guessing game."

"Makes sense," I conceded, giving him what he needed. "You do what you need to do, baby. I'm here for whatever you need."

And I was. I didn't have a clue what the fuck he thought he'd get out of this woman that the police hadn't but whatever. I followed him through the parking lot and across the park lawn. We were meeting Lena Caulfield in the middle of some fucking park in Wichita. Ryder had a map. I didn't have a clue. I was along for the ride.

"What do we know about the woman?" I asked quietly. Ryder flipped open a notebook, glancing at it. I smiled. *He*

was so damn official it was adorable. The man looked like a goddamn journalist.

“Lena Caulfield...” He clicked his tongue as he read his notes. “Twenty-seven-year-old student from New York City. Came here on vacation with her boyfriend Brett, also twenty-seven years old.”

“Well, there’s you’re fuckin’ lie,” I muttered. “Who the fuck goes to Wichita on vacation?”

“Right?” He grinned. “Her statement to the police was vague as shit. They came here on vacation but decided to do different things. She thinks she saw him last at their motel, but she’s not sure.”

“We sure she ain’t the one who killed him?” I replied in earnest. I wasn’t a fucking cop, but even I knew she was full of shit. I watched enough bad crime shows to know some shady shit when I heard it. “Why the hell did she report him missin’?”

“She didn’t,” Ryder said. *Oh, well then.* “His mom did when he didn’t check in.”

“Ah... good ol’ mama’s boy.”

“And she’s not... not a suspect... it’s just the police don’t have enough to say she is,” he continued. His voice trailed in and out as he lost himself in his notes—something he did often. “And she has no connection to the other missing people... and if I’m being real honest, three other people have some equally ridiculous stories. It doesn’t feel right.”

That was his gut instinct speaking. My gut instinct told me this woman was shady as fuck and not to trust a damn thing she said.

“I’m stabbin’ her if she seems shady,” I announced with the utmost finality. He glared at me, but I just shrugged. I wasn’t budging on this matter. I wasn’t above stabbing anyone where Ryder was concerned. “I’m goin’ to protect my baby. Why the fuck did she agree to meet with us?”

“About that,” he faltered.

“What the hell does that mean?” I pulled him to a stop. “She did agree to meet us, right?”

“Not... really...” Ryder admitted quietly. I bit back a laugh. *He didn’t... if this fucking man did what I think he did.* “I may have illegally tracked her phone here so we could blindside her with some questions.”

Of course, he did. I burst out laughing. I fucking loved this man and his antics.

“Gold,” I wheezed. “Fuckin’ gold. I love it.”

“People lie, Gray,” he said. *A fact.* “It’s better to keep them unknowing rather than to give them a chance to make up a lie.”

Amen to that. Without another word, Ryder strode across the lawn, and I followed. He was a man on a mission, and I was his happy sidekick. Though, I wasn’t completely convinced that Lena Caulfield didn’t have something to do with her boyfriend’s disappearance.

“Ms. Caulfield?” Ryder began as he stopped next to a picnic table. The woman sitting there slammed her notebook shut as her head snapped in our direction. Dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. She stared at both of us with an impressive amount of malice in her eyes. *Not at all the greeting I expected.* Especially considering the gorgeous fucking smile Ryder had leveled on her. Usually, he was great at disarming people if he wanted—which, let’s face it, wasn’t often.

But Lena Caulfield wasn’t buying into anything he had to offer, even with me smiling harmlessly behind him. Okay, maybe I wasn’t that harmless looking. A fucking polo could only hide so much. The woman also looked like she hadn’t slept in fucking days. Dark bags weighed heavy under her eyes while wicked purple hair was thrown up in a messy-as-hell ponytail. She crossed her arms and buried her notebook under them. *What the hell was the woman so desperate to hide?*

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Hi.” Ryder’s smile never wavered. “My name is Ryder Hollins.”

I held back a laugh. I fucking loved that he combined our last names whenever he needed a cover. *Hell, maybe one day we’d make that a fucking thing.* It was better than the shit I did.

“Taye Quick,” I said with a cheesy grin. Ryder never flinched. He was used to my shit. Lena, however, frowned.

“Really?” she demanded.

“What can I say? A name’s a name, ain’t it?” I shrugged as I shoved my hands in my khaki pockets. She made a small sound and went back to looking at Ryder. *Probably for the best.* I didn’t have a clue how he intended to approach the issue, so I was in full eye candy mode.

“Ms. Caulfield.” Ryder sat down across from her. “We’re from Wild Sunflower Press.”

Oh, Jesus fuck. I hoped to hell he hadn’t come up with that name on his own.

“You two are reporters?”

“I’m an intern,” I offered. “I ain’t sure this is what I want to do. I’m great with a camera though if you want your picture taken.”

“No,” she retorted flatly. *Man, this woman was all business and no fun.* “And that’s really the name of your paper?”

“Small press and all that.” I dropped down next to Ryder. “Can’t blame us for the big boss pickin’ out a stupid ass name for the paper.”

“Seen not heard. Just let me handle this,” Ryder told me softly. “Ms. Caulfield, we wanted to talk to you about Brett.”

“I already told everything I know to the police. There’s nothing new for me to tell you.”

“Admittedly, I don’t know what’s in the police reports,” he said. “They weren’t willing to hand them over to us.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Lena muttered dryly. Her gaze flicked between the two of us. She was sizing us up, and we clearly didn’t fit the bill. “Look, just tell me what the fuck you two want. I’m not in the mood for bullshit.”

Well, then. She was something.

“The last time you saw your boyfriend—”

“It was at the motel or something.” She shrugged. *Huh. Ryder was right.* At the motel or something? It wasn’t like we were talking years ago. She should’ve remembered. And it wasn’t even just that. It was the whole nonchalant attitude to it. That did nothing to convince me she hadn’t killed him and stashed the body. “He said he was going hiking in the woods or something outside. I don’t remember.”

“How long have you two been datin’?” I interjected. Ryder glared at me, but I ignored him. It was a valid question.

“Five and a half years. Why?”

“No reason.” *She was definitely lying about something.* “Was he a good man?”

“The best,” Lena whispered. *Yeah, there was something she was hiding.* There was no way someone who was the best went missing and she didn’t know a damn thing. Fuck, even when Ryder and I had taken on separate hunts once upon a time, I still knew his every damn move just to make sure he was good.

“Ms. Caulfield—”

“Head’s up!” someone shouted just a little too late as a football came flying in our direction. Admittedly, I could’ve stopped it before it hit her, but I didn’t. I didn’t like her standoffish nature and her weird as fuck cover story. *Maybe that was petty, but I didn’t care.*

The ball hit her in the back of the head and hard.

I cringed, knowing it had to fucking hurt.

Ryder cringed.

Lena never flinched. She scowled. If looks could kill, that ball would’ve burst into a pile of angry flames.

But she never fucking flinched.

I frowned. *Who did that?* Who was so angry at the world that they got pissed off at a ball when they got hit with it? Sure, the woman was something, but that fucking bothered me.

“Are we done here?” she demanded. But her mind was made up without us ever saying shit. She didn’t wait for our answer as she shoved her notebook in her bag and tossed it over her shoulder. “For the record—not that any of you assholes care—but I fucking care. I do care about him, and I am worried about him being missing. Not that it means a damn thing to either of you.”

Giving neither of us a chance to speak, she stormed away.

“Well, that went fucking fantastic.” Ryder sighed.

“She didn’t flinch,” I murmured, rotating to watch her leave the park. *Who the fuck got pelted in the head and didn’t even*

react? Not normal people, that's who.

“What?” he snapped.

“She didn't...” I trailed off as I ran through it in my head. *Normal people... normal people flinched.* Normal people... normal people... unless...

“Holy fuck balls!” I exclaimed as the realization hit me. I flew off the bench and jogged across the park to catch up with her.

“Gray!” Ryder yelled after me, but I didn't stop. If I was wrong, this was going to go bad, so fucking bad. *End her fucking world kind of bad.* I probably should've done my research better instead of taking a leap of faith.

“You were huntin' it!” I let out breathlessly when I caught up to her. *Fuck, maybe I did need to start running.* Wasn't about to tell Ryder that one. He'd have my ass going for a run the minute we got back to a hotel.

“What?” Lena demanded with a frown.

“The demon,” I said. “You were huntin' it. That's why you ain't tellin' no one where you saw him last. It's too dangerous. You can't let humans go there.”

“Gray.” Ryder's smooth voice cut over my skin in a quiet warning as he joined us.

“How did—”

“You didn't flinch,” I told her. “Normal people react when they get pummeled by a fuckin' football. A descendant of

Raphael wouldn't."

Descendants of Raphael were fucking impenetrable. They were built with a kind of resilience that admittedly I was jealous of. They couldn't be cut, their bones couldn't break, and they didn't feel pain the same way. *Hence the non-reaction to being hit in the head.*

"Oh." Her lips pursed together tightly. *Yeah, she was a fucking hunter.* I grinned happily, unable to stop it. I was fucking proud of myself. I figured that shit out first.

"He's not just your boyfriend. He's your partner," Ryder continued. For the first time since we'd met her, Lena's entire defensive nature deflated. She sighed and faced us.

"Yeah," she whispered. "We aren't the only hunters in town. Several of the others missing are hunters."

"How many?" I asked.

"Four," she replied. "Brett was never supposed to be reported missing."

"Why was he?"

"His mom doesn't know he's a hunter," she explained. "It was always just him and his mom. His dad was a fleeting thought after a hookup with his mom, so they never knew. He didn't know what he was until I met him when we were in high school. He just thought he was a superhero."

"Every teenage boy's dream," Ryder commented. Wasn't that the truth. Fuck, I remembered doing a lot of stupid—but

fun—shit as a kid in the name of being a goddamn superhero.
“What was his lineage?”

“Gabriel. When his mom reported him missing, the other hunters... they’re all hunters we network with. We decided it’d be smarter to report everyone missing and make it so people were wary of going hiking. We thought maybe if there was only some general information, it’d keep people out of all the woods instead of sending a search party into a specific part of the forest.”

“That ain’t workin’ for you, now is it?” I replied, and she shook her head.

“Did all of you go in together,” Ryder began, “or did you try to take out this demon on your own?”

“A little bit of both,” Lena admitted. “But we also didn’t know it was turning hunters.”

“Did it turn the humans?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s made itself a whole pack of demons. We don’t know what to do.”

“Get your team together,” I told her. “Or network, or whatever the fuck y’all are callin’ it. We’re goin’ to do this right.”

“And what makes you think you can do what we can’t?” she demanded. *Ah, there was that good old fucking attitude I disliked so goddamn much.* The woman was going to test my limits and not in a fun way.

“I don’t,” I admitted with a shrug. Though, I was confident in my fucking power. I was a damn good hunter, and so was Ryder. Sure, we had bumps and bruises, broken bones and concussions along the way, but we always came out on top. “But it ain’t like we can just leave that thing out there.”

“Okay.” Lips pressed together, she nodded slowly. “Your name isn’t really Taye Quick, is it?”

“No.” I chuckled. “Gray Harper.”

“Ryder Collins.”

“At least one of you is halfway decent at the fake names.”

“Here.” Ryder jotted something down on his notebook, tearing off the sheet and handing it to her. “Get your team together and meet us here. We’ll figure out a plan together.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Lena said. We watched her walk to her car and leave. When her car was nothing more than a memory, Ryder rounded on me. I grinned sheepishly as those baby blues I loved so much leveled on me. *I was in trouble.*

“You thought running across the park and yelling about being a hunter was the best way to handle that?” he asked under his breath. The frown on his face was deep. It brought out that adorable fucking crinkle between his brows. I knew he was trying to be stern, but it was hard to take him seriously when he was so damn cute. “On an assumption, Gray? Because that’s what that was, wasn’t it?”

“Hey, I didn’t yell!” I countered quickly. *Though, I’d definitely thought about it.* “And be happy I did it that way and

not the other way.”

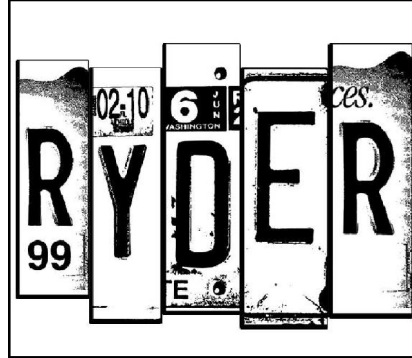
“What other way were you thinking about doing it?”

“I thought about stabbin’ her, baby.” I shrugged.

“And what if you were wrong?” Ryder exclaimed. His voice rose a full notch with his disbelief. He knew I would’ve done it too. I wasn’t exactly prone to making solid decisions in the moment. That was his department. It was why we worked so well. I was the present, he was the future.

“Ain’t you happy I didn’t?”

Chapter Seven



“Fuck, I feel fuckin’ old,” Gray muttered angrily. The Twizzler had been traded out for a lit cigarette, his wild hair was shoved under a backwards hat, and his gun sat snug on his hip. I knew he had two more knives hidden on his body as well. Even with his dandelion Taylor Swift tattoo showing, this Gray was different. *Hard. Focused. A hunter.* “Why are they all so fuckin’ young? Does no one go to fuckin’ school no more?”

“You didn’t,” I told him quietly, crossing my arms. He wasn’t wrong. Lena had collected the other hunters in her network and met us at our hotel room. The idea was for us to plan together on how to handle the pack of demons. While she was in her late twenties, the rest of the team was questionably legal. I still wasn’t sure they actually were. Fake IDs were easy as shit to access. As hunters, we had more of them than I wanted to admit aloud. It wouldn’t surprise me if at least two of them were under twenty-one.

“Fuckin’ babies,” he continued to grump. *They were*. We easily had a decade or more on most of them. “I ain’t signin’ up to be their babysitter.”

I glanced over my shoulder once more. I didn’t blame him. This so-called team we had to work with was too green to be doing this kind of shit. At least alone. Really they should’ve been out living their lives and not dealing with demons at all.

Darren Smitt was twenty-one or so he said. The kid looked maybe eighteen on a good day with a baby face that couldn’t grow hair for the life of him, a mop of dark curls on his head, and the most skeptical attitude I’d ever come across, which was saying something. It was obvious he used his strength as a descendant of Gabriel like a shield. His brother, Charlie, was one of the ones who’d gone missing. Darren didn’t think anyone else could do a better job than he’d done trying to get his brother back.

Mason Burke was a quiet twenty-year-old kid and a descendant of Raguel. That scared look in his wide green eyes didn’t surprise me. I’d have the same stressed-as-fuck face if I was stuck seeing the future. His wife, Ava, was missing and had been the first to be turned. I kept my commentary about their two-year marriage to myself considering their age.

The last was Selena Holmes, who had lost her best friend, Kelley, to the demon. Selena was another empath who clearly wanted to be anywhere but in that room. Her blonde hair was shoved under a hat, and she kept to a corner by herself. I didn’t blame her. The emotions in the room were fucking loud. They

vibrated painfully against my skull in a way I couldn't filter out. My jaw ached from how hard I clenched my teeth to deal with it. But I pretended I was fine. There was no reason to make Gray worry more than he already was.

“They're a fuckin' tot squad pretendin' to be fuckin' hunters,” he snapped under his breath. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. *What an accurate fucking assessment.* “How the hell are we supposed to take them huntin', baby? They're a fuckin' liability.”

“One thing at a time,” I reminded him. “We need to figure this thing out.”

“We already told you everything we know,” good old Darren cut in angrily. The boy's default mode was a loud, visceral anger he had no problem throwing around like a goddamn sword. If he kept doing it, Gray would probably put him in the ground. And if Gray didn't, there was a good chance I would just to keep everyone else from fighting.

“Boy, take that tone with me one more time,” Gray snarled. *Just like that.* I sighed. The hostility building between them was exhausting.

“Look, we have much bigger issues to deal with than the clash of egos in the room,” I began as I tapped the map we had crudely tacked to the wall. Given the new information we'd acquired from the tot squad, we'd put together a decent map of the demon's location. It was further away from people than I expected. Hell, it was better than what I anticipated. Fighting a demon of this caliber in the woods was favorable to trying to

avoid people in the city. The only worry was the hiking trails. “We need to focus our efforts on this area here. It’s central to where all of you were attacked.”

“What’s in that area?” Gray asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Trees?”

“More trees,” Mason muttered.

“Where the hell is it hidin’ durin’ the day?” Gray turned slightly to give the others his attention. Not that any of them seemed interested in our help. They were seconds away from giving up—not that I didn’t blame them. All hunters had that *one hunt* that knocked them out by the knees. Sometimes getting back up was hard as fuck.

“I don’t know.” *I didn’t have a fucking clue.*

“I don’t know what you think you can do that we couldn’t,” Lena said. *Ah yes, her favorite phrase.* Even I fucking scowled. Sure, they were beaten down by the situation—any hunter would’ve been—but their attitudes weren’t helping us get to a better plan.

“They can’t,” Darren chimed in. “They’re just going to get their asses kicked.”

“This thing can’t be killed,” Selena commented softly. “It’ll only turn one or both of you too. It’s better to leave it all alone.”

“Or fucking burn the whole forest down,” Lena retorted. *Jesus fuck.* None of them were helpful.

“All right, first off, you fuckin’ tots,” Gray growled as he rounded on all of them. “No one is burnin’ down nothin’—”

“So, we’re burning down something,” Darren interrupted smugly. The kid wasn’t helping shit by commenting on Gray’s grammar. The temperature in the room soared as Gray’s temper swept through the room. Someone would get hit. The longer we dealt with them, the higher that chance was.

“Listen up, you fuckin’ morons!” Gray shouted. “All y’all keep your tiny asses in this room. The adults are goin’ outside to talk.”

He stormed out the door before anyone could say a thing. I didn’t offer an apologetic smile as I went after him. I couldn’t blame him. The kids were infuriating. *Or maybe I was just too damn old for their bullshit.* That was also a good possibility.

Gray paced the far end of the parking lot, furiously smoking as he muttered to himself. The minute he realized I was headed in his direction, he shook his head.

“I ain’t goin’ back in there,” he told me quickly, gesturing with his cigarette to the room. “They’re too fuckin’ green, Ryder, and too fuckin’ dumb when it comes to this shit. Their attitudes—I’m goin’ to fuckin’ kill one of them. This is why we don’t do partners. I don’t fuckin’ like people.”

“I know,” I said, keeping my voice quiet. I stopped next to our car and crossed my arms as I leaned against it. “But they’re scared, Gray. Attitudes aside, they’re just scared kids.”

“Kids, Ryder! They’re fuckin’ kids,” he reiterated. “We can’t take them out there.”

“We have to.”

“Why?” Gray demanded. “They’ll just end up fuckin’ dead if I don’t kill them first.”

“Because that kid in Chicago says there’s a good chance those hunters are still alive,” I replied, revealing the one piece of information I’d been holding onto. That stopped him dead in his tracks. His eyes widened as he stared at me. *Yeah, I knew that feeling.* Hunters turning into demons turning back to hunters... it wasn’t something I’d ever heard of. I wasn’t sure if anyone had.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Only one of them may be the real demon. He thinks if we kill the real demon, the others will turn back.”

“Thinks?” he repeated. I understood the doubt in his tone. It was a hell of a long shot, to say the least. “And if they do? That’s eight fuckin’ people we need to drag out of the fuckin’ woods!”

“And that’s exactly why we need them. They might be green as fuck hunters, but we need the extra manpower. I’m not dragging eight bodies through the fucking forest. Are you?”

“I hate this,” Gray snapped and picked up pacing again. “I fuckin’ hate this, Ryder. It’s a disaster in the makin’. I don’t like it.”

“You think I like it?” I shot back over his rambling. “We need a solid plan to go in, kill the real demon, and get everyone we can out alive.”

“And how are we supposed to tell the real demon from the turned ones?” he asked. I didn’t answer. *I knew how. He’d just hate it.*

“I think we have to rely on patterns,” I answered slowly. It was a partial truth. “The turned demons probably won’t have the same honed hunting skills that the real demon does. They’ll fight and hunt differently. They’ll be all instinct and no experience. The real demon knows what the hell it’s doing.”

“And if they do?”

“Then I do it,” I said, my voice soft. His expression hardened, and those honey-chocolate eyes darkened as he glared at me.

“No.” The finality in his voice was definite, and I knew he expected me to give in. I wasn’t going to.

“We both know I can do it,” I told him. Emotionally connecting to a demon was a horrible idea. *I’d done that. Once.* The fallout had been horrific. The idea of doing it again made me want to throw up and get the hell out of dodge. But if the hunters that’d been turned still had some kind of human emotion, I’d be able to tell.

“That’s nine fuckin’ demons, Ryder!” Gray exclaimed. His anger rolled through me in one nauseating wave after another. I swallowed hard. Bracing for it had done nothing. “One

fuckin' demon put you in a coma for ten months! Nine will fuckin' kill you! You're not doin' it!"

"I might be the only way we can figure this out—"

"I ain't losin' you again, Ryder!" he hollered. "I'd rather burn the whole fuckin' forest down with the goddamn tot squad in it than let you do that!"

He didn't mean that. Not really.

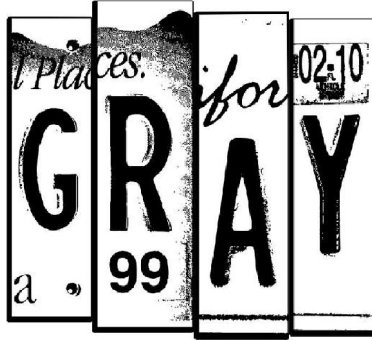
Okay, maybe a little bit. I took a moment to let him be angry before replying. Even without my empathy, I understood it. The one time I'd done so it was accidental, which put me in a coma for ten months. I couldn't begin to describe what the hell that'd been like. *Violent. Cold. Soul-crushing.* Those were the start of it maybe.

I never told Gray—mostly because I didn't want to talk about it—but I was fairly certain that somehow the demon had dragged my soul to Hell with it when it died, using my power against me. It wasn't supposed to be possible, but the things I'd dreamed... *the things I'd experienced...* I could still feel their mark on my soul. They were things nightmares were made of.

"We ain't doin' that, baby," Gray reiterated quietly after taking a few deep breaths. "We use the other plan. And we ain't even sure if those people are alive. I ain't riskin' you on the off chance they may still be in there. A demon's a demon where I'm concerned, you hear me?"

“Just promise me we’ll try to save them?” I asked, even though I knew it was pointless. He’d say the words, I knew he would. But he wouldn’t mean them. There wasn’t a damn person on the planet Gray wouldn’t sacrifice if it meant saving me. *Including himself.*

Chapter Eight



I huffed out another angry puff of smoke. I hated his plan. I hated his stupid fucking plan.

I hated it because I knew Ryder. In the heat of the moment, he'd do whatever the hell he needed to do no matter what it cost him. I could keep reminding him until I was blue in the fucking face—*which I would*—but that didn't mean he'd listen to me. The man had the heart of a fucking hero.

“I don't like it,” I muttered as I slammed the trunk shut. I leaned against the car, watching Ryder double-check his rifle piece by piece.

“You don't have to,” he whispered. His gaze flicked upward to where the tot squad was checking their weapons and getting ready to hunt. They still didn't quite understand that I had no intention of getting them involved if I could avoid it. They were there to be the clean-up crew only. I wasn't about to be responsible for a bunch of kids barely old enough to drink. *Fuck that shit.*

“Hey.” I grabbed Ryder’s chin and made him look at me. Those pale eyes were none too impressed with me interrupting him, but I didn’t care. I brushed my thumb over his cheek fondly. “You better fuckin’ tell me if somethin’ goes wrong on your end, you hear me? I don’t care if it’s a good time for it or not. You tell me.”

“Gray—”

“I’m fuckin’ serious, baby. I’ll burn down the whole fuckin’ forest and everythin’ in it if I have to.” *If I tapped into enough of my power, I could do just that. And I would.* For Ryder, I’d do anything. I didn’t care what the collateral damage looked like. Keeping him safe was my sole fucking purpose in this world. That much I knew. “I don’t give a flyin’ fuck about the tot squad, you hear me? You tell me, and I’ll protect you.”

From his expression, I knew my message got through. I could only hope for once the man listened to me.

As always before every hunt, I leaned in and kissed him. My hand slid over his jaw and around the back of his head, threading my fingers through his hair. Despite the ridiculously high tension of the situation, I felt him melt a little for me. He tugged on my shirt to bring me closer to him. I savored the warmth of his body and the taste of his tongue as it swept over mine. This right here, this was why I hunted. *For Ryder.* I didn’t give a fuck about saving the world. The world certainly had never given a single fuck about me. But Ryder did. And Ryder wanted to save the world one demon at a time, and so we did.

“Don’t do nothin’ stupid,” I growled when I pulled away. His forehead touched mine. I breathed him in deeply, committing to memory that ridiculous combination of cheap bar soap and fancy-ass shampoo he loved. It was so uniquely him, and I craved keeping that smell with me.

“I could say the same about you.”

“Please,” I scoffed as I made myself back away from him. If I didn’t, there was a good chance I’d toss his ass in the car and leave the tot squad to deal with nine fucking demons. “Safety is my middle name.”

“It’s Charles,” Ryder corrected. “Your middle name is Charles, and you don’t know the meaning of safety.”

“Okay, Ryder *Josiah* Collins.” I rolled my eyes.

“You couldn’t find the word safety if you looked it up in a dictionary,” he continued.

“Who the fuck uses a dictionary these days?” I demanded. “I got Google. Just like I got Google to tell me what way is North.”

“It’s that way.” He pointed over my shoulder with a cocky grin. *Fuck, I loved that smile.* “And so is the demon.”

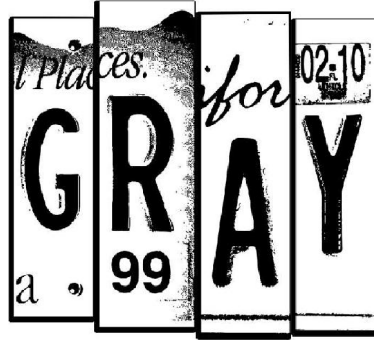
“Okay, tot squad!” I clapped my hands together as I faced the mini-hunters with distaste. From the glaring looks they shot in my direction, the feeling was mutual. “As a reminder, you stick with him, you don’t do stupid shit, and you let me do the huntin’.”

“It’s a dumbass plan,” Darren said. The kid was heavily armed. He’d overdone it. While weapons were useful, half the shit he had on him was useless. All it’d do was weigh him down in the long run. “You don’t even have any weapons on you.”

He was right. I’d left my shit in the car. I didn’t need them. Nothing store-bought could compare to what I was.

“Kid,” I began with a knowing grin, “I am the weapon.”

Chapter Nine



OUTLAWS & OUTSIDERS
CODY MARKS, TRAVIS TRITT,
IVAN MOODY, MICK MARS 

“It’s nothin’ special,” I announced as if they didn’t already know. It’d taken almost twenty minutes of trekking through the dark woods for us to find the spot we expected to find the demon. Or demons. Who really fucking knew what would happen? It set me on edge.

The spot was a horrible place to hunker down and fight demons. An open field, sure. But we were surrounded by trees, darkness, and more fucking trees. *Why did demons have to come out at night? Why couldn’t they hunt and kill in broad daylight?* Hunts would’ve been ten times easier that way. If I knew what was coming at me, it’d be way easier to fucking kill it.

“We’ll make do,” Ryder said.

“No, he’s right. We’re all going to die if we stay here,” Mason whispered. *The more this fucking boy talked, the more I regretted giving in to Ryder saying we needed him there.*

“All right, you little ray of fuckin’ sunshine, go sit your ass down by that tree and don’t fuckin’ move,” I grumbled. Mason didn’t need to be told twice. I was almost positive the kid wasn’t an active hunter. “We should’ve left his ass back at the motel.”

“He’ll be fine,” Darren interjected. “He’s just not used to the field.”

Yeah, definitely not used to the fucking field. Shit.

“How fuckin’ dandy. You go sit with him. All of you over there and wait for Daddy Ryder to come babysit y’all,” I ordered and proceeded to tune out anything else the tot-squad might have to say. Instead, I turned back to where Ryder checked his gun once more and ignored my comment. *The attentiveness of this man.* It made me smile. While some hunters preferred close-range weapons, he fell back on his military training from the Army. He preferred to stick with the SCAR 17 I’d absolutely obtained illegally for him as a first-anniversary present. I was stupidly proud of that present. “You ready?”

“Are you?” he countered.

“I was born ready.”

“No, you were born naked and probably late as fuck,” he teased. He finally glanced up at me and none of his

amusement touched those baby blue eyes. He was worried.

“I could go hunt the demons naked if you want,” I suggested with a grin, attempting to lighten the mood. Nerves and stress would do us no good going into this chaos. Even as I spoke, I began putting distance between us. “Feel like the demons might bite my dick off though.”

The eye roll I got in response was worth it. I focused on the woods around us as I put my back to him. Drawing in a deep breath, I leaned into my power. My hands glowed in shades of deep green and white as it activated. The pull was sudden in my core, warm and comforting. *Like coming home.*

Earth and air.

Air and earth.

All of it... mine.

I touched every molecule of air around me in the darkness. I felt the way it flitted through the beaten-down grass... the way it wrapped around the trees... the way it danced through the sky above.

I touched every bit of the earth. The trees, the grass, the dirt... roots, vines, leaves... all of it. It moved through me, becoming an extension of myself.

The world opened up in a clear map for me to navigate. Every twist and turn, every upturned root and fallen log. Every animal and bug in the forest I could sense. One little dip tight into my control over air and I could crush the air around any of

them to kill them. There was an odd satisfaction in that—one my father told me had made me a wicked child.

Wicked or not, I liked knowing just how dangerous my power made me.

It also made it easy to navigate the woods to find the demon.

Demons.

Fuck, there were so many of them. Eight of them. Eight demons towering well over six feet, largely built of muscle and taut skin, fangs and claws. Vicious and waiting.

One little tug was all it took.

One little tug of the air around them, dragging all eight demons forward just half an inch. And then another half for good measure. *Calling them. Taunting them. Making myself known.* They bolted, the air wrapping around them like a leash as I led them right toward us.

Every muscle in my body coiled tight, bracing for impact. My fingers itched with an insatiable need to cause irrevocable chaos. One little twitch was all it would've taken to tear open the earth underneath the demons.

Violent scenarios flashed through my mind of the various ways I could've ended this fight right here, right now. No mess, no real chaos. *But I couldn't.* I'd promised Ryder we'd try to save the hunters and humans who'd been turned. I kept my promises to him no matter what. But fuck if I didn't want to tear the demons apart little by little without any regard to who they might've been.

The ground vibrated beneath my boots as they charged closer. Several pulled ahead, faster and stronger than the others.

My heart hammered in my chest with excitement and anticipation.

I always did love getting my hands dirty.

“Come and get me, you ugly fucker,” I whispered as the first one neared.

The shadows exploded in front of me, and the night erupted with angry screeching. *And fuck, ugly was a fucking understatement.* Towering over me, this thing was everything werewolf horror stories were made of. Dark eyes honed in on me, fangs bared and claws extended. It barreled straight toward me.

And I let it.

I let it because I was a sick motherfucker who enjoyed the high of a demon bearing down on me. I craved the violent buzzing of my hunter instincts against my skull warning me of danger. There was something intoxicating about staring down death as it came for me, especially when I intended to beat death.

Only when the demon’s claws damn near scraped my nose did I react. I clenched the air around its center and sent it crashing into the closest tree. As it scrambled in a rage of claws and growls to get to me, roots and branches tore from

the ground at my command. They wrapped around the demon in a vice grip, coiling over and over to secure it to the tree.

The demon was strong, but my power was better.

I didn't have time to think about it. The rest were coming. I glanced upward at the red light in my peripheral vision. The vibrant dot from Ryder's laser sight flashed once, twice, three times against the tree.

Our signal.

I've got you.

The best eyes I'd ever have on me were that of my sniper.

One demon against the tree.

More bursting from the shadows.

Two.

Three.

Four.

They came fast and hard with no direction. Just the straight-up instinct to kill. I launched each one against a tree with a powerful gust of air and trapped them there, using the trees to create cages and snares.

But with every demon that appeared, my power was split and fractured. The demons pinned to trees fought back. I actively held them in place—adjusting and readjusting their branch restraints every few seconds. *Fuck, they were strong.* Stronger than I'd planned for.

Five.

Six.

Shit. My power was stretched too thin. Sweat trickled down my spine. My chest ached with every panting breath I took. My hunter instincts went off on an endless repeat, buzzing painfully against my skull.

Demons fighting back against the trees.

Demons careening through the woods.

My attention was horribly divided.

Seven.

I could feel myself breaking.

My power was slipping.

I teetered the line of a dangerous situation. If I pushed too hard and lost control, the elements would crash down on us in a violent wave of wind and earth combined. It'd swallow us whole.

I couldn't do that to Ryder. I wouldn't.

Branches snapped and a vicious growl built behind me. I whirled, my hands flying up.

A single shot rang out through the night. The demon's chest exploded outward. Claws scraped my shins when the demon collapsed to the dirt.

That little red light appeared over my heart, flashing three times in rapid succession before vanishing.

Fuck that was the best present I'd ever bought him.

I knew what that shot had cost him. I didn't have to be anywhere near to know the emotions were off the charts with the tot squad because of what he'd done to save me. *What if the demon he'd killed had been one of theirs?*

I didn't have time to entertain that thought.

The eighth demon dropped down from the trees overhead and damn near clipped me. I lashed out with a blast of air. It slammed straight through the trunk of a tree with the force of my power.

Fuck, I didn't want to do that either.

Tough luck.

Branches clamped down around it. With the last demon secured to a tree, I managed to catch my breath. They fought and struggled. *Seven demons. Seven trees.* My power split seven ways and waned, but I held onto them as best I could.

For as powerful as I was, I had my limits. *And fuck, my limits were being pushed something fierce.*

That red light flashed three times over my heart. *Reassurance and comfort.* I patted my chest twice, knowing Ryder could easily see me through his night scope. I breathed in deeply, letting the night air fill my lungs. I dipped hard into the element with hopes it'd build me back up even just a little bit. Anything would fucking help.

One breath... two... one more...

My eyes snapped open.

The shadows moved.

Behind Ryder.

I whirled on my boots, throwing out as much of my power as I could to find the source.

The ninth demon was out there.

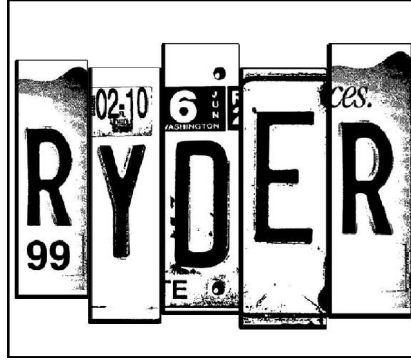
Lurking.

No, not lurking.

Hunting.

Hunting Ryder.

Chapter Ten



“You shot one!” someone— *Lena, maybe*—screached. I tuned out the quiet uprising going down around me. We’d promised not to shoot anyone, but I wasn’t about to apologize. I wasn’t sacrificing Gray on the off chance that a demon might turn back into a hunter, and I wasn’t fucking sorry about that.

The panic on Gray’s face was plain as day through the night scope. My heart lodged in my throat. *That wasn’t good.* His eyes glowed brighter with his power as he wildly searched the trees behind me and the kids. My instincts bristled violently against the back of my skull. For as badly as they told me to run, I stayed put on my stomach—gun in hand and my eye to my scope.

There was no way in hell I was moving unless the demon moved me.

Not when Gray was clearly struggling to hold his own against so many demons. His power was stretched too thin. I could see it in his ragged breathing, in the tension wracking

his body, in how tight his lips pressed together with every passing minute.

I wasn't leaving him.

Poised and rigid. That's what I was as I waited. I trusted Gray to handle whatever the hell he saw. I could only hope the fucking kids did the same. The more chaos we caused, the worse the situation would get.

Their fear, though.

Fuck, they oozed with it. It leaked everywhere. *How could they not?* Any hunter worth their weight knew the situation we were in was a disastrous one. The whole thing was a ticking time bomb waiting to fucking explode in our faces and possibly take us out as collateral damage. And that wasn't even me channeling Mason. Those were just fucking facts.

"There's something moving out there," Selena said, rolling on her back next to me. She stared into the darkness as she reached for her gun.

"Lay low and don't fucking move," I growled softly. "Don't move. Don't draw attention to us."

"And if it attacks?" Darren demanded. *Thank fuck they were all smart enough to stay down on the ground with me.* They may have had short-ranged weapons, but they were at least out of the way. I just needed them to stay that way. We couldn't handle any more moving parts to track.

"Trust Gray," I reiterated. *How many times would I say the phrase before they believed me?* Probably never. "Stay low

and don't fucking move. That's all we're doing—”

The wind yanked me forward several inches in the dirt. I groaned with the shock and pain of my rifle lodging hard in my shoulder. Claws slammed into the ground around me, and hot breath rolled over my back.

Fuck me.

I froze.

Every muscle in my body locked up as saliva dripped down my back.

Yeah, I was fucked.

For a heartbeat.

That was all it took before branches lashed out and snatched up the demon. They dragged it violently forward as the wind crashed around us.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Gray underestimated his power in an attempt to protect me. The demon crashed into him, and the two went toppling over each other. Strangled cries mingled with vicious growls. They vanished into the dark.

No, no, no.

I leaned into my hunter senses, desperately needing to know what was happening to him.

Swearing.

Scrambling.

Snarling.

And one hell of an angry commentary coming from Gray.

Thank fuck, he was alive.

For how long was another question entirely. I tried to follow the action in my night scope, but there was too much going on. Trees. Shadows. Movement.

He was holding his own.

Barely.

Tearing away from my gun, I glanced at the hunters with me. Mason was absolutely useless. The kid didn't belong in the field. Neither did Selena. Darren was too hot-headed and worked up to not get himself hurt or killed in the process. And maybe some of us as well. At least Lena could take a hit if needed.

And I fucking considered it.

I considered asking her to be bait. To get her ass kicked just so I could get Gray the fuck out of there.

So goddamn selfish.

I wracked my brain for ideas. Something—*anything*—that could work.

“Stay here, lay low, and don't fucking move.” I snapped when I had one.

Someone said something as I lurched to my feet, but I didn't care. Instead, I ran. Never again. I never wanted to hunt with

this big a group of hunters again. Too many opinions and too much distraction. *Too many fucking variables.*

Gun in my hands and heart in my throat, I bolted through the darkness. The sounds of Gray fighting the demon taunted me. I needed enough distance between him and me to make this work. It was a dumbass plan. A half-baked plan that'd probably get me killed.

But on the other hand, it could work. I was about to test some fucking theories about how in tune Gray and I were to make this fucking work.

When I saw a spot I could use, I skidded to a stop and dropped to my stomach in the dirt.

Red dot target ready.

Eye to the night scope.

Drawing in a deep breath, I steadied myself. *One good shot.* One good shot was all I needed. Planting the red dot on the demon's shoulder, I flashed once... twice... three times. I knew Gray would see it. I just needed him to fucking hear me.

"Run home, Gray!" I hollered.

"What the fuck does that mean?" he shouted back. *Damn it.*

"Run your sorry Texan ass home!" *Maybe that would trigger something.* Gray's favorite sport was baseball. However, I was fairly certain his actual favorite sport was yelling at anyone involved in baseball. The man had an opinion on every fucking play ever made.

And it worked.

He whirled on his heel and ran, charging straight through the trees toward me. The demon chased him. Claws kicked up dirt, wide shoulders fractured trees, and *fuck*... those fangs were too goddamn close to Gray.

Deep breath in.

Calm. Collected.

I could do this.

I'd done this shot hundreds of times. Maybe not this *exact* shot, but a bad guy was a bad guy, even if it was a demon chasing down the love of my life.

"Come on, honey," I whispered as Gray neared. "Bring it home..."

As the demon's claws scraped against Gray's back, he dropped, one leg folding under as he slid the rest of the short distance between us in a spray of dust. I opened fire, trusting my aim.

One bullet between the eyes.

And then a second one for good measure because you never fucking knew with demons.

The demon crashed hard to the ground, skidding and sliding with its momentum. I grabbed the front of Gray's shirt and dragged him back what little I could from where I was. The demon's wet snout pressed into Gray's shoulder as it came to a

halt. My breath hitched in my throat at the set of claws that stopped just inches from my face.

Holy fuck balls.

The silence was deafening. His heavy breathing and my heart pounding in my ears filled the night. I took my time setting my gun aside and stared at the dead demon in front of us. *Too fucking close.*

“Jesus fuck,” I whispered. The demon was fucking huge. Bigger than anything we’d hunted before, which did nothing to ease my mind about the seven others tethered to trees.

“What the fuck would you’ve done if that didn’t work?” Gray demanded breathlessly.

“Probably would’ve died,” I answered honestly. The sound of his deep chuckle was appreciated.

“And you say I’m the reckless son of a bitch.” He chuckled, the sound like liquid gold on my skin. I’d come so damn close to not hearing that sound again.

“You are. I just never said I wasn’t.” *Wasn’t that the God’s honest truth?* How the hell we were alive some days was a goddamn good question.

“*Bad puppy,*” Gray muttered with a lazy pat on the demon’s massive snout. *Like that. The man pet demons.* He groaned with the movement. “Fuck me...”

“You good?” I asked.

“Not a chance,” he mumbled. The quiet fading in his words worried me. I reached for him, planting a hand on his stomach, and faltered. *Wet*. So fucking wet. There wasn't a damn reason in the world for it to be wet unless he was hurt.

“Gray... Gray, what the fuck happened?” I demanded and scrambled to my knees. Yanking up the bottom of his shirt, I found three gashes crossing over his rib cage. Any further over and it would've gutted him. The sight of him disarmed what walls I had in place between me and my empathy. His pain washed over me. *Burning, searing pain*. It laced across my torso, setting my nerves on fire. My stomach rolled, and bile stung the back of my throat. I swallowed hard. I had to keep it together. “Shit!”

“Puppy got a good chunk of me,” he told me. With a heavy sigh, he patted my arm. “They ain't that bad, baby. Just my dumbass gettin' my ass kicked again.”

“It looks fucking bad.”

“They ain't that deep.” *Oh. Okay*. I trailed my fingers over the wounds. He was right. They weren't quite surface level, but they weren't as deep as I'd first thought. He'd heal in a day or two thanks to his hunter's blood. Gray cocked half a grin. “See? Ain't that bad. I need a damn good nap. And Twizzlers. Lots of fuckin' Twizzlers. Maybe a beer... yeah, a fuckin' beer sounds damn good right now.”

“No, no,” I said quickly as his eyes closed. “You aren't napping in the fucking woods. Not again.”

“But I like it here, Ryder,” he retorted, his voice barely audible. “It feels cozy...”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sleeping in the woods again,” I snapped. If I let him, he’d stay right there until he felt better. The man felt more at home in the middle of the woods than he did anywhere else. It was the way his power worked. “Don’t you fucking fall asleep on me, you hear me? I’m not carrying your dumbass out of here. You’re walking out, Gray. *We’re walking out of here.*”

I refused to believe otherwise. I was too stubborn for that shit. *I also loved him too damn much.* Shouldering my gun, I braced myself as I slowly got him standing. With his arm slung over my shoulders, I took on the brunt of his weight. The direct line between me and his exhaustion made it difficult, but I buried it. I could do this.

“I can’t hold ‘em much longer, Ryder,” Gray whispered. *Fuck, he was still restraining the demons.* “They need to turn back, or you got to kill them. I can’t...”

“Okay,” I replied. “Okay. Let’s just get you back first.”

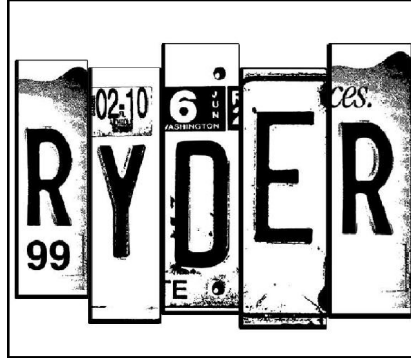
“You think they turned back?”

“One thing at a time, honey,” I said. I’d get him back to the car and then worry about everything else.

That was a lie.

I didn’t give a damn about anything but getting Gray back.

Chapter Eleven



“Okay, here we go. We made it, we made it,” I assured him as I eased Gray into the front seat. The second he was settled, I dropped the seat as far back as it’d go for the sake of comfort. *As if that really mattered at a time like this.* Eyes closed, Gray said nothing. Fuck. Was he even awake? I shook his chest. “Gray? Come on, honey. You need to stay awake.”

Fuck. I needed him awake long enough for me to figure out the situation with the demons. The last thing I wanted was to have to hunt seven fucking demons on my own. I wouldn’t be able to do it. There was just no way.

“Gray,” I said once more and gave him a little shake. *Nothing.* “Shit... I’m sorry. This is going to hurt.”

Drawing deep into my power, I reached out with my empathy to the other hunters. Specifically, I wanted their pain. That raw, emotionally charged pain that their own hunts had incited within them. That pain of loss they carried with them. I drew that to me, utilized it. Weaponized it. Tendrils of black

wrapped around my fingers as I gathered as much of it as I could into one jolt of power.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered once more. I hated doing this. I hated that it was even a thought in my head to do, but I needed him awake. I funneled all of it straight into Gray’s chest for the pure value of shocking him back to consciousness. He surged forward with a horrific scream that cut right through my heart. He grabbed my wrist, eyes wide.

“I don’t like that! No! Don’t like it!”

“I know, I know,” I rushed to say and let up with my power instantly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Just... I need you to stay awake long enough for me to kill those things, you hear me? I’ll take it all away. I promise. I’ll take it all away. Just stay awake for me, please?”

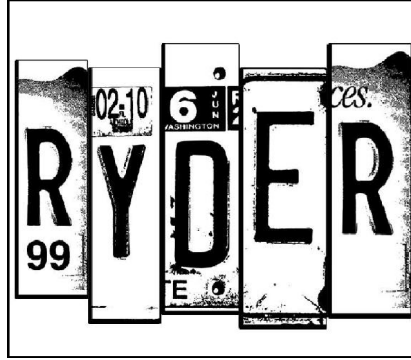
“Don’t do that again.” Gray sagged back against the seat. His pained expression broke my fucking heart, but I had to do it. I had to do it. I kept telling myself that as if it justified causing him that amount of pain. It didn’t. It fucking didn’t.

“I won’t,” I promise as I set my rifle in the back seat and traded it out for a pistol. Normally, I’d properly secure it, but I was on borrowed time. There was no way in hell Gray would stay conscious for long. The demons needed to be killed before any more shit hit the fan. I grabbed his face, shaking it slightly. “Stay the fuck awake long enough for me to kill them. Pass out when I get back. Got it?”

“Awake. Yeah,” he muttered, his head nodding rapidly. *That’d have to do.* It wasn’t good, but it’d have to do. I left

him—and fuck if it wasn't hard as hell to leave him there
bleeding all over the seat of the car.

Chapter Twelve



I sprinted down the path, my heart pounding hard in my chest as I listened to the woods for chaos. My mind ran rampant with every option of what could've been happening. It stressed me the fuck out. The situation was so far out of hand. The variables were too many, the demons were too many. Fuck, it was just too much. My mind got stuck on repeat with the single concept.

I slowed as I neared, listening closer.

Quiet sobs. Growling. Swearing. Snarling. Wood splintering.

What the hell was happening?

Good things. Please for the love of all things holy, let it be good things.

The first thing I saw was Mason on the ground rocking a blonde-haired woman. She was unconscious with his jacket wrapped around her to cover her visibly naked body. *But she was alive.* It had to be his wife.

Which meant they'd turned back.

They'd fucking turned back.

Holy shit. The kid was right.

A quick scan told me at least three of them did: Brett, Ava, and Kelley.

Fuck, Darren's brother wasn't among them. I told myself three out of four wasn't bad, considering the odds. It was a morbid thought, one I could say all I wanted, but I knew I'd never convince myself past the guilt. The horrific waves of anguish that rolled off him did nothing to support that thought either. I built my walls up tighter and did my best to keep him out. Three of the seven demons had turned back to hunters. We still had four to kill.

“Stop cutting him out and go kill that one over there,” I ordered, pointing to Lena as she did her best to saw Brett out of the branches wrapped around him. She opened her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. “He'll be fine for a few minutes. *We* won't be when Gray passes out. The minute he does, these things are coming down, and we'll be stuck with four demons who want our asses dead. Kill the fucking demon.”

She didn't need to be told twice. *Thank fuck.* With a quick apology to Brett—even though he was unconscious and couldn't hear her—she left him dangling to go put a bullet in a demon's head.

“Hey! I need you to kill that one.” I snapped my fingers at Mason on the ground, but he didn't even look up. I had a

feeling nothing I did would get that man to move away from his wife, so I left him. The demon closest struggled against the branches. *Thank fuck Gray's power was holding strong.* I put a single bullet in its head.

“No!” Selena shrieked. “What if that’s a person?”

“It was a person,” I said as I moved on to the third demon while Lena killed the fourth one. My tone was cold, but I didn’t care. *Us or them.* I kept telling myself that. It didn’t soothe the guilt, but sometimes even I needed the reminder. I couldn’t protect Gray if I didn’t do what had to be done. “Hard lesson, kid, sometimes it’s us or them. You make the hard choice.”

Her entire body shuddered when I put a bullet between the last demon’s eyes. Four dead demons hung strung up against a tree, heads dangling with blood dripping.

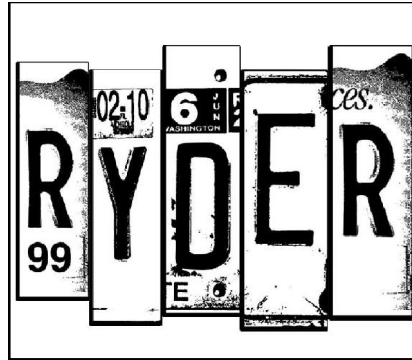
Four dead humans.

That’s what they were. Someone’s mother, father, brother, sister, partner, friend.

And one dead hunter if I was assuming the demon I’d shot to protect Gray was Darren’s brother.

Fuck. What a fucking disaster.

Chapter Thirteen



I left the kids in the woods—well, at the edge of the woods. I stuck around just long enough to make sure they got to their cars safely. I also made sure to give Lena my number in case she needed it. The entire drive, Darren’s distraught and broken demeanor stuck with me. I stood by what I did. I’d do the same thing every time over. There wasn’t a damn thing I wouldn’t do to protect Gray, but fuck if it didn’t suck. I knew what that kind of loss felt like even without my empathy. I wouldn’t wish it on a damn person. It made me tighten my grip on Gray’s thigh as I drove faster.

By the time I got back to the motel, Gray had passed out. The motel was quiet, no one hung around outside, and getting him inside was at least an uninterrupted process. For as much as I wanted to say I wasn’t used to patching him up... I was. His recklessness made it a necessity. Gray was always quick to throw himself on the flames if it meant keeping me out of danger. Which was exactly why I already had all the tools I

needed in our baggage. I worked quickly to lay everything out—a needle, thread, ointment, bandages, and disinfectant.

“They turn back?” Gray asked weakly. The sound of his voice startled me. I glanced at him. His arm was thrown over his face, but it did nothing to hide the pain in his expression. Tension wracked his body head to toe, every muscle locked up.

“Yeah, three of the four,” I told him. “Darren’s brother didn’t, though.”

“Probably the one you shot.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You did the right thing,” he whispered. “We ain’t no good to no one dead, baby.”

“I know,” I replied. *Still didn’t feel like it.* I grabbed the hem of his shirt and peeled it away from the gashes. They didn’t look any better in the dim light of the motel lamps. “I’m going to cut your shirt off. Just hold still.”

“I’d say that’s fuckin’ hot, but I’m hurtin’.” He blew out a hard breath. “Fuck.”

“Just give me a minute.” I cut the bloodied shirt off him, tossing scraps onto the floor. We were going to add this motel to the list of ones never to come back to. Shady motel or not, leaving a bloody mess behind wasn’t doing us any good.

“Don’t do it. I can take it. Had worse,” Gray muttered. I ignored him. He was in no condition to talk me out of it, even

if he could. I couldn't take back the crap the night had put us through, but I could make it easier on him.

I settled a hand on his chest as I drew in a deep breath. I couldn't take his pain away. Not really. My power didn't work that way. I couldn't create emotions and couldn't displace them. They had to come from somewhere, and they had to go somewhere. If I wanted to take away his pain, I had to take it on myself, which wasn't a smart plan. I needed to be functional to take care of him, so instead, I sent him to a happy place.

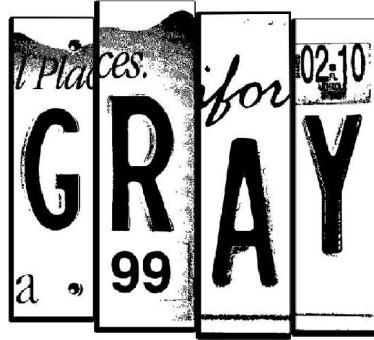
I drew on the memories I clung to when shit got bad around us. The day we'd met. Our first kiss. Our first night together. Our first dance. Late nights of laughter and music. Taylor Swift songs and Twizzlers. Sharing dreams and planning a life together. *Those things made me happy.* They were easy things to get lost in.

Black tendrils of my power built in the hand I had on his chest. *Joy, comfort, love.* I layered them on one another as strong as I could. The feelings seeped into him. His body visibly relaxed, and the corners of his mouth tipped upward in a lazy smile as he spiraled into a happier place where the pain was diluted by goodness.

My guilt lessened as I soaked his wounds in disinfectant without a reaction. I took my time threading the needle through his skin. Sadly, I was damn good at this part. He'd barely be scarred by the time I was done with him. I smeared

on an antibiotic ointment and layered up the bandages for good measure. Maybe it was overkill. Who fucking knew?

Chapter Fourteen



Two days of sleep, three packs of Twizzlers, and crappy motel TV shows had me restless. I was ready to leave. To hit the open road and find another city, another crappy motel, and another demon to kill. I wanted to move the hell on from this place. I wanted Wichita in my rearview. That was our life.

Ryder, however, insisted on cleaning the car out first. *Okay, I didn't quite blame him.* There was blood. Everywhere. Not like I could help bleeding out. That wasn't my fault. The demon did that shit, but I'd definitely made a mess of the car. And the fucker wouldn't let me help as he scrubbed the seat to the best of his ability considering we were in a motel parking lot.

I lay on the hood of the car, watching the clouds gather lazily in the sky and enjoying the comfort of the breeze rolling over my body. I loved that about my power. The elements were everywhere. *Earth and Air.* I could find them anywhere, and their effect on me was immediate. Hunters healed fast in general—we were genetically made that way for survival and

all that shit—but the elements replenished me right down to my very soul. It was why after two days I felt ready to get the hell out of there. Maybe I couldn't fight a demon quite yet, but I was up, mobile, rocking out to my favorite girl, and good to go.

“I could help,” I tried to offer again as I glanced through the windshield.

“I'm not making you clean up your own blood,” Ryder said, shooting me down damn near instantly. I sighed. *My man could be so damn frustrating.*

“You ain't makin' me do nothin',” I retorted. “I offered.”

“No.”

“I'm bored.”

“Eat a Twizzler.”

“I'm out.” I grabbed the empty plastic and shook it—*sad day.*

“Do you need your allowance to go buy more?” he teased, his head popping out of the car. That happy little smile on his face was perfection. The man didn't smile enough. I understood why, considering everything he felt on a daily basis, but I still wished he would. Making him smile every day was a damn life goal—one I actively worked toward.

“More places need to sell the chocolate kind,” I replied. It was a serious problem. *Okay, it was a serious life problem to me.* The world needed more chocolate Twizzlers. Not that

gross black licorice shit, but good old chocolate Twizzlers. “It ain’t that hard to stock the chocolate-flavored ones.”

“Or maybe just don’t eat so many fucking Twizzlers, honey.”

“Smokin’ or Twizzlers. Pick one, baby,” I ordered with a cocky grin. I had a major oral fixation—*no fucking surprise there*. Before Ryder, I chain-smoked as if my life depended on it. My life didn’t, but my temper usually did. He hated it and made a very valid argument for why I should slow down. “I traded smokes for Twizzlers because you asked, you know. This is your beast in the makin’.”

“Or maybe I’ll give you something else to put in that damn mouth,” he retorted. *Oh, sassy*. I liked it. Ducking back into the car, he continued, “We have one more night at the motel. By the time we check out tomorrow morning, the car will be dry. That gives us time to figure out our next move.”

“Is this really all you two do?” The sound of Lena’s voice made me sit up. Slowly and with an obnoxious groan. She stood by the front of our car with Brett next to her. Dark-haired with dark eyes and too much wild facial hair, the man looked good for someone who was a demon two days ago.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with bein’ mobile,” I said. “My home has wheels.”

“Wouldn’t an RV be easier?” Brett asked. “Or maybe a camper of some sort?”

“You ever paid gas on a camper, boy?” Money wasn’t an issue. Not really. Ryder came from a wealthy as fuck family,

and his sister was always funneling money into our account to make sure we were good. *But living in a camper?* Fuck that shit. Sure, a camper had a bed, but I'd take my Firebird any day.

Four wheels low to the ground, windows open, music blasting, and a long stretch of road ahead of us made me a happy fucking man.

"You two doing okay?" Ryder tossed the scrub brush back in the bucket as he stood and leaned on the open door.

"Yeah." Brett shrugged. "I honestly don't remember a thing. I remember us planning to hunt, but that's about it. But I hear you two are who I have to thank for being here. You saved all of us."

"Most of you," he corrected softly. I bit back my comment. Ryder would carry Charlie's death with him for life. Charlie Smitt's name would remain a permanent scar on his soul. He was a good man like that.

"Well, that's better than none of us," Brett said.

"And Darren will be okay," Lena chimed in. "We'll make sure of it."

"Tell him I'm sorry, will you?" Ryder asked. "I know it's not much, but still."

"We will. And you?" She glanced at me. "You're looking pretty good for a guy who almost got gutted."

"Please," I scoffed. "I've done worse to myself on accident."

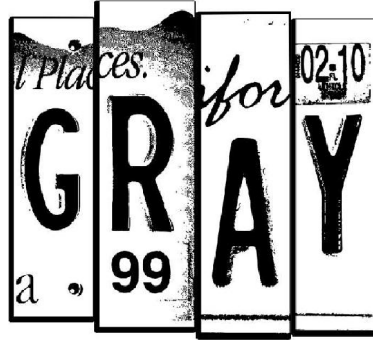
“He has,” Ryder agreed. A small grin tugged the corner of his lips. What I wouldn’t give to know what story he was thinking of. “Don’t ask.”

“I’m not sure I want to know,” Lena admitted.

“Well, look,” Brett began as he shoved his hands in his pockets, “Darren left, but the rest of us are hanging around for another few days. We’d like to take you two out for drinks and dinner if you’d let us. There’s no good way to say thanks for saving my ass when I turned into a demon, but free beer is a good start.”

“It’s a damn good start,” I said. I looked at Ryder, and he shrugged. Free food and drinks were always welcome. It wasn’t like we were leaving right then anyway.

Chapter Fifteen



“This isn’t us leaving, honey,” Ryder murmured against my mouth as I pushed his back to the door. We’d agreed to meet the tot squad for free drinks and food, but Ryder looked a little too irresistible in his good jeans and a fitted t-shirt.

“You had me stuck in this motel room—”

“You got hurt!”

“—and you ain’t let me touch you for two days. Healin’ or not, that’s torture, baby,” I finished and dragged his mouth to mine once more, my tongue driving through his lips. For as much as he protested, the moan he let out sure as fuck was telling.

My hands slid under his shirt and ran over his stomach, teasing the waist of his jeans. His hips rocked forward with the motion. His fingers threaded through my hair and an arm locked around my waist as he pulled me tight to him. *Hot*

kisses, scraping bites, demanding tongue. The heat in the room skyrocketed as I lost myself in him.

His body was tense under mine—as it always was before he went out. *I hated it.* I wanted to make him feel better. At ease. I wanted him to enjoy himself. To let go even for just a few minutes.

“I was told you had somethin’ I could put in my mouth,” I whispered against his cheek. I nipped playfully at his scruffy jawline and kissed the spot under his ear. As I kissed my way down his neck, I breathed him in deeply, finding that fancy-ass shampoo of his intoxicating. My dick strained hard against my zipper, aching for his touch. I shoved my desires back. I wanted to make this about him.

Rushing through undoing his belt, I pushed his pants down over the curve of his ass, enough to free him. I stroked his hard length and ran my thumb over the bead of precum waiting for me. His hips moved in tandem with me. Even with so little, I could feel the way he turned into putty in my hands. I loved that.

I lowered to my knees, and his gaze followed. His mouth opened to say something, but I cut him off.

“Relax for me, baby,” I ordered. I ran my tongue over his slit and savored the salty taste of his precum. “Let me take care of you.”

“Gray, this...” Anything else Ryder planned to say was lost to a low moan as I took him entirely in my mouth. *Sometimes I liked to tease him, sometimes I liked to get straight to the point*

just to watch him come undone for me. His fingers tightened in my hair as his cock hit my throat. He let out a breathy sigh of relief, his head tipping against the door. “Fuck, we’re going to be late.”

Damn straight we were.

His cock glided over my tongue with ease as I wrapped my hand around his thick length. I worked him in all the ways I knew would make him unravel, watching the little signs he gave. *Faster, slower, deeper.* I brought him to the edge over and over, enjoying how he throbbed in my mouth. Every time he was close, I slowed and teased him. My name fell off those sexy lips as every ounce of anxious tension left his body, replaced by his need for release.

I didn’t stop him as his fist balled up in my hair and his hips rocked forward. I wanted him wrecked and undone just for me. I wanted him so lost in chasing his own pleasure that he forgot about the world outside our door. His chest rose and fell with rapid breaths while his groans grew louder.

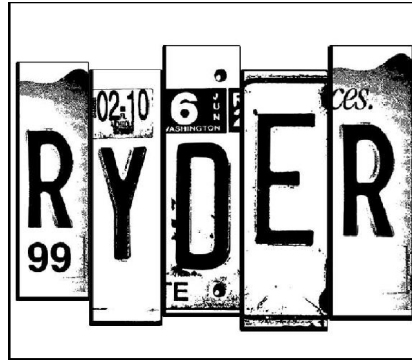
“Fuck, Gray,” Ryder growled. *Fuck, I loved that sound.* The closer he got, the faster his hips thrust into my mouth. I let him take over—let him use me how he wanted. My hands wandered under his shirt as I traced the defined lines of his muscles. When his hand found mine and gripped tight, I knew he was close.

Two fast thrusts and he fell apart. Cum coated my tongue and throat as his dick jerked in my mouth, emptying in quick spurts. I swallowed every drop he had to offer me. Only when

his hand relaxed in my hair did I sink back on my heels. Those baby blue eyes caught mine while a lazy smile curled the corners of his mouth.

Yeah, that look on his face was definitely worth being late for free beer.

Chapter Sixteen



HEAD OVER BOOTS
JON PARDI



“So, we got this fuckin’ thing cornered,” Gray was saying as he laughed, “and we’re over here thinkin’... fuck yeah, we got this, you know what I mean?”

“But you don’t, do you?” Ava—Mason’s wife—asked as she giggled into her beer. Mason, Ava, Lena, Brett, Gray, and I sat crammed around a high-top table in the back of a busy bar. Selena and Kelley changed their mind and left town early after putting together gift cards and a thank you card for us—truly unnecessary but appreciated nonetheless. Gray had already taken the Visa card so he could use it on Twizzlers later. *Not that I minded.* Country music bounced off every wall and people danced. Waitresses flitted through the crowd in flannel country girl outfits to deliver greasy food and beers that went down all too easily. Despite the noise and constant chaos, the collective mood was happy. I rode the emotional high

everyone around me offered up so willingly and let the beer take the last little edge off for me.

“No fuckin’ way!” he exclaimed. “Turns out this fuckin’ thing could climb walls. It full-on crawled its way up the fuckin’ alley wall like it was fuckin’ Spider-Man or somethin’.”

“You forgot the part where you tried to stop it,” I chimed in, laughing. Gray’s forehead fell to my shoulder with a groan as I reminded him of one of his funniest fuck-ups ever. It was not one of his better moments.

“We don’t need to tell them that part,” he retorted. Even as he said the words, he was grinning like a fucking idiot. He found the story just as fucking funny as I did.

“Oh, please tell us!” Lena demanded, clapping her hands excitedly. Drunk Lena definitely let loose in a way sober Lena didn’t. She was carefree and having a great time.

“What he’s not saying is that he tried to catch the damn thing using vines,” I said. His arm snaked around my waist as he kept his face hidden. Despite his bashful behavior, he was laughing under his breath. “So, this fucking demon goes straight up a wall, and he—”

“Forgot to disengage,” Gray finished for me. Heaving an overly dramatic sigh, he sat upright. “It ain’t just the demon that became Spider-Man that day.”

“No!” Mason gasped, his eyes widening with complete shock like he hadn’t seen that ending coming.

“Yeah,” he replied. “And I don’t like heights, boy.”

“He really doesn’t.” I shook my head, laughing harder as the image of Gray being dragged up a building popped into my head. *Fuck, that’d been a crazy hunt.* Gray and I had done a lot of wild shit in our eight years together but watching his dumbass get dragged up a wall by a demon topped that list. “Getting him down was a fucking feat. The demon left him at the top of a building. I had to talk him through—”

“Rappellin’ down,” Gray interjected. “I rappelled down the side of the buildin’.”

“No, you *tried* to rappel down the building. You ended up falling face-first in the fucking dumpster,” I corrected. Those honey-chocolate eyes leveled on me. He feigned his upset while the others burst into laughter. And me? My face hurt with how wide I was smiling. I knew he wasn’t the least bit bothered as his amusement and happiness washed over me.

“First and last time I’ll ever go dumpster divin’,” he said finally. His hand curled around the back of my neck, and he pulled me closer. I went willingly, leaning comfortably into him as he kissed my temple. We didn’t socialize much. Not to this caliber. Usually, I was good with that. I liked it just Gray and I. But sitting there with them? This was nice. It was comfortable to sit with them, no pressure and no chaos. Just six people doing normal shit. “All right, give it up. Give us your craziest stories.”

“We went dumpster diving after getting thrown off a building,” Lena told us before anyone else could say anything.

Brett shushed her as he damn near giggled.

“She thinks she’s funny,” Gray replied, his breath hot against my ear. *Fuck, that did things to me.* I suppressed a moan because my dick getting hard in the middle of a busy bar wasn’t what I wanted.

“I once hunted a demon that spit out acid and set the acid on fire,” Ava cut in. Her sentence shut the rest of us up. *What the fuck?* Her head cocked to the side as she thought about it. “You know... it kind of looked like a dinosaur.”

“That’s fucked up,” I said and took another long drink. Dinosaur demons? That was a new one.

“We ain’t fought a dino demon.” Gray glanced at me. I recognized that look in his eyes and groaned. I wasn’t going to hear the end of this for months until I found him a damn dinosaur demon to hunt and kill. “I want to fight a dino demon, baby. Why ain’t we fightin’ dinos?”

“I don’t control the demons!” I exclaimed in a hushed voice.

“But dinos!”

“Okay,” Brett began over us, “but how did you kill it?”

“Very fucking carefully,” Ava announced. “And lots of liquid nitrogen.”

“Hold up now, cowgirl!” Gray slammed a hand to the table, his voice rising a full notch with excitement. “You hunt usin’ liquid nitrogen?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged. “With the right weaponry, it’s a perfect tool. Makes hunting easy.”

“I want liquid nitrogen,” he said as he rounded his attention back to me. “Please? I’ll do whatever you want, baby. I just want liquid nitrogen.”

“How are we going to travel with liquid nitrogen?” I asked.

“Damn it.” He playfully pouted, those honey-chocolate eyes making him look like a goddamn puppy dog. I was right. There was no way in hell we could bring that shit on the road with us. But fuck me. That look made me want to try. “I hate it when you’re right. Okay, but how y’all usin’ it in the field?”

“Modified liquid nitrogen gun,” Mason replied. “A guy I know who modifies weaponry—”

“Ryder! He knows a guy who modifies weaponry!” Gray exclaimed with excitement as if I hadn’t heard him. I grinned though, enjoying every ounce of joy rolling off of him. The man and his love for finding unique weapons cracked me up. Just give me my pistol and my rifle any day. I didn’t need anything else. “I want a guy who does that!”

“I know you do, honey.” I kissed his shoulder. “Let him finish talking and maybe he’ll give you the information for his gun guy.”

“Oh, yeah.” Mason nodded. “My gun guy likes bragging and making new shit. He’d be thrilled to have another customer.”

“See! I got a gun guy now!” That stupidly happy grin on Gray’s face put a vice grip on my heart. Did we need more

guns? No. *Would I end up buying him more guns just because it made him happy? Yes, I would.* Hell, guns were easier to get than Taylor Swift tickets. “I’m gettin’ more beers, and then y’all are givin’ me all the details on your gun guy.”

“How many times do you think he’s going to say gun guy tonight?” Brett laughed.

“You have no idea,” I replied as I watched him leave. “We sort of had a gun guy for a while there, but he got himself arrested for animal trafficking of all things.”

“No shit.” Ava’s eyes widened. “Like zoo animals?”

“You should’ve seen the look on Gray’s face the day I told him that he couldn’t have a baby hyena even though the guy offered it to him.” I shook my head. That’d been a whole fucking ordeal. One I’d be happy to never live through again.

“He’ll say yes, you know,” Mason whispered as he leaned closer to me. I cocked an eyebrow, waiting for the boy who could see the future to elaborate. “I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“I saw you two last night,” he said. I was grateful for the way he kept the conversation quiet for just us because I had a strong feeling I knew where he was going with it. The last thing I wanted was for anyone—especially Gray—to accidentally overhear. “It was a little... distorted... but you two have a hell of a journey ahead of you. One I wouldn’t want.”

“That’s just fucking lovely,” I grumbled.

“But when you ask him to marry you, he’ll say yes. I know you’re worried he won’t,” he continued. My lips pressed together tighter. *Damn hunters who could see the future.* I’d been carrying around that ring for almost three years. I couldn’t seem to work up the nerve to ask him. Even after all these fucking years, I wasn’t sure he’d say yes. I could hunt a pack of demons without a second thought. No clue, no problem. But propose to Gray? *Yeah, that shit scared the crap out of me.*

“I thought you guys only saw the future where hunting demons was concerned,” I retorted, completely bypassing his statement on purpose. *That wasn’t something I was about to discuss with someone I didn’t know.*

“I don’t know.” He shrugged but offered a big smile. “I mean there was definitely demon chaos in all that shit. Sometimes I get lucky and get something nice premonition snuck in there too. I’ll take it. Those are nice.”

I grunted but said nothing more. Instead, I glanced over my shoulder across the bar to where Gray was weaving his way through the crowd with six bottles of beer in his hands. He lost himself in the country song playing, dancing in small steps through the crowd and singing at the top of his lungs. The man was so damn happy and carefree that it was contagious. People around him just gravitated toward him, roping him into a few simple steps on the dance floor.

Every now and then when I looked at him, I wondered how the hell I got him. How the hell had I managed to keep him?

Me, a dishonored Sergeant and wanted fugitive. *What the hell did he see in me?* Maybe that was why I couldn't bring myself to ask him to marry me. Being on the road as a hunter was one thing but being on the run with a fugitive wanted for murder was something entirely different. If he walked away right now, he'd have the world at his feet. There wasn't a damn thing he couldn't do. With me, the risks were fucking high. *What the fuck did I really have to offer him?*

Nothing but just me. The answer was nothing but just me.

But then his gaze drifted up and found mine, that lopsided smile lighting up his handsome face. All those crappy thoughts and doubts vanished. That smile? It was just for me. Those feelings he had for me? They were genuine. Every last one of them. That shit was irreplaceable.

"This song is too damn good not to dance to," Gray announced as he finessed his way through setting down all six beers. His hand found mine. "Come on, baby. We're dancin'."

"Dancing sounds like fun," Lena agreed as she slipped all too ungracefully off her stool. Brett chuckled as he caught her.

"We should dance too," Mason chimed in and dragged Ava with him.

"See?" Gray beamed over his shoulder at me. Hand in hand, I followed as he picked a spot on the dance floor. "I'm a trendsetter."

"Yeah, you are, honey," I said. He spun me and I went easily, letting him take the lead. The others danced around us, but I

lost sight of them. Music thrummed against my skin as I gave into the moment. Letting go wasn't difficult as I spun and swayed with Gray—my hand in his, his hand around my waist. I wasn't half the dancer that he was, but that didn't matter.

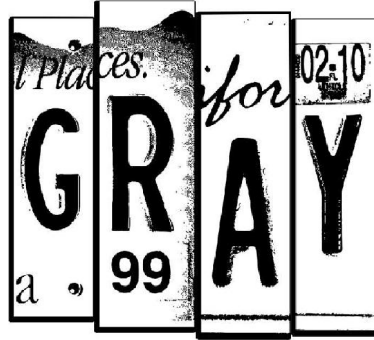
His easy smile, his bright laugh, his deep singing voice as he belted out the lyrics. That was all that mattered. Everything about him disarmed me in a way I readily fell into. His happiness washed over me, vibrating through my body in a wonderful kind of high. I didn't care if I looked like an idiot trying to keep up with him.

Song after song, I danced with him. Rhythm? Skill? Basic knowledge of how to keep up with music? None of that shit mattered. It was just me and Gray. *That was all that mattered.* A little bit awkward but every bit perfect

“You happy?” Gray asked as he pulled me close to him. Fingers in his dark hair, I leaned in and kissed him. His arm tightened around me, and his lips curled that slow and sexy smile of his. His heated gaze captured mine, and he asked, “Want to get the hell out of here?”

I nodded. I didn't need to be asked twice.

Chapter Seventeen



IN YOUR LOVE
TYLER CHILDERS



We barely managed to get through the door before Ryder grabbed my face and dragged me in for a kiss—his mouth demanding and desperate. That little moan of relief I swallowed from him shot straight to my dick, doing nothing for how fucking hard I was. Watching him dance, carefree and happy, did things to me. I loved putting that smile on his face. I loved making him laugh. I loved watching him let go and just be happy. All of it got my blood pumping. All of him turned me on.

My tongue swept over his in a hungry battle while I dragged the bottom of his shirt up. Shirt off. Pants undone. Boots kicked aside somewhere. His clothes. My clothes. I couldn't get the man naked fast enough. My skin vibrated with excitement, my nerves blazed hot under every spot his hands

touched, and my head buzzed with a high only he could give me.

And all of it came to a screeching halt when his forehead pressed to mine, and he let out a small sigh.

“I love you,” Ryder whispered. “You know that, right?”

I stopped with my pants around my ankles and one sock missing to take hold of his face. I made him look at me. *I fucking hated his insecurities in us.* I couldn’t blame him. I knew exactly where they came from. Everyone in Ryder’s life had failed him. Everyone left him. Abandoned him. Sure his sister had come back, but she still left him in the first place. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop with us—even after eight years—and it fucking killed me.

“Now, you listen here, Ryder Josiah Collins. There ain’t a damn thing in the world you could do to get rid of me, you hear me? It’s you and me right up to the end, got it?” My thumb brushed over his cheek as I stared into those baby blues of his, watching his reaction closely.

“Yeah...”

“If you leave me, you got to take me with you, got it?” I teased, doing my best to reclaim the smile of his. The small laugh he let out was worth it. “I mean that, baby. It’s you and me up against the world. Not a damn thing can stop us. Except maybe a demon. Or a bullet. Liquid nitrogen would too. I really ain’t very good at these epic fuckin’ speeches about love and all that shit, baby. I just love you, and you love me, and not a damn other thing matters.”

“You can stop now,” he interrupted my rambling. *Oh, thank fuck.* I was so fucking bad at trying to put my feelings into words. Good words anyway. I loved the hell out of him and did my best to show him but telling him was hard. I wanted to make it mean something, and I sucked with words. His lips met mine in a soft kiss. “I hear you.”

Good.

One quick kiss turned into a second then a third. I kissed him over and over, running my hands down his strong back and over his sides. His thick cock pressed heavily against my hip. I pushed him back toward the bed, making him chuckle as I struggled to kick off my pants. That sound shot straight to my dick.

“Fuckin’ clothes,” I grumbled as we tumbled onto the bed. Between kisses, I drunkenly announced, “I should be allowed to walk around naked. It’d make all this shit way easier.”

“No.” His teeth tugged on my bottom lip.

“It’d save on laundry,” I teased. My mouth skated down his neck as I settled over him. The warmth of his body under mine was an inexplicable comfort I craved. *Ryder was home.*

“Still no,” he grunted. I nipped his neck and enjoyed the moan it pulled from him. “You’d get your ass arrested all over again.”

“Jumpsuit orange ain’t my color,” I commented. *It wasn’t.* I knew that one from experience.

I dropped the conversation, needing more of him and less of everything else. Reaching between us, I wrapped my hand around both our dicks and ground my hips against his. *Fuck me... it felt so goddamn good.* My spine tingled, and my cock throbbed against his. Precum gathered on the tips of my dick and his as I continued to thrust slowly against him. That fucking groan he let out was an aphrodisiac all of its own.

Ryder's fist balled up in my hair, and he dragged my mouth back to his. *Greedy. Hungry. Lost in it all.* I swallowed every moan he gave me. My tongue battled his. My hand stroked faster. His hand gripped my forearm as his hips moved against mine, his leg wrapping around my hips.

Heat built in my spine. *Shit.* I was so fucking close.

"Fuck me, Gray," Ryder rasped, his voice thick with a need that mirrored mine. "I need you inside me."

Yeah, didn't need to be asked twice. I struggled to hold myself back as it was. Taking his hand in mine, I made him take over stroking his cock while I grabbed the lube. I sank back on my knees and drank in the sight of him. *Splayed out, messy hair, dick in hand, hungry eyes. God, he was sexy as sin.*

"Like what you see?" he asked when I continued to stare instead of move.

"Always." I smirked and indulged in watching him as I coated my cock in lube. I took in every lazy stroke of his hand over his dick, the sight making me throb with anticipation. "Can't help it. I got the hottest view in Wichita right here."

He rolled his eyes and laughed. *The joke was on him: I wasn't lying.* But I also told him that shit no matter what city we were in, and he always rolled his eyes at me. It was our thing.

I pressed my lips to the dip of his hip and crawled my way up his body. I took my time worshipping every glorious inch of his strong body with soft kisses and tracing the definition of his muscles with my tongue. The quiet sighs he let out, his nails scraped against my scalp, his hand running up my side. I craved all of it. *All of him.* I breathed him in deeply as I tumbled freely over the edge of letting him consume me. *Ryder's world was the only place I wanted to be.* Nothing else fucking mattered.

His legs hooked around my hips once more as I adjusted my positioning, lining myself up. I caught his mouth in mine, tongue driving past his lips, and pressed forward. The crown of my dick slid past that tight ring of muscles as I eased inside him with a deep groan. The moan he let out echoed mine as I buried myself completely in one smooth motion. The vice grip he had on my dick was fucking euphoric. Molten heat curled around my spine, and the temperature in the room spiked. My restraint frayed. All I wanted to do was fuck him senseless.

“You feel so goddamn good, baby,” I whispered against his mouth. *Good was the goddamn understatement of the century.* “I ain't goin' slow, baby. I'm aimin' to wreck you tonight, you hear me?”

His fist balled up in my hair, and his mouth crashed hard against mine. It was the only invitation I needed. Bracing over him, I damn near pulled all the way out of him. One time. That was it before I thrust into him, chasing my release.

Moaning and panting.

Skin slapping against skin.

I knocked away his hand and took hold of his dick. His pulse throbbed under my hand as I stroked him in tandem with my pace.

Desperate words fell off his lips.

Faster.

Harder.

Wreck me.

Ryder was completely lost in the moment, his head tipping back with his eyes closed and his lips parted. Everything about that was enough to send me careening off a fucking cliff. I stroked him faster and enjoyed the increase in his volume. Sweat slicked our skin, his fingers dug into my ass, and my head fell to his collarbone as I stared down the lengths of our bodies. I drank in the way his muscles tensed and his cock pulsed hard in my fist.

“Fuck, I need you to come, baby,” I managed to say. My balls drew up tight with the scorching heat in my spine. *I was right there.* I needed him right there with me. “Come on, baby. Come for me.”

Those words. They were enough to make him fall apart for me. He came hard, thick ropes of cum coating his stomach. His moans would forever be my undoing.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck,*” I chanted while I came apart at the seams. I buried myself as deep into him as I could, hips flush with his ass as I gave him every last drop I had in me. Panting, I faltered as I lost my bearings, the world spinning with the rush. *And probably the alcohol.* “Fuck me...”

“Give me like half an hour and I will,” Ryder commented with a small chuckle. His hand brushed up my side, sending a cascade of tingles through my body, and I shuddered.

“Smart ass,” I retorted. *But I fucking liked that plan.* I kissed the side of his neck as I eased out of him. Gently, I ordered, “Stay. I’ll get you cleaned up.”

I pressed featherlight kisses to his chest and down his sternum before sweeping my tongue over his cum as it collected on his stomach.

“Damnit, Gray,” he let out, my name getting lost in a groan and making me grin. *That got him every time.* I nipped his hip before heading to the bathroom. I took my time cleaning up, letting the sink water warm up. The old motel had shit for water and I wasn’t about to use cold water to take care of Ryder. For as much as I loved fucking him into satisfaction, I thoroughly enjoyed taking care of him afterward. *God, if twenty-year-old me could fucking see me now.* I was borderline domesticated and shit.

I showered him with an obscene amount of kisses as I wiped him down with a warm washcloth. The blush and stupid smile it incited wrapped tight around my heart. He was so damn adorable like this, and I loved it.

“That’s a fair enough send-off to Wichita, right?” I asked as I crawled into bed with him. I wrapped myself around him, instantly clinging to him as I settled my head over his chest. The steady thrumming of his heart was music in my ears. His fingers brushed up and down my spine, and I wiggled closer, fusing myself to him as much as I could. “We can just go ahead and add that one to the map.”

“You and your fucking map.”

“If I’m goin’ to road trip across the fuckin’ states with you, I’m goin’ to fuck my way through every goddamn state with you,” I retorted with a sleepy smile.

“And how many have we—”

“Thirty-seven,” I answered so quickly that I cut him off. His body shook with his deep laughter. “Hawaii and Alaska are goin’ to be a challenge considerin’ location and all that, but you up for it?”

“If you do your job right, I’ll be up for it,” Ryder said. It took me a solid thirty seconds to realize there was a pun in there, but when I did, I chuckled.

“Done deal, baby,” I whispered. I kissed his chest and dragged the sheet up around us. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow

mornin' we'll get waffles, figure out where we're goin' next,
and hit the road."

"Make it pancakes and you got a deal."

"For you, anything, baby."

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To all the superheroes in my life... thank you for building me up, keeping me going, and keeping me sane as I went down this wild road.

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I love each and every one of you.

About the Author

Thank you for reading *The Wayward Sons & The Wichita Werewolf*. Ryder and Gray have a special little place in my heart with their passionate romance and wild shenanigans. I hope you enjoyed their story. There will be more novellas coming next year following their wild adventures.

I'd love to connect with you on social media. I can be found on Instagram @awinchesterauthor

I also have a Facebook VIP group as well: Wanderlust Haven: A. Winchester's Reader group, which is a great place to grow and connect with me on future projects.

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