



Then, Earth  
Swallowed  
Ocean

a dark romance by

Shiloh Gloane

# Then, Earth Swallowed Ocean

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Shiloh Sloane

*For the people who are afraid of the dark, but still close their  
eyes and wait for dreams.*

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Ballad of a Law Abiding Sophisticate - Colter Wall

Let the Rain Come Down - Brent Cobb

The Devil Wears a Suit and Tie - Colter Wall

Bringing' Home the Rain - The Builders and The Butchers

Oh Wee - The Wanton Bishops

Death Grip - Morosity

Will There Be Enough Water? - The Dead Weather

Living on the Sand - Colter Wall

Girl from the North Country - Bob Dylan & Johnny Cash

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Georgia Law Man - Poor Mans Poison

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## Before Entering This Book

This story might fuck you up. If you'd like to prepare for that, a list of CWs is available [here](#) as well as on my Linktree.



## Prologue: Death

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The first time Ridge turned, it broke him.  
He was young.

Old enough to know what his desires meant, but young enough to misunderstand the context that such things fell into. He was hungry, so what did it matter who he was hungry for?

At first, he spent a lot of time wondering whether things would be different if his brother had been there to guide him. But there was a war happening overseas. One with a good and a bad side, and how often was that so clear? A Great War, a World War. How marvelous and destructive this war must have been, to steal all that was left of his family.

Wright had raised Ridge, and as he slowly unraveled he wondered why he would leave him unfinished. Why his brother with his low voice and aged wisdom would abandon him for the army. So, he would be marvelous and destructive, too. In death, or in whatever was happening to him as he bent and broke on the forest floor that night in late August, when the air was so thick he couldn't hear himself scream.

The first time Ridge turned, he felt like his insides were clenching,

Spiraling,

Wrapping like a scarf caught in a fan.

Around his spine.

Again and again

Until he found himself on all fours, head bowed down to the Earth like a pagan at prayer. He curled into himself and then he fell to his side and swore that he was dying.

His skin split away from his back. It peeled, worse than a paper cut, worse than that time he stepped on a nail and it went through his foot. Then, he had also been alone. No older than seven, tow-headed and lichen-eyed, he pulled the nail out and saw steel drenched in blood and felt hungry.

The pain split down his shoulders, up his neck, down his thighs, until his skin was gone. On the forest floor in front of him it sat in its burst, summer-tanned glory. He thought for a moment of the dress his homecoming date had worn and how it looked crumpled on the rug in his bedroom. Only fifteen, he knew sex locked tongues with violence.

His skin was in the dirt, and nothing had ever looked more delicious. When he first sunk his teeth in, he realized they were not his teeth. They were sharp, greedy canines. Predator teeth. *Monster* teeth.

He devoured himself bite by bite. Licking his furred muzzle. Snapping his ferocious, bone-shattering jaw.

He'd learn later that other people tasted even sweeter.

# Chapter 1

## *Don't. Fucking. Run.*

**S**adie wakes on the root-knotted, muddy shore of the river, dizzy and nauseous as if she's been jostled from a fever dream. The Tennessee and its sweet water lap at her toes. Out here, even on their small spot of farmland there's not a neighbor around for a mile on either side. She breathes in the sticky, heavy heat of the summer afternoon and lets her head settle back in the moss.

It was only a nightmare. The yelling, the fire, the gunshot, the grief. She smells the ghost of metallic dust and smoke in her nose and she closes her eyes once more. The Appalachian dirt does little to cushion her weary head from the pebbles and rocks that line this shore, but she's grown up napping on the banks. She's used to waking to the sting of mosquitoes landing on her neck or the close-by call of hawks sighting mice as they skitter through the bark-covered veins of the forest floor.

All around her, the wind shifts the hanging kudzu in waves. She imagines an ocean she's never seen outside of movies. Churning. Breathing. And for a minute, she is infatuated with the gigantic, violent beast that is nature. This is peace. This is the end of waiting.

A rotted creaking shatters her stillness.

It's the swing.

Her swing.

Long ago when her mama was still alive, her papa had strung a long rope from the top of the maple tree down over

the water. They'd swing from the bank halfway across the river and let themselves fall into the water below. Squealing. Good screams. Laughter between them had been easy, loud enough for her mama to tell them both to hush. Those days were good days.

She hasn't heard that swing in a long time.

She lifts her aching head only enough to look at the hanging, knotted rope.

It's tied a little differently.

Wrapped around his neck like that.

A man is hanging there, except for he isn't a man. All her life, he's been more God than anyone she hears about in church. He brought her into this world in the living room, guided her out of her mother's womb. Her blood is half his, the sparkling part, the part that feels restless when sitting still and the part that makes stories in her mind for all the places she'll go. But his hands, the same that brought her crying into the light twenty-three years ago, now build prisons and darken skin. He has made a hell for her, so he is not a man.

But he is hanging.

Her papa in all of his mighty strength hangs like a doll from the kudzu-drenched maple tree. She is so, so dizzy that she has to blink a few times to be sure it's him. The ringing in her ears feels like a thousand cicadas grinding their legs together. Telling her that this vision isn't true. Telling her that her mind, which is so often wrong around him, is lying to her too. She can hardly think, much less walk away. She only knows one thing.

She has to cut him down.

In this dream, there is no ax, no knife, no scissors. Nothing on the shore. Her head throbs with so much pain she thinks she might vomit just to relieve it but she can't. She can't waste a moment of time and her mouth is so dry that her throat clenches when it gags.

This is dire. This is the biggest, most important thing she has ever had to hurry for. Her papa, her only parent, hangs still save for the way the wind moves his body. His face is red and at the same time splotted with red, a monochrome calico cat, a scraped knee.

“Papa,” she murmurs, but her mouth is weak. Each time she moves it, she feels the throbbing in her head. She reaches up to touch her temple and her fingers come back slick with crimson. How did it get there?

Who did this?

She doesn't wait to see. Like she's one of the boys in town recounting stories of the war, she springs to action. She scrambles. Grabs roots and then branches as she pulls herself up the bank. At the top, she stands on shaky legs and looks up at the hill before her. With her forehead pressed to the damp, warm bark of a tree, she bats weakly at a fly that tries to land in her wound. It'll lay eggs, she thinks. They'll hatch in her mind and it'll hurt even more.

What happened to her?

The hill looms before her, unconquerable but still *there*. Still something she must take on, like sleeping with all the lights off as a child. She needs a knife to cut him down. She needs to save what she can.

There's no relief in the way his body sways; some nights, she wondered how bad it would be. If the day he died would feel like V-J Day. If she would take a deep breath like all the country did, ignoring the death for a fractional moment to welcome the promise of peace. It never would be normal, without him. It hardly was when her mother passed. That doesn't matter now. She needs to save him.

She staggers up the hill that now seems taller than an Arkansas pine, then stumbles down on shaking legs. At the porch, she sees a sprinkle of blood on the ground and a ring of char. Her suitcase lies at the center of the blackened circle. She remembers packing it. Remembers keeping it under her bed,

not knowing if she'd ever leave but wanting it there. It smells like lighter fluid now. Lighter fluid and a burnt future.

Still, she needs that damned knife. She braces herself against a post of the dilapidated porch, stepping over the missing floorboard and pushing open the screen door. The tiny kitchen is sepia toned after sleeping in the sun. She'll get what she needs. She'll cut him down.

*Screech.*

She freezes.

No one lives here except her and her papa, but she hears a noise upstairs. A dragging sound. It's heavy and loud and it rumbles through the base of her spine as it moves. A drag, and then a step. A drag, a step. Like someone has a concrete block for a foot they can't quite lift.

Sadie holds the handle of the knife tighter. She should run now, try to cut her papa down. Try to save him for whatever horrors came upon them that led to this. For whatever is waiting on the top floor, slowly making its way towards her. The ghost. The demon. The home intruder who fell upon such an innocent family in their small farmhouse and tried to take something that didn't belong to them. The hangman who came for her father even though he hasn't been in town in years.

Who did this?

Part of her needs to know, so she stays.

The top stair creaks. The one she had to skip whenever she snuck downstairs. It creaks slow like whoever's there is testing it. Sadie backs against the counter. She feels her breath squeeze from her lungs.

The next stair whispers its alert. From her vantage point in the kitchen, she can see something dark between the white railings. There's still time. She can leave and surely this thing will see her but it won't catch her. She's fast.

Except, it doesn't move anymore.

It waits there, and she waits where she is. Trying to decide whether to run or to fight or wait and see who could have done this to her family. Who could have stolen her only parent, strung him up with the same swing he once built.

“Sadie girl.”

Her papa’s voice.

She clasps her hand over her mouth, pressing in. Stifling her breath. She doesn’t expect this to make her cry but it does because he hasn’t called her that since things were easy and they haven’t been that way for a long time.

“Sweetheart,” he says. “Why don’t you come upstairs? I need to talk to my little girl.”

Tears spill over her hand. She knows what she saw. Her father is dying, hanging by a rope that cinched his throat so tight that even if he did talk again, it wouldn’t sound like this.

“I’m so sorry for what I did,” he says. “The drink hits me so hard these days. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know the gun was loaded-”

“Stop,” Sadie growls, holding the knife out in front of her. “Don’t you dare speak in his voice. It’s *his*.”

The stair creaks again. A dark cloak pools over the railing. She backs away but there’s only the kitchen counter behind her and there’s no retreat without turning her back. She can’t look away. That seems impossible. If she turns away for even a second it will be on her, sprinting, teeth and claws sinking in.

“Did you load the gun, Sadie?” her father’s voice asks. “Did you do this to us?”

And then footsteps slam down the stairs. Fast. Sadie turns and sprints, knocking through the screen door and running as fast as she can outside. She feels her head throb, so pained that her jaw feels like lead-filled jelly with each stride she makes as she bolts away towards the river. She’ll swim away from this thing or she’ll cut her father down and she’ll save them. It has to be a dream. It’s all a dream.



She looks back to see who's chasing her.

But no one is.

At the top of the hill leading to the riverbank, lush weeds and failing crops all around her, she's alone. The wind whispers through all that hanging kudzu, through the dying corn stalks and the rotted wood of the barn. She's heard this sound a thousand times; she should feel safe.

But she's not.

She feels eyes on her, feels the way such a glare prickles the nape of her neck. There's a devil in these woods.

It almost overpowers the way the world spins from this vantage. From the hill that seems too high and the July air that seems too hot, too humid.

She crouches down, hanging her head. Feels her stomach leap and turn inside her. She still holds the knife but her hand is weak. She just has to get to him.

"Need help, Miss?" an unfamiliar voice asks.

She looks up.

Silhouetted against the sun is the dark shadow of a man. Without seeing his details, she knows that he's handsome from the way her skin prickles. When she blinks, when her eyes adjust to the shadow, she breathes a little easier. He looks like someone from her town, dirty from farm work but wearing nice jeans. A crisp white t-shirt. He carries a long rope and for a moment she thinks it's the rope her father hangs from, but it's not that thick. It's a slim rope, attached to something moving. It's a leash.

He holds out his hand to her. She doesn't take it.

"Looking a bit spooked," he says. He's got an accent she can't place outside of knowing it is far from Tennessee. "What are you doing with a kitchen knife out here?"

"I..." Sadie looks down the hill. From where she's crouched, she can see the tree but can't see her father. Lush

green leaves cover everything. "I need to cut him down."

"Cut who down?" the man asks.

"My papa," she murmurs, pressing herself to her feet. The world is blurry all around her. When she reaches for the man, it's like he's too far away. Her hand catches air and she stumbles. "This is our land. You shouldn't be here."

"Apologies," the man says. "Was just passing through."

He pulls the rope, and a loud bleating erupts like a gunshot through the humid air. Sadie follows the sound with her gaze and sees a dark shape. Sees horns. Hooves. It's a goat, but something's wrong with it.

"You've got quite the head wound," the man remarks.

She touches her head again, feels slick blood and pain swirling at her temple. She falters. She wants to sit down, but she forces herself to remember that she can't. If she sits down, if she lets him hang there, she'll lose the only parent she has left. And though he hasn't fit that role for a long time, she's still waiting for the change. She knows it's coming. She knows he'll be back with her, if only she can cut him down.

"Not looking too good," the man says. "Why don't you sit down, rest a little more? I think you need it."

"He's gonna die," she says, pushing forward.

"Hasn't it been difficult? Always fighting for him?" the man asks. "Aren't you so tired being the person keeping the farm going, making sure everything doesn't collapse around you?"

She stills. "I don't know you."

"Now that he's gone, you can see the world," he says. "Go to the ocean like you had planned."

Sadie feels tears well in her eyes again. "I don't want him gone--"

"After all he did to you?" the man asks. "Do all the things he held you back from doing. You can be happy. You're free."

It's good that he's dead."

"I have to cut him down," she whimpers. "I have to save him."

"He's gone, Sadie," the man says. "Let go."

"No," Sadie growls, turning and glaring at him. She snarls, snaps her teeth. She doesn't know who this man is but she won't let him speak to her like this. Like he knows her. "He's going to get better."

"He never would have."

"He's sick."

"He was selfish," the man says. He sits down on the ground, kicks his long legs out in front of him. Leans back on his hands to look at the river. "Now all that's left is what you decide."

The goat pads over and lies next to him. He strokes its coarse black hair.

She was right about the Devil. He's sitting next to her on the hill. She looks back towards the house but there's no figure coming for them because he's already there. The voice of her father, shrouded in the black cloak. He takes many forms, and this one paints himself in the sun's rays. Golden skin, blue eyes, blonde hair.

"What do you mean?" she asks. "What do I have to decide?"

"Where you go next."

"I don't want to go anywhere," she says.

"Then you'll have to give me something," he replies in his calm, low voice.

"I'll never sell my soul to you," she snips. "Especially just to stay here."

He laughs. "It's too late for that trade."

"I never traded anything to you-"

“Raymond shot you,” he interrupts. “And he hung himself from the guilt. That black-hearted man you call your father. He’s gone to my world but you... You’re here. For now.”

“I’m not dead,” she says. She feels her own pulse. Her heart is beating fast and strong.

“Are you not?” the Devil asks.

He gestures forward. She sees a body now. Golden, plump legs and a sprawl of brown hair splayed out amongst the weeds. A flowered dress with a torn hem and a belt at the waist, buttons in the front. A hand-me-down from her mother. It’s her body she’s looking at. Her face is lifeless, her eyes open in shock. Blood seeps from her temple to the ground.

“No!” she screams. She rushes backwards, not wanting to see it. Not wanting to be near her own death. But she bumps into something hard. The Devil is a fortress she can’t break through. She ducks away from him only to see herself. The black goat sits next to her lifeless body on the ground now, licking her outstretched palm.

“Touch your skin,” the Devil tells her.

“No,” she groans.

“Feel how cold you are.”

“Stop it!” she screams, turning around to face him. She aims the knife towards his chest and holds it in front of her as if it can ward him off. As if a simple blade could hurt someone like him. It doesn’t matter. If he plans on taking her, she will make it hurt. “Stop it right now! I’d rather burn than sell my soul to you!”

“I’ve got little use for sweet women,” he says. “You burn like paper down below. Short-lived enjoyment and then ash.”

She catches her breath. She’s *breathing*; he can’t be telling the truth. But she’s seen her body. Seen herself dead on the grass. And her papa is hanging over the river. He wouldn’t do that. He’s stayed alive for this long, stayed her parent even

when she'd damn him just as well as her. He wouldn't leave this world.

Unless...

Hadn't he always said that he'd give his life for her? That even on the worst days, she was the one thing he did right?

Had she loaded the gun? Had he, in a drunken haze?

How often had she thought that he would hurt her so bad it killed her?

She'd packed the suitcase not to live her life, but to save it. And it was too late.

"If you brought someone to me," the Devil says. "I would be so grateful. I'd give you life again."

"I'm not dead," she insists, but she's not sure.

The goat huffs, nudges her corpse with its horns. She swears she feels them against her side.

"Bring me an evil soul," the Devil says. "And I'll let you live. Evil for good. That is what the man upstairs likes best."

She stares at him. Tries to see the parts of him that are just a dream. A nightmare she'll wake up from as long as she doesn't agree to make a deal like this. But he seems so real she could touch him, and she doesn't know how to say no to the Devil. Hardly knows how to say no to anyone.

"What is evil, anyway?" she asks.

"Now that you've seen me, Sadie," he says. "Evil's going to come for you. It'll find you quicker than you can find it. Then, you've just got to shepherd it to me."

"I won't kill someone."

"Take them to the ocean," he says, shrugging. "That's where you want to go, isn't it? Take them to the ocean and pull them under. Then you can have life. Freedom. Everything you've ever wanted."

The goat is licking her hand now. Her hand which shakes as he reaches for it...

Sadie snaps out of her dream and finds herself curled in the bed of her father's cherry red Ford truck. The sun is fading through the fog of the Blue Ridge mountains. It turns the sky above her purple and gray, not like the blood red sunsets she watches over her father's farm. This is a new land, one she's never been to before. That freedom the Devil spoke of sets into her bones like rainy weather. She's got all the money in the coffee tin under the sink, and she's got her papa's keys. She doesn't have much for clothes anymore.

He burned them.

He hanged himself.

She agreed to trade her soul for another's.

It isn't a dream, not really. It's a memory she replays constantly like the only moving picture in a small town drive-in. Every time she closes her eyes, she thinks of it. Maybe for the eternal torment. Maybe as proof that she will wake up. This evening, she gets in the truck. Starts the engine. She's got half a tank left and a vision of the ocean, and maybe she'll make it with an evil soul to trade or maybe she'll just see the waves before the Devil brings her under.

She has a month to do it.

She's already wasted two days.

Today she passed the Tennessee state line for the first time in her life.

In the dark pitch of the woods outside the dilapidated gas station, the orange glow of Ridge's cigarette is the only tell of his presence. He stays outside the circle of light created by the lamppost and the faint half moons of the windows.

This and the small state highway that stretches in either direction are like a second home on nights like these. On nights where hunger whispers sweetly into his ears and trails

its lips down his neck. Asphalt hunting grounds. He lets the scent of gasoline linger in his nose and wonders about the warnings Elam gave him. Could he really blow the place up just flicking the butt of his Newport on the stain the gasoline makes in the cement?

He prefers his flesh raw. But imagine the destruction.

Living through a world war unscathed is a reinforcement of one's durability. Living through a world war as an American, on American soil, makes annihilation akin to victory. Ridge was a wolf when the bombs went off, but he saw the photos. And even afterwards, he heard the world take a sharp breath.

Now, as he inhales the heavy ashen scent of tobacco, he wonders how close it is to the smell of destruction.

If a nuke landed over this part of North Carolina, would he have a moment to let it fill his nose? He imagines taking someone then, digging his teeth into her neck as her pulse hammers hard against his tongue. The sky boiling above them. Fucking her. For no purpose, for no completion, other than soaking in the ultimate fear, the full awareness of her death. No hope. No light. His cock twitches at the thought.

He tosses his cigarette. Watches it spark triumphantly against the gravel before darkening along with the rest of the world. No explosion. His heart rate hasn't risen at all from the threat.

Then, he hears the sound of tires over damp asphalt.

Coming from the endless road, slowing for this stop.

He feels her instantly. Feels her like the bright burst of a torpedo on a distant shore as he waits on a ship destined for obliteration. She's new, not from around here, but he anticipates her arrival like a rare eclipse. He *smells* her before she even opens the door of the cherry red Ford F-Series.

Her scent is honeysuckle, brown butter, salt air. Morning dew and favored sweat. She is an entire world, stepping out of the cab and into the night with confusion lining her sweet

young face. He smiles when he sees her. The second he sees her. Feels his lips spread over his sharp teeth and swallows another lungful of her scent.

Delicious. Suddenly he's starved. Suddenly, he hasn't eaten a proper meal in months. Years. His entire life. It takes all he's got not to rush her now and gorge himself on her blood. But something tells him not to.

Something tells him she's different.

She looks at him.

She *sees* him, he's sure of it, even in the darkness that he's come to call a second home. And the moment she sees through the shadows, a pulse echoes out all around them. He feels it. He thinks it might be her heartbeat, but it might be his because it's moving at the same pace now. That upbeat percussion. His heart pounds like the pulse of prey.

"Hey! Sir!" she calls out. "Do you work here?"

He looks back at the store with its lighted windows, knowing that Elam the clerk will not be there. He never stays when Ridge hunts. Turns his stomach, he says. Though Ridge hasn't thought too much about it, he does run the store on nights like these. He just leaves it unattended when he catches prey.

He should start charging Elam. It'd help his brother and god knows the man needs it.

Ridge nods. "Need to fill up?"

"Yes, please," she says, already ducking her head down. Looking through a coin purse. Across the parking lot, Ridge hears dollars shift and rustle like dried leaves. He hears her stomach growl. There's a drying wound on her temple and blood on her fingers like she's been toying with it. He'd like to lick them. She's sniffing. Congested. No pollen, so she's likely been crying.

"Come inside," he tells her. He wants to see her in the light. He sees clearly in the dark but there's something



different about warm light on warm skin.

She looks at him. For the first time, she recognizes danger. Her skin prickles. Ridge's mouth waters.

"Sure you're hungry," he says. "Hot night. We've got shaved ice."

"I don't have a lot of money," she says.

He knows this from the sound.

"Free with a fill, darlin'," he drawls.

He walks into the light, holds the door open for her even though she hasn't approached him yet. When she sees him well, her skin flushes. Arousal mixes with her heady scent. Predators are beautiful, he knows, and his maker blessed him well. He's strong, tall, carved like marble. No flaws on his skin or in his smooth, brushed-back hair. Large hands and soft lips. He's many kinds of deadly.

"Ain't got boiled peanuts?" the girl quips, walking steadily over to him. He gets the sense that she's mocking his accent, laid on thick to encourage trust. She's not a Northerner. At first, she had a drawl herself. She's got bright hazel eyes and warm freckles, with a bit of plushness to her that pleases Ridge. Softens the muscles that shift beneath her skin. More to devour.

When she passes Ridge, she's more than a foot shorter than him. But her scent?

Her scent could knock him out better than a shotgun. He growls low in his throat when she's close to him but she doesn't seem to notice, biting her lip and purposefully averting her gaze from his. She blushes like a schoolgirl. Pretty, young, vibrant. He'd like to feel her fight with her hummingbird pulse under his broad palms. He'd like to lick the tears from her cheeks.

She approaches the register whilst he's still envisioning the scene. Looks back at him and smiles.

"Do you really work here?" she asks.

That smile. It's no different from what he felt when he first saw her. Impulsive. It's magnetic, and he smiles too. More than he ever does with prey.

"Suppose I do," he says. He stands behind the counter now, presses his palms on the surface and listens to her sharp inhale.

"How much is a gallon of gas?" she asks.

She's quizzing him.

"A dollar," he teases.

She laughs. He leans forward. Nearly snaps his teeth, and how easy would it be? He could lean in and slice her throat open, his teeth a hot knife through her buttery flesh. Spill her taste over the polished wood. Catch some in his mouth. Be wasteful with it.

"If that's the case, I need to find a different gas station," she says. "Was twenty-seven cents at a store not far down the highway?"

"Something brought you here."

She smiles, folding her arms in front of her chest and swaying a bit on her feet.

"Surely it wasn't God," she says. "Not when you look like that."

He can't tell if she's teasing or if she's intuitive, because she's right. As far as he knows it, there's no God.

"What's your name?" he asks her.

"Sadie," she says.

He can taste each letter.

"*Sadie*," he repeats. He must be lascivious with his enunciation because she shivers. "Kiss me and you can have a tank for free."

He surprises himself. He doesn't kiss. Knows damn well if she kisses him he'll bite into her early. But he wants to. He's

famished for her. Wants to devour her for each time she meets his gaze.

“What kind of girl do you think I am?” she asks. “That I’d kiss a man I just met?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Not any type I’ve met before.”

She laughs nervously. “You are bold, sir.”

Something about the way she says that last word makes his cock twitch.

“You’re very handsome, though,” she says in such a soft voice it’s barely a whisper. He hears most people like they’re yelling but her voice is perfect. Like waves in the ocean. He’s been landlocked for years.

“You’re beautiful,” he says. He’s never meant anything more than those words. Never been so drawn to prey. Looking at her feels like watching a sunset over the blue mountains west of town.

“Oh, my... you’re a wolf,” she says.

He stills. Cocks his head.

“You probably speak to every girl like this,” she continues. “Looking at me like I’m the only person in the world.”

“You are,” he says.

She rolls her eyes.

“Do you see anyone else?” he asks her.

Looking around, her isolation sets in. Prickles goosebumps across her skin. That, and the blush that creeps warm up her neck is turning him animal faster than he can hold back. He’s never spoken to prey for this long. He feels the power winding up his spine. Her eyes are lush forests in the dim light of the empty store. He’s getting hard just from this. The conversation. Her hushed voice.

“If I kiss your cheek, will I get the twenty-seven cents deal?” she asks lightly.

“Kiss my hand,” he tells her. Darkness in his voice. In the air between them.

Her pulse races. This is dangerous, and she knows it.

She holds out a trembling hand to take his. He shakes his head once, slowly. Clicks his tongue.

“Not like that,” he says.

His voice is lower. Her breathing grows shallow. Some deep, animal part of her knows he is a predator.

“Elbows on the counter,” he says, bringing his thumb between his teeth.

“Sir-” she protests.

“So you’re looking up at me.” Firm. Final. He splits the skin of his thumb so deep he feels the blood spill from his mouth down his chin. Blood and spit. Drool as his mouth waters for her taste.

She watches him. Swallows. A fatal part of her is hungry now.

When she leans forward, even her modest dress shows the hint of a lush, golden bosom. He wants to see much more of her than that. He’d like her to be nude when he eats her. When he digs his teeth into her sweet flesh.

“Don’t move,” he says.

His hand is bleeding. He hooks his finger and thumb around the top button of her dress. Unbuttons it. Then the next, and the next until he sees the silk of her bra shine in the dim light. He’d like to tear through it; instead, he runs his bloody thumb along the crease it makes in her skin. She’s panting. She’s soft, so fucking soft he can feel the pillow of her flesh against the roof of his mouth and he hasn’t even tasted her yet.

“I’m a virgin,” she whispers.

He growls at the thought of being baptized with her blood. At the thought of being the first and last man to wreck this

woman.

She looks at the door, but he catches her chin. Keeps his knuckles tucked underneath as he tilts her face up to his. Her heart slams against his touch. Her large hazel eyes water. With her freckles, she looks like a baby deer he's discovered in the woods. Curled amongst the flowers she smells like.

"Don't be afraid, little fawn," he soothes, brushing his bloody thumb over her quivering lower lip. "Kiss it."

She's barely breathing. She purses her lips and kisses the pad of his thumb. And while she's terrified, she still holds that scent of arousal. He hears the catch of a whimper in her throat as the blood seeps through the crease of her lips.

"Better than that," he scolds.

Watching him, she slides her lips over his thumb. Sucks gently. Lets her teeth pressure his skin, oh *fuck* he's losing all control. She feels so good like that. *So* good. His skin can taste the sweetness of her tongue, of her spit, of her fear and her desire. He wants that mouth on his cock, now. Needs it even.

And then she bites him.

Hard.

The pain hardly registers compared to the thrill of her challenge. She's running. Fleeing. His little fawn has legs. He lets her get through the doors before he springs over the counter and barrels after her. She's fast for her stature but he's faster than any human could be and her running sends him over the edge. He's feral now. Savage. For her. Running across the misty asphalt on the hot July night. Letting the summer air and the scent of her coat his lungs with a perfect, iridescent sheen.

He's free. He's powerful. Her bright dress rushing ahead is like a comet but he is the darkness it falls into.

This gas station is floating in the middle of the humid Appalachian universe and they are the only living things left.

He lets her catch the driver's side handle before slamming his fist through the window, punching through the glass. Shattering the silence that their breathing and the cicadas allow. She yelps and turns but he sends his other fist through the metal next to her. Feels something vital in the truck burst. Theatrical, he knows. But he wants her terrified. Glass and metal are weak to the strength of his arms. The cuts on his skin will heal in mere hours.

She's pinned like this. He watches the realization dawn in her eyes that he is not human. He's not an enemy she can defeat. Her fear is even more beguiling than her natural scent. He leans in and breathes deep.

"Don't. Fucking. Run," he growls in her ear before nipping it. His teeth are sharp. They pierce through her skin like it's butter and he sucks at the blood that trickles from her lobe, groaning. His hips press into hers. His erection so hard it could burst through his jeans. She's parting her legs for him. Denim and cotton stand between them and nothing else. He'll fuck her before he eats her.

His arm is bleeding. He feels it drip from his wrist down the door of the truck.

It doesn't matter. He can feel the air move around her pulse thrumming, thrumming, thrumming under her jaw. Her eyes brim with tears and she whispers with quivering lips:

"Are you the devil?" she asks.

He rolls his eyes back in his head. Her fucking voice, like this, drills into the nerves of his spine and spills champagne over them.

He reaches his hand from the window, taking glass splinters with him. Pressing against her neck, letting the glass catch on her skin. He feels each tiny shard burst through her skin and all he sees are his teeth digging into her. Abrasive. Abrasive as he pulls the sleeve of her dress down, ready to cut into the soft plumpness of her breast.

"You swore you'd wait," she whispers.

His mouth waters but her words catch him.

“Never met you,” he states. Though now he’s not sure of it. Her scent riles him like nothing ever has.

Now it’s his words that do something to the girl. She presses her hand against his chest, frowning. Feeling. His heart hammers against her hand and he looks down at it because it can’t just be *her* hand, this innocent-looking girl’s hand on him. It can’t just be flesh.

Their hearts beat together.

His slams into the muscle of his chest.

Reaching.

His skin tastes her and it’s enough to make his mouth water, that mix of sweet and salt. Most people are too much of one or the other but this girl is *perfect*.

He’s famished for her and they’ve only just met.

When her eyes meet his again, there’s a spark in them. Damned hope. She pushes herself away, further down the truck towards the bed. When they run, he loses control. It ignites a fire in the back of his skull and now he can *taste* how her blood will splash from her neck to his mouth as he tears into her.

It’s only been a second. He’s on her now, lifting her by her hips like she’s weightless. She might as well be, to him. He spins her and slams her against the truck and her cough as the wind knocks out of her stifles her scream. She’s scrambling. Her arms reaching into the truck bed. Her dress riding up over freckled thighs, her skirt lifting to white cotton panties. He can smell her even stronger now. She’s wet. Arousal and fear leak through the cotton.

“Told you not to fucking run,” he growls, and even though she’s got strong legs his hand spans the back of her thigh. Her skin is hot and soft and she’s fighting but he holds her still. Devours her with his fingertips.

He feels his canines grow long. Hard. Sharp.

He sinks them into the flesh of her thigh.

She screams. They all scream but hers sounds different, tickling at something in the front of his mind that feels darker than lust. He closes his jaws, groaning, so aroused he nearly comes in his jeans. Still, he slips his fingers under the placket of her underwear. Swallows a small bite of her as he sinks them into her heat. She's wet. So fucking wet that as he strokes her walls, her scream turns into a shuddering breath. And she's still moving around up there but she's not trying to escape anymore. He drinks from the wound on her thigh as his hand explores her, as his cells taste all of her fluids. Nearly too delicious to kill.

She sighs like fluttering wings. He unzips his jeans with one hand, not willing to take his other from her. His length throbs for *her*, not just for warmth, not just for another kill. For that sweet fucking brine between her legs. For that fluttering breath. Her blood is in his mouth and in his veins and in his mind and that sound, *fuck*, that *sound*.

If he hadn't decided to eat her, he might give her his name just to hear her say it.

Another bite, this one smaller, at her rear. He licks up her inner thigh and takes her juices from there. Spreads them with his tongue, mixing them with blood. Curling his fingers inside her. She's tight but he adds a third in anyway. He bites her again on her thigh and swallows more flesh. No one has ever tasted like this.

He feels her building, hears it in her breath as he laps at her wounds. That sweet little contraction around his hand. He can taste her on the edge of her pleasure and he rarely cares but he wants to devour it from her. He wants her last dying breath to be a moan.

Under the hazy, moth-flitted light of this gas station, he wants to feel her pulse stop while he pumps into her.

He slides her from the wall of the truck. On shaking legs, she turns to him.



And he hears a crack erupt between them.

Smells the familiar burnt metallic scent of gunfire.

Another crack.

The pain hits after.

His chest. His hip. He wonders if she chose to miss his cock. It would have been an easy target. But the hip and the chest, for a human, would be fatal. She's not a bad shot. She shot to kill.

Too bad she doesn't know him. He's on his back on the cooling midnight asphalt as he watches her limp away. Thinking that she has defeated her attacker. But he's got her scent memorized now.

And he told her not to run.

Wright lies in bed at night staring at the ceiling, waiting for the cracks in the water-damaged paint of the farmhouse to open up and inhale him. He thinks one day they will take the dust of him up with their darkness.

He hasn't slept right since his deployment. Those years deprived him of familiarity. A foreign country. The scent of death, so many bodies, ripe and rich in his nose like freshly tilled earth. Smoke and rubble. He can smell both sadness and fear like they're chemical gasses and he smelled those too. It was enough to disorient the humans he served alongside, so it was more than enough to knock him out. He'd wake not knowing where he was, not knowing which body he'd slept in.

Once, he heard of a man who was trapped in a mine in West Virginia with no light for days. By the end, he didn't know if he was lying down or standing up or sitting. His body didn't exist to him. That was what war was like for Wright.

If his infantry had known what he really was, he was sure that men in suits would stick pins in him. Try to figure out how his cursed genetics could be made into a weapon. He saw

that everywhere. Saw what the Germans did to all those people, smelled the gas and the poisoning of endless bodies. His country didn't kill the men in suits. They asked them how they did it. The unit in Japan that burned prisoners alive just to watch how their bodies melted, no...

He wouldn't let them know of him. Because power was the same in every axis, and that made decisions he couldn't change. That sent him off to war, or at least the repercussions of power did. The knowledge that without the money, he wouldn't have enough to provide for Jess and Harry, and that Ridge needed to finish school so he could make something of himself. He let himself be cannon fodder. Worked hard enough to move up in ranks, though there was no one faster or stronger than him even when he held back. They wanted him fighting. Didn't care what his mind could do.

Why would they care how tormented they made it?

He wondered if there were Jews like him in the camps, or Chinese like him when the Japanese came for their cities. Or Japanese like him in Jerome and Rohwer and out west. If in horrid laboratories somewhere, scientists dissected creatures like him alive. For a creature like him, one who can be destroyed but can't stay dead by most hands?

Endless. Fucking. Torture.

He can smell the burnt flesh. Smell the sweat and filth of so many people housed on top of one another and then starved. Treated worse than the animals in the slaughterhouse near town. Far worse than any livestock he or his neighbors keep. Unspeakable evils. He sees friends blown to pieces. He smells the marrow leaking from their cracked bones. It's in his nature to taste that scent on the roof of his mouth. His mouth waters even as he'd just as soon spit the flavor out.

Then, he smells the dried, years-old blood on the kitchen tile of his own home.

The two scents braid themselves together into a venomous snake that slithers into his nostrils and sinks its fangs into his

mind. Now, he can't smell much without the hint of it. It's a shadow. It exists everywhere, even in the daytime, but at night it's all he sees.

On nights like these, it settles in thick. He stays up and imagines how much worse it would be if they'd discovered what he was. He snuck out of the barracks often those days. At night he lived as a wolf, slaughtering German soldiers in far kinder ways than they did all those Jews in their camps. They didn't taste any different than Americans he'd eaten. Their evil didn't overpower the tang of their fear. Those bastards cried out for their mothers in a tongue not too different from his own.

And then he'd turn into a man again. Brought his folded army uniform from underneath the thick roots of the trees and walked into the barracks with flesh in his teeth. Listen to the lullaby of bombs crashing through the streets.

Those nights, in the rare moments he could sleep, he would look up at the smoky sky and wonder when he, too, would drift up into it. He'd lost anything holding him down a year after his deployment. Any rocks meant to anchor him had burned to ash, and he was weightless.

There wasn't a worse thing for a man to be than weightless.

Not free, but unanchored.

His bed once held two people and now it's weightless too. He and that frame he'd built by hand when he graduated high school have lost their once-honorable purpose. He's lying and listening to the sound of the cicadas screaming outside his open windows when he smells blood.

It's not much, but it's human. Carried in on the breeze with the sound of panting breath. A woman's breath.

He knows.

He knows who's made her his victim, but he doesn't know why she's here. It's a long walk from the gas station to the white farmhouse standing amongst the tall grass and

sunflowers and corn stalks. A long walk through clouds of gnats and skeeters and ghosts that call your name. That beckon you into the woods.

One of those ghosts is his brother.

Still breathing, but halfway dead. His soul rests somewhere on the dark side of the moon.

The woman, she's bleeding and panting and stumbling towards the house. He doesn't rise for her. If Ridge is going to kill her, he doesn't want to see it. He'll have to hear it but his brother can spare him the vision of what it might have looked like all those years ago when it mattered most.

When his absence was as good as a death sentence for all those he held dear, including the sweet boy who became a monster.

Footsteps on the porch. Creaking the gray, rotting wood that wraps around the front of the two story home. If he looks out the window of the master bedroom, he'll see her.

He does not want to see her.

But she doesn't knock.

She turns the doorknob.

Falls into the house. Kicks the door closed. Keeps her foot against it.

There's no one Wright knows who would willingly lock themselves in the home of the Lindal men. So he turns on the light in his bedroom. He rolls his tall body from the handmade bed, and in just his drawers starts downstairs.

He doesn't bring a gun. He wouldn't need one even for a man. Even for a fucking bear. It would take more than a heavy caliber rifle to keep him down so he doesn't need to carry the heft.

At the landing, she's lying with her hands wrapped around her bleeding leg. This woman. This girl. Ridge's latest victim. Her shining brown hair is matted with sweat and leaves but

otherwise spread out underneath her bleeding head on the carpet. Set on a landscape of broad features and freckled skin, her hazel eyes widen in fear when she sees him.

He knows he looks like Ridge. Ridge's body more than his face. Ten years older than his kid brother, with little of his animal nature. But there aren't many men as broad and tall as the Lindals. It's part of their breed.

"I'm not him," Wright says.

She's got tears streaming down her face. She sniffles.

"Please don't kill me," she whispers.

She's beautiful.

"I don't want to die again," she cries.

Soft. Soft cheeks, streaked with blood from a wound at her temple and another at her ear. Soft body, plastered in a filthy dress. She's bleeding from larger wounds on her legs that smell like bite marks, but he doesn't hear Ridge outside.

"Where is he?" Wright asks.

She clasps her hand over her mouth. Stifles a sob. Crawls further away to press her back against the door. Wright makes himself smaller by sitting on the bottom step and folding his hands in front of him like he's praying at church. He notices a gun on the floor. Service weapon from the war before his. Must be her granddad's, or she's got a daddy who served when he was young. She can't be older than twenty-three. Only a couple years younger than Ridge.

"What's your name?" Wright asks.

She has to breathe to speak, he figures. "Sadie."

"You shoot him, Sadie?"

She sobs, nodding.

"Good," Wright says. "Keep breathin'. I've got you."

"Am I going to turn into one of them?" she asks.

"No," Wright says.

Speaking to her feels easy already, as if they've known each other for years.

“What brought you here?” he asks.

“It smelled like home,” she says.

And he doesn't have a clue why anyone would feel that way about the ramshackle house that's falling apart all around him. But he's a man of his word. He'll keep her safe.

They wait by the door like that until daybreak.

## Chapter 2

## *We're not vampires*

**A**fter a night of rain, the town of Orion, North Carolina smells strong enough to dull the scent of humanity. Still it fights with tooth and nail and all the things it builds. Horse stalls. Painted wood. Freshly plowed earth. The exhaust from what few trucks pass by on the highway. Dew on the grass and in the dangling kudzu that clots the trees.

Ridge wakes to the smell.

The sun is so bright and hot already that his clotted blood feels like glue sticking his back to the drying asphalt. Then, he feels an abrasive rush of water. He growls. He's on his feet swiftly, angry enough to rip someone's head off and hungry enough not to care who it belongs to.

That's when he sees his brother with the hose. His brother and Elam Chandler, the owner of the gas station, laughing like maniacs as they lean on each other. They served together years ago.

"Rough night, boy?" Wright calls out.

"Lookin' like a kid after his first time drinkin'," Elam adds. "Hardly as fearsome like that, Ridge!"

Ridge yells or barks at them. He can hardly hear himself think over the water.

He smooths his large hands over his face and the events of the night come back to him. That girl, whose scent lingers all over this place despite the heady smell of gasoline and the cold



rush of the hose on his chest and the rain that poured last night. He's never experienced anything like her before. His stomach growls. Those few tastes he managed were the first hit of the first drug that ever worked for him. He wants more. Craves and needs more. Now.

The hose quiets the screaming in his mind but that is pounding loud, loud, loud on the door of his waking consciousness. He storms towards the market and his brother lets up on the hose.

"No, no, Ridge, don't go draggin' all that water in there!" Elam calls out.

Ridge ignores him, pushing through the door and finding the meat locker before he can hear the bells herald the other two men inside. He takes out a pack of venison and bites into it cold. Bland. Lifeless. But enough to soothe his growling stomach.

"You'll be paying for that," Elam says.

Ridge smiles at him, licking the clotted blood from his teeth.

"I fell in love last night, Elam," he says, rolling back his shoulders. He knows how much broader and taller he is than the man, likes seeing the way even his size scares him. "Hunt more; prepare for the wedding."

"That so?" Wright asks. The bitterness in his voice compliments the bland meat well.

"Yes, brother," Ridge growls.

Ridge polishes off the first packet. The blood is a rust-colored waterfall down his neck. He grabs another. Recognizes for this passing moment that it's odd for Elam to see him like this. There's a distance between the reality of the Lindals and what Elam sees.

His deal with the gas station owner is the same as his brother's: no killing anyone who lives within a twenty mile radius of town, and he can have his share of the unfortunate

few passing through on the state highway. Elam's family tree, then, is safe.

Though his daughter makes eyes at Ridge whenever she's in the store with him. Doubtful her father told her what he is. Doubtful still, as she grows more appetizing with each passing year. Elam would do well to send the sweet thing off to a prep school instead of letting her wander the streets where someone might snatch her up.

Where someone might eat her, soft belly first, as she screams in a voice not much changed since childhood.

"Heard the gunshots," Elam says.

"She get you good before it healed?" Wright asks, fishing two dollars from his pocket and passing them to Elam. Wright is a good man. A war veteran. Not a menace, but a town hero. Wright kills *wicked* men. Not his brother, but the ones he can stomach.

"Oh, she's got me," Ridge says.

"Who?" Elam asks. A hint of fear in his questioning. Maybe he *has* seen the way his daughter looks at Ridge.

"The moon," Ridge tells him.

If he cared to quell Elam's fears, Ridge would tell him that his daughter is too young for him. Girls that age fear shadows. There'd be nothing special about her screams. Nothing like the woman's from the night before. Her fluttering fucking *breath*.

He'll hunt her down. He'll tear out her lungs and steal her dying whispers. He bets they'd taste like cotton candy used to.

"Might as well be," Ridge continues, tossing the empty packet to the floor and licking his fingers. He tilts his face back and breathes deep. "She's got me *howling*."

He follows her scent, leaping up into a crouch on the desk next to the cash register. He howls loud enough for anyone driving by to hear. A wolf's howl. It prickles the skin on the back of Elam's neck, makes the man sweat a bit. Even his brother perks at their shared call.

Hooking his elbows over his knees, Ridge looks out at the store. All dusty wood floors and dustier shelves, the dirt of which is displaced with every new shipment of canned goods and local produce. Their corn lines the shelves too, so it smells like their land. And her arousal. Her fear. The memory of her lips around his thumb.

“Her scent,” he says, leaping off and waving his hand past his brother’s face. “Is nearly as delicious as her flesh. But that, brother, might make you reconsider your morals.”

He stands in the doorway, looking out at the bright morning.

“Won’t rush to reconsider,” Wright says.

“That’s her truck,” Ridge says, tapping his finger on the glass. It leaves a bloody print.

“Noticed,” Wright says. “Know what that’ll cost to fix?”

Ridge smiles. “I couldn’t let her get far.”

He storms through the doors. The light is instantly blinding. He’s hungover from want.

“Hunt with me,” Ridge tells him. He takes long strides towards the truck, towards the densest portion of her scent.

“Or let fate tell you to cease your wickedness,” Wright says smartly.

Ridge laughs. “What fun would that be?”

“Higher power intervened last night.”

“I am the highest power in this fucking town,” Ridge says, reaching through the shattered truck window to unlock the door. “As long as you hold yourself back.”

“Yeah.”

Ridge looks at his brother, really takes him in. The years have aged him like they shouldn’t. Their kind stops aging when they mate. But he stopped and started again, rapidly, and now he looks like the spitting image of the father Ridge hasn’t

seen since he was a child. Stern. There are lines around his eyes and mouth now. He's losing his power.

Never mind why.

Fuck *why*. Damn it to hell with the rest of them.

"*Yeah*," Ridge repeats.

"Don't want you in the house for a few days."

Ridge scoffs. Any excitement he's felt from his brother acting like his old self with his army friend fades quickly. He feels the dark clouds the man carries settle over both of them. "That right?"

Wright nods once. "Got a woman of my own I'd like to spend some time with."

This should be something to celebrate. Wright hasn't taken a woman in months, and while he sends his brother out of the home each time, the lightening of his posture is worth it. To know that him losing his mate didn't kill some urges innate to man and beast. Even so, the dark clouds hang. And the days that Wright does kick him out, Ridge can smell pussy on his brother like cologne. Not today.

There's something Wright isn't telling him.

Ridge leans in and sniffs his brother's collar. He smells the girl from last night, but no more than he does everywhere else near the truck. Maybe her scent lives in his nose now. Maybe it poisoned his brain.

"What do you smell, boy?" Wright asks.

"She's all I fucking smell," Ridge groans.

"Let her live then."

Ridge bares his teeth on instinct, but he palms the driver's seat. With his hand, he tastes her sweat where it remains against the leather. Wipes his hand on his jeans when he tastes another man's. Her father's, most likely. Did she steal the truck?

Oh, he'd like that. Suits his rebel heart.

"I'll let her live as I devour her," Ridge tells him. "Let the blood flow. Let fear eat first."

He swears, Wright looks like he could kill him.

Ridge smiles. It's good to see the man has got some fight in him.

Days pass at the Lindal house with Sadie never speaking of what happened in Tennessee. She spends her time helping Wright in the yard. He's harvesting corn, one of her papa's crops. She scouts portions of the land that may be good for strawberries, tomatoes, potatoes. Apple trees. It's good land, but she's not sure Wright knows much about farming. He was a soldier. Tells her his parents left when he was young.

He tells her scattered pieces of his life that she picks up like a foraging squirrel but he doesn't tell her much about his brother past his name and the fact that Ridge will kill her if he sees her again. That's why she's staying there. Until Ridge gets it out of his head to want her, he'll hunt her like a rabid, starved animal. There's no use fixing her truck when he's got the scent of that too. Even working in the garden poses a risk to Sadie but she can't stay cooped up inside for long. It's a godsend that it rains as much as it does out here.

The rain washed away the trail of her scent to the house, says Wright. As long as she stays put, he'll buy the time she needs to leave. And she nods when he says this, but she has no idea where she's going.

To travel to the ocean now seems like a girlish, childish dream. One that fueled her enough to pack the suitcase that set off the dominoes to the end of her world, but a silly notion nonetheless. There's magic in this land, in Wright, in the memories she keeps of Ridge, even.

And she does keep them.

Late at night, when Wright is asleep two doors down, she bends her knee to her chest and feels the indents in the skin where Ridge bit her. She feels what he's taken away from her. Empty pits in her flesh. They've healed so quickly, there must have been something in his spit.

She feels the scars, then feels Ridge's long fingers inside her. Curling. Stroking her walls. His hot breath on her skin. His tongue on her inner thighs.

He's beautiful from what she can remember. Tall and broad like his brother. Towering over her with his lichen-colored eyes like morning dew on a meadow. His nose with its squared tip, the way his cheekbones slice like granite cliffs, he looks so perfect he's almost godlike. Defined lips that look so soft against his razor-sharp teeth. She thinks of his mouth between her legs and then she slips her hand there too. Pictures his tongue instead of her fingers.

She's terrified of him but she thinks of him like this just as much. Surely it's how the Devil wants her to feel. The Devil invades her mind every day out here and lays his head down to sleep with her at night. He feels weighted and dark. Bony in the wrong places as he makes his home between her temples.

Maybe Ridge is the evil she's meant to trade her soul for. If anyone were evil, it would be the man who tried to eat her alive. Why shouldn't she try to drown him? Why shouldn't she tempt him, if it's her scent that has him as riled as Wright implies?

Well, he didn't die when she shot him, for one. But there must be some way to kill them.

Over cereal one morning, she watches Wright. Tries to figure him out. He went to church the day before this one, invited her along. He's a God-fearing man but she knows he's killed people. She sees medals from the war on the mantle and thinks for a long time about how fearful that must be. While she doesn't have much empathy for the Germans, she knows what it's like to face down one of the Lindal men. She thinks he must have been fearful on the battlefield. That they would

have rumored a monster stalking the grounds of no-man's-land, impervious to bullets, who could rip their throats out and devour them whole. Who thirsted for their blood.

She can't picture Wright hurting someone like that. She can picture him hurting someone, though. He has the stature for it and he walks like he's won every battle he's ever fought. But his teeth don't seem nearly as sharp as Ridge's. His smile is warmer. It's crooked. Broadens out his lips and wrinkles his eyes.

There's framed photographs on the mantle of the two boys when they were younger, Ridge a towheaded schoolboy and Wright a gangly young man. Wright still has blonde hair but Ridge's darkened with age. Their eyes are similar. Greens and blues. Supposed to be good luck, those eyes, but she reckons the people who wrote those superstitions never met a man with sharp teeth.

There are photos of Wright with a pretty girl, brown-haired and blue-eyed and pale. There's even one of them looking like a family in a bus station somewhere. Wright in his army uniform, the woman at his side holding an infant. Ridge is a teenager in those photos. Smiling his wolf-like smile, but not cruelly.

Wright must be married. He wears a ring. But the house looks very empty of any woman living in it. Sadie has taken the job on herself since arriving, as a show of thanks and to keep herself busy. Sweeping. Dusting. Organizing the bookshelf of novels that don't seem to have been opened in ages. Most are romance. The woman's, she figures. Under a stack of quilts she finds comic books. Dog-eared and wrinkled from humidity and endless page-flipping.

Those, she tries not to think about. If she does, she imagines they once belonged to Ridge. Evil people don't read, do they?

She supposes Hitler read. He wrote a book that all the Germans read, and he was evil. But he couldn't have read comic books, or he would have known he was the villain.

“How old is Ridge?” she asks Wright over cereal in the morning.

Wright frowns, thinking. “Twenty-five or twenty-six. Don’t know.”

“How don’t you know?” Sadie asks. It seems impossible that anyone could forget the age of their own brother, regardless of how distant they seem. Though there are no recent pictures of the two of them, there had been many from before the war. They’d been happy, once.

“Not sure how old I am. I’m ten years older’n him. Don’t know what year he was born ‘cause our parents weren’t much for tellin’ us things like that.”

“No birthdays?”

Wright smiles to himself. “Said our birthday was the same as Jesus’s.”

Though she senses some tragedy, this makes Sadie laugh. Light. Empathetic. They could probably swap stories about their parents. “I’m twenty three,” she says.

“Thought as much.”

Sadie pauses. Most people ask her why she’s not married by her age, but Wright doesn’t pry. He never pries about anything. Lives off the knowledge that she’s left her father because of his drinking and leaves it at that.

“I’m not married,” Sadie says, testing the waters.

“Mm,” Wright acknowledges.

“Most people ask why.”

“Ain’t most people,” he says. “Neither are you, considering.”

At first she bristles at the statement. “Considering what?”

“You ain’t asked what I would have, in your circumstance.”



Her circumstance could mean a thousand things, most of which he does not know. Her circumstance, to her these days, seems like a spiral of confusion, lust, and dread. The longer she waits here, the less time she has left alive. Suddenly the air feels thick.

“You don’t ask what we are,” Wright clarifies.

“You’re vampires,” Sadie says.

He laughs. “What makes you say that?”

Sadie could have sworn she was right, though the two men could go out in the sunlight and they didn’t sleep in coffins. She figures most myths are rooted in some truth. Two overwhelmingly powerful men could glean that strength from the supernatural, as long as they ate living flesh. Humans, for Ridge. Considering the fresh meat in the fridge, she figured Wright could survive on raw animal flesh. Or chose to.

“He bit into me, but didn’t kill me,” she says. “So I figure he must have done it to drink my blood. And his spit is healing. The wounds he made scarred quickly and he healed the wound at my temple, which he didn’t even cause.”

Wright pauses at this statement. She thinks he means to say something about it; he was the one to bandage her head, after all. Maybe he could have done something to heal it. Didn’t she remember him licking his finger before touching her? Couldn’t there be something to that?

“We’re not vampires,” he says.

“Well, you’re not people.”

“No, Miss.”

“Call me Sadie, won’t you?”

Wright pauses. “Would prefer not.”

“Why?” she asks.

He holds sorrow in the gray of his irises, in the tensing of his jaw. It makes Sadie’s stomach fall. What she thinks is, he

doesn't want to learn her name because he thinks she'll not be around for long. It's a distance he can add to his words.

She presses her lips together. He's told her she can stay for as long as she needs, and she thinks he needs her too. The house looks so much better than it did before. It's starting to look like a home. But of course she can't stay forever; Ridge lives here.

And Ridge will kill her if he sees her again.

"What are you?" she asks.

"Hopin' you'll never see."

"That kind of talk scares me, when I *have* seen him."

Wright shakes his head. "You ain't."

She wants to yell at Wright that she has. That he doesn't know what it was like at that gas station. She saw Ridge's lichen eyes under the golden light as he bit his thumb so hard blood spilled all the way down his chest. He made her drink it. It tasted *good*. His fingers stroked inside of her when he bit her thigh. She felt his growl from the base of her spine all the way up to the top.

"Tell me what it looks like," she says. "Because I think I have seen it. I think you're wrong."

Wright sighs. She knows he doesn't want to answer but she feels that of all people she deserves to know. If Ridge wants to kill her, she should know what to look for.

"Like a wolf," he says. "That's the closest I can think of for what we look like. But when you see a wolf, you know it's a wolf. And you could see us, on all fours, shaggy as hell, sharp teeth, golden eyes... But no matter how many times you tell yourself it's a wolf, you'd know you were lyin'. It just ain't right. Your brain knows it."

"He looked human," Sadie says. "He looked like he does in those pictures."

Wright inches back slightly like he's been slapped.

“We *can* feed without turnin’,” he says. “But if we’re cornered, or if we’re too hungry, it’s instinct.”

“Hungry for what?”

“People,” Wright tells her.

“Lord,” Sadie breathes. “Not you, though? You don’t eat people?”

He doesn’t answer her this time.

She feels her pulse rise like it had with Ridge. Feels cornered again. It brings her back to the moment she woke up on the shore of the river. That feeling of being watched by something greater and more powerful than she can ever hope to be.

“I choose who I kill,” Wright says slowly.

She thinks he must mean to comfort her but it doesn’t work. She imagines he could leap across the table at any moment and attack her.

“Sadie...” Wright starts. “Fuck.”

She doesn’t realize she’s been pushing herself away. Her hands are braced on the table’s edge, her feet firmly planted.

“Last man I killed was days ago,” Wright says. “I ain’t close to hungry, won’t be for another month. And that man was rotten. He set out a few towns over and I could smell his intentions. That he was huntin’ too. Not for food like me but for... It might offend your senses, as a woman.”

“What?” Sadie snaps. She needs to know.

“He was lookin’ to rape someone,” Wright says. “He’d done it before, from the way he moved. From his comfort in it. So I put a stop to that.”

This stills Sadie’s racing mind. Not entirely, but somewhat.

“What can stop you?” she asks.

“Another of our kind.”

“So you could stop Ridge?”

Wright nods. “Pray it’ll never get to that.”

“Why?”

Wright doesn’t answer. She’s overstepped. She averts her gaze downwards, glancing down towards where Wright’s hand holds his coffee mug. The gold ring glints in the dim morning light. He’s left-handed, she notices. Mark of the devil.

“Is Ridge married?” she blurts.

Wright cackles, hitting the table with his fist. The tension and darkness between them dissolves just like that. His laughter is rusty and gritty and contagious. Soon, she smiles too. Watches him wipe his eyes as he catches his breath.

“Now, I know ya ain’t wonderin’ if the wild goddamned animal has got a wife,” he laughs.

“A lot of monsters have wives.”

Wright takes a deep breath. “Suppose that’s true.”

He nods like the words echo past where she can hear them.

She wonders if he kills monsters who have wives. If they are dearly missed when they’re gone, or if it feels like breathing. She misses her papa, even now.

With all she’s endured, she thinks she could have saved them both.

## Chapter 3

## *Look at me when you swallow.*

Wednesday morning, Ridge sees his brother's truck parked outside of the market.

It's no strange sight and at first he thinks nothing of it, but then he's curious.

The past two days have been a blur of the forest and every street in town that he's traveled looking for Sadie. He hunted a deer just because he could, and because he knew no human would satisfy his hunger except for her.

He thinks of her always. Masturbates to the memory of her taste. But she's gotten away. She's gotten away and that very fact might kill him because *no one* escapes. He's never had to wait for anyone, never had to bide his time watching the stars and envisioning the freckles on her skin replacing every constellation.

She's nowhere to be found.

He's avoided his home like a good brother but when he sees Wright's truck parked, he finds himself curious. There's an itching thought in the back of his mind wriggling like an inchworm fallen to a lemon and just as sour. Just as biting.

Could Wright be harboring her?

Could he be *fucking* her? *His* fawn?

He should have questioned the coincidence sooner but it seemed so unlikely. Wright doesn't interfere with him anymore; he gave up on that a long time ago. Relinquished

Ridge to the instincts of their kind. Their father would be proud of Ridge. He'd resent Wright for his cowardice. For the way he so quickly let go of his nature. So in a way, the abandonment lent to a raising that would have better imitated the one he'd got if his parents had stuck around.

That feral, powerful nature.

Ridge opens the driver's side door and breathes deeply. His brother's scent is strong, not in the same way as hers but somewhat comforting. Like home smells after being away from it for too long. He knows this smell, so he's looking for others. What separate fragrances linger over that woody, cinnamon-and-tobacco scent his brother carries?

Where is her honeysuckle and brown-butter smell?

He doesn't catch it lingering anywhere in the cab and he feels disheartened. Even though it would be a betrayal, it would be a fight. It would be *something*, goddamn, a fresh whiff of her and a reminder that Wright still has some fucking wolf in him. It's pathetic, really, how quickly he's turned from his nature. How he's let himself be weak.

Ridge leans back in the truck. He has to push the seat back for his legs. Either he's grown or his brother is shrinking, and he imagines it's the latter. Wright should have been the strong one. He was the soldier, the family man, the vision of a new future for them. Then he fucked off too, and everything changed. All for a memory Ridge racks his brain for and can't find. There's no scent to it.

There's no scent at all, save for his brother's and his own.

No scent, not even that of another woman.

That's what Wright had told him. That's why he pushed him from his own home; he'd said it. Clear as day. *A woman of my own.*

Ridge chews the wording over in his mind. The only woman of Wright's own was Jess, and he'd never refer to any of the airheaded beauties he picks up at bars as *his*. That ownership is reserved for mates. And Jess is gone.

Wright is lying to him.

Is he drinking again? That would be the answer, that he could have the house to himself for days to booze and mourn for all the memories he cherishes like his photographs. His brother, the man with the dark cloud always lingering over his head.

Ridge opens the glove compartment to check for the telltale bottle of Basil Hayden. The same brand Wright taught Ridge to drink on when he was twelve. It marks those days. Ridge can't stand it now because he tastes somberness in the oak.

But it's not the bottle that tumbles into Ridge's searching hand.

It's a gun.

He tastes her on it the moment it touches his fingertips. His little fawn. Her sweet fucking flavor. His stomach growls instantly. It takes a moment for him to recover from how strong her taste hits. Even the faintest whisper.

Even just her fingerprints on the gun she shot him with and the dried sweat from where she held the weapon as she ran away. He breathes deep. He should be angry with Wright but he's too aroused, too joyous in his findings.

"Sadie," he whispers. "Gonna swallow you whole."

Then, the chase begins.

Sadie's washing dishes when the hairs on the back of her neck creep up. She doesn't know how to explain it, has never experienced anything like it before. But she knows the truck rolling up the gravel drive won't be carrying Wright.

It'll be Ridge in the driver's seat.

She just knows.

She sees him before he sees her. Watches him park the truck and unfurl his long body from the driver's seat. The



truck looks too small for him.

Soapy water drips from her hands.

She thinks about running for the fields but knows he'd catch her.

He's fast.

He's fast and he is spellbinding.

He steals her breath with even the look of him at a distance, his beige henley undone and his hair slightly messed. He's taller than she remembers, broad-shouldered and confident. His cheekbones cast shadows over the hollows of his sculpted face. He has a devious beauty. She'd call him menacing if she didn't feel so drawn to him.

She watches him close his eyes. He breathes deep and she knows he can smell her. Even from this distance, she feels his inhale sweep the air away from her skin. She steps gently back from the sink. Looks towards the door.

She can't run.

She's got to get the shotgun from her room.

Without even breathing too loudly, she crouches and pads towards the stairs. The wooden floors of the farmhouse creak gently underneath her and she prays he doesn't hear them. She doesn't hear the door. When she makes it to the stairs, she moves slower. Knows they're noisy. She hears Wright cross them every time.

She prays that her plan works.

If Ridge enters through the front door, he'll see her. But if he enters through the side, the screen door that leads to the small yellow kitchen, she'll be out of sight. Wright often goes through the side door to take his boots off so he doesn't track mud in the house but Ridge doesn't seem like the type of man or... creature... who would care.

She's halfway up the stairs when she hears the side door open and she nearly breathes a sigh of relief. Instead, she uses

the noise of him kicking his shoes off to make it the rest of the way. To the landing. On her hands and knees, she crawls to the bedroom.

But as if she's triggered something, she hears rapid, pounding footsteps. They're running towards the stairs. She yelps, covering her mouth and bolting to the nearest place instinct will take her. She rushes on her tiptoes towards the slatted doors of the closet. They won't do much for cover if he enters the bedroom but she's shaking too much to risk trying the gun.

She feels hanging clothes brush against her back as she shuts herself in. Tries her best not to move them. Not to make a sound. Where is Wright? He should have the truck. Ridge shouldn't be here. She knows even a gun won't stop him...

The door to the bedroom opens.

She hears it creak.

Hears and then sees him stride to the center of the room. The ceilings are higher than the ones in her own home and she imagines it's to make room for him. That's how close his soft-looking brown hair is to grazing the popcorn paint.

Through the slatted door of the closet, she sees him peel off his henley. He's got ivory skin, not as dark as her own. Even in the blue morning light, he seems to glow ethereal. When she glances towards the spot where she knows she shot him, she sees only smooth, unmarked flesh. Flawless as a clear sky. Completely a fantasy.

Broad shoulders and lean, strong arms. All limbs as he brings his large, long-fingered hands to his belt buckle. She watches the lines of him like she is the predator here. The cut of his collarbone, the tendons of his neck, the way his abdomen slices like a valley into the waistband of his jeans. The muscles that tighten over his stomach are enough to make her mouth water.

This man nearly killed her. She doesn't need Wright's confirmation to know that he will again if given the chance.

And so her heart races, pounding against the hollow of her chest. Where is Wright? Why would he leave her vulnerable in the closet like this with a man who can't die but kills like he was created for it?

And then...

Then she sees.

He shucks his jeans unceremoniously from his narrow hips. He's naked now. Strong, long legs. Lines in his thighs where the muscle cuts. A trail of dark hair leads from his navel to his...

Sadie looks away.

The man, Ridge, might be evil incarnate but she feels she still owes him privacy. Even as she looks away, however, she holds the image in her mind. He's erect. Not like anyone else she's seen has been erect. He is massive, the head of his member like a glistening plum as his shaft throbs against his large fist. No, he can't truly be *throbbing*. That must have been a trick of the light.

Without looking, she hears him moan.

She bites her lip. Her heart races all the way to the base of her throat but now it's half from fear and half from thrill. Arousal. She wants to see him. If she moves even a little, he will find her in this closet and tear her limb from limb.

She turns her head anyway. To see. Just for a moment. Just for her own righteous damnation.

He's seated now. On a desk chair that sits in front of a mirror. She can see him pump away at himself and his cock *is* pulsing. She recognizes the rhythm as the one hammering against her own throat as her lips quiver and her mouth waters because he is all things her mama warned her the Devil would be.

Terrifying.

Deadly.

Gorgeous.

Everything about him reminds her of the fear she felt that night. His hand is so large. She remembers what it felt like to have him grab her thigh. His brow is furrowed, his full, red lips parted. She remembers how sharp his teeth were when they bit into her flesh and tore mouthfuls away from her. Still, the sight of those teeth thrills her.

*Thrills* her... does she truly feel this way? Why, knowing each danger, does she want to crawl towards him? Why does she want to know how he *feels* inside of her?

He hunted her here.

He is a dangerous beast.

All that stands between Sadie and a violent death is the slotted closet door and now the small space is hot with her breath and her body. Might he feel it, the way Wright knows where she is without her telling him? Ridge cannot see her, even as she stares at him. Even as he flicks his summer morning eyes up and meets her gaze in the mirror.

Just for a second.

But a second, with him, feels like a lifetime.

He's no longer looking at her when his lips curl so slightly. A devious smile, an evil smile, broken by breath as he strokes himself.

She has to leave. She has to leave but then he'll be sure it's her, and he'll devour her before Wright can stop him. How fast can she run? The other night, he was on her in a second. But maybe he'll be incapacitated. She watches his wrist move faster. He's thrusting his hips gently to meet his hand, and she feels her own drool pooling at her lips.

He groans another soft, low groan.

"Fuck, your *scent*," he growls.

She freezes. He is speaking to her. Quietly, as if to avoid being heard by Wright wherever he has gone off to. Somehow,

she hears him like he has his lips against her ear.

“If I reach my tongue back to my molars I can still taste your flesh there,” he whispers, his voice wavering to the gentle thrusting of his hips. “The scent of your cunt lingers in between the cracks of my fingerprints. Underneath my nails.”

He brushes his thumb over the head of his cock, wiping drops of excitement from his skin. Smearing the mess around as he strokes himself. She tastes him, heady on her tongue.

“I’m going to eat you bite by bite, little fawn,” he breathes. His inhales are jagged. “I’m going to get to your bones while I fuck you, and I’m going to feel your last heartbeat around my cock...”

She clasps her hand over her mouth to hide the whimper that swirls in her throat.

“Yes,” he gasps. “I feel it now. Your hummingbird heart.”

The pulse of his rod matches the pounding in her chest.

“You cower there with your drenched cotton panties...”

He groans and spills onto his taut abdomen, painting himself slick and glistening like oil on skin. She feels it hot and wet as if against her own flesh. Summer rain or fresh blood. He keeps stroking, his mouth open to his panting breath; even he is surprised at the flood of it.

When he’s finished, his head falls back. Eyes towards the ceiling instead of her. Lips parted in satisfied pleasure. Droplets of cum drip down the valleys of his taut abdomen as he grips his still-hard cock.

“You’ll still be warm when I come inside of you,” he says, scooping his pleasure from his skin into his cupped palm. “And then I’ll eat what’s left.”

He stands and turns towards the closet.

Even as he spoke to her, she held some doubt that he’d know where she was. But now that he faces her again, now that it’s not just his reflection that she’s seeing, a chill sets

back into her spine. He's so tall that from her angle she imagines his head could graze the ceiling of the farmhouse. His cupped hand could crush her skull.

She backs away. Only clothing and the wall of the closet. No escape. The hangers slide. Metal against metal. Loud. Kneeling like she is, she feels each step he makes echo from the hardwood floor through her hips. Creaking her bones. Why won't her body listen when she tells it to run?

He tears open the door, his gaze darkening. Her heat rushing towards his chill. A yelp springing from her lips.

"Until then," he says, holding out his cupped hand to her. "Drink."

She looks up at him. His full lips part again. The rest of him remains lithe, coiled to attack. Anyone else, if nude, would look vulnerable. Anyone else doesn't look like him. His body is a weapon, faster than any human and stronger than the metal of her father's truck. His teeth slice through flesh like a knife through butter.

"Please don't kill me," she whispers.

His brow softens but his eyes remain fiery. "Look at me when you swallow."

He won't promise her something that counters his desires. But the threat is specific. He'll kill her, some time. If she doesn't listen, he'll kill her right now.

She leans forward, pursing her lips around the mess in his hand. She takes a sip, expecting bitterness. There is nothing bitter. It is like nectar, both sweet and salted. Almost like kettle corn, but richer. She craves it immediately, drinking from his hand and licking everything that remains.

All as she keeps her eyes on him.

All as he falls deeper into hunger.

When she's finished, she wants more. His cock is at eye level with her. Still erect, but no longer pulsing. A drop of excitement pools at his tip.

“Kiss it clean, little fawn,” he tells her. “Lick the rope of your noose.”

Her mind is on fire. Her whole body trembles. But she obeys. She licks the droplet from him and savors it. Swirls her tongue over him. His eyes are no longer lichen-colored, but instead a dark teal sea. Storming. He tangles his fingers in her hair and grips tight and she feels the pain of splitting at the root.

She needs this.

She opens her mouth to him and he thrusts mercilessly inside, impaling her throat so quickly she chokes. She’s sure she’d vomit if he ever withdrew; he’s stuck to the hilt. Thrusting in the depths of her throat. Never withdrawing. Just moving within her. She can’t breathe. He’ll kill her like this.

Why, then, does she slip her hand between her thighs?

He groans and she sees black spots in her vision but rides her hand anyway. Her body is electric for him. Her skin thrums with lightning. She’s dying. She’s dying and she doesn’t care. She’s dying and all that she would have to do to save her soul is slipping away as he annihilates her.

The door bursts open.

She ignores it, so desperate is her hunger for his taste. Just another drop, as her throat rubs raw around his thrusting member. She knows her teeth nick him; they must with his girth. But nothing, not pain or the open door or the precipice of death stops them.

“She can’t breathe.”

Wright’s voice, or it must be, because Ridge isn’t speaking. She can feel his length pulse, pulse, pulse with her weakening heartbeat. He’s panting. Taking all the air she would. She’s floating in a mess of pleasure and a soft voice of fear that this will be the end.

A gunshot explodes behind her. She knows the sound and its proximity well by now.

Ridge's hips still. His hand that grips her hair pulls her off of his rod and she rasps for air. Coughing, or attempting to. She still can't breathe. If Ridge weren't holding her up, she'd collapse into herself.

The taut ivory skin before her drips with blood now, curling into the line of his pelvis and to the trim, dark hair above his shaft. He guides her face towards it. Messes her lips with his blood. The taste is the same as his cum. If she could swallow, she'd drink every crimson drop.

When she tilts her gaze up towards him, she sees he isn't looking at the fresh gunshot wound on his shoulder or even his brother. He's staring dark-eyed and starving at her. The edges of him are blurring but *that*, she sees crystal clear.

Someone pulls her away.

She thinks her throat is broken. Hurting. She's desperate for air. The further she is from his taste, the more it dawns on her how close she is to death. She's being pulled against a clothed chest now. A warm hand against her neck. Stroking her. Too gentle to be Ridge. Her eyes water but then she's breathing again. Not nearly as much as she'd like to. Soft pants.

"Go. Eat someone else," Wright says above her. His voice is colder than she's ever heard it. He must be speaking to Ridge. "Family meeting, tonight. Get out of my house until then or I'll keep you on the fucking streets."

Blinking, Sadie looks at Ridge like the reaching fires of her fall to hell. For a moment she wants him to linger. She hears a growl in his throat. He's angry, so angry, as his brother holds her. It radiates off of him like heat waves over pavement and it's hot enough to burn her tender skin.

"Don't touch her," he tells Wright. A warning more leaden than the bullet from Wright's gun. The wound on Ridge's shoulder bleeds steadily, but he doesn't look hurt. He doesn't look at anything but her.

"Jesus Christ, she can hardly stand," Wright objects.



But there's something unspoken between the two of them. It prickles the nerves in Sadie's spine. He guides her to the bed where she sits and catches her breath. Slipping the pistol in his waistband, he crosses his arms in front of his broad chest. He's the only creature she knows with Ridge's size and strength but she wonders how that could ever be enough to keep him from her. How anything could.

Ridge smiles. It's a warm, beautiful thing as it lights his lips.

Still, she knows how sharp his teeth are.

Keeping his gaze set on her, he sinks two fingers into the wound on his shoulder. The girth of them widens the small circle. She feels him penetrate the red parts of her. Aches for it to be true, even as crimson streams down his chest.

Then, above his heart, he writes her name in his blood.

A declaration.

A threat.

When he turns, he'll devour the letters on his skin.

Wright has seen his brother kill, but he's never quite seen the look in his eyes that he gave Sadie. Long after Ridge leaves, he thinks about what this might mean.

What he's gathered from personal experience and family stories from when his pa was still acting like a father said that creatures like him, like *wolves*, mate for life. They don't choose their pairings. For each of the men who are wolves, there is a human woman bound to them by fate and blood. Once they find one another, it is impossible to keep them apart. They crave everything about the other. Scent, touch, warmth, sound.

It could be beautiful. His parents had loved each other; he'd seen that. Their love had a physicality that isolated the Lindals even though they were married, even though they went to church with the others and his pa held a job. He hadn't

wanted that isolation for himself. It was *important* to avoid that when he married Jess. He'd loved her. Dearly. Irreparably. But he was better at playing innocent.

He met Jess on his first day of school. She was three years older than him. Without knowing much about mates or why he was so drawn to her, he befriended her the only way a six-year-old boy knows how: aggressively annoying her at every opportunity. He got his knuckles struck often by their teacher, but something must have stuck because within a week Jess was his friend. She felt their bond too.

They lived a mile and a half away from each other and would meet along the creek that ran between that land. His childhood is flooded with memories of her, the sound of joyful shrieking, the scent of mud on warm skin. He could still see her hands catching frogs and butterflies in memories where his hands were smaller too. And then, she was there when Ridge was born. They escaped the groans of his mother's labor playing in the rafters of the barn. Even now, he smells hay. Sun-baked wood. Bones of a structure that has now gone to hell along with him.

He wouldn't have been the man he is if he hadn't grown up with someone as sweet and vibrant as Jess. If it weren't for her, he would have been made of stone.

One gray morning in spring, he watched her hold his baby brother and he felt something new. In a second, he realized he'd risk everything to keep her in his life. She was barely older than thirteen and he was too young to know what those feelings meant but they rang strong and resonant as church bells. He loved her. Not in the way he loved his brother or his parents and not in the way his pa would encourage him to love someone, with walls and gates and structure.

He loved her like an open field.

She was his first kiss. It was when he was all human, no animalism, nothing feral. They were both safe those days. It wasn't until after he turned for the first time that his pa pulled him out to the barn and told him he could kill her.

Mating is a visceral act. It's letting a part of the animal out, the one that seeks to reproduce, the one relentless drive to build a pack. There aren't many of their kind and there's a reason for that. Even at his weakest, which Wright regrettably acknowledges is *now*, he can bend iron with his hands. Snap bone with his jaw. Cut through muscle with his teeth like biting into melon. He had a tough mother to handle his pa. *Most* women his kind are drawn to are sturdy. Jess wasn't.

Not every mate is a good fit. But every mate is bound until death. There's something deeper in the process than human love, something deeply wound into their biology. They stop aging when they mate. Both human and wolf. Because so many die, it's key to their existence that those who survive have many children. And Wright can fuck and have feelings for as many women as he wants to, but the only woman on the planet he could ever have children with is gone.

Jess is gone.

He loved her. He always loved her, from the age of six on. She was his first kiss, the first woman he slept with... The only woman he would have slept with if fate gave him the choice. The others since are just fucking, not mating. The sensations are different. The connection is bland. A pencil sketch of a sunset.

He'd hoped his brother would never find that. Ridge is a live explosive. Destructive, degrading, feral. Meant to stay as far away from humanity as possible until aging or another wolf kills him. He's rotten. Broken. Evil.

If Sadie is Ridge's mate, it will be the end of the sweet girl's life. Already, he's nearly killed her twice, and that is without even mating with her. There's no way he can control himself in that bond, not like Wright did with Jess. He can't be gentle with her. He'll bite when he should kiss. Choke too hard. Crush her pretty skull in his hand.

But the way he looks at her...

The way Ridge looks at Sadie is the same way Wright's father looked at his mother and the same way he saw himself looking at Jess in their wedding photos. God damn. Because now, she'd better hope she can get far away from Ridge. Otherwise, any man who touches her, god forbid kiss her or make love to her, is as good as dead.

It's in their nature to destroy anything that stands between them and their mates.

He'd seen that fervor in Ridge when he touched Sadie. That immediate bristling. The whisper in his subconscious, *a fight to the death*. Ridge is strong. He's let himself be feral for too long; he's stronger than anyone who lives with humans should be. If Sadie is his mate, anyone who kisses her, anyone who makes love to her, anyone whose scent mixes too well with hers, will be hunted down and killed. Violently. Aggressively.

God help them.

Wright prays that Ridge's desires for Sadie aren't etched in stone. That the sweet girl with flushed cheeks and warm eyes won't be cursed with a man like his brother. But in his core lies the sinking feeling that Ridge would have already killed her if there had been nothing deeper than lust between them.

Wright could have killed him for what he walked in on. He'd known his brother was depraved, but that exceeded his concerns. He would have killed her like that. She would have let him.

Fated mates.

Please, God, no.

Even if he weren't worried for Sadie, he'd be worried for his brother. For what a mistake like that would do to him. Ridge is already far enough from any semblance of a soul. He can't handle losing his mate, even if it is by his own hand.

Wright knows that loss well. He knows the violent severing of that sacred bond.

He closes his eyes and sees Jess on the swing in the backyard, reading a book. Her chestnut curls frayed in the Carolina heat. Sweat glistening on her slender neck. Her lip between her teeth. Deep in focus. Then, she turns her moonlike face up to him. Widens her bright blue eyes ever so slightly. And smiles.

Even the memory of that smile steals the ground beneath his feet.

Now, he thinks of Jess in the ways he tries not to. How his pa had always told him to wait till he was fully grown, so he waited till he was married to be with her. How on their first night together, he treated her like a china doll. So worried that if he let his weight settle over her or kissed her too hard or held her too tight he would break her. Each thrust inside of her had been like pulling nails from a board with his bare hands. He was not built to be gentle, no muscle or tendon in his frame. But she wasn't like him. She was soft and fragile. Breakable as the girl Ridge had already bitten into...

He shakes his head. Dislodges the memory.

Sadie. The poor girl is running from her father and now she's got a darker monster to contend with.

Wright makes her warm tea to soothe her throat and sits with her in the small, humid kitchen, where the fog rolling in from outside makes even the tablecloth damp. She has a blush he can see through her freckles and feel through the cooling air. Her lips are red and wet and he knows she's tasted honey in his brother's blood. He can smell her arousal. Bad signs. Deadly signs.

He won't speak of it.

He won't let the idea settle in her mind.

He won't think of how, only a half hour ago, he saw his brother impale this woman on his cock. How Ridge brushed her lips against the blood on his skin. How he painted her fucking *name* on his chest-

He hears splintering and looks down to see his mug shattered in his hand. Cursing, he tosses the pieces in the sink.

She watches him like she's waiting for something worse than a broken mug. He thinks of her father again. Jesus, he can't kick her out on the street. She'll have nothing. There has to be some way to help her that doesn't result in more degradation. Maybe he'll chain Ridge to a tree outside. It'd take him at least a few hours to break through iron.

"Wright," Sadie rasps, flustered. "I do appreciate your hospitality."

He turns to her, snapping from his reverie. *Go on.*

"I'm mortified that you would see me like that," she admits. She steeples her fingers and ducks her face to her hands, closing her eyes. "I'm not the kind of girl who would do that with a stranger. With anyone! Especially not... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He frowns. "Hm," he acknowledges.

Tears darken her lashes before they drip down her cheeks. She is quiet with her crying, wiping her face before any droplets can splatter onto the tablecloth. She snuffles, though. Sweet and soft like so much of her.

He stifles the thought when it rises, but he likes the look of her in his flannel. He likes the way her supple curves rise underneath it. How it warms the tan of her skin all the way up to her full cheeks and quivering lips. And he knows he'll never find another mate, but he sees her like a man is meant to see a woman. Like she is something beautiful meant to take space in this world.

"There's a woman in the photos with you," Sadie whispers.

Wright stiffens. His wedding photos are on the mantle; of course she'd seen them. As well as those that he took with Jess before his deployment. Their high school graduation photographs. Her holding his son. He has had no guests from out of town. No one to explain himself to.

But Sadie speaks like she knows loss.

“Will I meet her, too?” she asks.

The only easy question she could offer him.

“No,” he says gently.

“She loved you.”

“Yes.”

“She knew who you were?”

Wright nods. He realizes she’s trying to glean some reassurance from this questioning, and god willing it’s not the thought that Ridge could love too. That he could love her. He can’t. He’s gone.

“You seem human to me,” Sadie says. “Not like him.”

“Suppose that’s true.”

He’s weaker. He knows he’s meant to eat more than once a month. In the war, he devoured Germans, a handful every week. But even then he had a difficult time stomaching it. He’s never wanted the curse his brother takes so well to.

“And you loved her?” Sadie asks.

“Yes,” he breathes, but it’s somehow anguished, this simple question.

She watches the air shift between them.

“He’s not like me,” Wright admits. “But that is our family’s doing.”

“In what ways is he not like you?”

Wright pauses. He imagines she should know, and wants to say that he’d never take her on her knees until she couldn’t breathe, as that should be enough. That he’d never wait underneath the lamppost at the gas station and attack an innocent woman just to cure his hunger.

Instead, he starts at the beginning.

“Well,” Wright says. He isn’t sure *how* to begin. In towns like his, even with his family’s circumstance, he rarely has to recount anything. All memories are shared. “My parents fucked off to God knows where when I was old enough to take care of him, so I could blame them for half of it. Haven’t talked to them in... Fifteen years. So Ridge ain’t seen ‘em since he was a kid.”

He watches her sip her tea, watches her wince as it slides down her throat. More honey, he figures. He spoons extra into her mug and she lets him. Smiles politely, not genuinely.

“Things were good for a time,” Wright tells her. “Had me and Jess. Thought he had two people who...”

If he speaks too much like this, he’ll break something else. Wreck the kitchen. Wreck the house. Find his brother and tear him apart for what he did.

He should have, all those years back.

“He was a kid, you know,” he says. “We made sure of that, ‘cause it ain’t no fun tryin’ to raise yourself or acting grown before you have to. But then the war happened, and we needed the money so I went. Four years. Think he turned for the first time a year in. Maybe less, but that was when they stopped picking up the mail. Started getting sent back to me. I had my pa when I first turned. Ridge was fuckin’ feral. And I knew...”

A shiver runs up his spine and he folds his arms in front of his chest. She drinks the tea. He’s pleased to see she likes it. Sweetens out the bitterness that scrapes up his throat with each word.

“I could’a gone home earlier,” he says. “But I knew I wouldn’t find anything I left here. Not the sweet kid who used to climb trees and play fuckin’ baseball and read comics. Surely not the wife who’d be answerin’ my letters if he didn’t, or our... Still, I talked myself into thinking that they’d be waiting for me. That I’d be seeing her and smelling her and making more babies with her, and I wouldn’t want to kill my



own flesh and blood, but... I could'a come back earlier. And I'd have to see it all fresh, but he wouldn't be this way."

He smooths his hand over his mouth. As if wiping away the words could steal the truth of them.

"He turned," he says. "And they were there, and Jess was human and my boy was too young to turn, so... No, I ain't got bodies buried out back or nothin' cuz there was nothin' left of anyone when I came back here."

"*Wright,*" Sadie breathes. She pushes herself out of her seat. Before he can stop her, she's got her arms wrapped around him.

It's enough to make a grown man cry, feeling her warmth surround him like this. She's a sweet thing run away from home and she feels the need to comfort a man who's all but damned her. He can't let her linger. Can't get his scent on her too much.

He can't, but maybe just a moment more. Maybe just the time it takes to brush his hand over her hair and let himself want her. He steps to the side. Forgets to let go of her arm. His flannel feels different with her in it. Smells sweet.

"He had no one," he says. "By the time I went looking for him, he didn't even speak."

He settles back against the wood. There's more he could say to her, about how when he came back from war he spent four months in Raleigh before catching the bus that would take him back home.

How he killed men there who looked something like his brother, which meant they looked something like him. Again and again until he thought he'd lost all feeling.

How when he came back there was nothing of Jess and his son but the blood he never wanted to smell splashed over the cabinets they leaned against. An upturned cereal bowl, a knocked-over high chair, splintered into wood. Rotted by rain and the air seeping in through every open door. All the food Ridge could have eaten instead of them, left to the scavengers.

Molded in the fridge which had long been turned off when the power company didn't get paid any longer.

How still, when he saw that familiar sable wolf in the cottonwood trees he told him never to come back home and Ridge stared back looking like he didn't know what Wright said apart from the voice he said it in. He hadn't been human for a long time. For years, his brother had lived in his wolf form. Impenetrable. Safe, though he hadn't a clue what the man would have been hiding from when the skin beneath his fur was all but bulletproof.

That was when Wright was at his strongest. He should have tried to kill his brother then. He's got no chance at it now. But his strength died with her. He lost every part of himself that felt alive; how could he fight? If Ridge had fucked her, if he'd just hurt her, the challenge would be to cut him down where he stood. But it was all gone. Nothing left.

In a moment Wright loathes his damned self for, he looks at Sadie's neck. At her throbbing pulse underneath her soft jaw. If she were Ridge's mate, all he'd have to do was bite into that spot. Tear out her flesh and her pulse along with it. Her blood would be on the cupboards for Ridge to come back to, and though his brother might have wanted to kill her he'd still feel that emptiness. That complete shelling out. He'd feel as dead as Wright had the second those letters came back to him.

He wants a drink but knows how little good it does him, how it breaks those walls he has carefully built. Makes him an animal. And how can he do that, when it's her father's poison?

"You start out like he did, it ain't a habit you can break," Wright says.

Once, he never would have let himself say those words. But there's no use giving hope when he has long disowned it.

"He's not human anymore," he says. "Just looks it."

Sadie frowns. He thinks she'll object to what he says but after holding herself tight she just whispers something. Barely

above a breath. If he weren't part wolf, he wouldn't have heard it.

"You told him to kill someone else instead of me," she says.

He pretends he doesn't hear her.

Ridge's sharp teeth are filled with the flesh of another. Unsatisfied. Sadie is the only thing he thinks about. He couldn't recall the face of the hitchhiker he offered a ride to. Its flesh tasted bland compared to the way even her scent lingers on his tongue. She coats him like powdered sugar. He feels her throat wrapped around his cock, her sweet forest eyes watering, the skin of her face brightening from the lack of air. Pulled off to the side of the road, he unzips his jeans and strokes himself to nothing but the thought of her face. Comes on his bare chest and cleans himself with an old t-shirt.

He hasn't masturbated much since childhood, hasn't had to. There's always prey to fuck. There's always someone willing.

But the thought of anyone else seems dry to him now. Tasteless, faceless. He wants Sadie. The girl with whose scent has no match anywhere on the fucking planet.

Now, she sits at the kitchen table. Eating noodles and chicken like she doesn't have the taste of his seed on her lips. The peeled wood of the screen door frames her in its warm buttery light, her body wrapped in a white t-shirt far too big for her short frame. The summer heat puts static in her dust-brown hair. Her legs are crossed at the ankles, her toes perched on the yellowed tile floor. She's got dirt on her feet from walking barefoot outside. He wants to bite her soles.

Watching her, he is no different from the caddisflies and moths that hurl their weightless bodies towards the light, wrecking themselves on the metal screen that keeps him from her. He's drawn to her from the base of his spine all the way out. In every direction.

He knocks. She starts. Stares at him with her doe eyes. He doesn't see Wright, but there's another plate across from her and one on the side. A true family dinner.

"A rule for our kind," he says, securing a lie for later. "You've got to let me in."

"What if I don't want to?" she says. She blushes and bites her lip.

As if speaking to the monster outside is bolder than tasting him.

As if his flavor doesn't linger in her throat.

He cocks his head. Is she teasing him? *My, little fawn, you are full of surprises.*

"Then I'll blow the house down," he says. "All around you, so nothing mars your skin but my teeth."

Her teeth release her lip. This game may be nearly impossible to play. Her scent is so strong through the screen, sweet and enticing. He thinks of pancakes on Sunday mornings as a boy, burnt butter on cast iron and songs hummed under breath. It's a sweet image, really, when she's wearing something short enough to bare those legs he dreams of biting into. She's got a bit of weight to her. Thick thighs and a plump ass. A soft neck, golden brown and freckled as it dives into the white shirt. He likes it. Tender flesh.

She stands and walks to the screen door until it's the only thing between them and he can see her, really see her, in the yellow light of the kitchen. He watches the misty cool of the summer night thrum with her racing pulse. Her broad, pink lips tremble.

"Are you scared, my little fawn?" he purrs.

She looks at his teeth. Swallows. Her throat moves with it, heartbeat picking up even faster than before. Those hummingbird wings, oh *yes*, he feels them flutter against his tongue like her breath will when he takes her.

"You *are* scared," Ridge says. "I can smell it on you."

He leans his forehead against the screen. A growl spirals up his throat.

“You’ll kill me,” she says.

“Not yet.” He pauses. “There’s much I’d like to do to you. Killing you is just the last.”

Still, it makes him stiff to think of biting into her inner thigh hard enough to cut the artery. Pinning her legs apart and fucking her until her pulse grows weak. Knowing the last thing she sees will be him.

That’s all he’s wanted from the rest of them. All he’s wanted from anyone. Eat, fuck, sleep. Animal instinct.

Why, then, does he want so much more from her?

Why do her freckled lips make him want to kiss her? He doesn’t kiss but he wants to tease her tongue with his until she’s gasping against his mouth, and he thinks of all this as she’s watching him with her legs squeezed together and her eyes wide with fear.

“I stroked my cock in the truck only thinking of your face,” he says. “The way you look at me like you are now.”

She’s wet. Her nipples are hard peaks underneath that cotton. But she is afraid, very much so.

“Take that shirt off,” he tells her. “Press your body against the screen. Let me taste you through the metal.”

“You’re an evil man, Ridge,” she whispers. But she toys with the hem.

He smiles, pressing his hand to the cold barrier. Tasting her breath with the flat of his palm, he thinks of how small her face looks when it’s next to his hand like this.

“I’m no man, Sadie,” he replies. “Even my skin can taste you.”

She presses her hand against the screen. Against his hand. Her fingers come only halfway up his but all the space they cover hums warm and electric. The girl is barely over five feet

tall. Doesn't look like she has an ounce of killer in her. But he swears when she touches him, she could cut him down. The way her breath catches threatens to throw him into a frenzy.

"Do you feel that?" she asks. All wide-eyed and innocent. Completely devourable.

"It keeps you alive," he tells her.

Her lips part and she jerks her hand to her side like she's been burned.

Ridge's smile broadens. Just as he's about to pounce through the flimsy door and pull her into the darkness with him, he sees Wright's broad frame enter the light of the kitchen.

"Made your favorite meal, brother," Wright says pointedly. "Sadie, he'd ask for it every birthday as a kid."

"Were you sweet then?" she asks quietly.

"You've tasted me," he quips.

Wright is looking at him with a fierce warning, *don't start this now*. It's not enough to quell the urge but it sure gives Sadie some courage. She opens the screen door for Ridge.

"Come in," she says.

He brushes his fingers under her chin when he passes her. Tastes the way the air in the house has made her skin damp and warm. Summer. She tastes like summer, when summer meant more than heat.

He'd like to rip that shirt off of her. Especially when she takes the two empty plates from the dinner table and begins to fill them herself. Damn, he hasn't had a plate fixed for him since he was a kid.

Wright watches her with an amused expression. When he catches Ridge's eye, he smiles. A shared air of *would you look at that* falls between them. There hasn't been a woman in the house since Ridge turned for the first time and the thought sticks a thorn right between his ribs.

When Sadie sets his plate down, he wants to pull the thorn out. He wants to tell her that he's already eaten, which will horrify her and make his brother kick him out of the house. But he plays the long game. He sits across from her and says *thank you*.

"Sadie, do you say grace?" Wright asks when he's sat between the two of them.

The men are each over a foot taller than her, and their limbs make up most of that difference. At the small kitchen table, she is a caged deer.

"I..." Sadie starts, looking down at her plate. Ridge watches her because this is a different kind of flustered than she shows with him. She's got sorrow in her scent. Mourning. "I don't know if I'm the best person to do it right now."

Wright sighs a laugh. "Better than anyone at this table."

"I think God would strike me down," she says.

Ridge reaches for her hand, takes it before she can halt the tremor.

"God," he says. "Thank you for what part you may have played in all this, though I doubt you've got a damn reason for staying around in our neck of the woods. Most with half a mind might be sure you've abandoned this place. And good riddance. But thank you for this meal. Though it has little appeal to me, I think she likes it. Amen."

He waits until Sadie loses the taste of mourning to let her slip away.

"Could be worse," Wright acknowledges.

Ridge smiles. "God's not watching."

He turns his focus to Sadie.

"But if He was, He wouldn't strike you down, Sadie," he says. "You're such a good girl."

"You don't know me that well, Ridge," she says softly.

A growl coils at the base of his throat. "I'd like to."

"Ask me questions, then."

She's challenging him. He doesn't ask questions, but he doesn't keep his prey alive for this long either. He lets silence fall over them as he takes in her face. Thin, arched brows over those hazel eyes. A slightly broad, rounded nose. Those perfect, lightly freckled lips. The more he looks at her, the more he recognizes that he's never seen beauty like hers before. That he read Jess's romance books to relearn language and everything they've described lives in the features of her face.

Wright clears his throat. The silence must be longer than Ridge imagined, but Sadie hasn't looked away from him before now.

"I meant to call us a meetin'," Wright says. "Because what happened today can't by any means happen again."

Ridge ignores him, keeping all his focus on Sadie. "What did you eat for breakfast this morning?"

"I..." Sadie starts.

He takes her hand. Before she can jerk it away, he stills her there. Traces his thumb in circles around her palm. Tastes the meal seeping through her pores. "Toast," he says. "Fresh butter. Raspberry jam. You made the jam. It tastes more like you than the rest."

Her breath hitches. "Not raspberry," she breathes.

"Blackberries," he realizes. "You picked them outside."

Her knees knock together under the table, but she slips her hand away. Takes several large sips of the water in her glass as her hand shakes. It's too late. He can smell her arousal and he wants her, now.

"I won't ask what you ate," she says sharply.

He narrows his eyes at her. "I'm starving."

"You didn't eat?"



“There’s only one thing that can satisfy such feelings,” he says. His voice is low, sneaks up the floor and curls between her legs.

She swallows.

“My little fawn picks blackberries and thinks God will strike her down,” he says, reaching under the table to her knee. He settles his palm over it. Long fingers stretched up her thigh. His thumb curls around her to steady his grip. She’s so fucking delicious. He wants to take a mouthful of her flesh again, damn the dinner, damn anything else. “While the demons roam free.”

Her eyes widen. Dark lashes against flushed skin.

“Alright,” Wright interrupts. “What I mean to say is, it’d be best if you don’t stay here for the time that she’s with us.”

“No,” Ridge says firmly, stroking Sadie’s knee.

“You’re a danger to her,” Wright says.

He can smell just what that danger does to the place between her sweet, lush thighs. His mouth waters. Words are gone to him now. Everything is, save for the way she’s looking at him. He shifts his jaw, feeling everything in his mind darken to the taste of her underneath his hand, to the scent of her all around him.

“We agree it’d be a good thing for you to keep your distance from ‘er,” Wright says.

Ridge imagines flipping the table and diving onto his knees before her. Hoisting her legs over his shoulders and devouring her cunt-first. He licks his lips. She reads every fantasy in his mind and they color her golden cheeks.

“Is that right, my little fawn?” he asks, leaning forward.

He can smell her arousal damp against the cotton between her legs and he wants to eat the fabric. It might tide him over so he can keep her scent around. He’s already hard. In moments, he’ll be palming himself under the table. But all he can think about is the thrum of her pulse against her throat. It

would be sheer ecstasy to cut her jugular, feel it pump in that rhythm as he choked on the life that left her veins.

“Is what right?” she whispers. Fixated. Her nipples pebble into pretty little points against Wright’s white shirt. Ridge won’t eat them. But he’ll take a bite from the flesh of her breast and he’ll lap the blood over those peaks until she comes.

“Do you want me to leave?” he asks, gripping her thigh tighter. Her skin is so soft that when he digs his fingers in he can smell the bruises they make. If it wouldn’t bump the table, he’d reach all the way to that snug warmth between her legs.

She inhales sharply.

“Don’t touch her,” Wright warns.

Ridge ignores him. “Little fawn,” he insists. “Spread your legs when I speak to you.”

She *whimpers*. He’d like to tell his brother to fuck off. He’d like to pull her over this table and thrust deep in her throat again. Instead he pushes her knee until it’s pinned against the wall and he can smell her dripping down to the chair. Yes, he’ll lick the chair too. He’ll scrape the fucking paint off of it.

Sadie braces herself with both elbows on the table. She’s panting.

“Do you wonder what it would be like if I ate your cunt?” Ridge asks. He runs circles with his thumb on her inner knee. She’s shaking under his touch.

“*Ridge*,” Wright warns.

“I’ll only swallow some of the flesh at your thighs,” Ridge growls. “But I’ll nip and suck at your folds and that *sweet* bud in between until the only taste left is my spit and your pleasure like salted fucking caramel on my tongue.”

Her toes curl under the table. He hears them. Her breath is ragged and she is drenched for him.

“Every time you come for me, Sadie,” he adds. “I’ll let you live another day.”

“God damn it, boy!” Wright yells, pushing back his chair. He slams his fist down on the table before grabbing Ridge by the hair and wrenching his face upwards.

Ridge breathes in his scent. And over it? What sweetness lingers against his brother’s familiarity?

Hers.

He nearly turns when the realization hits him, it strikes such an anger within him. That the scent of her body could be on his.

Wright notices instantly. “It’s really her, ain’t it?” he asks in a low voice.

Ridge growls, bares his teeth.

“She was wearin’ my flannel earlier,” Wright tells him, releasing him to slap the back of his head. “Now I’m wearin’ it.”

He sits down abruptly. Shovels a large bite of chicken into his mouth. Speaks through it.

“I’ll speak to you fuckin’ straight, as ya seem to need it,” Wright says. “If I can’t trust you around her, which I sure as shit can’t, I’m keepin’ her by me. Sleepin’ in our old room, then, beds for me and her to sleep separate but I can keep watch. Durin’ the day, I want you with me. Ain’t fixed up the fuckin’ barn in years and I could use a hand. You wanna stay here so badly, give yourself a reason. Don’t talk about threatening her again, I cannot tolerate that in this house, in this...”

*In this room*, is what Ridge knows he’d like to say. The kitchen, where all the dried blood was when Wright came home too late. Wright can’t even get the words out. He doesn’t mind his brother challenging him because that’s what their kind does. But it feels like raw skin to see the man he once

looked up to break over words. Over a memory Ridge doesn't even have.

“Does that sit right with you?” Wright asks.

Ridge murmurs an agreement.

“And Sadie?” Wright asks.

“Yes?”

Her voice is still breathy. It crackles in Ridge's ears. Outweighs the anger he feels at Wright's insistent dominance. Ridge doesn't like games; he likes war. Brutal. Open. Combat. But he'll pretend to be very obedient if it means keeping Sadie in this house with him, her scent and her taste on every surface.

Just waiting for a single moment where he can be alone with her. She's staring at Ridge now like she can feel everything he plans to do already. Her fork makes light, tinny noises on her plate as she traces it. He licks his lips just to watch her lose her breath. Under the table, he curls his hand around her calf. Feels her pulse. Tastes the sweat under her knee.

“Keep the gun on you,” Wright tells her. “Shoot him if he gets too fuckin' close.”

## Chapter 4

## *Drink your dying blood.*

**O**n Sunday morning, Wright asks Sadie if she wants to go to church again. He wants to make her do it, feels justified with his right to when she's living under his roof. It might make her feel better about what happened with Ridge. About whatever kept her from saying grace that night. She'd be right to repent for something if it weighed on her mind like that.

But it's also the first morning they've woken without Ridge outside their door. Without him anywhere in the house, even. He's gone hunting most likely; it's been three days since their dinner when he last ate or seemed to. He knows she's thinking about whoever his brother is eating. She kneads her hands together as she folds the laundry. Keeps twisting a strand of hair around her finger.

"I can't go to church with you, Wright," she says.

"If I'm able to-"

"No," she whispers. "I can't even think right now."

The fact it tears her up like it does is yet another reason to get her out of the house. Let her have some normalcy after all this time with his brother lingering, smelling her air, howling for her late into the night. Still, for Ridge that behavior is tame. He's been more man than wolf lately; without his past, Wright could even mistake him for a valuable contributor. They work together during the day, repairing the barn. Sadie brings them sweet tea. They clear weeds and she plants tomato

seeds and peppers, crops that can fruit before the fall frost or endure it. She'll be gone by then, god willing, but it's nice to see the mark she's made. Even in her short time at the farm, she brightens the place.

At night they sleep in separate twin beds in his and Ridge's old bedroom. She falls asleep later than he does. Reads Jess's books by moonlight. Whimpers a lot. She's fighting some demon in whatever dreams she has.

He doesn't like sharing a room with her. Always, he's interrupted by the thought that it'll trigger something in Ridge that he doesn't have the capacity to fight. Wolves are territorial. He doesn't touch her. He has her wear Ridge's clothes now. He thinks about eating again.

He thinks he might have to.

His presence may deter Ridge from attacking her but if Ridge did, he'd slaughter Wright. He's too strong, been wild for too long, been feasting while Wright restrains his own hunger. There's a power balance between them that's existed since they were younger. Wright is in charge of the home. The alpha, if they are to use the terms Jess once showed him in a textbook.

It's an easy role to maintain when the stakes are simply preserving order, as Ridge has never shown an interest in running the farm. But with Sadie, there's tension. An incoming battle. He can sense it in the space between his skin and his muscles. He knows if she doesn't leave soon, they'll fight one another. Hopefully not to the death.

"You won't mind me leavin' you here?" he asks Sadie as she folds clothes to put away. He got hand-me-downs from a neighbor whose daughter was around Sadie's size, so she has a few dresses now that suit her well.

"You've done it before."

"Yeah," he acknowledges. "Not with... Him knowin'."

She nods. "I will have the shotgun at the ready."

He smiles.

“But...” she starts, biting her lip. “He has been good lately.”

“He has.”

“More human, I think,” she says. Her cheeks flush with the statement and he wonders what he hasn’t seen. It’s not just his brother who might feel the draw of a mate. It’s her, too. She probably only knows what human love is like. Mates are different. A compass that doesn’t point north but pulls all the same. She ended up in this town because of it, he’s convinced.

“More human,” Wright repeats dubiously.

“You say that like you’re calling me a liar,” Sadie says.

Wright sighs a laugh. “I say that like a few days don’t justify the past few years.”

“You don’t believe he’ll change.”

Wright shakes his head.

“That’s tragic, Wright. That’s awful,” Sadie says. “You’re all he has, aren’t you?”

This statement pisses Wright off a bit, knowing what she knows.

“He used to have more,” he says, standing. He moves to leave but stops himself. Pinches the bridge of his nose. He should leave. He should say nothing. He should not react to the anger he feels boiling inside his chest.

“He lost them too, didn’t he?” Sadie asks.

Wright glares at her.

This time, his resistance fails. “He killed what else he had. My family was his too. Don’t think for a *second* he won’t make good on his promise to kill you, because he will. I smell it on him, and I know my brother, so don’t fuckin’ talk to me about what I do or don’t know. This ain’t the same as your fuckin’ father.”



She flinches at this but doesn't back away. Sucks in her lips like she's chewing on a thought.

"I said I'd keep the shotgun on me," she whispers.

"Good to know you have some sense, yet," he snaps.

"My father's dead," she says firmly. "I buried him in my backyard not long ago. By myself, because we have no one else. So I might know something."

He halts.

"You'll miss him," she says. "It doesn't matter how rotten you think he is. Damn you for letting go."

The control's already gone. He's furious with her damning him on the Lord's day when she won't even go to church. He snaps his hand out, grabs her face and squeezes her cheeks like she's a child he's reprimanding for cursing.

It feels like that all the way until he has his hand on her. She's small. Soft. Smells like honeysuckle. Her lips have freckles on them and her eyes do too, deep in the hazel color of her irises. He can taste her. She must know this by now. He tastes her sweat seeping in through the pads of his fingers, forbidden and mouthwatering and wrong.

He loosens his grip. She drapes her hand over his wrist, moving his hand down until it's resting against her neck. Her body is so sweetly plush that he wants to touch more of it but he shouldn't even be holding her at all. If Ridge came home right now, he would kill him. It would be in his blood for the images he's seeing in his mind of Sadie. Of what she looks like without that dress. Of what she'd look like underneath him.

She's just a woman he's let himself know. Maybe that's the entire story of it.

That, and how much he knows she means to Ridge. Even if his brother has no idea of their matehood. Even if she doesn't know. Though, with his hand on her pulse, he imagines there's

very little she can't intuit. He was like that too as a kid, for every stress his father took out on him.

"He loves you," she says softly. "He looks at you like you're his family and that means something, even if you don't believe it."

He won't tell her how sometimes Ridge looks at her like she's sacred. Or how, right now, with his hand on her throat and her eyes trusting he won't squeeze, he feels that same reverence. It won't help anyone. It'll kill her, even.

He lets go of her.

"Take a bath," he says. "Get my scent off of you before he comes back."

With that he leaves. Gets in the truck and drives away from her. He fantasizes about driving away from it all, leaving his brother behind so that he doesn't have to fucking think about him, even. He's too far gone.

Unless he's not.

No, no.

He won't consider it.

If there was any hope left for Ridge, he'd have to face how he failed him and he can't. He doesn't owe him that.

He pulls off to the side of the road under the shade of a sycamore tree. It's too early for service anyway and he needs some time to clear his head. Today isn't as hot as the others from this week. It's cool as if they're in the mountains, with a fresh breeze and dew on all the leaves. The kudzu hanging from the trees sways around him. The forest calls to him, the same as it always has. He's been avoiding this call with denim and cotton on his skin and cooked meat in his mouth. But days like this, it catches him anyway.

It's perfect weather to be free.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he unbuttons his collared shirt and shirks it from his body. Leaves it folded on

the passenger seat along with his belt, his pants, his drawers, and his nice leather boots. He steps out of the truck naked. No one's around for at least half a mile on each side. Everyone's going to church except for the two he lives with.

He'll pray a different way this morning. Doesn't need the preacher to talk to him about forgiveness or about letting God lay judgment. Just needs to sink into the power of the deep, black mud underneath his feet.

He lets the feeling take him.

He lets go.

Sadie is underwater.

She blinks at the way the ripples skew the stains of the bathroom ceiling. If she breathes in like this, the Devil can take her back and she won't have traded a single soul for her own. She'll be done. Free of the guilt she carries whenever she thinks about Ridge.

Because there may not be a single man more deserving of hell than the one who tried to kill her, but she doesn't want to picture a world without him. Eliminating fear doesn't make paradise. She imagines how tragic it would be if there were no lions in the savannah, no sharks in the oceans she dreams of, no bears in the forests.

No wolves in North Carolina.

Bursting back above the surface, she swallows deep lungfuls of air. It would be wrong.

Her deal is rotten.

At least, her deal is rotten if it means losing Ridge. She plunges back under the water and shuts her eyes to the thought. Is she really sweet for this creature? She thinks about him an awful lot. Even more than her agreement with the man on the hill, and she imagines nothing should be more important than that.

She breaks above the surface gently this time, thinking she hears a sound and that it must be her body moving against the porcelain. But it's not.

There is something at the door.

Something huge. She hears it breathe with its big lungs. Sniffing.

Then, a howl erupts.

It cuts through the door like there's nothing between her and the creature. Buzzes in her eardrums. It is enormous in its volume, bone-chilling, animal. Part of her feels like she's heard this sound before but she can't have. The closest she's ever come to a wolf are the dogs in her neighborhood and they are pitiful compared to this. Shallow creatures. With her hand clutched against her bare chest, she feels like she is hearing God speak to her.

The howl continues. Ripples goosebumps up her skin like scorching sun after frigid water. For a moment, she forgets to be afraid. She's so spellbound by the beautiful sound and the draw she feels to the creature past that door.

To the one who seems like he's howling for her.

Then, the door bursts inward. She yelps, pushing herself backwards in the tub. While she doesn't know what she imagined seeing, she couldn't have expected the size of the beast in the doorway.

It looks like what she imagines a wolf to look like. Long, sable fur. Sharp teeth. Claws that tick against the tile floor as it steps closer to her. But its shoulders are taller than the doorknob. It takes up half the width of the door frame with its broadness.

And its eyes.

Its eyes are human.

Not human.

*His.*

“Ridge,” she whispers. She knows it’s him as sure as she knows her own reflection. As sure as she knows he can kill her like this. Maybe, it’s even why he’s there. He’s been patient.

She picks up the shotgun next to her but doesn’t yet aim it in his direction. He bares his teeth at her, growls so low she can hear it in her spine.

“I don’t want to shoot you,” she pleads. “You need to leave.”

He steps closer, lowering his head. She’s seen his teeth when he looks human but these are long, razor sharp points. If he wanted to, he could tear off one of her limbs like this. She’s not sure he won’t.

She aims the gun in his direction.

He leaps into the tub.

She feels his claws cut into her, first her shoulder and then her thigh. Screaming, she levels the muzzle of the gun towards his head. His claws slice through her side, right over her ribs. Pain, so much pain. Sharp. Bold. Electric. She presses the muzzle into his thick fur. Right under his neck as he snaps his teeth at her, as he dips closer. He’s growling and she’s shrieking, so fucking terrified when-

*Bang!*

The sound sets off another scream. She hardly notices it’s hers. His body flies backwards off of her, rolling to the floor as the water settles around. There’s enough blood in the water for everything to be scarlet against the porcelain. She groans, looking at the damage. His claws cut so deep she’ll need stitches. Her skin stings enough to make her eyes water and she presses her hands down tight against her thigh. Watches the blood flow in red clouds through her fingers.

Then she sees what she’s done. There’s blood on the ceiling from where she shot him, splattered like fireworks. Streaking the walls too. The shotgun sits in the tub with her. Probably ruined. Knowing it could be a hazard, she picks it up and sets it on the ground.

But that's where the wolf's body lies.

Motionless.

Wright said a gun wouldn't stop them but the wolf is dead. It is nearly the size of a bear when it's stretched out like this. Eyes now lifeless and still. She shudders. She should feel good. The Devil will take his body as payment for her own. She'll live.

She'll live, but he really is beautiful. His fur sways like a field in the breeze from the open window. Looking soft, while his legs look strong. She shot him right through the neck and it's all dark there now, dark and bloody with vermillion. Pasted to the soft fur.

Even though he would have killed her, she doesn't want him dead. She ignores her own bleeding and presses herself up, leaning over the edge of the tub to touch him there. He'd been so vibrant. She has dreamt about him every night since they met. The way he moves the air around her. The way he has owned her from the start.

She runs her hand over the fluffy fur of his chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, smoothing against the wound. "I'm so sorry, Ridge-"

Something clasps around her wrist. It's slick with blood but she knows the feeling even as she screams in surprise. Ridge's hand reaches from the hole in the wolf's neck. She has the feeling down by memory, knows the spread of his fingers and the iron grip he has. She's screaming, maybe screaming for Wright and maybe just with some animal instinct deep in her brain as Ridge grabs her neck with his other hand and pulls her out of the tub. Underneath him.

His lichen eyes glare down at her from a face so coated with blood it looks like red, shining plastic. She sees the whiteness of his teeth. Human teeth but menacing all the same.

His bloody lips are smiling.

She watches the skin of the wolf fall to pieces around his naked, glistening form. His blood is on her now, all over her. He kneels between her legs as he pressures her neck. She can't scream without breathing so instead she writhes underneath him. Spasming as his blood drips down over her. He'll paint her his color. The color of life.

Then, just as easily, he loosens his grip on her neck. Strokes the skin all the way to her chest where he smears his blood over her breasts. She whimpers in between gasps; she's never had a man touch her like this. He settles his hips against hers and she feels his erection hard on her thigh. Pulsing at the rate of her heart.

On the tile floor, surrounded by blood and shaking with the tremors of fear, she thinks she's been waiting to give this part of herself to the monster who has her pinned. She thinks she has always belonged to him.

All this blood should smell bitter, acrid, and metallic but it doesn't. It smells divine to her. Like campfires and maple syrup. Burnt butter and honeysuckle. Kettle corn and fresh grass. His fingers shift to the four lines he's sliced deep in her thigh. He growls. She feels him throb.

"I'm going to fuck you in our blood, little fawn," he tells her before running his tongue up her cheek. She hasn't noticed she's crying. Doesn't care anymore. She wants him. *Needs* him. This is something bigger than the both of them now.

"Yes, Ridge," she breathes.

"*Fuck*, when you say my name like that," he groans. "You're the only one who knows my fucking name."

Gripping her thigh so hard his fingers dig into the soft flesh of it, he lowers his head and drags his tongue up over the cuts there. She gasps. Where there should be pain, there's only pleasure, even as he sinks his teeth into her thigh. He groans lasciviously. It feels so good she'd arch her back if she didn't think he'd dig deeper. He swirls his tongue over the marks of his claws and stamps a trail of glowing warmth within her.

Without noticing, she grabs his hand. Holds it as he kisses up her stomach to her ribs.

She's healing as he swirls his tongue over her but she'd let him do anything now. It's like every part of him was built to pleasure her. He kisses her breast when he's done with her ribs, sucks gently enough to bring lightning to the point where his tongue meets her skin. That same warm feeling throbs as her nipple stands for him. He leaves her shoulder bleeding or he doesn't notice it, because suddenly he's looking into her eyes again.

Even covered in their blood, he's the most beautiful man she's ever seen.

"You're the only thing that could kill me," he whispers, his fingers tracing her pulse.

Then, wrapping his hand around her neck, he kisses her. Presses his full, soft lips against hers and invites her with him.

She's been kissed before, but never....

Never naked, his warm body flush against hers. His length hard against her hip. His free hand sliding down to cup her breast, toying with her nipple.

Never covered in blood, his and hers, fragrant and heady.

Never like this.

Because anyone else who could hurt her could kiss her, but they wouldn't taste like Ridge and they wouldn't feel like him either. His breath on her lips. His tongue in her mouth. Kissing him is like swimming in sun-warmed water, feeling a cool breeze against her face, but knowing knives grow from the riverbed. She's shocked to find herself diving in. Needing more. Pulling him closer to her.

Each time her tongue or her lips graze his teeth, she feels a nick and there's more blood between the two of them. He squeezes harder, choking her neck, teasing her breasts until she feels wetness drip between her thighs and her breathing



turns to pants and makes it even harder to avoid the blade of his teeth. She's moaning. She's a sinner. A heathen. She can't get enough of him.

He hoists her up like she's weightless. Wraps her legs around his hips and rushes forward until she's up against the sink and he's got her pinned there with his body. His cock is so dangerously close to the space she's never let a man enter. The space between her thighs aches for just that, for not just his terrifyingly large member but the aftermath. Her impurity. Even to be pregnant by his seed spilled inside of her. She knows what this leads to, knows that even if she said no he'd not let her go. He broke in the bathroom door knowing what he'd do to her.

"Ridge," she whispers as he kisses her neck, bites at the skin of it and licks the blood that flows. *God*, he feels so good. Her body is so warm and wanting she can't think of anything but his name. "Ridge."

What will she say? Should she ask him to be gentle? Knowing he never will be. Doubting she wants such a thing. He's grinding against her and she wants him to destroy her in ways she's never felt possible.

But before she can say or speak anything else, his hand is on her neck again. Squeezing. His thumb brushing over the blood that seeps like syrup from her fresh wounds. He draws back enough for her to see that his eyes are evergreen dark and hungry. And then he reaches behind her.

She sees steel glint in the morning light.

A straight razor.

He'll kill her now, like this. She knows it.

"On your inner thigh," he growls, shoving her legs further apart. He slides the blade between them and now she can't move without cutting herself. "You've got an artery from which every drop of blood in your body will bleed if I slice it."

Her heart is pounding. She looks down between them. Her thighs glisten not from water but how aroused he's made her.

He flips the razor so the dull edge is against her and scrapes it up her skin. Collects the wetness of her pleasure.

“Lick the blade, little fawn,” he tells her.

She’s panting. He presses the razor to her lips and she licks the flat edge of it, tasting herself. She tastes him too.

“*Sadie*,” he says in a low voice. He lowers the razor and traces a circle around her left nipple. Watches it harden into a peak as he continues, as he presses lightly with the blade enough to draw just a drop of blood. It pools, reddening the tip. He ducks his head and sucks it off, flicking his tongue over the bud.

Sadie feels the pleasure build hot in her womb. More wetness trickles out of her. She moans lightly. He moves to her right breast.

“I can smell when you come,” he tells her, circling this nipple even more. He uses his free hand to smear the mix of his blood and his spit over her left, plucking and tracing it. Excruciatingly detailed. Gentle when he wants to be. She’s quivering for him. She’s going to come just from this, and then he’ll smell it. “I’m going to devour your cunt with this blade against your sweet inner thigh.”

He digs the blade in above her right nipple and she cries out. She’s so sensitive she feels every drop spill over her breast before he lowers his head and laps against this wound, too. Her back arches to him. She pulls him closer and he bites at the flesh of her breast, drawing more blood. Teasing her in her own slickness until she needs him so much it makes her eyes water.

“*Yes*,” she moans. She’ll let him do anything to her if it feels like this.

“And if you don’t come for me,” he says, sinking to his knees. “I’m going to slice through your flesh and drink your dying blood.”

Ridge keeps the straight razor against the delicate flesh of her inner thigh. He can see the pulse of her artery against the steel but he's not looking at that. He's staring at her sweet, dripping cunt like it's his last meal. For this, he'd take the chair and let it kill him.

Between her legs, beneath a soft thatch of brown fur, are the gates of heaven itself. Her lips are full, frilled in their delicious excess. A sunset of mauve and brown and pink. Her clit is swollen under its hood and his mouth waters for it.

"Each time you come, my little fawn," he says, spreading her wider with his free hand. He slips two long fingers inside of her, curving upwards. She shudders. That *noise* in the back of her throat. "I'll spare your life another day. Do you understand?"

He's already fucking her with his fingers, feeling her quiver for him. He presses the flat edge of the blade further against her inner thigh.

"Answer," he growls.

"Yes," she pants. "Yes, Ridge."

His eyes roll back in ecstasy at the sound of her moaning his name. *Fuck* yes. He's craved this since the moment he caught her scent across the parking lot. Now she's here, bare and in perfect view. Dripping for him. Soaking his hand all the way to his wrist. Her legs shake and he knows she's trying to fight the undoing because his razor makes thin red lines on her skin.

He licks them first and she gasps.

Then, he kisses her cunt. Covers the quivering lips with his mouth.

God.

Fuck.

Yes.

Her taste is *otherworldly*.

He can't think straight. Nearly blacks out, but remembers the razor held precariously against her. She's divine, both in taste and texture. Her lips are slick with her pleasure, with his spit, with her holy taste like the nectar of the gods, like pie crust straight from the oven with sugar and salt on top, like cherry slush on the hottest day of summer, like honey wine, like pancakes sizzled in too much butter and served by a loving hand, like ocean salt after a lifetime on dry land. She's moaning, screaming his name, her cunt pulsing around his fingers, but he hardly registers it because all he can think of is devouring her and drinking more. He fucks her hard with his hand, tasting heaven on the inside with his fingers. His tongue flicks and swirls over her, his mouth sealed around her sucking her in. *This* is a kiss he excels at. He feels more like a worshiper than a God now, but they'll have to pry him off his knees.

"Ridge! Oh, God, Ridge!" she's screaming.

And she spills onto him. Comes around his fingers, in his mouth, down his neck. He buries his face in her. Won't lose a single fucking drop. Her leg that isn't held by the razor is spasming and he can smell more of her blood dripping from her other thigh but he won't stop. Her pleasure is his oxygen now and he'd damn every other thing for one more lick, for one more drop, for the gates to heaven pearled with his spit and her cum.

He feels her peak again, again, again all around him. Never tiring, he grows more alive with each taste. Groaning into her. Suffocating himself between her thighs. She may live another week and that's before he even fucks her but he realizes if anything could ever be better than this it would be sliding his rod inside of her and claiming her for himself. Bathing his shaft in her virgin blood and writing her fate inside of her, that he will be the only man she ever fucks because he is never letting her go after this. He wants so much more than he knew. He wants to do this every day for the rest of his fucking life, for the rest of eternity.

He drops the razor. Kicks it across the floor. He doesn't need it, only her. He's so aroused that his cock is already weeping for her warmth. She's panting, gasping, sobbing or moaning. Tears in her eyes from pleasure. He licks them from her cheeks. Shoves her legs apart and thrusts savagely, brutally inside her-

"Fuck!" he yells over her own shriek.

His vision fizzles. It's ecstasy shooting through his spine now. He feels static electricity on every inch of his skin and all of him, every ounce of energy and every feeling of elation he's ever thought possible is spiraling through his balls, reaching through his cock for her. She's too tight for him. Too snug. Fuck it. He'll split her in two. She's grabbing him, clawing him, biting him. Seeking to destroy every inch of him even as her body shakes with pleasure.

He grabs her ankles and pushes them to the counter by her hips. He's hitting a barrier within her but he'll break it. She meets his thrusts and even when she tries to hurt him she's like a mating animal. Biting him just to sink her pleasure somewhere, clawing at him to pull him deeper inside her. She can't speak anymore. Her innocent face is scrunched up, eyes squeezed close and gorgeous mouth parted and he loves her now. He can't imagine wanting anyone but her. She's so stunning when she takes him.

His hands shift to her thighs. Gripping lush, shaking flesh. Pushing himself deeper than he's ever been with anyone. Feeling her sweetness pull him closer. He'd come in an instant if he didn't want this feeling to last forever. If it wasn't the most incredible thing he's ever felt in his life. He's impaling her, his little fawn. Again and again. He can only withdraw a fraction of an inch each time because it's like he's locked inside her. Knotted. It's never been like this. He couldn't stop fucking her if he tried. If the world fell apart around them.

God. Yes. God. Yes.

He smells the blood fresh from her cunt. Savors it as it pastes itself around his throbbing shaft. That delicious

perfection, better than heaven, darker than hell. She's his fate. Everything is nothing compared to her. In this moment, she's more powerful and important than any god he can imagine; her moans, the fluttering of her eyelids as her eyes roll back, the feeling of her soft, warm body wrapped around his, are his entire world. She'll always be his world now. He can't kill her. He wants her forever. He wants this and only this until the day he dies.

Now, he grips her hips for stability because he feels fucking lightheaded from pleasure. He can sprint twenty miles in a stretch but he might collapse from how good she feels. She's built for him, and him for her. His body has been waiting all its wretched time on earth for this. Their pulses toy with each other. His cock, pulsing within her as her core contracts, timed differently even though their heartbeats synchronize. He lets her breath lather his tongue. Sharp releases. He's been on edge this entire time but he's getting closer. A firework spiraling up into the sky. His vision is full of them. Hers must be too, because she seems dizzy. She's shaking. Coming hard all around him. Clawing her nails down his back.

He's closer, closer, closer. His balls are so fucking heavy. He can't hold back. He'll come inside her. He'll plant his seed in her fucking womb. He wants her pregnant and swollen, wants kids with her beautiful eyes and freckled mouth, wants her warmth all around him and always.

Oh, God.

*Oh, God.*

"Oh, *Sadie!*" he groans, letting go. Feeling himself flood her hot, wet, aching cunt. Feeling all of himself spill into her. He's giving her his fucking soul. Still stuck inside her, he can't stop. She shudders as she takes everything that's left of him.

Then his vision fizzles and pops more than he can handle. He feels consciousness slip away. And he is charmed that no bullet hits him quite like his little fawn.

He collapses, lovesick and spent, on the bloody bathroom tile.

She falls with him.

Wright comes home from the woods to silence.

No speaking. No sounds of life in the house.

But the air is rich with the smell of blood.

He sees his world dissolving as he rushes up the stairs, following the scent all the way to the bathroom with the busted-in door. Two bodies on the floor, one the long, lean frame of his brother and the other Sadie's plush, smaller form. Naked. The remnants of Ridge's fur on the ground. Blood covers nearly every surface. Each other's blood, it seems. It blends crimson with the water in the tub and spills onto the tile, splatters against the sink and the mirrors past it. On the ceilings and the walls. If he couldn't smell death, he'd assume they were both corpses.

But they're alive.

He smells something else, too.

The unmistakable scent of consummation.

They're mates. It's so clear now. Even unconscious, they reach for each other. His brother, who has been a monster for years, sleeps like an infant with his hand wrapped in Sadie's. They're holding hands like this.

Neither of them showing any sign that they know how close to death she must have been to lose this much. He could kill Ridge. A mate is a sacred bond and he knows this, or at least he knew it at some point. Through the blood splashed over Sadie's skin he can tell she's pale. He's made her weak. Could have killed her.

"Get up," he growls at his brother's sleeping form. He marches towards him, grabbing him by the hair and wrenching his blood-soaked face from the floor. "Get up!"

“Fuck off,” Ridge mutters, batting at him as he rises to his feet.

“Check her fucking pulse-”

“She’s fine,” he groans.

No.

She’s not *fucking* fine.

Anger possesses Wright and he tackles his brother to the ground. They slip amongst the blood but Ridge is weak from mating and Wright has the upper hand. He punches his brother in the face. Once, twice, three times. Feeling the impact of his knuckles on Ridge’s cheek.

“What are you doing?” Sadie exclaims from behind him.

“Take it out, brother,” Ridge growls, grabbing his collar. “Be a fucking man.”

He will. He’ll give Ridge a whole new set of teeth to regrow.

Even if they break his skin just as much.

Ridge takes the beating. It’s as if he enjoys it. He looks pleased with himself.

“Finally, some fucking *life* in your eyes,” Ridge spits.

Wright’ll blacken his eye. He draws back his fist before he notices the hands pulling back against his shoulders. It’s too late. He feels the contact of his elbow on a soft body with breakable bones. Feels the fracture he makes. Her cheek, he thinks.

He doesn’t have much time to do anything else.

In an instant, an enormous growl erupts from underneath him and he finds himself on his back. Ridge doesn’t even need to pin him down because Wright feels hot breath on his neck. Canines digging into his flesh. Ridge has his jaws clamped on Wright’s throat and he could kill him. He could keep him dead.



*The only thing that can kill one of us is another of our kind.*

“Don’t!” Sadie shrieks.

Wright thinks about joining Jess, and his son, and the hundreds of women Ridge has killed. He’ll have an entire town bonded from death alone. But he needs Ridge to know who Sadie is. If he hasn’t figured out from how it felt to sleep with her or how Wright accidentally hurting her set a fire in him, he’s a lost cause but it bears stating.

It’s her command that kept him from biting down.

“She’s your mate,” Wright whispers, feeling the teeth slice into his skin. He doesn’t give a damn if it’s the last thing he says.

But Ridge draws back. “What?”

“She’s your fucking mate,” Wright repeats, pushing himself to a seat. He feels the back of his head. Ridge smashed it so hard against the tile that it opened up his skin. “She’s it for you.”

Ridge looks from Wright to Sadie and keeps his gaze there.

“That’s what it fucking felt like,” Wright says. He rises to his feet. Anger and exertion are throbbing in his lungs. “Every time. For *years*. You’ve only just met her but it grows even stronger than this, and I left her behind for our fucking family! I trusted you!”

“What does that mean?” Sadie asks, barely above a whisper. She’s got a cut on her cheek now but it’s hardly distinguishable from the rest of her blood.

Wright ignores her, glaring at Ridge. “What you did to me. Imagine, never getting to touch her again-”

“Stop-” Ridge protests. His expression shifts instantly, his once-confident, broad form buckling even as he rises to his feet. His chest heaves with panicked breath.

“Fuck that,” Wright spits. “Picture it. You know what it looked like, don’t you? All that was left for me was their blood!”

“*Wright,*” Sadie pleads.

“There’s blood now,” Wright says. He steps closer to Ridge, who steps away. “Picture it. Picture coming home to this, you fucking bastard!”

Ridge growls. He looks younger. Lost, cornered, *new*.

“Look around!” Wright yells, shoving him. “Imagine you find her-”

Ridge pushes back but he looks disoriented.

“He didn’t try to kill me,” Sadie pleads.

“Imagine you see it,” Wright growls. “Imagine you don’t even have a fucking body to bury! That you can’t hold her even when she’s cold! Even to say goodbye!”

Ridge is panting, staring at Sadie. For the first time, he looks scared.

“Know that warmth you feel,” Wright demands. “I shouldn’t have to explain to you why I don’t have any fucking life left!”

“Shut up!” Ridge yells.

“Imagine she bears your child and you lose him too!” Wright yells.

Ridge freezes. Grips his hair, closes his eyes. He shakes his head like he’s trying to dislodge a memory.

“Still won’t say you’re fucking sorry, will you?” Wright snaps.

But one look in Ridge’s now-red eyes tells him he’ll never hear those words. He’s falling apart. There’s a crack in his brother’s steel armor now. Ridge pushes past him, storming down the hall. Down the stairs. Out the front door buck naked and covered in blood.

Wright hears sniffing behind him. It does little to dull the anger but he turns and glares at her anyway. She's holding a towel around herself now, shaking like a leaf in a storm with one hand clasped over her mouth. Her hair is a mess of knots and blood. Tears spill down her cheeks to her fingers.

“Grow the fuck up,” Wright snaps.

“Wright,” Sadie whispers. “You are *cruel*.”

He can already smell the bruise forming at her cheek.

“Yeah,” he clips. “You’ve gotta find somewhere else to stay.”

## Chapter 5

## *True enough to bring you here*

**I**t takes hours for Sadie to clean the bathroom and herself. Hours in which Wright doesn't speak to her and Ridge doesn't come back.

When she lived with her father, she'd look forward to lonesomeness because it was rare. It's the safest feeling in the world for her. But she is in an entirely new world now. Making love to Ridge, if she could call it that...

Well, what else can she call it? She can't imagine it was just sex. It felt like worship. It felt *unbelievable*. Now, with blood under her nails and in the cracks of the bathroom tile, she doesn't know how to feel.

From the inside out, she belongs to him. Her reflection looks different. Some of that isn't Ridge, she knows, like the purple bruise under her eye. Wright hit her hard. For all he says about himself, he's a lot stronger than he seems to think. She thought he would have killed Ridge.

Or that Ridge would have killed him.

Her lips are red but any cuts she felt from kissing Ridge have healed from his spit. She sees him gripping her hips, looking down at her as he holds her on the sink. Sees the way his eyes were so dark they could suck her into them like tornado skies. But there was humanity there. So much so that she feels an ache deep in her chest. It feels like love.

She loves Ridge Lindal.

She's not known him for long and their encounters have been far, far from the beautiful moments she's read about in romances. There's no ballroom dancing. No moonlit walks. No promises of marriage or strong declarations. So often, there are no words between them at all. But she feels as though she's been missing a piece of herself for her entire life and it's only now come back to her. When he looked at her like that, his face cast in the warm light of morning, she knew. She knew what people sang songs about, wrote books about.

Why does it have to be now?

Why did she have to die to find him?

She ducks her head, feeling fresh tears fall to her cheeks. *Grow the fuck up*, Wright had said. She's twenty-three. Most girls she grew up with have children. All of them are married. She's lived all these years for her father and the moment she finds someone who desires her like this, she's weeks away from death. It's not fair. None of it is fair and it makes her want to fold into herself and die.

How cruel is the Devil, that he'd send evil after her and she'd fall in love with him?

How cruel is that evil to leave her now?

She straightens.

This must end.

She'll have Wright drive her to a bus station and she'll make her way to the ocean. Live off the money in the coffee tin until the Devil takes her away. She'll read books she's wanted to read, eat delicious food, and watch every sunset.

And she will leave Ridge before she lets her feelings for him change her decision. If she stays with him, she'll get selfish. She'll talk herself into saving her soul.

Still, she lets herself think for a moment of waking up on the bathroom floor. Feeling warm, despite the cold tile. Slipping her hand into his and feeling him hold it.

She'll die knowing what love feels like, even if it is different than anything she's imagined.

On steady, strong legs she makes her way to her bedroom. Packs the hand-me-down dresses and Ridge's shirt, which she lingers on too long because she smells him there now. She hadn't before.

"Why does it have to be like this?" she whispers.

She'd like to steal his entire wardrobe of clothing just to smell him but she sets her bag down. Takes off the dress she's wearing and folds it neatly on the bed she's slept in. She'll leave it for him to have some memory of her. To keep her scent. She'll take his to the grave.

While pulling on a new dress, she grazes the claw marks on her shoulder. She feels him there too. Feels how deliciously his tongue traced over each of her wounds to heal them. And she thinks about throwing away her plan. Pleading with Wright to let her stay.

She can't.

She's already too far gone.

She walks downstairs, listening to the creaks in the wood. All her memorization of the sounds in this house is for naught. The way one kitchen tile isn't secured fully and she hears its sticky adhesive whenever she steps down. The rocking sound the barn walls make when she stands inside it as the wind blows.

Wright sits at the kitchen table. A new familiarity that she'll also take with her. He's got a glass of whiskey or bourbon in front of him that makes her not want to break the barrier at all, but he looks at her when she crosses the threshold to the kitchen. He looks sorry.

"I was wondering if you could drive me to the nearest bus station," Sadie whispers.

Wright stands and steps away from his glass, approaching the sink like it's a wild animal. He closes his hands over the

edge of it.

“I’ve enjoyed your presence,” he says. “You’ve been a great deal of help at the farm.”

“You-” Sadie starts. She wants to tell him how wrong it was for him to talk to Ridge like that, but she doesn’t really know him. She doesn’t really know Ridge, even though it feels like she does.

“I’m sorry for grabbing you,” he says. “And for hitting you. I didn’t know you were there.”

How many times did her father say the same? She doesn’t acknowledge his apology. It’s not really for her, anyway.

“It hurts,” she clips.

He pushes away from the sink, stepping towards her. She steps back.

“*Sadie*,” he starts. His gray-blue eyes glisten underneath his furrowed brow.

She bites her lip.

“Let me heal it,” he says. “*Please, Sadie...*”

She isn’t sure when he started saying her name but he lingers on it now. It means something to him now. Another loss. He keeps a different kind of distance from her, not one of a stranger but one of a warden, the prisoners his touch and civilians her skin. Making a wall of the air between them.

A few escapes, when he grabbed her mouth and hit her cheek. But he quelled those riots. Until now, when he asks to heal her.

He’s standing in this kitchen like a swaying tree with roots planted closer than she’s used to. In the gray light of the afternoon, he feels warm again. He’s nurturing even if he’s got a mean streak.

“How would you do that?” she asks, a spark running through her. “Are you asking to kiss my cheek, Wright?”



He shakes his head. “Sit,” he says.

She complies. He runs the sink, scrubbing his hands. She watches his body move. He might be the same size as Ridge but his shoulders move like he carries heavy weight on them. That weight can’t be lessened with the bourbon in his glass.

“Look up,” Wright says.

She tilts her chin up to him, expecting him to hold her face. To do anything to steady her.

“Didn’t kiss your temple when I healed your forehead,” he tells her.

The air between them feels like a brewing storm. It feels like neither of them should be here, in this dusky kitchen, breathing each other’s air.

He dips his thumb in his mouth and then reaches just his fingertips to her jaw. Holds her steady with a gentle touch as he brushes his spit over her cut. Over the bruise. This is the most he’s ever touched her on purpose.

It feels cold when he takes his hand away.

“Is that enough?” Sadie whispers.

“If it ain’t, then...” he pauses, narrowing his eyes at her before turning back towards the sink. He washes his hands again. “Frozen peas, I guess. Used those on Ridge when he got into fights at school. Didn’t much care for getting spit on his skin.”

“I just love it,” Sadie teases softly.

He turns. Settles his hips against the sink. His mind is elsewhere as he dries his hands on the towel. As he wrings the water from his skin, as he erases any scent or taste of her.

“Think you’ll go back to your home?” he asks.

“This place felt more like a home than my pa’s farm,” she says quietly.

He sniffs, wiping his face and sighing deeply. Nods to himself.

“I’m not asking you if I can stay longer,” she clarifies.

“I know,” Wright says. “Just fuckin’ weighing if I should ask you to.”

She stares at him.

“Should I?” he asks.

“No,” she says. “There wouldn’t be much use in that.”

He must feel the weight of her words because he sets down the towel, stepping closer.

“Do you drink?” he asks.

“What is it?”

“Basil Hayden,” he says. “Kentucky bourbon-”

“I know what Basil Hayden is,” she says. She pulls the glass towards her just to keep him from downing it. “I should leave before he gets back, I think. You’ll tell him I said I was sorry.”

He sits across from her.

“That I don’t know what to do with the feelings I have for him,” she says. She does take a sip. A large one. It burns her clenching throat. “But that he’ll be happy with someone else. Who has more time left to spend with him.”

Wright recoils. “Don’t be a fuckin’ fool and think he’d be happy with anyone else.”

“Can you please,” Sadie snaps before holding herself back. “Not speak to me like that.”

“Apologies for cursing.”

“No,” Sadie groans. “Like he won’t be happy with anyone else.”

Wright stares at her. Mimes locking his mouth and throwing away the key. Eyes her glass. She sips again.

“Promise you’ll take care of him,” she says.

“Do you have cancer?” Wright asks.

Sadie stills. It would be easier to say that than the truth.  
“Yes.”

Wright leans in so swiftly she braces her hand against his chest. He ducks his head and leans into her neck. The air around her skin moves with his sharp inhale.

Then, just as quickly, he draws back.

“Would prefer the truth,” Wright says, looking away.  
“Smell healthy as a horse.”

“I hope I don’t smell like a horse,” she quips.

He isn’t humored. “You don’t have cancer.”

She ducks her forehead until it’s pressed to the glass in her hand. She’s struck with the vision that her papa’s done this a thousand times in front of her. That if she were ever to carve a sculpture of him, it would be bowing to his drink.

“If I told you why I have to leave,” she says. “You’d think I’m crazy and send me away.”

That cracks a true smile on his face. “Alright,” he says.

“What?” she asks, confused.

“Let me think you’re crazy.”

“No, Wright.”

“Sure it ain’t crazier than loving my brother,” he says.

She pauses. “I don’t even know if it’s true what I experienced.”

“It’s true enough to bring you here.”

She stills. Settles her shaking hands around the glass. He folds his arms in front of his chest and leans back to look at her. He takes up space when he sits like that. She decides to as well.

“Don’t interrupt,” she says, uncrossing her legs.

“Alright.”

“And you make good on the promises you made me,” she adds.

“Hand to god,” he says, raising his broad palm up in oath.

She finishes the glass.

“Two weeks ago,” she whispers before pressing her lips together. “My papa killed me.”

She keeps her eyes closed. And she remembers, for a long while, the part of that day she tries to forget the most.

Sadie felt the air in the room before she ever looked at her papa.

It was enough to make her want to turn and run before she talked herself out of it. So cold were his chestnut eyes. So cold was the way he kicked her suitcase out on the kitchen floor. She'd packed it two days ago, knowing she would leave. Knowing she would do the things a daughter was not supposed to do, but her papa was a sick man and she thought he might kill her even though she knew how much he loved her.

She knew how much he loved her before he even said it, which he always did when he got this way. It was always the first thing he did.

“You know I love you,” he said with breath so acrid from liquor that it burnt her tongue.

“I do. I love you too.”

He nodded in the way that said no matter what words she thought of, he wouldn't believe her. It sickened her because today, something was different about him. Something was decided.

“Come to the back porch with me, Sadie girl,” he said. Sweeter than she expected.

He rose from his seat and when she began to follow him, he stopped her.

“Bring the suitcase,” he said.

Like she’d stepped onto a trapdoor, she felt the ground escape from underneath her. Still, she did as she was told. She picked up the same quilted bag her mama would have packed for her if she saw her husband like this, and she walked out the screen door to the sound of cicadas.

Where they lived, even on the banks of the Tennessee they didn’t have a neighbor for a mile on either side. Once this had been farmland. Once it had been *their* farm. But now it was debt and drink and dandelion greens for supper. Sadie’s mama had either kept it all together or died before it could end like this.

That’s what it was. That’s what she was trying to escape. The *end* of things. Sadie was twenty-three years old; her friends were married by now. They had families of their own and she knew she could never have anything of her own when each night was spent testing the air. Every romance she’d ever had ended in nights like this, or somewhat like this, because this night felt like falling into space. Like walking on the moon, if that were ever possible.

As if he’d read her thoughts, her papa asked: “Are you eloping? Do you have a sweetheart?”

She hadn’t thought it a good idea to bring anyone into the mess so she wasn’t lying when she told him *no*.

And as raw as she felt about not loving anybody yet, there was a time when she hadn’t been bitter. When it had been enough, her papa and her. The cross outside where her mama was buried had felt like a stitch that kept them together. Pierced through both of their hearts.

It and the war had been reason enough not to let boys get too close to her. When they came back, all those veterans looking like heroes in the way they walked, even the few in her town had seemed like wild things. She’d started talking to

a boy named Jack. He kissed her. Wanted more. Back then, whenever he spoke of love she would act like she did with her papa now. Rehearse her lines.

*Yes, I love you.*

*Sweetheart.*

*Baby.*

But when she thought of marrying him, she thought of her papa all alone. She thought of their nights by the fire reading from books to one another, or mornings tending to the goats and chickens they still had left. If she were honest, it was the moments they didn't speak much to each other that felt the warmest in her mind. It seemed rare and special that she could have someone that she could love without talking to.

It wasn't perfect, those days. She loved her papa more than anything in the world but he still had nights with tense air sometimes. It was like the weather, she figured. Sometimes it rained. Sometimes she didn't feel safe around him. But the bad nights always had a curtain call until they didn't.

Until it was the good days that seemed like the lie. Until every time he said he loved her, it felt like he was hiding his hate as a secret he was too afraid to speak about.

“Did I ruin you?” he asked.

That truth, she bit her tongue around.

“I think I might, if I go on like this,” he said. “Seeing her face in you like... Why, you're a ghost of her-”

“Don't say that!” Sadie yelled. She did look like her mother, from the freckles that sprayed across her dark golden skin like dandelion seeds to the hazel in her eyes and the curl to her hair. Her papa had called her mama an exotic beauty even though that beauty kept them from ever fitting in right amongst the people who looked like him in their town. But Sadie's martyrdom and what was left of her humor was her papa's and she hated to see him push his ruination and her mama's beauty into the air like this. It hurt her.

The fire burned inside her and she let go of her suitcase to push him.

He was drunk enough to stumble backwards, careening into the empty crates he hadn't bothered clearing.

"I'd think you'd love for me to leave!" she yelled. "I'd think it'd feel good to be gone of me, to not have a reason to stop drinking!"

He reeled back. She thought he'd slap her but what connected was harder. He punched her and she felt a crack in her jaw. She fell to her knees on the dusty planks of the porch. Fireworks in her eyes just like in the comics.

"What do you have all this hate in you for?" she asked. "Sayin' I'm a ghost. I'm here. I've been here, I've been tryin' to help you-"

"I don't need help from a girl who ain't got the sense in her to run off with someone," he scolded. "Rather be alone than with her family, huh?"

"I've given you *years*, papa-"

"And I gave you my life."

She firmed her lips, tasting blood but keeping quiet about it. She'd call it self-preservation if that wasn't just reserved for men who drink.

"I don't owe you mine," she managed. Bracing herself on one of the splintering posts, she rose to her feet. Then the weight of her words hit her. She didn't want to mean them. She wanted her papa back. Why wasn't it enough that he'd lose her?

"I was raised by a pa who gave me worse than I ever gave you," he said. "Lost your mama-"

"We lost her."

"No," he spat. "I lost her. You lost a fraction of who she was. I loved her because I made the choice to. It ain't the same thing to lose a parent."

For all his coherence, he spat into the dried earth.

“Don’t blame it on mama,” she said. “The happiest year with you came after. When it was just us, you remember that?”

“Don’t speak like that, now,” he said, his voice cracking.

“I’ve prayed and prayed every Sunday for you to come back and be like that again-”

“Guess ya gave up prayin’, didn’t you?”

He threw her suitcase with the white foam of his spit.

“The Lord does have a funny way of lovin’ us,” her papa said. He fumbled for the can of lighter fluid, half empty and sun-baked on the porch.

Sadie frowned before she realized what he had planned. Then she sprung for him, only catching sprinkles between her fingers in her effort to stop him. He shoved her hard. Pushed her away.

“Don’t!” she yelled, dropping to her knees. Her hands were slick now on the bag as she pulled. Slick enough to make the suitcase feel heavy. “Please, papa! That’s what’s left of her!”

He sent the match down anyway.

Flames erupted before her, white and bright and licking. They kissed her lips and flickered over her eyes. Cinema images of destruction. She stumbled backwards but her hands were hot, too hot, and they stung when she planted them in the mud.

Breathing. Gaspings. Reason through the terror. She could leave with nothing if she had to. If this was the worst he had planned, it hadn’t even been their worst night.

“The only thing the Lord let me keep was you, Sadie girl,” her papa said. “My little girl. My brightest dream. I wanted the world for you but the world took from us, didn’t it?”

She blinked back tears from smoke or his words. She didn’t look at him, couldn’t let him see.



“Yes, papa,” she whispered.

“A debt we can’t pay,” he said solemnly.

She lifted her hands from the mud. They stung horribly.  
Burned by his flame.

“I wanted to go to the ocean,” she confessed. “Charleston.”

“You ain’t never been further than Fort Loudoun.”

“I’d like to,” Sadie whispered. She couldn’t make full words of the truth. Of her secrets. “I’d get a job out there, make money for us-”

“No, no-”

“I could send it home to you-”

“No!” her papa yelled, and this was the way she knew him. This chaos in his mind spilling out into the air. Drink flowed with the wild inside of him until he was spitting like a baby. Not a father. Not an adult.

But when he next spoke, it was so steady she thought he’d sobered up.

“You’ll never know how deep I let us sink,” he said.

He took a deep breath and she felt his inhale fill her own lungs.

“I love you, darling,” he said.

“I love you too,” she promised.

It would be okay. She blinked back her tears. Barely registered the click.

When she turned around, he was pointing at her.

Then, her world exploded.

When Sadie finishes telling her story to Wright, they sit silent for a while. She’s told him what she must do to stay alive, but mostly she tells him how much she misses her pa. And how

maybe she'd never have been able to leave him if it hadn't ended the way it did.

Wright thinks he himself might be a bastard but if the man were still alive he and Ridge would pay him a visit. Make sure he didn't breathe another second on this earth for hurting Sadie like that. For making her cry for him, even now.

For taking her life.

She woke up on the banks of the river the next day, she told him. Woke up hardly remembering who she was before seeing the man on the hill. Something doesn't sit right with this. Wright goes to church. Believes the Devil would walk this land if the Lord let him. But Sadie's too sweet for such things. If Satan came to their land, he'd visit the Lindals first.

"You sure it was the Devil?" Wright asks.

"Who else could it be?"

Wright shakes his head, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "Think you'll trade Ridge?"

"I'm not gonna trade anyone."

"You should," he says. "Not him. Someone. Your life is worth more than a lot of people's."

"I don't think like that," she tells him. "Not sure you should."

"Mm," he acknowledges. "Flaw in the machine."

"I think I love him," she says. "Ridge. So I can't trade him."

"But you do think he's evil."

"I..." she starts. "No. He can't be."

Wright restrains himself from arguing. This time. But she notices.

"How do you know it was him?" she asks.

Wright doesn't want to fight anymore. He just wants her gone, needs her gone, because he can still feel her hand on his

chest. Her fingers on his collarbone. The way her cheek felt under his thumb. He needs this small thing with her soft skin and sharp tongue out of here so it'll be easier for him to act as he's always done. Go to church. Spend time with Elam and the other families in town. Be half-alive as he ages rapidly towards his own peaceful demise.

"He says he doesn't remember," she says.

"And once, someone said the moon was made of cheese," Wright states dryly.

"We don't know 'til we get there," Sadie replies. "Why not leave room for wonder?"

There's no doubt in Wright's mind that Ridge killed Jess and Harry. But he can tell she questions it. Not because she doesn't feel his pain but perhaps because she feels the quick of it. They're not too different.

He can tell she loves Ridge. And god damn it, there's some part of him that warms to this. Some part that thinks someone so kind and hopeful could be the person to bring the sweetness back to his brother. That has been gone for a long time. Before this, Wright would say it'd be forever. But what if there's a chance it's not?

That chance will die with Sadie.

He tenses, ducking his head away as the hurt crashes over him.

"Y'know if you needed our help," he says. "If you need me to help you find someone deserving, I'd do it for you? Maybe we can make something work. Maybe you don't have to leave-"

"I can't let myself get closer to him," she says. Her voice is wet, her eyes damp. "It's already going to be so hard to say goodbye. Maybe if I get far enough, he won't even know. He'll think I'm still alive and out there."

"Don't kid yourself," he snaps before he can stop. "He'll feel it-"

“Don’t,” she interrupts, wiping her eyes.

She smiles. A thin one like she’s pressing her lips together as the tears well against her lashes.

“Don’t tell me that,” she says. “I don’t want to know that.”

Wright sighs. “You’re a good woman, Sadie. Can’t fucking stand it.”

She laughs. More tears spill out.

“Take the truck, okay?” he says. “Your pa’s still needs repairs-”

“No, Wright, I could never-”

“His is worth more’n ours anyway,” Wright says firmly. “And take the home number, alright? I want you to call us. I want you to change your mind.”

She breathes deep, holding herself tightly. She looks so small and alone like this. He can’t stomach the thought she’ll die. It’s not fucking right.

“I’ll go with you,” he says.

She bites her lip hard before shaking her head. “He’ll need you.”

Wright feels his own throat tighten. She takes a deep breath before standing, pulling her bag of clothing with her.

“He needs you already,” she whispers.

He can see why his brother loves her, because he feels her occupy every soft place in his heart that remains. And against his better judgment, he lets her go.

“How could you let her leave?” Ridge yells at Wright, pushing against him. He let Sadie pack, let his fawn leave. In their truck. Rolling over for fate, or God, or something equally unimportant.

“Ain’t fuckin’ listening to me!” Wright yells, shoving him back. He snaps his teeth at him. Now, he’s brutal. “It was you or her!”

Ridge stalks back, grabbing his own hair just to feel the sting at his scalp. He’s holding himself back from too much. From turning and ripping his brother’s throat out. From pushing past the man just to chase endless highways to find his girl. He can’t cease that perfect feeling of her wrapped around him, can’t let the sound of her voice leave his life.

“Devil ain’t *fuckin’* real,” he challenges, grinding out the words between his teeth. “Should’ve shaken her. Should’ve locked her in the fuckin’ bathroom-”

“She’s her own woman.”

“No she fucking ain’t!” Ridge yells. He’s too far from Wright so he throws the table instead. Its metal frame slams into the plaster lining the brick of the house. White powder shatters onto the floor she swept. Tainting her perfection. Her sweetness.

No, he won’t let the thought of her become a memory. She is his. All of her, every inch of her flesh and breath in her lungs and synapse in her brain.

“Where were you, then?” Wright asks. “When I told you she was your mate, you *ran*.”

Ridge fixes his jaw. He might kill Wright. Rip his head from his body. Regret it later.

“I don’t fucking run,” he growls.

“Where’d you go, then?”

Ridge rolls back his shoulders. Grips his fists tight. He regrets throwing the table because he has seen her eat cereal at it so often. It’s where she rests her elbows when he says grace. It’s where he imagined taking her, fucking her so hard it topples or collapses or breaks through the wall.

He *hadn’t* run, not by his own consideration. He’d gone to the woods. For their kind, that’s anything but running. It’s the

closest thing he has to prayer. He ran through the trees and tried to remember the fucking day his brother mourns because it should have been stained in his mind, what he did. He remembers every kill besides that one. To think that it could have been Sadie... What it would be like not to see his fawn again. To lose her. To know there's nothing in his power he can do to get her back.

It's not an option.

She's talked his brother into this ludicrous notion, that the Devil has made a deal for her soul. Never once questioning how Ridge didn't feel her death. Even if she was only gone for a second from this earth, even if it was before he'd ever met her, he'd know. He'd have felt it. He felt her absence from the farm long before he returned. Before he saw the missing truck. Before he felt how empty the house was without her there.

Wright had let her go, knowing their matehood. Knowing what it would do to him.

"I wonder, brother," he says to Wright. "If you don't forgive me for what you think I did-"

"Watch your fuckin' words-"

"If you'd damn her too," Ridge clips.

Wright growls deep in his throat. "The hell you accusing me of, boy?"

"So ready with the fantasy of me losing her," Ridge growls. "That it's the first thing you said-"

"Not fantasy," Wright spits. "Memory."

"Did you think of killing her?" Ridge asks. "To tip your precious goddamn scales, did you daydream of taking her from me?"

Wright fixes his jaw. Stares at him. Silence thickens out like ice in a glass bottle, threatening to crack the clear walls between them.

Then, the phone rings. Ridge nearly smashes it into the wall for its interruption. For what it keeps him from learning. Who the fuck could be calling them at this hour?

Wright glances at him warily before answering.

“Lindal farm,” he says in a low voice.

“I wanted to let you know that I’m safe-”

Her voice is soft through the receiver but loud enough for Ridge’s wolfish ears to hear her clear as day. It shocks his heart like a jolt of lightning and he seizes the phone, shoving his brother. Every bit of tension boils over within him now.

“Reconsider what *safe* means to you, little fawn,” he snaps.

He hears her staggered breath. “Ridge. I had to go.”

“Because I can assure you, I will fucking find you-”

“Please don’t.”

He growls.

“I didn’t want to leave you,” she whispers, as if someone else is listening on her end.

Ridge will kill them if they do. He’s bloodthirsty enough that her words don’t register right away.

“Should I soap your sweet mouth before I fuck it?” he asks. “Don’t tell me you’ve done something you didn’t want to because your Devil told you a lie.”

Her breath hitches. “Wright told you?”

He growls again. It had been at least an hour before Wright had told him her story. Enough time for Ridge to trash the barn they’d rebuilt and start on the front porch. He’s not satisfied enough with her illusion for it to soothe his anger.

“Do not tell me you wanted him to keep a secret from me,” Ridge says slowly.

“I would have told you, but you were gone.”

He breathes deep. Calms slightly.

“My fawn doesn’t run from fear,” he says. “She runs towards it, doesn’t she?”

“*Ridge,*” she pleads.

His eyes roll back in his head at the sound of her begging like this. God, is he getting hard at just her voice over the phone?

“Doesn’t she?” he asks, palming the growing bulge in his jeans.

“Listen to me,” she pleads. “It scares me how much I want you. How much your voice makes me feel.”

*You have no idea.*

He hates her now, as much as he adores her. But he could listen to her speak forever. He will, when he finds her. For all the moments they spend together where she manages language.

And when he finds her, there will be very few of those for a very long time.

“But the Devil’s gonna take me back-” she starts.

“Don’t you fuckin’ talk like that!” Ridge yells, snapping from his fantasy. He hates that he sounds like his brother when he’s angry. Like the schooling and the books didn’t do him any good.

“It’s true!” she yells back. “I know you don’t believe, but I’ve seen him.”

“You ain’t!” Ridge yells.

“Don’t come looking for me,” she says. “I wouldn’t be good for you. I swear. I just need to do this. I just need to take care of this.”

“*Take care,*” Ridge repeats, nearly spitting. “Risk your precious life, you mean?”

“I’ve been dead since you’ve known me-”



“Your Devil is a liar,” Ridge snaps. “I’ve tasted the life in you. It still coats my lips like sugar crystals. *You*, my little fawn...”

He glares at Wright, who turns and walks out the front door.

“When I fuck you,” Ridge tells her in a low voice. “I feel your heart beat with mine. Before I met you, I could sense you. I could *feel* you.”

He’s hard enough for it to distract him now.

“You are *mine*,” he growls, stroking himself over the denim. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Sadie whispers.

He groans. “Fucking right. If you risk what’s mine, I will punish you.”

“I can’t go back.”

“Then I’m going to hunt you down,” Ridge growls. He’s seething. “And I’m never going to let you out of my sight again, do you understand? I’m going to kill anyone who gets in my way. You’re mine. You’re staying mine.”

He hears only her shaky exhale in the receiver. The catch of a whimper in the back of her throat.

“Are you trembling, Sadie?” he asks, lowering his voice. He unzips his jeans. Already desperate from the sound of her voice. He’s feral now. Knows what they mean when they scold him for it. He could drain the world. He strokes himself thinking of her at a payphone, bare legs glistening with rain. “Do you know just what I’ll do to you when I catch you? Just how I’ll devour your sweet flesh again...”

“Ridge,” she breathes.

He feels the sound trickle down his spine. It awakens him. He drips with anticipation and smooths it over himself.

“Say that again,” he growls.

“*Ridge*,” she moans.

“Need you so fucking bad, Sadie,” he groans. “Can still feel you on my cock. Your sweet virgin blood.”

He thrusts into his hand. Doesn’t care how shallow the action is without her there to swallow. He can hear her voice. Her breath. She knows what she’s doing to him.

“I still feel you,” she breathes. Rasping. Aroused.

“I still taste you,” he answers. He doesn’t cease his rhythm. “It’s not enough. *Nothing* will be enough except for you. Here. With me, where you’re meant to fucking be.”

“I can’t even walk, Ridge,” she tells him. “I feel you inside of me with each step.”

“*Yes*,” he groans. “Touch yourself.”

“The phone booth is glass,” she whispers.

He growls, envisioning it. He hears rain through the receiver. Realizes it’s outside, too. Pictures Sadie with her leg propped up against the clear frame, their shared storm pouring down around her. How he’d find her like that. Fuck her in that phone booth. Feel her all around him again.

“Hike up your skirt to your waist,” he commands. “So when you bare yourself, I can imagine your pretty little cunt under your hand. Your swollen fucking jewel...”

“Someone might see me.”

“Who are you more afraid of?”

Silence.

He smiles. No other objections to their game. “If anyone watches you, I’ll kill them first. Do it. Fuck your hand like it’s mine.”

He hears the rustling of fabric. Closes his eyes and imagines her there, pleasuring herself. Her sweet, thick thighs bare under the golden light. In this imagining, she is a glorious, beautiful creature stuck in an aquarium that saves her

from the night. Her fingers tease her glistening folds. His breathing turns to panting.

“You belong to me, Sadie,” he tells her, stroking himself faster. “All of you. Fate gave you to me.”

“I’m yours, Ridge,” she whimpers.

“When I find you,” he growls.

“You can’t,” she breathes. Her voice hitches.

“When I *do*,” he says. “I’m going to *cripple* you.”

She moans and he growls at her, so hungry for her presence he thinks it might kill him.

“Please,” she pants. “Have mercy on me.”

He groans, nearly comes from her begging.

“I’m going to tie you to a bed,” he says. “Make the ropes tight enough to cut into your wrists and ankles.”

She gasps. Such a sweet fucking sound.

“Take bites from you,” he pants. “Spit your own blood into your mouth. Make you hold it as I fuck your throat until it spills down your neck.”

“*Ridge*,” she moans. “Please don’t hurt me.”

God, her begging makes him *throb* and she must know it.

“Please, Ridge,” she whimpers. “Be gentle.”

“When you can’t breathe anymore, I’m going to fuck your cunt, my little fawn,” he says. “I’m going to make it hurt. Take your ass after. I’m going to break you. Wreck you. Annihilate you-”

He hears her gasp, a high-pitched sound, before he hears the breath shudder out of her. Even from the phone he feels her come and it pulls him with her, jutting from his spine all the way out. He spurts onto the wall, hot and wet and thinking of her naked there, her golden thighs spread and red pussy dripping with his seed. He has to brace himself against it then, just to catch his breath. Just to adjust his vision from the way it

fizzes from her. From the control she has over him, even over the phone.

But she stole her warmth from him.

He listens to her breathing just to drive himself insane. Hangs his head, wishing it were against her back. He can't tell her that her leaving feels worse than any turn he's ever had. How he'd prefer getting shot a hundred times and stitching the wounds back together to coming like this without her soft body to lie against.

That damned soul of his isn't dead after all.

"I don't know what it means that I miss you now," she whispers.

*Anguished* is the right word. "Come back."

"I can't," she says.

"There is nothing," he growls. "That could get through me to you. *Nothing*. Do you doubt that, Sadie?"

He hears her breath hitch again but there's a sob on the edge of it. For a long time, he's savored the way sadness flavors a woman's breath but now he thinks he'd pull the stars from the sky if it meant she never sounded like that again. It guts him. But her refusal to answer pisses him off, too. That she would think the Devil could get through him.

If that could happen, it would have already.

"Do you think," he growls. "That I've *hurt* you before? Have I been *cruel* to you?"

She doesn't reply but he hears her, feels her through the phone. Her crying ceases. He centers her, too.

"You shouldn't doubt me, little fawn," he states, already aroused again with the challenge. "I've played nice with you. If you think even your Devil can cut through me, I'll show you how wrong you are. Because he could open the earth underneath our feet and I would fuck you in our fall. I would

devour him and free every damned soul just to see you in the sun again.”

She exhales sharply. “I won’t let you prove that,” she whispers.

“Then hide well,” he growls. “Because when I find you, you’ll have no other god but me.”

He hangs up the phone without waiting for her answer. And for the second time, he remembers how he told her not to run.

## Chapter 6

## *Damn the library.*

**W**right hasn't seen his brother since Sadie left. Ridge didn't even wait for her father's truck to be fixed for them, just took off down the highway on foot that night in the rain. The likeliness of him finding her all rests on whether she wants to be found. That is to say she might disappear from their lives forever. She was determined when she left.

Not all of her, of course.

Not the part of her that called their house from a payphone and listened to Ridge say unholy things to her. If she enjoyed it, they must be a better match than he imagined. Darkness and light. Softness and steel. A flower and the knife that cuts it.

He's never seen his brother more determined. It makes him think he could have been an excellent soldier, one more scheming and articulate than Wright himself had been. Perhaps he'd move up in the ranks, be a career man.

If he were different.

If he cared about anything more than himself and the girl with the sweet voice and scent of brown butter on her skin.

Anyhow, Ridge will need that determination if he does intend to find her. It was raining the night she left, took her scent with it. All over the field where he used to smell her there is only the prevailing scent of earth. Like his brother, the ground is more alive with her presence. The seeds she planted

smell like they're sprouting. There will be tomatoes and melons in a few months, and she will be dead.

It's fucked. *Cruel*. Wright knows the world can be that way. He's seen the bodies in the camps, both dead and near-dead. Shoes and the lingering scent of gunpowder. Gunpowder and sadness. Not fear. Resignation. The Jews in the camps, those people he helped free, they weren't afraid anymore. The Germans had devoured that first. Left them with the rotten blueberry taste and wet iron smell of tragedy. In Wright's mind and amongst his fellow soldier, the Nazis were soldiers of Lucifer himself.

He'd grown up hearing that the devil was everywhere. Waiting for him to sin or make a wrong step in that direction. But if he was a good person, if he was honest and kind, if he killed only in the Lord's name, he'd make it to Heaven one day and see his wife again.

When he came back to the states, his town's preachers praised him and the few other soldiers for doing God's work. For all they spoke of internal battles, they knew nothing of war. Men turned into monsters overseas. Kind only to each other. Numb to the rest.

Not Sadie.

She was kind, would've stayed kind forever. But the Devil got to her.

Wright can't understand how such a thing would happen. Sadie's good, so good, sugar-sweet and thoughtful. The kind of girl who could make walls, windows, and a roof into a home. The kind of girl who could make a good wife for Ridge one day if he doesn't fucking kill her.

The kind of girl the Devil would have no business talking to.

Ridge followed her out east because he doesn't believe in the Devil enough to question him. But Wright does. He wants the bastard to fucking answer him, tell him what gave him the right to send her on a mission she'll never fulfill. Maybe he'll



answer him, because he's been praying to God on it for days and he hasn't heard a damn word. Sadie is gone with no phone number to call, so instead he decides he'll learn from the other source.

From what she told him, her pa's farm is off the 58 in the thickets of hilly woods that make up the Tennessee's shores. Between Chattanooga and Knoxville. Near Mount Olivet Methodist Church. He borrows Elam's truck one morning and drives west. He needs to see for himself the same land the Devil walked on.

He might be a better tracker than his brother because it only takes him half a day to get there. Two white goats stand in the gravelly drive, chewing away at the weeds near the fence. He clicks his tongue at them when he steps out and they stride over to him, bobbing their little horned heads. They're soft. Well-cared for, even if they have been abandoned.

He tells himself he'll bring them back with him. That he'll check to see what other livestock she wouldn't want abandoned by the river like this.

The front door to the house is unlocked.

It swings open on weak hinges when he pressures it and reveals the small world she's described in her stories. The wood floor that frames a small couch and a lamp before making way for the tile of the small kitchen. He could walk from the front door to the back in less than eight paces. He feels the hairs atop his head graze the ceiling as he looks up the uneven wood stairs to the top floor. It looks open, no separate rooms. His own family's farmhouse is a castle by comparison with its four bedrooms and separate kitchen. Still, she treated it like it was her own. Cleaned it without his asking, without any complaints.

He wonders what it was like for her on the good days. Her scent is on the couch like she slept there most nights, so there can't have been many. She's not the type to seek isolation.

“No, that would be you, old boy,” he says to himself. He can hear his pa in his own voice now.

Rather than head for the kitchen, he approaches the stairs. Steps up to the very top, though he worries with his size he might fall through the creaking wood. Where had the creature been when it spoke in her father’s voice? He smooths his hand over the top stair. Feels something there. *Smells* something there.

He leans in closer. It’s not brimstone or sulfur. Her smell is here. A man’s scent too, equally faded. A heavy drinker. Her pa. He can smell the liquor from where it seeped through the soles of his feet. There’s more of a concentration on the upper stairs than the lower, as if they spent many nights sitting there. The good nights, he wonders. The man’s scent is strongest; he came here most often. From the stairs, Ridge can see the couch perfectly.

He decides to mimic them. Turns and sits down, where now he can see writing on the cracked, yellow-painted wall opposite the stairs. The Lord’s Prayer is scrawled in charcoal, beset by sketched flowers. It looks aged. He’d think it was Sadie’s writing but with her disinterest in church he bets it’s her mother’s. It makes sense to him that she and her pa would keep it up after her passing. That they’d spend time sitting together in front of it. All across towns like this, people have their own churches.

For a flickering moment, Wright thinks about a story that a soldier from Kentucky told him. About how witches used to summon the Devil to do their bidding. The Nazis were infatuated with Satan. He heard that was who they worshiped instead of Christ. He himself hadn’t seen any of the occult churches his fellow soldiers spoke of, but those camps were worse than hell. Lucifer probably took notes from the Germans. Figured out the next tortures all their soldiers would face.

The man from Kentucky had told Wright that to summon Old Scratch, all a witch would do was stand on a grave at

midnight. She'd renounce Christ through some grand gesture, like the burning of a rosary or the cutting of flesh. Then she'd say the Lord's prayer backwards. The Devil would appear to her like a familiar friend at a bar and share in conversation.

"Tricky bastard," the soldier, Matthew, had told him. "He's the father of lies but they do it anyway. Then, if they fuck him, they get witch powers."

"Witch powers," Wright had laughed. "What's that mean, anyhow?"

"Mind control," Matthew said.

"Uncle Sam a fuckin' witch then?"

Matthew laughed.

Wright didn't. Mind control, or the quest for it, was rumored why his battalion was told to take Nazi doctors prisoner rather than killing them. These men annihilated entire families and they couldn't kill them. Any German soldier was a fair target, but not the men in lab coats.

He'd rather damn himself than let those bastards live.

Now, looking at this call to prayer, he thinks about witches. He made Ridge say the prayer before bed every night and now the man from Kentucky's words prick the hair on the back of his neck.

He looks behind him like trying to catch a ghost. There's nothing there. Not that he can see, anyway. The top floor is an open space, a large bed in one corner and a smaller one diagonally opposite to it, sheltered by an A-frame ceiling. There's a chest of drawers for clothing and for a second he thinks to get what Sadie's left behind so she doesn't have to wear hand-me-downs anymore. But the memory of her death sentence is a bird that hits the windows in his mind.

He stands up, listening to the stairs creak. Wondering if he'll fall through as he ducks his head to avoid the low ceilings. Sadie's pa must be short like her or comfortable stooping.

Wright walks to the drawer to see if anything rests on it. His ma kept jewelry on top of hers in a wooden box, but there's nothing like that here. All Sadie's pa's clothes are folded neatly but Sadie's clothes are missing. There's not much of anything in that room. A moth-eaten, handwoven rug. A few books. A bag of knitting. He imagines Sadie feeling the emptiness, that being why she prefers to sleep on the couch.

*This place felt more like a home than my pa's farm,* she'd said.

God, he's a fucking wretch. Ridge is right, as dark as Wright feels to admit it. He shouldn't have let her leave. Should have made her spend her last weeks with them, dealt with the pain of having her there. Made sure she knew how much he appreciated her.

But that's why he's here. He's going to figure out how to make this right.

There's a glass on the trunk by the larger bed, something that once held liquor but now is syrupy with dead flies and dry brown stains. He lifts it. The trunk is riddled with rings from condensation on glass but amidst the stains is a carving of the Tennessee flag. A circle with three stars on the inside. He thinks of Sadie's family: her ma, her pa, and her. Three stars for three people.

Whoever leaves the glass there made a point of only staining one of them.

He looks at the glass. The liquid that remains is so thick it's like amber for the flies caught in its clutches but it smells inviting. Smells like corn liquor even though it's not the color. Probably her pa's own distillation.

He's got his nose in the glass when he hears laughter outside.

A child's laughter.

He frowns.

The farm itself is even more isolated than the Lindal's for its small size, surrounded by hilly forests instead of other homesteads. Yet there was the sound, sharp and strong. He turns and steps carefully down the stairs, bracing his hands against the second floor as he goes. Walking through the kitchen will lead him out back where he heard the laughter but he stops when he notices the bottle on the table.

The amber liquid inside glows like a lighthouse to him.

There's a clean, sparkling glass set out next to it. It's waiting for him now. He saw the kitchen when he entered and he sure as hell didn't see this. The bottle looks unopened. There's no label. Makes him think he's right about it being her pa's own creation.

Almost as if there's a cloud in the room with him, he sees the blurred figure of a ruddy-faced, squat man sitting at the table. The more he looks, the clearer it gets. The man smiles at him, crinkles his eyes, and now Wright knows this is Sadie's pa.

"Hope you fucking stay here," Wright growls. "And what's left of your soul rots in this house."

The man raises his glass in a toast before vanishing with the mist.

Wright blinks and rubs his eyes. The whiskey bottle remains. Along with the crystal clear glass and the laughter outside.

There's something to being a different breed than human that Wright feels makes the veil between this world and the dead thinner. He senses things. Part of it's science, he figures, being so close to the scent of death. If he breathes deeply enough, he can smell the fresh dirt and rotting flesh where Sadie buried her father's body outside.

When he looks in that direction out the screen door, he sees a boy.

A smiling, towheaded thing. Not unlike Ridge when he was a young child. But he's got freckles on his nose and light

green eyes that sparkle as he presses his hand against the screen. He stands no taller than the doorknob, can't be older than five.

“Uncle Wright,” the boy calls. “Come outside.”

The moment he says this, Wright smells the charcoal of a grill cooking chicken. He sees a red checkered tablecloth draped over a picnic table stocked with bowls and beyond it, two figures playing in the tree line. Two boys by the looks of it, one older and one younger.

Like a fish drawn with an invisible string, Wright brushes open the screen door and steps onto the yard. Laughter echoes through the muggy afternoon warmth, swarms like mayflies all around him. He sees the distinct form of his brother, tall and broad, cooking on a red grill. Smoke all in front of him and a woman with her hand flat against the middle of his back. She's stroking up and down his spine and for a moment, Wright can feel it.

Then, Ridge draws back. Wright's close enough to see his smile in profile as he sets down his metal spatula and cups her face in his hands. Her light brown hair spills in waves down her back. He can tell from her height and the way she moves that it's Sadie.

Gentler than Wright's ever seen him, Ridge kisses Sadie's lips. It's a long kiss. One that feels distinctly intimate to interrupt. His hands shift from her cheeks to her neck. She holds his arm with one hand, knots her fist in his shirt with the other. Then, he tucks two fingers underneath her chin. Brushes his thumb over her lip.

“Beautiful as the first night I saw you,” he says.

Wright's never heard his brother's voice like this. It's still low, nothing like it was when he was a boy, but warmer than he is now.

“We didn't wait long enough to age much,” she teases, smoothing her hand over his chest. “And our boys came soon after.”

“Let’s have another,” he says.

Sadie laughs. “We have a lifetime for that, don’t we?”

“That is a *challenge*, my little fawn.”

“You dog,” Sadie teases.

Ridge growls, burying his face in her neck. Her laughter lifts, even as she grips his shirt. But Ridge is laughing too and he pulls her closer.

Wright looks away.

He doesn’t expect this to cut him like it does.

He doesn’t know how much he wanted this for Ridge before he sees it.

For years, he’s been too resentful towards his brother to think about his role in his upbringing but *fuck*, if he wouldn’t feel so damn proud to see him like this. To see him with a home and a family, to see him *laughing*? It sears straight through Wright’s chest. But it’s an illusion.

Something like this could never happen, because Sadie doesn’t have the time it would take to start. There’s no point in daydreaming about what could happen if she stays. About who his brother could be if someone gave him the chance to be warm again. But he still hears his brother’s laughter, the genuine kind, the sweet kind that still after everything lights his own cheeks.

He wipes his face. The humidity’s getting to him.

He feels a small hand take his.

“They can’t see you, Uncle Wright,” the boy says. “But it’s okay. We can.”

The two other boys weave through the trees in the forest and he watches them, trying to catch a glimpse of their faces. From afar, they look just like he and Ridge do in the photograph on his mantle.

Where he stands, it's as if he's experiencing a living memory in a foreign place. Everything is as it was once, except for where they stand. Except for how, when he looks back at his brother, he's looking at a man holding his wife. Looking out at their boys. Discussing having another. Sadie stands with her back against Wright's chest, her hands holding his arms around her so tight that he can see the tendons in them. Like if she lets go, he'll slip away. Ridge holds her just as tightly.

"Pa says you were as good as a dad to him," the boy says.

Wright smiles grimly.

"Sure he has his complaints about that," he says.

"Nuh-uh," the boy says.

Wright sighs a laugh. Not quite believing.

"They say they forgive you," the boy adds.

The air grows thinner.

"What for?" Wright asks, his throat tightening.

"For what you're going to do," the boy says.

A chill runs like a freight train through Wright's body and he shudders, closing his eyes for only a blink. When he opens them, the smell of charcoal is gone from the air. The sun is falling into the trees. The scent of fresh dirt is stronger now and when Wright looks down, he realizes he's standing on a grave.

The one Sadie dug. It smells deep, like she took the extra care to dig six feet down. Would have had to dig taller than her own head for that but he knows how she cared for her father.

When he thinks of Sadie now, he sees her in Ridge's arms and it's enough to break his fucking heart. He can't picture her with a shovel in her hands but knows that's a part of her as much as the laughter, as much as her scent on the couch, as much as the flowers sketched in charcoal on the wall with the prayer.



God damn the world that would bring such a person down to the Devil. That would curse her for her father's sins.

He sees the bottle of amber liquid so vividly now it's as if it's in front of him. So close, is oblivion. His mouth waters for it. It's warm outside but he needs another blanket, one silky and oak-aged.

He doesn't even realize he's pouring the glass at first. Doesn't notice the walk he's made until he's swallowing the burning sweetness down, down, down into the depths of himself where he's finally warm again. Another glass. There's no use in him leaving the house tonight, anyway. There's no use in him *existing*, anyway. Another glass. He didn't save Jess and he won't save Sadie either, which'll kill what's left of Ridge when he feels her leave this earth.

It takes the fourth for him just to steady his hands.

Then, he braces himself against the table. Hangs his head down. It's heavy now. Filled with nothing but the sand he's built his life on since he got back from war. His breath is deep in his throat and he exhales it all out.

The table is cool under his palms. The rest of the air grows scorching and muggy. Too much. He wishes he could just sit in front of a fan but he's lucky there are even working lights here. He turns them all on and lets them burn his eyelids before pouring another glass.

"For what I'm going to do," he whispers to himself. "The hell is that, then?"

That space on the stairs calls to him. The beckoning is so loud that he looks towards them just to see if the Devil is there waiting. But there's nothing there and no one waiting. He has to use his free hand to help him climb up that narrow path, has to duck so that he doesn't hit his head. Then, on the second stair from the top, he sits.

He watches the words of the Lord's prayer blur and dance. It's enough to make him nauseous. Like he's seen Sadie do, he leans his forehead against the rim of his glass and breathes

deep. Steadies himself where he sits. It's too late to regret drinking. He's far enough that he can only think about having more. Finishing the bottle. Is there anything left in it? It'll be how he chases her bastard father, swallowing all of his vice until that ghost has nothing but the dregs of the hell he put his daughter through. Wright hopes Sadie doesn't end up here. She deserves to see something beautiful, even if it's Heaven.

"Our father," Wright grumbles, feeling the glass press hard into his skin. It'll leave a mark on his forehead but he can't detach himself from that amber prayer. "Who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name."

He sees Ridge laughing into Sadie's neck, sees her smiling so broadly it makes her eyes glisten.

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done."

He sees the boys running through the woods. Sees himself and Ridge, as kids, running through the woods.

"On Earth as it is..."

But it was never just him and Ridge, was it? Jess was always there, and she was faster than his brother.

"Can't fuckin' bear it, Lord," he groans. His chest heaves, his breath stifled. Tears brim in his eyes. "Can't fuckin' do this again."

When he looks through the glass, the whiskey reflects the words upside down.

Night falls over the city of Raleigh as Ridge watches from a distant hill. He sees the glowing lights and recoils from the scents and noises of the city. Sadie isn't there. He can feel it deep in his bones that she's like him in this way. She may tell Wright she has dreams of finding the ocean but she'll shirk from the crowds when she does. Despite fleeing, she knows she belongs in his arms with her blood in his mouth and her breath on his skin. In the dewy grass of the Carolinas or somewhere in the mountains where no one can find them.

He sees everything clearly. Even as he starves, knowing only her taste will satiate him. Even as he travels by foot more than two hundred and fifty miles over the last three days, sleeping outside, often in his wolf form. He hasn't lived in the fur of it for this long since Wright came back from war and he feels how animal it makes him.

It's nothing compared to her.

Nothing brings out the wolf in him like his little fawn, her sweet fucking smell and the taste he still holds on his tongue. God, yes, the feeling of her around him. The way she takes his cock so well even though he knows it hurts her as much as it brings her pleasure. When he sees her, he'll make her speak into his ear so he can feel her breath along with the sound of her voice. Then he'll squeeze her throat until her pulse becomes a hammer underneath his long fingers and he will nick her skin right under her jaw. Drink the fervor of his desire for her.

*It keeps you alive*, he'd told her. Now he thinks it keeps him.

Tonight he breaks into a house that smells empty. Steals a man's clothes even though the jeans are short on him and the shirt leaves space in his midriff. Takes a six pack from the fridge and heads for high ground. There, he climbs far enough into a tulip tree that he can see for miles in front of him.

Somewhere past the buzzing lights of the city, his little fawn is waiting. He sees her in a hotel room somewhere, her hand between her legs and his name on her lips. The same as it had been in the phone booth he jerked off in once he caught a whiff of her scent. Pressing his nose to the glass where she braced her hand after hanging up, her pussy still drenching her fingertips. The smell of her neck and hair were heavy against one wall like she'd leaned there for a while afterwards.

It didn't occur to him to wait for her call because he knew that was the last she'd make for a while. He imagines with a start to his heartbeat that she wiped her hand on the glass knowing he would find her. Wanting him to smell what he'd

done to her. His girl's got a rebellious spirit just like he does. The call was her challenge. She wants him to find her. And better than anything, she knows he will.

He bets she feels him, even like this. He feels her. It soothes aching spots within him like mending a wound or smelling cooked food when he was hungry as a child. Both healing and nourishing.

She should never have left him. When he finds her, he'll ensure she never does again.

Humans run the churches that preach to his brother and Sadie. Those with real magic, be it dark like his own or light like he imagines exists within her sweet, plush form, don't confine themselves to buildings. They don't reveal the rules they follow. One of them lied to her. Someone with a silver tongue and a black heart like his own wants his little fawn for themselves but they do not know him.

They do not know how powerful he is when she's at stake. He will be a god for her. He will be nuclear. He can taste the burn of uranium in the back of his throat. Hunger echoes like an endless howl through his bones. Rings in his eardrums. It's not something that anyone else can satisfy because it's not in his stomach. It's in his fucking soul.

He will kill all who hunt her. He will keep her forever.

The image of her prints itself onto his eyelids. Hazel eyes, dark lashes, a blush beneath the freckles on her cheeks. Sweet, golden thighs spread wide and willing. *She's it for you*, Wright had said. More true than anything he's ever heard. Her scent is still wrapped like cellophane around the inside of his nostrils but he needs more of it. Lives for it. Drives his body forward for it day and night.

It feels fatal to him. But lust and hunger are not the only reasons.

Within hours of attempting to stalk her trail, he realizes something else is hunting with him. A predator. Perhaps the one who lied to her and perhaps even more than that. He

catches a bitter scent often overlapping with hers. One that is excited, aroused, fiery. Drooling. Searching for her. She doesn't know anyone else is hunting her and so she leaves him her scent: her wet handprint in the phone booth, the sweat of her thighs on a park bench, her knees in the grass.

He's close.

They are too.

The thought bristles Ridge's fur when he's in his wolf form and clenches his fists when he's human. He'll get to her first and when he finds her he'll claim her in the blood of whatever fool tried to track her too. Whoever has the wrong idea to pretend they can rule the dominion of her sacred flesh. He is her master, and she is his.

The fawn in the grass and the wolf who guards her, linked forever with scent and spit and blood and cum.

It's all east of here. East of him. Towards the ocean that he knows she longs for. The waves and the swampy outer banks that smell strong enough to swallow even the most delicious scents. He hopes she stops before she gets there. Hopes that she waits for him.

But here, outside the flowing city, Ridge feels something like a stone dropping in his stomach. At first he looks in her direction. Lets the bottle shatter to the ground beneath him and breathes deep the scent of the wind.

No. Not there. Not with her.

He looks west towards where the rest of his family remains, raises his face to the stars, and howls.

Wright stumbles onto the yard, the near-empty whiskey bottle in his hand. The heat builds still, threatens to swallow him, so he's barefoot and shirtless and drenched in sweat. Has to drink more than he would to keep his mind as fuzzy as he needs it. He swears the moon feels like the sun in how bright and burning it is overhead. Boiling dew clings to the weeds

beneath his feet. And while he hears bugs chirping and buzzing in the forest loud as fighter jets, he can't see them in his haze.

If not for the heat, he'd think he was back in France. He'd think he was chasing moonlight through the trees, looking for the scent of someone safe to eat. Germans and Americans and French all smelled the same. He'd have to get close. Here, the grave is his enemy.

He stalks hesitantly towards it like it will swallow him instead.

Still, he approaches the spot of fresh earth. Tonight he'll feel its breath on his skin.

He wrote the prayer on his forearm in ballpoint pen. Of him and Ridge, his brother who lived as a wolf for years is the academic. Wright was never good at sitting still. To be educated and to be a predator are similar existences. They require the ability to study something until one knows its bones, to expect and predict the future based on the past...

That is his brother. Ridge relearned language not from talking to Wright or attending church but through reading. Voraciously. His light eyes sprinting while the rest of him sat still.

Even Wright's handwriting betrays his faults. Uneven letters, their ends stretched. Straying from solid lines. It's poor scholarship and the drink, which he hasn't indulged in like this in months. But he's done it. He's written the entire prayer, written it the correct way. The way he doesn't go to sleep without reciting.

When he stands on the grave, its fresh dirt is so damp and deep he feels he might sink down with the corpse. There's an older cross next to this one. If he breathes deep enough, he can smell rotting cedar and bones below the surface. The old grave is shallower than the depth at which Sadie buried her father, or enough of the earth has eroded to where the body is only three

feet underground. He sees Sadie standing in a ditch taller than her own head and he steadies himself. Firms his resolve.

He'll speak to the Devil tonight. And though she's not the only person he'd do it for, she's the only one still breathing.

"Amen... forever... glory," he says in a low voice. As if he can speak quietly enough that his own Maker won't hear him.

He stumbles over his words so often it's as if something is pushing his tongue in his mouth. Pushing him towards the Lord he's prayed to all his life. But God didn't look after Sadie when her father killed her. God didn't watch over the fucking camps that smelled somewhere between slaughterhouses and crematoriums and housed millions of still-living, half-dead souls. God didn't watch over Jess and Harry, and God sure didn't look out for Ridge.

But the Devil kept a close eye over all of it, didn't he? Wright sees him when he drinks every time he tips the bottle.

As he catches his footing and his chanting grows stronger, he feels the air shift. While it was sweltering when he walked outside, there's a cool breeze now. It brushes past his face like a caring lover. Kisses his neck. Runs fingers through his cropped hair.

The humming of insects and the brush of the breeze swirl around him as he unsheathes his hunting knife and levels the point of his blade at the soft part of his forearm. For a man of God to renounce his Savior requires sacrifice. He wrote the Lord's prayer on his own flesh and he'll give Old Scratch the part that sees the sun.

The blade is sharp but his skin is thick and he must dig deep to cut himself. It stings. No, it *screams*. His hand shakes as he holds the blade like he's skinning a rabbit, careful to not take too much of the muscle as he goes. He uses his teeth to hold the flap of skin as he cuts the rest of the strip from his arm and tosses it to the dirt at his feet.

His blood is the sound of rain falling to the earth. Trickling in small rivers down his fingers. They're slick with it. The air

is slick with it. Everything is.

The buzzing in the woods grows louder. Soon, it sounds less like bugs and more like a battalion humming. Their voices raise, still low and guttural, the tide of their collective breath rising in his spine. Reaching spidery fingers through his scalp and turning his face towards the moon.

“Kneel,” a dark voice says above the din.

“No,” he growls. He will speak to the Devil but he will not kneel to him.

Suddenly nausea rips through his stomach and he buckles forward with such a force that he’s knocked to his hands and knees against the cool dirt. At his size, he doesn’t know anything that can do this. Bile runs from his throat, through his mouth, to the place where the dead man lies. Black like the night above. Fizzing.

He vomits again, still unable to stand. It feels like his hands and knees are filled with iron and drawn to an unbearably powerful magnet underneath the ground. He can’t lift them. Can hardly lift his heavy head. The blood streams from his forearm down over the top of his hand, sealing him down like glue. He spits. Groans. Feels like he’s dying, and maybe he is.

Then, there’s a hand on his bare back. A familiar warm palm and long, slender fingers brush circles over his spine. He closes his eyes.

Hell loosens its grip on him or greets him with soft, dry hands.

He no longer feels a strong pull towards the depth of the earth but he feels weak, so he sets back on his heels and rests his elbows on his knees. Feels the hand reach for his shoulder.

He smells her now.

It hits him like a bolt of lightning, the smell of her. Fresh roses and summer tomatoes, the scent of warm grass after heavy rain. Black tea with honey and cream. It pulls fucking



tears from his eyes, that scent. Breaks the stone of his heart, that scent.

He grabs her wrist. It's a violent need. Wraps his long fingers all the way around and holds her there. Nearly a decade has passed since he left for war and last smelled her like this. Now, the old world shatters over him.

The years he spent soothing lust with meaningless encounters. Fucking strangers for days at the farmhouse in the bed he shared with her. Drinking and quitting drinking. Mourning the loss of his family and angry at Ridge for all he's done for it. Blaming him. There are so many lines on his face now and he should have stopped aging years before he left but he lost her and the moment he did killed a good half of everything he felt. It filled the empty spaces with all the black bile that seeps and steams into the earth.

"Drink this," her voice tells him.

He sees dark liquid in a mug, offered by her ivory hand. He hears the buzzing of the insects in the forest and the hum of the sweltering summer night. The scent hits him next.

"Coffee," he laughs, taking it.

"Sobers you up a bit, if I recall," she laughs. That *sound*. That warm, perfect sound like fluttering pages and torn lace.

He smiles. Keeps his face down but holds the mug in his hands. It feels like if he drinks this, he'll be agreeing to something. Instead he lets gravity draw him closer into the rich black earth. Tastes it with his knees.

"Won't you look at me?" she asks.

He shakes his head. Takes a sip of the coffee now. It's bitter but rich, mixed with chicory root the way she used to make it. It is tempting for him to look. So tempting it feels like wanting to pull his hand from a fire.

"No," he says.

"Why?" she asks.

“Because I’ll notice it then,” he says.

“Notice what, darling?”

“What you are.”

The Devil as Jess leans her forehead against his temple. Presses a kiss to his neck. Lets her warm breath heat his damp skin. His hand travels from her wrist down her side. She’s wearing silk and lace. He feels the strips of it as he shifts his touch to her thigh. To her long, lean legs. He can feel the muscle in them. The warmth. The soft, fine hairs like peach fuzz over her knee. Even after all this time, he remembers how she feels. He could find her in the dark if she was ever truly warm like this again.

He pushes his hand up her thigh. More peach fuzz. His fingertips graze the line of her hip first. She’s not wearing panties. He lets his thumb brush over the triangle of hair between her legs. Spreads her lips as he strokes up. Pleasure whimpers from her throat and he can’t help himself. He toys with the wet bud, stroking her with his thumb while his other fingers stay braced against the meat of her thigh. She spreads her legs for him. Sweet noises in her throat. The cicadas growing quieter against the sound and taste of her.

“Blindfold me,” he murmurs. His eyes are closed but he needs more restraint. He’s got no chance with how much he wants her; even the illusion of her makes him sink deeper into the ground.

“Is that all ya’d like to speak about?” she asks, giggling as she smooths her hand over his thigh. He’s hard for her. She strokes that too, the way it presses against the leg of his jeans. They were like teenagers when they were together. Fuck it, they were teenagers if they stopped aging then. When he was young and she was alive.

Whatever creature he’s speaking to knew her well. Knew how she felt to him.

But it would never get her eyes. Would never understand the way she looked at him, like they’d never be apart for as

long as they lived. They'd grown up together, gave each other more than their fucking families ever cared to give to them. She was his soul outside of his body, so something without that light could never come close.

She unzips his jeans and pulls him out of them. He thinks the heft of his veined cock is indecent even in damnation, but she wraps her long-fingered hand around him and strokes him gently. Excruciatingly gently, as he toys with her. Sightless. Blind. Soon pleasure will be all that exists for him.

"I need to speak about the girl," he says. Low but firm as she ties the silk around his eyes. He still keeps them closed. Won't risk it.

She's in his lap now. Long legs, still not as long as his when she straddles him. He feels her roll her hips over his and groans, grabbing them tight. Feeling her warm, wet cunt grind against his shaft. He wants to slip inside her. To flood her with the soul he wishes he could give back. He feels the space between her shoulders, all soft skin and the divot of her spine. Such a beautiful fucking back. He thought he'd break her when he took her from behind but she stayed strong. Now, he wants to grind her into the earth.

"Sadie," Jess whispers.

He hates that her name turns him on, but it does. "Sadie," he repeats, his throat rough with lust.

Sadie, whose bright hazel eyes will never look at him with desire and never should. Whose plump breasts and thick thighs bear stark contrast to most women he sleeps with. She is forbidden, foreign, and yet...

He can't say her name without feeling his lust throb.

This isn't Sadie. This is his fucking mate. The devil, as his mate, doing a damned convincing job.

He grasps the thin ribbon straps of her dress and pulls them down, feeling for the mark on her shoulder where once he bit too hard. The divot in her skin is still there. The raised birthmark on the side of her neck. He kisses it. Tastes how the

air from the river flavors it. Listens to the sound of the rushing tide.

“She gave herself to me,” Jess moans.

She’s like ocean waves smoothing over him now and even without entering her she’s the best thing he’s felt on his cock in years. He aches for her, pants for her. When he kisses her, she doesn’t bleed. She’s no longer breakable.

Good, then.

He pushes her onto her back, pinning her wrists with his hands, digging them both into the fresh, wet dirt. He’s poised at her entrance now. Losing his mind.

“You can’t fuckin’ have her,” he growls down at the woman he can’t see but can feel. The one he has dreamt about touching for a decade. The one his entire body aches for.

She slips her hands from his grasp like she’s made of nothing but mist. Holds his face. Soft palms, long fingers. She reaches behind him and unties his blindfold. He feels it brush past his face and fall below him. And he opens his eyes this time.

He sees only lavender silk. Draped over her face like liquid mercury, shining and swirling in the moonlight. Her strong nose and narrow jaw. The arch of her brows. He doesn’t need to lift it to know she’s watching him. Her curls splay across the dirt of the grave where his hands are buried so deep that the wound on his arm is black with it. Still, he touches her face through the silk. His darkened hand leaves a mark.

When she speaks, he can only see her lips brush against the cloth. They make ripples like rain falling onto a battlefield.

“What will you offer me, darling?”

He buries himself in her.

Every morning without Ridge, Sadie wakes up on the floor in front of the motel room door, kneeling with her head resting against the wood. She's got splinters under her nails and a red mark on her forehead that's starting to look more like a bruise. If she didn't chain the lock, she'd sleepwalk to him. All the way from the rickety motel outside of the small lake off the highway surrounded by tobacco farms, where she's spent the last three days feeling like there's a thick wall of glass between her and her route to the ocean.

She knows what that glass is made of.

When she looks at it, really looks at it, it's the same light, lush green of his eyes. It feels the same as his hand on her neck. A welcome restraint. She misses the warmth of him, the breadth of his fingers spread across her body, the feeling of his lips and his tongue on her skin. And in her strongest moments of fear for what's coming, she thinks she'll die with just that feeling of absence.

It's worse than the dread. Missing someone she hardly knows feels no different from a knife wound.

*Because I do know him*, she thinks to herself. *I know the core of him.*

The Spring Hope library is one of the few public buildings in the nearest town to her hotel. It is a long, one-story gray building with blue trim. It's only open for a few hours each afternoon of the week, but for all of those hours she peruses the shelves. She sits on the hardwood floor, feeling the shift of dust under her dress, and reads about lands and people she'll never see. She reads *Rebecca* and hopes no one remembers her as wicked. Reads *A Farewell to Arms*, thinks of Wright, and cries for him. She stops reading then. Abandons the library for the lake a short drive away.

It's not enough, this place. She thinks nowhere will be. Maybe if she could go to Stresa or the Alps, she'd feel like she has more than a week and a half left to live. But as she treads along the wooden planks of the small dock by the lake,

looking out at the fan boats and kudzu-laden hardwood trees, she fights back tears again.

She hates her father, she decides. Hates him for what he did to her. The scar at her temple is light pink against the rest of her skin and she will die with it healed, but the anger for him is still bleeding. How could he?

She lets the anger burn, lets it mix with the hot air all around her as she stares at the ripples in the lake. The reflections of trees taunt her with their longevity.

How cruel.

How merciless.

Out here, right now, it's quiet. No sound save for the wind and the bugs and the birds. The things that will outlive her.

What does she have to lose when everything will be gone for her soon?

She looks around before unbuttoning the dress she wears and sliding it over her head. She's still got her bra and panties on, the ones that are tight on her waist. Looking around, she sees no one.

And so, she strips to only her skin. Dives into the cool black depths.

She lets the lake take her at first. Didn't think it would be so deep that her feet float in what feels like nothing. Her hair swirls in the rays of sunlight that peek through the surface.

How long can she stay under?

Long enough for the Devil to forget her name?

She swoops her arms forward, swimming further into the pitch. She can't see anything in front of her. There could be water moccasins, alligators, monsters waiting for her to pass by. It doesn't matter. What will they do, when the Devil has his claim?

With her lungs squeezing and reaching for air, she thinks that this is what she will do with her time. Damn the library.

There's only a week and a half left in her life, but it is a week and a half in which nothing can harm her but the all-seeing lord who shook her hand. She swims further. Her lungs feel like they may burst. Her throat spasms and she thinks of the way Ridge looked down at her the second time she saw him.

When he held her by the hair and rutted her mouth until she couldn't breathe.

And she bursts up to the surface now, because she realizes that even though the Devil has his claim, he's not the only one.

*You belong to me, little fawn...*

Her body runs with chills. She feels every wave of water around her naked form. Closes her eyes and lets herself float on her back, far enough from the docks to mask her indecency if anyone is to show. She sees him, sees those light moss eyes gone black with anger. What would the man on the hill do to him? What could he?

She feels their powers equally. Both are her fate. Both are so tightly wound within the fabric of her life now that she can't shake their hold. That she can't even take off towards the ocean knowing she'll be further away from that farmhouse she's come to recognize as home.

"These yours, Miss?" a man's voice calls out.

She startles. Feels her heart pound heavy in her chest as she rights herself and looks back at the dock. There's a man standing there. Before she met the Lindals, she would have considered him tall. He's got dark pants and a dark button-down shirt, snug under a black vest and gray jacket. There's a gold chain hanging from his vest, likely attached to a pocket watch. He looks like she used to believe the Devil did. It's enough to make her gasp.

That, and knowing for every detail she sees, he sees just as many of her own.

"Don't let me interrupt you," he says. His voice carries over with the wind. Sounds like it's closer than it should be.

Like it's close enough he can see every detail of her body under the water. "My church is just across the road; I walk here sometimes to clear my head."

A church. Not the Devil then, but there's still something unsettling about him. He rests his hand on the back of the bench that overlooks the lake. Sadie wants to cross her arms in front of her chest but she needs to keep herself afloat and she's treading water.

"Seems you're doing the same," the man adds.

He's got a black book in his other hand. The Bible, Sadie imagines. She's got no idea why she feels afraid of him. Maybe it's some effect of being damned.

"Is it cold in the water?" he asks.

It didn't feel that way before he got here.

"It's alright," she says shakily.

"Don't mean to surprise you," he says. "Didn't even see you before I made it to the docks, or I wouldn't have interrupted-"

"It really is alright," she insists.

"You're not from around here?" he asks abruptly.

She exhales a shaking laugh. She doesn't want to answer him.

He crouches down to the pile of her clothing on the ground. Lifts her dress up and folds it, smoothing it with his hands. Even in the water, she feels his touch on her skin. He takes her bra and folds it neatly in half, placing it atop the dress. When he lifts her panties, he stares at her.

Fear stifles her voice. As long as she's in the water, she's safe from him. But she can't tread water forever.

"You might think a town like ours is in the middle of nowhere," he says, stretching the fabric of the waistband. He looks from it to her. "That you'd not run into a soul out here."



He folds her panties but keeps them in his hands.

“Surely ain’t seen someone who looks like you before,” he drawls. He closes the fabric in a fist and brings it by his face. They’re not the cotton panties that Ridge can smell from across the room. They’re satin. “You’re ethereal, ever heard that word?”

She wishes Ridge were here.

“Pretty caramel,” he says, tossing her panties with the rest of her clothing. He stands, rubbing his thumb against his fingers like he’s trying to feel some extra moisture. “Anyhow, you’d be surprised what folks we have pass through this place. Some carry guns, not the word of the lord.”

He chuckles.

“I’ll go back to the church now,” he says. “If you’re new, you must be staying at the motel nearer to Spring Hope. It’s a nice place. If you’re still here, stop by for service on Sunday. All are welcome.”

With that, he turns. Strides on long legs over the wood of the docks.

Sadie waits at least ten minutes, her fingers pruned and body shivering, until she’s sure he won’t see her. Then she scrambles up the dock, pulls her dress over her head, and runs to the truck. The next morning, she sits with the phone from her motel room in her lap and dials the farmhouse.

Just to hear Wright’s stern voice. Just to hear Ridge growl threats into her ear.

No one answers.

## Chapter 7

## *Possessed*

**B**y the time Ridge tracks down his truck in the motel's lot, desire has made him feral. His hands shake like Wright's do when he's coming off the drink. Even the whirring of a car engine meandering through the parking lot is enough to make him snap his jaws.

*Fuck.*

He has to eat.

He has to eat before he sees her or she'll think him insane. But he doesn't want any food but the small bites he dreams of taking from her flesh. Those golden fucking thighs of hers have been on his mind. Never found a pillow quite so soft. He'd like to sleep with his head perched between her splayed legs, her juices baptizing his crown. Waking intermittently to lick and nip at her folds until she drenches his chin. What a way to live, what a way to die...

He's so close that all rationality must go, but he's got a deranged look in his eye and his attempts to quell it might get him arrested. Earlier he broke into a store and found some clothes closer to his size. Washed his face with a hose. He's got a black t-shirt and black pants belted to his narrow hips and he looks like a fucking city boy. Looks like he drove here straight from a mansion in Raleigh.

Not like he's a wolf who hasn't ventured past his hunting grounds in the past ten years.

He hates it, a bit. But he knows it buys him things that ill-fitting jeans and a filthy t-shirt might not. Buys him a lack of questioning from those he passes who might wonder why a man is standing in the parking lot looking like he's going to take his next meal between his woman's legs.

A woman leaving the motel with her husband stares so hard at him that she trips in her heels. Any other day, she'd make a fine meal. He'd tear her husband's throat out and fuck her as she screamed but such an action seems faceless and masturbatory now. Sex with anyone but Sadie is a waste of sweat and seed.

The motel is a single-story blue and gray building with six rooms and an adjoining restaurant. It's just past lunchtime but he smells cooking oil, fried meat, some pitiful excuses for tomatoes. Butter on a skillet that makes him think of her.

Judging by the scent even at this distance, Sadie's room is number two. The second one from the left, he imagines they'll get noise complaints when he takes her. He has no intention of ceasing fucking her for at least two days. Should have brought smelling salts in the event that they pass out again. He's going to break her like a wild mare. Bruise and bite her skin until she fears him more than her Devil.

The smell of another predator followed him here. With too many new people, he can't spot its exact source. A motel off of the highway could attract any number of creatures looking to snap his fawn up in their strong jaws.

Like the man in the black blazer who leans against the corner of the motel. He, too, has worn all black today, though looking at him you'd think it a cool fall evening rather than a sweltering July day. He's got long pants that smell like wool and he is sweating. A human. Still, he doesn't like the way he lingers.

It's too much like how Ridge waits in the shadows for prey.

Ridge watches as the man steps onto the walkway adjoining the motel rooms. He walks carefully, slowly, like he's making his footfalls quiet to avoid being caught. Steps that only imitate the wolf's walk Ridge falls into normally. If he wants to be heard, he has to make himself heard. Loud footfalls in the house when he knew his fawn was hiding but otherwise, stealth.

The man is standing in front of Sadie's room now. A low growl rolls from Ridge's throat.

If he knocks on the door...

If she lets him in...

Ridge grips the hollow iron of the lamppost next to him, imagining the man's neck instead of hot metal. He's got death in his eyes. He's feral. But the man is far away, none the wiser to Ridge watching him palm the door that smells like hers from this distance.

The man leans his ear against it.

Ridge feels the metal of the lamppost begin to cave in. He loosens his grip, but it's all he can do to keep from barreling towards the man and tearing out his throat in the parking lot. Splashing Sadie's blue door with the man's red blood. Independence day was weeks ago. The bastard smells like church pews, that distinct Necco wafer scent. Someone who preys on goodness, Wright would say. But Wright would kill the man too for the scent of semen on him like he's fucked his hand in the parking lot. A predator. Weak but still deadly to someone.

Could be to her.

Ridge pushes forward. The thought that a man would be just the type who'd tell Sadie she was meant for hell adds wood to the fire that burns within him. Fuck it, he'll bring an entire town into his secret. He'll kill in broad daylight.

Feral. He's feral now, gone too long without Sadie now that he's tasted her. Too long not knowing if she's safe.

The man turns. Without looking in Ridge's direction, he strides towards the restaurant with a restrained, quiet gait. And Ridge is struck with the thought that this man is not the only evil thing tracking her. That there is still the scent of something more powerful in the air.

*Fuck, again.*

Ridge has spent too long hunting to wait now.

He's starved. Wants to taste his fawn's blood on his tongue. Drink from her. Devour her. Fuck her while she's bound to the bed beyond that blue door, come inside her so hard he puts a child there and keeps her as her sweet curves transform for him. *Yes.* He ignores the preacher, instead taking long strides towards that haven. That glorious fucking space where he can take his fawn again.

When he reaches the doorknob, it only takes a sharp twist to break the lock. He pushes inside and nearly falls to his knees at the bliss of her scent all around him. Brown butter, honeysuckle, salted air. He didn't notice before how strong the scent of ivy is within her. Like she's grown roots everywhere she travels.

She's not here and that matters but it doesn't stop his drive to consume. He grabs a dress from the bed and buries his face in it, groaning. He's an animal now. No thoughts but the drive to devour. He crawls onto the bed, tasting her sweat with his hands. Buries his face in her pillow. He'd like to roll in her scent. He's not even a wolf anymore, but a dog. Smoothing his hands over every single remnant of her. Her clothes. Her toothbrush in the bathroom. He nearly gnaws on her hairbrush. Runs his hand over the damp bathtub and drinks the water he collects.

It hasn't been long since she left.

The truck is in the parking lot.

She must be in the restaurant.

"God damn," Ridge curses under his breath. He'd really like to soothe his throbbing lust and he imagines such a thing

will be difficult as he kills that fucking preacher.

Not impossible, though.

He thinks the only thing that may quell his anger for the church and his lust for Sadie is fucking her on some altar in the man's spilt blood. Maybe she'll see it as a sacrifice to her god. A worthy trade.

He growls at the thought, standing and straightening himself in the mirror. His lips glisten from his watering mouth. He has to tuck his erection into his waistband. Redo his belt and pull his shirt over it. Smooth his hair back. Being in public in the daytime is a fucking betrayer of subtlety. They'll sense the hunger in his eyes. His teeth are too sharp when he smiles.

Her scent lingers in the air of the walkway; his hands shake. His stomach growls deep within him. When he steps into the restaurant, which could be more aptly called a diner, he has to fight the urge to turn. He slides into the closest booth, his heel catching a staccato rhythm against the floor as he steeples his hands and breathes.

He can feel her. *Fuck*, he forgot how strong the urge is when she's this close. The animal part of him is taking over and he'll have to fight to keep himself from turning and slaughtering every human in this place.

But then he hears her voice.

It's not aimed in his direction but its perfect rounded tone, its rushing of cool water, bathes his ears and soothes all the way down his spine. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. There are other people in the diner and the scent of food cooking is likely strong but he can't smell anything but her. Can't hear anything but her.

"I didn't know anyone would be there," she says.

She's sitting at the bar with her back to him, her legs squeezed tight together but no arousal in her smell. It's a protection. There's fear in her scent and in her posture and in her voice. She never puts her elbows on the table like this, not without Ridge causing her to buckle. Never hunches over

when she eats. The man in the black suit sits next to her, one glass of water between them but his hand on it. Ridge grinds his teeth to keep from leaping up and gutting the preacher where he sits.

The man notices him, glancing in his direction briefly before looking back at Sadie.

“Good that someone was,” the man says, turning the glass on the counter. “Gators in that lake. Water moccasins too.”

“Sir, I grew up swimming in the Tennessee,” she says. “We have our own creatures there and I have a good sense about those.”

The man chuckles.

“Who am I to insist a woman doesn’t have good sense?” he asks. “You made it out here, didn’t you? All by yourself?”

*Not all by herself*, Ridge wants to say. *Her mate is sitting a few booths down, planning which part of you he’ll devour first.*

Sadie takes a deep breath. “Is that what you’d like to hear?”

“Pardon?”

“At the river, when I was swimming,” she says. “You folded my clothes.”

Ridge’s hand snaps into a fist so hard he’s surprised he doesn’t break his fingers.

“Didn’t want them to wrinkle,” the man says.

“*All* of my clothes,” Sadie whispers.

Ridge grinds his jaw. He imagines the man’s nimble fingers smoothing over the cotton of her panties, imagines him breathing in her scent. His vision and his mind are black with the thought.

“Good afternoon,” a woman’s voice says in his direction. “What can I do for you?”



Ridge looks up at her. She's a waitress, has a sea foam green dress and everything. Auburn curls and bright chestnut eyes. She bites her lip when she makes eye contact with him. Catches her breath in her throat. He smells arousal between her long ivory legs.

"Invite those two to sit with me," he says in a low voice. He doesn't want her to hear him yet.

She blushes. "The reverend?" she asks. "Are you a religious man?"

He smiles. If it weren't for Sadie, he'd be charmed by the intelligence that lingers in her voice. "Oh, I just eat it up."

She laughs. "Anything else you'd like to eat, sir?"

"Coffee and hotcakes, please."

She nods. "That'll be right up, Mr..."

"Ridge Lindal," he says, fixated on Sadie's back.

He watches her straighten. Feels her pulse now. It was already racing but it skips and flutters as it does against his tongue.

"Alright, Ridge Lindal," the server says, none the wiser.

She walks towards Sadie and the reverend, placing her hand on the man's arm. His eyes linger on the collar of her shirt when she speaks to him, but Sadie's turned around. She stares at Ridge with wide, glistening hazel eyes. Already, she's trembling.

She pushes herself from her seat on shaking legs and braces her hand on the cushion. Looks between Ridge and the door. When she meets his gaze again, he raises an eyebrow. Challenging her. *Run, my little fawn. I would love to catch you.*

He rises and steps towards her, watching her track him until he's standing in front of her and looking down. His brother was right when he said the bond would get stronger after they'd mated because he is speechless in his lust for her. Even four days is enough for him to forget the exact pattern of

the freckles on her face and he's unable to stop himself. He reaches out and holds her cheek. Feels the softness of her skin and tastes the remnants of tears.

There are three urges stronger than anything he's ever felt. The first is to sink his teeth into her neck and rut into her in this diner, drinking her blood while he fucks her and not giving a damn what anyone sees. The second is to kiss her, to press his lips to the corner of hers that bears a cinnamon constellation. The third is to fall to his knees in front of her and bury his face between her legs.

He can do none of the sort when killing another predator is in the day's cards but he can taste her with his fingertips. God, she wants him too. He lets his eyes trail down past the blush in her cheeks to her full breasts, where the small bumps of her hardened nipples poke against the snug fabric. He exhales sharply thinking of the taste and feeling of pressing a razor over those peaks and lapping the blood from them. Fuck, he might not make it. It's taking everything for him not to drag her by the hair to her room.

He's surprised, pleurably so, that she holds his wrist. That she grabs it, really. Keeps his hand where it is. He's gritting his teeth so as not to grab her by the waist and pull her to him. He wants to feel her wanton, plush form. All of it. Now.

"How did you find me?" she whispers.

Her.

Fucking.

Voice.

He's hardly aware of his own body right now, so deep is he in the fantasy of bending her over the table and taking her hard, aggressive, until she bleeds again. Clawing his fingers into her back. Breaking her sweet skin. He wants to fuck her so deep he can feel her marrow seep onto his cock as her bones break around him.

All he manages is a growl that prickles goosebumps on her arms.

“Do y’all know each other?” the reverend asks.

He’s got a wavering to his voice like he’s nervous and he should be, but not yet. Ridge needs him to go somewhere with them. He needs him to take them to church.

Inhaling deeply, Ridge lets Sadie’s cheek go and balls his fist at his side. It’s all he can do not to lick her sweat off his palm. He smiles, standing straighter. The man is tall but still inches shorter than him; he tries not to make it too obvious that he’s looking down when he speaks to him. He thinks of Wright. Wright presents himself as trustworthy. Wright is a man people want to spend time with. A safe, if imposing, presence.

“Hi there,” he says, nodding to the man. He even speaks with his brother’s thicker drawl, which makes the edges of Sadie’s lips curl up. He adopts it with prey, did so with her when they first met. “Nah, my sister here seemed deep in conversation with ya, so while I didn’t want to interrupt, I thought it would be mighty fine to treat ya to lunch. We’re new around these parts, lookin’ for a house to rent.”

The reverend looks stunned. “Sister?” he asks, directing the question more towards Sadie.

She hasn’t stopped staring at Ridge. She tilts her head, confused, before firming her lips together.

“That’s right,” she says.

“The two of you don’t look alike,” the reverend remarks.

Ridge can’t disagree with that statement. Sadie’s got a darker complexion and stands more than a foot shorter than him, not to mention the freckles and the broader features in her face. He could have said she was his cousin, but he wants to see the man squirm.

“Different mothers,” Sadie quips, surprising him.

“What is yours like?” the man asks her.

Ridge frowns, not liking the accusatory tone of the man's voice. "Not mine," he quips, guiding Sadie into the booth. He gestures for the man to sit across from them, which he does reluctantly.

The reverend won't be the only one challenging himself with restraint at this table because Ridge has to stifle a groan when he feels Sadie's heat against him in the booth. Nearly panting, he takes her hand under the table and presses it to the bulge in his pants. She inhales sharply. He feels the sound at the base of his spine. Fuck, he might come from just her touching him. From the way her hand makes fractional strokes underneath the table.

He looks down at her. Her eyes are full of wonder. So. Fucking. Wide.

He takes a deep breath, spreading his hand across her thigh and gripping tightly.

"So, Reverend," he addresses the man, leaning forward. He keeps one elbow on the table. The other hand, he digs into her flesh as he feels her pull him closer to the edge. It's only the smallest movement, only through fabric, but it's her. It's his sweet little fawn and her hungry eyes. It's the taste of her underneath his palm. The scent of her dripping cunt through new satin underwear. He fights the urge to tangle his fingers in her unruly hair and pull her to him, to lick the sweat from her forehead. "Any sermons today?"

"Nah, not 'til Sunday," the reverend says. "Got some baptisms tomorrow."

"Any today?" Ridge asks.

Sadie traces the outline of the tip of his erection. He's fucking leaking for her. His desire spreads to her fingertips.

"Not yet," the reverend says. "Why? Are you interested?"

The question is meant to be in jest but Ridge takes it. "For this one, actually."

He nods to Sadie, who pauses her exploration. She touches her lips with her damp fingers. Ridge wants to kiss the taste of himself on her but instead he digs his fingers harder into her thigh. She whimpers lightly as a bruise breaks across her skin.

“You haven’t been baptized?” the reverend asks, placing his book down on the table. Ridge knows from the smell of him that the man has unholy desires for Sadie, but there’s something spiteful when he speaks to her. Like he’s angry about something she’s done.

*You folded my clothes.*

“I suppose not,” Sadie says.

They’re speaking but Ridge hardly notices them because he wonders, in what instance would this fucking holy man have an excuse to touch his woman’s things.

“How did the two of you meet?” Ridge asks.

The reverend frowns at him for a moment and he realizes he’s dropped his thicker drawl. He clears his throat.

“Seemed familiar before,” he says. “Good to see my sister talkin’ to a man of god. Lord knows she’s got some demons after her.”

He slides his hand further up her skirt, tracing the line of her slit under her panties. Lavishing in the taste. He hears her breath shudder out of her. She opens her legs to him.

“She didn’t tell you?” the reverend asks. He seems pleased with this notion.

Ridge parts Sadie’s lips and smooths two fingers over her swollen bud. So slick and full of desire. Her legs quiver as he circles it. Microscopic attentions, he gives to her. Anyone looking at them wouldn’t think he was moving at all. But he feels her throbbing.

“No, she didn’t,” Ridge sighs. He wonders if he can have her sit on his lap so he can sheath his cock inside her while they speak. She tastes so fucking good. He knows how incredible she feels.

The reverend smiles at Sadie, who is looking studiously at her menu. Beneath her freckles, her cheeks are flushed bright red. She's trying to stay composed but Ridge hears her shuddered breaths. He keeps stroking her clit.

"I didn't have a..." she whispers, biting her lip. "Sorry. I didn't have a chance."

God, she's so fucking beautiful. So delicious and willing and *his*.

"We ran into each other by the lake," the reverend says.

Sadie stares at him, her lips parted now to her quiet panting.

"It's a short walk from my church so I go there often to clear my head," the reverend continues.

Ridge watches as Sadie's hands start to tremble.

"Are you alright?" the reverend asks.

"She's possessed," Ridge remarks, gravel in his voice. His fingers pick up speed.

Sadie leans forward on the table, clasping her hands in front of her mouth. He feels a tremor ride through her, feels more wetness leak from her entrance. She's such a good girl, taking pleasure still and silent like this. Even though her legs are shaking.

"Here are your hotcakes, sir."

It's the waitress's voice. She sets the plate down in front of him. Ridge watches her eyes widen; from her vantage she can see his hand between Sadie's legs. He slips his touch away slowly, trailing her pleasure along her thigh. It slicks her golden skin. From the color on the waitress's pretty cheeks alone, he knows she sees it. Still, or because of that, he uses his glistening fingers to scoop some of the syrup from the plate and paint his tongue with it. Sucks Sadie's juices and the syrup off and swallows.

"Delicious," he tells her.

“That ain’t proper,” the reverend says.

“Mm,” Ridge acknowledges. The waitress walks away, looking a bit shaken herself. No less aroused, he notices. “We’ve been on the road a bit too long, Reverend. Could use some rightness. Some connection to the Lord. Get my sweet sister right.”

Sadie braces her hand on Ridge’s thigh. *Fucking* sweet. God, yes.

“Heal her, Reverend,” he coaxes. “She’d be so grateful.”

“The flock could always use another lamb,” the reverend offers.

Ridge smiles broadly, clapping his dry hand over the man’s. He dwarfs him. “Good day to save a soul,” he says.

Sadie looks dazed when she smiles at him.

He’s still iron-hard for her. Waiting for the moment he’ll enter that perfect cunt again. But he has a plan now, a vision of what he wants. It will soothe his many hungers.

They ride in the reverend’s truck, Sadie in the passenger seat and Ridge in the bed of it, perched on the side but balanced impeccably. Predators are always graceful. Sadie wants more than anything to be sitting in the back with him and asking him how the heck he found her and what in God’s name he intends on doing with the reverend but the man in the black suit insisted that a truck bed was no place for a lady.

As Sadie listens to him drone about sin, she rolls down the window and urges the wind to soothe her swirling mind.

Ridge found her. Maybe it doesn’t matter how he did, just *that* he did, and that when he did she wanted him immediately. She still does. She has to dig her nails into her knee not to crawl through the open window and make her way back to where he sits. Perfectly balanced. Long legs made to look even longer in his black trousers. The tendons of his ivory neck and strong arms flex and move with the jostling of the truck. His

hair flows in wisps in the wind and smooths back over his head and his lips, his lips are glistening. He doesn't need to tell her that his mouth waters for her.

She feels it too.

She feels it like she ached to feel his touch in the restaurant, so unabashed and wanton that she spread her legs for him under the table. Oh God, when the waitress saw them Sadie's entire body lit on fire with shame. But she would have sucked her juices from his fingers if he asked her to. She would have straddled him and let him fuck her on that table.

The need for him is constant. It feels engraved deep in the notches of her skull that she'll want him and only him, that she needs him inside of her always, that she needs to bear his children. That the idea thrills her. To be swollen with the child of Ridge Lindal, so brutal to everyone including her, but so willing to use that brutality *for* her.

Even as they drive, every time she looks in the mirrors he is watching her. He's tracking her with his gaze. Hungry evergreen eyes and sharp teeth.

It's almost enough to make her forget that she's got less than a week and a half to live.

Almost.

Maybe this reverend is the evil she's meant to slaughter. Fate made Ridge find her and this man in the restaurant, when she never could have expected even the reverend to find her there. She hadn't wanted him to. Every moment she spends around the man in the black suit makes her feel like her skin wants to crawl away from her body on a thousand small insect legs. Ridge is right when he says she doesn't run from fear, but discomfort is still unpleasant.

She wonders how the reverend doesn't sense the danger he's in. Shocked that he'd agree to this, even as his hand settles against her thigh when they drive. Even if she knows just what his motivations are with bringing her into his congregation. She saw the way he and the pretty waitress



exchanged looks. It's clear he has some dominion over the single women in this town. But that doesn't make a person evil, and it sure doesn't make a man stupid enough not to know that when Ridge is in a room he'll own everything with a pulse.

Except Wright. She wants to ask him where he is too, though she knows it'll upset Ridge. After the fight she witnessed and the way Wright answered the phone, she can't imagine Ridge left home on good terms with his brother.

She also knows the look Wright got in his eyes when he stared at that glass of whiskey. It's a dangerous look. She worries about him.

"How does a girl like you end up here?" the reverend asks her as the small white church comes into view. Surrounded by lush green trees, this place could be an oasis. It's simpler and smaller than the church she attended growing up, its steeple a modest, chimney-looking structure that mimics the lines of the awning. Two windows stand in perfect symmetry on either side of the front door. No stairs. No pretense.

"Fate, I guess," she says, looking back at Ridge. Her heart catches in her chest. The way he looks at her makes her feel like she's built from beauty and sunlight. It strips every darkness from her but the way she feels for him.

She wants him.

No.

Yes.

Of course yes, but she needs to talk to him more. If she thinks too much about how he's here, what that means, and her own fate, her head will start spinning.

They park in front of the church.

"Reverend," she says, reaching to touch the man's arm. "If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to my brother for a moment."

"Course," he nods, stepping out of the truck. "I'll gather what we need inside. Can take it to the lake."

She feels the truck lift as Ridge leaps out of it to open her door for her. This action and the way he casts her in shadow with his back to the sun seals them into their world. Still, she watches the reverend enter the church doors and walk inside. He leaves them hanging open. Even through the darkness, Sadie can feel his eyes on them. Watching them.

“Will you walk with me?” she asks.

She starts when Ridge snaps his hand to her jaw, tilting her face back to his.

“Don’t look at him; look at me,” Ridge says firmly. “He’s not a danger to you anymore.”

The contact between them, even like this, whirs electric through Sadie’s veins. She pushes herself from her seat, brushing her body against his. Not thinking about her fate. Not thinking about just how important it was to run away from this man.

“He can see us here,” she whispers. “I don’t want him to see us.”

All the hunger she’s seen rise in Ridge burns with his gaze and he takes her hand, pulling her towards the side of the church. Here, there are three windows but they’re spaced out along the white painted siding. Sadie’s legs shake as he drags her to a solid wall.

He pins her there. Traps her. His hands braced on either side of her like he did against her papa’s truck at the gas station all those nights ago. She looks up at him. There’s shade on this side, a break from the heat, but she still feels a fire inside her chest. It pulses towards him as he looks down at her with hunger written in the tension of his jaw. She wants to kiss his neck. She’d have to stand on tiptoe for it, though.

“Two questions, you can ask me,” he says. “Before I tear into you, my little fawn. I thought I was stronger than this but there’s no fucking chance.”

She feels her skin prick with chills. She’s wet between her legs and she still feels his fingers there. Wants his mouth on

her breasts, which now ache with the craving.

“How’d you find me?” she breathes.

Her body trembles so much she’s not even sure if the words she asks him sound like they should because his scent, his gaze, the heat of his body, is her entire world. It doesn’t matter how he found her. Nothing matters. He’s here and she wants him and-

He kisses her.

Hard.

Open-mouthed.

He swallows her gasp and splits her lips but she’s clinging to him already. Climbing. Needing him the way he took her in the bathroom. He grabs her by the meat of her thighs and wraps her legs around him. Slams her into the church wall. She’s slipping her hands under his shirt just to feel his skin and the tautness of his muscles. Groaning into his mouth like a heathen.

He unzips his pants while she’s still wrapped around him, not ceasing his kissing even for the panting that bumps their lips together. Takes his cock out, pulls her panties to the side, and impales her to the hilt. She cries out the only word she remembers.

“*Ridge!*”

He covers her mouth with his large, dry palm, thrusting mercilessly inside of her. Fucking her, ramming her, into the church wall. He only needs his hips and one hand to hold her up, anyway. She’s locked onto him the second he enters her.

It’s not an unraveling this time. It’s a brutal crash. Pleasure and pain whip in a hurricane between her legs, up her spine. He’s *feral*, rabid, but he moves the hand that covers her mouth to her hair and instead of biting her he kisses her. This is as balanced as his poised body on the truck, but it’s far from predation. It’s near-groveling in desperation. She claws her nails into him. She’s an animal too. He’s assaulting her,

pummeling her. He feels like she imagines an earthquake feels, but inside her womb, shifting the organs in her body. Gripping tight to her hair and her hips to drive deeper.

Soon, each breath he takes is edged with either a growl or a groan and he's fucking her harder, so hard she'll break. She's got tears streaming down her eyes from the hurt and the ecstasy and she could have him like this forever. Even if it kills her. It feels like it might.

"*Fuck*, little fawn," he groans into her mouth. He grips her hair tighter and buries his face under her jaw as he pounds his length deep inside her. She can feel him hit her spine. "*Fuck*, gonna come quick. Gonna come in this perfect little cunt, can't fucking hold back."

His words untie her tongue and she cries out, her own pleasure splashing over him. He slams his fist into the wall and she feels paint chips sprinkle over her skin but only for a moment, because she feels him next. She feels his cock kick inside her, feels the warmth flooding her entire body. He grips her tighter, continuing to thrust. He feels even bigger than before. Wider, somehow, like he's locked into her. Like he'll break through every wall within her and become one with her blood.

It feels incredible. Her vision fizzes and pops but she doesn't let go of him. Catches her breath as he leans her against the church, covering her with his body. Her legs are still wrapped around him. Her feet don't touch the ground.

He kisses her temple. Licks the sweat from under her jaw. Another tremor runs through him into her and even in the heat they shiver together.

She grabs his face to look into his eyes as they soften for the slightest of moments. He blinks like he, too, is dazed. Thank God she's not the only one who feels this way. He collars her with his hand. Gently this time. Keeping her close enough where she feels his breath on her lips. Where her heart finds its pace with his own.

*I love you*, she thinks but doesn't say. The words are too overdone in her mouth and this feels like a different thing. It feels stronger. Scraped like gravel under her skin after a fall.

"I belong to you, Ridge," she whispers.

He smiles. Such a beautiful sight. They breathe each other's air. Right now, they are the only two people in the world who matter. The only two people who feel this way, who will ever feel this way, about each other. His lips are cool when he kisses her gently, and she ignores the sting.

But somehow, through everything, she feels another set of eyes settle on them.

## Chapter 8

## *The Devil is afraid of us.*

“Should hope you aren’t siblings,” an unfamiliar voice challenges.

Ridge hears it from behind him, ten feet away, he imagines. Not the reverend. A stranger. He wouldn’t be able to get this close if Ridge hadn’t been concentrating on Sadie. But it’s *her*. Everything else is nothing. Even now, her whisper flows like rain through his mind. *I belong to you*. Silky sweet. If he hadn’t already decided he’d kill their intruder, he’d do it for making him extract himself from her warmth too soon.

Could he keep fucking her?

He’s swollen inside her. Something new, with her, that his body has never done with anyone else. He felt it in the bathroom, that engorging at his base that locked him so tight inside her he blacked out when he came. Now, he’s dizzy but his body wants to stay. It’s inconceivable, pulling from her.

It’ll hurt like hell if he extracts himself, so he *could* just continue. Maybe if he does, the man will simply walk away.

Sadie is tense, though, making herself small. And he smells predation those ten feet behind him. Like the magnet of their lovemaking drew monsters from the dirt of the forest floor.

“Though I suppose every sin is equal,” that same voice adds. Accusation ices his tone but he could be saying anything. Ridge wouldn’t care.

His mind is on Sadie, who clings to him still. She's got one hand clasped on the back of his head and one on the back of his neck like she's protecting him from something. His sweet, perfect mate protecting his impenetrable body makes him smile at first.

Then, he smells fear on her skin that he did not cause. A delicious smell in any other instance but this one. This one carries danger. Mating weakens him for a few minutes. A few too many when she smells like this.

He grimaces, pulling himself out of her as gently as he can but she cries out anyway and he groans from the displeasure of his knot exiting her snug entrance too soon. Her breath is ragged and shuddering and she grips him tighter. He can smell his cum drip down her legs, pulled out by the suction. Cursing, he sets her down against the church wall.

"The world had better be ending," he growls.

"Ridge," she whispers, her lips trembling.

"Yes, little fawn?" he asks casually, pulling his pants up and belting them. He rolls back his shoulders, sensing the man behind him but knowing he hasn't walked closer.

"Turn around, son," the intruder commands.

Ridge rolls his eyes but complies just to humor his new prey.

"Damn," Ridge curses.

For what feels like the hundredth time this month, he faces the barrel of a gun. A .357 Magnum. Can put down a bear, which means it hurts like a bitch to take. He's been shot with one before and it knocked him out nearly as long as fucking his fawn for the first time.

Can't have that. Not when she's at stake.

He's still dizzied from mating. If they were alone in the woods he'd pull her on top of him for a nap in soft grass. Keep his member knotted inside her so none of his essence trickles



out. God damn it, he can never seem to get his way with her. A little bit of tenderness and fate won't fucking allow it.

The man is a few inches shorter than him, not that any human poses much of a threat to the Lindals. But he smells like the reverend does, that familiar church smell and the one that lingers underneath. Oddly, the scent tickles something in his brain that feels like memory. Smells like iron, white paint, incense, warm blood.

"Put the gun down, sir," Sadie pleads. "We aren't siblings; you're right. You- the reverend is just inside, sir."

Ridge shoots her a look telling her to be quiet, mainly because this man doesn't deserve to hear her voice. "They're related," he tells her. "Smell the same."

"Smart man," the man with the gun remarks.

Ridge settles his attention back on him. He doesn't mind playing games with prey. Doesn't mind when they fight back. But his girl being here means he has something to lose. Might not get to play as much as he'd like to. He sighs. Rolls his shoulders back again. Every bone in his body feels uncomfortable like he is fighting to prop it up. He should be holding Sadie. Kissing her, which he's come to crave, with that sweet taste of her blood and spit on his tongue.

He licks his lips. God, he can't focus on anything else.

"Don't look very shaken when a gun's aimed in your direction," the man remarks.

Ridge keeps his gaze on the barrel. No, he's not concerned. Just studying, as he does, the dozen ways any dangerous situation might play itself out.

"Then again, I'd bet a man who takes a woman against a holy building doesn't have much of a soul left to shake," the man adds.

"We're sorry!" Sadie insists. "We'll leave just fine; we know we've done wrong."

Her voice wavers like she believes her words. This bristles Ridge, to whom a church is no different from a house.

“Didn’t do wrong, little fawn,” he growls. “Nothing wrong about the things we do.”

She’s fixated on the gun.

“Don’t look at him,” Ridge says for the second time that day, tucking two fingers under her chin. “Look at me.”

When she swallows, he feels it. Tastes the fear he hasn’t caused. He’s more than ready to kill this man and burn down the goddamned church while he’s at it.

But not without fucking her on the altar within.

As wise and intuitive as she is, she seems to read this in his gaze. She presses her lips together, condemnation in the slight shaking of her head. She doesn’t want these men dead. It’s hard not to kiss her for that; he adores her sweetness, even if he doesn’t understand it.

“That’s right, little girl,” the man says. “Look at the tall sumbitch that brought you to sin. That speaks with the Devil’s tongue.”

*My ma wasn’t the dog*, Wright would say when he heard that term. It nearly makes Ridge smile despite the circumstance. But he tastes sorrow seeping into Sadie’s skin like something the man’s said has cut her deep.

“Please don’t call me that,” she says to the man with the gun.

The man with the gun chuckles. “Little girl?” he repeats, scratching his head.

He looks deep in thought for a moment.

“Why?” he asks. “Did your pa tuck you in at night with his hand between your legs?”

Ridge shifts his jaw, glaring at the man. FUBAR, fucked up beyond all recognition. That was another one of Wright’s expressions, a word he and Elam used when they wanted to

refer to something so thoroughly destroyed he couldn't even see what it was meant to be. That's what Ridge is going to do to the man who mocks his fawn. He is going to tear him apart so thoroughly that even when they find his bones they'll have to shift through the shards for proof of humanity.

"No," Sadie quips. "Did yours?"

Even through her shaking voice, she's got some spark in her. Ridge loves her, truly does, and it's more than her taste or her cunt or her scent or their matehood or even the light in her eyes. He doesn't know anyone who thinks as quietly or chooses their words so well. Doesn't know anyone whose big, beautiful heart is a sharpened blade out for blood. Yes. He loves her, though the words feel odd to say. He hasn't said them since he was a kid and even then, it's only a guess that he did. Only an echo of a whisper.

"Get inside," the man snaps.

While Sadie is hesitant, Ridge guides her along. He's ready for where this takes him. Excited, even. He keeps her in front of him, always his body in between her and the gun. But there's a vision stroking the piano keys in his mind. A scent he's forgotten for a long time that now wafts in his direction.

Sadie looks back at him. Her body is so prone to trembling but she's steady as she walks. Her eyes are distant. She's remembering something too. It makes her turn into herself. He's daydreaming about the ways he will kill these men.

"This your church?" Ridge asks.

"My brother and I's," the man says.

Ridge nods, entering the single-room building. White walls and chestnut pews. It's a modest church. There's an old grand piano up by a stark altar, more a platform than anything. Not even a podium. Every structure inside is worn and smells of humanity. Crowds on Sundays. Burnt incense. Candles at night.

And death.

He smells death in the pews, not funeral death, but the action of it. Someone's been killed here. Women, specifically. He knows the scent from experience. Knows the taste and the craving.

It's been gone since he met Sadie.

"Welcome," the reverend says from a pew near the altar. He drapes his arm over the chestnut frame to look back at them. "Do you remember V-J Day?"

Ridge had forgotten how to speak by the time the war ended. Sadie looks up at him like he should tell her what to do. All he does is pull her closer. Spread his long fingers over her side like they can form some kind of wall for her.

"Our boys were like heathens," the reverend says. "Making love in the streets of New York and San Francisco. What war did the two of you win today?"

Sadie tenses against Ridge's chest. They stand in the aisle now and he imagines she might still feel exposed. Even with his size surrounding her. His sweet little fawn, too accustomed to being prey to know how this will turn out. He presses a kiss to the top of her head. Breathes deep the scent that keeps him upright.

"Do you remember that, boy?" the reverend asks. "Did you serve?"

"My brother," Ridge says. "You?"

The men seem older than Wright, but Ridge isn't sure. The man who raised him seems both older and younger than every other man he meets. With his crow's feet and silver-blue eyes, Wright is a frayed rope of time. Blank like a child but weathered like stone.

"We had a mission here," the reverend tells him. "To listen to God. To spread gospel all over these parts. And we did see how the unholy lived."

Ridge curls his body around Sadie's. There's an animal part of his brain screaming to make her invisible. It battles the

thrill of his racing heart.

“Sides, we ain’t gonna fight the Germans,” the man with the gun says behind him. “For doing God’s work.”

Ridge grits his teeth.

“How could you say that?” Sadie asks. “Did you not see what they did? The photographs?”

She’s not invisible any longer.

“That is *not* God’s work,” she protests. “They killed children, you know-”

“Jews,” the man quips. “They don’t have children.”

“You don’t know what you’re speaking about,” she snaps. “You don’t know how much like the devil you sound-”

“Waste of American lives,” the man spits.

Ridge doesn’t think much about the world overseas but he does bristle hard at someone belittling his brother’s service. “How’s about as men we don’t fuckin’ speak about a war we ain’t seen firsthand?” he snaps.

Sadie looks up at Ridge and startles. He wonders what anger looks like on his face.

“Al’s got his own views,” the reverend says soothingly. He directs his words at Sadie. “Mine might align more with your own, little girl. It’s awful, all the misery we see in this world. I can see it in you. All the pain. You carry it, you know that?”

The softest whimper climbs from Sadie’s throat. She’s got air between her body and Ridge’s now. Cold air.

“I see it on your face,” the reverend says. “It’s beautiful. Most people don’t have the empathy that you do; the man who stands with you surely doesn’t.”

“Don’t speak to my woman,” Ridge says. His voice is chilled now. There’s a bite to his words and he sees the preacher shift from it. Sees him glance at the man with the

gun, Al, an expression on his face that makes Ridge brace himself for the bullet.

But the reverend gestures for Al to lower his weapon.

“You must understand, Mr. Lindal,” he says. “I’m not a man of empathy either. But God speaks to me anyway. Doesn’t He speak to you?”

Ridge narrows his eyes at him. Doesn’t answer.

“Do you not feel the suffering inside her?” the reverend asks. “Do you not feel how she prays for heaven? How she longs to part from the wretched ways of this world?”

Oh, he will make the reverend’s torture last longer than any hurt he’s ever caused. His fawn doesn’t fucking pray for heaven. She gets on her knees for him. The reverend preys with his words, whittling them into bone, and Ridge understands some of his desires. The urge to fuck, to destroy. To claim someone even as he drains them of life. It’s heady.

But Ridge hunts for a day and he imagines the preacher takes his time. He bets this man sees suffering in the waitress and has given her a speech like this one. If he showed himself to Sadie yesterday, he’d been hunting her since she arrived. He’ll have fantasized about this moment, dreamt of stripping his little fawn naked. Hurting her. Spilling her blood. Rutting into her.

These men will never know how delicious that fantasy can be.

They are foreigners to matehood. They don’t know how special she is.

“Answer him!” Al yells behind him.

He can feel the air shift, hears the man move closer with his weapon. He imagines the barrel leveled at his head.

“Don’t believe in heaven,” Ridge says curtly. It’s not entirely true. He just knows that heaven is between his girl’s legs and if he does this right they’ll find it in each other until the sun falls from the sky.

“Ah,” the reverend says. “I bet you believe you’re a god. So tall and powerful. Smart. Fine-featured... But now you’re here, aren’t you?”

Ridge shrugs. “Now I’m here,” he says. “How humbled you’ve made me.”

Ridge smiles. Big and broad, he shows his sharp teeth when he does. He sits Sadie down at the pew, notices his own cum glistening on her inner thigh, and growls. She’ll look gorgeous on her knees with her elbows propped up. With her skirt lifted to her waist. He’ll make her pray to him like that, in this church, once he kills these men. Paint crosses over the points of her nipples and drink the blood of their kill from her skin.

“What a place,” he remarks, gesturing around him. He knows how to lurk in shadow but he knows how to make a show of himself too. In his mind, he’s outside in the backyard with Elam and Wright. Telling a hunting story. Not here, in this church, shifting focus away from his girl. “Would take a good storm to tear it down.”

The reverend stares at him blankly.

Ridge turns around. “I’ll bet in all the years you’ve had it, you’ve never really had one.”

The reverend pauses. “God protects.”

“All but those you guide to heaven,” Ridge remarks. He steps forward, jumping up on the altar. Sees the man with the gun nearly fire as he starts. Even Sadie jumps. He hopes she doesn’t try running. “You’re right, Reverend. I’m not an empathetic man. And God doesn’t speak to me. But the dead do. You’ve killed...”

He inhales deeply.

“Three here,” he continues. “I see their ghosts.”

“Don’t you be talkin’ ‘bout ghosts, now,” Al warns in a quivering voice.

“Mm,” Ridge nods. Breathes deep again as he steps down to the aisle. “Two women. A small boy. One of them’s his mother.”

This makes the preacher stand.

“There are no ghosts in this church,” he says. “Those souls do not rest here.”

“Three are *restless!*” Ridge yells, mocking voices he’s heard in radio sermons. He turns to the man with the gun. Widens his eyes and grins. Makes himself a terror. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” the reverend snaps. “Sit the hell down.”

Ridge notices he’s holding a hammer. Smells steel mixed with sweat. He steps in front of Sadie, standing to the fullest extension of his height. No way is he letting the man in black even think about using a hammer on his little fawn.

“Put down the toy, reverend,” Ridge says. “Use what your god gave you.”

The reverend looks to his brother, who raises the gun.

They’re closer.

Everything is closer.

“What did their blood taste like, preacher man?” Ridge growls. “All those souls. Bet you think you put them to rest.”

The reverend frowns. “Who are you?”

“Man who’s gonna eat you and your brother alive, that’s who-” Ridge snaps, before halting. He’s caught this scent before. Years ago. It’s uncanny, familiar, chilling. “You ever been to Orion?”

“What do the ghosts tell you?” the reverend asks. He glances down at Sadie, who’s firmly tucked to Ridge’s hip.

Her heart is racing. She feels like a captured rabbit awaiting slaughter. Ridge doesn’t understand how she can be



afraid of someone else when he's near her.

"They tell me I know you from somewhere," Ridge states flatly, stroking her hair. "Tell me you cowardly fuckin' rats have crossed my path some other unfortunate time. Before now, where you stand and threaten my fuckin' woman. And what would it be, if I wasn't here? Would it be her with a gun aimed at her head, kneeling and begging for forgiveness?"

When he says those last words, he turns to Al and his gun. Nearly spitting, he's so angry. Ready to snap his jaws over both their necks as soon as Sadie is safe from their attentions.

"I do believe we've visited Orion," the reverend says. "I think we passed through there, likely when you were just a boy. Spread the word of gospel to those who needed it. Perhaps you went to one of our sermons."

Ridge spits on the floor. "Couldn't save me then, could you?"

"*Ridge*," Sadie pleads in a hushed tone. "You're going to make them angry."

"Goin' to save me now, reverend?" Ridge taunts. He steps away from Sadie only to stretch his arms out and watch his size put some fear in the men. "Are you gonna to nail me to your cross with your blessed holy hammer? You've never killed a man here before-"

"How does he fuckin' know that?" Al snaps.

"Ignore him," the reverend demands. His focus is on Sadie, who has made herself small behind Ridge's large frame.

He takes a step forward. Ridge meets him in the aisle, glowering down the four inches that separate their heights.

"Why, Reverend?" Ridge asks. "Are you fixing to give a sermon? I'd like to hear it. I'd like to hear the lies you spew-"

And then steel connects with Ridge's cheek. Hard.

It knocks his head to the side. Fills his mouth with blood. He spits the communion onto the ground and listens to the splatter.

“Don’t hurt him!” Sadie shrieks. She tries to rush to Ridge but he catches her, pushes her away. He can’t have their focus be on her.

“Stay!” he yells, the word erupting from his throat in a near-bark that sends her rushing back. Fearful. Her eyes water as they fix themselves to the mark on Ridge’s cheek. And already he wishes he didn’t yell at her, because there’s a distrust in her now that hurts more than any cut.

“Get on your knees and pray, boy,” the preacher says, shoving him forward. “Pray for the bullet to take you quick.”

“Pray for you to be a man and do better than a fucking bullet,” Ridge growls.

The preacher hits him again, this time in the back. He winces from the pain but feels, in his mind, the grip of that sweat-drenched handle. He played baseball as a kid, never quite lost the hand-eye coordination. He won’t need more than a hammer to disable the man with the gun now that Sadie’s further away.

“Get down!” the preacher yells, hitting him again.

Ridge can smell the sweat blossoming from the man’s forehead. Feel the bruises bloom under his own skin. He kneels at the altar. Lets the anticipation build in his stomach.

“Stop!” Sadie sobs. “Stop hurting him!”

Ridge smiles. He can, when their focus is on him. His sweet little fawn shot him not too long ago and now she’ll plead for his life. How darling. He truly does love her.

The reverend smacks Ridge in the head with the handle of the hammer this time. Ridge hisses through his teeth, but the moment isn’t right yet. He feels blood seep through his hair, but he’s aroused and infatuated with Sadie’s defiance. He wants to hear her get mean.

“You murdering bastards!” she screams.

He doesn't correct her that he himself is also a murdering bastard. There's a knife at his neck now, attempting to dig into his skin. The reverend will need more pressure if he wants to do any real damage.

“What would you do to keep me from hurting him?” the reverend asks. “Would you swim with the gators? That might be a sight to see.”

Against his better judgment, Ridge looks at Sadie. She's shaking now. His girl. His mate. Though she's in no real danger, the look of her like this bristles him. He's the only man with the right to scare her. The only one.

“Swim naked like you did the day I saw you,” the reverend says.

Ridge's vision goes black for a moment. A growl unfurls itself from deep, deep in his throat, something so low and resonant that the reverend flinches at the sound. Gone is the knife from his neck.

He turns slowly to stare at the reverend. Stays on his knees. He wonders where he'd best like to start with this man. The throat is the most satisfying, but it makes for a quick death.

“The eyes first,” he says to himself.

“Pardon?” the reverend asks.

“I don't like that you saw my woman like that,” he says coldly. “So I'm going to eat your eyes first.”

The reverend's eyes widen for a second. Animal instinct kicks in and he backs away, calling for his brother. “Shoot!”

He barely has time to finish the word.

Ridge leaps to his feet, ripping the hammer from the floor and hurling it like an ax at the man with the gun's shoulder. He listens to him cry out when the sharp edge embeds itself into the muscle there.

He grabs the reverend and scoops his two fingers into the man's eye socket, fishing out the slimy ball and popping it into his mouth like a fig. Pushes the holy man to the side and marches towards his screaming brother.

The man fires one shot, so wavering from the stuck tool that it only grazes Ridge's shoulder. Ridge catches the man's wrist and aims it away. Pulls out the embedded hammer and whacks at the shoulder joint, digging in. Breaking tendons. Shattering bone as the man flails against him, so weakly human that it does little more to Ridge than batting away a swarm of flies.

Then, with the sharp end of the hammer lodged against the man's joint, he pulls his wrist. As hard as he can. He hears popping and tearing and then, sweet moments after, an enormous, fleshy ripping as the man's arm separates from his body. The gun fires. Ridge hears the shattering of a window. Wonders if this is the type of town where a gunshot sends folks running to help or if it makes them close their doors and tell themselves it's just a hunter. Orion is a closed-door town. For all he wants to do, he hopes this is too.

The man screams but doesn't seem to notice he's screaming. His eyes are wide on the arm that was once his but now belongs to no one. Ridge makes sure he's watching as he takes a bite of the man's bicep. Pulls the fabric of the shirt from his mouth as the man blinks and stumbles backwards before hitting the ground cold. Maybe from the sight. Maybe from blood loss.

Then Ridge feels the full weight of a man's body collide with his back as the reverend rushes him. The holy man stabs hard into Ridge's chest but he doesn't know how far from human Ridge's body is. A knife in a human hand doesn't have the power to give more than a flesh wound. It'll glance off the denser parts of him. Only thing that can cut Ridge's muscle is a bullet or a wolf.

So the reverend stabs at him and his skin is shredding and it hurts, sure. But the reverend's not stupid and it only takes

about three strikes for him to realize Ridge isn't going to die like this.

Predators are always smarter. Ridge once had a man stab him instead of running. Kept laying the blade down again and again as Ridge ate his jugular. That man had a prey mind. Some of them have to.

Now, the preacher is rushing towards Sadie. Holding the knife in one hand and his burst eye socket in the other. Looking for a hostage in some last grab at survival. She backs towards the wall, hitting it right under the cross.

Ridge thinks to toss the dismembered arm to the side and rush him but instead he pries the gun from its fingers and fires it at the preacher's hip. He wants somewhere painful that won't burst through into Sadie. His target hits the ground of the altar. Heavy caliber, that coward's gun. Turns a lion into a lamb.

As the preacher rolls on the floor, Sadie grabs the knife from his hands and throws it far away. Ridge is smitten, goddamned *smitten* with her defiance.

"Ridge," she calls out in a wavering voice.

He meets her gaze.

"If they've killed people, we can get the police," she pleads. She's breathing heavily, hyperventilating. Not nearly as calm as she should be when she's not in danger.

Ridge looks at the preacher on the ground, holding his wound. Bleeding from his empty eye socket. The man on the floor at Ridge's feet is missing an arm and that arm is currently in Ridge's right hand. He has to bite back a smile because his sweet fawn is innocent enough to think they can pretend this was self defense.

It's not.

He's going to turn these men to dust.

"No, Sadie," he says, knowing love fogs his voice. "Close your eyes, little fawn. It'll be over soon."

She sinks down to the ground, her back against the wall. She covers her eyes like a little kid playing hide and seek. Her skirt rides up enough for him to see her thigh and the marks he's made there. Fucking divine, her body. Only thing that could make him believe in God is the thought that someone carved her.

But she was born, nature-made as he was. He's the one who's carved her form.

Still holding the man's arm, Ridge strides slowly up the aisle. He deposits the limb on the front pew, watching the blood pool all around it. Feeling remarkably calm. He's in control now, of everything. Of everyone.

"What are you?" the reverend yells. He's got blood and grit in his voice.

Ridge ignores his question.

"Stay put," he commands, marching back towards the man who's passed out in the aisle.

Al's already-ivory face is pale and splattered with the crimson that seeps from his open shoulder. Ridge kneels on his chest, letting his weight crush him. Reels back and slaps the man in the face with the back of his hand.

"Wake up," he growls.

The man startles awake, already sobbing. Pushing at him as if he's still got both of his arms. Then, the horror hits again as he looks to the right and sees what's missing.

"You try to hurt my woman?" Ridge asks, taking him by the hair and slamming his head into the wood of the aisle. He hears a crunch, watches the man's eyes roll around like spilt marbles. "Were you gonna fuck her before you killed her?"

"Please, stop!" the man slurs. He coughs and Ridge smells vomit deep in his throat. He could drown him like this if he doesn't let him up.

For only the reason of prolonging this man's torture, he drags him to his feet. He has to hold him by the back of his

shirt just to keep him standing because the man is woozy, near-passing out. His head rolls. Briefly, Ridge regrets ripping off his arm. Judging from how much blood is on the aisle where the man lay, he doesn't think he'll have much time to take his anger out.

"Answer the question," Ridge growls, gripping the back of the man's neck.

"I don't want to," the man sputters. "I'm dyin', it fuckin' kills-"

"I'm gonna fuck her in your blood," Ridge says. "Because she's mine."

With that, he stretches his jaw out and snaps it down on the front of the man's throat, eating into his soft flesh and screaming lungs. He relishes in the blood, in the meat. It may not quell his desires for Sadie but it's better tasting than the preacher's eye. Hypocrisy lends a rotting taste and evil is flavored like citrus. Much better. It feels fresh in his mouth as he drags the man's body further up and leaves him gagging at his brother's feet.

Then, he grabs the reverend by the hair. Wrenches his tear-streaked face up to his own.

"Look at me with the eye you have left," Ridge growls.

The preacher complies, his other socket dripping blood and jelly.

"I don't give a damn about anyone else you've killed," Ridge says. "I'm not delivering you anywhere. There is no heaven. No hell. There's just me and her, understand that? She's all that fucking matters."

"Don't kill me then," the preacher whimpers.

"Okay," Ridge says, smiling.

The man lets out a shuddering sigh of relief.

And then, Ridge scoops out the reverend's grateful eye. Chews it over his screaming face and spits the gore into his

mouth. His brother tastes better than he does.

Ridge wonders if he himself tastes better than Wright. If someone were ever to eat the two of them, who would they prefer? If someone were ever to fuck the two of them...

He bristles at the thought. His fawn is it for him and if Wright ever touched her like that he'd kill him. It's so instinctive that he feels it in his shoulders and his tensing hands the second he thinks of it. It distracts him from everything else. The reverend is crawling past him now, down the aisle. Past the dying body of his brother and towards the large black doors. Fumbling. Blind.

Ridge grabs his ankle.

Drags him back.

But when the preacher rolls over, he is smiling through the lines of red that streak his face. Smiling with gritted teeth.

"Beloved," he spits. "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it..."

He moans with pain but keeps his smile planted across his eyeless face.

"Leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written," he groans. Coughs like he'll vomit before twitching on the ground, a spasm running through his body. "'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord!"

He screams then, a maniacal shriek that prickles the hair on Ridge's neck. The reverend twitches on the ground like a fish ripped from the water. Back arching. Hands stretching and shaking.

"Is this your eye for an eye, Mr. Lindal?" he yells. A sharp, barking cackle reaches from his lungs.

"Stop him, Ridge!" Sadie yells. "I can't bear it!"

He looks at her. Holding herself tightly, her body shaking in fear. The savage in him wants to leave the preacher be just



to fuck her against the wall, wrap her trembling legs around him and kiss her until she breathes full and strong again.

“Soon,” he tells her. “It’ll be over soon.”

As soon as he’s deemed the scales equal for these men threatening her.

Ridge presses his boot down on the man’s thigh. His femur. Wright says breaking your femur is the worst pain a man can endure, that he saw it in the crumbling buildings overseas. So he steps down hard on the preacher, who cries out and spits through his teeth. Turns his head to the side and vomits onto the aisle. He’ll die fouled like whoever else he’s killed.

But Ridge doesn’t judge murder.

He kneels down at the reverend’s level, grabbing his face and angling it towards his own. It’s so distorted from pain it looks the texture and color of chewed bubble gum.

“Last words?” Ridge asks.

“Lindal farm,” the preacher slurs before coughing.

Ridge stares down at the man whose pulse is nearly slower than his words now. Nearly weaker. His face is a mess of empty sockets but his split lips still quiver and shift.

And he said *Lindal Farm*. The sign that hangs outside of his own driveway.

“What?” he asks.

“Orion,” the preacher says finally. “We saved them in Orion.”

And even as he dies, he spreads his broken lips over his bloodied teeth and laughs his hoarse, chilling laugh.

Ridge can’t stand the sound. He sinks his teeth into the man’s neck, tearing out his throat along with his jugular. Eating that piece as the man chokes on blood. The second chunk he takes is enough to feel the man’s heart slow to the

point he knows it'll stop in only a few minutes. He swallows what he chews but nothing more.

He doesn't want to be full.

Instead he buries his mouth in the preacher's throat and drinks his vitality. His life. Wretched and vile just like Ridge's.

But weaker.

That's what makes him prey.

That's what makes his words negligible, though they crawl and settle into the notch in the back of his skull and they wait there. They wait there, but Sadie is at the wall and he smells her fear and it's delicious, now that she's safe.

It's fucking intoxicating.

He stands just to take her in. Just to slide the shirt off his body and watch how her eyes glaze him in hot, scalding sugar. He feels her. Wants her. Needs her, now, and nothing else matters. Not the men dead on the floor or the godless skies above the steeple. Just her.

Panting, Ridge opens his mouth and lets the blood spill down his chin. He lets it send rivers over his neck, his bare chest. All the way down to where his pants are still belted.

She watches him with unrestrained hunger. His little fawn feeds on darkness. Her broad lips tremble. Her back is to the wall but her legs are parted. The blood of his kill is on her dress, on her knees. Splattered over her golden cheeks.

She's so beautiful. So *fucking* beautiful. Everything that matters to him exists no more than a foot outside of her body. She, with her defiance and her silky innocence, is all he needs for a world. And she's staring at him. At the holy land he's drenched with his own destruction.

He stands tall. Drops his hands to his belt buckle and slides it from the hooks of his pants. He knows what he'll do with it. With her.

Despite the fear in her eyes, she licks her lips.

He shucks his pants and folds them on the only clean pew in reaching distance. Stands naked and throbbing amongst the remains of the dead. He walks to the front pew, where the detached arm lies. Pushes it away and drenches his hand in the slick, warm blood before sitting.

Sadie is on the stage, even if she doesn't think of it as that. Her body quivers beneath a wooden cross. So perfect. So wanton. So *his*.

"Take off your dress," he tells her, closing his blood-drenched hand around his cock. He strokes himself and her eyes follow hungrily. He pauses. "Now, Sadie."

"Ridge," she whispers. "You killed them."

"On my honor, the only thing I will never repeat is yelling at you," he says firmly.

He stretches his long legs out, sighing. Raises an eyebrow in her direction. There's a spark in her alongside the hunger now.

"We should run," she breathes. "We should leave town. We can't stay here."

"Take. Off. Your. Dress," he repeats firmly. "Slowly."

"*Ridge*," she pleads, though her voice is nearly a moan.

Finally, she brings her trembling fingers to the buttons, starting at the top. When she gets to her chest, her breasts spill forth. She hasn't worn a bra today. He thrusts with his hips, unable to hold himself back. Even fed, he is beyond feral for her.

Shrugging the dress from her shoulders, she stands near-naked under the cross. The light shines golden on her skin, on her plump breasts and hardened nipples, on the thrum of her racing heartbeat. On her lush thighs and the way the muscle in them cuts a shadow against her freckled, honey-colored skin. Her soft, sweet belly, so fertile for his babies. And her satin panties, soaked dark with his cum as it leaks from her womb.

She stands beneath the cross and for the first time he's tempted to kneel and pray.

"*God,*" Ridge breathes, pressing himself up to stand. He releases his now red-stained erection but gathers more blood on his hands. "You're the only sacred thing I've ever seen."

Her eyes track him as he gathers his belt from the pew. There's fear mixed with arousal in her scent. In her quivering lip.

"Are you scared, Sadie?" he asks in a low voice, stepping gracefully onto the stage with her. He inhales her. He's hungry already. Famished for her taste. For the many ways he will break her as the sky darkens around them.

"Is this who you are?" she whispers as he ducks his head to her hair, lets his breath heat her scalp. Everything about her from the hairs on her head to the goosebumps on her arms stuns him with its beauty.

"No," he breathes. "It's who you make me."

She's panting now. He is too, but he doesn't think of himself. His mind is blank to anything but the picture of her.

"Look at me," he growls, cuffing his bloody hand at her neck.

She whimpers but she meets his gaze, her hazel eyes defiant. Hungry. Fearful. So many things live in her.

"I killed these men for thinking they could have you," he says, smoothing his touch over her breasts, down to her stomach.

He pulls her flush to his naked body. Wants her to feel how he throbs for her.

"That makes the violence ours, Sadie," he growls, running his tongue up her neck. He nips at the skin of her jaw. Grinds his cock along the crease of her ass just to feel her heat there. "Such a good fucking girl today. You gonna be good for me now?"

“Yes,” she breathes, reaching for him.

He grabs her wrist. Jerks her arms behind her back abruptly enough to make her start but not enough to hurt her.

The vision of her now, breasts exposed to the violence he’s wrought in her honor, soaked, satin-clothed cunt and trembling legs on the bloody altar, it’s enough to make him growl. More so when she looks up at him with all the trust he thought he lost secure in her gaze.

He kisses her deep. Pillages her mouth as he ties the belt around her wrists. His little rebel’s hands find his shaft and stroke him gently. Lightly. He cups her glorious breasts and circles the points of her nipples with his slick, bloody fingers. Teasing them just to watch her squirm and writhe against him. He tweaks and massages those points until she’s moaning and shuddering into his mouth. Until he can smell the wetness that drips between her legs.

“*Ridge*,” she groans in agonized pleasure, her voice nearly a sob. “*Ridge*, I’m gonna come. I’m gonna come just from you touching me.”

*Oh, fuck.* There’s nothing sexier than her. Nothing even close.

He turns abruptly and pushes her against the wall, her breasts the center of his attention now. He paints them with blood slicked like oil and she’s writhing, gasping, already. He drops to one knee. Pulls her down onto it so her sex grinds against him with her back to the wall. Despite his height and her short frame, her breasts are at eye level with him now. *Glistening* with blood. Still, he reaches for a puddle of it on the ground. Coats her skin until it’s soaked and dripping and takes his breath away.

To ride him, she has to lean her shoulders back against the wall. Has to press herself to her toes. She was a virgin when she met him and now she rides him like a dancer, her hips making waves and bucking sporadically.

“So fucking pretty, my little fawn,” he growls. He grabs her face and jerks it towards his own. “Drench my fucking knee.”

He catches her hair and yanks it back, pressing her breasts to his face. He lavishes them. Licks and sucks and bites at them as she rides him. She’s so fucking exposed, so delicious, a divine creature all for him.

Soon she’s shuddering. He flicks his tongue over her right nipple as he twirls and plucks the other with sticky fingers. She’s riding his knee harder, moaning out, struggling against her bound wrists. He feels her tense and build and he wants to watch her face but can’t take his lips or his tongue or his teeth from her skin. Her blood is like salted caramel mingling with the divine savory of her sweat. He feels the tremor first in her breasts. The jiggle of soft, delicious flesh.

And then she’s spilling onto him, and he’s grabbing her hips just to balance her as she falls apart. He’s teasing her and he’s so hard it’s torture but he likes this pain. He likes when he feels her trembling thigh brush his cock and he likes knowing it’ll feel even better if he makes it last. Kissing her breasts clean. Letting them smother him. She’s yelling his name in this house of worship and coming undone. Spirals of her soul falling over him. Tears on her cheeks.

“That’s my good girl,” he says, smearing crimson on her face.

He holds her by the jaw and pulls her to stand with him, kissing her lips as she catches her breath. He’s such a sick bastard that he’s smiling as he does, blood smeared over his chin and cheeks, pressing it against her angelic face like charcoal transfers in kindergarten. Like this, she feels just as innocent to him.

Drenched in his kill and her cum. An angel with breath like powdered, salted sugar.

It’s time to break her, now.

“Come here,” he growls, turning her and pressing her flush to his body. Her back is slick with sweat already, deliciously heady against his skin. Her soft, bound hands stroke his member.

They look out over their slaughter. The blood their love spills. Their casualties.

“On your toes, heels together,” he commands. “Spread your knees out.”

“What if someone walks in?” she asks, suddenly alarmed, blinking up at him.

He laughs. She blushes, ducks her head. She’s smiling too and he kisses her temple before growling, “spread your fucking knees.”

On shaking legs, she’s wobbly but leans into him for support. He looks down at the slickness on her inner thighs. Waits for her legs to quiver from the effort. It doesn’t take long, and she’s looking up at him, her back arched and skin glistening with sweat and blood.

“Like that,” he approves.

He hooks his thumb around the waistband of her panties and jerks the fabric hard. Rips it off her now-reddened skin. She cries out from the sting and he slides his hand from her shoulder to her neck, holding her tightly.

With his other hand, he feels just how wet she is. Parts her folds with his fingers and curls them into her. Fucking her like that. Squeezing her neck enough for her skin to redden, and then letting her breathe again. Her pussy is so fucking slick, tasting like sugar cookies dipped in ocean water and salted watermelon, all around his fingers as he fucks them into her.

“If anyone walks in, they’d see two slaughtered men,” he says, withdrawing to tease at the slick, swollen jewel between her folds. She whimpers as he closes his two fingers around the bud, pulsing and stroking down against her sex. Massaging deep. He keeps this pattern. “Then they’d see my bloody hand on your quivering, exposed cunt. They’d see the daylight shine

on your glistening pleasure. They'd see you come, wouldn't they, little fawn?"

"Yes," she moans.

"I wouldn't stop," he growls. She's writhing, her back arching, her legs shaking. Glorious. His dancer, his angel, his bliss. "*Fuck*, I wouldn't stop for an air raid."

She cries out as tremors run through her. He watches her gasp with her red-soaked lips like a demon whore for him, her eyes rolling back in her head. *His* fawn. He's owned her since she set foot in the parking lot of Elam's market. Their love is fragrant with gasoline.

"I wouldn't stop for the end of the world," he says, sliding his drenched fingers into her mouth.

She sucks dutifully and his vision goes nearly black with desire. All he wants is to fuck her but he's made her a promise and those pretty red lips need to pay penance for what she's done to him.

"The Devil is afraid of us," he says, running his tongue up the blood on her cheek.

Sadie tilts her chin up. She wants to kiss him and god, she tastes delicious. But he made her a promise.

"I told you I'd be cruel to you," he reminds her, reaching far enough into her mouth to stroke the back of her throat. "Do you like the taste?"

He withdraws.

"It's nothing like yours," she whimpers.

He growls, bending her forward and grabbing her bound wrists. Nearly forgets what he's decided upon, he wants to rut into her so badly. It *consumes* him. The quick shift in balance has her pressing her sweet ass hard against his hips to keep from falling and he grabs the meat of it brutally. His cock is weeping for her.

"*Ridge*," she moans. "*Please*. I need you inside of me."



The tip of his cock traces glossy shapes over her ass, her thighs. Still, it's red with blood he won't waste.

"Please," Sadie begs breathlessly. "Please, Ridge. I need you so badly."

"Tell me how," he demands.

"I never wanted anything for myself," she whispers. "But I am selfish for you. Gluttonous for you... For your body, for your voice, for the way you use me. For the way you smile. I..."

She trails off with the first letter of that first word on her tongue. That lovely sound.

Holding her tight, he edges just the tip of his length at her entrance. Making excruciatingly small movements there, letting her warmth kiss him and then the air. Not fully penetrating her, not even close. He takes the angst of his resistance out on his grip. Digs his fingers into her sweet, soft flesh and tastes them bruise. Looks down at the connection between the two of them, panting. He feels her cunt quiver. Knows just a single thrust will finish her off.

"Who do you belong to?" he growls.

"*You,*" she pleads. She's panting. So wet she is glistening, *dripping*, for him. His member is slick with her juices now, drenched in them. "I belong to you."

Withdrawing, he grabs her hair and wrenches her face up to his.

"Then get on your knees," he tells her.

She complies almost immediately, turning to him.

*God damn.* The only sacred thing is her, her mouth, neck, breasts, stomach, and thighs crimson and rust with the blood of his kill. With the belt tying her wrists, she is prone below him. Lips wet and mouth watering. His erection juts before her, bloodied up to his aching balls. He wants to come all over her. To bathe her in it.

One day.

Today, he's going to punish her.

"You're going to lick and suck every drop of blood from my cock, little fawn," he says, tangling his fingers in the hair at her scalp. He grips tight and she whimpers. "Then, I'm going to make you choke. I'm going to keep you from breathing. Do you know why?"

She's panting but she keeps her gaze steady on him. "Because it feels good?"

He smiles. "No. Because that's how it felt when you left. You took the air with you."

She swallows. A fresh scent of fear graces her perfect skin. "I woke up every night on the hotel room floor."

She runs her tongue over the tip of him, her breath hot on his member. He shudders. Then, he sees the hunger swallow her whole.

"I woke up on my knees, Ridge," she whispers.

He growls. Low and hungry. If he were a spiritual man, he'd wonder what he did to deserve her. But he's not and she's wrapping her lips around his girth and taking him as far back as she can without him forcing her. And he nearly grins when her eyes widen. So new, she doesn't know how far he pushed her then. How she can only push half of him deep in her throat when she's really trying.

It's still enough to make his head fall back in ecstasy. She is fucking divine. He pushes his fingers through her hair, holding her by the scalp. Easing her deeper before withdrawing and guiding her to his balls.

"So much blood, little fawn," he urges. "Get every drop."

A whimper curls from her throat and she sucks on the soft skin there. Feels fucking electric in his spine. Her teeth aren't sharp. He likes when they nick him with her sweet, inexperienced mouth. Likes that it's because she doesn't know

any better, and likes knowing it's only his cock that will ever feel this deep, intoxicating pleasure.

She looks up at him and kisses the length of him. Slowly. Thoroughly. Sucks at it too, kissing his shaft like she kisses his mouth. Relishing it. She's such a good fucking girl, worshipping him on this altar. Such a glorious fawn. She explores him like this, all soft lips and wet tongue. Cleansing him of their kill. Her eyes plead with him and she's panting; she knows what's coming. What he'll put her through.

And then, when he can't hold back anymore, he grips her hair tight and impales her gasp. Feels like he's fucking all the way to her lungs. He might be deep enough to touch them. To fuck the parts of her that make her perfect rasp of a voice.

When he ruts into her throat like this, he can't withdraw much or she'll gag. So he's fucking the sleeve of her throat deep. Barely withdrawing, just enough to feel his thrusts fizzle in the marrow of his hips. It's an earth-shattering pleasure, the look in her watering eyes and the suction as she gags on him. He's going to come in her throat first, *yes*. Make her swallow every drop of him.

"Stick your tongue out," he groans, withdrawing.

She complies. Gasping for air, she sticks her pretty pink tongue out and he slaps the head of his cock over it just to see. Just to feel her hot, grasping breath on his sensitive skin. Just to listen to the sound of his member's heft on the wet, soft parts of her.

He impales her again. Never relenting. She's fucking magic on his cock, pulling out his marrow. In the clutches of her throat, he feels the suction right up through his spine. He's pummeling her throat. Watching her eyes water. Her sweet fucking lips, god, those fucking lips, Jesus *Christ*.

He thinks he's fucking knotted. Somehow, knotted in her mouth.

It's not a big one. Not like it was when he fucked her outside, holy *fuck*, *that* killed to withdraw. That was

everything he had, inside of her. Flooding the hot wet depths of her womb. He's going to get her pregnant soon. Can feel it in his bones each time and god, the thought empties him out into her.

He moans, but it's nearly a shout for how it rips through him. He's pulsing, spilling, deep into her throat. Erupting inside of her.

"Christ, Sadie," he groans. "Oh, *God*." He grabs the back of her head and pumps as deep into her as he can. Feeling the heaven of her depth and her surrender. She swallows all that he gives her.

Now, he withdraws, his base enlarged enough that her teeth scrape it on the way out. He's still hard. Fucking massive, truly, and he wonders how he'll fuck her in her virgin ass later. Might tear her in two, but what a lovely sight. Nothing his spit won't fix.

Sadie's licking her lips. Blinking her dazed eyes. Gasping for all the air he choked out of her as he strokes the tears from her cheeks. He pulls her up to stand. Kisses her on the lips. Tastes his cum in her mouth, that stamp of ownership.

*I love you*, he thinks to say now.

But that's just not in his nature.

"Catch your breath," he tells her with his hand on her throat. He feels her lungs fight with all they have.

"I want to touch you," she pants.

"Not yet," he growls, before pulling her to him and bending her over. He grabs the belt that binds her wrists and angles his hard length at her entrance, feeling all the wetness leaking out of her. Edging into her heat.

He's sensitive after he comes but his body doesn't care because the second his cock registers the feeling of her snug, sweet cunt, it begs for her. *Needs* her. And it's like he's already on the edge again. Like he's gone his entire life without fucking her.

There's a stillness in the air now, tempered by the sound of their breathing. It feels like a cliff would, right at the top. He slides into her just an inch or two. Just enough to hear her whimper. Moves his hips so that he's teasing her, taunting her, kissing her insides and then pulling out.

He looks at her freckled back. It's soft, he thinks. Soft like much of her. She's strong from farm work but lush like this. There are dimples near her lower spine. Holding her with one hand, he touches the back of her arm. Feels the give it has. She's got bruises there, undoubtedly from him, and how beautiful they are like this, coloring her skin beneath the cinnamon sprinkle of the sun. How supple she is. He traces a line up to the spot where her arm and her back meet. He thinks just this spot of her, even, just the spot where her arm and her back meet without showing bone, just where softness meets softness, feels like love to him.

And on top of the cliff, he dives feeling that same love in her warmth. One hand on her shoulder and the other holding her bound wrists, he impales her sweet cunt.

He was right about her being on the edge.

The moment he hits the depth of her, she falls apart all around him. Throws her head back and howls his name. He changes his grip from her shoulder to her neck. Holds her there. Feels her heat contract around him in desperate pleasure. Feels her breath rattle out of her as he thrusts into her. Harder than making love should be but it feels that way to him. He hits so deep inside her he knows it must hurt but he doesn't care. She feels fucking incredible. So delicious, so beautiful, so his.

"Gonna get you pregnant, little fawn," he groans. "God, I'm gonna fucking *breed* you. Fill you with my cum every day, put a fucking baby inside you..."

She moans, pushing her hips back, and he drives into her harder. He hasn't felt this way about anyone or anything but her. This urge to own her in a different way from those he eats. This urge to make a family with her.

He wants this now. What Wright had.

And when she looks back at him with pleading, hungry eyes, he knows she's the only person in the world he will ever feel this for. The thought bursts between the two of them, white-hot and electric. Such is his need for her. His total, unbridled desire.

It's nearly stronger than the urge to dominate her like this. To remind her that she is *his*. He's come inside her sweet pussy once today. He'll do it again in the next hotel they find. Or in the truck on the way over.

"But I'm going to come in that sweet ass of yours this time," he growls as he drives inside her. "Because you are *mine* and you forgot that. We can't have that, can we?"

"God, Ridge!" she cries out.

"You've been bad, haven't you?" he growls.

"Yes," she whimpers.

He grabs her ass as he fucks her now, kneading into the meat of it. So fucking plump. He spanks her hard and she cries out, her cunt pulsing around his length. God, yes. He feels her pull him, rippling over him, her whole body spasming with the heft of pleasure. She nearly goes limp in his arms. Twitching as he holds her to him. Hanging her head. Catching her breath. She'll need more stamina for all he wants from her, but that will build over time when he fucks her day and night.

Still inside her, he pushes her forward. She stumbles from the altar but he braces the two of them with his hand against the back of the church pew. Uses the momentum to hit inside of her even deeper and spreads her cheeks wide for him. For a glorious minute he just watches himself fuck inside her, fighting the knot that threatens the base of his cock.

Then he reaches for the belt at her wrists. Loosens it, slips it away to the red sea below them. He holds her hand and brings the knuckles to his lips, kissing her there. Tasting the salty sweet of her sweat.

“You ever even had a finger in your ass, Sadie?” he asks her, slipping out of her just to smear some of her pleasure against her back entrance. He grits his teeth and milks some of himself there too, smoothing it into her hole.

“No, Ridge,” she breathes. “I’m scared.”

“You were such a good girl today, I’ll make it sweet for you,” he tells her. He thrusts back into her cunt, tracing his finger around her tight little hole. Circling her with her cum. He spits there too. She shivers. Already caught in the fantasy of it, he edges one finger inside while he fucks her. Groans loud at the feeling of his length rutting through her from the inside.

She gasps, both in pleasure and agony; he feels her tremble. He keeps his finger inside of her, just moving gently. Massaging while he thrusts into her pussy.

“It feels good,” she whimpers. “Like you’re filling me up more than I can bear.”

He slides another finger in and she winces. He slows the way he fucks her. Makes it deep, so fucking deep, but with shorter, luxurious thrusts. Grinding himself against her clit. Making her feel him everywhere.

“*Ridge*,” she moans. “Oh my *God*...”

“*That’s* right,” he groans. “Come for me, Sadie. Come hard.”

Her hands grip the back of the church pew tight and she shudders, fucking back into him. Taking him deeper. Her toes curl and a tremor rocks her body. Then, gloriously, she erupts with a shout and a sprinkle of wetness that paints his hips. She’s half-moaning, half-sobbing, her throat raspy from how deep he fucked her. She’s dissolving around him.

He keeps grinding into her, knowing he’s close, using half his concentration just to keep from knotting. God, he wants to get her pregnant in this fucking church. It would be a total damnation of all that threatens to take him from her. Her thoughts of goodness, her fear of the liar who calls himself the

Devil. Ridge will burn the church to the ground when he's through.

If only he could burn the one in her mind that gave her the urge to run from him.

He eases her hips, slowing his own thrusting and leaving the warmth of her perfect, gripping cunt. Notches himself at her rear entrance and smooths his hand over her lower back. He withdraws just to kiss the sweat from it. To trail kisses up her spine to the nape of her neck, before angling her face back to look in her eyes.

“It's going to hurt, Sadie,” he says.

Her lip trembles. She grips the back of the pew so hard her knuckles go white but she doesn't shrink away from him.

He kisses her. Poises his pleasure-slicked cock at her hole and eases in. With her lips against him like this, he tastes every hitching of her breath. Every whimper of pain. He's gentle but *fuck*,

*Fuck,*

*Jesus Christ.*

It's not just how tight she is.

Not just the stunning scent of her around him.

Not just the blood of their shared kill gone sticky and clotted on their skin.

It is her breath in his fucking mouth as she gives herself to him.

It is the perfect fit of his body over hers.

This exchange is like killing in that it's got its own death to it. The way she feels around him, hot, snug, submissive. This is the moment he knows for a fact that he will die if he ever loses her. That it'll rip everything out of him, because *this*? No one could preach a paradise like her surrender.



He fucks her slowly like this but he's gone. Already off the deep end, lost in both his love for her and how good she feels.

"*Ri-i-dge*," she moans, shuddering around him.

"Oh, *fuck*," he groans. "Oh, f-"

He's gasping, his face angled towards the ceiling. He can't see anything. Knows his eyes are rolled back. Knows his mouth is hanging open. Knows he's got one hand gripping her shoulder and the other on the small of her back.

But he doesn't feel any of those things.

He only feels her tight, snug ass gripping him like a vice. So fucking tight he can feel a hair twitch like lightning in his spine as her canal tugs the length of his cock. She's sobbing and moaning and he's going to black out again. He's going to black out inside of her, bent over a chestnut pew in a church filled with blood and cum and they'll burn him for this but who gives a damn when it's *her*?

"I'm gonna fucking marry you," he growls before burying himself to the hilt.

He empties all his soul into her before unconsciousness takes him.

## Chapter 9

## *Lick the salt*

**S**adie wakes to Ridge carrying her somewhere, his strong arms holding her like she's a small and fragile thing.

Like she's young, when she feels so grown. Her head is in the crook of his arm; a breeze whooshes past her bare feet. There's a frozen moment between them, this brief time in which she doesn't know where she is, why his skin is stained with that rust color, why she feels naked under the dusky pink of the setting Carolina sun, and he doesn't yet know she's awake, where the two of them have no cares in the world other than each other.

She puts her hand on his chest right over his heart. Feels the warm, broad plane of muscle there. She can't remember the last time someone carried her. The last time anyone stood up for her, or took care of her, even.

Today, she spoke out against those men who threatened her. She doesn't want to think of their deaths but she does think of that. Before she met Ridge, she was so very used to keeping her mouth shut. Now, boldness feels safe.

So comes the stinging thought that the setting sun means she only has a week and two days left to live like this, with him holding her without her asking, with him caring for her like she's young the way she never quite got to be, with her finding the voice she forgot how to speak with. It sparks tears that catch in her throat. When she tries to hide them by ducking her face to his chest, he pauses his walking. Shifts her to where she's got her arms wrapped around his neck and her

legs wrapped around his hips. He kisses her temple. Strokes her hair.

She is naked, and he's naked, and her dress and his pants are draped over his shoulder. At first she wants to ask him what happened to the church but she doesn't really want to know. She smells something like a bonfire and sees smoke billowing into the sky. Bites her lip.

"How long was I out for?" she whispers, tracing the line of his brow with her pointer finger. He's analyzing her. Reading words in the irises of her eyes and the curl of her lips that she doesn't even know she's written.

"Couldn't be more than thirty minutes past my own waking," he says in a low voice. "Was out cold myself, little fawn. After coming inside you like that, *Christ*."

He squeezes her thighs as he holds her up. His eyes darken against the neon skies. It makes her feel like she's flying, or falling from heaven. She's just as familiar with either feeling as she is with sex itself.

"Is that common?" she whispers, not sure she wants to know. "Passing out after... Making love?"

She feels herself blush fiercely at the words and he grins. Kisses her lightly on the side of her jaw. Traces his tongue along the line of it. "No, Sadie."

His breath and his lips send goosebumps down her spine and she shivers, holding him tighter.

"Nothing about you is common," he says.

When he looks at her like this, she can't even breathe.

"You're it, little fawn," he says. "My world."

Somehow, he can hold her up with just one hand. Uses the other to stroke her cheek. She leans her forehead against his. Feels herself want him again, already, though her body is so exhausted she can't imagine what they could do together.

Still, she whimpers and he grips her tighter.

Tilts his head.

Thins the air.

She feels him swell. Nods to him, reaching between them and stroking his waking member. They're so close to each other that their eyes just look like the color and they can feel each other's words.

"This isn't what sex feels like?" she asks him. Genuinely. She wouldn't know. He's the only man she's ever been with and they've done so much so quickly.

"No," he says. He's grinning now and she doesn't even know if he notices it but he looks so sweet when he smiles. "I don't do any of this. I don't feel any of this, with anyone but you."

She giggles. "But you aren't domesticated."

His smile softens into something deeper. He's hard in between them, her hand still moving up and down. Feeling the length and girth of him. It's hard to imagine how he's been inside her. Everywhere he's been inside her.

"You're wild," she whispers, guiding him to her entrance.

She's swollen. Raw. It hurts when he pushes into her. But as he slides deeper, that toe-curling bliss returns to her like sitting on hot asphalt after a cold swim. Like dandelion seeds brushing over her skin. Like only he can feel, fizzy and electric and glowing. She pushes the clothes off his shoulder to the weeds. There are sirens howling in the distance but they're somewhere safe, in the trees with the gentle lapping of the lake matching his breath in her ear.

She starts to ride him. Slow and luxuriating. Her body is still getting used to this, to making itself a wave over him, to liquifying under his touch. She kisses him as he guides her hips, moving her whole body with just the rhythm of his hands. She's sure he could hold her up like this. Dance her through the air with just the strength of his index finger. She's seen his valor and his destruction.

It scares her. Terrifies her, really.

But that fear lives with her love for him and now, after today, she thinks the two might be interwoven. Locked together like their bodies when he makes love to her like this.

Her pleasure builds higher and she grabs his face, gasping into his mouth. And his eyes are smiling even as he's panting, open-mouthed from bliss. He licks the inside of her mouth. Groans from the taste of her.

"*Sadie,*" he growls, beginning to thrust even deeper. Still holding her hips, pinning her to him, grinding against her sex until pleasure spirals up her spine and she comes for him. Over him. He kisses the sweat from her neck. "You're wild too."

There's no ground beneath them. No wall against her back. Nothing but their bodies and the setting sun.

Later, they'll speak about marriage and wanting an entire litter of children and Sadie will pretend that she'll be alive to birth his sons. She'll do such a good job because the world is unfair enough for making her picture smiling freckled faces with lichen colored eyes and racing hearts who love so hard it hurts.

But now their breathing grows short and desperate, and the air around them is just pushed in and out of each other's lungs, and spit and sweat is on their skin from wanting. He floods her as she gasps in rapture up towards the darkening sky, and she whispers the words she didn't think she could ever mean.

"I love you, Ridge," she says. Not needing him to say it back because she knows.

Still, he turns. Locked into her. His warmth alive in her warmth. She recognizes where they are now. At the edge of the lake, where the sun paints the water like peach skin.

"I love you too," he tells her.

His heart is racing faster than it does with a gun to his head.

It moves in sync with her own.

Ridge is ready to sleep for a week and he's sure Sadie is too, the way she nods her head as she lies against him in the bed of the motel. It's nearing nine o'clock but they'll leave tonight. News of the burning church will spread fast in a town like this. People might speak of having seen him and Sadie with the reverend, so he can't afford them finding out who they are.

There's just one thing he must do to ensure that.

"Call the farm," he tells Sadie, kissing her on the forehead. "Tell Wright we're going to the cottages near Ocracoke, think we went there sometime as kids."

"Where's Ocracoke?" Sadie asks sleepily.

"At the ocean, little fawn," he says, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She opens her eyes smiling. Makes him want to stay here rather than leave at all. Hold her all night wrapped in blankets rather than driving the hours it'll take to get to the Outer Banks.

"We're going to the ocean?" she asks, pushing herself up.

She's so surprised, he wants to chase her father's ghost into hell and do the Devil's work for him. Should've taken the days off. She should've been given everything that would light her up like this.

"Gonna lick the salt from your perfect fuckin' skin," Ridge tells her, reluctantly pressing himself up to stand. He kisses her again, on the lips this time. "Right now I've gotta do something. Close your eyes if you've got to, sleep for a while. It'll be a long drive."

She nods, but swings her legs to the side of the bed with the phone. Just the look of her bruised knees makes him want to take her on that bed but it's getting late.

The restaurant closed not minutes ago. She'll be leaving it soon.

His pants are still damp from washing in the lake as he walks away from the motel room. Luckily, Sadie stole one of his shirts. He's wearing it now, so it's dry and bloodless. He looks well. Not at all like he killed two men and fucked his woman in their carnage. Even the cut on his cheek from the hammer has vanished.

He waits outside for a few minutes before seeing her under the light. She still wears the seafoam green dress she's worn all shift. The way she smokes a cigarette like the world is safe to her gives him an odd, unexpected pang in his chest. Like he shouldn't be killing this woman.

There's no other way.

She knows his name.

It had been arrogance and a lack of foresight to tell her that, but fate has made her just as much of a threat to his future with Sadie as the men he killed.

He could have been more careful with them. He left their bodies to burn in the church and someone will question the arm. The police will know it was arson. But he knows Sadie paid for the motel with a fake name, and the only person who could tie him to the murders is smoking a cigarette under a street light, waiting for someone.

He approaches her. Makes his movements louder so she isn't startled.

At first when she looks at him, there's a flash of hunger in her expression. Then she remembers. Memory pulls judgment into her pretty chestnut eyes.

"Can I bum one off ya?" Ridge asks.

She purses her lips. Still, she reaches into her bag and offers him the carton and a light. Their exchange is a silent one. An opportunity for either of them to walk away.

But they don't.

He stands there with her, breathing deep the ash that numbs his senses. Last cigarette he had was the night he met



Sadie and out here, at a motel by a state highway, illuminated by yellow light, he can see that memory crystal clear. See her stepping out of her pa's truck. He remembers how the hunger hit him.

It's never gone away, that drive to indulge himself in her. It's just become a different craving, consummation over consumption. Love, like she calls it. Like he's never known it before. He'll have to figure out how to control the way he eats at her. Doesn't want to curse her with scars all over her body. She heals quickly but not completely. Not like him.

Jess died with the one bite Wright ever gave her still light against her skin.

"You've got a lotta nerve coming back here after what you did to that girl," the waitress says.

"Well, we're heading out," he tells her. "Just walkin' to clear my mind."

"They're sayin' the church burned down."

He smiles. "You might think me devilish but I promise I didn't have a thing to do with that. Been freely walkin' into churches since I could stand on two feet."

"Hm," she regards.

She takes a deep breath, now, and it's tinted with enough relief that he thinks there's a chance she won't tell on him for what he's done.

"You tell anyone what you saw me do to my wife?" Ridge asks, taking a deep drag.

"You ain't wearing a ring."

He exhales.

"Very judgmental, caring that a man can't afford a ring," he remarks. "She's my wife all the same. Love of my life."

Sometimes, hunting grounds are a confessional.

"I ain't said nothing," she says.

“Glad to hear it,” Ridge replies.

“Ain’t a gossip.”

Ridge smiles. “Wasn’t accusin’ you of that.”

“Not loose-lipped neither,” she quips.

Her breath hitches when they lock eyes and Ridge lets his gaze linger. She’s young. Older than him by a year or two, the same age as a handful of the girls Wright spends his weekends with. She’s tall and lean like the women Wright likes. Like Jess was.

“You waitin’ on a ride from someone?” Ridge asks.

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, but he ain’t showing up. Imagine he won’t, with what’s happened.”

Ridge nods. “I can drive you home.”

“Don’t think that would be wise,” she says.

“Why’s that?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Because whether or not that sweet girl is your wife, you’re looking at me like you could eat me alive.”

He smiles. “Don’t be callin’ me a dog, now.”

“Don’t know anything about dogs,” she says. “I’m just calling you a man.”

She exhales a white cloud before biting her lip.

Ridge looks at the way her heartbeat thrums underneath her jaw. She’d taste good. Not as good as his fawn, but she smells nice enough. If he weren’t in love, there would be other feelings too. He’d probably fuck her against the brick wall before ripping her throat out. That’s what he’s done in the past.

*We saved them in Orion.*

He’s an evil man. Savage, brutal, cruel.

*I love you, Ridge.*

He shudders, disguising the reaction with a cough. He can kill this woman. It's easy. It's in his blood; it's who he is. He's spent more than a decade knowing this. He can kill her, and Sadie will never have to know the things he does to keep her safe. Because he would kill a thousand innocent people for just another day with her under open skies. He's never felt guilt about something as simple as taking space in his own dominion.

His kind eats people. It's what they do. What they have to do.

But he's not hungry.

"Your mind is a battlefield, huh?" the waitress asks, tossing her cigarette to the dirt.

He grins, though he imagines it doesn't meet his eyes. "Long fuckin' day," he says.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

He doesn't answer her. Doesn't avert his gaze either. There's a surreal feeling in his chest now like he's waiting for her to give the right last words. No one else will hear them. She found a space pretty far down the road for whoever's picking her up. Maybe the reverend. She's lived a life up until now and doesn't know he's the one who's going to end it. Seeing prey as more than scent and flavor is new to him.

He takes a last drag before dropping his own beneath his boot.

He'll get no pleasure from this kill and he's eaten enough to satisfy his hunger. But leaving her alive might put his name on a wanted poster and he can't have that.

He can't walk away.

The decision must be clear on his face because he watches her expression fall. Once flirty, now there's dread in her eyes and a quiver in her lip like Sadie gets around him. She knows. Fear and adrenaline spring to the forefront of her scent.

She looks past him to the restaurant. “I’ve got a shift early tomorrow morning,” she says nervously. “Maybe they’ll have an extra room I can stay in.”

He takes a deep breath and steps closer to her.

She laughs nervously. “I’d best be on my way.”

He doesn’t move.

When she blinks, tears fall onto her cheeks and she wipes them away with shaking hands.

“I’d really better be going,” she says, looking at him. Expecting him to leave. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“Yes you do,” he tells her. “You know my name.”

“I’d never say it,” she says, hiccupping. She keeps crying, keeps wiping her face, but she doesn’t try to move. Not to run away from him or towards safety. “I promise, I’d never tell anyone. I don’t care what you did. Even if you k-”

She stops herself, covering her mouth.

“Here or somewhere better?” Ridge asks.

He’ll give her that at least.

“What do you mean?” she breathes.

He takes her in. Her legs are shaking too much to run. She’s going to scream. They’re close enough to the motel where people will hear her. Where his fawn will hear her, and she’ll know.

“You know what I mean,” he tells her.

The second she inhales, he lurches forward. Hand over her mouth, other at her neck. First, he snaps his grip at her throat so tight he feels the collapse of her windpipe. No screaming. No noise.

Then, he frames her face, not unlike the way he holds Sadie. One hand gripping her jaw and the other on her neck. He twists.

As hard as he can.

There's a crunch and she's looking far, far away from him now. Limp and breathless. Empty as she falls into his arms.

His mind quiets. He hoists her over his shoulder and carries her through the shadows to his truck.

He still doesn't believe in God but she's got a little gold cross on her neck, so he drives her body out to the lake. It seems like a pretty place to rest for a while. There, he watches the cool black water reflect the bright moon.

Folklore says his kind goes wild by moonlight but he always feels calmed by it. Tomorrow night, he'll take Sadie out on the beach at midnight and make love to her in its glow.

He's just got to do this first. If he eats enough, he can wait a week without killing again. Maybe even two. Wright waits four but he can't imagine letting himself get weak like that. Not when there's still evil out there waiting for his girl.

He takes his white t-shirt off, and the pants. Strips himself and the waitress naked and drags the corpse into the water with him. He can smell and feel the gators moving around him but they're wise and won't approach just yet. He's got to have his meal first.

Waist-deep in water, he bites into her neck. Sucks what blood he can from her, as most of it is clotted. It's still sweet. A hollow taste compared to his fawn but he expects that by now. He eats at the flesh of her breasts and then turns her, taking the lean meat from her back. He takes chunks from her thighs and her calves. He's surprisingly ravenous.

When he's done, he pushes her body towards the waiting jaws of the gators and he swims out for a few minutes in the dark. No bugs or fish or snakes come near him. They smell on his skin who and what he is.

The natural world keeps its order.

The phone rings at the Lindal farm but again, no one answers.

Sadie is starting to get worried for Wright. She thinks he might be passed out drunk somewhere. Maybe really hurt himself. It feels like that in her gut, like something bad happened to him. She has a mind to tell Ridge they can just go home so they can check on him, avoid the ocean in favor of his brother's safety.

Instead, something tells her to call her own house.

She knows no one is there but maybe she just wants to see if the line still works. Just to know that there's some sound echoing between those walls. The house will go to the state, she imagines, when she dies. She hopes someone cares for the goats. They might grow lonely, left out there for too long. She feels rotten not for thinking of them.

She dials the number she's more accustomed to giving out than ever calling. Listens to it ring. Once, twice, three times. Four. She should feel silly but she presses the receiver closer to her ear almost as if she'll hear her own voice on the other line and realize this was all a dream.

The line clicks.

At first she thinks that it has been shut off, so silent is the other end.

But then, slowly, she hears a shuddering breath.

She leans forward. Listening. She knows this is her own home number, knows she didn't just call the one Wright gave her again. Someone is in her house.

"Lindal farm," a man's voice says dully.

She presses her hand to her mouth. Her heart is pounding. She must have called Wright's number. She must have.

But she knows she didn't.

"W-Wright?" she asks. "It's Sadie."

She hears a sigh on the other end. It sounds so different from him that it turns her stomach, like she's listening to an

alien broadcast. She felt that way listening to a recording of that Orson Welles show. Her once-warm room feels freezing.

“Where are you?” she asks.

“Your kitchen, apparently,” Wright says. “Thought it was mine.”

There’s the clinking of a glass. She hears him swallow.

“Is he with you, Sadie?” Wright asks. His speech is slurred.

Tears well in her eyes. It’s too much to think of him like this. Something’s wrong and she’s too far away to help. Even if they drive overnight, they won’t get there when it counts.

“Wright,” she says. “How did you find my house? You shouldn’t be there right now. It’s not safe. You shouldn’t be like this.”

“Is my brother with you?” Wright asks.

“Yes,” Sadie says, though she’s not sure where Ridge is.

“Can I speak with him?”

“He’s out right now.”

“Okay,” Wright sighs.

“I can tell him whatever you’d like when he gets back,” she says. “Or you can tell him in person-”

“Don’t come back here,” he says firmly. “Don’t ever fucking come back here.”

“Come to us, then,” she says. “He wants you to meet us at the ocean. At Ocra... Ocracola.”

Wright laughs. It’s the first thing that sounds like him. He takes a deep breath.

“Ocracoke,” he says.

She pauses, chewing on her lower lip. Her throat tightens.

“I really need you to be with him,” she whispers. She ducks her head, lets her tears fall to her scraped knees. “I need

you to be there. You know why that's important, right... Wright..."

She laughs lightly, sniffing.

"I love him," she says. "He loves me, too, and this hurts so much."

He sighs long on the other end.

"I saw him with you," Wright says. "And you two had fuckin' cute kids, Sadie."

She wipes at her cheeks because the temptation of honesty is too much now. "Well, you know that can't happen."

She bites her lips between her teeth and cries. Silent, just like she would lying on the couch not too far from where Wright is now. Sneaking downstairs just to let the pain hit without her papa knowing.

"You think," she asks, wiping her face. "Do you think I'm his punishment? For what he did?"

There's silence on his end for a while.

"You're nobody's punishment," Wright says. Gravel in his voice. "Understand that? Fuckin' hell, first time I saw my boy laugh in years was the day after he met you."

He laughs but it sounds forced, like it's covering something.

"It's gonna be okay, Sadie," he says.

It isn't, though. She thinks of the men at the church, how she couldn't even watch Ridge kill them. As tempted as she may be to have a lifetime with him, she knows it's not in her nature to end someone. It's the very softness he loves about her that'll send her to the grave.

"I did something..." Wright starts. "God, I'm fucked up."

"You're drunk."

"I wake up covered in dirt."

Sadie shudders. "*Wright.*"



He falls quiet on the other line. She winces when she hears the pouring of liquid into glass. The sound of him swallowing hard.

“I need you to leave my house,” Sadie says. “And you can’t do that very well when you’re drunk, can you?”

“It’s been a long week since I got here,” he sighs.

“I haven’t been gone a week.”

He pauses. “How long you been gone for, then?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Days, maybe. Four days.”

She hears a chair move over the tile. Hears him settle into it.

“I got here yesterday?” he asks.

It’s not a question she can answer, nor one she’s meant to.

“It’s been days with her, Sadie.”

“Who?” Sadie asks.

Silence. She thinks she hears another voice in the room with him, but not very loud. Faint. Just above a whisper. She can’t make out the words.

“Please get out of there, Wright,” she tells him. “I’m scared for you.”

“Don’t worry, darlin’,” he soothes.

She feels his voice in the pit of her stomach. She hears him take another sip.

“I’ll meet you in Ocracoke, you hear me?” he asks. Or tells. It feels like a promise.

“Leave tonight.”

“I’ll leave...” he sighs. “When I’m done with the bottle, I’ll leave.”

“*Wright,*” she pleads.

“I’m already good as dead,” he says. “The road ain’t gonna take me.”

## Chapter 10

## *When the radio plays*

**A**t a cottage they rent by the seaside inn, Ridge and Sadie sleep until the afternoon. He wakes to her cheek pressed to his chest and her sweet, ineffective fist curled under her chin. She didn't even have the energy to change into bedclothes last night and her dress is wrinkled against him. Sadie, smelling like honeysuckle and brown butter and Ridge's pleasure. Ridge, smelling like campfires and the lake. If there's any blood left on him, she hasn't noticed.

Whatever Wright told her on the phone shook her, but she looks so peaceful now. Her thumb presses at her lower lip like she's a child resting on him. But she is no child; she's his woman. Her weight anchors him. Calms him. He listens to their heartbeats match one another.

He's never woken up with someone before, but even if he did he can't imagine it feeling like this. It's like the second he opens his eyes, warmth flushes through him. Sunlight rises in each vertebrae of his spine. He craves her already, longs for her, the way her thick thigh drapes over his hips. The way the skin of it is soft and warm and melts into his own. Without waking her, he wraps his hand around her leg and pulls her over him. Slides his fingers over the pitted parts of her skin where he first bit her and feels the indentations there.

He was reckless with her then. Now, he's learning limits. A world without her seems inconceivable. A world without waking up to her weight on top of him and to her heartbeat

reminding him there's some soul to him still. He's greedy for this. For her.

Nothing else matters because it would be impossible. *Impossible*, for even the Devil himself to take her from him. Death would fall and let the world continue on. So be it. Let the bodies pile up; he will do the man's job for him if he's even real.

Ridge is the most powerful being he's ever come across and still, her sweetness and her love conquer him. She's gonna houstrain him, gonna domesticate some of his spirit.

Gonna make him a father to a whole fucking litter of freckled wolves.

All while he whispers sweet nothings with her blood in his mouth.

It's easy, like this, with his body fueled and mind still, to tell himself that he can take down anything in their path. He has. She ate the reverend's holy blood from his mouth. He brushed the waitress's skin out of his teeth in a rest stop bathroom. It's only Sadie now. He'll figure out a way to live better after this, but now, *this* is all there is.

An ocean breeze blows through the window, floating the gauzy curtains in the golden light of the sun. She's peaceful. She should be.

Ridge traces the line of her neck with two fingers. Doesn't tell her, but the softness of her jaw is one of his favorite parts of her face. He can press his lips to it and feel each pulse echo out across her body. When she murmurs as she wakes, he hears the vibration in the pads of his fingers.

"It's too bright," she whispers. She shifts as if trying to move tighter to him, but gravity has already sunk her as deep as it can.

He smooths his hands up underneath her dress, feeling her soft, sweet back. He tastes sleep on her. She whimpers sweetly. Grinds gently against his waking member.

“Did we sleep too late?” she asks with her lips on his neck.

“Might be sleeping for two,” he murmurs.

“*Ridge*,” she giggles. “I don’t think it happens that quickly.”

Her breath catches with sorrow and she buries her face against him.

“Let’s not think about such things,” she whispers.

He threads his fingers into her hair and pulls her back enough to look in her eyes. He’d like to shake some sense into her, to remind her that any deadline she holds in her mind is somewhere between his birthday and a holiday. Might seem important, but in the end it’s just some other day. Ain’t anything gonna take her back to the land of the dead. He doubts she’s ever set foot on that ground.

“Gonna kill that devil of yours,” he says. “Gonna eat his fuckin’ marrow, and he can tell me how strong he thought he was over his own screams.”

Now, he draws her back until she’s straddling him and sitting upright. He wonders if he can soften his teeth enough to let her sit on his face and smother him with her scent and flavor. He’d take sandpaper to them and wait for his next turn to heal.

“We’re going to the ocean today, little fawn,” he says. “I’ll carry you there myself.”

She smiles, yawning and stretching her arms overhead. All her weight on his hips makes him growl.

“Should take you to city hall,” he says, gripping her thighs and grinding her against him. “Marry you there, Sadie Lindal.”

“Mm,” she says, pressing her hands to his chest. “Do you even know my last name, Ridge?”

“Don’t intend to have you keep it,” he states, pushing up the hem of her dress. He wants to see her glistening folds in

the morning light, the swollen redness of her sex. She hasn't worn panties, might not have a single pair left.

She laughs, covering her face with her hands. "I don't know you. How do I love you when I don't know you?"

"Last name's Price," he says, unbuttoning the top of her dress. He doesn't even need to press himself up for this. His arms can reach everywhere on her gorgeous, petite frame. "Looked at the registration in your pa's truck the day after you shot me."

She pouts slightly. "I'm sorry for shooting you."

"Would'a killed you if you didn't."

"Don't say that," she scolds.

"The truth," he tells her, finishing the top buttons of her dress. It opens to the moons of her cleavage, warm in the light. God, she's fucking lush. "Take off your dress."

She narrows her eyes at him, placing her hands on his torso instead. He's naked, sleeps naked. Wants her to.

"Tell me about yourself, Ridge," she challenges. She traces her finger down the center line of his abdomen, the muscle there.

"You know everything worth knowing," he says in a low voice, smoothing his hands up her thighs. Under his palms is the sugared salt of her sweat and the toasted marshmallow flavor of sleep.

"Do you watch movies?" she asks.

"No," he says, sliding up her hem and stroking the fur of her cunt. He spreads her and already, he's nearly drunk with desire. Licking his lips as he brushes his thumb over her sweet, soft, reddish mauve folds. Like honey mixed with ocean waves. His mouth waters. He wants to fuck her, sure, but he wants to eat at her too. She should sit on his face anyway, even if it's like sitting on knives. He can let her blood and her cum pour down his throat. If his seed doesn't take and she bleeds this month, he will bury his face between her thighs all the

days of her cycle. Now, he presses his thumbs on either side of her jewel, massaging deep circles just to feel her pleasure seep onto his growing erection.

She moans lightly, deep in her throat. “When the radio plays, what do you like to hear?” she asks breathily.

“When the radio plays, I turn it off,” he says. “Take my cock, little fawn. Can’t fuckin’ think with you like this.”

“I can’t think with you inside of me,” she challenges. But he’s kneading her, and again she’s moaning, tilting her face towards the ceiling. Fuck, he needs to be inside of her. He doesn’t even need to move, just needs her glorious goddamned womb gripping him.

He wants it sweet like she is. Wants it sleepy and sunlit for as long as he can manage.

“*Please*, Sadie,” he groans. “*Fuck* you’re so goddamned beautiful.”

He’s never asked for anything. Never begged. But he does it for her and it feels right. She blushes and he smells how much she likes it.

“Take off your dress and show me all of you,” he tells her. “God, I need to see you in the sunlight. Show me what’s fucking mine.”

By the time she reaches for her hem, her arousal is dripping onto his teasing fingers. She lifts the dress over her head and he sees her for the first time all over again, sees the sacred plumpness of her pale breasts and the sweet, soft curve of her stomach. Her freckles add to their eroticism because they seem to be everywhere but on that plush, sand-colored flesh, otherwise unmarred by anything but the razor and his teeth. Her nipples are a sweet light pink mixed with tan, so tender and sensitive they threaten to drive him insane. But he loves the veins he sees, too. The blue-green lines that throb for him. So plump and ripe for biting.

“Lift your hips,” he growls, guiding her.



She does, and he notches the head of his aching cock at her entrance. He does not fuck women like this, with them on top. Likely won't fuck her like this for long. But God, she's so beautiful when her breath hitches as she lowers herself onto him. As she stops halfway, overwhelmed, and he catches her hands in his.

"I can't," she whimpers.

He growls from the base of his throat this time, shifting his grip from her hands to her hips. Keeps his gaze fixated on her as he thrusts slowly, deeper, from underneath. Short movements. Watching her eyes water and then darken as she feels all his hunger impaling her soul.

He can see hers, vibrant and true. And her body may be sexier than anything he's had the grace of seeing in his long quarter century, but it's her eyes that trap him. He's so very much in love with those hazel spheres. They brim with tears from pleasure and pain but she quakes and she takes him obediently. Shuddering. Gasping. Breathing his name.

The deeper he plants himself, the more ecstasy runs through his spine. When she sets her weight down he groans loud, rolling his eyes back. *Fuck*, how can he ever last long with her? She's too perfect, too sweet, too warm, too much another world he'd like to live in over his. He watches a twin pleasure invade her form. Watches it sprinkle goosebumps over her skin.

She tries to ride him but he holds her hips instead. Settles her to where he's deep, deep, in the grip of her reaching cunt. To where her womb swallows him even as her legs shake. Already pulsing. Already pulling him deeper. He groans. When he presses his hand against her belly, he can feel his cock stiff inside.

So they look at each other, her pinned in place with his hands. And it's like they can feel all the sweetness he saved for ten years in the honey between their bodies.

He brings his hands back to her sex but now when he toys at her swollen bud, he feels every shiver and clench on his length. He feels all her pleasure all around him. He says her name like a curse and a prayer, watching the way it moves her.

“When you look at me like that, I do believe it,” she whispers.

“Believe what?” he asks, reaching his pleasure-soaked fingers up to circle and pluck at her right nipple.

She gasps, the sound catching in her throat. He rolls her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, making it stand. He wants all of her on edge for him.

“That I’m as beautiful as you say,” she says. Her voice wavers. Her body quivers around him. “You’re like no one I’ve ever seen before, Ridge. You look like an angel.”

He grins savagely, pinching her left nipple just to make her yelp. But he draws back to look at her with his hand under his neck. Laid back. Watching the sunrise of her presence light the afternoon sky.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he says.

“Prettier than Elizabeth Taylor?” she asks.

“Don’t know who that is,” he laughs. The movement inside her makes her whimper. She’s darling, like this. Like she doesn’t know how the sun and the earth and all his thoughts circulate around the way her cheeks dimple when she smiles. “But my little fawn, you’re prettier than the ocean. More beautiful than the blue mountains back home and more than a cloudless night with a full moon and the galaxy behind it. Never met a person who could put those sights to shame until I met you.”

He reaches down to where they’re joined, to where her pleasure soaks his hips.

“Taste yourself, Sadie,” he says, bringing his slickened fingers to her mouth. “You’re my communion.”

She does as she's told and sucks the moisture from him. Her eyes close in concentration, and *Jesus*, she looks so seductive like this. With a slight furrow to her freckled brow and her own pleasure on her lips. He throbs inside of her, unable to hold himself back from gentle thrusting. From returning his hands to the heaven between her thighs and pillaging her for pleasure.

"*Ridge*," she gasps, falling forward. She plants her hands on his chest and her breasts spill towards his face. She's too short for him to reach them with his mouth but what a glorious sight. He keeps his deep massage at her sex. Her bud is so fucking swollen between his fingers, and her cunt is so fucking full with his girth.

"What music do you listen to?" he teases, pushing deeper. "When that radio plays?"

She's quivering already, her back arching. Her nipples are hard and slick with her painted pleasure; it's fucking cruel, really, that they have to talk at all right now. It's *punishing*.

"I like bluegrass," she shudders, her sweet, wet sex pulsing around his shaft. She's torturing him and she knows it. "When I clean. And... Jazz when I cook. You read."

"I read," he groans.

He's going to make her come but his cock is aching with restraint. Just teasing her warmth when he could be fucking it. When he could be fucking her and knotting, keeping his seed inside her long enough to take to her lush, perfect womb.

"What's your favorite book?" she moans. "Oh, god..."

He's kneading her bud with his thumbs on either side, digging into the sweet flesh of her cunt. She shudders over him, panting. Gasping.

"Oh, *my*," she moans, throwing her head back. Her legs are shaking. She's *trembling* over him. Quaking. Coming hard as the warmth of their waking bodies envelops them within this room. This is perfect. *She's* perfect. She soaks him. Rasping out as she rides him through it. Fuck, she's gorgeous. Her hair

lit by the sun behind them, her perfect freckled throat with the scars he's made. Little pink lines of ownership. *Yes*, she's his. All his. Her soft body ripples through every twitch of pleasure she takes over him.

The taste of her spreads around his throbbing member, across his aching balls, into the lines of his pelvis. She is divine.

"It's on my nightstand at the house," he tells her in a voice made rough by desire. He brings his drenched fingers to his lips, locking eyes with her as she blinks down at him. As he sucks her juices from them.

"What?" she whispers, catching her breath.

"My favorite book," he says. "Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. Jess gave it to me when I was a kid, thought it would be like my comics or close enough to them."

"That's a dark book for a child," she remarks, stroking his chest.

He's still inside her, ready to fuck her senseless, but this is sweet. An island of peace amongst the sea of their lust, a flickering memory he sees but doesn't often touch, a mention of the past. She brings it out of him.

She brings so much out of him.

"It ain't dark for a wolf pup," he says. "Hell, I saw Wright kill before I ever read it. I liked the story. Think it meant something to her. Helped her understand what we were."

"Monsters," Sadie says.

Ridge smiles. "Think I'm a monster, little fawn?"

Sadie looks deep into his eyes then. He grips her hips tight. Tight enough to hurt. Tight enough for her not to deny the creature within him.

"What does it mean that I love you still?" she asks.

He springs up to grab her, then rolls her underneath him. Never once slipping from her, but thrusting harder when he

settles above. Crying out, she drags her nails over his back.

“Everything,” he growls, nipping at her neck only to kiss the blood off. “Means fuckin’ everything.”

Sadie’s feet are in the sand.

She’s watching a living beast breathe before her, a creature more powerful than anything she’s ever seen. Stronger than God, stronger than the devil. It could swallow Ridge up in its neverending vastness but she thinks it wouldn’t because it sounds like his voice. This, more than a human and something like him, must be where he came from. It’s the only explanation for the power they both share. It reaches for him, whispers his name, and so it reaches for her and whispers her name too because she is in front of him and he’s holding her in his warm, strong arms.

*I love you, the beast says.*

*Infinitely.*

*From your skin*

*To the pockets of your lungs,*

*I will flood you,*

*And you will never be the same.*

She walks close enough to the surf that the sand is wet and caves in beneath her feet. She stops sinking when the ocean is satisfied and she stands, partially buried. This beast is unconquerable. It could throw itself at her and pull her into the depths if it wanted to. A swallow. A stealing. Her heart races in circles in her chest, wondering which side of her is safest.

Ridge feels it with his lips and his tongue under her jaw. And her heart says, right here. Right beneath his sharp teeth.

It’s long past when the crowds would be here, too dark to attract anyone but the two of them and some strangers who sleep on the sand. Sadie gave a man who was singing Kay Starr what was left of her dinner and he seemed grateful.

There are more people who need things here than she's ever seen.

But it's not a bad place to crave what's missing. The waves are an endless calming whisper and they glow in shimmering aqua like they're lighting candles for those who are lost. Ridge tells her that it's not the water itself that's glowing but rather, millions of microscopic creatures who hold onto the sun's light until nighttime.

"Like fireflies," he says.

"Like magic," she whispers.

And she feels for those who lack, because in this exact moment there's nothing in her life that feels absent. She's full of the good and beautiful things she dreamt about when she was little but never had the reach to grasp onto. She's here. She's loved. She's cared for.

"Do you swim?" Ridge asks.

"In the Tennessee," she tells him. And the lake with that awful preacher, but she won't remind him of that.

"This'll be easy, then," he says, stripping off his shirt. He unbelt his pants and shirks them too until he's standing naked on the dark shore, his figure black against the glowing waves. Still, she can see the indecency in his silhouette. How can he think of swimming in something so vast and open?

He's fearless, of course. And she is full of fear. But he's taught her to love it.

He walks back towards her.

"Aren't there sharks?" she asks. "Sea monsters?"

"They'll keep their distance, they know what's good for them," he teases.

And even in the dark, she can see him smile.

"Come, little fawn," he says. "Before I pull you in."

She takes a step back, her heart pounding once more.

“Pull me in,” she whispers.

He growls low and she shivers.

“Can you see at night like a wolf does?” she asks.

“I can see every goosebump on your perfect skin.”

She takes another step backwards. Her feet are on dry sand now. She coils herself to run, taking one deep breath before turning and sprinting as fast as she can. She doesn't run towards town, but down the beach. Away from the lights. Into the darkness until she can't see anything around her and all she can hear are the crashing waves and her own breathing.

Her legs grow tired from running. She thought he'd catch her quickly.

Now, it's just her alone in the universe. Her body thrums with electricity. Her ears perk, waiting for him. Waiting for the sound of his breath or his footfalls on the sand.

There's nothing.

She swallows. Suddenly, she's afraid. Worried. Did something happen to him? Did the ocean take him back?

“Ridge?” she calls out. Turning around, she sees the lights of the town but they're distant and nothing cuts between them. “Ridge!”

Something brushes past the hem of her dress and she feels wind at her back. She turns to look in that direction and sees nothing but blackness. She's panting now, both afraid and alive. He's here. She knows his scent. But he's toying with her like a cat would a mouse and she's ablaze with the thrill of it.

She feels her hair lift from her neck. Feels him rush by. When she turns, he's gone, but she heard him this time. She feels hunted. The meal for her wolf. Not the sheltered, sweet girl who feared the dark any longer but the one who is made alive by it.

He grabs her. Scoops her off her feet and high into the air, then over his shoulder with his large hand wrapped around her

thigh. Startled, she screams and then laughs as he rushes her into the dark waves. He lets her slip down as he does. Legs wrapped around his hips, arms wrapped around his neck. He sprints through the shallows like water gives no more resistance than a cloud. The ocean kisses her bare thighs and affirms her belief that it indeed created him. It awakens something new inside her. Scares her a little. Clings to her skin.

Soon, they plummet into the darkness.

Sadie can see the reflection of the moon and all the night stars in the water. She can see the glowing creatures too, no more detailed up close than light is. Each time she moves her arms to swim, she casts a glow along her skin. Ridge's long, lean body is neon with them as he circles her like a bewitching serpent, so natural and fluid are his strokes. Other creatures, small dark shapes and some larger ones, swim their glow-streaked bodies away from them. He was right.

Animals big and small can smell his danger. She tastes it mixed with salt water. That perfect flavor of kettle corn and campfire smoke. It's what love tastes like.

Her eyes adjust better to the moonlight and she watches Ridge watch her, his lips in a near-permanent smile. He looks younger now. Not in age but in spirit. His dark hair curls around his head.

"Still afraid of the water?" he asks.

She shivers. "Yes," she tells him, swimming closer. "I can't touch the ground. And there's..."

She grasps a floating, slimy leaf.

"Plants," she says.

"Seaweed," he laughs.

"It feels like death reaching for me," she shudders.

He palms her waist gently. Pulls her close enough so that their bodies drift together even as they both tread water. The waves move them, him first and then her.



“Would never let that happen, little fawn,” he tells her.

Something in the way he says it makes her want to believe.

“My knight,” she says. “In wolf’s clothing.”

They float together in the glowing sea as the waves guide them closer to shore. She feels like his touch completes a part of her that dreams built. They’re in harmony, under and over the endless stars.

Sadie feels the ground through him first. When he can stand, he takes her with him, wading in gentle spins until he finds waist-deep water and sits with her balanced on his knees. She wraps her arms around his neck. Here, they are perfectly entwined. Her dress feels like seaweed, floating around them.

“You’ll catch a chill with this dress on,” he tells her.

She giggles. “Is that so?”

He lowers his face to her jaw, pressing his lips there. Trailing kisses down to the crook of her neck and shoulder as his hands find her zipper. He pulls the dress down so that just her shoulder is exposed. It feels cold at first, but she doesn’t mind.

“The ocean tastes good on your skin,” he says.

She turns her head and licks his neck. He tastes salted now and when she sucks on the skin there she feels his body grow warmer.

He peels her dress off and throws it towards the shore. Strips the panties from her thighs and sucks the water from them before kissing her. Hot breath and cold sea. Naked like this, she feels how alive the ocean is. It moves over her, caresses her, like it’s not just him and his large hands exploring her body but rather this living thing they’re occupying. This beast that’s swallowed them whole.

“Kneel on my shoulders,” he murmurs, a moan edging his throat.

“What?” she laughs.

“Want you to straddle my fucking face,” he growls.

He stands with her wrapped around him. This feeling, of his hot skin pressing towards one side of her and the cool air on the other, is like a hurricane within her. She’s writhing for him. Needing him like shelter.

She looks back towards the lights of the city but they seem further away now. Still, if she does as he says she’ll be naked with her rear exposed to anyone who finds them.

Panting, she looks up into his eyes and sees him grinning at her. He raises an eyebrow in a challenge. *Try to rebel and I’ll have your hide.*

So, she climbs him.

It’s messy and difficult to find her footing but he guides her and then she’s got her knees on the muscle between his neck and shoulders and he’s got his breath on her sex. He holds her effortlessly and she laughs into the night sky, thrilled and shocked and delighted. He kneads his hands into her thighs as he holds her to him. Drags his tongue to part her slit, groaning approvingly at her flavor.

She tilts her face to the stars and howls. Breathes the ocean air deep into her bones. He’s strong enough where she can lean back without him even wavering, so as he begins to lavish her she feels like she’s floating. She watches the galaxy as his tongue swirls over her again and again, picking up its rhythm.

“*Ridge,*” she moans. “You feel like heaven.”

And it’s the last thing she can think because he pulls her closer. Lavishing turns to devouring, turns to her gripping his hair and riding his face until she peaks loud and wild over him. The ocean mimics the waves within her, crashing, swirling, deafening.

She’s sobbing with pleasure by the time he slides her off his shoulders and wraps her around his hips. Knee deep in the

water, he thrusts inside her and groans her name as a curse in her ear, against her neck.

“*Fuck* yes, little fawn,” he growls.

She rides him too this time, clinging to him as he fucks desperately inside her. There’s something feral about doing this outdoors, about feeling and hearing the ocean all around them. Each time she meets his hips she feels herself get higher. Higher, as he grips her ass and impales her mercilessly. Higher, as their lips bump with blood and spit, his curses and her prayers.

His hands shake as they grasp at her, as they pull her closer until there’s nothing but salt and sweat between them. She’s looking in his eyes like the lichen green in them is alight with those glowing creatures, but whatever light she sees in them is just his own. Just the way the moonlight licks at his features. Just the perfect iridescence of watching someone love her.

She’s falling apart around him when he moans and wrenches her hair back, picking up his rhythm. He’s locked inside of her now and she feels each push and pull like it’s tearing her apart and filling her with gold. Her vision’s growing dizzy from pleasure. The world is spinning.

For a second, she wonders what will happen if they both pass out in the waves. If they drown amongst the swirling creatures, will their ghosts be caught in this perfect moment?

Then, her thoughts dissolve in the hurricane of him. Of his love and how it feels when he stamps it into her skin, into her hips, into her cunt, into her soul. She is their connection incarnate for a long, sticky time when pleasure fizzes through her and he shudders, spilling more inside. Filling her, their bodies knotted and breath shared. He moans, gasps, blinks, stumbles.

He makes it to the beach before they both black out in the sand.

They wake laughing, still connected, the moon bright overhead.

It takes four days for Wright to drive from Sadie's family home to the shore of Ocracoke, but he doesn't know what roads he takes to get there. He's not even sure if it's daylight or nighttime until he finds himself standing in front of a cottage with no real clue how he got there and Ridge sitting on the front porch like he was waiting for him all this time.

"Got her fuckin' worried," is all he says.

Wright nods to him. Ridge smiles.

His brother fucking *smiles*. Just like he did as a kid, the smile that broadens his lips and dimples his cheeks. Now, it sets crinkles in the corners of his bright eyes and dents lines underneath them. It's a good age for him to live as. He looks remarkably handsome.

"Glad you made it," Ridge adds.

And then the front door flies open, and it's Sadie's dusky chestnut hair swirling in the wind as she rushes down the porch steps in a mess of noise. Before he can stop her, she jumps up to wrap her arms around his neck. He touches her only long enough to keep her from falling. He's so tall that she hangs from him like a ragdoll.

He already senses Ridge bristling. Even when he sees that she's just hugging him, the wolf is alive in his brother. It's a defensive instinct. This is the distant sound of gunfire. The dark bird of a plane's shadow in the distance before a raid. Still, as Wright watches his brother, he's struck by how much he's grown.

He didn't care about a damn thing not too long ago. Was little more than a savage tumbleweed before he met Sadie. She's changed him. He's far more man than boy with the fervor in those spring green eyes. Wright missed him, even with the silent threat that he cannot dare touch the woman who cries into his neck right now.

He wants to. The longing is fierce in him, to hold Sadie. To stroke her hair and tell her he did what he had to do to save her and give her and his boy a future. That there's only one more step before the end. He's standing so very fucking close to home.

Part of him loves her.

She drops to her feet, wiping her eyes before grabbing him by the shirt. He's forgotten how lovely she smells. How her wide hazel eyes look up at him like there are answers for all the world's questions in his pupils.

Most of him loves her.

There's a glow to her now. She looks happy. He pauses and breathes her scent in deep. She might be pregnant. From the smell of sweat, spit, and cum that mingles with the soap on her skin, he imagines she and his brother have been breeding like rabbits.

Now, he feels a sting on his cheek.

Sadie has slapped him.

"How dare you take so long coming here!" she yells. "We were so worried!"

Ridge walks up to her, disguising a smile that brightens his eyes. Wright feels the ground beneath his feet for the first time in days. Sadie pushes him but he doesn't shift.

"How could you go to that house?" she asks. "After all you know of it!"

She pushes him harder. Ridge curls his hand around her arm and pulls her to him.

"Don't break your wrist, little fawn," he tells her, tilting her chin up. Making her look in his eyes. Wright watches a calm settle over her.

Ridge leans down and kisses her softly on the mouth. Draws back only enough for a hunger to roll between them.

Wright considers loading back into the truck and inquiring about a room at the inn. Instead, he clears his throat.

Resting against Ridge's side, Sadie shoots him a dirty look. She's gotten bolder since he last saw her. The days feel like years.

"Well, what took you so long?" she asks curtly.

Wright looks at his brother but the man's focus is downwards, at the petite girl locked to his hip. He's never seen them like this, closely knitted side by side. Her head only reaches the middle of his brother's chest and his hand dwarfs her shoulder as he strokes her there. If she weren't strong and full-figured, he imagines Ridge would break her in two. Maybe he's trying. She's clean of blood but her once-smooth lips show signs of scarring. Further down, he sees razor-thin crescents on her neck.

But she's content. She smells happy, satisfied, in love.

He'd been wrong about her delicacy. She's sturdier than he thought, or she loves the pain. As perfect a fit for Ridge as a hot cast iron pan to the browned butter she smells like.

"How long's it been?" Wright asks. He's not sure.

Her lower lip pouts. She shakes her head and Ridge squeezes her a bit tighter, but his focus is on Wright now. Reading him. Wright's sure he doesn't have the truth written on his face: even if he looked in a mirror, he wouldn't see it. But Ridge is literate in things he doesn't even register, so he stiffens nonetheless.

"'Bout four days, brother," Ridge says. "Hell, I travel faster on foot."

This cracks a smile onto Sadie's lips, but it doesn't last long.

"What happened there?" she asks.

He heard this question all the time when he came back from war, people asking what it was like. What he'd been through. He'd kept the same blank expression, only giving

details on the sights he saw. Most are satisfied that he got to see the Eiffel Tower, though it looked small after combat.

Even air raids pale in comparison to what he saw in that farmhouse.

Nothing in France had made him fear for his soul but he damned himself in Tennessee, with a bottle of whiskey and a fresh grave. Someone will write a song about him one day. But now, he takes a deep breath and shakes his head lightly.

“Fell off the wagon,” he says. “Nothin’ more’n that.”

Ridge raises his eyebrows and sighs dismissively, but Sadie keeps watching him. There’s a world in her expression now. Her lip quivers with unspoken questions. She saw some of what was out there. Maybe, she’s seen more since.

Wright knows he has. Illuminated by headlights, sprinting across his closed eyelids when he tries to fall asleep at night, in the dark corners of Elam’s truck and the waiting eyes of hitchhikers. Wright sees hell like a preacher planning a sermon. He sees it all the fucking time.

“Well,” Ridge says. “Fall on it, then. Don’t want my girl having to see that shit; it shook her enough to speak with you on the phone.”

Though tempted to lie and say he hadn’t had a drop since leaving the farmhouse, Wright knows Ridge can smell the booze that lingers in his blood. Can probably smell the empty whiskey bottles that clinked on the floor of the passenger seat. Elam’s truck hardly survived the drive. Most of Wright didn’t.

“I’m done,” Wright says.

He has no intention of making that a truth, but it’s worth lying about.

Just like everything else.

There’s some energy in the house Ridge can’t get right with. The moment Wright steps close enough to Sadie he can feel it

like they're sharing the same scent. Not each other's; that would get the man killed. But *something*.

Maybe it's the way the farmhouse lingers. For a few days, he stopped smelling that creature around Sadie but it's back now and it should know better. The moment it shows itself, he'll rip it apart. Here, in the cottage, he thinks Wright has seen a kindred beast.

He thinks maybe, he brought it back to her.

Ridge kisses Sadie on the temple once more, pressing her sweat to his lips and savoring it. "Come to the porch, brother," he says.

His fawn stays inside. He hopes she naps; he's been keeping her awake most nights. Watching her pad on her short, freckled legs to the living room, he doesn't intend to stop that. She'd better sleep on the couch while she can.

When they step out on the raised porch overlooking the wooded area that separates them from the inn, he offers Wright a cigarette. He's still got the Lucky Strikes he took from the waitress and he'd rather offer his brother one of those than a bottle. He'd rather Wright never drink within a hundred miles of his woman, for all she's been through.

"She has nightmares, you know," he says, tapping out a stick. "About what happened at her pa's. What that creature made her see."

He offers it to Wright, who takes it, and he passes him the matchbox.

"The devil," Wright says.

Ridge clicks his tongue. "Ain't that..." he starts.

Wright glares at him.

"If that's what you'd like to call it, I'll give it the name," Ridge says. "But there are creatures in the mountains Elam has stories about, and I'm sure the Jews and the Chinese tell their own."



He shrugs. Wright lights a cigarette and closes his eyes.

“I saw it,” Wright says.

“It’s watching her,” Ridge tells him, rather than disagree with his brother’s statement. “Watching you, too.”

“Sure is,” Wright scoffs. “Can fuckin’ smell it out here. Surprised you ain’t seen it.”

“It knows what’s good for it. Got no fear of any creature,” Ridge says, lighting a cigarette for himself. It doesn’t calm him nearly as much as his fawn. He glances in towards the living room. Sees her pretty head resting on the arm of the couch. “Nor any worship outside of that woman in there.”

Ridge isn’t afraid of any living thing, but the idea of losing her chills him to the fucking bone. He can’t.

“What did it look like?” he asks.

Wright doesn’t answer. He takes heavy drags. His eyes are full of memory but he doesn’t seem compelled to share any of what he sees. Ridge doesn’t know what his brother was like when he came back from France, because he didn’t return to Orion for months and even then Ridge was too animal to recognize his subtle emotion. But he won’t ask him about it. That’s not what they do.

“Would help me to know,” Ridge adds.

“Won’t look the same for you as it does for me,” Wright clips.

“It’s a trickster, then.”

“Father of lies.”

Ridge grits his teeth. He doesn’t like Wright’s need to align this creature with what the town preacher tells him. It’s likely different than how Sadie knows the beast, and if they’d both drop that urge to identify the evil stalking her it’d be a hell of a lot easier to know how to defeat it. As far as Ridge is concerned, the conversation is at a dead end. And it pisses him off, but he’ll be hospitable. Lately, he’s enjoyed peace.

“Noticed you’re driving Elam’s truck,” Ridge says.

“Noticed you’re smokin’ another woman’s cigarettes,” Wright remarks.

“I’m a loyal man. Didn’t fuck the other woman, just ate her. And a few others.”

He thinks about telling him about the preacher but it might offend his brother’s senses. He’s not as rational as Sadie.

*His fawn.* Ridge grinds his hips against the banister.

“Sadie doesn’t smoke,” he says. “Such a good girl.”

“That she is.”

“Prefer her lips elsewhere.”

Wright laughs. “*Jesus*, boy. Should I ask what y’all have been up to this week?”

“Worship,” Ridge quips. “*God*, that woman’s cunt is like honey wine, fresh blood, and sunlight.”

Even thinking of it, he wants to drag her off that couch and fuck her again. They’ve been making love at least six times a day, each day, taking advantage of her youth and his virility. He can’t go more than a few hours without sinking into some part of her. He fucked her mouth as she kneeled on the kitchen floor just a half hour before Wright arrived, came all over her pretty lips and bare, reddened breasts. That image sets a fire in his mind.

“God forbid you fall in love with ‘er,” Wright says.

“Deeply,” Ridge growls, tossing his half-smoked cigarette to the ground. He’s hard already and the sleep pants he wears don’t do much to hide it. “Her voice is my favorite sound, brother. Want to take her everywhere in the country just to watch her light up at the sights... Damn, they write poetry for this.”

Poetry he read in Jess’s books, is what he doesn’t say. But it’s true. He loves her so irreparably it makes him think he can

be a better man. It set off a flood in him, from a well that seems endless now.

“Glad to hear it,” Wright says. And he sounds honest.

“You don’t believe she’ll die either,” Ridge remarks.

Wright clears his throat. Taps his cigarette out on the banister before tossing it to the ground below. It takes some time to fall. The house is raised on this side, twenty feet between its first floor and the weeds. The way the cigarette floats down, it’s like it’s falling off the end of the earth.

“Three of us don’t want her to, do we?” he asks.

Ridge smiles, clapping him on the back. “Got some fight in you still.”

They stay out there for a long time. It reminds Ridge of a time he’s not sure has ever existed between him and Wright, where both of them were grown but held no resentment towards each other. When there was nothing but family between them. If Elam were there, they could split a six pack between the three of them and talk about nothing but who Wright and Elam had seen in church that Sunday, whose crops were dying, whose daughter was looking to marry, and whose son enlisted. They’d discuss what a wedding between him and Sadie would look like.

He thinks of the very thing when he makes his way inside and climbs over her on the couch, smoothing her legs around him and kissing the sleep from her mouth. Wright stays away while he fucks her slowly just like that, one hand on her waist and the other pinning her wrist to the cushion. Watching her quiver and moan underneath him like she’s forgotten anyone has interrupted their solitude. He’s so sure, when he kisses her sweat-damp neck, that things will be like this forever.

Later, Wright takes them to the grocery store. Insists on it when he stands in front of the open, empty fridge in the kitchen.

“When was the last time you ate?” he asks Sadie.

She tells him last night, and it's long past noon, and he gives a look of judgment Ridge doesn't give a damn about because he's still got Sadie's taste on his cock and now, she's sitting in his lap. He nips at her neck just to hear her squeal and to remind Wright that he's not her caretaker. Ridge is feeding her well enough. Wolves go hungry in between meals and his little fawn keeps up with him.

Still, the bustling grocery store makes Sadie blush hard whenever he grabs her, so there's fun to be had. Wright pushes a cart to which Sadie adds heavy cream, flour, sugar, baking soda. His darling, she wants to bake something. Strawberries come next. When she adds those, Ridge catches her hand and kisses her fingers. Tastes the juice on her skin.

They are impossible in public. Elam will have to evacuate the shop so he can fuck her on the counter when the mood strikes him. There are just so many *humans* here.

"Fixin' to bake something?" Wright asks Sadie.

"Time of year for strawberry shortcake, if you can manage the cost," Sadie says.

"Ain't a burden," Wright says before eyeing Ridge. "How have *you* managed the cost, brother? A cottage by the ocean?"

"When there's a will," Ridge clips, raising an eyebrow.

He pinches Sadie's rear and she yelps.

"Should we buy dog food?" she teases, turning to him.

He fixes his gaze on hers and growls. She shivers.

"Only if you domesticate him," Wright remarks.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sadie breathes.

Her lush hazel eyes look Ridge up and down and he's pulling her to him, pressing his lips to hers and sweeping his tongue in her mouth. Her breath catches for him and her hands tangle in his hair. So fucking delicious. He'll fuck her right here-

Wright's hand slaps the back of his head and the pausing makes Sadie look around. See all the people staring at them like they're heathens for wanting each other. Her fingers trace the blood in her mouth and perhaps Ridge *is* a heathen because he wants to suck that blood right off her hands. Wants to pin her wrists behind her back and fuck her like he did in that church, in front of everyone so they know how good she is for him.

But then he'd have to kill them for seeing her, and eight people make for a lot of wasted food. He's never tried refrigerating a body, though. Wonders if that might work.

"We're on honeymoon," Ridge says to an onlooker, collaring Sadie's neck and pulling her flush to him. "Think she's pregnant with my child."

"*Ridge*," Sadie hisses scoldingly, even though she wraps her hand around his wrist and holds him there. She looks at the older woman, who grows paler by the second. "Sorry ma'am. I can't stop him. He's an animal."

God, he's fucking hard for her. There's swinging doors and tarp in the corner leading to the back of the store. Plenty of boxes, he imagines, to hide amongst. From behind, he grips her jaw and angles her gaze in that direction before pushing her forward slightly. She understands, meandering amongst lettuces as he waits by Wright.

"Ain't takin' the two of you out again," Wright grumbles. He pauses. "But the house reeks of sex. Even a human would smell it."

"Find yourself a motel," Ridge chides.

"Rather sleep outside, in case it comes for her."

Even though Wright has long retired from the army, the way he says that makes Ridge think he's got some war inside him still. All the lost battles pile up behind those words in his throat. Something happened at Sadie's pa's place. Wright fired first. Now, he waits for retaliation.

Sadie glances back at them before disappearing behind the doors. There's a stillness in the air, a slight seizing in Ridge's heart that he nearly blames Wright for. But his brother doesn't seem to notice.

"Ridge," Wright says. "Don't tell me you're about to fuck that girl in the back of the store. Gonna get us run out of town."

"Don't act innocent, brother," Ridge quips. "I don't complain when the farm smells of you and a stranger. At least I love this one."

"Love?" Wright repeats. He smiles, shaking his head. "Weeks ago, you wanted to eat her."

"Now, I told her to marry me," Ridge says with a smile. "Almost convinced her to come to city hall, before you brought your dark clouds this way."

"Raised a romantic," Wright clips.

"That's what she says," Ridge replies, before following his future wife.

He finds her waiting by a case of strawberries in a darkened corner of the storage room. Doesn't pass any workers on his way to her, and thank god. They wouldn't do much to keep him from her now that he's got his sights on her like this. He's already palming himself over his jeans.

"Sir," Sadie says. "I was wondering if you knew the price of a single strawberry."

"A dollar," he growls, before pulling her in for a kiss.

The second he tastes her, he's unbound, pulling her closer than possible like he can bury her into his own body. He breaks away from her only to grip her by the neck.

"I'll sell a box for twenty-seven cents if you put your fucking panties in your mouth," he tells her, his voice low and rough against her ear.

Panting, she hikes up her dress to climb out of the beige satin. She looks up at him.

“Slowly,” he adds.

With her sweet, shaking hand, she feeds herself the drenched fabric. Never breaking eye contact with him. He’s so aroused he’s nearly leaking in his jeans, so the second her lips close around her new gag he spins her and bends her over the cart. Flips up her hem and claps his hand hard over her perfect, bouncing ass.

Her gag stifles a sharp yelp. He kneads his hands into the flesh of her rear, spreading her in the dim lighting. She’s dripping down her thighs already. Not just her pleasure, he knows. He came inside her not an hour ago.

“*Fuck*, little fawn,” he breathes, unsheathing his cock and pulling her onto him. Impaling her only to slam her back against the crate. He starts slow. One hand on her shoulder and the other on the small of her back. Pinning her to the wood. “You’re fucking filthy with my cum. My *god*, it’s dripping out of you. Why didn’t you tell me when you were walking through those aisles that your sweet fucking thighs were drenched with my seed?”

He spanks her again. She’s quivering around him. He groans.

Her muffled voice sounds like she’s pleading. Her knees buckle into the cart.

“No begging,” he says, reaching between them to the mess. He feels where he’s fucking her, his shaft an iron bar inside her wet heat. He soaks his thumb and slips it in the sweet ring of her asshole, filling her even more. “You should have told me. You should have said, ‘Ridge, your seed is dripping from my perfect cunt and I need you to fuck more into me. Need you to flood me with it so I can have your fucking babies.’”

He spanks her again with his free hand before grabbing her by the hair. Fucking her savagely.

“Look at me,” he tells her darkly. “I’m gonna finish in your mouth, Sadie. You’re gonna walk out of this store holding my cum between your lips until I tell you to swallow.”

Her eyes widen but she nods, whimpering. He picks up his rhythm. One hand in her hair and the other pinning her to the crate by her lower back. Immediately, she spasms and he fucks her through a wave. Shaking the crate. They’ll break it and he doesn’t care. She’s soaking him. Soaking him, and pulling him deeper, her warmth begging for him with each pulse. God, yes. Fuck, she feels incredible. It *always* feels like the first time, even now when she’s got his sweat dried and added to all over her thighs and back. Even now when things are starting to feel like home. She’s never less perfect. Tight, snug, warm.

He hears a sound and Sadie freezes. An open door. They’re in the dark still, but no one had better turn on the lights or they’ll see them there. He won’t stop fucking her, though he slows his thrusts. Though he grabs her hips to ease the pressure their bodies make on the crate. He’s too close to stop now. Sadie’s quivering around him.

The worker walks along the opposite wall to a back door. Pushes through it, exposing them to a brief flash of light. He doesn’t notice. Ridge bucks into Sadie harder than before, deep and near violent as she explodes around him.

“Yes,” he groans. “Oh, little fawn, you know I’d kill him if he saw you...”

She whimpers.

“So fucking perfect,” he growls. “So fucking *mine*...”

He pulls out of her abruptly, so close to the edge he’s going to fall off it forever, and he brings her to her knees. Pulls the panties out of her mouth and thrusts his dripping cock inside. Grabbing her by the hair, he fucks her like that for only a moment before he has to withdraw as he comes. She keeps her mouth open. Such a good, obedient little thing. He laces her tongue with ropes like candle wax and she gasps, choking for air but fighting the urge to swallow.



“Breathe through your nose,” he soothes, palming her face and sweeping cum into her mouth with his thumb. The same thumb he fucked her ass with. It’s clean and he nearly wishes it wasn’t. He wants her to taste how much he owns her. She sucks his claim from her skin.

He seals her lips together and then crouches down to kiss them.

“The only sacred thing,” he breathes. “Is us and the dirt of this.”

## Chapter 11

## *Anything is near-death*

**T**here's dark, dark circles under Wright's eyes lately and Sadie feels as though it might be her and Ridge's fault.

They make love constantly, all through the past few nights, and though she insists they stay downstairs to keep things quiet she knows he's got the same hearing Ridge does. The same predator ears, even as Wright mixes her coffee with extra cream and sugar. It's sweet but rich, better than anything she's had. With Ridge asleep on the couch, this is like their mornings at the Lindal home.

"You make strong coffee," she tells Wright.

He smiles. "The French called it weak. *Café noyé*, or *faible*."

"You speak French?"

"They called me *le géante*," he says. "Knew enough to get some better digs in."

Wright sighs a laugh before yawning into his fist.

"Did you sleep alright?" she asks, taking the warm mug in her hands. She settles into one of the stools at the counter. There are no doors inside the first story of this house, just rooms that chain into one another. The stools look into the kitchen, which looks into the living room where Ridge sleeps and doesn't look at all. "I tried to keep quiet."

August has crept up on them and it intrudes through the curtains, hot and humid and gasping. There's sand in Sadie's

hair. A single fly buzzes around the kitchen. Wright brushes it away as he settles his hips against the sink, dwarfing the mug with his large, veined hand.

It looks so much like Ridge's that she can feel it on her skin.

The thought feels indecent. She won't dwell on the sensation. Instead, she wonders if Ridge will look like Wright when he gets older, if they'll be two graying men drinking coffee on the porch someday. She hopes when they do, that they look back at her fondly.

"I slept through bombings," Wright remarks. "Can sleep through two kids fuckin' like rabbits."

She ducks her face to her mug, blushing.

"It's healthy, darlin'," Wright teases. "Do wish you were married, though."

"I'd marry Ridge in a heartbeat if I didn't think it would make this hurt more," she protests.

"He wants to marry you."

"I know," she says. She doesn't tell him when Ridge first mentioned the subject, ejaculating deep in her rear entrance, but she knows it well. Dying as Sadie Lindal breaks her heart more than anything. When she passes, she wants him to have a chance at love again. Keeping her distance has failed in all other regards so she can't take his name. "What kept you awake then? If not our premarital sinning?"

Wright smiles. "Didn't call it a sin. Just think it'd be good for ya. 'Sides, I'd be happy to share a name with you."

"For a handful of days," Sadie reminds him.

He looks at her a bit too long now, sorrow threading itself through his brow.

"What?" she asks. "I've told you this."

He shakes his head, taking a sip of his coffee before speaking. "Can't imagine not seein' you again, is all. Believe

that? I hardly know you.”

“We’re family,” she says. “Even without the name.”

He presses his tongue to his cheek.

“You’re less talkative these days,” she remarks.

“Mm,” he acknowledges.

“So you can imagine why I’d think I’ve done something,” she insists.

He sighs. “You didn’t do anything wrong, darlin’. Just been speaking with my maker.”

She raises an eyebrow, a tick she’s learned from Ridge. “About?”

“Where I might go next.”

“I said I wanted you with him,” she says, feeling herself grow defensive. “Don’t break your promise to me. It would break my heart, Wright.”

“*Sadie.*”

There’s something deeper to the way he says her name, and he’s looking at her now with an intensity to his gaze he had on her last day at the Lindal house. Now, there’s more protection than anger in his darkened eyes.

But there is even more there.

He looks so much like Ridge sometimes with his broken boyishness, Wright’s own visage aged far past his brother’s. Their hair falls the same way, a few loose strands at the forehead threatening their vibrant eyes. But even though she knows Wright is a restrained man, sometimes he looks more feral than his brother.

Right now, he looks at her like he could swallow her whole.

Her breath hitches.

His gaze drops to her lips.

“Do you think,” he asks, his voice low. “That I’d let you die if there was a damn thing I could do about it?”

“What are you saying?” she whispers.

“That my brother’s a fuckin’ warrior, but he thinks he could fight Satan himself,” he hisses, leaning towards her. He sets down his coffee. They’ve got just the counter between their hips and hot air between their faces. “So if I had to, and I ain’t sayin’ I did, I’d find a different fuckin’ way.”

“Wright,” she whispers, suddenly deeply concerned for the man who towers over her. “What did you do?”

They’re closer now.

Wright tilts his face down to her. She tries to read the words he won’t tell her. He deepens his frown.

“What did you do?” she asks again, quietly so as not to be heard.

His lips part but no words leave them.

“Just tell me,” she pleads.

“It weren’t all his fault, you know?” Wright whispers. He’s searching her eyes for something. They mirror each other. “I know that. What happened to her. I shoulda been there for ‘im, and I wasn’t.”

It’s not what she wants to hear. What she wants is a reassurance that he’s going to be okay and that he didn’t put his own life on the line for hers.

When he looks at her like this, there are no reassurances.

“Be there for him now, then,” she says, letting her voice raise louder than a whisper.

“I’d be there for you regardless,” he tells her.

Not every line in his face is between his brows. Some are caught in the corners of his eyes like he’s spent time laughing since he started aging again. They look dark at her now.

Sadie doesn't know what it means for him to look at her like this. So close she thinks she can feel the air move when he does.

He moves his face to her neck.

For a second, she thinks he'll bite her there. That she was wrong all along about his protection. She should jerk her neck away. God forbid he bites her; when he's like this, she doesn't know him. He could kill her.

Instead, she stills like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. She feels a prickle against her skin as he leans his face towards her neck and breathes in. He doesn't touch her. Something feels right, not like it's what she wants to happen but like it's what has to happen. Like instead of the white tiled kitchen, they are hurtling towards the sun.

"Think you're pregnant," he says low, not quite drawing away.

"It wouldn't happen that fast," she whispers.

"I can smell it on you," he says. "Smelled it with Jess. He don't have that reference, considerin' he turned after she gave birth, but I swear."

"How is that even possible?" she asks him. Her flustered spirit pushes her away. "It's not possible, Wright. Don't even talk like that. Don't even-"

She chokes up, clasping her hand firmly over her mouth.

When she closes her eyes, tears spill over her fingers.

"It's not possible," she insists. "I'm not even alive. I've just been brought back from the dead."

"Sure about that?" Wright asks.

"I'm sure!" Sadie exclaims, pounding her fist on the table.

Wright firms his jaw, exhaling slowly through his nose.

Sadie wipes the tears from her face. But they're on the counter too, where she leaned so close to him that they must

have hit his coffee mug. They must be swirling in the black liquid, lost at sea.

“The hell are y’all talkin’ about that’s got my woman upset?” Ridge asks from the living room, his voice still glazed with sleep.

Sadie pleads with Wright with her eyes not to tell him. She’s crying fully now, can’t seem to stop herself.

“Shit you don’t believe in,” Wright clips.

Ridge strides in fully nude, the golden sunlight painting his ivory skin with a tan that will never take. The long lines of his body look beautiful like this despite the stark indecency of his cock hanging by his thigh. She watches his muscles move, sees the beast in him. His eyes swirl with tornado skies and he sets them on her instantly. Sits at the stool next to her and pulls her onto his lap.

Already, she’s calmer. He strokes her hair. Kisses the top of her head. Nestles in. He’s home, and he’s here, and she can’t be carrying his baby because that might be the one thing she’d kill for.

Even if she’d never forgive herself.

She reaches for his cheek and pulls him down closer to her, then presses her lips to his. He’s so sweet in the morning. Tastes like smoked maple syrup when he smiles against her lips.

“It’s all better now,” she whispers.

He murmurs some hungry sound.

Wright leaves through the sliding doors. He doesn’t come back until long past supper, and Ridge and Sadie don’t see him at the beach. At night, Ridge slices strawberries paper thin and sets Sadie’s naked body on the counter. He plasters the fruit to her skin and kisses it off, trailing dollops of whipped cream over the peaks of her nipples and the junction of her thighs. Then, he crawls up onto the linoleum and Sadie thinks they’ll break it but doesn’t care much, because he has made her



reckless and there's not much to care about when one is in love.

She hears the sliding door open when she and Ridge are in the bath afterwards. The slowness of it runs a chill up her spine.

Deep down, she knows Wright has brought something with him.

He and Jess were never like this. Strawberry juice on the counter. Bath water on the carpet in the hall. They didn't breed like rabbits; the sex was beautiful but neat enough to leave no evidence. Nothing in disarray. He was gentle with her.

He'd never bruise her. Never choke her with his lust.

Did he want to?

Did he harbor some desire too tamped by the way he was made a father to his brother and the head of his household at fifteen? He's known Jess since they were kids. He's never been an animal with her; he couldn't.

He smooths his hands over the countertop and he can taste Sadie there. She's got an ocean in her that pairs with the sweetness. In his other hand is a bottle wrapped in brown paper and he clinks it down there because god, he thinks about licking her sweat from the surface just to see if it'll make him feral too.

He was not this way with his mate. Never uncontrolled like he feels he's becoming in his lust for Sadie. There has to be hate behind it, he knows. For himself or for Ridge or for her for not just fucking killing someone.

Tonight is a bad night.

They haven't all been.

He's enjoyed, really, having Ridge and Sadie back in his vicinity again.

He's enjoyed her laughter and the sweet scent of her skin, enjoyed how she talks about the ocean like she's telling him of some fictional land even when they stand on its shores. She asks him if he knew there are creatures who glow like underwater fireflies. She builds sandcastles. Ridge taught her how to drip wet sand to look like stalagmites and she finds shells to build windows, and it's all very innocent until he drapes a towel around her waist and pulls her onto his lap.

Their lust is insufferable.

Yet, he suffers.

It was the whimper in the back of her throat that did it to him. He heard it like a lightning bolt straight to his cock, and the shorts he wore to the beach already threatened indecency without it. He can't be getting hard around his brother's mate just as his bond with Ridge is mending. So he left. Walked away just as he did this morning, out of the house and into obliteration.

On the beach, he met a girl who was far too young for him, a city girl by the looks of it, on summer break from college. Too young and too polished for anything he's craving. Said she wandered away from her friends and ended up where he was. She's got dark curls and a smattering of freckles and she's tall and lean, nothing like Sadie. A perfect distraction.

He needs one.

He's reluctant to do what he has to do to save them. Ridge feels like his boy again, and that's something. It's something that they smoke together on the porch, adding a charred tobacco scent to the salted air. It's something that Ridge asks him questions he once didn't feel ready for, of what love was like for him. The boy is a poet, despite or because of his roughness. When he speaks there's gravel and blood lining the back of his throat.

They don't speak of what will happen to Sadie.

They listen to the violins play on the deck of the Titanic. They watch the sun set before the Blitz. Acting like nothing

could go wrong. Sadie doesn't even speak to Ridge about her impending fate, only mentions it to Wright, and he knows that's how she'd prefer it when she intends to die but instead it builds on him. He imagines the dirt of her pa's grave like it's wet sand. Piling up to the top of his skull. Drilling through the bone to let the scorching sun in.

She'd try to stop him if she knew what he's got planned. He'd try to stop himself too, and he can't have that. So, he bought a bottle this morning and kept it in that brown paper bag and even though he's had enough to feel the room spin he's still got something left. He falls down on the couch with it. Listening to the pounding in his head. Watching the ceiling fan throw shadows.

Everything is lit by yellow light now. That's how he knows it must be close to midnight. The light's only like this when the sun runs the furthest away. He hears its footsteps, steady and rhythmic.

They're not just in his head.

They're upstairs, past the ceiling fan. Where the bed frame of the master room knocks into the wall. Again, again, again. Hard. To the beat of a song he needs to forget. The coils in the fucking mattress squeak.

And he hears her moan.

He should leave.

He must have been carrying some kind of scent on him at the beach yesterday because the college girl told him where her friends were staying and which window opened to her bedroom.

It would be a healthy thing, to pay her a visit. To fuck her and get this heat out of his system.

Healthier than listening through the ceiling.

"*Ridge*," Sadie moans. "Oh, *my*..."

What would she look like underneath him, her brow scrunched up and her lip quivering? He imagines gripping the

bed frame like he did with Jess, and then he imagines gripping her instead. He thinks about wrapping her legs around his hips and pinning her wrists to the bed and fucking her like that, on his knees with her lower back lifted. He sees those full breasts of hers quaking each time he bottoms out. He tries to think of the college girl but her hair becomes Sadie's hair and her skin becomes Sadie's skin.

Ridge growls and the pounding gets louder. Sadie's crying out in a high-pitched moan, and Wright's so fucking frustrated. He should just leave. He should just leave, but his jeans are fucking tight and he unbuttons them and shoves them down his hips because he's too hard to do anything that requires half a brain.

"Who do you belong to?" Ridge growls.

Wright hears a smacking sound and imagines Sadie's plump ass like it moves when she runs on the beach. Now, he's stroking himself. Feels fucking excellent.

"You," Sadie moans. "I belong to you."

Wright settles his head back on the pillow and thinks of her pa's farmhouse again. She came to him in those visions, knocked on the wall like she was asking to enter. And he looked up from her pa's bed to see her standing in a little nightdress that barely covered her furred sex. He could see the dark hair of it in the lamplight. See the way her full breasts peaked under the sheer white fabric, hard pink nipples poking through.

"I can't sleep, daddy," she whispered. "Can you help me?"

"O'course, darlin."

And she padded over to that bed and knelt next to him.

"It's so hot," she said, wiping sweat from her brow. "Can I take this off?"

He nodded, his eyes fixed on her body. And she lifted the sheer white nightdress over her head and placed it on the floor. He let himself watch her. She crawled and laid her soft, warm

body against every part of him. He watched how his hands dwarfed her hands, her face, her cunt.

Such savage things, he dreamt about her.

The way she spread her legs for him and he crawled on hands and knees to her, burying his face in the sweet taste of her pussy and drinking wine from her slickened lips. The texture of them was fucking divine, and that beast got Jess right. Her flavor. The sounds she made. He nearly forgot them, but fucking that thing was like a memory in a bottle. So it must not be too different from the girl with hazel eyes who tastes like honey mixed with ocean salt.

He wants to take care of Sadie. Sweet girl needs some looking after. He should only want that, only want the mission he's assigned himself, only want her to look at him like she did after Ridge first bit her, like he had all the answers in the universe. Like he was someone who could save her, like he was a soldier, like he was fucking worth something.

Ever since then, he hasn't been sure.

In her pa's farm, she rode him until he came deep in the reaches of her womb, his hands spasming on her wide, plush hips. Gripping her soft flesh and sealing her to him with his release.

Upstairs, he hears Ridge groan loud and Sadie cry out as they come together, and he grips the bottle instead of his erection. Empties the dregs down his throat. Consumption over consummation.

He feels numb again.

Tonight is a bad night, but not all of them are, he thinks as he pulls a knitted blanket over himself and closes his eyes in the brightly lit room. Some of them are pleasant. Tomorrow night, he figures, he'll stop drinking long enough to go find someone to fuck. The college girl or someone who really knows what they're doing.

He won't lie down here with his cock in his hand while his brother fucks a woman who will never be his.

Sleep hits like a bullet to the base of his skull. He doesn't dream much, but when he does he sees a dark figure. A tall man not unlike the Lindals in structure. For a moment, he thinks it might be their father. Finally returned. And he might have thought himself angry at Ridge but it's when he sees that man that he remembers how he felt when he was fifteen and waited for his pa's truck to pull back into the driveway.

Two fucking days. It took two fucking days for him to realize they'd left them. Jess knew sooner but she wouldn't say.

And he remembers it so clearly now. He didn't tell Ridge, who asked him where his ma and pa were every day for months. Just told the little kid with his mess of dark hair and his then-teal eyes, they'd be coming home tomorrow. He started asking every week. Then only a few times a month. Then never.

Wright had felt irritated whenever Ridge asked. So much so that after a while he'd lock him in the barn sometimes. He never got to mourn, and Ridge never got the truth, and that's how life hit them, ten years apart.

If Wright does what the devil told him to, the coin will flip and everything will end just like that.

Sadie sees the dark figure before she even knows she's awake. But it's there, tall and cloaked in shadow. Watching her.

She'd think it was Ridge if she didn't feel him wrapped around her. He shifts, and instantly tears clot her eyes. She knows that the man watching them will hurt him. Worse than the preacher and his brother ever could. And all this time she's thought Ridge impenetrable but right now? Right here? She's afraid for him.

Still, she can't look away from the figure in the corner. He watches her and his breath fogs in the moonlight like it's freezing inside. To her, it feels sweltering. She feels sweat on

her forehead and on Ridge's chest as he pulls her tighter to him.

Then, she feels his lashes flutter against her skin.

A growl unfurls itself from his throat. Not like the way he growls at her when he's fucking her, but like she heard in that church. Right before he attacked the preacher. Right before he tore him to shreds.

But he can't tear the devil down.

The man doesn't leave. He just watches them, his breathing shallow bursts of white now.

"How precious," his dark, low voice tells her. "Something worth killing for, isn't it?"

Ridge springs into a crouch, sharp yet fluid movement, baring his teeth in the moonlight. Glowering at the man. He blinks as if he's trying to adjust from a dream and she wishes that were true but she knows that it's the devil in the room with them.

"Don't," Sadie whispers. "Ridge, don't."

But she knows from the way his muscles shift under his moonlit skin that there's nothing she can say to stop him. He jumps from the bed like a panther, hooking his arm around the man's neck and stretching his jaw to take his throat, she's sure.

At least, that's what her mind tells her. Everything is a blur. They move too fast.

With just a movement from the man's arm, Ridge is hurled into the wall. Not disabled for long, he rushes the man again but the man catches him by the neck and slams him into the window. Glass shatters everywhere. Ridge's head whips back sharply. Sadie can't bear to see it. She rushes the man and jumps onto him, clawing at his eyes. Somehow, she catches flesh under her nails.

He drops Ridge only to tear her from his back and throw her onto the bed.

She hits the headboard with a *thwack* that knocks the air from her lungs.

Then, she hears a yell fused with a growl. A sharp sound of agony. Something wet hitting the floor. In the darkness she sees the form of Ridge's massive wolf sink its teeth into the man's shoulder. Dark liquid splatters everywhere. Hits the ground like a sprinkler to hot pavement.

And then the wolf falls to its legs, empty air underneath and before it. Sadie presses herself to a seat and the wolf looks around. Growling. Bearing his teeth. As his eyes search the darkness. Ridge's skin is on the floor; blood pools on the wolf's fur.

The door bursts open and Wright enters, wild-eyed and shirtless and panting. For a second, it seems like they might reach peace. That it had been a bad dream, or a ghost. But the iron of blood is rich in the air. Sadie locks eyes with him, opens her mouth to speak.

A canine, sharp yelp echoes from Ridge's wolf. Dark blood falls to the floor from his chest. He's yelping in pain and snapping his jaws and something is hurting him. Something is cutting into him.

Wright wraps his arms around his brother's chest, his large hands pressing against the now-open wound.

"The fuck is happening?" he yells. Panicked.

The whimpering stops and now he's holding the wolf's body and blood is streaming down over his forearms. Over his torso and his thighs. Ridge's head lolls to the side, his tongue out. His throat slashed.

"Get him out of there!" Sadie shrieks.

Wright stares at her, then down at his brother's limp form, before wrapping his hands around the wound and pulling. For a moment, Sadie doesn't see anything but gore. Tearing skin. Bloody fur. She can't think straight, can't let this be true.

No.



No.

And then.

She sees something smooth. A strong shoulder painted in blood. Wright pulls at the wolf's head and she sees Ridge's neck, his blood-plastered hair. His body is large but the wolf's was larger, and Wright tears away at the animal until he can pull his brother out.

Ridge isn't moving. He's limp in Wright's arms as his brother says his name, as he growls in a desperate prayer.

"Wake up," Wright snaps. "Wake the fuck up."

He holds Ridge's neck, feeling underneath his jaw.

"He's alive," he says. "Alive but knocked out."

"Put him on the bed," Sadie cries, pulling him into her arms as best she can. He's heavier like this than he ever is on top of her. His blood-slicked skin is cooler than usual.

There's something wrong with him but she feels his heart beat. At least that feeling is still present. She doesn't know if she'd be alive without it.

"Ridge," she soothes, stroking his face. "Wake up, baby."

Wright crouches down to the skin and fur on the ground.

"Wake up!" she cries out, shaking Ridge as best she can. He's heavy in her lap. A beast of a man, cut down like this. "Please!"

Wright stands, the wolf's hide in one hand. Claps his other hand across his brother's face.

Still nothing.

She knows what will wake him up, though. If she can get her blood to him, he'll wake. There's something in the ichor of it. She knows how much he loves the flavor.

"Bite my wrist," she tells Wright.

Wright stares at her.

“If he tastes my blood, he’ll wake up,” she pleads. “I know it.”

“If I taste your blood, he’ll kill me when he does,” Wright snaps.

“He won’t!” she pleads, frustrated with Wright’s insistence that his brother is no more than an animal. Even now. “You have to think better of him!”

“He won’t!” she hears her own voice echo. “You have to think better of him!”

Her own heart stops this time.

She looks past Wright to see a nude woman, short and full-figured, leaning against the doorframe. Her mind trips over itself. The woman has her face.

The woman is her like a reflection would be, but she moves separately. Moonlight paints her languid motions as she leans gracefully against the doorframe and crosses her legs at the ankles. Her arms fold in front of her chest, but all of her is on display. It’s Sadie’s face. Her hair. Her naked body.

The only difference is the gash on her neck.

Wright stumbles backwards. Looks back at Sadie, then at her reflection at the door.

“Get the fuck out of this house,” Wright growls.

“Who, me?” asks the woman, the stranger who wears Sadie’s skin.

“Not welcome here,” Wright clips.

“Why are you being so mean, daddy?” she asks. “I can’t sleep. Help me like you did before.”

Frozen with confusion, Sadie doesn’t care to think too much about why Wright has a history with this creature. It doesn’t matter. Sadie holds Ridge tighter to her chest, stroking his hair, hoping that her scent can wake him but not wanting him to charge this thing too. This replication of her feels evil

just like the devil does. They could even be the same creature wearing different skin.

“Does she know?” her reflection asks. “Does she know that you call me by her name? That you moaned it while you fucked me, *oh, Sadie. Fuck, Sadie. Darlin’...*”

She steps closer to him.

“Don’t you want to tell her what you did when you heard me moaning?” she asks. “How you hated yourself for it, but you couldn’t stop yourself...”

Sadie watches in horror as her reflection reaches for Wright’s belt buckle. She looks away. Now, it’s not how her reflection is a walking, breathing creature that terrifies her most.

It’s that he lets it touch him.

“Don’t!” she yelps, but that means she has to look at him.

He’s backed up against the bed as the reflection curls her hand... Sadie’s hand. Around his member. As she strokes up, he’s getting hard. In her hand. She’s never seen him like this, has never thought of him like this, but now she’s watching an image of herself masturbate him and he isn’t doing anything to stop her.

“Wright,” her reflection whispers. “Oh, daddy. Won’t you save me?”

“Stop it,” Sadie chokes. “Stop it right now!”

He’s indecent, and she realizes she herself is naked, too. That she and Ridge and her own reflection are, and Wright is nearly so, but that should be irrelevant because...

Because what?

A fog rolls into her mind.

She’s starting to feel warm. Ridge is alive and well; he’s just sleeping on her.

“Doesn’t it drive you wild?” her reflection asks. “How I love letting him use me?”

“Get out,” Wright groans, but his hands are gripping the edge of the bed.

Sadie is spellbound and she bets Wright must be too. He had a mate; he’d never lust for her. He knows who she belongs to.

“Wright,” Sadie says, but her voice comes out as a whisper. “Stop her.”

“Can’t you show me what gentle feels like?” her reflection asks, dropping to her knees before him.

“Get out,” Wright breathes. “Please.”

He’s fully erect now, large and imposing, thickly veined. The tip of him shines in the moonlight. Slick with precum as her reflection takes him back into her hand and drags her tongue over his head.

“Teach me, daddy,” the woman pleads in Sadie’s voice. “Teach me how to make you feel good.”

Wright’s blood-drenched hand closes over her head and he pulls the reflection’s mouth onto his member. Curses in pleasure. His long fingers catch in her hair.

“*Stop*,” Sadie warns.

He doesn’t look at her. He moans lightly, thrusting into her reflection’s mouth. In the moonlight she sees him like another beast, his lean muscles cut jagged and vascular into his skin. His body looks rougher than Ridge’s smooth, agile form. His face angles towards the ceiling. His mouth hangs open.

Some sick, awful part of her wants to see him finish.

“*Fuck*, Sadie,” Wright groans. He says her name so lasciviously she feels it between her legs. And she shouldn’t.

He moans again. Breathes jagged.

He’s got his eyes rolled back like Ridge does.

Just the thought of him grounds her back in reality. Suddenly, she doesn't give a darn about Wright or the devil because she's got her love in her arms and he's not waking up.

Something's wrong with her mate.

The dizzy feeling in Sadie's head begins to fade and she remembers where she is, who she's holding onto. Ridge breathes warm against her skin, his eyes moving like he's dreaming. Covered in slick, sticky blood from the way he turned. He's going to be hungry from turning twice in no more than a few minutes. She wasn't sure that was possible.

"Wake up," she whispers.

It feels impossible to speak. The air around Wright and her reflection is warm and soft as wool. It's pulling her closer. Pulling her in. No, no. She's got tears on her face. Those, she feels. From seeing something awful that's now blurry in her brain.

She can hardly move.

Or at least, she can only move her hands. That, she does. Slips her shaking hand from Ridge's neck to his teeth and presses her thumb down against the sharp incisor. She drags it deep. Blood spills from her thumb down into Ridge's mouth. She feels her skin part nearly to the bone. If it weren't for his spit she'd need stitches.

Ridge starts to move. Writhing softly. Uncoordinated like she's never seen him. He growls low and hard but she doesn't shirk away. Her blood is messing over his lips, his chin. She's trying to get as much of it as possible into his mouth. Trying to feed him thoroughly. To wake him.

"Sadie," Wright says firmly.

She won't look at him. She doesn't even want to think about what she'll see. Instead, she keeps her thumb at Ridge's mouth. She tries edging her wrist towards his teeth.

"Sadie!" Wright yells, not in lust anymore but in panic. "Get your fuckin' hand away from his mouth!"

She does as she's told, jerking it away and adding a spray of her own blood to the red coating Ridge's chest.

Where her hand was a second earlier, Ridge snaps his teeth closed. Gnashes his jaw. He's like a wild animal, biting at the air and flailing. Hungry and possessed. Feral. Rabid.

Then his eyes spring open.

Ridge was wrong when he said Sadie was the only thing that could kill him.

Part of him was correct. She'd be the thing he stood in front of when his death arrived, bold and brilliant, its moonlit eyes dark and fierce. He's shifted from his wolf form but his once-clear skin is marred now. A thick, broad scar rakes from his neck to his chest. This is where that creature he couldn't see tore him open.

Sadie lines her fingers up with the new valley in his skin like she can fuse it together with just her touch, but he considers this something of an engagement ring. He's never found anything that could be so permanent until he met her. Tonight in the Ocracoke cottage, he felt something stronger than him for the second time this month. He felt death's sharp talons rip the flesh from his bones.

But that was only the second stronger thing.

Because the first was the way his heartbeat shifted when Sadie told him that she loved him. Strong enough to turn steel to a powder, his little fawn's sweetness. Strong enough to break every bone in his body.

So no, Ridge isn't afraid of the devil, or whatever that thing was. Even as he holds his shaking girl in the bright cottage kitchen and his brother folds himself over in prayer, he's not afraid of the thing that came into their room that night. He's just ready for it now. It showed itself to him.

Somehow, he knows it can't keep him dead. Even if it got close. Even if it killed him for a minute or two, it didn't keep

him there and it won't kill Sadie either. But it'll try, so Ridge will find her someone to kill. It's so simple he's shocked he hasn't tried it yet. If this thing wants Sadie to spill blood, he'll find her a forgettable soul to take. He's starving anyway. Worked up a hell of an appetite from turning twice in just a few minutes.

"Sadie," he whispers, smoothing her hair. He washed his blood from her skin and dressed her in a nightgown. Now, she's curled in his lap so small and fragile he could mistake her for younger than she is. She's got both her arms wrapped around one of his forearms like it's a stuffed animal designed for comfort. Her tears spill slick between their bodies, not the sweat or pleasure he's accustomed to. It tastes like getting his throat ripped open. "There's nothing that can take you from me."

"You almost died," she says, keeping her calm until the last word. Then, a sob racks through her.

"Didn't," he corrects. "Anything is near-death, little fawn. I've almost died a hundred times. Ain't that right, brother?"

Wright just stares at him.

Not him. Sadie.

Ridge narrows his eyes, holding her sweet head closer to his chest. She hasn't paid Wright any mind at all since his attack. Doesn't smell like him. They didn't touch. But there's something in the way Wright looks at her that feels like he's apologizing for something.

"What happened when I was out?" Ridge asks. "Or do I have to smell that fucking room?"

Wright's eyes are on him now. About damn time. He's angry. Glares at him over his folded hands, not praying any longer.

"Up there?" Wright snaps. "Don't matter what you fuckin' smell, because I'll tell you. I held the kid I fuckin' raised from childhood in my arms, and I felt his heart stop through his fur! I held you as you fuckin' died!"

Ridge feels Sadie's tears spill down his chest.

"Not near-death, boy!" Wright yells. "You were dead!"

Ridge could kill him for yelling with his fawn still in the room. She's sobbing against his chest now, whispering bits of an apology he refuses to hear. He growls low at Wright.

"Don't fuckin' start that, now," Wright challenges. "I thought I lost you and your woman told me to crack open your fucking wound. To pull your body apart and find you inside. You know what that fucking means for her?"

Ridge doesn't, truly doesn't, but he doesn't like his brother's tone.

"You broke her," Wright snaps.

"She ain't fuckin' broken," Ridge fires.

"Don't you dare talk like that!" Sadie yells at Wright, suddenly fierce. "Don't you dare, when..."

Wright's eyes widen. Ridge is done with this secret between the two of them.

"What did you do to her?" Ridge snaps at his brother.

"Didn't fuckin' touch her," Wright fires back.

"I'm not broken!" Sadie shouts. "How dare you say it's me who is!"

"Won't fuckin' save yourself," Wright barks.

"Neither will you!" Sadie yells back, nearly pushing herself from Ridge's lap. Her anger feels fresh to him. A little bit fucking divine. She braces her hand against his shoulder as she turns to face Wright.

"You have no idea what the fuck you're talkin' about, Sadie," Wright says coldly.

There's something in the way he says her name. Something in between an apology and a collection of debt. There should be no depth in the way his brother says his mate's name.



“Tell me,” Sadie challenges. “Tell me what you saw in the farmhouse.”

Wright hasn't taken his eyes off her since she spoke to him. His intense, gray-blue gaze is set on her as he shakes his head slowly, side to side.

“Start taking this fuckin' serious,” Wright growls. “How many days are left?”

Ridge bristles.

“How many days are left, Sadie?” Wright yells, slamming his fist on the counter.

Sadie curls tighter to Ridge's chest. Anger boils inside him at his brother for making her feel this way. For threatening her like this. He's the only one who should ever make his little fawn cower, and lately he prefers her in the light.

“Three, come morning,” Sadie whimpers.

The floor drops out from underneath him.

Ridge doesn't believe in God. He's not even sure he believes in the devil, if that's who they saw and felt in the bedroom upstairs. It's been over a decade since he last attended church, though of course it's only been a week since he set foot in one. Hell doesn't scare him and heaven is sitting in his lap right now.

Telling his brother she only has three days left to live.

Ridge doesn't believe in God, but he does believe in power, so he feels the earth swallow him whole.

Sadie doesn't sleep.

Wright leaves the house and Ridge drags her out on the porch, his freshly scarred chest heaving in the bright moonlight. He's so beautiful it's almost painful. She thinks his scar only adds to it, the way it slices alongside the tendons of his neck into his collarbone. The way the broad flat muscles of

his chest look even bolder at night. He hasn't even washed the blood off. She doesn't want him to.

They came outside to talk, she thinks.

For the first time, he believes that she's got a deadline on her life.

And yet.

She grabs his wrist and she feels the heat of his skin and there's not a single other thing she can do but pull him towards her.

It's a waltz between the two of them. He steps close enough to brush with her body and she exhales, stepping back. Away. Just enough to kiss his warmth. He looks down at her like he did in Elam's gas station, like he's going to toy with her. But this time, there's something heavier in his eyes than hunger.

Grief looks like anger in that sea foam green.

She steps forward.

Their closeness knocks at him, but nothing holy can push over Ridge Lindal.

"I'm sorry," Sadie whispers.

He grabs her mouth.

She thinks he'll scold her like Wright did but he pushes forward and kisses her. He's desperate. Clutching at her body. He tears the nightdress she's wearing like it's tissue paper and throws the fabric to the damp, salted deck. Ocean mist clings to her feet as she stumbles backwards, as he picks her up and hoists her so she's perched on the railing. It's not too far a drop behind her but she feels like she's floating in the air. Nearly naked. Her nipples hardening from him and the breeze.

He steps back. Panting as his eyes trail over her body from her toes, to her bent knees, to her hips, glazing over her breasts with rock sugar and dry sand. He's angry. He's hungry. He's in love. He meets her eyes and she shivers in the cooling ocean

night. It's probably early morning by now. They can watch the sun rise out here.

“What direction is east?” she asks.

If she says anything else, she'll crumble into a million pieces. Parts of her will become grains of sand and slip away in the wind. They'll bury themselves in the grass below. She just looks at him in the moonlight that sets a cool tone over his marble-carved torso, his long legs. He's wearing boxers with stripes on them. The man she loves is so beautiful it makes her want to cry.

He's staring at her. Breathing like he's just run a marathon, or whatever the equivalent would be for something like him.

“You don't have a say in this,” he tells her.

She swallows.

He storms towards her then. He can make a storm in three strides. She braces herself for him but he grabs her hard, one hand squeezing her waist and the other trapped in her hair. Wrenching her face up to his. Even perched on the railing, she has to look up to see him. He glares deep in her eyes. Still panting. She breathes quickly too now because his gaze incinerates her.

He must feel her heartbeat. How it races.

Then, he snaps jaws to the intersection of her neck and shoulder. She screams. It's been a long time since she's felt fear with him but she does now with all his anger as he sinks his canines into her flesh. She's bleeding. He hasn't let any blood spill from his mouth but she feels it flood from her.

He drags his teeth before releasing her neck. She feels the blood pour down her bare chest, seeping between the two of them, as he presses his lips to her ear.

“I'm not losing you,” he growls, wrapping his hands around the legs of her panties just to rip them off.

She doesn't care about the pain. She needs him. He notches himself inside her and ruts in with his mouth on her

bleeding wound, drinking from her. And the pain is her world but the pleasure is too, swirling around them like a hurricane as he presses her ankles by her hips. She clings to him so she doesn't fall, because she might. This is dangerous. This is no different than a razor on her inner thigh.

She thinks he might kill her and she'll let him just so they never have to see that thing again.

"I'm gonna breed you tonight, little fawn," he says, fucking her so hard it shakes the railing. Shakes the porch. Shakes the world around her and all its night stars. "Gonna knot inside you and keep my cum there till sunup. Everything you do's gonna be with our baby in mind, understand that?"

"I can't kill someone, Ridge-"

"Not a fucking say," he growls. "Open your mouth."

She's breathing too hard to close it.

He sucks at her wound and then keeps her mouth pried open with his thumb. Slows his fucking to look in her eyes.

He lets her blood drip from his mouth into hers and she tastes herself like he must taste her. It's not metallic anymore. It's salted caramel, just like he says, and now she grabs his face and kisses him. Swirls her tongue with his, even though his teeth cut her lips. Even though cries echo from her throat as he fucks her. He catches her jaw and he's kissing her neck, his breath hot and rapid on her skin. It's never been like this before. Never so feral. She hears the wood start to crack but she knows that won't stop them, that nothing will.

"You're going to kill someone for me," he growls as he pounds his hips and his cock into her. His throat is rough like healing from the wound made the edges abrasive, or rough like he knows she won't agree with him after day breaks, or rough like he knows he's going to lose her.

She's fucking him just as hard, planting her feet on the railing and using that leverage to get at him. Clawing his back. She bites his lip. He growls and impales her harder. She bites his neck too. Tries her hardest to sink her teeth into him but

she can't because even a knife wouldn't cut through him. Nothing would cut him except for a bullet or Satan or her death.

Then, there's a crash.

The railing gives out and gravity pulls them down, down through the dark night. Down through the humid air. She screams because she can only see stars for a second. Because truly, nothing else exists for a second. The only grounding and connection she has is him, his length inside her and his arms reaching around her and his warmth everywhere. She watches the stars move further away. It's not a long drop, only twenty feet, but it feels like one. She should brace herself for the landing but she doesn't, just keeps staring up at the stars and feeling the ecstasy of lust and fate threading their hands through her hair.

Then, he's got one hand on her head and one on her lower back and she lands with him holding her like that, still locked inside her. He lands on his feet. He bruises her from the inside. They're groaning, gasping. Hearts pounding, minds blank of anything but the image of each other. His silhouetted face in the shadow of the night. Her starlit gaze, full of awe.

"You caught me," she whispers.

"Always," he growls.

He lays her to the ground before their souls break and he fucks her there with one arm hooked under her knee and one hand on her neck. Like this, she can't think of anything but air and the way he fills her. He's breathing into her mouth and he seals each of her gasps with a kiss. She thinks, as her pleasure peaks high into the night, as she arches so intensely that her head digs into the grass, of how soft his lips are when they lavish her like this. She thinks, even cursed, that she is the luckiest woman to ever live.

He comes grinding his hips hard against hers like he's trying to crush her bones, his cock flooding her so intensely she feels cum trickle past the lock of his widened base. They

don't black out this time. They fight it. His hands knot in her hair and he kisses her. Licks the blood from her skin and from her still-seeping wound. She drags her tongue across his only scar, the one at his neck, the proof of what he'll do for her.

She sleeps with him inside of her. Only an hour at a stretch because when one of them wakes up, they start again. By the time the sun rises, she's covered in cuts from the rocks and the weeds and his mouth and she's convinced he is born of both the earth and the ocean, and that he's never been human, and that she hasn't either.

East is to their left, she realizes.

On a map, that means they're upside down.

## Chapter 12

## *The dirt of this*

**W**right wakes up in a stranger's bed.

The morning sun is burning bright and golden in the sky. He wishes it were gone. He feels so drained it's like he lost half the water in his body and he doesn't have a fucking clue whose window he climbed through but it's still open and the scent of cheap perfume is thick in his nose. Little natural scents other than the smell of rampant, angry fucking.

*Jesus.*

The memories from the night before come crashing through and he shudders. All the lust he's harbored for Sadie crawled out into the open like a fucking cockroach and she knows, now. She fucking saw it. Watched him fuck into a demon's throat and moan her name. While his brother could have been dying. If there were ever an evil soul she could trade with the devil for hers, it would undoubtedly be his.

And then, because he was too sober and he hadn't damned himself enough, he found the college girl who was far too young for him. Knocked on her window and fucked her until sunup.

He took things out on her.

Bent her over the open windowsill with her hair fisted in his hand and fucked her from behind like he was trying to break her in two. Her wild gasps and howls must have sounded like an animal to anyone passing by, but if they



looked up they'd see her gripping the sill with her manicured hands, her pert breasts shaking with each thrust.

For his last few days on earth, he's living like he's already in hell.

When he's sober in Orion, he's a church-going former soldier. A family man exposed to too much tragedy, a good man with rough hands. He takes care of people when they need it. Helps out with labor at neighboring farms and dates appropriately aged women, not long enough to give them the illusions that he'll marry them.

He's been good.

But is that the truth of him?

Peeling himself off the damp sheets, he's not so sure. The scent of bacon lingers in the air and he pulls on his boxers, his jeans. Last night, he left without a shirt or shoes like a fucking beatnik. He looks in the mirror to steady himself. Smooths his hair before opening the door and padding down the hall.

There are three young women scattered in the living room. Empty wine bottles spread amongst them. Two are smoking as they fix their gaze on the television.

He doesn't have a television back home. Even if he could afford one, he hates the way the static prickles his skin.

"Morning," he says to them, nodding.

"Heard you last night," one of them chides.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, fighting nausea. "Mm."

"Don't tease him," a more familiar voice hushes from the kitchen. Must be the woman he went to bed with. He doesn't recognize the rest.

"Wouldn't dream of teasing a fine man like that," one of the smokers remarks. "So tall. Look strong too. You a soldier?"

He locks eyes with her. She's older than college-aged, though not by much. If he'd had his wits about him, he might

have chosen her instead. She looks a bit more roughened by life.

“Yeah,” he says.

She smiles. “Ever kill anyone?”

He looks towards the kitchen. “Yeah.”

“Germans, Italians, or Japanese?” another woman asks.

“Nazis,” he clips.

And Americans, but he won't tell her that. He imagines she's just interested in hearing what happened overseas.

“That's brave,” the smoker says. “How did it feel?”

“Alright,” he sighs. He turns away from them, strolling into the kitchen.

The girl, or the woman, considering what he's done to her, looks up at him with pretty brown eyes and thick, mascaraed lashes. Soap, perfume, tanning oil. No nature in her scent but what he's brought to her. He's brought something feral, judging by the marks on her neck. He's given her hickeys like he's a fucking teenager.

He reaches under her chin. Tilts her face up to his and presses a kiss gently to her lips. He doesn't know her name but she deserves some kind of sweetness. Her friends holler from the living room.

“Best be goin’,” he says.

“Stay a while, won't you?” the woman asks. “We've got bacon and flapjacks. They don't eat much.”

He finds part of him softening for her and, not wanting to deny such an offer, fixes himself a plate. He sits at the kitchen table next to an untouched newspaper with a headline reading *Preachers Burn*. In some small town he's never heard of, a church burned with a reverend and his brother inside. In the wreckage, they found three unidentified bodies that appeared to have died long before the fire. Under the floorboards.

The preachers were killers.

Hell might not be so different from North Carolina.

Maybe he won't miss being alive.

Suddenly, there's a thud on the porch just past the sliding glass doors and the woman in the kitchen screams. Wright looks outside to see a tall man wearing a short-sleeved, striped button down open over matching swim shorts. The height and his face are unmistakable.

Ridge knocks on the glass pane of the door.

"My god!" the woman exclaims.

"Who the hell is that?" the smoker asks, having now materialized in the doorway. "Looks nice."

"My brother," Wright grunts, smoothing his face in his hands.

"Is he single?" the smoker asks.

"No," Wright clips as Ridge pushes the door open.

He nods to the woman before grabbing a piece of bacon off Wright's plate and shoving it into his mouth. "Morning," he says to the room. "Fuck, I'm hungry."

"We have more..." the woman begins, but Ridge grabs a handful of food from the plate and crams it into his mouth, not even swallowing. "Excuse you!"

Ridge eyes her, licking his hand.

"Any meat?" he asks.

There's something wrong with him today. Something jumpy and remarkably human. It's in the frenetic air around him and in his light eyes, under which dark circles lie for the first time.

"There's a ham in the fridge," the smoker says, her voice mystified. "Are you gonna eat it whole?"

"Ham ain't raw," Ridge clips. He turns to the counter and pulls raw bacon from brown paper, devouring it quickly and

wiping his grease-drenched lips.

“Jesus Christ,” Wright murmurs. The woman from the night before watches Ridge in disgusted horror, but the smoker’s eyes widen in intrigue. “Out!”

“Comin’ with me,” Ridge says.

“Course. Where’s Sadie?”

Ridge firms his lips together, his eyes turning glassy and lake-like. “Asleep.”

That’s what it is, then. Fear. This is what fear looks like in his brother. Wright sighs. No rest for the weary or whiskey-soaked.

“I...” Ridge starts, before abruptly looking away. His scar looks like rose quartz in the light. He takes a piece of bacon from the still-sizzling skillet and wolfs it down. Wright knows it must burn. Ridge wipes his mouth.

“Let’s go,” Wright says.

He says his goodbye to his hosts and slips out the back door with Ridge, looking over the banister. From the sound of it, he figured Ridge jumped from the ground, though it’s a full ten feet below them and there are stairs he could have chosen instead. He won’t ask how Ridge found him. He found Sadie when she was three hundred miles away.

They stroll down the sidewalk together, Ridge silently guiding him in the direction of the ocean. Even in Orion, where everyone knows who they are, the two of them catch stares from onlookers. It could be their height. Could be the innate ability of humans to detect predators.

Whatever it is, he feels eyes on him. Smells ocean air and fried food and the bacon grease on Ridge’s mouth. The town isn’t as loud as a city but it’s still loud, brimming with engine sounds from a few cars meandering the streets, the whirring of bike tires, the screaming of children. Wright watches two redheaded boys chase each other to the sand.

“She ain’t dyin’,” Ridge remarks after a long silence.

Wright looks at him. Ridge is wide-eyed like a kid now. Looks uncomfortable in his own skin, which he never does. He's always smooth-moving, jarringly confident. Now, he seems fidgety.

"She can't," he says, shaking his head. He furrows his brow. "She can't. She can't."

"Hope you didn't look like that at the house with her," Wright clips.

"Don't know this feeling."

"It's fear," Wright says. "You keep it together around her?"

Ridge nods.

"That's all that matters, then," Wright says.

Ridge grabs his arm. A tremor runs through his wrist when he does, like he's shaking for a fix. "Who would you kill here?" he asks fervently.

Wright sighs. "Jesus Christ."

"When was the last time *you* ate, brother? I fuckin' mean it," Ridge snaps. He's raised his voice. Ridge *never* raises his voice; Wright admires that about him. "Who would you kill here?"

Wright looks around them. A couple outside a cafe not ten feet away from them stares back at him.

"You gotta learn some subtlety," he says under his breath, guiding Ridge towards the sand. He drags the man towards the rocks, where no one but a toddler with a bucket stands within earshot. "Sit. Can't talk like that. What if she wants to live in a city? Or anywhere with fuckin' people?"

"Mm," Ridge grunts, sitting on one of the boulders. He brings his knees up enough to rest his elbows on them but fidgets with his hands. "She sees you as a good man, you know?"

*Not after she watched the fuckin' embodiment of my lust take the shape of her,* Wright imagines, though he enjoys

Ridge's sentiment.

"You want to find someone bad she won't mind killin'," Wright says.

Ridge nods. "Someone you'd kill."

"You're also fuckin' hungry," Wright says.

"I'll eat the prey, I figure," Ridge says. A devious smile flickers across his face suddenly. "Mm. I like that. Eating someone she's killed."

"She's not gonna kill anyone," Wright tells him.

"Nah, she ain't got a say in that," Ridge says. "Ain't fuckin' losing her just so some worthless sack stays walking. But she's sensitive. Figured I'd give her someone *you'd* kill. Someone rotten. A rapist or a murderer, to ease her sweet mind."

Wright scoffs despite himself. Ridge raises an eyebrow in his direction.

"Something funny, brother?" he asks.

"Sadie is not going to kill someone who's murdered or raped anyone," Wright repeats. "Because she knows you've done worse, and she loves you."

Ridge stares at him. There's a craze in his eyes that Wright saw in shell shocked men, but never in his brother. He looks away from it, towards the crashing waves. If he were going to eat someone, which he is long overdue for, he'd probably find one of the men who camp on this beach.

There's one further down by the shore, covered in a tarp. Coin's toss if he'd be a bad man but he'd be someone no one would miss and sometimes that has to be enough. Still, he'd feel guilt. Sadie would never do it. She's got too kind a nature for such things. If he didn't have the hunger for it, he wouldn't kill anyone either.

"Do you think you'd do the things you've done if it wasn't to feed yourself?" Wright asks.

Ridge shrugs, picking up a piece of dried seaweed and threading it through his fingers. “Like asking a bird if it’d ride a plane.”

“Yeah,” Wright laughs. “She ain’t killin’ anyone. Loving you takes an acceptance of cruelty.”

“She does what I tell her to.”

“Loving her takes an acceptance of kindness.”

Ridge frowns, his face breaking open to panic. “That thing is fuckin’ dangerous. You said it yourself. Can’t rely on fuckin’ kindness.”

“No.”

“So don’t act like there’s another choice,” Ridge snaps. “There ain’t. Not without riskin’ her getting hurt and I can’t... I can’t abide by that. I can’t do that.”

“I’ve got it handled,” Wright says. “I know the devil.”

“It ain’t the fuckin’ devil!” Ridge yells. “It’s a creature, same as you or me, except it can look like somethin’ else and we don’t know how to fight it yet.”

The toddler collecting shells looks wide-eyed at his brother. Wright fights the urge to comfort the child. Doesn’t quite feel the same urge for Ridge and his ignorance.

“Cause you can’t,” Wright says. “You can’t fight it.”

Ridge stands abruptly. “Then help me find someone for her to kill. Hell, help me make her do it. Say you’ll save her soul. Lie to her. I don’t care. I’ll put a gun in her hands and pull the trigger myself.”

Wright has never seen him like this before. He’s like a live weapon, fixing to go off. Fixing to take casualties. It makes Wright step back.

“You ain’t hearin’ me,” Wright says. “Can’t make that woman do something she don’t want to do. That ain’t lovin’ her proper.”

Ridge scoffs. "Alright."

He shoves his hands in his pockets, presses his tongue against his cheek. Not one for subtlety of any type.

"Think you need to eat," Wright says. "Think you need to get right with yourself."

"You're refusin' to help someone who looks up to you, know that?" Ridge asks. "Sadie thinks the world of you, even while you're getting drunk every fuckin' night. After all her pa did to her. Don't tell me to love her proper 'cause I do. Gonna start a family with her. And no war could take her from me, that's for damn sure."

"Fuck you mean by that?" Wright snarls.

"Maybe I shouldn't be asking the man who left his family to fight some rich man's war--"

Wright backhands him so hard that the air before his cheek makes its own sound. Ridge keeps his head turned. Flexes his jaw. But it's not enough. Wright is livid, this man before him more a stranger than his own kin for an accusation like that. He grabs him by the hair.

"You think you're ready to be a father?" Wright growls. "No fuckin' clue what it's like to leave your life so your boy can have the chance you didn't."

Ridge glares at him. "Harry was a baby, had a whole life ahead of him--"

"Not Harry," Wright snaps. "Harry was my baby. You were my boy. I fuckin' raised you from when you were five years old, took that on way too young. You don't think I would'a liked some kind of childhood? You think I wanted to ship off so soon? Damn you, Ridge. You selfish, arrogant bastard. Don't you ever speak to me like that again or I will put you in your grave."

He pushes his brother away from him, seething. Ridge settles back, a crease in his brow.

"Yeah," Ridge says flatly.



He's got wisdom in his gaze and for a brief second Wright thinks he himself might be the youngest because of whatever's unsaid inside his brother's mind.

"Your arms get tired from carryin' all that weight in 'em?" Ridge asks. "Put it down, then. Find a mirror. We asked you not to leave."

He turns and strides towards the water.

Further away and some time later, he crouches down next to the tarp and lifts the edge. Starts saying something Wright can't hear over the wind. Wright's stomach turns. He sees the dirty, matted hair of the man Ridge speaks to.

"Fuckin' hell," he mutters.

Ridge must have seen him focus on him. Such a subtle shift, he thought, but it was there, there when he thought about killing. Ridge is a predator, an excellent one. Knows what the other wolves are eating.

He would have been a pack animal if the world had given him that. But Wright doesn't watch his brother hunt.

He just lies back in the sand and sweats the booze out in the August sun.

"You were filthy," Sadie murmurs, running the washcloth down Ridge's chest. They sit together in a shallow bath, her straddling him but not riding him yet. "Did you eat something?"

Ridge smiles. "Bacon."

She laughs, wiping his mouth and his chin. "Could it be? Did you wrestle a pig in the dirt?"

The dirt drips down to the water and she thinks they should leave the bath before they get too intimate with one another. He traces his fingers up her bare spine, nudging her forward. He kisses her shoulder, her neck, gentle, sweet pressings of his soft lips on her skin. She reconsiders.

“Us and the dirt of this,” she whispers, shivering.

“Didn’t like being away from you for so long,” he breathes against her ear, guiding her over him.

If it were any other day, she’d tell him it was only a few hours. But waking without him felt cruel and she didn’t like it. So instead she braces her hands on his chest. Sitting this way, with her hips lifted and his in the water, she can look down at him. His hands slide up her waist, thumbs brushing her breasts.

“I didn’t like it either,” she says. “I should wake up to you, always.”

*For as long as I have left,* is what she doesn’t tell him.

“Damn right,” he says with a smile.

He leans forward and licks a circle around her nipple. She moans lightly and he sucks at it before kissing to the space between her breasts.

“Every day, Sadie,” he murmurs. He repeats his pattern with the next. “Every night. My sun and my fuckin’ moon.”

Her heart hurts but her body feels so good in his hands. Like sunshine-melted butter. Like warm water flowing freely. He guides her by the hips to stand, but he stays seated.

“Turn around,” he growls. “Bend over. Grip the tub. Don’t want you to fall.”

She listens to him. Wraps her hands around the cool porcelain. Feels his nose, his face, his breath, against her sex. He’s warm enough to light up her skin as she stands there bent over on one of her last days.

“You’re gonna repeat what I say,” he says, spreading her with his hands.

He flattens his tongue against her, running up once and then down. Sucking at her clit. She gasps.

“Yes,” she breathes.

He grabs her by the hips and presses her to his face, his tongue lavishing her. Flicking over her again and again until he stops suddenly. Spits on her entrance. Slides two fingers inside of her, angling down, and begins to fuck her with them.

His hands are so large that he can fill her like that. He adds another finger. She's sore but she's willing. She whimpers. She's panting. He'll buckle her.

"Repeat," he says, pulsing his fingers inside of her. "*Every fucking day.*"

"I don't cuss, Ridge," she moans.

"*Every. Fucking. Day,*" he growls, slipping another finger in. He's got four now, she knows from his thumb massaging her clit while he works into her.

"Every f-" Sadie starts, shivering. Her legs are quaking already. It's different like this than with his cock; he pulses at her front wall each time he thrusts. She's overwhelmed. "Every darn day."

"Repeat: *every fucking day, I will wake to you,*" he says, his voice so low she feels it in her spine. "*And I will sleep with your cum inside me.*"

"Every day, I will wake..." she whimpers.

He fits his entire hand in now, and she's so full she thinks she'll burst. So full she can hardly think straight. He growls, fucking her like this as she quivers and screams for him.

"Ridge!" she screams. "Ridge! Oh my god!"

"I can fucking feel every part of you," he groans. "Not long ago you were a virgin, little fawn, and my how I've deflowered you. Repeat. My. Words."

"I'll wake to you!" she cries out, unable to think. It's almost too much for her to feel something down there but she knows she's coming. She knows she's coming down his wrist. Her world blackens and fizzes. "Every day! And sleep with your cum inside me!"

She can hear him smile. He stops his pulsing and she groans.

“Please, Ridge!” she begs.

“Why won’t you curse?”

“I want to have a chance at heaven, at least.”

“Why?” he asks, withdrawing his hand. He leaves an aching emptiness in his wake. She looks back and watches him lick his fingers clean. She whimpers. “Heaven is here. In the space between the two of us.”

She doesn’t know why she says it.

She’s done such a good job at not talking about it with him. With anyone but Wright.

But it’s coming. The deadline is coming and he gave her what he would if she was dying when they were on the porch. It fed something in her. An awakening, maybe.

“Because I’m going to die in three days, Ridge,” she whispers.

He stands in the water, spinning her around and gripping her neck. Glowering into her eyes.

“You fuckin’ ain’t,” he growls. “Don’t you say that about yourself, now!”

“*Baby,*” she whispers, reaching up to touch his cheek. His brow is deeply furrowed, concern rich with the lust in his gaze. “It’s the truth.”

“No,” he snaps, reaching around her waist and hoisting her out of the tub. He pulls a bathrobe from the hook and wraps it around her. “No. You ain’t. You’re killin’ someone today. You’re killin’ someone right now; won’t think about this anymore.”

She feels tears threaten her eyes but wipes them away. “I can’t, Ridge,” she breathes.

“You can!” he yells, pointing his finger in her face. “I said, you don’t have a fucking say, Sadie!”

He never yells at her. Doesn’t even seem to stand Wright yelling at her, and it pushes the tears from her eyes to her cheeks. To her neck. She can’t breathe. She holds herself tight, the sound of a raised voice and anger sending her back to her pa’s house.

“Please,” she whispers. “You said you’d never raise your voice at me.”

He wraps a towel around his waist, ducking his head. He’s panting. He’s stealing all the air from the room.

“Ain’t fucking losing you!” he yells, slamming his fist into the counter. “Not ever, you hear me?”

“*Ridge*,” she sobs. “Please! You’re scaring me!”

He tears the door open before grabbing her by the wrist and dragging her down the hall. She doesn’t even know that she’s fighting. Just knows the rug burn that heats the soles of her feet.

“Where are we going?” she asks. “We need to get dressed.”

He pauses at the top of the stairs, taking a deep breath. Nods to himself. He releases her wrist, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her to him. He strokes her hair and she lets herself calm to his touch. Her cheek rests on his heaving chest, but he is warm and strong and hers again.

“I shouldn’t’a yelled,” he says. “I’ve been outta sorts today. Just walk with me, alright?”

He leans back to look her in the eyes. She nods, biting her lip.

“Not going far,” Ridge soothes. “Told you, I ain’t losing you. Not for anything in this world, you hear?”

Even the warm air feels harsh and raw on her skin. Her wrist hurts something awful every time she moves it. He might

have fractured it.

“Not for anything,” he repeats.

She follows him down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door to the porch. It’s too warm to wear this bathrobe. If they were in Orion, they could be naked. He guides her, still in his towel, down the steps to the grass. Now all his movements are gentle. He’s found some control again.

Then, they reach the space underneath the porch. It’s darker in the shadow, even though the sun is high in the sky. But there’s a tarp down here.

It covers something. Could be firewood, could be as simple and innocent as that.

But she knows it’s not. Even she can smell the iron in the air.

“I love your sweetness,” he says. “But sometimes we gotta do things we don’t want to do.”

He lets her go and she holds onto a pillar for support, wiping at her eyes. He walks towards the tarp, hesitating at it.

“Your deal was to trade a soul for your own, and this one left its woman with two little babies to take care of all by herself,” he says.

“What are you saying, Ridge?” she asks. She feels nauseous.

Ridge gestures to the tarp. “Course, I know you ain’t one for damning something for its actions. So, I worked it over a little bit. Need to warn you ‘bout that before I show you.”

“Please don’t,” Sadie whimpers.

She’s sobbing now. Hasn’t even noticed because the air is hot and heavy already. But she sees and hears flies buzzing thick under the tarp. She doesn’t want to see who’s underneath. They aren’t even moving.

“I’d have not done anything to it,” Ridge says, strolling towards the far wall to retrieve a black object. Sadie can

hardly see through her blurred vision. “But this way, it’s gonna die anyway. You don’t need anything on that sweet conscience of yours.”

She’s shaking. She can’t watch this.

“You’re not yourself, Ridge,” she whispers. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

“Look at me,” he says, taking her face in his free hand. He kisses the top of her head. “Look at me, little fawn. Look at me, now.”

He’s shaking too. She blinks away the tears and he presses a kiss to her cheek. Presses a gun in her hand.

“It ain’t gonna feel like anything,” he says. “Made sure it’d be a mercy. Don’t think about it.”

“Ridge,” she whispers. The gun stays in her hand but she can hardly hold it. It feels like the weight of the world. “What did you do?”

She peers over his shoulder to the tarp. Those flies are screaming now.

“Look at me,” Ridge snaps, grabbing her face in both his hands. “You’re going to put something out of its misery. It’s an honorable thing. A good deed.”

His voice is gravelly with restraint. She knows he would be yelling. It doesn’t help that he refrains, not when the flies raise their voices for him.

Not when whoever is underneath that tarp can’t even speak.

He steps away from her and walks to the tarp, bending down to unsheathe the mound in a grand display. Sadie screams. She thought there would be a man underneath, but instead there’s just a mass of blood. Someone half-eaten, his chest moving only slowly. Chunks taken out of his naked thighs, out of his arms. His hand is missing. His cheek is gone. When Ridge reveals him, the man turns what’s left of his head towards her.

“Help,” he whispers, his voice bubbling blood from between his lips.

His stomach is torn open.

Ridge tore his stomach open.

And yet he’s alive, and he’s been here for a long time. How did Ridge know he would stay living? How many times has her mate done this?

“Shoot it,” Ridge says darkly. “It’s not going to survive this.”

“We have to get him to the hospital,” Sadie whimpers. Her hand is shaking so hard she drops the gun. She doesn’t want to pick it up. “We can say we found him there, that an animal did this... We can save him.”

Ridge frowns. He nearly looks confused. “Can’t move its body like this.”

“*Him*,” Sadie pleads. “He’s a person, Ridge. He has a soul. Say *him*.”

“Him,” Ridge repeats. “That better? Pick up the gun, Sadie. You’re gonna save your life.”

“*No*,” Sadie whimpers. “Let’s call an ambulance.”

“Little fawn,” Ridge soothes, walking up to her. He smooths her shoulders, wipes the tears from her cheeks. “We’re gonna start a family. We’ve got an eternity ahead of us. You’ve just gotta do this one thing. You’d be saving him pain.”

The air between them is too thick. The flies buzz too loud.

“Don’t you want that?” Ridge asks.

“More than anything,” she whispers.

“So do it,” Ridge says, and his voice isn’t loud but it is low and harsh with anger. “Pick up the fuckin’ gun.”

“No.”

“Stop sayin’ that!”



She feels his hand in her hair, wrenching her face up to his.

“*Sadie*,” he pleads.

In the shadow, she didn’t notice the fear in his eyes but she sees it now. He is fierce, an animal with its leg in a trap, hissing and biting. It makes him angry but anger doesn’t push her. This is her soul. This is the only thing she had before him.

“Please,” he begs. His voice is shattered, fragmented like a precious vase dropped carelessly onto cement. He’s panting. “Please, *Sadie*. He’s just a fucking human.”

“So am I,” *Sadie* whimpers.

Ridge drops to his knees to scoop the gun from the ground. He forces it into her hands.

“Do it!” he yells, grabbing at the terrycloth of her robe. “He’s in so much pain! Do it!”

“You don’t understand how grateful I was that I didn’t kill you, Ridge,” she cries. “Even when I thought you were evil. I can’t feel that way again! I can’t lose my soul!”

“You don’t need a soul,” Ridge growls, standing.

She looks at the dying man, all his bleeding wounds and broken bones. “Fix him, Ridge. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Ridge glares at her. “You don’t deserve this.”

She falters, clasping her hand over her mouth. “It’s just fate, baby,” she whimpers, speaking through her fingers. “It’s just what life did to me.”

He stares at her, wide-eyed but blinking. Something comes over him. Transforms him like a veil. He nods, pulling the gun from her hands. He aims it at the bleeding man and fires right into his skull.

*Sadie* yelps.

Ridge turns. Presses the hot muzzle of the gun against her temple.

“You don’t know what it’ll feel like, do you?” he asks. “To lose you? If I pull this trigger, I’ll be killing myself. A true fuckin’ death, Sadie. Told you that from the start.”

She’s sobbing. She squirms to get away but he keeps her pinned with his free hand.

“You are worth more than a thousand men,” he growls, shoving the metal harder against her skin. A tear rolls down his cheek. She’s so close, she sees a whisper of her own reflection in the sheen of it. “You’re worth more than me.”

With that, he raises the gun to his own temple and fires.

## Chapter 13

## *Cotton in my ears*

When Ridge wakes, the sun is setting and he feels bruised. He's not sure he remembers much of what happened today, just remembers his woman in the tub, the taste of her on his fingers. He smells her now.

He's coated in the scent of her.

He lifts his head and looks before him, towards the sliding glass doors of the kitchen. There's a small trail of blood on the tile leading from the outdoors to his feet. He's lying on something soft, though.

He reaches behind him, to where he feels and tastes Sadie's knee. She's propped against the wall, his head in her lap, her legs crossed like a pretzel. Her hands rest on his shoulders but her eyes are closed, her cheeks streaked red with tears even now. Licking his lips, he tastes her salt on him. She cried over him for a while before she fell asleep.

"Little fawn," he croaks, his throat sore.

Her eyes snap open and she screams, scrambling away from him. Immediately, those same eyes fill with tears. She cowers against the wall opposite to him. Small and fragile as she sobs. She's got blood all over her, plastered to the white robe she wears and to her hands. It's rusted and heavy on her palms.

He remembers now. What he did. What she wouldn't do.

"*Sadie*," Ridge murmurs, pressing himself to his knees.

“I thought you were dead,” she sobs. “I thought you killed yourself, Ridge. How could you do that?”

She folds into herself, wrapping her arms around her knees and clinging to them as sorrow and fear rack through her.

To him, how he could do it is simple. She needs to learn. She needs to change, to kill someone so that thing lets her go. He’s not sure he can fight it and he needs to be sure. He can’t risk anything with her.

But there’s a large purple bruise on her wrist and she’s shaking. Her body is past the point of trembling; she is traumatized. Her spirit is more badly beaten than he’s ever seen it, even after he tried to kill her.

He could apologize. Now is when the words would be perfect. But something holds him back from them. He can’t form them in his mouth.

*I’m sorry*, he thinks to scream. But it’s not all he feels. He knows this is what’s best for her, doesn’t know how she can’t understand. There’s an aching scream inside his head he tried to kill with the bullet, the thought that she would rather be dead than love him. It’s just not true. She loves him.

She loves him and he hurt her anyway.

Isn’t this who he is? Isn’t this what he does?

He loses his use of language. Moves towards her. She flinches and he doesn’t care. He reaches for her arm.

She flails at him. Hits him.

He catches her wrist.

She cries out. She’s crying.

He kisses the bruises he made. Lets his lips linger on her skin, not just to taste her but to heal her too. He hopes his spit can soak through her freckles and he wonders if he can kiss her temple to heal the memory of what he’s done. He’s hurt her.

She pushes him away.

He stares at her, and she stares at him. Panting. They're both panting.

She launches herself forward and kisses him, her blood-soaked hands sticky on his neck. He kisses her back. Deep. Cutting. She climbs over him. He pushes her onto the floor and shoves her robe open. It's quick. Neither of them think. He fucks her on the floor not twenty minutes after coming back to life.

It's the only thing he can do anymore, isn't it?

Fuck her.

Love her.

Wait for her to die.

Sadie peels herself off of Ridge. The darkened skies tell her it should be after dinnertime but she has no appetite. She walks to the fridge anyway. Stares into the white glow of it and pulls out strawberries and whipped cream and a shortcake she baked when things were sweeter and Ridge kissed the batter off her fingers.

She makes the dessert for herself. Plates it nicely. She feels him watch her from the floor.

It's all too much. For every beautiful thing she's experienced in love, she's not sure if she should have let him catch her. However difficult she thought it would be, this is so much worse. This is going to destroy him. This is destroying him.

*You're the only thing that could kill me.*

She pushes her plate away and strides quickly upstairs. Quick enough to make it to the bathroom where she dry heaves into the toilet. There's not enough in her stomach. His brain is on her hands. He was dead in her arms. He *killed* himself.

And that man he brought her...

Was he even a man, after what Ridge did? After what he showed her?

She has to leave.

Leave, before he kills anyone else for her.

Leave, before the devil comes back and kills him.

Just leave.

If she takes the truck, he might not find her right away. She'll only have two days left come morning and then she'll just disappear.

That's right.

All she has to do is leave.

She pushes herself from her knees and rushes towards the bedroom, but Ridge is already there. Sitting on the bed, his elbows propped on his knees. He looks up at her.

"I'm going to the beach," Sadie says, wiping her eyes. She needs to look away from him. Can't see how dark he is right now. Can't face how this person who is so harsh and so cruel could be someone she loves but she knows he is. She knows he is and she'll lose him like she's lost everything and everyone else.

She can't let the world lose him too.

She hears the door to their room close.

When she looks back, he's still there.

Standing there with a wrinkle to his brow and tornado skies in his irises, he looks at her like they're both equally human. And she wonders if that's how he sees it. If even for this small fraction in time, he sees himself as less than a god.

"You don't understand me," she whispers. She's crying hard enough to feel the tears drip onto her chest and she's shaking, too. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Don't use that word on yourself," he tells her. His voice is too cold for this.

“You must believe it!” she exclaims. “For you to do that. I was so scared, Ridge-”

“I told you I would protect you,” he tells her, taking a step forward. “Think I’d do anything that would keep me from that?”

She steps away. Her back is at the wall. “Protection?” she yells. “Seeing the man I love blow his brains out! That’s protection to you, Ridge?”

“Proving a goddamned point,” he snaps.

“What point?” she asks. “That it’d kill me if I lost you?”

“Imagine how I feel!” he yells. “Knowing that you’d let that *thing* take you?”

“It gave me another month,” Sadie says. “With you. These have been the best days of my life, Ridge, and I am so grateful for them-”

“Don’t talk like that,” he growls. “I haven’t had enough time with you-”

His voice cracks.

“I haven’t, Sadie,” he sniffs. He wipes his face. “I haven’t had *close* to enough time with you. I haven’t woken to you in my arms enough. I haven’t heard you laugh enough. I haven’t fucked you enough. It’s not enough for *me*. A hundred years wouldn’t be enough, but it would be close, so what is it?”

His face is bright with strain, his eyes glowing like the creatures in the water against the redness.

“What would make you want to stay?” he snaps. “Because I’ll give it to you, Sadie. If you want to live in the city, I’ll shove cotton in my ears and breathe through my mouth. If you want the ocean, I’ll cut a river through the state and bring it to the farm! But if you want to die-”

His voice breaks and he shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. He braces himself against the dresser.



“If you want to die, let me kill you,” he groans. “Knowing it will destroy all of me that matters. Knowing that for any world I try to give you, you are the borders and the heart of mine. You are everything...”

He shudders.

“You are my gravity,” he says, his voice a near-growl. “You are my sky, my fucking ocean, my moon, my air. You’re my religion. You’re what I reach for, *don’t*...”

He punches the wood of the dresser and it collapses inward.

“Don’t leave me,” he breathes. “Don’t take yourself away from me.”

“I don’t want to die,” she whispers.

He keeps his head hung low, keeps his hands braced on what’s left of the dresser. She approaches him gently. Like she’s expecting lightning, she smooths her hand up his bare back. Along the length of his spine. His shoulders relax to her touch.

“I can’t lose you,” he breathes, wiping his face. “Don’t do that to me.”

She leans her forehead against his back and feels so warm, so unbelievably warm, that she can’t imagine anything but safety. She wraps her arms around his waist like this. Lets herself be so close to him. He smells like rainfall over fresh grass. He smells like home.

“I love you,” she whispers.

“Promise me you’ll live,” he shudders.

“*Ridge*,” she soothes.

He turns and catches her face in his hands.

“I love you, Sadie Price.”

He says it like a death rattle, but his touch is gentler than anything he’s given her. This is how he kisses her. Pressing his

lips to hers. Close-mouthed. There is nothing sharp between them but the stinging salt of tears. Even though he has to hang his head to meet her and she has to rise to her toes, they are a dance. A waltz. A ballet. Instantly. He tries not to push her but she's tripping over her feet, falling backwards onto the bed and he's over her but the way he looks at her it's like he's up in space, not the few feet between his chest and where his hands are planted.

"Promise me you'll live," he repeats roughly, his low voice like the gravel in the driveway of her home.

She can't promise him but she can push herself up and take his beautiful face in her hands and kiss him again, run her tongue across his lips until he opens his mouth and his teeth aren't as sharp this time but his breath is. He threads his fingers through her hair and pulls her so tight towards him that they fall to their sides. Her leg drapes over his naked hip. His body betrays a deep longing but he doesn't move to touch anything but her face and soon, she forgets that is even a step in this because this kiss, *this* pressure of his lips against hers and teasing of his tongue, is what she needs before she dies.

He's grabbing her. Not her neck, not her waist, not her ass. Her back. Her legs. Like every time air slips between them is a surrender and this is a war on home turf.

"I love you," Sadie whispers against his lips. "You're the easiest person I've ever loved, Ridge."

He knows his knuckles are white. That his hands are shaking. That his throat is tight, and it can't be, so he kisses her jaw. Her ear. Her neck. Ducks his face deep into the scent of her and inhales her into his lungs so deep she'll always be there. He doesn't remember losing his family but he'll remember this. He'll remember every molecule on his tongue.

Then, he chokes on the thought that it will be memory.

"Lie to me," he breathes, only breathing is a shudder. "Say you'll live."

She's over him and her hair is a curtain of her scent and she's close enough for her eyes to be just the color. He feels her tears pepper his cheeks and sees her freckles like they're on his own skin.

"Fucking lie to me," he growls. "Please, Sadie."

She pushes herself up. She's straddling him and he wants her, wants her so fucking bad, but touching her feels like breaking each of his ribs and it's pushing him into oblivion.

"I won't make any of my last words a lie," she whispers. "Or the ones I say won't mean anything."

He cannot be here. He cannot take this. He's so in love with her and she makes beautiful promises but she's surrendering and not just to him anymore. To fate, to her devil, to god. To all the entities that wouldn't matter to him even if he believed harder because she's it. She's everything. Heaven could never top her warmth. Hell would be cold by comparison.

Ridge won't lay hands on her but his head is spinning and he climbs from the bed. Shaking. Climbs from everything he finds beautiful in this world. Shaking. Doesn't even listen to the sound of her voice. Pleading. Begging him to stay. Sobbing. Stumbling down the stairs.

Then, the ocean air is coating his skin and he looks back just for a second at her reddened, tear-streaked face in the golden doorway. She must have collapsed. Holding her knees to her naked chest. And his throat is tight and he can't cry, won't fucking match her tears anymore. He'd rather not be human.

He turns right there in the street. Doesn't give a damn who sees.

The numbness seeps into him, though. And somewhere swimming in dark waves, he remembers the morning in the farmhouse.

That was the last time he closed himself off like this. Then, it took a world war to get him back.

Wright walks in the house and almost trips on Sadie's curled, naked frame in the foyer. He thinks, immediately, of how she was when she first saw him. How she'd backed as far as she could away from the silhouette of him in the darkness, how she'd been terrified of him.

Now, her hazel eyes don't register his presence. They're flat. Despondent. Shell shocked just like Ridge's were. He'd think she was dead if it weren't for the sound of her slowly beating heart. He'd think Ridge had hurt her if he didn't recognize the way a person's body folds around their own blade.

The look in her eyes is a spiral of self destruction that Wright has seen too often in the mirror. She's got dark circles from crying. Redness that make the green in her hazel irises look fierce and neon. He never noticed that she wore mascara but she's got that under her eyes, too. Thin black lines roll down her cheeks.

"Hey," he says, snapping his fingers in front of her face. "Hey, darlin'. Honey. This ain't how we're leavin' this world."

She doesn't move. The bell tolls within his mind, an echo so loud he's shocked she doesn't hear it. Or maybe she does, and just doesn't care.

Regardless, he scoops her into his arms because it doesn't matter anymore if he gets his scent all over her. He needs to, and he'd rather it happen this way than how the devil showed him.

He went to church today. There are three Methodist churches in town but he drove to the one in Buxton that was Catholic. He's never been to a Catholic church before but there was a priest who strolled the broken streets in France and spoke of confession. He figured he'd need it. The building was stunning, right on the water, its blue roof just a shade or two darker than the sky.

But when he got in the booth, he said nothing.

It's not what he's done that he'll need forgiveness for.

It's what he's going to do.

He might be pissed at Ridge, wanting to put his brother through a fucking wall for the awful shit he said to him, but he knows this is gonna hurt. With a little drink in him, Wright wonders if he can walk away from it all. If he really has to be someone, or if he can get away with welding one of his teeth into a bullet and putting it through his brain tonight. A fair trade, if there ever was one. Same wound, different souls.

"It ain't your time yet," he murmurs into Sadie's hair. The butter-honeysuckle smell has some of Ridge's blood mixed in. He can't begin to imagine what happened while he was away. He carries her into the living room that connects to the kitchen and sets her on the couch.

She puts her elbows on her knees before collapsing over them.

"No, no, no," he drawls. "Chin up. This ain't the end of anythin' for you, I promise you that."

"You can't," she grumbles.

He smiles at her. "Good to hear your voice."

He leaves the room for the laundry, pulls a dress and some underwear for her as well as a glass of water from the kitchen.

He feels like this is something that Jess would do for him, has some odd memory of her like this that he doesn't know is real or fake. But everything is like a dream now. He's half insane, doesn't know more than how his name is spelled and that the girl on the couch is someone he loves very much.

He stands in front of her and wraps his fingers in her hair.

*No, the warning bells scream. We don't touch her.*

"Yeah," he murmurs. "We do if we end this."

She blinks at him. He guides the glass to her lips, letting his gaze linger there. On the tan-pink color of her mouth, on those brown freckles that rim her outer lip. The moment he

saw her, he knew she was beautiful, but there's something more to her now.

There's love in the way he looks at her.

Love tainted by the memory of her reflection's lips on his cock, calling him *daddy*. It sets the whisper of a growl in his throat when she swallows. She is young, and beautiful, and soft, and maybe he's got some evil deep inside him that finds great thrill in that. That wants to taste the forbidden innocence between her legs.

"That's right, darlin'," he says, keeping the tone of his voice restrained. It should be this way, even knowing what he must do. He should be safe to her even if it's a lie.

He lets her pull away.

"Should wear this, I think," he says, holding out the dress and underwear. "Get decent."

She stares blankly at him.

Damnation is here, in her nudity and the pain it's painted with. There's blood on her arms. Not hers. Ridge's. The hell did that boy do to her?

"Raise your arms," he murmurs.

She complies, and he tries not to look at her bare, full breasts when she does. Tries not to let his gaze linger on her pretty pink nipples. He slips the cotton dress over her. He's left holding panties that smell more like lavender detergent than her skin.

"Erm," he says. "These."

*Fucking hell.*

"Stand," he tells her, kneeling on the ground.

She does.

His heart is hammering against his chest. He's getting hard from this. He should not be getting hard from this; he's thirty-

five years old. Does he not have enough maturity by now to be around a naked woman without turning into an animal?

“Step,” he says. “Put your hands on my shoulders, don’t lose your balance.”

One foot, then the other. She’s got pink nail polish on her toes. Her legs smell like sunscreen but they smell like earth too. Dirt. Sweat. Humanity. His mouth waters. Her knee brushes against his lips as he guides the panties up her legs. Up her thighs. He tries not to feel her skin as he goes, tries not to feel the plumpness of her rear graze his knuckles. She’s too distressed for this. Too distressed to want him lingering in that space.

He moves back. She sits down. Curls her knees to her chest again.

“I need to leave this place, Wright,” she whispers. “That thing’s gonna come for me and it’s gonna kill him and...”

She sobs, burying her face in her hands. It’s a deep, contagious sorrow ripping through her. It leaves a hole in her throat and in the back of his skull.

“I wish I could do it!” she yells. “Why can’t I do it? It’s so easy for you two-”

“It ain’t easy for me,” he says firmly, eyeing her.

He leans closer, smoothing his hand over her cheek.

“You look at me, darlin’,” he tells her. “It’s a good thing you ain’t wantin’ murder, a damn good thing. Hear me? Saw a lot of men overseas, just like you. And it was awful what we made them do, got that? No one should ever be forced to kill someone-”

“But they did,” she insists.

“No,” Wright says, shaking his head. “They died.”

More tears spill from her. *Shit.*

“He shot himself, Wright,” she sobs. “I thought he killed himself because of me.”

“In the head?” Wright asks.

She whimpers as she nods.

“Bastard,” Wright says. “He’s done it before. Boy’s sense of humor is FUBAR.”

She frowns.

“Fucked up beyond all recognition,” he tells her.

She giggles, wiping her face. “You should have beat him to a pulp when he did.”

“Should have,” Wright laughs. “Left him outside.”

She smiles. He brushes the tears from her cheeks. Lets his fingers trace down to the soft line of her jaw. He wants to kiss her.

That’s not the purpose of this. That’s not his mission.

“Sadie,” Wright says firmly, clearing his throat. “Gonna tell you somethin’. But I ain’t gonna tell you somethin’ till you’ve had a drink.”

He walks back to the kitchen and pulls a bottle of Basil Hayden out of the freezer.

“Don’t drink that, Wright,” she warns when she sees him from the other room. “Don’t you dare do that to me now.”

“It ain’t for me,” he says, retrieving Sadie’s bag of sugar and twisting off the cap. He scoops ten spoons of the white sugar into the bottle. Enough to make it detestable to him, but he knows she likes things sweet.

“I don’t drink liquor,” she says.

“Yeah,” he grunts, lifting the bottle to his lips. He drinks only enough to make room before screwing the top back on and shaking it. “You do tonight.”

Most of the crystals dissolve in the amber liquid, though some of them swirl like sand at the bottom of the ocean. *And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand...*



Wright's surprised he can even think the verse without bursting into flames. He walks to her with the bottle, and it's almost hypnotic to him, those waves. The rhythmic sloshing from one end to the other. He's watching it instead of what's in front of him and he stops too close to her.

More so, she stops him. With a hand on his thigh and her head tilted up. It's like she's kneeling at his feet. Like she's her own reflection the awful goddamned night before this one. She looks smaller than the devil did, and that sets an ache in his soul he's not sure will ever pass.

If he has a soul at all by the time this ends.

Her wide, blinking eyes watch him like she's waiting for something.

"Finish your water," he tells her. He picks the glass up from the side table and sets it against her lips.

She holds his gaze and drinks it.

Her lips glisten with moisture.

Is he doing it now?

Is he hypnotizing her now, without trying?

No, because it's his brother who likes fucking her like this. In Wright's fantasies, he's got his face buried between her legs. Licking at her cunt as she calls him that word, *daddy*, or as she moans his name.

She looks away, wiping her mouth.

He pours the glass half full with sugared whiskey.

"Suppose I should ask what put you on the floor," he says.

"The thought that I would have hurt him less if I'd disappeared better," she whispers.

He frowns. His vision blurs for a second.

She takes a large sip before coughing. "This is disgusting."

"Finish it," he tells her.

Glaring at him, she obeys. He smiles. A thought occurs to him, that he's not sure why Ridge calls her his little fawn. Other than the freckles like their spots, she's got sharp teeth. Not a predator by any means, but something with its own defenses.

"Tell me," she says.

He looks at the glass. Pours another splash into it.

"No," she protests. "You said *a* drink. One."

He wants to touch her face. Wants to fold his entire body down towards her and kiss her sweet, back-talking lips. Instead he sits down, and the couch is big but not that big, where if he puts his feet on the ground his knees bend sharply and the backs of his legs are lifted. It doesn't fit him. He's the same size as Ridge, but she won't fit him either.

"When I was at your pa's house, I saw a vision of you and Ridge," he says. "Two o' you had three boys. Cute fuckin' kids, I mean that."

"You... You told me that."

"I mentioned it," he says. "That ain't the same thing. One of 'em called me Uncle Wright. And the two of you, my god, you were so happy. Talkin' about growing your family, whispering to each other. Laughing. Like all of this was some kind of bad dream y'all woke up from."

Sadie finishes what he's added to the glass. She looks like she's caving into herself.

"That's what's true, Sadie," he tells her. "You're gonna get married, and take on the farm. You know what the hell you're doing; God knows I don't."

"I didn't kill someone," she says.

"No," he says. "No, you didn't. But I know it."

"Are you drunk?"

Wright laughs. "Nah, just..."

He trails off.

“Just fuckin’ honest,” he says finally. “And, well, with all Ridge did that had you on the floor, he’s prolly more scared than he lets on. As that is how us men prefer to operate.”

“Are you scared?” she asks him.

He wants to tell her yes, but not for the way she thinks. Not for losing her. He knows his mission and he doesn’t fail those. For all that comes after, though, he is quite afraid.

“You did something at the house,” she says. “My family’s house.”

Wright firms his lips. He ignores the words he can’t respond to.

“So you’re thinkin’ on leaving again,” he says.

“I think I have to,” she says.

She leans against him, nestles her head on his shoulder. This feels more like an act of exhaustion than affection and within seconds she pulls back, her pulse pounding against her neck.

“Oh my, Wright!” she exclaims. “I know I can’t touch you.”

“It’s fine,” he says.

That’s when he knows the witch’s powers work. She doesn’t protest as she would. Instead, her expression softens. She smiles lightly, encouragingly.

And then her hand is on his cheek.

“I’m glad,” she says.

*No, no, no. This.* This he feels in the base of his spine. He longs for her. He reaches his arm around her and draws her to his side. He keeps civil. No, this is anything but civil. The back of her hand, the one that holds the glass, rests on his thigh. If Ridge came back now, the night would never end.

“I’ve only got two days left,” she says. “I need to put some space in between myself and Ridge or he’ll see the devil again. It’ll kill him, Wright. It’ll... Cut him down, isn’t that what the two of you say?”

Wright closes his eyes, leaning his face towards the top of her head. Breathing her in. She finishes her drink and she has to move away from him a little bit for that but with the distance she can look in his eyes.

“What in the devil is on your mind, Wright?” she asks, turning to face him.

Sat on the couch like this, her knees are on his thigh and her back is nearly to the room.

“We never spoke about the vision you had of me-”

“No, and we fuckin’ shouldn’t,” Wright quips.

She stares at him. “Do you-”

“No-”

“Do you want that from me?” she asks. “Did you really...”

She blushes bright red.

“No, Sadie,” he objects. “That was the devil.”

“Did you really masturbate to me?” she whispers.

He’s done it many times, but he can’t tell her that. She’s his brother’s mate after all, *Jesus*, he shouldn’t even be thinking about her. He shouldn’t even be here. His heart is pounding in his chest and even though she can’t hear or see it, he feels the need to hide it away from her. To keep this wretched secret.

“You can’t believe what the devil says,” Wright tells her. “Father of lies, that’s what God calls him. O’course not.”

It could be a trick of the light, but she looks nearly crestfallen. Wright frowns.

“Is it only for propriety’s sake that you’re askin’?” he asks.

“If you could feel that way after losing your mate, I’d have some hope for him,” she says softly. She glances towards the bottle and he passes it to her, but she doesn’t drink from it. She just holds it like she’s reading her own prayer amongst the amber waves. “Maybe, even if it takes some time, he’ll be himself again.”

Wright touches the back of her hand. Turns it, with the bottle, until it’s facing up like an offering. He holds her wrist instead. Strokes his thumb over her pulse. Makes it slow. Makes her calm. Her skin’s so damned soft like this that he has to swallow to keep his mouth from watering.

“That kinda thing, you can’t ever get over,” he says. “Hell, I’m not sure I’d get over losing you and you’re not... You’re not mine.”

“No, I’m not,” she says gently. “It doesn’t feel the same when you touch me. When he touches me, it’s electric.”

Wright traces up her inner wrist to the crook of her elbow and back down. Her skin is lighter here than the rest of her. He doesn’t meet her gaze.

“What about when I touch you?” he asks.

She swallows. “Wright,” she breathes.

Finally, he looks up at her. She’s leaning towards him, her cleavage spilling forward. For all his preference towards slender women, he feels as though he’s been a fool. Because she is something different, a lush world protected by soft skin. She’s got goosebumps all over her body. He meets her gaze again.

“You don’t touch me,” she says in a near whisper. “Now, it feels like the death of something.”

“Nothing will feel like he does,” Wright says. “And even if I kissed you...”

He pauses when he sees the blush spring onto her cheeks like fireworks. If he kisses her, he’ll lose any control he has

left. His cock is rock-hard from just touching her wrist. He doubts she notices, but he does. He wants her.

“Even,” Wright breathes. “If I wanted to kiss you, it wouldn’t feel like her.”

“Why does it feel like it has to happen, still?” she asks, searching his eyes.

*Because it does.*

*For you to live, it does.*

*For me to die instead, it does.*

“I love him,” she whispers. “I don’t love you in the same way.”

His hand is on her wrist. He can feel her pulse.

She’s lying.

This is what fear feels like.

This is what fate feels like.

This is what lust feels like, too.

“Wish you didn’t love me at all,” he says.

But he pulls her close to him. Pulls her by the wrist until their faces graze one another and she braces her hand on his cheek. Not moving away. Ducking her forehead to his.

“I love him so much,” she says.

He kisses her.

Presses his lips against hers and he might have been lying too because a fucking shock runs through him. His breath hitches and she smooths her thumb across his cheek. She’s hypnotized but he doesn’t care. He opens her mouth with his own, pulls her on top of him. Her weight feels so good on his hips. They were aching without her. He pushes his hands through her unwieldy hair and tangles his tongue with hers.

There’s tears on her cheeks and he can’t do this, but she’s kissing him back like he’s seen her kiss Ridge. Like he’s

envied her kissing Ridge. He grabs her by the hips and grinds her over him. He can't fuck her. He can't but he wants to, so goddamned bad it feels like waiting for oxygen. Feels like his cock is a live wire that weighs fifty fucking pounds.

She tastes good. Sweet. Like powdered sugar mixed with the whiskey. He *inhales* her, but he's inhaling her ghost.

He wants her already, is achingly hard for her, and when he guides her hips over his she whimpers into his mouth. She slips her hands in between the buttons of his shirt and he rips it open for her, needing her touch on his skin. Her fingers spread wide. Tracing his shoulders, the muscles of his abdomen. All as her sweet, soft tongue circles his.

He feels her breasts through the fabric, teasing her nipples lightly with his thumbs. Pressing against them to hear her whimper. God, she feels lush. Beautiful. Perfect.

Pushing up the hem of her dress, he wraps his hands around the sides of her thighs. Kneads into them, but he's too desperate, and he catches her hair again. Kisses down her neck even though he has to crane himself for it. She's grinding hard over his jeans. He'll carry the scent of her.

His kingdom for the scent of her. It'll fill the streets with the black bile of damnation but my god, he can think about these few minutes when he burns.

She moans against his lips.

*Fuck.* He didn't know he'd want her this much. Didn't know he could want anyone this much after Jess. Her breasts are pillowy, plusher than anything he's ever felt, and he wants to bite into them. Wants to suck at her nipples until they stand for him, reddened from his mouth and his hands and his greed. He runs his tongue along the crease of her cleavage and kisses the center of her throat. Tasting her.

"What..." she pauses, planting both hands on his shoulders. When he looks at her she's blinking like she's just stepped into the light from the darkness. Sobering up. Recognizing him. "No..."

She stands, stumbling away from him like he's hot iron she's just burned her entire core on.

"I don't know what's gotten into me," she says, wavering. He shouldn't have given her so much to drink. Even her sweat tastes like whiskey.

But he has to do this.

His palms are cold now, open and reaching.

She wipes her mouth and looks at her own hands.

"Oh, my..." she says. "Oh, no."

She clasps her hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp. Tears spill over her fingers and she buckles to her knees on the floor. Her back heaves with choking sobs. She's shaking.

"Oh, no," she cries. "I hurt him so badly. Oh no. No, no, no."

She's curling into herself and Wright feels like a fucking monster but it's not over yet. It's not enough yet. If the hypnotism, the mind control, whatever the witch's powers are don't take properly...

He can't have that. He can't let her die. He can't lose the vision he has of her and Ridge together.

"Oh, God," Sadie cries. "I'm so sorry."

"Quiet, Sadie," Wright says. "Please. Just... Quiet."

This is it. This must be it.

Sadie firms her quivering lips together. Looks at him through her tears.

He loves her.

She's not his mate but fuck, he loves her. Loves too much about the sweet, freckled girl who kneels before him. If things had been different, he could have been happy with her. If she never loved Ridge... They'd age. They wouldn't have children. But those two things aren't even heartbreaking



because he would have eaten breakfast with her at the table and she would have kissed him and meant it.

He bartered with the devil for his own life because he thought it worth giving away but now he realizes, far, far too late, that he could have found happiness somewhere. If not in the depths of Sadie's hazel eyes, then in someone else's, or even in the fucking mountains. Self sacrifice seemed sweeter when he'd still thought of Ridge as helpless without her, but he could have made himself better too.

Seven years since the war ended. It hadn't been enough time to heal. He could have just waited, but now she's kneeling before him and his spit is in her mouth and he's got a decision to make.

"Forget this happened," Wright says.

"I can't," Sadie whimpers.

"You can," Wright says, stepping towards her. He kneels across from her on the ground and takes her face in his hands. Thinks of what he's done for this. He hypnotized her to kiss him. "Come on, Sadie. Forget."

"I hurt him. I can't believe I..."

"Forget," Wright says. "Go to sleep."

"I don't know what happened," she sniffles. "I'm not like that. I love him too much..."

"I hypnotized you," Wright says.

She stares at him, blinking. "No you didn't."

He's still got her face in his hands. He knows lying by the pulse and it's not there in her, and the thought that she might have wanted him even for a second is enough to drive him insane.

"You didn't," she whispers again. "Why did you kiss me?"

He should say something now. Convince her again. Kiss her again. Control her like he feared being controlled at war,

but he can't, and maybe the difference between him and his brother is he can't do what needs to be done when it hurts.

"To damn myself," he tells her. But then, that's not all it is, is it?

He has wanted her for a long time.

She might not have her hands on his pulse but she sees the lie in him.

"How does it feel?" she asks, bringing her hand to his cheek.

And he shouldn't do it.

"Tell him, some day, how it feels to love someone who wasn't built for you," she whispers. She's got tears spilling from her eyes again. "Because I need him to be okay, Wright. I need him to live after me."

Wright nods. "I'll tell him," he lies. "Tell him it feels like summer."

It feels like a lavender field hot with gunpowder.

"I'll tell him it smells like sunshine," he breathes, kissing the tears from her cheeks.

It smells like warm yarn drenched in gasoline.

"That it tastes like salted caramel."

She kisses him now.

Makes her lips soft and even though they taste like sorrow he pulls her closer. He probably tastes like it too. But soon it's her blood in his mouth and he shouldn't want it but he needs it. Her breath heats it. His desire sets it on fire. It's boiling between them.

She shouldn't be here.

She is *not* his.

But if he's not hypnotizing her, that means she wants him too.

This time, he's the one who pulls back.

"You don't have to do this," he says.

"Stop lying to me," she whispers.

He looks at her like this, kneeling with him. And though he's over a head taller than her, though she has to crane her neck to kiss him, he thinks she could tower over him with the power she's wielding right now. It just comes from her throat. Her fingers, not her palms. He thinks she knows that this is going to kill him. He thinks he's the only person she can end.

He'll let her.

It's better than anything he could imagine. Better than any way he's tried to destroy himself.

He peels the open shirt from his body and pulls her onto his lap. She's fumbling with trembling hands for the buttons of her own dress but he stops her. Kisses her knuckles. Her hand is small in his and he kisses the palm of it too, before pressing it over his chest. Over his heart. As damned as his soul is, his heart still pounds for her.

They don't speak.

She stands slowly, her legs shaking, and he slips his hand around her calf. Pulls her freckled knee to his lips and kisses her there. Tastes her with his tongue. Trails his mouth up her inner thigh and pulls her to him by her hips, breathing in her scent. Kissing her through cotton as he meets her eyes.

Here, beneath her, everything is fatal. She watches him like the last night sky she'll ever see. She threads her fingers through his hair and grips tight and he doesn't know if she's trying to tear him apart or if it's the only way she knows how to touch someone.

He keeps things gentle. Smooths his hands up her legs to the waistband of her panties, pulling them down. She steps out of them and he guides her thigh over his shoulder. In his dreams, he has her like this. Her sex glistening right before his

eyes. He grabs her hips. Drags his tongue to part her. Sinks his fingers into the meat of her ass and buries his face in her.

His lips press against her folds, the slick, frilled parts of her. The red parts of her. He kisses her there, sucks and laps at her clit just to taste her. If fate was kinder, he could do this every day. To hear her whimper with pleasure. He would taste her every fucking day, but if this is his last he'll spend it on his knees for her.

This is what fatality tastes like. Her honey is cyanide powder. He lets it drip down his chin as she peaks over him, her thigh quivering against his neck.

Panting with tears in her throat.

He eases her down to straddle him. She unbuckles his pants and pulls him from them, and his erection is indecent and swollen between the two of them. When she holds him, her hand is shaking. Looks small around his thick, veined member.

"I've never been with anyone else," she whispers. She strokes him gently, tracing over his leaking head. Her fingertip makes small, careful circles over the sensitive skin there. "I've never even touched anyone else."

He frames her face with his hands. She looks nearly scared. "Take it easy, darlin'," he says. "Go slow."

She nods, lifting her hips up and guiding him to her entrance. He groans at just the feeling of her pressed to his head, and then she works just the tip of him inside. It's like a lightning strike of pleasure shooting up through his spine. He stifles a curse, gripping the back of her dress. Even with all the ways Ridge has fucked her, she's an impossibly snug fit.

He grabs her hair just to keep her gaze on his. The forest of hazel in her eyes floods.

"*Wright*," she stammers. "Oh, *my*."

She's fucking *saccharine*.

When she lowers herself all the way, his vision fizzles. *God, fuck, yes.* She moans, just rocking over him lightly. He feels every atom inside of her grip him tight.

“*Oh,*” she gasps, her breath jagged and hitching. A rush of wetness soaks his lap.

She eases up and slides back down, her legs quivering. He cups her ass with one hand, takes her hair in the other, and begins to thrust gently from underneath her. She feels like fucking heaven. She claws into his hair. He feels her contract around him. So tight she’s nearly unbearable. He groans, picking up his rhythm. Her hips meet his. Uncoordinated at first but better, so much better.

“*Fuck,*” he curses, kissing her neck. “*Fuck, Sadie.*”

If she’s poison, she’s a delicious goddamned death.

“*Oh, daddy,*” she moans.

He growls, wrenching her by the hair and drawing her face back to look at him. She’s trembling, all of her, around his cock. She feels fucking magnificent.

“*Say that again,*” he groans, thrusting hard and slow inside of her.

Her lip quivers before she bites it. He can feel her build.

“*Do you like it?*” she whimpers.

“*You have no idea what it does to me.*”

“*Oh, daddy,*” she whispers.

“*Yes, darlin’,*” he growls. Impaling her, each time to the hilt, and drawing slowly out. He’s so close already, from her voice and the feeling of her around him. Doesn’t matter that she’s clothed or that his jeans are still halfway down his thighs. His mind is gone and his soul is bare for her.

They fuck slow at first. He wants to last with her. Wants to last in this moment forever, her lips brushing his and her breath in his mouth. They’re grabbing each other so tight that if her grip could bruise him it would, and it would dig those

bruises deeper as she shudders. She feels like bliss, like rapture distilled, and if she doesn't know this is the end for him then she should know she made it beautiful.

She tilts her head back and cries out, a heady tremor running through her that squeezes him even deeper. They've gone so slow he feels it wrap around his hips and spiral upwards. He's going to lose control.

But she can handle it.

He runs his tongue up her neck, picking up his rhythm and nicking his teeth under her jaw. Her blood drips into his mouth. Honeysuckle nectar. Salt and sweetness. Then, he finds her lips.

He kisses her fiercely, pushing her back onto the floor. He's going to fuck her into the carpet. She cries out and he pins her wrists with one hand, stretching her out. Watching her body move as he scoops his other arm under her lower back and pounds into her. She's arching her head into the ground. Her hair will be a mess of knots.

Her cunt squeezes him, pulls him, milks him with her pleasure. He's so close. God, so fucking close it's nearly painful but when he comes, he wants to spill so deep in her he can taste it in her bloodstream.

"Christ, *Sadie*," he growls. "Gonna come inside you, darlin'. Desperate fuckin' need."

"Please, daddy," she moans.

He groans, releasing her hands. Driving her into the floor. Ruttng into her hard enough to bruise her inside. A spasm runs all the way from her sex to the muscles of her brow.

"You hurt so good, Wright," she cries, gripping tight to his hair. She whimpers a high-pitched sound. Presses her forehead to his. He feels her pleasure like it's his own.

All resistance collapses.

He nearly shouts, emptying into her.

He comes so hard he thinks it might kill him.

Ecstasy pours like a broken dam from the base of his neck all through his spine and out his cock. It's like nothing he's ever felt, some sacredness he can't define. Something like salvation. His hands shake with reverence, one braced on the floor and the other on her neck.

"Oh, God," he gasps, collapsing into her. "Oh, God."

And for the first time since he made his deal with the devil, he feels God looking down at him. At her as she trembles with their connection. As she blinks in a daze.

He moves to pull out of her, to lie down next to her, but she holds him tight. Grips him with her sweet, shaking legs and whimpers.

He can't let her go.

He has never been able to, not since the moment he met her when he could have sent her away. Not since he knew of the Devil's deal with her. And now, sunk inside her, she won't let him leave either.

Maybe she knows it's a goodbye. But he won't protest. He scoops her up and she drapes her arms around him, looking into his eyes. She lays her small, sweet palm against his cheek. Kisses him lightly with cooling lips.

"I'm worried," she whispers.

Wright blinks, and then shuts his eyes. He's fucking disoriented from how good she felt, how good she still feels. He catches his breath.

*Jesus.* He doesn't think he's ever even come like that before. Nearly blacked out.

"About?" he whispers, smoothing his shaking hands up her back.

"Everything," she says.

When he looks at her again, she's got her eyes closed too. Closed as she wraps her legs tighter around him. And he

knows this hurts her a different way, knows she's loyal but fucked up, and he realizes what he should have meant when he said Ridge broke her.

The kind of love his brother has is jagged and razor sharp. That's how it gets to the heart, he knows. Starts out brutal and gutting and it never goes away. Sadie doesn't know where to put the hurt if he takes it from her so she brought it to that living room and gave Wright just what he asked for.

Worship and damnation. Soft, warm agony.

That is what loving her feels like.

He stills. Even knowing it'll be torture to leave her warmth, he stills. Catches his breath. Kisses her on the cheek, and the neck, and her hair.

"That's enough, darlin'," he breathes against her ear.

"What's wrong?" she whispers, blinking at him. Her eyes are brimming.

He lifts her by the hips off of him and she breathes a full exhale. Their mess is like a flood. He pulls his pants back on. She keeps her gaze down like she's ashamed of something but she shouldn't be, so he wraps his arms around her and presses a kiss to her temple. Brings her down on the carpet with him, pulling her over his chest. He wishes he could turn out the lights but won't leave her, and she already tastes of exhaustion.

"You feel like heaven," he tells her. "Just can't take any more from you."



# Chapter 14

## *Gonna go to hell for you*

**R**idge is so far from the shore he can hardly see the lights, but he's not tired.

He's ablaze with memory. Drawn towards it like a caddisfly to a flame or a bat to the moon, he pushes onward. The more his muscles burn, the clearer it gets. What happened a decade ago blooms amongst the glowing waves and he remembers it all.

At fifteen, he woke in the woods, kudzu flowing overhead. At twenty-five, he watches seaweed dance amongst the waves and he thinks of Sadie's laughter but he also thinks of how far away he is. From the shore, from the cottage, from her. From the green vines that choke every tree south of the Mason Dixon, that looked like they were reaching for him that day.

When he woke up, he was famished. Starving. He didn't know that it meant he hadn't eaten as a wolf, just knew that he had to get home. He wished he was near a pay phone and could call Jess and ask her for pancakes.

He was a kid. He'd never even eaten raw meat. He just craved sweetness.

But he was naked, so even if there was a pay phone in the town of Orion he wouldn't have had a single coin to spend. He'd have nothing but embarrassment and disappointed words sent overseas to Wright. He didn't know why he was naked, or why there were rust colored stains all over his body. He wasn't even sure where he was, just that the endless hunger ate at

him. Scents were stronger. Noises were sharp. Everything felt brighter and more colorful as if someone had brought him outside for the first time in years of waiting in a cement cell.

He remembers how the hunger felt. Nothing had ever threatened him like that. He was terrified of it. Fearful of his own stomach devouring him from the inside, where Jess would find just blood on the ground and not even know it had once belonged to him.

It took hours to find his way home with all that fear and pain in his mind. He'd pass out on the ground and wake up fetal and clutching his stomach. He was a skinny kid but he felt deeper hollows below his ribs. Something was swallowing him up, something inside him with its own mind and its own beating heart that wouldn't tell him where he'd been. He knew that he'd turned but knew something was wrong. If he'd done it right, it wouldn't feel like this. And that scared him too. Knowing he wouldn't have Wright at home to guide him, knowing he'd never risk mentioning wolves in his mail, he thought he'd feel like this until the war was over.

Back then, it seemed like it never would be.

But he could still go home. There, Jess would run a warm bath for him and cook him some food, and he could think clearer when he had a full stomach.

By the time he arrived at the farmhouse, he didn't even question why the lights were on in the daytime. He smelled something, though.

Something delicious.

She must have been cooking because it was better than anything he'd ever smelled before. Somehow savory and sweet, richer than chocolate and more satiating than chicken and buttered pasta. He didn't know what food it was but he imagined it heaped high on a plate. He'd devour the entire thing. He wouldn't leave any for Jess or Harry, who was learning to eat, and Jess would be pissed at him for being so greedy.

“You rascal,” she’d scold. “Just like your brother, you know. You’re gonna grow tall as this roof, Ridge. I swear. Better learn to hunt, ‘cause I can’t afford to feed you.”

And then she’d ruffle his hair a bit too rough and he’d laugh and know he was forgiven, but he’d spend extra time with Harry to ease some of her burden. They’d eat dinner at her parents house and all would be well by morning.

He wasn’t used to hearing well yet, so he didn’t notice the silence. Walked through the side door and brushed his feet on the carpet.

“Ma,” he called out to her. He didn’t always call her that but he knew already he’d need to sweet talk her. “Smells delicious. Sure hope you weren’t slavin’ all day over that ‘cause I could eat a horse.”

He grabbed one of his flannels and wrapped it around his waist.

“Don’t ask me where my clothes went ‘cause I don’t have a damn clue-” he started, before he saw it.

The rust-colored spot on the wall of the entrance.

It looked like a handprint, but it had some drag.

Reaching fingers.

“Ma,” he called again, leaning into it.

The mark must’ve been chocolate, he figured. It smelled so sweet.

She was baking; that had to be it. Sweet and rich. Soul-nourishing. He licked his thumb and smudged some of it off, bringing it between his lips and groaning. He was so hungry he nearly pressed his face to the wall and licked at it. So hungry he couldn’t think of anything else.

There was a thick spray of that syrup over the floor and before he could stop himself, he scooped it up from the hardwood and licked it from his palm. His stomach growled, encouraging. He was like a dog. He lost all language.

He crawled on his hands and knees, scooping the syrup from the floor. It was the best thing he'd ever tasted. He didn't even look in front of him; why would he? He grew up in that farmhouse. He could navigate it blind.

But then, his hands found hair plastered onto the tile.

Even now, the memory sends him into the present. Sends him amongst the calmer water. There's a cargo ship cutting between him and the impending dawn and he watches the shadow of it instead. It seems impossible to go back to his mind. The lights on the ship look like Christmas lights. He wonders what each of them means.

No. No. He has to go back.

He has to see this.

Has to feel the way her hair was sticky between his fingers like something he'd cleaned from a drain, like the feathers of a slaughtered chicken, like...

Like he knows a woman's head to feel when her own blood hits it.

He had been so hungry that it nearly made him blind, but that jolted him. Hair on the ground. When he came to, he saw Jess's face and it was wrong. Open blue eyes not looking at anything. It was a doll of her, glassy-eyed and pale-lipped. Red everywhere on the tile floor.

Her throat was a smiling mouth.

That was where the syrup came from.

He stays in the memory. He looked away so quickly there was only a blurry image of it but he thinks it was a clean cut. Wasn't close to what it looked like when he ate someone's throat, but how would he have known that then?

*We saved them in Orion.*

On the tile floor, fifteen and freshly changed, he saw the closest thing he had to a ma with her throat slit and he knew he'd drank the milk of death from her body. He vomited.

Puked up all the blood. It was a terrible thing to do because he was still so hungry. So *ungodly* hungry it would kill him.

“Harry!” he called out, lightheaded. The baby wouldn’t answer him but he could recognize his name. He’d cry after seeing what happened. Why wasn’t he crying?

Ridge looked around.

No.

The cargo ship makes its own wake but it looks like it’s hardly moving.

No.

Not there, in his high chair, cereal floating in a sea of crimson.

Had he done this?

Is this what he forgot?

Ridge fell back against the wall and he couldn’t breathe, and his hunger was screaming. It overcame him. He crawled over to Jess and lied down next to her, pulling her into his arms. He was only fifteen, only skin and bones, but he was taller than her already and it felt like outgrowing an entire life on that floor. She was cold and stiff, no heartbeat left in her, but he apologized anyway.

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed. “I’m so sorry.”

Those were the last words he said for three years, and he hasn’t said them since.

The next thing in his mouth was the open wound on her neck.

Within days, there was nothing left of his family.

And nothing left of him, either.

So what did *sorry* really mean? Sorry for what he was going to do and not what he’d done, but memory painted them both with the same brush. How can he say those words to Sadie when it doesn’t change what he’s done to her? They’re

airy words. They're excuses for actions that render guilt he doesn't feel. *Sorry* meant nothing then.

He did what the animal within him needed. But he didn't wield that knife. When he was so young and so new to turning, he didn't understand the difference. He knew it would hurt Wright more than anything he'd ever done and he couldn't get himself to write a letter to tell him what had happened. Would he apologize to him, for gnawing the meat off Jess's bones and cracking the marrow to eat that too? His brother would never forgive him for keeping his family from heaven.

He was scared. He was a fucking coward. He let fear change his reflection. A kid doesn't know enough of the world to think there's anything but good and evil. He figured he was a monster so that was what he allowed himself to be. Everyone else had written the part for him. He could only live with that role to play.

Just like Frankenstein's monster. All patched up and wretched and foul. And Wright would hunt him down because he, more than any father they had who donated sperm to a woman Ridge can't even remember the face of, created him. The man Ridge is came from the seeds Wright scattered in the Carolina dirt. The wolf of him came from the wild.

He loves his brother, and love held hands with fear then, too.

Now, he swims in the pitch dark sea and he knows himself differently. Maybe he is a villain. He doesn't even know how many people he's killed. Doesn't know it any more than a farmer knows how many chickens he's eaten in his lifetime. Doesn't care.

It doesn't matter if he's evil or if he's brought pain to a thousand families.

All that matters is in that cottage.

That's where his family lies. That's where he left the woman he loves crying on the floor. He'll be damned if he lets her slip through his fingers. He fucked up. He made the wrong

choice. He doesn't need to find her someone to kill. He just needs to destroy that creature.

Flesh and blood. Creation. It's all the same. Nothing on this earth is more powerful than wanting. The animal within him taught him that. There is no devil. No highest power. Just animals wanting and needing and not knowing what to call something.

He won't apologize for making a god of a creature he doesn't understand. But he'll stop now, because that is worth something.

When people write about his kills, they call them animal attacks. Cougars, bears, alligators. When whoever wrote that book that his brother and Sadie hold in such reverence made Christ for their story, they did it to find something to explain what they couldn't. Science like he knows hadn't come around yet. No atom bombs, just judgment day. No mates, just a singular, eternal creation. The breaking of a rib. It feels that way sometimes. Loving a mortal feels like fracturing bone.

All around him now are jellyfish, their domes catching the rising sun. They can't hurt him in his wolf form, but they do make him think. These odd animals floating like clear gelatin bear no resemblance to anything he's seen on land. They come from the ocean, where most corners are not traveled. Where the pitch black dark beneath his floating body might be full of animals who could cut him if they showed their faces.

He just hasn't met them yet.

They just didn't know how humans could evolve.

None of this makes the creature the devil. It just makes him desperate for answers in a world as dark as the sea. Not knowing leaves room that an Almighty does not offer. Humans don't like open spaces.

As the sun breaks over the endless ocean, Ridge becomes sure that Sadie has never died. That he's been right all along, and there is no God, no devil, no permanent rulers to this place. Only those who attempt to challenge the throne.



This thing tricked Sadie and it tricked his brother, but it cannot fool him. He's too animal for such deception. He'll smell it.

He turns back.

With his mind set, he rides the tide that long distance back to shore.

Sadie's fallen fast asleep on Wright's chest as they lie on the carpeted floor together. Things will be nuclear soon. This moment and how long it lasts is the end of his peace. In some ways, this was all he wanted. Her warmth on top of his. His arms locked around her sweet frame. Her knowing he loves her before this all explodes.

The sex, the way it happened, her voice, the feeling of her all around him... He can't think of what it means that she felt like she did. Like she does.

She feels like a beginning.

He'd do anything for her. If he were ever to ask himself why he felt confident going to hell for someone, this feeling would be his answer. Whether it's love or matehood doesn't change the outcome. He saw the future and he's not in it. She's not a start; she's an end. But he can't shake how much lying with her feels like watching the sunrise used to, before he left for war, before he even had to make himself grown. Like that single moment of beauty meant everything would be perfect from then on.

So he talks to her now, and she's asleep so he's talking to the ceiling fan, and he's talking to himself. To remind him what he felt right before she kissed him back.

"When Ridge was a boy," Wright says softly, stroking Sadie's hair. "I thought he might go pro with baseball. He'd practice all day with me, till I got plum tired from staying out in the fields. But it made him smile, so I did it anyway."

He laughs lightly to himself, surprised when a tear spills from his eye.

“What is it about that boy?” he chuckles. “He’s like a dog with a bone about what he deems worthy and ain’t worth a damn when it comes to anything else. Don’t know how to live. Maybe that’s our fault, not raising him proper.”

Sadie murmurs sleepily, nestling closer into his neck. She’s so sweet, so fucking sweet, from her skin to her gentle breath against him.

“I hope he takes care of you,” he says. He lets stillness fall over them before speaking again. “I’m doing this for both of you, so don’t let the grief hurt too badly, alright? Don’t let it steal him like it did me. He’s stronger, but...”

Another tear soaks into his temple. Damn right about strength.

“Well...” he continues. “I told the Devil I’d trade my soul for yours and Old Scratch won’t have much use for it if my heart’s still beating. So I had to do this, you see, not just because I love you. Not just because I want to be yours so fuckin’ bad that death can’t be worse. But because it’ll make him kill me. And he’s the only weapon that can. But I know... I hope it don’t ruin him.”

He loves his brother. Not well, but permanently, and without forgiveness for anything he’s done or made him do. He doesn’t have to forgive the evils in his boy’s soul to care that he’s happy. So close to the end of his life, all he feels when he thinks of Ridge is sunlight. The boy would never have hurt Jess or Harry if he’d known what he was doing. He loved them, too.

He kept her book on his nightstand. Kept Harry’s bronze shoe on his dresser.

“Hope he knows he’s the only thing I’ve got in this world that’s truly mine.”

Exhaustion creeps into his bones and he thinks dreaming is just as good a way as any to spend his last few hours.

“This is gonna kill me, Sadie,” he whispers. “And I ain’t got much of a life left but it has been sweet since you’ve come to it. You make me see hope where I haven’t. You gave me him back. As animal and rotten as he is, you make him smile. So...”

He ducks his head to her, kissing her crown.

“So I’m gonna do it anyway, darlin’,” he says. “I’m gonna go to hell for you.”

# Chapter 15

## *FUBAR*

**D**awn cracks over Ocracoke, the runny yolk of it casting a golden glow through the windows of the cottage.

Sadie wakes on the couch alone. She feels the sticky mess of sex between her legs and knows she shouldn't reach for Wright but wants to anyway. If loving Ridge is the ocean, loving Wright is the night sky. It's different. It feels out of place until she's in it, not knowing if the sun is meant to be there. When he puts his hands on her, she wonders if what he said about mates was true.

If there is only one for each person, how can he feel so good to her? How can she think about him underneath her like he was and see his beautiful, rugged face so clearly? The steel in his eyes gone dark with lust. The way he came inside her...

She didn't know it could feel this way with more than one person.

She'd die for Ridge, would run away just to ensure that creature never gets to him, but the moment she wakes she gets a sinking feeling that something bad has already happened. Running up the column of her spine is the thought she's architected such destruction.

Moving hurts. She feels sore between her legs. Ridge is longer but Wright is wider and she thinks the veins of his cock cut separate valleys in her. Her head spins to think she made love to both of them in just a few hours.

My, what a deflowering. She should deserve a place in hell, but it doesn't feel that way. She wants to wake between the two of them, sandwiched between the love she feels and the kind they've shown her.

And then she remembers what Wright told her about possession. How when he'd so much as collared her neck, he made her bathe to get his scent off her skin.

*If I taste your blood, he'll kill me.*

Oh, no. Oh, lord.

That's what it was.

It all comes crashing in on her now, the realization of what Wright did. Wolves can only kill wolves. Wright doesn't feel matehood with her. He needed her to load a bullet in the chamber of the only gun that could kill him.

"Wright!" she screams, pushing herself off the couch. "Wright!"

She wishes she could smell him just to see if he's in the house. She rushes upstairs, checks his bedroom first. The bed is made neatly, his clothes folded. There's a note on the comforter.

No, no, no.

She doesn't want to read it. Doesn't want to read his own condemnation, nor any apology for what he's done. She doesn't have time, anyway. She needs to clean the living room carpet, where Ridge will be able to smell their sweat. She needs to bathe her entire body in bleach. She needs to find Wright and make him do the same.

"Wright!" she shrieks.

But that would hide their encounter only for the day. It wouldn't hide the other things that came with it. She's felt his hands on her body now. He's come inside her. She's slept on his chest.

There's an intimacy she can't shake. Even if he doesn't love her back, she thinks she needs him to.

"Wright! Please!"

"Stop screamin', now."

It's Wright's voice in the doorway. She turns and looks at him. Ridge is beautiful, a marble sculpture, but Wright is a home built with aged wood. He looks lighter now, his skin a bit brighter with a glow and his eyes crinkled in the corners. Like some of the dark clouds he carries have dissipated. He's sharply, brutally handsome. Sadie wants to run up and slap him and ask him why he'd make love to her when he knows it could kill him. But the longer he waits there, the more she feels in the pit of her stomach like she knows the answer.

What reason would he have to take his life after all this time?

When he won't tell her about what happened at her pa's farm...

"Did you read the note?" he asks.

She looks at it, there on the comforter. She shakes her head.

"Good," Wright says, striding towards her.

She nearly steps back but he takes her face in his hands, kissing her. Deeply. Her breath hitches. His tongue finds hers. Soft yet desperate. It's nearly impossible to keep herself from falling on the bed until he braces one hand against her lower back. He unleashes her. She grabs his shirt to bring him closer.

Then, he stops.

With a craned neck, he rests his forehead against hers.

"We have to get cleaned up," she says. "Clean the house."

"Can't clean this," Wright says.

She grabs his wrist. "You said he'd kill you."

“He has to,” he whispers.

She frowns. Pushes at him. He’s strong and she knows that but he steps away anyway. This is how he listens to her.

“Do you even love me-” she starts.

“Don’t ask that,” he interrupts.

“Do you even want me like that?” she asks, ignoring his request. “Or did you have sex with me just to get him to kill you? I thought...”

She pushes him again.

“Did you use me?” she asks.

Her voice breaks. Her vision blurs. She covers her mouth.

“This is FUBAR!” she exclaims.

She hears him smile. Feels him touch her arm, pulling her in, but she stops him.

“Get your scent off me!” she yells, pushing harder.

“Listen,” he growls. “Listen to me.”

He pulls her closer, tilts her chin up. Just like Ridge does. She fights him, tries to look away, but he catches her face in both of his hands.

“Only way I could stop dreaming about you is if I stopped fuckin’ dreaming,” he says.

She bites her lip hard to keep her eyes from watering.

“The only thing I needed from you was for you to know that,” he tells her. “Only way I could-”

He doesn’t finish his sentence.

They both hear the front door open.

It sounds like a gunshot when it hits the wall.

“Don’t go down there,” Sadie whispers.



Wright stares at her. Her words are invitation enough; he'd like to stay up with her forever. Even if the house was burning down, he'd like to push her onto that bed and see her naked underneath him. Her real body, not just his fantasy. He'd like to spend an evening kissing and licking every square inch of her salted caramel skin, because when she looks up at him like this with her wide hazel eyes he feels like they're damn close to heaven.

But he can't. There is no world where he lives and she saves her soul.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Though he'd like to kiss her again or to feel her warmth under his hands, he has no interest in postponing the inevitable. That isn't how he's trained. He's at war now, readying himself for his last battle.

As he walks down the hall, she follows.

"Please," she hisses, grabbing his arm and pulling.

He doesn't listen. Pushes onward.

"Ridge! He's doing it on purpose!" she yells, and he freezes. "He wants you to kill him!"

They both hear the sound of knees hitting hardwood.

She looks at Wright and sprints past him, down the stairs to the living room. So he follows too. Rushing.

Ridge is kneeling on the ground. Naked.

Right where they made love last night.

There won't be any explanation.

"Fawn," he snarls, his back to the two of them. "Go outside."

"Don't hurt him," she pleads.

Ridge is on his feet in an instant, covering the space between him and Sadie in the blink of an eye. She presses her back to the wall and he pins his hands on either side,

glowering down at her. He looks angry. Fuming. Like he could kill her.

She reaches up to touch his cheek.

“He’s doing it on purpose,” she whispers.

He punches into the wall. The wood splinters. The plaster cracks. White dust catches in her hair. She doesn’t flinch.

“But I know you,” she tells him.

He’s red-faced. Straining. Soon he’ll turn, but now he’s with her and even Wright feels like he’s intruding on something between them.

A growl unfurls from Ridge’s throat and he bares his teeth, snapping them to her neck. Wright lurches forward but he hears Sadie’s voice, not even shaken.

“I know you’re stronger than what’s inside you,” she says, stroking Ridge’s hair. There are tears in her eyes and when Ridge pulls his head away, her blood is on his lips. Not too much of it, though.

He glares at Wright.

“Baby, you’re the strongest man I know,” Sadie whispers.

A growl erupts from Ridge’s throat. He falls to his knees again, ducking his head. Crawling towards Wright. The skin on Ridge’s back stretches to the point of shining and he screams in loud, twisted agony. His voice is human when he does. Panting, growling, he stares up at Wright.

“Turn!” Ridge yells. “Fucking turn!”

“No,” Wright says. He can’t. He needs this to be quick.

Ridge howls in anguish, rolling onto his back. He’s panting, his eyes shifting from green to amber as he blinks. Blood pools at his lashes. He seizes, his arms curling in towards his chest.

“No!” he yells. His neck snaps back and a wolf’s growl emits from his throat. The skin on his neck stretches too. Soon,

it'll burst. Soon, his beast will rip through him. All as he writhes there in distress, his very nature torturing him.

Red tears drip down to his temples.

He rolls onto his side. Slams his fist on the ground. His whole back heaves with breath.

“Sadie,” he groans, his voice losing its humanity.

She rushes to him, brushing her hands up his back.

“Fight it,” she whimpers. “Fight it, baby.”

Ridge yells a tortured, long howl into the room. He's shaking. Wright can hear him breathe through gritted teeth. He can hear his wet, bloody breath shudder out. Ridge's bones break like snapping branches in a storm. Sadie doesn't leave his side.

“You're doing so good, baby,” she comforts. “I love you so much.”

The two of them, Wright realizes, might fuck this up.

Nothing has ever hurt as much as this.

There's no words for it. Nothing in all the novels Jess gave him. Even *Frankenstein*, though there is something to it that feels like being ripped apart and stitched together with mismatched pieces.

Ridge feels the vertebrae inside his back shift. Feels his femurs grow and then compact themselves. Everything in the world now is blurred by the sanguine color of blood. He's choking on it. Choking on the ichor that fills his lungs.

If he turns, he'll kill his brother.

He can't do that.

Not even for him fucking Sadie, not even if he deserves it, not even if he *wants* it like she says he does. He loves Sadie but he loves Wright too, and they're just about the only things

on this earth he gives a damn about so he will not let the animal win.

The thoughts disappear as white-hot pain explodes in his temples and behind his eyes. He's screaming. His skin stretches and threatens to rip but he can't let it burst. Turning hurts but it's quick; this is slow. Agonizing torture. Like being stretched in the medieval days or drawn and quartered. Like being hung a thousand times and feeling each tendon snap.

He's going to throw up. Maybe he already has. His entire body is nothing but white lightning and gnashing cuts.

"I've got you, baby," Sadie soothes. Her voice and her touch is the only thing that can cut through this. She runs her hand over his spine and doesn't shirk away from the shifting vertebrae. She won't leave him. "I've got you."

He spits blood onto the floor, and it's not just spit. There's a rush of it running up his tongue and out. He shivers. Spasms. His vision blurs with red.

"Fight it, baby," she whispers.

He grits his teeth. Feels one of them crack. Making way for a wolf's jaw. He's losing this fight. He'll kill what's left of his family and without Wright he can't fight this fucking creature so he'll lose his fawn too. That can't happen.

His brother didn't fucking believe he'd resist this, did he?

Fucking bastard. He'll kill him.

But with a gun, so he can fucking come back.

Sadie smooths her hand over his forehead. "Just hold on. Please, just hold on."

Pain cracks like a whip up his spine and he screams again, arching into her. His chest is too open, too exposed. The wolf will come from there. He punches his arms forward. Curls inward. Howling. Sadie wraps her arms around him. He wants to tell her to stop, that he could hurt her, but he can't fucking speak anymore.

Something sends him inward.

He's no longer in the living room. He smells the cornfields and wet grass. He's lying there, with Sadie. She's holding his hands. She's naked, her golden, freckled skin its own meadow amongst the green. He smiles through his broken teeth. They made it.

Pain zaps him, but he fights to stay here. In the place with bright blue skies and the scent of the earth.

"Only sacred things," Sadie whispers, guiding his hands to her belly. He feels the roundness of it. Feels his child kick inside of her. "Are us and the dirt of this."

A bolt of pain strikes him between the eyes and he cries out, spinning onto his back. Hitting his fist on the dirt next to him. It puffs up. The wind carries it over towards the corn stalks.

It outlines the shape of a man.

Ridge screams. The pain is smaller now. There's less blood in his mouth.

He blinks and sees the ceiling fan swirling overhead. He's panting. He feels Sadie's hands on him. Looks down at his body. There's blood and viscera everywhere. Furred patches burst from his skin and his stretched legs bend nearly backwards at the ankles, but the pain is lesser now. He's stronger. Somewhere between a wolf and a human.

He growls low.

Sadie holds his chest but he pushes past her. Falls onto his hands and knees between the living room and the kitchen. There, his back arches wildly like a cat's, curving towards the ceiling.

"Talk," he rasps.

He looks back at Sadie, expecting to see fear.

There's nothing but love in her eyes.

"You got this, baby," she says. "Fight it."

“Fuckin’ will,” he growls, not sure the words come out. “Flour.”

He pushes himself up and sprawls over the kitchen island. Tremors shake his whole body. He hears Sadie rushing in. She finds the bag of flour left over from her shortcakes and brings it to him.

“Wright,” he groans, though the mention of his brother’s name makes the wolf in him harsher. He feels another patch of fur break through the skin of his forearm.

Panting, he presses himself to stand. Grabs the patch of fur and rips at it. The pain bursts hot and searing through his arm, all down his spine. But the fur rips away. He slams it on the counter, watching skin take its place.

This does put some horror in his fawn’s eyes. She pulls her flour away.

He smiles. From what his tongue feels, he’s missing some teeth.

Reaching to his chest, he finds another patch of fur and rips it from himself. Throws it onto the ground. The joy of a victorious battle overpowers the hurricane of rage and pain within him. He blinks at Wright. The blood stings.

“Love her?” Ridge rasps.

Wright says nothing. Stands there with more than a little horror in his eyes. Ridge feels his feet slip on the tile and hears the sound of claws scratching the hard surface. He laughs. Might feel like he’s getting burned alive but he’s sure he’s never looked more terrifying.

“Hurts to talk,” Ridge growls.

“I do,” Wright says. “It’s why I did it.”

“Okay,” Ridge says, wincing as the wolf ripples through his torso.

The drawer next to him holds utensils. With a shaking hand he opens it. Feels the gumminess of dried blood connect

with the wooden handle of a steak knife. Perfect.

“Shut up,” he growls at the wolf. He feels within himself. Right at the side. That’s where the second heart is.

He plunges the blade where he feels the beat.

Immediately, he vomits onto the ground. Black bile.

It’s not just the splitting pain that gets to him; all of him feels bruised like he’s been hit by a truck. His muscles strain past exertion. He growls. But it’s a human growl.

“We love her. So we’re gonna kill it, brother,” he says, lurching forward. It’s hard to balance on his mangled legs. He doesn’t know how to walk with them yet. “*‘Cause it ain’t the fuckin’ devil!*”

Those last words, he yells so loud it shakes the house. He rolls his shoulders back. When he stands, he feels the hairs on his head graze the ceiling. He touches his face.

Aside from the teeth and a hole in his cheek, he’s intact as far as that goes.

“Believe me yet?” Ridge asks, poking his finger through the viscera to touch his molars. One breaks off, a sharper tooth in its place. He spits it to the ground. “Cause I don’t know if I’ll be talkin’ in a bit.”

He flexes his hands. Stabbing the wolf seemed to stop his turning, but he isn’t turning back either. As he fucking shouldn’t. They’ve got a monster to kill.

“Smell for it,” Ridge growls. “Get the flour.”

With that, he turns to the table, picks up the whiskey bottle, and swallows a shot of it for the pain. He feels it dribble from a hole in his neck he didn’t notice before.

“Likes the drink,” he says to Sadie.

The sliding door opens.

Ridge turns, pulling Sadie instinctively towards himself.

There’s nothing there.

Nothing but a whistling sound like standing on the top of a mountain or at the edge of a cliff. The wind spirals outside, the trees moving like a hurricane. The sky is still clear and early-morning blue, no clouds to be seen

“Smell,” Ridge murmurs. The only scent in his nostrils is blood.

“Just left,” Wright says.

Flour tucked neatly at her side, Sadie opens the breadbox and pulls out a gun.

Ridge growls.

Not in a predatory way.

He might be half a monster, and he might be bleeding out, but one half of him is a man deeply, irreparably in love and lust for his mate. She’s so fucking perfect. She looks back at him, and he is a monster made of peeling flesh and bloody fur, and she looks back at him and smiles. Pleased with herself.

They’re going to get this thing.

Past the porch, every part of the air looks like a heatwave. Sadie wanders carefully, shielded by Wright’s strong frame, to look out at what’s beyond that space. It’s a large, dark pit. She imagines this is what the world looks like opened up, past the crust of all of them. There’s no ending.

“Not real,” she hears Ridge grunt.

Still, he guides her away from the edge.

She can hear wind whirling down in that empty pit but there are no birds or sounds of people passing by. She thinks it might be the mouth of hell. Still, it’s hard to tell her mate she doubts what he’s saying when he’s standing taller than any human, patches of fur bursting from his skin and broken legs that somehow carry him gracefully now. He was stumbling on them just minutes earlier, but he adapts as all predators must.

He’s never been more horrifying.



But she's never been more conscious of how in love with him she is. He's strong. He defies the laws of his kind. Even Wright doubted him but he was foolish for it. The world is Ridge's dominion, even the parts that include himself.

And he stands tall and bold, his shoulders angled so that he curls around her even from a distance. Her protector. He still carries the bottle of whiskey. Sadie doesn't know if it's instinct or insanity.

With Ridge, she'd be willing to bet it's a mix of both.

The porch creaks.

Instantly, Wright sprints in the direction of the sound, but he hisses. She watches a patch of red spread across the side of his t-shirt. She reaches into the flour and throws it in the rushing wind. It spreads like smoke, closing around the frame of a man and Wright spins, launching himself onto the creature and taking a bite out of its neck. Dark purple liquid streams everywhere. It must be the creature's blood.

The floured creature rushes from him. Shakes off white powder in a burst. Wright falls to his knees and swallows whatever chunk he was biting. They're doing damage.

Sadie looks at the flour on the wooden panels. There's footsteps. Pointed away from her. She breathes deep, raising the gun.

Then there's pounding, shaking, on the porch and the footsteps rush towards her. Inhumanly fast.

Just as quickly, Ridge blocks the creature's path and a spray of red coats Sadie. Ridge yelps. There's something piercing his torso. Something long and sharp like a blade but opalescent, something enchanted. He wraps his large arms around the thing piercing him and she hears an ungodly screech. Ridge holds in his hands a large flap of something.

It's clear, but it's not invisible. It waves like gelatin. Flesh. Skin.

The empty bottle he was holding rolls towards Sadie on the ground.

But Ridge falls to his knees, holding his wound. He braces his hand on the wood of the porch. Spits blood onto the ground. His turn weakened him.

Sadie sees the glint of a blade in the light right over his head. The creature is going to finish its job.

“No!” she screams.

Wright tackles the invisible mass. Not quite invisible, really, with its flour and its gore. The blood from where Ridge ripped its skin off seeps purplish from a gaping wound and there are spurts from where Wright bit into its neck. Above it, he forms his hands around something that could be its skull. He’s slamming it into the wood. Again. Again. Again.

Past the porch, Sadie sees the black pit in the earth flicker like a broken signal on a television.

It isn’t real.

It’s an illusion, and it feels real, but suddenly she thinks of her body on the ground. The way the devil showed her a corpse. Said it was hers, but what if that was a lie too?

Why wouldn’t it be?

Wright groans and she looks back to see a dark red line spreading across his chest. His blood seeps from it. She raises the gun towards the figure underneath him and fires. It screeches. She fires again. She empties every darn round into that thing but it stays screaming. Helpless, she watches as the blade slices upwards into Wright’s neck.

She freezes.

What was it, about mates and immortality? That they can die if they don’t have one?

She doesn’t listen to reason anymore.

She tackles the beast, screaming, pushing it away from Wright. Pushing him away from it. Wailing on the thing as

best she can, knowing her fists are ineffective. If Wright couldn't beat it to death...

It's not invisible anymore.

Her father lies beneath her.

"Sadie girl," he says, reaching for her face. He strokes her cheek, smiling. "I missed you."

His features, so close to her, so lifelike, so unexpected, make her choke.

The bottle rolls next to his head.

She takes the neck of it in her hand.

"I thought you killed me," she whispers. "You thought you killed me."

She shifts forward, pinning his arms with her knees. He's bleeding badly. This creature is weakened.

"I'm so glad I didn't," he says. His eyes shine with gratitude.

She shakes her head. "I wanted to go to Charleston," she tells him, reeling back the bottle.

He frowns at her. The amber light casts a dark shadow across his face.

"What are you doing, little girl?" he asks.

"Orion was better," she snaps, smashing the bottle against his head.

The creature shrieks, louder than it even had when Ridge ripped its skin off. She listens to the alcohol sizzle into its wound. Dark black smoke curls upwards towards her face.

She takes the jagged handle of the bottle and stabs it in the throat, ripping it out just as quickly. Purple blood sprays into the light, sizzling on the wood. The liquor burns it.

She and the creature are alike, she realizes. Living with their fears as close companions.

Only difference is, her fear loves her back.

As her father gasps on the ground, she stands. Presses her hand to the outside of the house to support herself. Still, the black pit outside gapes open. The wind swirls around it fast and loud. It's like a tornado. It pulls at her hair, at her dress. It wants to inhale her.

Her father rises to his feet.

His face is only his face in glimpses now. It's a flickering light. A moth running into a candle. She watches him reach his fingers to the burning blood at his neck before looking at her.

"Little girl," he murmurs. "Why would you hurt me like that?"

She doesn't answer, but it's because she can. Something feels right about it. Maybe it's the liquor. Maybe it's how this creature told her to trade an evil soul for hers without remembering it fit the bill.

She looks at her men. Her mates. Wright's eyes are closed but his chest rises and falls. Ridge stirs on the ground, blood-streaked and broken. She glares at the creature, thrusting her weapon out in front of her.

"Let one of your lovers kill me," her father rasps. "Don't ruin your sweet soul."

She shakes her head.

Slowly, the creature begins to transform. He stretches taller, his neck wound widening. The sparse hairs turn to a thick brunette. His eyes become lichen green.

She won't let it get that far.

Before it can turn into Ridge, she rushes the creature with all her strength. It's strong but she's running, and she plunges what's left of the bottle into its chest. Pushes it backwards. It shrieks, loud and chilling, into the air. Wraps its arms around her in a tight embrace but she's running, shoving...

And then the world gives out.

She falls.

This thing is taking her off the porch. Not just towards the ground but towards total darkness, the blackened pit that lies beneath them. She screams. Shuts her eyes.

Feels a different hand hook around her waist.

It knocks the wind right out of her and she's wrapped in different arms, spinning fast and hard over rocks and weeds before thudding against something and hearing an enormous crack.

Then, there's silence. Without looking, she knows the gap in the earth has closed up. She no longer feels the prickle of fear that comes when that thing is near her. The creature is gone. As dead as it can be. It's gone and it's never coming back.

She feels her heart pound so heavily she worries it might be outside of her chest.

It is, but not like that.

She's feeling Ridge's pulse.

He's holding her, and they're on the ground, a clear sky overhead. There are broken pieces within her body from how hard he hit her. His body is broken from all he fought. These things, she knows innately. They're connected like that. Forever. Mated.

But there's a third heartbeat with theirs now, and it's sounding from the top of the porch where Wright lies. Sadie doesn't think Ridge notices it yet. When he does, it'll piss him off. But right now, they're too damaged. Fouled up beyond all recognition. She waits for the pain to hit.

As if sensing this, Ridge guides her face towards his. He looks very much like a monster with his bloody lips and cracked teeth, with a hole in his cheek and a flap of skin hanging off. But he's her monster. He's beautiful, even with his now-amber eyes dripping blood.

She'll love every iteration of him.

He guides her mouth open and presses his saliva and his blood inside, the same he heals her wounds with. She drinks from his lips. Somewhat weakly. His hand is on her face and he's warm and she's safe for the first time since she's met him.

"Ridge," she whispers.

"Yes, little fawn?" he asks before licking his palm. He presses it to her back, to where she feels a bruise blossoming.

"You caught me," she says.

He sighs a laugh and kisses her forehead.

"Always," he tells her.

As he presses his broken lips to her wounds, she doesn't know which way is east. But she knows they fell in the right direction.

## Chapter 16

## *Where wolves still roam*

**W**right waits in the hospital next to Sadie. He wrapped his wounds with a few bandages before arriving. He'll heal faster than they can give him stitches, and he hates the feeling of pulling them out. Worse yet, a doctor might notice and ask questions.

Ridge is at the cottage still, doing god knows what to turn fully human. If anyone saw him like he was, they'd shoot him in the street.

And they'd have even more to explain when he came back hours later.

So Wright stays with Sadie, who sleeps holding his hand.

Even the lull after war wasn't this quiet. But he remembers that, remembers his bus ride to Raleigh. How he knew he wasn't going home to anything. There was no peace then, not in his mind. Not like this. In Sadie's closed lids and parted lips, there is a world of peace as heavy as the bottom of the ocean.

They aren't weightless anymore. They have roots now, the three of them, and though there's a whole lot of forgiveness to be asked for, it is the closest to home Wright has felt since he crossed the Atlantic. So he sits in it, and he doesn't for a second wonder if Ridge was right about that creature not being the Devil or if the battle they fought was some spiritual journey that needed finishing. The three of them are all there



is. The only thing he knows, without a doubt, with feet firmly planted, is that what he feels is true.

They are safe. They're a family. A pack, in their own right.

Silence used to mean a whirlwind of thoughts. Blame, guilt, anger. But those are gone now, and in the blankness he feels like he's standing on solid ground. He loves the girl in the hospital bed. He loves his fucked-up brother, who might be a lot less fucked up than he is. They share their name and their height and a propensity to destroy whatever is in their wake but there's love between them and it'll only grow.

Like a tree that's been split by lightning, it won't look pretty. But it'll live.

That split, though, he's been thinking about it.

It sunk in his mind last night when he held Sadie in his arms. It has weight like river stones, a deep bass like a heartbeat, and it's centered somewhere on the lower rungs of his spine.

Decision. Not God, not country, but something made up in his mind by sheer desire and a little wildness. His own decision. It's the first time he can truly claim it.

Sadie stirs, inhaling sharply before turning to face him. She smiles. It meets those gorgeous hazel eyes of hers. He brushes his thumb along her palm.

"I was right about him," she whispers.

He laughs.

Loud, booming, laughter. It takes the rest of the weight off his chest and he leans back in his too-small chair, shaking his head at her.

"All the damn things we've been through and the first thing you say is how you were right," he says, clicking his tongue.

"Eat your words," she teases.

"I intend to," he admits.

“Gotta eat something,” she says.

“I’ll get around to it,” he says, knowing that is on his horizon too. “How’re you feelin’?”

She stretches, reaching her arms out to the sides. Eyeing a drip that’s attached to her arm, she pulls it out roughly.

“Jesus,” Wright curses.

“I don’t want that,” she says. “I feel good.”

He eyes the blood on her inner elbow now.

“That’ll bruise,” Wright says.

“Not if you kiss it,” Sadie replies.

Wright growls low. Already, she’s waking something up inside him. He feels it at the base of his spine, this hunger for her.

She inches towards him.

Resistance is a dying cry. He’s living now.

He wraps his hand around her wrist and kisses her right at the veins there. He can smell and feel the blood rushing. Her heart picks up for him. There’s a strong green artery beneath her soft flesh and he traces it all the way up to the wound left by the drip. He swirls his tongue over it, lavishing in her blood and remembering not long ago what it felt like to kiss between her legs like this. He wants to bite her. To taste more.

Instead, he grips her thigh. Presses himself to a seat at her bed just so he can look at her better. Her hair is messy with blood and leaves. But beyond the dirt, she’s blushing. Smiling at him.

A slice of heaven, this girl is. For him and his brother.

“You love him,” he says.

“I love you too, Wright,” Sadie whispers. “It’s the same and different but I really love you too.”

His chest fills with warmth. He tries to hide the smile that pushes at his cheeks like sunlight through a thin curtain.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Wright clips. “I don’t think he’s one for sharin’.”

“It’s true,” Sadie says. “He’ll have to be okay with it. Our heartbeats are the same now.”

Wright sighs a laugh. “Seems a little incestuous.”

Sadie laughs too.

“It’s fucked up,” he adds.

“Beyond all recognition,” she says sweetly. “But I love and want both of you and I’m not gonna stop.”

“I believe it,” he says.

She tilts her chin up. “Darn straight.”

He touches her cheek now. Looks at her lips. Traces the beautiful freckles that dot the corner of her mouth. He loves her. They share this love, despite the madness of it all, and despite how Ridge might try to kill him if he sees him like this.

“What?” she whispers.

“Tryin’ to decide if it’s worth a beating,” he murmurs.

“Please, daddy,” she whispers, resting her hand on his thigh.

He growls. “You’re a fuckin’ sadist, Sadie Lindal.”

But he leans forward. Presses his lips to hers. Sweeps his tongue in her mouth. She curls her hands around his neck and opens up to him. Rakes her fingers through his hair.

She’s so sweet that he’s helpless to her, easing himself over her on the bed. It creaks. He doesn’t care. She wraps her legs around him and he slides his hand up her thigh, gripping the meat of her rear. Pressing his hips against hers.

Fuck, he’s already hard in a goddamned hospital room, wondering if he can properly block the window and fuck her again. But he’s not his brother. He’s got a sense of propriety. He’ll wait a little while first. Test the waters with Ridge. He

does not want to fight a man who stopped himself from turning and lived to tell the tale.

He draws back to kiss her forehead, then eases himself into the too-small chair. He has to spread his legs wide to find comfort with a raging hard-on. Like a fucking teenager, all over again. Sadie shoots him a mischievous look and bites her thumb gleefully.

“Lookin’ like a goddamned schoolgirl,” he says. “Won’t fool me with that false innocence.”

She giggles. “Well you’re no soldier, Wright. You’re a wolf. Want to see you wild.”

He inhales, feeling the lust grow deep in his spine. “Should ask about haulin’ you outta here. Thinkin’ I’ll show you wild.”

“You’ll have a lot of time for that when we’re back in Orion,” Sadie says.

Wright sucks in his cheek. That’s the decision. *His* decision. If he looks in her eyes too long, he’ll forget he ever cared to make it. “Bout that.”

“What?”

“Erm...” he starts. Feels like standing on a goddamned cliff. “Well. I am going to leave for a little while. Go out west; I’ve never been there. Thinkin’ I’ll work with horses or somethin’ in big sky country. You know, that’s where wolves still roam?”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

He lets his hand rest on her hip. “Y’all should live in the house with each other for a bit. Plus, I don’t want to be wakin’ to a baby who can’t sleep through the night.”

“I thought you could sleep through an air raid.”

“Oh, I wake up for a baby’s cries,” he teases. “Always have.”

They let silence settle over them.

“I think if I’m alone,” he admits, breathing deep. “I might learn to live for myself. Ain’t ever done that. I’m not sure... I’m not sure if I can rightly know myself without it.”

She covers his hand with hers.

“I’ll be happy to see what that makes you,” she whispers. “Though don’t you dare drink out there, Wright Lindal. All the cowboys in the movies are drunks.”

He laughs. “Anythin’ for you, darlin’.”

She smiles. “Stay for the wedding, though.”

“There’s a wedding, now?” Wright asks.

“O’course there is,” Ridge says from the doorway. With a short-sleeved button down covering his scars and his hair washed and combed, he looks fresh and coiffed, nothing like the half-monster he was just hours earlier. Fuckin’ impenetrable, that boy. Or... Man, as he looks now. Something’s changed in him. When he catches Sadie’s eye, his entire face lights up. “Don’t think ‘cause of whatever the hell’s goin’ on between the two of you that she ain’t my mate and my woman.”

“She says she loves me,” Wright teases. Testing the waters fucking early.

“Better fuckin’ say it back then,” Ridge says, slapping Wright upside the head. “Rude not to.”

Ridge slides into bed next to Sadie, pulling her snug to him and kissing her hair. She nestles into him. Closes her eyes like just the contact of her body on his is the only home she needs.

Once, he and Jess were like that. She’d call them puzzle pieces, because they were both so young that they never wondered what would happen if a piece was lost. How incomplete that would make such a pairing. They weren’t puzzle pieces. They were waves and a shoreline. Longing to touch one another. Never so distant that the sand forgot what ran towards and away from it.

Wright still feels her. She still colors him. One day, when he's far older than he is now, he'll find her again.

Until then, this is perfect.

His face half-buried in Sadie's hair, Ridge looks at Wright with a rare solemnity. There's a world in his eyes. Bittersweet, undying love and the first breath of forgiveness. They share it like they share the warm soul who lies between them. There are no scales to measure, just this. Just breathing, just knowing, just love.

"Good to see you alive," Ridge says. "Gonna stay that way?"

Wright nods. Ridge murmurs an approval.

"You know, I ate two preachers in Spring Hope," Ridge says.

"Jesus," Wright says.

"You'll thank me for it," Ridge tells him.

"Can't fuckin' imagine that," Wright replies.

"You will," Sadie says.

Ridge smiles at her. And at once, they're in their own world again.

"Our little fawn is a hunter too," he says warmly, gripping Sadie tight by the waist. She giggles, reaching back to grab his neck. He kisses her like that. Slowly. His tongue sweeping circles around hers. "I'm gonna fuck you in this hospital bed, little fawn."

Wright stands, rolling his eyes. Ridge spans his long fingers over Sadie's breast. He circles her nipple through the fabric. She whimpers into his mouth.

"She's my woman," he says, lifting her gown to slide his hand between her thighs.

Wright looks away but hears Sadie moan.

“My wife,” Ridge says. “By law and ceremony. Bearer of my children. She wants you too, that ain’t even close to losing her. And I get to keep your sorry ass alive... At least fate found a sense of humor.”

There’s a rustling of fabric. Sadie cries out.

“Anyone else so much as thinks about touching her, I will take five days eating their body before I kill them,” he says. “Won’t I, Sadie?”

There’s a knock at the door.

“Busy!” Ridge growls.

“Sir, get off the bed please. Those are single-patient,” the doctor clips, raising an eyebrow in their direction. He doesn’t look at them at first, before seemingly noticing something on his clipboard. “Oh. This is her.”

Wright bristles. A remark like that, a singling out, is threatening to their kind.

“Sadie... Price,” the man says.

“Lindal,” Wright and Ridge correct simultaneously.

“Ain’t been legally changed,” Wright says.

“Will be,” Ridge clips. “She’s my wife.”

“Alright...” the doctor says, shaking his head. He addresses Ridge. “Were you aware that your wife arrived in the clinic several hours ago with multiple broken bones and internal hemorrhaging? Similarly to if she’d been hit by a car?”

Ridge clicks his tongue. “She’s a tough woman.”

“Remarkably,” the doctor says. “Because now, other than some light bruising, she appears to be completely recovered.”

“Good genes,” Ridge remarks.

“Not natural for... Anyone,” the doctor says. “We have x-rays showing a broken femur, a fractured collarbone... And

now she's mobile. Smiling. Without her morphine drip; you weren't meant to take that out."

"Was I not?" Ridge smiles. "Can I take her now, Doc? Or remove her from the hospital? Either is acceptable, but one will have to happen quickly."

"*Ridge*," Sadie hisses.

The doctor shoots him an irritated look. "Well, I'm not sure what kind of blood she's got, but we'd like to keep her for some extra testing. See what it is about her that makes her so durable-

"No," Wright growls, before standing and shoving the man against the wall.

Sadie yelps. Ridge stands abruptly.

"You get rid of her fuckin' files or I will hunt you down myself and eat you alive," Wright snaps, shoving the man again for good measure.

When the doctor looks towards the door, Ridge already leans against it. His large frame blocks the window.

"Never met a woman named Sadie Lindal or Price, understand that?" Wright growls.

"Y-yes," the doctor says.

"Never met us," Ridge adds.

"Understood," the doctor confirms.

It smells like urine. He's pissed himself.

"That all?" Wright asks, letting the man go.

"N-no," the doctor stammers.

He holds the clipboard in his shaking hands. Wright takes it from him. Passes it to Ridge, who scans the paper.

A bright smile cracks across his face.

"Ah!" he exclaims, tossing the clipboard to the floor.



He grabs the doctor's face in his hands and presses a kiss to his forehead.

The man wavers. He might pass out. It doesn't matter. Ridge can only focus on Sadie, his woman, his mate.

"It'll be a shotgun wedding for us, little fawn!" he exclaims, lifting her from the hospital bed. "So fuckin' much to celebrate!"

She squeals as he hoists her over his shoulder, not caring that she's only wearing the flimsy hospital gown.

"Be gentle with her!" the doctor exclaims. "She's just healed!"

Ridge claps his hand over her rear, digging into the meat of it. "She's the mother of my child, doc!" he calls out, already down the hall. "She's strong enough for a little roughness!"

Wright follows them out, all the way to the sunny streets where he can hear the sound of ocean waves meet Sadie and his brother's laughter. His skin warms in the glowing August sun and he closes his eyes to soak it all in.

A month ago, he wanted the night sky to inhale him. He wanted to disappear. He admits to himself that he let the fantasies of obliteration get the better of him. But now, he can't imagine how.

There's beauty here.

And the thing about beauty is it always comes back to you.

## Epilogue: Creation

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**S**adie listens to the sound of rain hitting the window. It's enough to wake her up, even though the sun still shines bright and white in the sky. This February morning is going to be unseasonably warm, she can tell.

Not warm, however, is Ridge's side of the bed. These days, she sleeps in later than him. Usually wakes to the smell of brown butter on a pan and either fried eggs or pancakes. Today, it's pancakes with apple butter. Her sense of smell is a dozen times better now that she's pregnant.

She presses herself up, already feeling the weight of her belly on her bladder. God, she needs to pee like a racehorse. She pulls on her soft bathrobe and nearly waddles down the hall. Ridge says she smells like she's gonna have twins.

It had better be twins, and then she's going to tell her body to take a break. Hopefully it'll listen. She's delighted to bear his children and she's optimistic for the future for the first time in her life. But darn it, she misses being able to lie on her stomach. Or sleep through the night without needing to pee.

They still make love like they did months ago. If anything, the frequency picks up now. He worships her like this. Can't keep his hands or his lips off her belly, off her swollen breasts, off any part of her it seems. It makes the carrying of wolf children a little more tolerable. He makes so much of life brighter.

She meanders down the stairs, gripping the smooth railing. Across them, at the wall, she's drawn flowers like her mother once did. There's no prayer on the wall of the Lindal farmhouse, however. Ridge won't teach their boys to pray with words.

He'll teach them to see glory in nature instead. She imagines them so clearly it's like seeing the future, her husband and their boys chasing each other through the corn fields. Opening their mouths to summer rain. Small, dirty footsteps all over the yellow-tiled kitchen floor.

So, it doesn't surprise her when she steps through the open front door and sees her husband lounging on the covered porch, a coffee in his hand and her two goats at his feet. Wright saved them from her pa's farm and it's good he did, because she can't go back to it. Told the state to sell it and used the proceeds to hire a farmhand. With Wright out west until at least October and herself back-bendingly pregnant, the extra help eases their burden.

Whether or not Wright will come back in October is a question she and Ridge ponder with each phone call. He seems more alive out west. Loves the mountains, working with horses, living with men he calls friends. It's like France, he says, without the tragedy or the croissants.

They'll visit him when it's warmer, she thinks. See him and that dark-haired woman he's always telling stories about. The thought makes her warm, almost like another heartbeat has joined her pack, one she feels across rivers and fields and mountains she has only ever read about.

But now, she's here, and her husband— *husband*, something she never thought she'd claim and something Ridge never thought he'd be— sets down his coffee and pulls her into his lap. And as Ridge smooths his large hands over her swollen belly, her world shrinks to just the two of them.

There must be twins in there. She's so swollen it's like those myths about watermelon seeds are true and there's a whole fruit inside her, heavy and large. Except she feels

movement in there a whole lot, especially when Ridge puts his hands on her. It's like the little ones know their pa without seeing him.

"I'm a whale," she giggles.

"Should we name one of 'em Jonah?" Ridge asks.

She laughs. "You're supposed to say I'm not a whale."

"You're beautiful," Ridge growls. "Call it whatever you like."

She pushes him playfully and he kisses her. Soft lips against soft lips. His taste darkened with morning. He parts her robe and bears her naked, swollen body to the light chill. As he traces her breasts with a coffee-warmed touch, her nipples perk to him. She shivers.

"You," he says, spreading his fingers and resting his hand on her belly. "Are creation itself."

She smiles, grinding her hips lightly over his. He ducks his face to her chest, running his tongue flat over her nipple. Breathing hot air over it before moving to the next. If she leans her head back far enough, she can feel the light rain paint her skin.

"Let's do this all morning," he says, tracing a circle around her rose-colored peak.

"Please," she murmurs, moaning lightly. "But I do have names, you know."

He's kissing her, licking her, heating the swell of her breast against the cool air. "Tell me."

"Zion," Sadie whimpers. "And if we have two, Ajax."

"Those are some strange names, woman," Ridge laughs. He covers her breasts with his warm palms and leans back to look in her eyes.

"Sacred land," she whispers.

“If they’re ours, little fawn,” Ridge clips. “Then sacred dirt.”

“Of course they’re ours,” Sadie whispers.

He smiles, and she traces it. Brushes her finger against one of his canines. Not too hard.

Just enough to make a dot of crimson trickle from her skin.

She draws it back in front of his eyes. Ridge watches intently as it pearls and drips down her finger. She brushes it over her own lips, and then over his. There’s still an animal in him. He is not yet, and will never be, fully domesticated.

So he grabs her by the hair and kisses her. On their land, in the rain, with her blood between them.

“Amen,” Sadie whispers.

## Also by Shiloh Sloane

*Cracked Blue Sky*, a standalone novel featuring Wright Lindal, will release early 2023.

# Acknowledgments

Oh my fucking my.

We've made it.

This wouldn't be possible without Ashley, my book wife. I read the entire novel to her. Somewhere on WhatsApp exists a mostly-drunk narration of this book from beginning to end. She's free to auction it off if this ever makes it big.

This also would not be possible without the community I've found through TikTok. You guys are so fucking filthy. You push me to get worse each and every day. Can't wait to see what we do next.

# About the Author

Shiloh Sloane is a horror enthusiast and lover of spice both in life and in writing. You may find her at a campsite anywhere in the US, with her solar charger, her greyhound mix, and a gallon of Arizona Iced Tea. This is her second shot at a debut novel, so stay tuned for more. She posts too much on TikTok.

This universe is always expanding.

